A NOVEL ‘CUTTING THE CORD’ AND AN ACCOMPANYING EXEGESIS ‘RECASTING DYSTOPIA: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NOVELS AND HOME-GROWN TERRORISM’

Natasha Molt

Presented as the requirement for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Creative Writing
Discipline of English
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
the University of Adelaide

March 2013

CUTTING THE CORD

Volume I

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Abstract

This creative writing thesis comprises a creative work, the novel "Cutting the Cord", and its accompanying exegesis "Recasting Dystopia: Twenty-First Century Novels and Home-grown Terrorism". Both the novel and exegesis are concerned with interrogating how terrorism within Western countries relates to a dystopian and utopian dialectic.

"Cutting the Cord" is a terrorist novel that explores notions of fanaticism, psychological aberration and dystopia through the experiences of its central protagonist, Amira Knox. Amira, a twenty-two-year old Australian has been groomed since childhood by her family to commit acts of terrorism against the world's capitalist elites. Her family leads the "Authenticity Movement", an unconventional terrorist cult with grandiose non-religious pretensions and a melange of rather vague ideas for eliminating a virus of "inauthenticity". The narrative concentrates on how the cult creates a dystopia for both its victims and perpetrators, and centres on Amira's quest to leave her terrorist identity behind.

The exegesis analyses specific works of terrorist fiction, including my own, as reconfigurations of critical dystopian writing. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the then American Bush administration, allied countries and mainstream media constructed a demonising discourse about the Arab as terrorist, exacerbating the potential allure of a violent ideology for minority Islamic Westerners. The exegesis examines three twenty-first century novels that work as a counterforce to that demonising narrative: John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), David Goodwillie's *American Subversive* (2010) and my own "Cutting the Cord". The novels are analysed in terms of the apparent, but often overlooked, relationship between terrorist fiction novels that feature home-grown terrorist protagonists ("HGTP novels") and the critical dystopia, arguing that there is a striking continuity between these two seemingly different genres. The exegesis argues that the deployment of critical dystopian elements enables these terrorist fiction texts to challenge prevailing discourse about terrorism while simultaneously silhouetting a utopian hope for a more harmonious world.

Declaration of Originality

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Natasha Molt
March, 2013

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Dianne Schwerdt for her careful readings of many drafts. Her constructive criticism was a major ingredient in the development of this thesis. Thanks also to Dr Carol Lefevre for her advice, guidance and support. I am also indebted to the University of Adelaide for enabling me to conduct research onsite in Germany and Switzerland through a Research Abroad Scholarship.

I want to thank my mother for her prayers, strength and love; my father for his constant encouragement and feedback; my sister for her willingness to listen; my son for his inspiration and patience.

Finally, I want to thank my husband Andreas, without whom none of this would have been possible.

Cutting the Cord

by

Natasha Molt

She was the perfect terrorist, then she wanted out

Pictures

Your boyish face is white, like the wet snow we press with our small hands. You toss your blue gloves up high and they fall through the air, feather-light, like a piece of sky undone. The Woman. Her face is blurry at the edges. Somehow I think and feel she is my Mama. She picks up your gloves, pats them against her legs, releasing flecks of snow. I help her guide the gloves back over your dimpled fingers. You shove marshmallows into your mouth and sticky goo dribbles down your chin. You are laughing, and I am, too. The Woman bites off pieces of carrot for the snowman's eyes and nose.

Three bottoms wedged on the sled: the Woman is at the back (her face no clearer here), I'm in the middle and you're in front of me. I hold you tight, my arms stretched over your snowsuit, and Mama squeezes us both into her as we race down the hill. You squeal with delight.

'Looking!' you shout. *'Looking!'*

We ride the ski lift going higher and higher towards the bright sky and the warming glow of the sun. Your blue eyes gaze down at the white glaring snow and you cry.

I kiss your sodden cheek. Salty.

Mama holds you. Shh. Shh.

1

Near Essen, Germany.

Tuesday, 4 May

Three Months After Phase 1 Resistance Initiation

I park the black hatchback behind a thicket of evergreen bushes. My blue eyes set in hollow sockets gaze back at me in the rear-view mirror. My hair is pulled back into a braid. Twenty-two-years-old. What am I going to look like when I'm fifty? I won't make it to fifty. I pull down the black balaclava, positioning the holes for my eyes, mouth and nose. Leather gloves are snug on my hands. I tuck the sleeves of my black jacket over the rims of the gloves. The Glock pistol is secure in my ankle holster.

I am ready.

I climb out of the car and cross the narrow road. The sunlight is white and hard, the sky a perfect blue. A cool morning breeze passes under my nose and the oxygen swells in my lungs and head and the pounding throughout my body begins.

I check my watch: almost 7.30am. From my surveillance over the past week I know that Jonas should be in his greenhouse.

I wade through the tall grass that flickers in the wind and raps against my long black pants. The earth is soft from last night's spring rain. Mud squelches on my boots. I cross the ditch, locate the rock near the security fence and push it aside, revealing the hole I dug yesterday. I grit my teeth and duck down. My hands land on the moist dirt

and I slither like a lizard to the other side of the fence. Mud clings to my clothes. I rise and run steadily.

Shards of sunlight spike through the towering, trembling, pines. Beyond the pines are rolling green meadows and beyond the meadows are three barns, a tennis court, and a pool, and on top of a hill sits a rambling house with a thatched roof. And security cameras.

I run to the first of the barns for cover and observe the greenhouse at the rear of the house.

I take out my gun, screw on the silencer and step away from the barn.

Four minutes.

I'm on camera.

The balaclava presses in on me, its wool soaks up the film of sweat coating my face. Through the glass of the greenhouse I can see Jonas watering orchids with a hose. Alone.

He appears an old man, still large, and hunched. A few strides and I open the rear greenhouse door and stand behind him.

My grip tightens around the Glock.

His pants are tucked into gumboots and a short sleeved, striped shirt hangs off his shoulders and the bump on his back. He hums a tune I do not recognise. His gaze is fixed on his orchids. Then, as if he senses someone else is near, he speaks: 'Britta?'

He turns and looks up; his eyes are red and watery. His eyebrows gather and one side of his upper lip and nostril rise warily. Do it quickly. His lips part and before words come I press the trigger: Pft! Pft! Pft!

He pauses, drops the hose, which falls to the ground and twists like a panicked snake. He holds my eyes for a moment, long enough for me to see an emptiness fill him, before he collapses with a thud.

I draw out a segment of the Manifesto from my jacket and toss it on a wooden bench.

Authenticity, ring in this dead man's heart and in mine.

Job done. Get out.

But my feet are heavy and the only movement they make is towards Jonas Baumann.

The pistol in my hand doesn't feel cold. It never does through the gloves. It feels warm on my finger and the polymer frame makes it light. My eyes drift down to my black scuffed boot and across to Jonas's frozen expression. Water from the hose thins his leaking blood. His face will grow familiar – the others have - rising out of cups of coffee first thing in the morning to surprise me. Or when I put my face underwater, reminding me how they no longer breathe.

I turn to his flowers. Orchids are everywhere. On wooden benches. Rows and rows of them. Inflorescences of delicate and bright colours. My nostrils are overwhelmed by the smell of the greenhouse: vanilla, fish, cinnamon, burnt sulphur from the gunpowder, and blood, still warm.

A creaking sound.

My eyes dart out of the greenhouse towards the thatched-roof home.

A girl's voice, sweet and high, calls through the side door.

'Opa? Opa?'

The child nears. With each step the shadow of the house leaves her and her silhouette becomes more vivid. Young Britta. Jonas's granddaughter.

I saw her with him at the weekend market eating bratwurst on a roll with mustard. She is ten, no older, with fair hair encasing a pale face.

The orchids shield me from her view.

I have to get out of here.

I bolt out of the greenhouse through the rear door. As I run towards the barn, time pushes down on me, like a vice squeezing wood. Near a barn wall I crouch down; there's a drumming in my body. I hear screams, the wail of the child, innocence trying to scare off death. I look back.

The red cedar sliding vents at the base of the greenhouse block my view of Jonas. But I see the child. Her contorted face, the curl of her mouth. Within seconds, she cries: '*Hilfe! Hilfe!*'

A woman, wearing an apron dusted with white flour, comes running from the house. She grabs the child and yells: 'Jens! Jens! *Hilfe!*'

Out comes a man, a woman, more children. They enter the greenhouse and topple down, like falling dominoes, to the ground where Jonas lies.

I blink.

And run.

Past the barn. Over the meadows. Through the forest. Grass turns to a carpet of brown thimbles and in them Britta's face appears. With each step I push them into the soft earth. The veins within my temples pound, threatening to explode.

Sirens blare. Loudly at first, almost deafening. The wolves are after me.

I slither under the electrical fence where I dug the hole and then push the rock back into place.

On the country road, my boots clap against the tar. A hundred metres down is the black hatchback.

My breath is even.

At the car I don't brush the dirt off but get in and start driving. Staring through the windshield, everything appears larger than normal, frighteningly clearer, sharper around the edges.

Off with my mask. The pistol under the driver's seat for now. I do not drive fast. After a few minutes I put my seatbelt on. Then the radio: *the riots in Athens against the*

Greek government's latest austerity package are yet another result of unchecked globalised financial markets.

All there is in the air and between my ears is little Britta's wail: *Hilfe! Hilfe!*

2

Sydney, Australia.

Thursday, 6 May.

Amira Knox, First Warrior Sister, hated flying long distances. Travelling under the name Anika Vollmer didn't change that: a fake passport didn't change who she was. She despised the reheated meals with mushy vegetables and rubbery strips of meat, the lack of legroom, the proximity of fellow passengers, and the stuffy air. Most of all she hated being trapped with her thoughts for hours at a time with no exercise, and no opportunity to paint. Looking about her, she imagined painting the plane lit up by a fire of bright yellows and murky oranges, the beige and brown of tormented faces. She pulled at her navy hoodie, then tugged at the dark, almost black hair that fell down in layers over her shoulders.

Having not been home to Kangaroo Valley for a little under a year, she was undertaking the journey now because there was no other choice: she had been summoned. There were no reasons given, just the order. After two eliminations in Europe, one in Paris and another in Germany, she should have been pleased to be returning, if only because she would get to see her mother and Third Warrior Brother, Kolya, but as the hours on the plane to Sydney passed she couldn't help wondering, and worrying over, why she had been recalled, why they all had been.

It had been late on Tuesday evening when she was recovering from Baumann, in her apartment and putting on a load of washing when the telephone rang.

'Anika, is that you?' asked a familiar voice. This was her Messenger, Wilhelm.

Amira took the laundry powder from the cupboard. She was irritated because he was calling her so late; especially since he knew that she had just completed her assignment. He always wanted to debrief and discuss things in painful, excruciating detail, but now wasn't the time to make an appointment for a meeting. 'Yes, I'm just about to go to bed. What is it?'

'You must return home. He wants all of you for Thursday evening.'

Her hand had slipped, overfilling the cup with laundry powder; white had dusted the tiled floor. Mother must be gravely ill, or there was some other trouble.

'Why? What's going on? Is something wrong?'

'I don't have the slightest idea. I was simply told to relay the message and organise your flight. I have left you tickets in your PO Box and sent you an email with the details. You'll have an early morning train to catch. You'd better pack.'

'It's so sudden, and I'm very tired. Are you sure… ?'

'Yes. The instruction was unequivocal. I'll see you when you get back.'

On her laptop Wilhelm's email had waited in the inbox. There were only the details of her train to Frankfurt and flight to Sydney. Nothing else. She could take a chance and call Mother. But phone calls home were strictly forbidden. Amira had packed a small suitcase and her backpack, and next morning rose early, collected her tickets, and was on her way.

This flight was worse than others she had undertaken, and she had been on many in the last two years. Beginning with a world trip with Kolya to Mexico, Africa, India, China, Japan, Europe and America, where, as part of their training, they saw how the inAuthenticity disease had spread, how it had affected the poor. The reason this trip weighed so heavily on her – she admitted to herself – had nothing to do with the woman

beside her coughing and grunting every now and then, or even her curiosity over why she had been summoned. It was rather because Britta's scream echoed randomly, and she had found that as the journey drew on, the girl's voice became all that she could hear, lodged in her ears, like grommets. Creepy and unsettling. She had freed Jonas and saved the girl from infection. So why should she be so shaken by what had happened?

Now she sat by the window and dabbed her pale honey-coloured face with the warm refresher wipe the airhostess had handed out. Her blue eyes gazed down at the backpack at her feet. She double-checked its contents: bottled water, a paperback, a make-up kit (necessary for a sudden change of appearance), a notepad and several biros (which she could use in more ways than one). Then she flicked through the complimentary airline magazine without reading the articles.

She often wondered in moments like this with time stretched before her about who her birth parents were, what they were like, whether they were still alive; why they gave her away. She was adopted, like all the Warrior children. In her mind her birth parents were always gentle, kind and loving, forced to put her up for adoption by circumstances beyond their control. Most of her childhood, in her private moments, she would imagine how they might smell, the colour of their eyes, whether she had any siblings. In these recurrent imaginings she would see herself being reunited with them, their presence finally filling her deep inner void. Some day she must find them.

The darkness beyond the glass caught hold of light, a setting sun on the horizon, a deep red that matched the Australian desert below. Her stomach rolled, as brown fields appeared beneath the plane. Hills covered with Eucalyptus trees reminded her of home, where the screaming had first begun.

I am Britta's age. The goat's tongue is warm on my palm, lapping up grain. First Warrior Brother, Randy, cajoles his lamb to eat the chicken poop. He thinks it's funny,

and Second, Third and Fourth Warrior Brothers – Laith, Kolya and Oscar – laugh, too. Stupid boys. I look out beyond the barn at the dry grassland. He appears in the entranceway, a dark figure against the white glare of day. All around him is light, and as he steps closer, the light shines out of his eyes, through his tortoiseshell spectacles. His thin lips, nestled in a bushy beard and moustache, curve up in a smile. Over his shoulder is a khaki knapsack. He is Father. The One.

As I watch, he strides into the barn, kneels down, gingerly lays the sack on the ground and unzips it. Inside are pipe bombs, the ones we made the day before. The boys huddle over them.

I watch the chickens peck food from the ground. They have such tiny feet; amazingly they don't topple over with their weight. A scraggly one has half its raw skin showing. The others have pecked out its feathers. Why? I lift the poor bird up and place it in the pen with the lambs; it will be safer away from its own kind. If I had a canvas, I'd like to paint it nestled in the soft wool of a lamb.

Father hands out the explosives. 'For your animals.' His eyes gleam.

I can't move. Why do we need to blow up our animals? Isn't there some other way of testing our bombs?

Father's eyes rest on my face. 'Amira? Are you okay?'

My brothers glance at me. First Warrior Brother heaves a sigh of irritation.

The muscles in my jaw tighten. 'I'm fine.'

'Good. Let's get started then, shall we?'

Father and my four brothers carry some of the animals to the pickup truck. 'Come on Mira, you have to help, too,' says Laith.

But I don't, my feet feel like they are plastered to the ground.

As I look on, the others continue to lift the animals onto the ute. The lambs bleat and the chickens squawk. Father jumps into the driver's seat. My brothers all climb onto the back of the vehicle with the animals, their spirits are high, all but Kolya's.

‘Are you coming?’ he asks me.

Father is watching me through the side-mirror.

I bite my lip, lower my gaze and shake my head.

Father starts the ignition and they drive away from the barn. I cup my eyes against the plume of dust kicked up by the pickup’s tyres. After about two hundred metres, the vehicle halts. Randy hops off the back. He is first. Father helps him set his cage down in the grassland. They carry a lamb, two chickens and a goat, one at a time to the cage. Once everything is in place they drive a safe distance away and Randy, a serious expression of concentration on his face, presses his trigger. His animals are blown into the sky and bloody bits of flesh, fur and feather rain down on the earth, splattering the truck.

I run into the barn and stare at the chicken without some of its feathers. The lambs press against stalls, noses hanging over planks of wood, eyes large, dark and watery, eager for more food. I struggle against impending tears, but in vain. Father must not see me like this. He will be angry. He will tell First Mother and she will be sad.

I find a corner in the shed and cover myself with hay. I hear more explosions and the creatures in the barn bleat and squawk. Help us. After some time, the ute returns. The sun sits low in the sky and Father appears in the entranceway. The light is gone from him and he casts a long shadow on the hay. Kolya is by his side, his eyes wide open. Father’s heavy boots crunch on straw and he calls out my name.

‘Amira? Amira?’

I remain silent, hidden. If I’m quiet enough, they won’t see me.

‘Find your sister,’ Father commands Kolya. His voice is taut, like a string on a guitar, how it sometimes gets before he goes at First Mother.

My brother finds me within seconds. ‘Mira, what’s the matter?’ he asks quietly.

I gaze into his face, his blue eyes filled with fear. Father pads over and examines me; I’m in trouble now, I dare not breathe. ‘Leave us for a minute,’ he says to Kolya.

My Third Warrior Brother very slowly walks out of the barn, but stops at the last moment, and quickly turns to look back at me.

'Go on!' Father yells at him.

I long for Kolya to stay, but he goes. I wish I could run from the barn, too. Run where Father can't find me, over the grassland, to some other place.

'Come here, child,' Father says to me. He sits on a bale of hay and pats a spot next to him. His beard is mostly black. 'Come here. I am not angry with you.'

Cautiously, I leave my hiding hole and sit down next to him.

'Tell me, what do you want out of life?' he asks.

I am quick to answer. 'To be a free spirit, to help others be free spirits, and eliminate the world's inAuthenticity.'

Father nods, smiles and pats my back. 'There's a good girl.'

I breathe relief; I'm a good girl, all will be well. 'But these animals are innocent,' I say, the words sliding out. My mouth is always blabbering before my mind has a chance to catch up.

Father laughs. 'Amira, tell me, do you eat animals?'

Reluctantly I reply: 'Yes.'

'Why do you eat them?'

'They have minerals, vitamins, proteins that serve a Warrior body well.'

'So you eat the animals – the innocents, as you call them – because they serve your purpose?'

I bite my lip, and nod.

'And so it is today. You must learn how to use your weapons properly. Don't you agree?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Today you will learn courage to instigate death, the great opening. For you can't hope to kill the infected, if you can't even kill these few animals.'

I am silent. I look at the bleating lamb and goat.

'I know this is difficult for you, Amira. You have certain sensitivities. You always have had. Nonetheless you accept the Warrior duty each year on your birthday and we know you are capable of many things. Otherwise I would not have chosen you.' Father touches my cheek. 'The West will look at you and see your gentle face and they will never suspect the blood you are capable of shedding.' His eyes shimmer like two black pebbles through the clear glass of his spectacles. 'Now, what do you say?'

I blink and nod meekly.

'That's my girl,' Father says, and he ruffles my hair with his hand.

I help him load the cage and animals onto the ute. The light outside is fading, and the voices of my brothers and the animals seem to grow louder in my ears, and all I can do is give myself up to the noises and the day and move, as expected. I wonder what part of me is still present in my body, in the movements, but most of all I think I've run there, to a place of nowhere.

My brothers come with Father and me, and we drive out into the grasslands. 'It's great, Mira,' Laith says. 'Just wait, it's almost as if you can feel the boom!'

We drop off the animals – three chickens, a lamb and a goat – and when everything is in place Father gives me the trigger. I hold it in my shaking hand. The chickens cluck and the sheep and goat turn pressing against their cages.

'Do it quickly,' Kolya whispers over my shoulder. 'It's easier.'

I gaze up into Father's face. He smiles warmly at me and I push the button. Boom!

Up go the feathers of the chickens.

Boom!

Up go dirt and smoke, and down comes a storm of flesh, wool, and blood.

There is only the sound of my thudding heart still beating. The air no longer carries the cries of animals.

I start to sob. I can't hold it in.

Randy starts laughing at me first, then Laith. Little Oscar squeals with delight, not sure what is so funny but happy that something is funny.

'Shut up or I'll punch you,' Kolya says.

Father turns around and faces us all, silencing my brothers with his wise-eyed look.

'Your sister is the bravest of you all today,' he says. 'Look at what she has overcome to kill these animals. For the rest of you it was easy; it wasn't a challenge. To you the animals meant nothing, but to your sister they meant a lot, and look what she was able to do. This is real strength. This is the perfect Warrior for Authenticity.'

I choke on my sobs. Father leans across and pats me on the back. Within me I feel a sense of pride. My father is pleased and thinks I will be the perfect Warrior, and that's all I want to be.

But that night in my bed, when the first of the snores can be heard and my mind begins to dream, the animals come screaming at me. Try as I might, I can't find the place of nowhere, and my tears flow.

3

The two-hour drive from Sydney's international airport to the vineyard in the Kangaroo Valley seemed longer. She was going to the home of Father, his mistress, Selena, or Second Mother, and their Biologicals. The home that was never hers. Not the home hidden in the nearby rainforest, with the cabbage palms and tree ferns.

The time was 7.20, the autumn night chilly. Beyond the car windows trees like dark shadows slipped by, until she was on the winding, gravel driveway that led to the house. There, fairy lights draped tall oaks, and the eight-bedroom, two-storey brick house appeared glowing from the garden lamps. On the front verandah pots brimmed with dahlias, asters and chrysanthemums beneath the lower windows. She pulled into the carpark on the right, along with about fifty other vehicles, and climbed out of the car. The night breeze carried faint music, guitar and African drums, from the back garden. So she had come for a party. The celebration must be in honour of something important. In hoodie and jeans she'd be underdressed, but it was too late to change now.

She walked to the entranceway, and looked up at Father's study window. There was a gap in the curtains with a pair of watchful eyes on her. She waved and continued on to the security guard at the front door, a man whose puckered face reminded her of a pug. David. One of Father's regulars. His eyes lit up and a grin spread in recognition. He nodded and opened the front door.

Inside, the butler, George, took her backpack and small suitcase. A few wispy black hairs clung to his scalp. He had sometimes made her lemon cordial when she was

a child, but he always skimped on the concentrate. He also ran a DVD shop in a nearby coastal town, feeding much of the profits to the organisation. ‘Amira, welcome home.’

‘Hello, George,’ Amira said. ‘How is everyone?’

‘Your parents are delighted to have you home even if only for a short time. I’ll put your bags in the green room. The family is waiting for you up in the study. Come.’

She followed his slight figure up the dimly lit stairs, smelt sandalwood incense, Selena’s favourite. At the end of the dark corridor they approached a heavy wooden door. George gave three sharp knocks.

‘One moment,’ Father’s voice bellowed.

The latch clicked, and she straightened her back, bracing herself. Henry, their guiding light, opened the door. His bushy hair, beard and moustache were all greyer than she remembered. He wore a purple robe with gold embroidery on the edges. His small dark eyes peered down at her through his tortoiseshell spectacles and he smiled. ‘Wonderful. Thanks, George.’

The butler left as Father stepped forward, clamping Amira in an embrace. Her fingers began to tremble. ‘Hello, Father.’

‘Welcome home, daughter,’ he said. Bowing his head perfunctorily, he kissed her forehead, his beard tickling like icy water. ‘Come in – we’ve been awaiting you.’

She entered the large room, as Father followed and quietly locked the door. His study was much as she remembered it: wall-to-wall books on topics ranging from philosophy to bomb-making. Plato to Lyotard. Gelignite to thermonuclear. Amira shivered involuntarily as her anxious eyes scanned the hundreds of volumes, coming to rest on the big mahogany desk. There were new folders with crisp white pages, probably downloaded from the web.

Second Warrior Laith, her twenty-four-year-old brother, stepped forward from the desk, his hair darkly spiked and his chin jutting. His arms encircled her momentarily. ‘Hi.’

From out of the shadows emerged Fourth Warrior Oscar, at twenty the baby brother. ‘Hey.’

Amira was about to respond when she glimpsed First Mother Edith. A large black ghost with long pale frizzy hair. Her eyes filled with tears. She laughed heartily and wrapped Amira in her arms. ‘My lovely daughter!’ She was wearing a black dress with sparse silk embroidery and beads.

Amira smiled, relieved that Mother seemed well. That had been her primary concern: that Mother had unexpectedly fallen ill.

‘Appears someone forgot to tell me the dress code,’ Amira said.

Father leaned against his desk while the others sat down in the leather chairs.

Amira wanted to know where Kolya and Randy were, but knew better than to ask. So long as Kolya arrived soon, she was sure the trip would be worthwhile. He and Mother were the only family members she wanted to see. Mother took her hand, held it, and she was grateful for the touch.

‘So Amira, give us your report,’ Father ordered, a glint in his eye.

‘Didn’t my Messenger already provide you with one?’ she asked.

‘Yes, but I’d like your personal report. Do you have sufficient funds, resources etc to carry out your tasks?’

‘Yes, you don’t need to worry about that. My Messenger is very capable of supplying me with my needs.’

Father’s eyes smouldered with satisfaction. ‘That’s good to hear. Your mother and I are very proud of your work with both Clément in Paris, and now Baumann.’

‘Will I remain in Germany?’

‘For now, yes. Germany is a central location for your upcoming targets.’

Amira gave a stiff nod. She still had no idea why they had been summoned. Surely it was not simply because of the few successes they had had so far? Four of the

infected, two claimed by her and two by Kolya, were hardly worth the cost of a trip back home.

'Are you pleased with the media coverage?' she asked. She was interested to know if everything was going as planned.

Father pulled at his beard. 'Not exactly. They weren't releasing the segments of the Manifesto we left with the bodies. So we had to put them up on the internet, and force them to display our handiwork. Oscar and Laith have been busy working on that. Making sure the authorities can't identify the originating server, along with other technological and recruiting tasks.'

Amira glanced over at Laith, who was staring at her. 'Are we still leaving three pages at a time with the infected?' she asked him.

'Yes. Drip-feeding the public hopefully makes them eager to read the next instalment.'

Her eyes shifted to Father, and she waited for someone to explain the party taking place outside.

'So you're all happy with your posts?' Henry narrowed his eyes at them.

Amira swallowed, at first she couldn't answer.

'Yes,' Laith responded.

'Ditto,' Oscar said.

All eyes turned to Amira. There was no point in her making an objection; it would go unheard. She nodded.

'Great,' Father said, with a clap of his hands. 'Soon we'll commence Phase Two. I estimate a couple of months at most. Thanks to all your hard work.' He paused and looked at Mother. 'No Father or Mother could be prouder of their children.' He smiled. 'Now come, let's join together in meditation. Laith, will you do the honours?'

'Of course.' Laith turned off the lights while Father seated himself behind the desk.

Amira sighed heavily. She had come all this way and no one had told her why. They were carrying on as they always did. After the meditation she would have to come right out and ask. And where were Randy and Kolya? How had they managed to wheedle their way out of this one?

Then her mind drifted away from Laith's meditation and it began: the blackness, the images, the voices that haunted her and she couldn't make them disappear.

I am at the clearing, a cliff above an ocean, dancing. I am so light and I can fly along with Mother, Father, my brothers. We hold hands and circle around in the air. Even Randy is here smiling at me, like he never has before. We are one. Nothing can break our chain, until Britta appears.

She is crying and screaming, tearing down the blue sky; throwing bits of it into a garbage bin.

'Don't do that,' I say.

'Why?' she yells. Then a gust of howling wind comes from her mouth and blows my family away. 'Why?' she hollers. 'Why? I loved him. He was my grandfather!'

I am the most worthy Warrior for Authenticity. I am…

I want to fly after my family, but she clasps my hands in hers and forces my feet back on the grass. 'No, you are not going anywhere!'

I struggle to set my hands free. She rakes her fingernails into my skin and blood starts to pour. Vivid red. Her salty tears sting my wounds. Then I hate her and her jagged, razor-edged screams, her child's tears. I want her to stop and she doesn't. She won't shut up. So I do it then, my leg kicks her in the stomach. She coils onto the ground.

I am the most worthy Warrior for Authenticity.

But she still is making a noise, only now it is ceaseless cackling. She is laughing at me! Laughing hysterically!

I slink back from the cliff and Britta. Laith's voice beckons me to open my eyes.

The room was dark. Amira quickly wiped away her tears. She needed to paint Britta's face. Laith flicked on the lights and she squinted in the glare. All was quiet for a few moments.

Then, Father rose and leaned on his desk. 'I have a surprise for you.'

Her stomach was queasy. There was no such thing as a good surprise from Father.

'This is the reason I have brought you all home,' he said. 'There is someone special I want you to meet.'

He dialled a number on his phone. 'George, please bring her in now.'

At first, the cries came dully though the door. They gradually escalated to the unmistakable sound of a disconcerted infant. A wave of panic rose within her. Father lifted the latch on the door lock and opened up.

George stood clutching a baby swaddled in a cotton wrap. The baby's face was red, as if she had been distressed for some time. Amira glanced anxiously at Mother.

'Children, this is your new sister, Amelia,' Father announced.

'A Biological?' Oscar asked, raising his voice over the baby's cries.

'No, she is not one of Selena's,' Mother said. 'She's your sister.'

'Second Warrior Sister,' Father added.

This could not be happening. And yet it was. Mother was leaning down, pulling a bottle out of a bag, asking George to warm it up, patting the baby's back.

‘You didn’t tell us that you were thinking of adopting another child.’ She caught herself from adding: you’re too old, how did you get through the selection process, again?

‘We wanted it to be a surprise,’ Father said. ‘Isn’t she adorable? Just like you when you were little, Amira. A fiery cry!’

Amira grimaced.

‘We wanted you to meet her,’ Mother said, pacing the room. Amelia’s cries lessened. ‘When she’s calmed down a bit you can all have a hold.’

‘I’ll be right,’ Laith said, rather coldly.

‘But how?’ Amira stared at Father, confused.

He grinned. ‘We got lucky.’

She hoped she concealed her horror sufficiently, swallowing and nodding. At least adoption in Australia was now legally required to be open so Amelia could find her birth parents easier. Not like that of the other Warrior children where the original birth certificates were under lock and key in the Australian judicial system and the identities of the birth parents kept a secret.

Amelia drifted to sleep on Mother’s shoulder. ‘Amira, here, if you take her now, hopefully…’

Before she could say anything Mother placed the baby upright on her chest. Amira’s fingers fumbled, she wasn’t used to holding babies, and Amelia began to stir.

‘Walk,’ Mother commanded.

Following Edith’s instructions, she paced the room and the infant settled back into a light sleep. Her smooth head was shrouded with fine golden hairs. She smelled soft and sweet.

Amira asked quietly: ‘How old is she?’

Mother smiled. ‘Three months. We’ve had her a week.’

A whole week and they hadn’t told her!

There was a silence, then Father said: ‘We know you will all help us raise her according to Movement principles. You might not see her much now, but that will change soon enough as we progress into the New World. You will be her role models, the people she will look up to in life.’

Amira turned away from them and faced the window. Her head spun. Amelia’s breath was even and warm on her neck. So that’s why they had been called. She wished she had seen this coming, and prevented it. But here was the baby in her arms.

‘Let’s celebrate!’ Father said. ‘Let’s all go and enjoy the party downstairs.’

Amira carried her sister outside to the garden where the festivities were in full swing. Strings of fairy lights hung on eucalypts, silver birches, diosmas, wattles. Sparks from a bonfire circled upward into the blackness of the night. Men and women chatted, musicians played and children ran around on the green lawn, squealing and laughing, some holding sparklers, some nudging a soccer ball. Adults lounged on rugs underneath a sprawling gazebo. Tables overflowed with drinks and platters of cheese, biscuits, fruit, cakes and hors d’oeurves. The night air was fresh and helped Amira feel more awake.

There was a drum roll as the Knox family stepped off the verandah. The crowd stopped talking and Amira looked down, aware of their pressing stares. These people believed the Knoxes were truly authentic, free spirits. They whispered and clapped. She hoped they wouldn’t wake Amelia.

‘Thank you,’ Laith called out. ‘Please, continue to enjoy yourselves.’

A flute began to play, and conversations resumed. Children ran smiling to greet Henry and he welcomed them with open arms and pulled homemade lollies (made by First Mother) out of his pockets, and tossed them into the air. ‘Later there will be a piñata,’ he said. They jumped up and down and wanted to know when and how long they had to wait. Amira tightened.

Britta will never fall into her grandfather’s arms again.

Second Mother and her Biologicals came towards them, then. Selena was taller than Mother and wore a lavender sari with beaded parrots down one side. Her eyelashes, heavily painted, were like long spider legs. Light, fluttery kisses on cheeks were exchanged in a show of friendliness, which was false.

'How lovely, you could make it,' Selena crooned, her smile exaggerated. 'It's so nice to have the family together, although it's only for such a short time.'

The three other Biologicals – all girls ranging from eighteen to Amira's age – stood off to the side, pouting, and doing their best, to look cheerful. These were Father and Selena's offspring. Selena had not allowed them to be trained. Unlike Mother, who was unable to have children, but would do anything for the Cause.

'Randy and Kolya aren't here yet,' Amira said, her voice coarser than she'd intended. On seeing how her comment had silenced Selena, she quickly added: 'The house and garden look immaculate.'

Selena blushed at this, and Edith looked down at her fingernails. Amira immediately regretted her clumsy comment. Mother, who had no self-esteem, would interpret this as a failure on her behalf, believing her home was not as well kept. Why could Amira never think of the right words? Why were the wrong ones always coming out?

'Thank you, Mira,' Selena said. 'I have a lot of help, of course.'

'Don't be so modest, Mum,' Jocie said (so the Biologicals were listening after all). 'You work hard enough at it: accept some recognition for something, for Pete's sake.'

Selena's role as a trophy was well known, and despite Jocie's comment, they all knew that she only told the gardeners and the housekeepers what to do. But this would be considered work by some, including Jocie, who was every bit like her mother. Edith on the other hand, knew all about real work. She was the woman of substance and

Selena resented the fact. They were all saved by the sound of the horn, and the beginning of Father's speech. Voices hushed and eyes turned to him.

He smiled broadly, opening his arms to the crowd, and declared in his confident melodic voice: 'Friends, tonight we have much to celebrate. Our period of waiting and unarmed battle is well and truly over. Already, we have successes! Already the masses are talking about our Movement and our message is spreading around the globe: the infected will be sent on, freed, and Authenticity will come!'

The crowd clapped and whistled.

'And I'm pleased to announce that First Mother and I are the proud parents of another daughter. We give you Amelia!' he gestured at the infant still snug in Amira's arms. 'May her life be blessed!'

Splendid applause broke out and people rose from their seats. A fiddle and other instruments started playing a tune and Father made his way around the crowd, shaking hands and hugging people, taking the time to speak with them, finding out about their ailments and goings-on. Singers, the finest in the Movement (which included, much to Amira's chagrin, the Biologicals) began to sing songs about the New World they would witness. Laith and Oscar went to collect glasses of punch, as she and Mother wandered the yard with Amelia.

Edith put a cool hand on Amira's cheek. It seemed Mother felt just as cold as she did. 'My two beautiful daughters.'

People stared expectantly at Amira as she passed, and with a sense of trepidation, she lowered her gaze to her new sister.

'Your father and I are very impressed with your work,' Mother said.

Amira lowered her chin. 'It's lonely.'

'Yes, it would be.' Mother stroked her arm. 'I get lonely, too, now you are gone. But we have to think positively. At least you're not at home all day, cooking and cleaning, making sure your children have done their calculus, learned a new set of

French vocabulary, memorised a segment of the Manifesto, run their ten kilometres and all the while trying to look attractive in case the love of your life pops in.'

Amira chuckled.

'You've come so far, Mira. I'm so proud of you and everything you've achieved. You hold a big piece of my heart in your hands.'

At this, Amira smiled, as Laith and Oscar approached with glasses of punch.

'No vodka,' Laith said, sulkily.

'Some things never change,' Amira replied.

'Hey, you can't complain,' Laith said. 'Father gave you and Kolya the interesting work. Must be because you're better looking. It's the pale blue eyes with the dark hair, fools them every time.' He stuck out his index finger and thumb in the shape of a gun and fired it at her, like when they were young and they played slaves versus masters and Kolya and she were always the slaves. She was lucky to be paired with Kolya, who was the best fighter of the Warrior Brothers.

I'm no slave! Are you calling me a slave? Are you calling our sister a slave? We're completely free spirits.

Oscar looked at the baby. Amira sensed a weariness about him that she wasn't accustomed to seeing in her younger brother.

'Computers?' she asked him.

'Computers,' Oscar repeated with a sigh.

'Important work,' she replied.

He shrugged and his eyes flitted to Mother. 'Are Kolya and Randy coming at all?'

Mother bit her lip. 'From what I know. But that isn't always much.'

People continued to gaze at them, closing them in on each other, Amira felt. Her brothers noticed the looks too.

'They're all jealous,' Laith said.

‘They’re not jealous,’ Mother responded. ‘They’re afraid.’

Laith smiled. He revelled in the power their fear gave him.

Kolya finally arrived; he stepped off the verandah, clean-shaven and tall in a white kaftan with matching pants. He looked exactly the same as when Amira last saw him (except for the outfit). She wanted to run over and hug him and noticed that she wasn’t the only one staring at him: many of the women were stealing glances at him.

Mother gazed affectionately up at him. ‘Your brother looks strong,’ she said proudly. And indeed his appearance lived up to the Slavic meaning of his name: victory of the people.

Amira smiled half-heartedly. ‘That’s what you wanted him to be. You and Father,’ she tried to keep her voice casual.

Father embraced Kolya and the elder man’s smile became a curdling grimace as the younger murmured something in his ear. Then Kolya’s smile was stretched too far.

Where was Randy? Surely they all had to be here tonight.

The two men strode vigorously into the house, followed by Father’s bodyguard, and an unexpected feeling of uneasiness came over her. She lifted Amelia from her chest and handed her to Mother. ‘I won’t be long.’

She trailed through the house after the men, up the stairs. Their pace was so quick, so determined, she almost had to jog to see their backs, hear the snippets of their chatter.

‘Why do you have to interrupt me with this now?’ Father said. ‘… always working… important occasion.’

Kolya raked a hand through his dark brown hair. ‘Sorry, Father. Sorry.’

From the top of the stairwell, they entered the study. She made it to the open door, just as Kolya was about to close it. Beyond Kolya, Father’s eyes watched her from under his glasses and he said to her: ‘This is a private meeting.’

Kolya mouthed – ‘talk soon’ – and shut the door.

She stood in the corridor with her hand pressed against the wood. Listening. Silence, broken only by her short breaths. Then she was startled by a creak behind her. She turned around and Mother was outside one of the bedrooms, a baby monitor strapped to her waist, but no Amelia. She pressed a finger up to her lips – shh – and tiptoed down the stairs.

Amira moved quietly down the hall and paused to look in on her sister. The door was ajar. She pressed it open. The light from the corridor spilled into the room and slanted onto the cot by the window. Amelia lay sprawled out on her back, the blanket pushed to her feet. Her hands were half closed fists. *Already a Warrior*, Father would say.

Amira's heartbeat increased. She stepped forward, reached out and gently touched Amelia, felt the baby's chest rise and fall under the weight of her hand. A heavy load, indeed.

4

The minutes passed and still the men did not appear. Amira went back out into the garden where the night rapidly grew colder and the festive atmosphere more boisterous. She began to imagine painting the crowd and tossed several different lights and mediums around in her mind. Her usual mix between abstract and figurative would work well here. Purples, charcoals, blacks. Oil on canvas. Then she smiled, as she remembered when Mother had first given her oil pastels.

I'm ten years old. Mother comes into my room, hands me a box. *Micador oil pastels.*

'You've quite a collection of pictures under your bed,' she says. 'Along with my water colours and paintbrushes.'

I meet her soft gaze, blush and drop my eyes. My paintings and drawings are supposed to be my secret, one thing that's just for me. Besides, whenever Randy finds my sketches he calls me a scribbler.

I look at the pastels; their vibrant tips show through the packaging. The pigment so strong, I want to touch it with my fingers, smear the colour across white paper, rub it into my skin.

'Are they mine? Or for everyone?'

'Keep them in your underwear drawer,' Mother says.

She moves to the door, and hesitates. Turns back to face me.

‘Mira, if you can, draw the sun, not rain and clouds. Flowers. Not decapitated chickens with no feathers.’

I nod.

When she leaves, I close the door and scramble under my bed. All my paintings and drawings are still there, plus a new pack of bleached A4 paper. Mother must have put it there. I take the first sheet from the top, place it on my desk, carefully open the oil pastels, select the yellow.

Sun.

My hand begins to circle, the brightness overlaying the stark white paper. I blend the colour with some orange and alternate between the two, building lines and layers. Time seems to evaporate as I draw flowers for Mother. Fields of flowers beneath blue skies. My fingers shaping forms, creating plants and new worlds, imperfect representations that nonetheless exist perfectly on the paper. I finish a picture, then another and several more. There’s a knock at the door.

I say nothing, hoping the intruder will go elsewhere.

‘I know you’re in there, Mira.’

Kolya. ‘What do you want?’

‘Come for a bike ride.’

‘No.’

‘Down to the dam?’

‘Take Laith.’

Silence.

‘What are you doing in there, Mira? Mother said to leave you be.’

‘Then why aren’t you?’

‘Randy’s being a pain.’

I stare miserably at the door. The red oil pastel in my warm palm becomes sticky. I turn and begin the outline of a red tulip. After a moment, I hear Kolya leaving.

My mind wanders, and so does my hand. Before I know it, a tulip is encased in a teardrop. A lake of flowers in tears. I don't know what it means, only that it feels secure, right, and like I'm connected to something real. The drawing allows me to completely let go. Even though I've destroyed Mother's pretty flowers.

Outside my window the light gradually darkens. I am aware at one point that Mother comes in, asks me a question, switches on the light, leaves again. When it is black outside and the pastels are worn thin, the door opens, and I let out a cry.

'Mira, what is it?' Mother asks.

'Nothing. I just got a fright.'

She steps towards me. Looks at the pictures scattered on my bed, on the floor. Grimaces.

'It's tea time. You need to wash your hands.'

'I'm not hungry.'

Her eyes move to a plate on my desk. There is a sandwich on it. 'You didn't eat your lunch.'

I shrug. Father would make me eat it if he were here. Maybe I'd receive a smack for not looking after myself. But he's at Selena's, and I'll eat what I want, just like when I have the time, I'll paint or draw without him bossing me about.

'Mira, I don't know what has gotten into you lately, but I'm not having you go without tea again. Wash those hands.'

I do as Mother says, but at the dinner table, as my brothers munch their food, I nudge the sheperd's pie around on my plate until it's time to do the dishes. Mother stands next to me, staring into my eyes.

'Boys, leave us please, I need to talk to your sister.'

'Oh, Mira's in trouble!' Randy says. He leads the others into the living room.

Mother clears her throat. 'I thought if you had the day to draw it would make you happier.'

‘It did,’ I say.

She shakes her head. Glances at my plate of food. ‘How about I make you some wedges? You love those.’

‘I want to go back to my room.’

She pulls out a chair, sits beside me. ‘How about we make a deal?’

I don’t like the sound of this.

‘You eat your dinner, and tomorrow after the run, I’ll take you into Nowra and you can pick out some new paints.’

I lift up a forkful of pie and shove it into my mouth.

Mother grins. ‘That’s my girl.’

Twenty minutes went by before Kolya reappeared, his face pale. Guests rushed to talk with him, but his eyes searched her out. Amira motioned to the side of the house, and he nodded.

She waited for him on a small wooden bridge arching over a pond that quivered here and there with goldfish. Solar lamps were scattered on the bank. Behind her there was a sudden stomp; she turned and Kolya stood before her, laughing effortlessly. On impulse she hugged him. His arms were too firm, and she could feel his strong heart pumping. After a few seconds he pinched her in the ribs.

‘Ow!’ she protested, looking up at him.

He winked at her with his blue eyes that shone out with a contagious optimism that had always betrayed his past. ‘Getting weak in your old age?’

‘I don’t think so,’ she replied stiffly. ‘Have you met her?’

Kolya smiled. ‘Amelia? Yes, I’ve met her. You’ll have a rival on your hands with her.’

Amira rolled her eyes. ‘What kind of adoption agency would let people in their fifties adopt?’

Kolya shrugged. ‘A desperate one, I guess.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

He sounded blasé. ‘Look, for local adoptions there’s no maximum age limit for an applicant. Besides, it’s good for Mother to have someone at home. She was growing depressed with us away, and having to face Selena and the Biologicals.’

Amira examined his face. There was a new hint of distraction about him that she couldn’t quite figure out. ‘What were you talking to Father about? Where is Randy?’ she asked.

He fixed his gaze on the pond. His jaw clenched, almost imperceptibly, and she found his silence infuriating.

‘Well? What’s happening?’

‘Leave it, Mira, would you?’

She drew a deep breath; it was pointless to press him further. He wasn’t going to talk about it, and that was that. Once Kolya had his mind made up, it was almost impossible to budge, and he’d grow cranky at her for trying. She settled into his silence. After a few moments he turned to her and touched her face, running a finger along her jaw. He frowned. ‘You’re too thin. You eat?’

‘I eat.’

‘Well eat some more. You’ll start to look like Selena.’

‘I’ll eat, okay?’

His hand dropped to his side. ‘Nice job on Baumann.’

‘Nichols wasn’t too bad either,’ she replied. A smile spread across his face, and she punched him in the upper arm. He rubbed the sore spot and said, ‘Still working-out, I see.’

She was silent for a moment. Then she said simply: ‘Yeah.’

Kolya looked at her. ‘Something’s the matter,’ he said quietly. ‘With you. What is it?’

She looked at the way the bright moonlight shone on the pond. A fish opened and closed its mouth on the water’s surface. She was aware that Kolya was staring at her, waiting for an answer, but she didn’t know what to say.

‘Well? What’s wrong?’

Amira rubbed the back of her neck. ‘Baumann had a ten-year-old granddaughter who discovered him straight after his death. I saw her.’

Kolya scratched his forehead. ‘That’s no good.’

‘I know.’

‘I assume she didn’t see you?’

She glared at him, indignant. ‘You really think I’m that slack?’

‘No, that’s not what I…’ He took in her expression for a moment, and she hoped that nothing else would be said about the incident. But Kolya knew her too well. ‘You feel bad for her?’

The fish plummeted into the depths of the pond. ‘Yes.’

He stared at her with wide eyes. ‘A slave girl? A granddaughter of an infected leader? Are you serious?’

She inhaled. It must sound absurd. ‘Yes.’

He arched a brow. ‘But she’s hardly neutral. It’s her kind we need to be worried about. Don’t be fooled by her, Mira.’

She rubbed her forehead, pressing against the sharp pain that had gathered there. ‘Kolya, I don’t know how much longer I can do this. I’m not as good as you Warrior Brothers. I’m not as strong inside.’

His eyes were on her. She wanted him to really see her, to help her find a way out of her internal mess.

‘You’re tired, that’s all.’

She sighed. ‘Yes. Tired.’ What had she been thinking expecting Kolya of all people – the best Warrior of them all – to understand? ‘Father seems the same as ever,’ she said, in an effort to change the subject. ‘A hippy who still thinks he can light up the world.’ If another Member heard her comment, she’d be reported for disrespect. But she could tell Kolya anything.

He cocked his head to one side, and stared at her blankly for a second. ‘You don’t believe he can?’

She gazed up at him, unsure what words to use. She wanted to be honest. ‘I don’t know anymore, Kolya. But I wanted to tell you something. I’ve decided I’m going to find my birth parents.’ There, she had said it; she let out a huge breath.

He threw an arm over her shoulder. ‘I wouldn’t blab these thoughts to the others.’

She scowled and pushed his arm away. ‘Oh, please. As if. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything stupid.’

His fingers jabbed her in the ribs again. He was always doing that. ‘I know you won’t.’ He picked up a pebble and threw it, skidding it across the pond’s surface. ‘So forget about your birth parents.’

She told him then about the memories from when she was a toddler, memories from before she was a Member, the pictures of the snow that were in her head, that were so faint that they were more like feelings, or something that she had dreamed. She told him about the Woman and the Boy.

‘Wow. I guess that’s why you’re so messed up.’ He smiled at her conspiratorially.

He didn’t remember much from before the age of five, only a sense of fear, falling out of bed a lot and wanting Mum. He told her to ignore the pictures in her mind, that he and the others were her real family, united by a stronger tie than blood – by Authenticity. ‘There is no greater bond,’ he said. ‘Not even James Bond.’

He was full of terrible jokes. ‘Oh, that’s bad.’

‘It’s the jetlag.’ Kolya’s smile was explosively bright.

She looked down at her hands. The skin seemed to be coming away more from the bones. Jokes aside, she had to find them, her birth family.

He read her mind. ‘You said you weren’t going to do anything stupid. Finding them is the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard. If Father finds out, you’ll be deleted.’

She had known he’d be difficult about this. ‘I want to know where I come from. What’s so bad about that?’

‘Father wouldn’t like it, and you know it.’

She was lost in her own thoughts for a few moments. Then she spoke: ‘Do you like the killing?’ she asked.

Kolya sighed heavily. ‘That’s not the point.’

‘But it is the point for me.’

‘They’re infected for goodness sake!’

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. ‘I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t like it.’

‘I can’t believe you’re talking like this. Like a child.’

Neither could she. Over all the years she had never had the courage, but now it was all becoming too much for her. ‘I want to have children myself one day. Be in love,’ she said.

Kolya laughed disbelievingly. ‘You made an oath. See out your calling first.’

She shook her head, holding back more tears.

He looked at her for a moment. ‘You’re tired, that’s all. Stay with it, Mira, please. You’ll get over it.’

Amira’s fingers twitched at her sides. What she was feeling wasn’t a phase; this was what she had always felt.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘happiness isn’t always found in the sunshine, it can also be found by dancing in the rain.’ He grinned.

She could never stay mad at him for long. He was too silly for that. ‘What a cheap quote,’ she replied.

‘I made it up. Remember it.’

‘You did?’

‘When I was a kid. When I was working on my triceps.’ He punched her in the arm and ran back out into the party, the dazzled faces.

5

Cologne, Germany.

Monday, 10 May

She caught a taxi from Cologne's airport and stared out the window. Cars filled the streets. Sometimes the lips of the lone drivers moved, even when their cars did not, banked up behind traffic lights. Pedestrians cluttered the pavement, pausing along the Rhine, lifting their faces to the sun as though thawing after another lengthy winter. Tourists gathered to look at the multi-coloured love padlocks along the Hohenzollern train bridge.

The taxi dropped her off at Brüsseler Platz in the Belgian quarter, an area that partied into the early hours of the morning in the bars, clubs and pubs. Turning her back on the yellow mass of St Michael's she dragged her suitcase up Maastrichter Strasse where an odd combination of modern and old buildings lined the street. Young mothers pushed prams along the footpath, cars fought for the pay parking spots and drivers gave bicycling students evil looks. She passed the headquarters of an alternative newspaper, a skateboarding shop, then a nightclub, until she was standing in front of a convenience store where she turned and gazed briefly across the road at her apartment building: four small balconies were enclosed with solid concrete walls, and four sets of square windows faced the street, a vertical clump. At the top was Ms Spifanso's flat, Amira's was second up, the third was vacant and Carla's was on the first floor. The Asian take-away next door was still open, although she couldn't see any customers. It was too early

in the day. Everything was the same as when she had left five days ago, before she had gone to Australia.

She turned back to look into the store at the comics and the French, Russian, Greek and German newspapers displayed in the window. There were more concerns over Germany buying European Central Bank Bonds. Apple, Google and Microsoft were engaged in an intellectual property dispute; there were protests in Greece. In short, the world was gradually hitting the meltdown point that Father had predicted, and it was all because of the *spread*.

The tiny shop was stocked with snacks and alcohol, the latter taking up half the space. Cigarettes were stacked at the back of the counter like brickwork. There was a shelf of mixed sweets that Amira helped herself to, placing them in a white paper bag with a pair of tongs. She looked at the frozen pizzas and chips in the small portable freezer but dismissed them almost immediately, turned instead to the register, where she picked up four chocolate bars. The Turkish shop assistant was rocking his baby in a pram. His wife was back on the cigarettes now that the pregnancy was over. From her balcony window, she had often seen the woman puffing away in front of the shop when there were no customers.

The man glanced over at her. 'You're back,' he said in German. His eyes turned to her suitcase. 'Been somewhere interesting?'

'Family.'

He nodded. 'Where do you put all this sugar?'

She shrugged, and carried her delights out with her past the deli and then the hairdressers with a Chihuahua in its window. At the hemp shop she crossed the street and let herself into her apartment building. She had received only junk mail in her letterbox, and the stairwell reeked of Carla's chronic smoking.

She dumped her treats on the kitchen bench and turned on the empty refrigerator. Next, she made sure her internet systems were turned off, took her wireless

RF detector from the concealed cavity in her wardrobe and conducted a search, looking for surveillance equipment. She used the vibration mode, the LED indicator lights and the earphone-only audible tone. She inspected each room of the apartment, the light switches, electrical outlets. Her holographic stickers had not been broken. She checked the mirrors, scanned the walls, the furniture, the floors, the ceiling, inside cupboards, behind doors. The canvases and paints scattered in the dining room. The treadmill, exercise bike, weights, cream leather sofa, TV and coffee table in the living room. The bed and side tables. The combined bathroom and laundry. She felt like a stranger looking at someone else's apartment.

In the bedroom she peeked though the drawn curtains at the office buildings and the parking garage below. A lone banker from the Kölner Bank building was walking to his car. The 5km sign hung on the wall opposite, the air conditioner fan on part of the bank's rooftop was spinning, the mobile bank bus was in its resting place and in the distance, around a curve, the apartment building in green with overhanging baskets on the third level down, no flowers blooming. Nothing.

She placed the detector back in the cavity, changed into shorts, a t-shirt and sneakers, and opened the glass door that led out onto the front balcony where she could hear the traffic rush and drone down Hohenzollering. Next she found a blank canvas behind a chair in the dining room, and in hurried strokes began to paint an outline of Britta's jaw. It wasn't quite right and no matter the angle or the thickness of the paintbrush she couldn't match the picture in her brain. She grabbed a chocolate bar from the kitchen bench, broke off a piece, popped it into her mouth, rolling it round on her tongue, smooth and sweet, and then she swallowed.

Disgusting, she told herself. Stop it, right now. But she couldn't; it was the pleasure of it that hushed the voices and created an empty space in her mind. Within minutes she'd gorged on three bars, and her hands trembled. The perfect Warrior for Authenticity. She went into the bathroom and rinsed her mouth out with water, rubbing

her tongue and teeth with a finger, trying to wash out any remaining sugar before it corroded her teeth. The noises were starting to clamour again. Better not be going crazy. She picked up her mobile phone, took it into the living room, turned on the television, climbed onto the treadmill, put the remote and phone into the recess meant for a drink bottle and started running.

Two pizzas for the price of one at lunchtime.

The oligarchs still deliver.

Kaufhof had a sale on.

She switched channels. The news. Jonas Baumann's funeral had been earlier that day. Several hundred mourners paid their respects. There were no visuals of little Britta, the girl who now waded through Amira's mind like a trapped ghost.

Amira's watching was broken by a bleep from the mobile. She swiped the screen to read the message. There was a text from the Messenger. *Forty-five minutes. Where life grows.*

Her feet pounded down on the pavement.

Modern Indian music with heavy percussion played through earphones all the way to her feet. A backpack containing a wallet, keys, water bottle, a paperback, and phone flapped against her back. A heavy breeze, more autumnal than Spring-like, swept through the air as she ran across the Hohenzollernbrücke, feeling the vibration underfoot from the passing of an Intercity Express, over to the other side of the Rhine. She went down steps, past the television stations and the old train tracks that used to serve the working harbour. Wild geese, black beaked and tailed, were nesting in the grass along the river. Seagulls fat from pecking pommes watched on as spectators and the cargo heavy barges trailed through the water. The yellow, green and red children's train chugged through the Rhinepark and dogs frolicked in the grass chasing tennis

balls. She caught a cable car up to the Flora and Botanical Gardens, and beneath her she could see the water glistening in the sun, the train bridge, the six-lane traffic on the zoo bridge and the towering gothic Cathedral from another time.

A family of tourists sat opposite her, their dialect Bavarian. The girl a little older than a toddler was frightened and the mother held her close. The father pointed to the *Altstadt* downstream. Intent on distracting the child they didn't pay Amira any attention. They made her think of the Boy…

A small boy shakes. He is only two or three. The Woman is with us, although I can't see her face. We are rising towards the clear blue sky. Our feet dangle loosely. The Boy cries. Down below, slopes of earth shrouded in white snow. People with skis. The Woman tries to soothe him. Shh. Shh.

She wanted to hold onto the picture, to see the Woman's face, but it swiftly dissolved, like aspirin in water, and it was time to disembark from the cable car.

Wilhelm, her Messenger, was waiting at the end of the gravel path by the lion's head fountain, his arms folded across his chest. This was a favourite meeting spot of his. He'd said the lion emblem on pots and fountains reminded him they needed to be strong and brave. He was twenty-five, fresh out of law school and married. He and his wife, Marie, a high-school sweetheart, had been Members for four years. He was tall, slender, had a nose the shape of a straight slope, and one eye slightly wider, more piercing than the other. Amira strode along the gravel pathway to reach him, past a rectangle of lawn with a pattern of red, dark purple, orange and yellow flowers centring around a fountain, and a relic of the Cologne Cathedral that was blasted to the Garden in World War II by allied bombs.

Wilhelm wore a creaseless white shirt, and spoke in German. ‘I was hoping you’d get a chance to rest on your holiday,’ he said in his overly refined, mellifluous, private school voice.

She didn’t answer.

‘They were pleased with Essen?’ he asked.

‘There are no problems. How’s your wife?’

Wilhelm shrugged stiffly. ‘She makes my bed and tidies up after me. I make a sandwich and she puts away the butter before I’ve even had a chance to grab the second piece of bread.’

Amira laughed. ‘Sounds tough.’

‘You have everything you need?’ His eyes examined her. ‘Enough money for food?’

Her weekly wage, supplied by Father, was more than ample. From the age of twelve, she had received money, although the amount had substantially increased over the years. Now that she was living in Germany, it was to be used for living and travel expenses, as well as incidentals to maintain her level of training, such as sport equipment. There had even been enough for her to save eight thousand dollars, which she kept mostly in a secret bank account. Father was not frugal when it came to supplying his warriors with money; other Movement members were less fortunate.

‘I want to talk to one of my brothers.’

‘You didn’t speak to him at the party?’

‘Not properly.’

He looked at her closely. ‘I’ll talk to my superiors.’

She shifted on her feet. ‘It can’t go through them. My father’s birthday is coming up, I want to surprise him with a present.’ She loathed herself for the lie. Wilhelm had always been good to her, helping her organise Baumann and Clément. He

had proved very useful, especially when it came to arranging transportation and weapons.

His piercing eye shot right through her. ‘You know it isn’t possible.’

She had anticipated his stubbornness. Wilhelm liked rules.

Their conversation was interrupted by the presence of a short, large-bellied man, who was making his way up the garden steps. Wilhelm wandered closer to the flowers pretending to look at them, deep in thought. He only spoke again once the stranger was well out of hearing range.

‘Next time, I’m thinking explosives,’ he said.

He knew her stance on bombs: her distaste for them as crude implements that sent slaves to their deaths before their time. She took a deep breath. ‘How’s Marie getting along with all this thinking you’ve been doing?’

Wilhelm faced her squarely. ‘Come on, Amira. Let’s give the people something to get excited about, something to motivate them towards action.’

She circled her toe over a small weed reaching up between stones. ‘I want to talk to one of my brothers. Then we can talk fireworks.’

He scowled. ‘I can’t get that information. No way.’

She had suspected as much. He would never be able to locate Kolya, not even if he wanted to. ‘I have specific targets,’ she said. ‘I’m not interested in collateral accidents.’

‘Just consider it, will you?’

She turned to leave, and a tentative touch on her elbow stopped her. When she faced him, he seemed afraid. ‘Wait, there’s something else,’ he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

‘There’s a group you must meet.’

‘Approved?’

‘Of course. Your father.’

‘The Kommissar?’

‘Not on it.’

The fact that the group wasn’t on the antiterrorist database relieved her mind. But Wilhelm’s Intel could be wrong. ‘Where am I supposed to meet them?’

‘The north,’ Wilhelm said. ‘A small town. Eckernförde.’

‘Germany?’

Wilhelm nodded.

‘Supplies?’ she asked.

‘Exactly. They’re Internationals.’

She paused for a second. She didn’t feel like travelling anytime soon, but she didn’t have a choice. Father wanted another European source of arms and ammunition. ‘When?’

‘Three days.’

‘The deal?’

‘I don’t know. You’re going to find out.’

She gazed up at the cloudless sky, an expanse so great it was somehow horrifying. ‘This request, it’s going to have to come through Father.’ She could play the rules, too.

‘Fine,’ Wilhelm said stiffly. ‘I’ll let him know. Here are your train tickets.’

When she was alone she opened up the envelope. Alongside the tickets was a slip of paper.

Tomatoes growing well.

Depends on the variety.

* * *

She walked the streets of Cologne and the sun shone down on the buildings and the throng of shoppers intent on food or other items they wanted to purchase before their lunch break was over. *The herd*.

Her legs carried her past Barbarossaplatz. She reached for the back of her neck and squeezed. The tighter the better, she felt. She squinted, but it was from the sun's glare, not the pinch. Glancing at her watch, she strode purposefully back to her apartment.

From her wardrobe she took a white karate uniform, a black belt. She'd spent enough time in physical combat with her brothers, her lithe limbs performing sharp punches, blocks and kicks. Her body had absorbed the routine, the motion. Karate, like jogging, lived inside her now. Sometimes, when she slept, she even dreamed in a sequence of katas, the moves playing out like a dance, beating in her veins.

She jogged to her dojo near the Volksgarten. During the day was the best time for karate classes. Only the professionals were there, those who competed in serious competitions. Noriaki, the usual instructor, was a Japanese immigrant, short, with rippling muscles, even at the age of fifty. Noriaki bowed his head when he saw her.

'Come in,' he said in his jovial voice. 'I thought that perhaps you had taken my advice and were trying some Tai Chi.'

'I did exactly that, Sensei.'

He looked at her dubiously, and began the class with a series of drills and warm-ups. Running up and down the hall, push-ups, sit-ups, squat kicks. There were about ten students today, not a bad number. Some faces were new. She hadn't practiced for three weeks.

In less than a minute, she had decided on her first sparring partner. He was one of the newcomers, a six-feet-four bulk of muscle with no neck, and his best friend was probably a bench press. She would enjoy bringing him down.

Noriaki directed a series of katas, first by number, then by sequence. Next it was time for the sparring. On the way to one of the four canvases, she gestured with her chin at the man of muscle and whispered in Noriaki's ear. 'That one.'

But the bulk left unexpectedly, in the direction of the washroom. Amira stepped onto a mat and Noriaki selected another partner for her. He was six-feet tall, blonde, another face she hadn't seen before. Athletic, compact and muscular. In the gap between his uniform she glimpsed a sun-kissed chest. More pretty boy than Bruce Lee. She'd have him lying on the ground within twenty seconds.

She stepped back off the mat. 'I'll wait for the guy in the bathroom.'

Pretty Boy's mouth hardened. 'Come on, let's go.'

Amira looked over at Noriaki, and he nodded in his serene way. She sighed heavily, stood back up onto the canvas. She could always tackle the guy with no neck afterwards.

Noriaki introduced the pair, one of his customs. 'Anika, this is Lukas. He normally attends evening class.'

With a surprisingly firm grip, Pretty Boy shook her hand. Amira responded with greater pressure.

Pivoting sharply, her back to him, she loosened her neck joints. When she turned around again Lukas looked straight into her eyes. He smiled casually, almost disdainfully, before glancing sideways at Noriaki. How fucking annoying was that? She'd wipe that smirk off Lukas's face in two seconds.

Noriaki looked around the room at all the participants. '*Hajime*,' he called. 'Begin.'

Lukas and Amira bowed, and without hesitation he advanced. His eyes took on a fervent sheen, the smile was gone.

He pounced, launching his body into the air, attacking with one sharp flying kick.

Amira took a deep breath, stepped to the side and fired an outside block, then a counterpunch. Her fist caught Lukas in the jaw. He did not go down, barely stumbled. He lowered his body and went for a foot sweep. She lifted her legs, spun mid-air, landed firmly on both feet. Attempted a punch to his ribs, another to the chin. He deflected both. His hand sent a stabbing pain through her left wrist.

She threw a sweep of her own, and another. No contact. He turned into her, and swiped her with a knife-hand below the knees. Her legs buckled and she hit the canvas hard.

She lay there stunned, a bead of sweat on her upper lip.

'You're done,' Lukas commanded, hardly breathless. 'Go get your water.'

Her leg whipped to kick him from the ground. He blocked the blow in time, arched an eyebrow, and his smile returned.

Noriaki called the round. '*Yame*!'

Anger rose up inside her. If only the sparing continued, she could have flipped him over, his face nuzzled into the mat. Shown him that he had simply caught her on an off moment.

Lukas stood, feet rooted to the floor, put out a hand to help her up.

'I can do it myself,' she said. She pushed off the canvas with her hands and struggled not to wince. The pain in her left wrist was slowly burning. He looked down at it.

'I'm sorry if I hurt you.'

'You didn't.'

'That's good, because I barely felt your punches.'

She rose, swayed on her feet, her pupils unable to focus. Lukas watched her carefully, and before she could turn away, he'd swung her up into his arms.

She fought it, kicking her legs, incredulous. 'Put me down!'

'I don't think so. You need to sit or you'll pass out.'

'I don't faint.' But as she spoke her limbs went weak.

He put her on one of the wooden benches lined up around the dojo, and squatted in front of her, taking his time to inspect her. 'Got some water?'

'In my bag.'

'Where?'

She glared at him.

'You know you want it, just let me get it for you.'

Amira remained silent. Her throat was parched, but she wasn't about to admit it. She wanted him to leave her be, start sparing with his next opponent. Allow her a moment alone to recover.

'Damn it,' he said, his face now red. He strode away and her shoulders relaxed. Lukas approached Noriaki. The Sensei then pointed at her bag. Here she was thinking that Noriaki was her friend.

Lukas dug in her knapsack. She tried to rise but dizziness swept over her and she had to sit back down. He found her drink and brought her bag over, too. He handed her the water bottle.

She gritted her teeth. 'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it. How's the wrist?'

'I told you, it's fine.'

'I thought it may have sprained.'

'As if.'

Lukas shook his head. 'Look, I wouldn't have been so hard on you. It's not my thing to spar with women.'

‘Sure it’s not.’

‘Noriaki told me to come. He said you were tough. That you could handle it.’

‘I can.’

She leaned back against the wall, stared off into space. Her sore wrist lay in her lap.

‘Low blood pressure,’ Lukas said. ‘You should get it checked out.’

‘What are you, a doctor or something?’

‘No. Actually, I’m a cop.’

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes. You’ve got to be kidding me. Of all the people she had to meet today. She needed a run, or an alcoholic beverage.

‘That’s nice,’ she said, her voice unfailingly polite.

Lukas smiled, then laughed. ‘That’s not the usual response I receive.’

This time she was determined to get off the bench. She began to heave herself up but it was no use. Her arms wobbled. Why was she like this? He hadn’t even knocked her head around and she was like a ragdoll. It must be prolonged jetlag. The memories of Britta and Amelia that had attached themselves to her brain. Amira lowered herself to the seat; she would have to wait a few more minutes, put up with Lukas the cop.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked.

She wanted to tell him to go to hell, mind his own business. ‘Walked.’

‘You need someone to take you home. I’ll give you a ride.’

She looked at her unwanted companion. His stance was firm, back ramrod straight. She could tell that he was probably used to getting his own way, ordering people about. He looked as though he may be around twenty-six and guessed that he was one of those ambitious, up-and-coming police officers who worked most of the time with no social life.

‘Thanks, but no thanks.’ Her voice was clearer now.

He gave her a long look. ‘Can you call someone, then? A friend? Family member?’

She smiled wanly. ‘Yes, officer.’

‘Fine. Use the phone in your bag.’

He left and went back to the lesson.

Amira contemplated saluting him behind his back, but didn’t in case he turned around. Noriaki paired Lukas with the guy with no neck. The two men went to a canvas, bowed, and began to spar. Lukas had the other man on the floor within thirty seconds. She grimaced at the injustice of it.

Feeling a little stronger, she lifted herself from the bench and started to walk out of the room, past Noriaki.

His chin was high, and he had a satisfied smile. ‘I think I’ve finally found your match.’

She shook her head.

‘Don’t be too hard on him,’ Noriaki said. ‘His mother was killed in an armed-robbery when he was eleven. He’s turned out well considering all he’s been through.’

She stared at her feet as she walked down the stairs. ‘I’ll see you in the evening class next time.’

‘Hey, besides, you needed the competition,’ Noriaki called out after her. ‘Lukas is the best I’ve got. He’s competing in German nationals later this year.’

‘Good for him.’

‘You should too. You’d excel.’

‘Maybe next year.’ With that she continued down the steps.

In the reception area she stopped at the vending machine. Plugged in two coins and pressed for a sports drink. She normally wouldn’t touch the stuff, only when she had done some sparing with Kolya and she didn’t have a banana. The electrolytes

seemed to reenergise her quicker than water. She twisted the lid and downed a third of the bright liquid.

There was the flat, dull sound of bare feet pattering against the hardwood stairs. The fast footsteps grew closer. She turned and looked up. Lukas stopped half way down. His expression was almost one of surprise. She sipped her drink.

He looked at her, concern in his eyes. ‘Someone’s picking you up?’

He was a real cop. A tenacious one.

Amira nodded. ‘My boyfriend. He’ll be here any minute.’

He paused, his eyes scanning her, up and down, seeming to debate the truthfulness of her answer.

She looked out the window, and there was a young man pulling up to the kerb in a BMW. Perfect timing. ‘Here he is now.’

Lukas looked down, spotted the man. ‘See you next time.’ He ran back up the steps.

She gulped down the rest of the drink, chucked the container into a bin and left, walking down the lane, into the labyrinth of streets that sucked her in, the yellow spring sunshine filtering down on her through the gabled roofs.

6

Tuesday 11 May - Wednesday 12 May

The next afternoon Amira walked to an Internet café on Neumarkt. She was determined to begin the search for her birth parents and needed a secure location, where Laith and Oscar, always the computer geeks, the Movement's number one hackers, would be unable to track her computer activity.

The usual avenues for discovering her birth parents after a closed adoption were unavailable to her. She searched an Australian online adoption registry for an unknown birth mother, father and brother, but found nothing that matched her birthday or name. She couldn't post her own details because Laith and Oscar would be sure to find out and report her. Also, she couldn't ask for the help of the New South Wales Community Services Adoption Information Unit, a non-government organisation, or a private investigator who might pry into the Movement.

Imagine: Amira Knox child of Henry and Edith Knox, otherwise known as the leaders of the Authenticity Movement. Raised in Kangaroo Valley on a diet of molotov cocktails, nitric acid, nitroethane, lead azide – could I be your child?

The takers would have clogged up her inbox.

One possibility was that Mother had more information, details she had forgotten to pass on over the years, which could be teased out with some questioning. Amira was only permitted to call her in the case of an absolute emergency, and this would cause

her trouble if Father found out. Given an eight-hour time difference, it would be 11pm in Australia.

She sat still for a moment, staring at the computer screen, then made up her mind. She went into one of the five empty telephone booths and made the call.

The phone rang several times as she rolled her shoulders and neck. Finally, Mother answered.

'Yes?' her voice was anxious, presumably because of the late hour.

'It's me, Mum.'

There was a pause. 'You're okay?'

'Yes.'

'Then I should go.'

'Is he there?'

'No. But you know the rules.'

'Mum, wait,' Amira's voice was choked. 'I miss your cooking.'

Mother laughed heartily. 'What rubbish! I always had to make you eat my food and now you miss it? It must be the lamb's fry you yearn for.'

Amira chuckled. 'Um, no.'

Mother had stopped laughing. 'I have to go.'

'Do you know anything about my birth parents? Maybe the adoption agency you used?' The words tumbled out in a rush. There was a moment of silence. Outside the window the sun hid behind a white glare of clouds.

'No, I don't know anything. Your Father handled it, I just signed the papers.'

Amira's shoulders sank, and in the background Amelia cried. Her sister had gas, Mother explained, and she wasn't sleeping well. Last night she woke every hour. She was testing different formulas to find one that didn't cause pain. If only she could breastfeed. She felt guilty. She wanted to ask Amira something. Her breathing was heavy through the mouthpiece.

‘I want you to look after her, if anything happens to me.’

Amira paused, her head light. ‘What’s brought this on?’

‘I’m getting old, that’s all. I’ll sleep better if I know that you’ll always be here for her.’

‘Of course, I will.’

She thanked Amira needlessly, murmured how she loved her and promised not to speak of their phone call to anyone. Before Amira could return her affection, Mother had hung up.

She put the receiver down in its cradle and pictured her mother at home on the rocking chair before the fire, singing a lullaby to Amelia, snug from the darkness outside. When Mother rose from her bed in the morning the house would be dark, the wooden floorboards cold on her feet. A cup of tea would warm her. Milk, no sugar. When Amira was young Mother would make her a cup with a sugar cube and they would sit together with their steaming mugs, watching the boys jump on the trampoline through the dining-room window. Amira had felt like such a big girl.

She paid the bored-looking youth behind the counter for the time she had used the computer and phone, then saw a newspaper on top of the bench. On the first page was a photo of young Britta and her mother leaving Jonas Baumann’s newly set grave. The mother wore black over-sized sunglasses. She walked with her back bent, holding her daughter’s hand. Britta’s countenance was blank, her lips loose, eyes focusing down on her feet. Her fair hair clung to her face.

The article below the photograph read:

Ten-year-old Britta Baumann was the first person to find Jonas Baumann dead in his greenhouse last week. She has not spoken since and is undertaking grief therapy with a psychologist. Her father died of cancer when she was four. A family friend told reporters: ‘Jonas was like a father to her, taking her to the markets, teaching her about football. Britta adored him.’

Amira thought of all the media cameras that must have been at the funeral, snapping away at Britta. The child appeared the embodiment of emptiness: life without love. This is how one exists, Amira thought, when life has hollowed you out. She glanced up, checked that no one was looking, swiftly folded the newspaper and tucked it inside her backpack. Then she ran.

Her legs sliced through the air. Past the Cathedral. The Rhine was ahead of her.

The seven defining principles of the Authenticity Movement are:

1. All individuals have an Authentic core.

2. The Movement's role is to protect this core.

She sucked the warm air in and dodged a cyclist along the river. The sunshine was on her face, a cool breeze had picked up and although she tried to continue reciting the principles her mind was distracted by a cracked bird's egg lying on the path. She stopped and couldn't help looking at the half-formed, baby bird inside. Thick blood mixed with clear liquid had leaked onto the concrete. The creature's feathers were wet, stiff. In the tree above there was an empty nest. It was a sign of something dreadful to come, but she didn't know what.

Run.

Father's call came through her home line late that night.

'Order the cake,' he said. She detected a firm, almost irritated, quality to the way he spoke. 'The baker is an expert and will do a fine job. His prices are fair. You have enough money. Get some balloons and streamers, too.'

This was his way of saying that her presence was required at the meeting in the north tomorrow – just as Wilhelm had said.

Before her trip she researched Eckernförde, the public transportation systems, the entrances and exits, the police stations and especially the home where she was to

meet the Internationals. On Wednesday, shortly after noon, she was on the train heading north. She sat by a window, gazing out at the Rhine, and the drizzle. The journey was scheduled to take approximately six hours with changeovers at Hamburg and Kiel.

She found herself remembering when she first travelled overseas at eighteen and how excited she had been. People didn't eat vegemite in Europe and they drove on the wrong side of the road. Everything seemed just as Father and Mother had taught her, the spread was taking over people's lives. The realisation that she could influence change had excited her. She was seeing the world as it would soon no longer be.

But as she sat on the train to Eckernförde, her head rested on her hand. The Rhine vanished and an industrial area commenced. Calls through the speaker were for Solingen, Wuppertal, Hagen, Dortmund. Then came the green fields that reminded her of home, and the rain fell down in layers. Münster West. Two children played in the aisle with toy cars. What would it have been like to grow-up like them, without weapons? Twenty-two, and she was exhausted to the bone, like a woman three times her age, where curling up in bed wearing a pair of wooly socks was a thrill. Osnabrück. Bremen. The further north the train went the more black and white Holstein cows there were, and horses the colour of milky coffee.

At Hamburg and Kiel she switched trains and then there were two more stops at rural villages before she arrived in Eckernförde, a small town on the Baltic Sea in Schleswig-Holstein, home to German submarines and a torpedo research facility. Posters advertised Flensburger beer. She walked through the octagonal train station past the DB Service Store and out into the day; the rain was fierce against her open umbrella. The hood of her parka was pulled over her head and a scarf covered her neck and lower face. The seaside town was glum under the mid afternoon, grey sky. People in coats waited to cross the road at the traffic lights and wandered the footpaths; their chatter was laced mostly with a pert Northern German dialect, although there were other regional strands from disappointed tourists who had hoped for a beach holiday.

Wherever they came from, they wore jumpers, jackets, jeans and long pants, despite it being spring. Pink roses grew wild, unpruned for some time, their petals heavy, damp and fallen, scattered on paths and in garden beds. She passed a giant millstone, a taxi rank, a public phone booth, a chemist, and walked on the right side of the path looking out for zooming bicycles on the left. A postman on a pushbike delivered mail the old-fashioned way. At the 20B bus stop, cigarette butts floated in the puddles.

She caught the Line 4 bus and was the only person who got off after the Sauer & Sohn pistol factory at the Domsland/B 203 bus stop. The Baker may work at the factory. She could have stayed on the bus for another stop, but she needed to make sure she wasn't being followed. Walking through the rain, straight along the path where fat slugs moved. They were as long as a finger, and the snails larger than jumbo marbles, their shells the colour of white sand. Burning nettle and weeds grew on the side of the road, and a truck filled with pink pigs, reeking of manure, went by. She turned right at a roundabout into Domsland, a newly developed area filled with construction work, redbrick flats, townhouses, a few stand alones. She counted three cats staring out of windows, watching her. She could still hear the traffic on the B203 when she took the second right down a narrow paved road to the house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

The sky was darker by the time she spotted the brown brick house, pines no taller than a six-year-old in its unkempt garden. A white van and three bins were parked under the carport, a satellite dish on the roof. The watering can was near the front steps – the sign that the place was safe and not being monitored. She crossed the driveway, walked up the three steps and knocked on the front door. Twice. Pause. Three times. Pause. One time. A clean-shaven man in his early thirties opened up. He had olive skin, black hair a and a slight build. She guessed he was either a Palestinian or a Turkish immigrant.

'Tomatoes growing well?' she asked.

'It depends on the variety,' he replied, opening the door more fully.

She closed her umbrella, put it beside the watering can and stepped inside. Two other men, both holding Kalashnikovs, stood by a scruffy couch. One looked nineteen, and the other, a broad-faced man, was around Amira's age. A woman wearing a headscarf, loose blouse and jeans was off to the corner, her eyes on her flat-soled shoes.

The room smelled of fresh paint and was bare of everything but a few pieces of cheap student furniture: a well-worn coffee table, a TV perched on a laminated entertainment unit and a round dining table with a scratched surface. As clean as a hospital. No dust, no clutter, no family photographs. Either they had cleaned up for her, or had just moved in. Windows were standard. The internal walls and ceiling were thin, prefabricated. She would use a quiet voice. Beyond, there was a kitchen and a rear door – a potential exit. There were stairs that lead up, most likely to bedrooms, and also some that lead down.

'You can call me Max,' said the man who greeted her at the door.

'I'm Cats.'

'My friend here, she must search you.'

Amira nodded sharply. 'Ankle-holster.'

The men turned and faced the kitchen while the woman searched her, her fingers light to the touch, tentative and slow, a non-expert. Possibly only brought in because Father had told them he was sending a woman to do the deal. She pulled up the rims of Amira's pants and eyed the Glock.

'Yes, she is clear,' she muttered in Arabic before slipping out to the kitchen. They seemed unaware that Amira also knew the language.

Max led her down into the basement, closely followed by the younger of the soldiers. The broad-faced man stood guard at the top of the stairway. The underground space was surprisingly large given the size of the house. There was another door that lead up to the backyard, which Amira knew from her Google search was small. Beyond the garden was a pond, a park for children, and a small field that made the house an

ideal location if urgent escape was required. The nineteen-year-old took his place beside this door. The walls and floor were concrete; there was little natural light. Samples of weapons were laid out on and under four rows of wooden benches. Her Warrior Brothers would drool. Laith would say ‘it’s better than a lolly shop’.

She walked through the aisles while Max remained near the bottom of the stairs. Handguns were first. Czechoslovakian produced CCZ 75s and her own personal favourite, the Glock 17, Austrian produced. She pointed to them.

‘Ten each.’

Next were the submachine guns. The Heckler & Koch MP-5. A very accurate piece of weaponry. She stopped, picked one up, felt the weight: it was loaded. She dismantled the weapon. Clean. Reassembled. Pushed the clip into the chamber.

‘Ten.’

‘Just like a man,’ Max remarked to his younger colleague in Arabic, a slight grin on his face.

Except she didn’t consider the machinery an extension of herself, it wasn’t worth fondling.

Assault rifles. AK47s and American M16s. ‘Ten each.’ Her brothers’ mouths would water.

Sniper rifles. A Remington 700 widely used by US Marine Corps. She was impressed. Even she had to pick it up. She snapped the rifle parts into position and gazed through the scope at the wall where there was a poster target, not intended for use. It appeared accurate.

‘Ten.’

This was going to cost the Movement, and Amira was beginning to fear the true price. She ordered suppressors, night vision goggles, infra red illuminators and thermals. Then she spotted two small glass jars with a substance inside that she suspected was ricin, made from castor beans, where one pinprick inserted into a human

being was lethal. The poison wasn't difficult to produce. The central problem with using it, was that it required close engagement with the target.

'Ricin?' she checked, automatically slipping into Arabic.

The corner of Max's mouth curled into a smile, as though he was pleased with her language ability. He nodded.

'Three jars.'

'Would you like to see it in action?' Max asked, sticking to his mother tongue. 'We could get an animal and…'

She cut him off with a raised hand and a shake of her head. 'That won't be necessary. Three jars.'

Unlocked mobile phones and unregistered sim cards were next. There were no local pistols, which she had been expecting. At the end of her shopping list, Max spoke.

'You've told me what you want, now it's my turn. Please, come back upstairs.'

In the living area, they sat at the dining table. The nineteen-year-old put a music DVD on through the TV at a reasonably high volume. The red curtains had been closed; the woman was nowhere to be seen, and the soldiers milled around the couch. Max leaned forward, laced his fingers together on the table between them, and watched her carefully for several moments, the skin below his eyes sagging. When he spoke his voice was low, almost a whisper against the music, and he uttered a single name.

She coughed in disbelief.

'You know who this man is?'

She knew. The name belonged to the Israeli Foreign Minister: that was the exchange. Father was contracting her out. He'd turned her into a commodity. A deep, burgeoning anger, rose in her chest. It was a rage that had been there as long as she could remember, only she'd never let it surface.

'He is coming to Berlin,' Max said. 'In three weeks.'

She blew her cheeks out.

The soldiers shifted their stances. Max's dark, steady eyes crossed to them and then back to her. 'He's gaining popular support, and wishes to completely eradicate our people.'

'I have heard of him and his reputation.' The politician was a regular star in international news coverage. Palestinians feared him becoming the next Israeli prime minister. She should tell him she wouldn't be hired, but deft duty kept her from moving. 'How do you want it to happen?'

Max smiled faintly. 'Your decision.'

She prevented herself from scowling.

He waited for her response, and when he didn't receive one he frowned. 'This target fits within your own agenda. You know I met your leader once, three years ago. We had a long discussion. We agreed on many points, shared many values, even though our fundamental beliefs differ significantly. We will benefit by working together. We have a common enemy.'

'Why not do this yourself?' she asked.

He calmly ran a finger along his jawline. 'Your people have showed great skill in this area.'

She was being handled; it was clear they wanted her, a white woman, and therefore an unlikely candidate for a security threat on an Israeli politician, to carry out the task. But what was Father thinking with this high security target so early on? He must be out of his mind.

'You will claim credit?' she asked.

'Correct.'

'I make my own way, in and out?'

Max licked his lips. 'Yes.'

And if she didn't get out, she'd take the fall.

* * *

The basement. I'm eight and on the roster of house chores it's my turn to mop the floors. But I'm sidetracked, keen to make a picture book for Laith's birthday. Father comes home unexpectedly; Mother has a mop in her hand. Her eyes darken in fear.

'What are you doing, Mother?' he asks in his taut voice.

'She's mopping 'cause Mira hasn't finished making Laith a birthday present,' Oscar blabs.

He finds me at the table. The sting from the back of his hand is what I feel first and then my head as it crashes against something hard. There's a ringing in my ears and then Mother's cries.

'You selfish girl,' he says.

He gathers my hair in his palm and pulls. I quickly try to find my feet. Kolya hits his leg in a dangerous move but is thrown against a wall. I bite my lip as Father pulls me down into the basement by my hair.

'You can stay in here for twenty-four hours without food, light or water.'

'I'm sorry Father!'

The heavy door is slammed, and I hear the deadlock latch. There is nothing in here, no bed. I sit for hours on the cold ground, hoping that Father will change his mind, and the urge to pee intensifies. There's a burning between my legs that moves up into my stomach the longer I hold it. Times passes. I don't know how long. In the end I relieve myself in a corner. The stench fills the space. I can't sleep.

I'm sorry. So sorry. Please, I can be better.

Then sometime in the middle of the night, there is the sound of a key turning in the lock. When I gaze up, startled, Mother stands in the doorway. She gives me a pillow, a blanket, a glass of milk and a sandwich.

‘I didn’t know he was coming,’ she says. She is crying too. She holds me.

‘Shh. One of your brothers will hear.’

She quickly goes upstairs and brings a mop and bucket back with her and cleans up my mess.

‘Oh, Mira, I’m so sorry. My darling girl.’ When she has finished she says: ‘Now I must go in case one of your brothers wakes up and tells your father. I’ll be back early in the morning to collect these things before he comes to let you out.’

I’m a teenager. Mother is in Melbourne on a woman’s retreat for Members. I have to do the grocery shopping in Nowra. There’s a bakery and I like to look at all the cakes, imagining, if I had the money, which ones I would buy. A boy comes up to me. He’s wearing board shorts, thongs and his hair is long, hanging in his eyes.

‘Let me buy you one,’ he says.

I’m taken aback. ‘I don’t know you,’ I say.

Then I see Father. His eyes are on me. His face is red as he walks towards us.

‘Get away from her,’ Father says to the boy.

The boy steps back. ‘Take it easy, mate.’ He turns and moves away, shaking his head.

I’m so embarrassed that I want to cry. Father grips my hand and pulls me to the car.

Slut. Whore. Whoring slut. You bring shame on the Movement. Shame on your Mother.

This time I’m in the basement for 48-hours and there is no Mother to help me through the stint.

* * *

Max opened his hands disarmingly; he looked worried by her delay. ‘I was lead to believe this wouldn’t be a problem.’

‘You have research? Locations? Times?’ she asked.

‘We only have general information that the subject will be attending a meeting in Berlin in three weeks to discuss trade ties between Germany and Israel. The Foreign Ministry building. Specifics will be your responsibility.’

A few months of preparation and it might be doable… but three weeks for a maximum-security target? She put her elbows on the table, her head between her hands. How had her life come to this?

Kolya’s words: You’re tired, that’s all. She wanted to believe that was true, she needed to. Otherwise, what else was she?

She raised her head. ‘Okay.’

Max’s eyes widened. ‘Okay?’

‘Yes, you have your deal.’

7

Thursday 13 May

The following evening Amira walked down Maastrichter Strasse, her knapsack knocking against her back. She stared up at the vivid violet sky speckled with stars and felt small beneath them.

She had no intention of following through with the assassination of the Israeli Foreign Minister, and on the train back to Cologne had decided that she wanted to assert herself in some small way. This was her opportunity to show Father she would not be put out for hire, although she would play the game to some extent. She would show him that she held some kernel of power.

Thirty minutes later she arrived at the dojo, eight minutes early for the class. While she waited, she started tummy crunches. At number thirty-two Lukas approached her. She groaned, her shoulders hunching. But she continued with her sit ups, didn't stop.

A smile crept over his face. 'Decided to come to an evening class?' he asked.

She avoided looking at him, stared hard at the wall. 'What are you doing here? I thought were taking day-time classes now.'

He laughed. 'So you switched? You must be afraid of me. Didn't think you could handle the competition.'

She rolled her eyes. 'I practically let you win.'

He raised a brow. 'Still suffering from dizziness, I see.'

Before she could respond, Noriaki called for the class to begin. Amira and Lukas stood in the last line on the right. Noriaki motioned for her to stand in the vacant spot behind Lukas. So she must have a lower Dan. A mere technicality. But with Lukas in front of her, she stood taller. Adrenaline surged through her.

'Okay,' Noriaki said. 'I want laps across the dojo. Run across, give me thirty push-ups, run again, thirty sit-ups, again, thirty-squat kicks, then twice more.'

Lukas and Amira exchanged glances. He had a gleam of determination in his eye. The battle was beginning.

Noriaki blew his whistle.

They sprinted in unison, firing across the floor like bullets.

Lukas reached the other end first, dropped onto his palms and toes. Amira was beside him, one push-up behind. His biceps and shoulders were larger, but she was lighter. She'd catch up on the sit-ups.

Up they went for the run. He was still ahead. After three sit-ups they were even. At ten she was two ahead. Lukas laughed.

'What's so damn funny?' she asked.

'You're not going to win.'

The speed of her crunches increased and he wasn't laughing anymore.

She beat him to the squat-kicks. When it was time for running and push-ups he was quicker again. He started clapping in-between each press. Amira doubted that this guy had ever even seen a doughnut in his life.

Her anger built. She could play at that game, too, and mimicked him.

His rich hazel eyes widened. 'Yeah?' He switched to doing a single-arm push-up on his left side. 'Come on, Mrs Schwarzenegger.'

'No talking!' Noriaki barked.

Lukas pressed his lips together and grinned at her. She wouldn't allow her mouth to curve up. Instead, she matched him, but her left arm quivered after ten. She hoped he didn't notice.

Six minutes later, Amira was one squat kick ahead. She pelted across the floor conscious that Lukas was right beside her. She made it to the finish line barely in front of him.

Placing her palms on the back of her head, she sucked the air in triumphantly.

Lukas rubbed his head.

Noriaki lined everyone back up for the katas. Pinan Nidan, Pinan Sandan, own timing.

'You're fit,' Lukas whispered to her.

She was not distracted; her left leg delivered a stamping kick.

'Sharp moves,' Lukas said.

Noriaki coughed. 'Remembering that karate is also a spiritual practice. And I will not allow talking during katas!'

A giggle rose in her chest, but she pressed her mouth downwards.

When it was time for sparing Lukas followed her to a canvas. Her foot jittered against the floor. This was her big chance.

His hazel-green eyes glimmered. 'You know, you looked pretty sexy before, tackling those one-arm push-ups. I kept thinking: I could lift you up, but I knew you couldn't have done the same for me.' He smiled, and stood up on the mat.

She jerked the bottom of her uniform. You're coming down, bad cop.

'*Hajime*,' Noriaki called.

Lukas and Amira bowed. This time she was ready for him to spring. She stepped in to jam his strike with a high block, followed by a reverse-punch to the head. Contact. Followed by a straight punch. He intercepted it, raising his forearm, then sending an upper cut to the jaw her way. She blocked it, and he grimaced. That was enough for her

to knee him in the groin, set her feet on balance, reload a kick to the head. He was down. The round was called. She got a warning for an illegal move, but she'd won using some basic self-defence.

He held his head in his hands. 'Shit. I can't believe I lost.'

'Go get your water bottle,' she said.

Amira left him lying on the mat, moved on to her next opponent. She forced herself to concentrate on the next round of sparing, and resisted the temptation to see how Lukas was faring. She defeated the black belt in front of her easily, but her pulse slowed considerably after the high of beating Lukas.

After the class, Lukas approached her. 'I want you to help train me. I'm aiming for the German Nationals.'

'Out of the question,' Amira replied.

'Why not?'

She shook her head.

'You're the best opponent I've seen in Cologne. Man or woman. I need someone who can match me.'

She knitted her brows together. 'I only train myself. Not other people.' Amira heaved her knapsack onto her back and waved goodbye to Noriaki. He gave her the thumbs up.

As she walked down the stairs, there were voices of the men behind her. Out on the street, into the fresh air, she was greeted by a man in ragged clothes. His hair was wild, eyes manic. He gaped at her, put out his hand to touch her hair. She tilted her head away but there was another arm there that was faster than her own – it was Lukas'.

'The young lady doesn't want to be touched,' he said.

The man was slurring, his breath sour with alcohol and smoke. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye. 'Fuck off! What would you know?'

Then he suddenly ran out onto the road, into the traffic.

Lukas dumped his bag by Amira's feet, and chased after the drunk.

A car was just about to slam into the man; Lukas pushed him hard away. The man fell onto the side of the road. The car came to a halt, knocking Lukas over. Amira ran out to him.

He was finding his feet.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

The drunk was up doing another jig. Laughing, yelling profanities.

Lukas jerked his body in the man's direction, and he ran off scared.

Amira looked down at Lukas. The car had torn his uniform and there was a gash on his hip.

'Band-aid,' he muttered.

He told the driver of the car not to worry, all was well. Then he went back into the karate building. Amira followed him. She grabbed his bag. 'Here, let me help.'

The receptionist had a first-aid kit. She handed it to Amira.

He went into the male change-rooms, and after a moment of hesitation, Amira went after him. Thankfully, they were the only ones in the room.

Lukas untied his belt, ripped off his top, looked at the wound in a mirror. His chest was smooth, muscles chiseled. Amira opened the first-aid kit. She got out the bandages. Washed and dried her hands with antiseptic lotion.

'Looks like you might need some stitches.'

'No. It's not that bad.'

She pressed a bandage on the wound. She could see a fine strip of dark hair leading down from the navel. Her heart began to race. Quickly, she attended the wound.

He grabbed her hand, his touch almost electric. 'Your fingers are shaking.'

'What you did was stupid,' Amira said. 'The man was a drunk.'

'Your concern for the unfortunate is admirable,' he replied.

She pulled her hand free, and stepped up to a basin. Turned a tap on and twisted and turned her fingers in the water. She looked up into the mirror. Lukas had sat down, and was inspecting her handiwork.

He glanced up and caught her gaze in the mirror. ‘Not bad.’ Then he stared at her hands. ‘I think they’re clean.’

She turned the tap off. Blinked. ‘All right,’ she murmured.

‘Pardon?’

‘I’ll do it.’

He looked at her. ‘Am I missing something?’

‘I’ll train you. But I’m not reliable. I’m always out of town on business.’

‘We’ll work something out.’

‘On one condition.’

Lukas leaned back, his stomach muscles flexing. ‘What’s that?’

‘I can pull out anytime.’

He stood up, and came towards her. ‘Anytime you want.’

She looked away from his stare. She could smell his sweat, salty against his aftershave. Amira hoped she wouldn’t live to regret her decision.

He looked down at her bag. ‘Do you have spare clothes in there?’

Amira nodded.

He stepped closer, his thighs heating her own, his cologne even stronger. She bit her lower lip. ‘Good, get changed,’ he said. ‘I’m taking you out for a coffee. We’ll discuss a training schedule.’

She opened her mouth to protest. He put a finger to her lips. ‘Don’t over-anaylse this, Anika.’

He rotated, strode back over to his bag and pushed off his white karate pants. ‘You can change in here if you want.’

‘I… I’ll meet you out front of the ladies.’

* * *

He was waiting for her in a black leather jacket, a pair of faded jeans with two motorcycle helmets in his arms. He looked her over as she emerged from the women's change-room. She wore lycra leggings, and a red sports top.

He took off his jacket and handed it to her. 'You're going to need this.'

She looked at him startled. She shouldn't be going to have coffee with a cop, but as his intense gaze washed over her, it was both captivating and scary. She put the jacket on.

'Do you make a habit of carrying two helmets with you?' she asked.

Lukas shook his head. 'Noriaki told me he was expecting you tonight, and I was planning on our rematch ending in my favour. Wanted to make sure I could give you a lift home.'

She scowled.

A smile curved his lips. 'What do you like to drink? A coffee, or perhaps a beer?'

'Green tea,' she replied.

'I know the perfect place.'

His black Ducati racing bike was in a carpark half a block away. He climbed on, slipped the key into the ignition and offered her his hand.

She hesitated. What would Father say if he saw her? She looked at the motorcycle.

Lukas started up the engine, and grinned. 'You're not afraid are you?'

She narrowed her eyes, put the helmet on and within a second she was behind him, taking care not to wrap her arms around his fresh wound.

He started up the engine, and they roared out of the carpark, into the streets and the night. On the longer stretches Lukas gunned the bike, swerved the corners, zigzagged through the traffic.

Amira could feel his taut body against hers; the air inside the helmet became stuffy. When they hit a red light, impatience rose tense in her shoulders. If he hadn't been a cop, she could've relaxed.

After six minutes Lukas cut through a side street, pulled up to a kerb. He took the key out of the ignition.

He turned and looked at her over his shoulder. 'We're here.'

Amira's hands dropped to her sides.

He showed her to an alternative café on the corner of Lindenstrasse called the Grunge. Student bicycles lined up on the side of the road, and on the footpath there were outdoor tables and chairs with orange cushion covers. Inside, original artworks dressed the walls, candles flickered on scratched wooden tables, and antique French-style chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Behind the bar were gleaming glasses stacked upside down, bottles of spirits and liqueurs, a coffee machine, and on the bench a large bowl filled with fresh fruit. A blackboard advertised the cake specials of the day. Amira eyed the pear and chocolate torte.

They sat at a back table, and he pulled out a chair for her. He ordered for them both. A double espresso for himself and a pot of green tea for her. When their drinks arrived he added a sachet of sugar to his coffee and stirred. She poured the boiling water through the strainer to produce a pale green liquid.

She blew on her hot tea. 'So, what kind of cop are you?'

Lukas leaned back against his booth, his shoulders broad. 'Personal protection.'

Amira scanned his face. 'You mean like a bodyguard?'

'Something like that.'

There was a long heavy pause. Amira was too busy trying to make sense of him. ‘Who do you protect?’

He tipped his mug of coffee to his lips and sipped. ‘It varies.’

‘High profilers?’

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, mug clasped in his fingers. ‘We take care of people in trouble. When they’re threatened by criminals.’

Amira flinched. ‘Because of your mother, I suppose.’

He was still staring at her. When he smiled she could see his jaw lock tight, she’d broken through the smooth, cocky veneer.

‘Noriaki’s got a big mouth,’ he said. ‘He should learn to keep it shut.’

Her stomach knotted. She was cruel to press him to remember pain, but she needed to see if it was genuine. The anguish in his eyes was unmistakable, even though he tried to mask it. When she was learning crouches and elbow crawls, preparing to penetrate the enemy, he was helpless in the face of a different adversary.

‘I’m sorry,’ she replied.

He sipped his coffee. ‘Your accent sounds a little unusual, like Cologne but then there’s something else…’ he said.

‘I spent a few years in France, maybe that’s it.’ A lie, which she couldn’t avoid.

‘Ah. And you said you were out of town a lot on business? What do you do?’

She shifted in her seat. ‘I’m a painter.’ A half-truth this time. She was improving. ‘I use the pseudonym Ava Schwarz.’

‘Must be a difficult industry to break into.’

She shrugged her shoulders. Her fingers were on the rim of her mug, she stared into her tea for a brief moment.

When she looked up, he was still gazing at her.

He cleared his throat. ‘It happened in a small village bank,’ he said unexpectedly. ‘We lived in Füssen. My mother went to withdraw some money for

groceries while I was at school. The police said the man was probably a drug addict. Drug addicts aren't difficult to find. Too desperate. But they never caught him.' Lukas turned his head, stared out of the window into the black night.

He wouldn't understand how she was hanging on his every word.

'My father took it hard,' Lukas continued. 'He moved us to the city. Turned into an alcoholic.' He glanced at her hand. 'Amazing how something so beautiful can throw such a punch.'

She blushed, and smiled.

'So you can,' he said.

She looked at him quizzically.

'Smile.'

She stood. Her head was throbbing now and her face was hot. 'I've an early start in the morning.'

He raked his fingers through his hair. His expression controlled. 'When should we meet for our first training session?'

'Give me your number. I'll call you.'

He looked at her.

'I will,' she said. 'Just be patient with me. It might take a few days.'

He wrote his number down on a serviette. 'Let me give you a ride home.' She wanted to say yes. Pulled out her mobile. 'No. I'll call a taxi.'

Inside her apartment the red light flickered on the answering machine.

Wilhelm.

She showered without listening to the message, and let the warm water wash over her skin. The time with Lukas had left her driven by a splendid intoxication, unlike any she had never known. She couldn't stop thinking of him, imagined him in the

shower with her, his smooth bareness on her own, warming her, his fingers sliding through her hair, down her neck, stroking her. She closed her eyes and her muscles tensed and, in an instant, became weak like jelly. Then there was Britta's face, menacingly gloomy, bereft of all happiness. A mere child.

She squeezed out a blob of shampoo and scrubbed it into her scalp, working it into a rich lather of foam that flopped down on her shoulders, onto the tiles, down the drain. After the shower, she tried to paint something. But the only image that came to mind was of a woman with thousands of little pliers, plucking all the hairs from her body and she didn't fancy painting something gruesome. Then there was the persistent red flickering of the answering machine.

'Oh, all right,' she muttered, pushing the play button.

'Best buddy here,' Wilhelm's voice said. 'Let's meet at 7.35 tomorrow night. The place of fun.'

She deleted the message and the next second the phone rang. She checked her watch: 11pm. Hopefully Wilhelm was cancelling, leaving her with an evening free to paint. The number on the display read 'private number'. She picked up.

'Hello?'

'You are homesick?' the Australian voice was rich, deep and unmistakably Father's.

She was frightened and had to think for a moment. Why was he calling her? Had she made a mistake in her order at the baker's? 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'You are trying to find out information about your birth parents. Why is this?'

She grimaced. Mother would not have divulged their telephone conversation. Father must have a listening device on Mum's phone. 'I only wanted to talk with Mother. The birth parent was an excuse.' The lie was partial.

'Are you keeping up with your daily meditations?' he asked, as if that explained her emotional problems.

‘I try.’

‘This homesickness is a sign of your lack of commitment.’

‘Yes,’ was all she could say in a detached tone. She had learnt that the appearance of submission allowed her to hold onto the unseen part of herself, to survive.

‘Centre yourself. Remember who you are and your true family, the one that would never abandon you.’ The phone went dead.

The dining room was unbearably and completely still, as though life had never moved within the walls. The light from the kitchen shone on a blank canvas, casting a long shadow. Looking at such emptiness and with the phone still pressed against her ear, Amira wiped her wet cheek. To please Father, she had abandoned herself long ago. She stared vacantly at the lifeless room.

8

Friday 14 May – Tuesday 1 June

Amira caught the tram on Line 16 to Rodenkirchen in the south of Cologne and walked for five minutes, arriving at Wilhelm's house at 7.40pm on Friday night. The two-storey property was on a corner block and faced a road. The white exterior looked over a hundred years old, but Wilhelm and his wife Marie had modestly renovated the interior.

When Amira was inside, Wilhelm went straight into the kitchen, popped open an Alsterwasser, a concoction of beer and lemonade, for her and a pilsner for himself. Marie was out tutoring a teenager. He served out two bowls of spaghetti.

They sat down at the dining table. The TV was on in the nearby living room, some soccer match. Amira swigged the alcohol, feeling it spread warmth into her muscles, and looked at the photos on the dining-room walls. She had seen them before, but tonight they made her feel a stab of unexpected hurt. Pictures of Wilhelm and Marie at the Eiffel Tower; Wilhelm and Marie dressed up in clown's costumes at Cologne's Karnival; smiling on top of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Her face tensed. She would never have such photos of herself and a man she loved. Amira had killed people. What man would want to marry her?

'Have you eaten anything today?' Wilhelm asked.

'A croissant.'

'A whole one?'

'It was stale.'

Wilhelm shook his head despairingly. ‘The lemonade is good, then?’

She raised her glass to him. ‘As always.’

He guzzled a third of his beer as she told him Max’s coded number. ‘You need this to arrange the transport of the goods.’ Marie and he would make a series of car trips to obtain the supplies and store them in their cellar.

Amira looked down at the bowl of pasta with meatballs. Normally she didn’t like pasta because it bloated her stomach, but tonight it looked good. She ate it with a fork, and Wilhelm was pleased.

‘So what is the exchange?’ he asked.

She informed him and he put down his bottle and appeared pale, lighter than the pilsner.

‘Impossible,’ he said.

‘Father doesn’t seem to think so,’ she replied. She took another mouthful and chewed.

Wilhelm pushed his food aside. ‘Tell them you need more time.’

She licked some pasta sauce from her lips. ‘This is their window.’

‘Well they should have organised it earlier,’ he said.

‘The information only became public a week ago.’

‘This is suicide.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence.’

He wiped his brow.

‘You wanted a spectacle,’ she said in jest.

‘But the public won’t even know it’s us.’

‘This is for a private audience,’ she replied. ‘Father showing off his muscle to a working group.’

‘I’m going to get a whiskey, want one?’

She'd never had whiskey before. 'Better not. The Alster has made my head dizzy.'

When Wilhelm returned from the kitchen he wanted to know her intended strategy and appeared dismal to learn that she didn't have one. The highest risk as far as the Israelis were concerned was a Palestinian suicide killer. That meant they'd be expecting explosives or a pistol at close range by someone who didn't care about getting away. A sniper would be less predictable, but not without dangers: protective service spotters could be on the lookout. Also, security would analyse where possible sniper shots could come from within a certain radius, although for a Foreign Minister they might not have the resources. Poison in food was unreliable; there were too many factors that couldn't be controlled. Or there was something like ricin – but how to get close enough to prick the target without being noticed?

In the end, they both agreed that the best option was a long-range attack, if they could think of a where and how. They would reconvene after 48 hours of research. Poor Wilhelm, he was going to stress about this. He wouldn't sleep for two and a half weeks.

She arrived back in her apartment around midnight, flipped open the laptop and activated the Anonymiser software and Oscar's customised P.G.P encryption key. She sent him an email asking for information on the Israeli Foreign Minister's visit to Berlin. Then she performed several Internet searches on open sources that revealed nothing.

She crawled into bed at 2am and smiled to herself: she had given the appearance of preparing seriously for her mission. An emboldened strength spread through her.

Reaching for the nightstand, she found her phone, punched in a message to Lukas. Sent it. Within two minutes there was a response. She leaned back on her pillow and stared at her mobile. What was she doing? And why was he awake at this hour? Was he out protecting a client, or suffering from insomnia? Regardless, in sixteen hours she'd see him. She was learning how to reinvent herself. How to find Amira.

* * *

There were about six people in the dojo when she arrived, Lukas among them. His eyes lit up when he saw her.

'How's the cut?' she asked.

He lifted up his top. 'Healing.'

She found herself wishing she could touch his smooth skin. 'Lesson number one. Don't advertise your weaknesses. Got it?'

'Bad day?' he countered.

She took a deep breath. Told herself she was capable of doing one good deed for this man.

'Lesson number two. You need to learn the power of defence.'

She guided him through a series of drills, then a sequence of movement that he had never considered. Making sure his knee was bent sufficiently, his breathing in unison with his actions. He radiated strength and determination, accepted her criticism without flinching. Not that there was much to critcise. He was truly a master at karate.

His strong eye contact gave her a sense of euphoria. She forced herself to focus on instructing him. At the end of the lesson they did some stretches on the floor. He reached over, and without warning, tickled her.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

His fingers were relentless. She couldn't help but smile, then he had her cowering in a fit of laughter.

'Where's your defence now? Huh?' he asked.

'Get off me!' she blurted.

Lukas' fingers wedged deeper into her armpits. 'Only if you let me take you out for a pizza tonight.'

‘No.’ She was trying to catch her breath so she could strike him, but it was no use. He’d found her feet. ‘Okay! Just… please, stop.’

He leaned back, crossed his arms, clearly amused with himself.

They sat outside in the beer garden of a restaurant on Buttermarkt overlooking the Rhine and dined on the local beer, Kölsch, and ‘pizza picante’ with salami, mushrooms and hot peppers.

They talked for a long time about places Lukas wanted to see – Mexico, Japan, Australia – his approaching competition. He was the first person outside the Movement that she’d had a proper conversation with, and she was delighted by his fresh perspective. He was twenty-six-years-old.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

He laughed. Ordered a second round of beers. ‘I’d figured you were more subtle than that.’

‘That’s not an answer.’

‘No. As it happens, I’m available. Why? Are you making me an offer?’

She shook her head, took a bite of pizza, chewed. ‘Why don’t you have someone?’

He looked mildly uncomfortable, but went on to speak about his one serious relationship. The girl had dumped him, claiming he was a workaholic.

‘Were you in love with her?’ Amira asked.

‘No. If we had stayed together longer, I may have fallen in love with her, got to know her more. She wasn’t an open person, difficult to read. But I don’t want to talk about me.’ He nudged her beer closer to her. ‘I want to know about you.’

She sipped the icy cold Kölsch. Damn, it was invigorating. ‘There’s nothing to tell,’ she said.

‘You’re not playing fair.’

‘No kidding? What were you doing awake at two in the morning?’

He lifted his beer bottle, took a deep swig. ‘You don’t want to know.’

‘Try me.’

‘I can’t discuss my work.’

Amira stared hard into his eyes.

He raised his hands in defence, smiled at her. ‘I was looking out for this woman. She has a psycho partner involved in some heavy crime. That’s it. Now, your turn. How are things with your boyfriend?’

She coloured, recalling the lie she told after meeting Lukas. ‘I broke it off with him. Nothing serious.’

Lukas nodded. ‘So how come a painter like yourself has a black belt? Seems an odd combination.’

Amira finished off her beer, then ordered another. She wanted to tell him. God, how she wanted to talk. But there was no way. ‘I’m from Australia, originally. Adopted. Grew up with four brothers.’

‘That’s why you’re good at self-defence.’

She shrugged her shoulders. This was the first time she had told an outsider so much about her personal background. Lesson Five violated. And with only a tremor of nerves.

‘What about your birth family?’ he asked. ‘Ever wanted to find them?’

Her eyes were glassy now. ‘Sometimes.’

He stood up, paid the bill. ‘Come on, Anika. I want to take you to see a live band.’

She should leave him to it, but the thought of returning to her lonely apartment was too much. Amira nodded acceptance, and rose. They went to the MTC and danced

to the music – a combination of punk and heavy rock – until they were grinning and sweating like two contented fools.

He yelled in her ear: 'Want to go to your place?'

She hesitated, shook her head. He took her hands. She didn't know what to do. She should let them go. He's a cop for goodness sake. But she liked him holding her, liked the warm feeling when he was close to her. The sense of security he gave her. He had to be legitimate – why else would he disclose that he was a policeman? He leaned closer, drew her in and kissed her. The music pelting, and the neon lights flickering, the strobing of the bodies around them. Overwhelmed, she put her arms around him and pressed hard against his mouth.

'Why don't we go to your apartment?' she said. Her plan was to find out more about this cop.

'Sure.'

Lukas' apartment was near the University across from Rathenauplatz, a park and children's playground. Amira paused at the carved lions on the large stonework exterior. They were a coincidence and she was just paranoid. On the footpath before the building were two gold-coloured stumbling stones to commemorate the lives of previous Jewish residents who died in the Holocaust. Lukas' large flat was on the fifth and top floor, and overlooked the park. She walked through the rooms filled with modern furniture, obviously expensive. Clean and sparse.

'This is really where you live?' Amira asked. There was no mess anywhere, no clutter. Not like her place with all the paints and canvases.

'I don't do much living in it,' he admitted.

There were photos of Lukas when he was a boy with his mother and father on the wall. He had his mother's angular face, gleaming green-hazel eyes, broad smile.

'Hungry?' he asked. 'Thirsty?'

'Water would be great.'

He poured her a glass of sparkling mineral water, put on some music through an iPod dock. They sat on the low-line black leather sofa in the living room. A LCD television, surround sound system and Xbox were opposite them. DVDs, CDs and electronic games were stored in glass cabinets. Amira caught a few of the titles: *Enter the Dragon*, *Bloodsport*, *Fearless*, *Ip Man*, *The Bourne Identity*. Real boys' movies. But there were also German art house films: *Wings of Desire*, *Faraway So Close*, *Lola*.

She leaned against the sofa and his eyes swept up her face. His hand rose and he traced a finger down her cheekbone, over her chin, brushing her lips. Although it made her nervous, she liked him touching her. She could feel his energy, magnetic and tantalizing, pulling her towards him. He moved closer, his gaze probing her eyes, her nose, her mouth. He came closer still pushing her hair aside, caressing her pale neck. Delicately, he took her earlobe between his teeth. She held her breath.

'You're so beautiful,' he whispered in her ear.

She forced herself to relax. Her eyes closed. She curled one hand up around the back of his head. His warm kisses traveled down her neck, her collarbone. She exhaled deeply, she had never known this feeling.

His hands lifted and rotated her hips against his hardness. He wrapped his arms around her and held her. She buried herself into his chest and clung to him. Her fingernails dug into his skin. An overwhelming feeling caught her off guard, scared her.

She untangled herself, rose.

'What is it?' he asked.

She forced an expression of calm. 'I want to go home.'

He stood, extended his arms and embraced her. Her shoulders curled. He stroked her back, kissed her forehead. 'All right,' he whispered. 'You're okay. I'll take you home.'

She shook her head. 'No,' her voice was hoarse. 'I want a taxi.'

He ordered her one, walked her down the stairs, spoke to the taxi driver, gave him a twenty Euro note. He opened the taxi door for her. ‘Send me a message when you’re home. I want to know you made it safely.’

She nodded, climbed into the car. Then she was gone.

On Sunday night there was an email from Oscar. He had sent her three pages of usable material, the most interesting of which was a communication between the minister’s advisor and the German Ministry of the Exterior diplomatic relations advisor indicating that on Wednesday 2 June at 10am the Israeli Foreign Minister would be participating in a wreath laying exercise at Berlin’s Grünewald Railway station, Gleis 17, or platform 17.

She began her own search on the venue and discovered it was a memorial to the holocaust where Jews were transported out of Berlin to concentration camps. This was where she would strike the target. It would be in poor taste to kill him while he was laying flowers for the death of millions of innocents, but for this very reason, security might not be so stringent if they believed the Palestinians wouldn’t attack there. The newspapers and the Israelis would have a field day. Wilhelm would be pleased. She decided to tell him she would use a long-range sniper attack on the basis that it was unlikely that the Israelis, constrained by budgetary limitations, would have a large number of spotters on hand.

There were certainties about the security operation: glittering SUVs, protected cars, binoculars, submachine guns hidden under security service jackets. The Foreign Minister was considered an important cabinet member and therefore was tightly protected by guards from the Shin Bet VIP security unit. Given his reputation and his right-wing philosophy the Israelis would also be aware of his attractiveness as a target. German security would also be present.

From Google maps she could see that Grünewald Railway station was a working cargo station and the Schnellbahn ran alongside it. There were a number of horse-riding venues nearby and a famous tennis club.

She booked herself train tickets to Berlin leaving the next day and sent Wilhelm an encrypted email letting him know where she'd be.

On the train the following day, she imagined a life with Lukas. She didn't care if it was in the New World or not. She could show him her little hut in the rainforest on the New South Wales and Queensland border, a secret hideaway she kept for emergencies without the Movement's knowledge. It wasn't a place that she could live in permanently. Built by hippies, the wood was largely rotten, covered in mould from the humidity and the garden was overgrown. There was no hot water or electricity, but Father didn't know where it was, and of course it was cheap. Six thousand dollars had earned her a share on the community land and the hut. She had used her life savings, and Mother had given her half of the money.

'Just don't tell anyone where it is, including me,' she had said handing over cash. 'I want you to have your own special place, that's just yours.' She had helped Amira to organise a four-day holiday, and thought up the excuses she could make to the rest of the Movement in order to visit the property alone. Once Amira had bought it, and the rainforest community's consent, Mother had collected a few items for her on the sly. Things like gas bottles, candles, torches. Amira would occasionally do half-day trips there, and she paid a man to slash the grass from the weekly wage she earned as a Warrior.

Storage was a problem because of the mould. She had to buy special airtight containers to hold mosquito nets, blow up mattresses, plates, cups, cutlery. She never took blankets, pillows or mattresses. She would need to buy those when and if she ever

used the place. She imagined taking Lukas there, and having to navigate through the house spiders, pythons and bush turkeys. The thought made her smile. But she couldn't get around the Movement. Also, there were finances to think about. She wouldn't be able to support herself on painting alone. Without a formal education she had no qualifications. There was an aching in her head; she tried to breathe regularly, deeply, to establish clarity of mind. A waitress. She would have to work in a cafe, or as a fitness instructor until she found her feet.

He texted her, asking how she was, when they would next meet. She didn't respond.

Halfway to Berlin, she searched different news websites on her laptop. She was behind with the news because of the Israeli and her constant fantasising about Lukas. She typed the Australian www.news.com.au into the web browser and went to the breaking news column. One of the items listed was:

Police Attempt to Identify Body Found off Sydney Beach'

Curious, she clicked on the link and there was a sketch of a man who looked just like First Warrior Brother, Randy.

Perhaps there was some mistake. Sketches were often inaccurate. But somehow she knew that this one wasn't.

Her chest constricted as she continued to read the article.

Forensic pathologists have determined several characteristics of the unidentified person found floating off the northern end of Coogee beach in Sydney on Saturday evening. The victim was a young man, believed to be about 24-26 years old, physically very fit, 189cms and weighing approximately 80kgs at the time of his death. The autopsy examination reveals that he was muscular with very little body fat and had been in the water approximately 11 days before recovery. He was shot at close range with a Beretta M9 pistol. A police sketch of his face appears below. Police urge anyone who has information about the

identity of the man to phone Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000. 'The death is being treated as suspicious and investigations are continuing,' a police spokesman said.

Images come at me, rushed and fierce. Kolya whispers in Father's ear. The door closes on me. Kolya and I eat chocolate at three o'clock in the morning, laughing about times when we threw saucepans filled with water on each other. The Berretta M9 is Kolya's weapon. Better than the Glock. He prefers the low recoil.

Then there's the broken egg. The half-formed, dead bird.

Noise. Screaming. Always Britta screaming.

She dry-heaved, snapped the laptop shut and raced to the toilet. That's why Randy never showed for Amelia's party.

In Berlin her actions were mechanical and kept to a minimum. Her mind glazed over in some kind of fog that she couldn't seem to see through. She checked out the venue, found a building where she would make a sniper shot from if she had to, and performed range estimates before returning to Cologne.

The next week passed laboriously and she struggled to eat. Thinking of Kolya was the worst, and how he must have put up a façade during their conversation when he told her not to talk about Randy.

Yet there were momentary breaks from her gloom: Lukas called her regularly and they chatted each day. She didn't know how he was managing to keep up with his karate training and work at the same time. In each phone call, despite her attempts to be

upbeat, he asked her if something was wrong. Eventually, he threatened to come to her place and tickle her into a better mood. Luckily he didn't know where she lived. He wanted to see her and she made excuses, saying she had to finish a painting, when really she was afraid that she couldn't control herself around him and would regret the consequences.

Finally on Thursday – just over a week after she had been to Berlin – they had another training lesson and afterwards he convinced her to see a movie. But she couldn't concentrate on the storyline because thoughts of Randy kept intruding. Lukas asked her again if she was okay and her voice caught in her throat when she said 'I'm fine'.

She worked on a new painting, 'Grenade Girl', where a young woman in a dark colour was devouring a brightly coloured grenade, a grin on her face, sparks flying in her clearly visible brain. The brain was a mixture of a computer grid and human intestines. She'd signed it Ava Schwarz.

When she was not painting or training Lukas, she went through the motions and prepared for the Israeli. By Sunday 30 May, three days before the elimination was scheduled to take place she met Wilhelm at the Botanic gardens. He was now confident that she could make the hit.

'Marie and I have already moved half the supplies into the basement. I don't think the Internationals would be pleased if we didn't deliver,' he said.

By Monday she had the sniper rifle and the ammunition, and her inner cheek bled from overchewing. It was becoming more difficult to stick with her plan to teach Father a lesson.

On Tuesday, the day before she was to go to Berlin, when her neighbours were at work, she threw a carton of milk down the stairs but the stupid thing didn't pierce.

Not even a bit. So she threw it again and again until the milk spurted out. Then she ran up and down the steps, forcing herself to slip. Deliberately causing a fracture was not as easy as she'd imagined. It took her an hour and four attempts before her left ankle had swollen like a balloon. The pain was so unbearable that she struggled to walk on it. It had to be a fracture.

She caught a taxi to the hospital and phoned Wilhelm.

'What?' he gasped.

'You heard,' she said.

'What hospital are you in?'

'The Universitätskrankenhaus.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

The x-rays showed that the ankle was badly sprained. There was no fracture. She had been hoping for a break that would have kept her immobile for weeks.

Wilhelm arrived in time to hear the doctor say that she needed to rest for a week and keep her weight off it. The doctor wrote her a medical certificate and bandaged the ankle.

On the way home, Wilhelm spoke after five minutes of silence. 'The other half of the supplies were to come after Wednesday, when you had eliminated the target.' His face was a picture of concentration as he stared hard through the windscreen.

'How did it happen?' he pressed.

'I slipped on the stairs – just like I told you. There was milk. One of my neighbours must have spilt it.'

'Milk!' Wilhelm snorted.

Her heart sank. 'I know, it's stupid. I was over-confident.'

Wilhelm glared at her. 'Why was it in the stairway?'

She shrugged. 'My upstairs neighbour, Ms. Spifanso is a bit batty. She must have dropped it without noticing. How the hell do I know how the milk got there?'

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘Well, what are we supposed to do now?’

‘I’ll call Father,’ she said. ‘Tell him it was my fault. He’ll understand, he’ll have to.’

‘Will he?’ Wilhelm replied in exasperation. ‘That damn oligarch will still exist now. That’s the worst of it. All because of spilt milk. You stink of it by the way.’

She lowered her head in shame for the trouble she was causing Wilhelm and sniffed the sour milk that was on her running shorts and T-shirt.

‘I’ll have to call your father,’ he said. ‘Policy. I’m sure he’ll ring you afterwards though.’ He stopped at a supermarket on the way to her apartment. ‘What do you want to eat and drink for the next week?’ he asked.

‘Chocolate. Lots of chocolate and cakes.’

Wilhelm glowered at her and slammed the car door. He walked into the supermarket, and for the first time, she began to feel delighted and thrilled with herself. That will teach Father. He could do whatever he wanted with her, but he couldn’t force her to go and kill the Israeli now.

Wilhelm returned with bags of fruit, vegetables, cheese, pasta, rice, meat, coffee, milk and juice. She rummaged through them and to her alarm there wasn’t any junk food. Not one chocolate bar.

‘It looks like you forgot…’ Her voice faltered at Wilhelm’s cross look. He started the engine. The next week would seem long.

At her apartment he helped her up the stairs and saw the milk carton. He kicked it with his boot. ‘Fucking milk,’ he said.

9

Wednesday 2 June

On Wednesday the Israeli Foreign Minister laid a wreath at the Grünewald railway station and there were photographs and articles all over the news websites: *Israeli Foreign Minister Lays Wreath for Holocaust Victims*. She was on edge the entire day waiting for Wilhelm or Father to call. Neither did, although she had a scare in the afternoon when her mobile rang. Thankfully, it was only Lukas. She fought the Molotov cocktail of emotions that built inside her at the sound of his voice – the arousal, the shame, the fear that their relationship was hopeless. He insisted on coming over when he learnt about her ankle, and she told him her address. Within an hour the intercom buzzed and she staggered to the door and released the lock. He stood before her, chocolates, cashews and a dozen red roses in his hands. He was wearing sunglasses, an open necked white shirt, a raspy stubble along his jawline.

He gazed down at her ankle. 'Ouch.' He swiftly put the goodies down on the dining table amid the paints. Swept her up into his arms. 'Sofa?'

'Through there,' she gestured with her chin.

When she was sitting on the couch with him beside her, he lifted her sore foot up to rest it on the coffee table.

'You look happier than I've ever seen you,' he observed. 'Are you a sadist?'

She chuckled. 'It's the flowers.'

'Yeah? I'll have remember that.'

He looked over at her gym equipment and from one painting to another, his lips parted, his eyes examining the detail. Watching him Amira was unable to speak. He rose and went over to ‘Grenade Girl’. He leaned over the painting. He didn’t say anything for what seemed a long time, and that bothered her. Finally, he blinked and looked at her straight in the face. ‘Hard stuff,’ he said.

She slid down further on the couch. ‘You don’t like it.’

‘No, I love it. Do you have a buyer?’

‘I only completed it yesterday. Would you like a coffee?’ she asked. She was glad now that Wilhelm had bought her some groceries.

‘I’ll make it,’ he said.

While he was waiting for the kettle to boil they discussed how she hurt herself.

He looked at her sharply. ‘I don’t believe that you of all people slipped on milk. You’re so sure on your feet.’

Amira tossed a cushion at him. ‘It’s the truth.’

‘No. It’s ludicrous.’

If he only knew the best of it. But if Lukas doubted her, what would Father think?

Lukas brought their coffees into the living room and sat close beside her.

‘Did you see the Israeli Foreign Minister laying a wreath in Berlin?’ she asked with controlled calm.

‘No, but I’d heard on the news last night that he was in Germany. Why? Did something happen? A terrorist attack?’

She shook her head. ‘No. There just seems to be a lot of hype about it. He comes and lays a wreath for all the Jews the Nazis killed but meanwhile he seems content to wipe out Palestinians.’

‘The sign of a true politician,’ Lukas remarked.

He bent over, his eyes on her ankle and placed a hand softly on it. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘Not much.’

He ran a finger up her calf. ‘Do you believe in a soul, or something like it?’

She was surprised by his question, tugged at her T-shirt. ‘Yeah, I suppose I do. Why?’

He tipped his head. ‘Just wondered, that’s all.’ He stared into space for a moment. ‘What about achieving a certain state of happiness?’

‘I don’t know what I believe,’ she said.

‘A heaven?’

She frowned. ‘Don’t you need to be at work?’

‘I’ve the day off. Not my shift.’

‘Then, play Yahtzee with me. It’s over there in the bookcase behind the treadmill. Beating you will take my mind off my ankle.’

She learnt that there was something about Lukas she didn’t like: his evil sounding ‘hee, hee, hee’ when he was about to win. For dinner they ordered spicy pizza – his favourite food – and kissed, passing jalapenos between their lips to see who could handle the pain the longest (he could). He left at midnight, tucking her into bed and making sure she had a glass of water nearby.

When he had gone there was a tortuous silence and she hugged herself. She was scared that she hadn’t heard from Father or Wilhelm. Horrible, endless speculations kept barging into her mind causing a cold sweat: would the Movement now be in conflict with the Internationals? Would Father be so mad that he would kill her? Insist that she return to Australia? Put her in solitary? Would the supplies have to be returned?

Then the intercom buzzed, enervating her all the more. She groped for her gun, under a hidden recess in the mattress. She switched the light on and scrambled out of bed. Perhaps Lukas just forgot something, or it was a drunk out to have some fun. She’d

had that happen before. She waited in case whoever it was went away. But there was another, persistent buzz.

She pressed the intercom.

'Yes?'

A muffled voice crackled through the speaker. 'It's your brother.'

Kolya?

'Please, I need to talk to you,' he called out. 'I'll leave otherwise.'

What was he doing here? Had he come to kill her? Like Randy? But she couldn't believe that about him. He sounded weary. He was her brother and she couldn't leave him stranded. She held the gun behind her back, unlocked the door and opened it, half-expecting to be pierced by bullets. Instead, he was walking up the stairs and stood before her, his blue eyes anxious. He held a brown paper bag.

'The bag?' she asked.

'Coffee,' he said, coolly. 'Want me to open it?'

She shook her head, stood aside so that he could enter and closed the door behind him. She had to find a place to hide her gun.

He was silent for a moment and then he looked amused. 'What have you got behind your back?'

'Nothing,' she answered, startled.

He put the coffee on the dining table and before she knew it he had her arm and had twisted it to reveal the pistol. 'That hurt,' she croaked.

He put the gun on the dining table beside the coffee. 'You heard about Randy, then? I wondered when you would.' In separate trips he carried the brown paper bag and Amira into the living room and turned the lamp on. They sat down on the sofa and he took the coffees out, peeled the lids off. The air in the room suddenly seemed very thin.

'You didn't tell me,' she barked.

He looked at her fiercely, his blue eyes arctic, then they were downcast and his face was dragged down by sorrow. The truth glared at her. He did it. He really killed Randy. She sunk deeper into the chair.

He rubbed his forehead for several moments and when his voice came out it was hoarse. ‘He was gone, Mira. He was involved with a drug cartel in Sydney. He was using all his training to ship heroin, to make money for himself…’

‘He was our brother!’

‘You think I don’t know what I did?’ He gave her such a scathing look that she recoiled. ‘How can you defend him? He always hated us, anyway.’

‘Me, he hated. Me, Kolya. Never you. He admired you. You were his younger brother but you were the one he wanted to be.’

‘You think it was easy for me?’ He looked stricken.

‘But you still did it. Have you come for me now?’

Kolya closed his eyes. ‘Oh, Mira.’

‘Do it,’ she said. ‘Hurry up and do it.’

His eyes opened. ‘I came to talk to you, that’s all,’ he said deflated.

He took a plastic spoon out of the brown paper bag and swirled the coffee around in his paper cup. Anxiously, she wondered how he had survived the killing.

‘I wish I had some vegemite,’ he said gloomily.

Her eyes widen in surprise. ‘Vegemite?’

‘Some places in the U.S have it. But it’s not the same eating vegemite toast alone.’ He was a dark shape against the yellow glow of the lamp.

Amira bit her lip. ‘No, I guess it’s not.’

He put his coffee down and leaned forward with his head between his palms. ‘I can see why Father is worried about you. It was too late for me to do your target. I couldn’t get a plane early enough.’

She didn't respond. She should have known that Father would try to send Kolya. He gazed at her ankle.

Her eyes looked down. 'But Father sent you to check up on me anyway?'

'What's the matter, Mira?' Kolya reached for her hand.

But she wouldn't let him have it. 'Apart from Randy? Gee, let me think…'

He rose and started pacing the room. Up and down the living room. His eyes closed for a second and when he lifted his lids again she could see tears leaking. 'He had gone into the drug business. I told you. Father found out – as he finds out about everything. Randy promised to quit, but he didn't.'

She handed him a tissue.

'I said: 'Father, please don't ask me to do this!' But he didn't listen. He kept saying I was the right man for the job. I argued that we could use Randy's funds towards the Cause, but Father said we didn't need drug money. He said that Randy had the virus and we had to send him on.'

She didn't know if Randy was really infected. But seeing Kolya's sadness, the way his veins pulsed near his temple, made her weak with regret.

'You should have seen Randy's face when he saw me. He knew straight away why I was paying him a visit.'

'But how did the body wash up? Didn't you weigh it down properly?' she found herself asking. Cold technicalities were often her refuge.

He sat down beside her. 'Obviously not. Father's pissed-off, to say the least. The noose I tied around his foot must have come loose. I should have done another one with heavier rocks, but I couldn't. I had to get it over with. My hands were shaking. They never shake.' His brow was furrowed.

'We have to get out,' she said.

He threw her a disdainful look. 'No, we can't. We need to pull-together, even in hard times. That's family, that's the Movement. Nothing can break us.'

‘You sound just like Father,’ she said. She clasped her knees and looked down at the floor where a few cake crumbs were scattered. ‘But what about Randy? We gave up on him. Is that family Kolya?’

He drank his coffee, tossed the plastic spoon onto the table, not saying anything.

She thought of the cold water that must have lapped against Randy’s body, how the rope couldn’t keep him on the seabed. Waves slapping against skin, sand finding a way underneath his fingernails. The grey of his face.

Then Kolya shook his head. ‘Randy was infected, how many times do I have to tell you? He wasn’t coming back.’

This was all too much. ‘Randy wanted out, no doubt that was all it was. Having Father press his twelve-year-old hand on a hot stove for eating the last piece of Mother’s apple pie probably had something to do with it. Add to that solitary confinement, and the beatings.’ Why was Kolya so blind?

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Amira realised she had to try a different way to get through to him. ‘If we get out maybe Laith, Oscar and Mother will follow,’ she said. ‘We can bring Amelia, too. I’m tired of being scared all the time. I want to wake up and have hope.’

‘We will have that when we achieve our objective!’ he cried.

She scratched her arm, as if scratching a bite. ‘I can’t do it anymore.’

Kolya’s expression was obdurate. ‘It’s our duty to act now.’

She was silent.

‘Our bravery and courage will save the unfortunate,’ he pleaded.

She held her head in her hands; she wanted her walnut-like brain inside to stop.

‘You’re becoming destabilised!’ he insisted. ‘Can’t you see? You’re at risk.’

The conversation was pointless. She began to wish that she had never raised the topic of becoming non-Members, but she had to try. She couldn’t leave Kolya behind. ‘I need time to think,’ was all she could say.

‘Time for the dogs to come and eat you? You don’t need time. You know what you need to do, you just don’t want to do it.’ He rose again. ‘I am your brother. You have your true family. Why not let that be enough for you?’

She couldn’t answer him. All she could do was sit there, her eyes wide, staring in front of her, not seeing anything.

‘You will bring us all down by acting like this. Is that what you want?’ He gazed at her.

‘No, of course not.’

‘Our parents brought us up the right way. Yes, we had a difficult childhood but we have to forget about our own emotions. They are not important. What is important is protecting the…’

‘Stop! Please stop!’

Kolya relented, finished both the coffees. ‘Let’s get you to bed, you look wrecked.’

She sighed, grateful the discussion was over for now. ‘You can talk.’

Kolya helped her into bed, and lay down beside her.

‘What’s it like where you’re living?’ she asked him. ‘So many times I’ve wondered.’

He talked to her about New York, the traffic, the shopping, until she was drifting off to sleep. Images of Britta, the broken egg and Kolya killing Randy woke her every few minutes. Each time, Kolya brought her a glass of water, a tissue, or a face washer, until at last she fell into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke, hours later, she was alone in the apartment. Kolya was gone. All that was left was a brief note on her bedside table:

Dear Sister. Please do not abandon us. It would break my heart and Mother’s and we would never recover. I believe in you. Love, K.

10

Tuesday, 8 June – Wednesday, 9 June.

The Israeli Foreign Minister returned to Israel unscathed, and when she wasn't worrying about Kolya, Mother, Amelia and Father's bad temper, Amira spent time with Lukas. He regularly showed up at her flat with food, or a board game. One time the game was Monopoly. It was a prohibited activity. She stood and looked down at the box.

'You look shellshocked,' Lukas said.

'I've never played before. It teaches greed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Forget it. Let's play something else.'

Her ankle was still feeling tender but was healing quickly – too quickly.

A week passed before she heard anything from the Movement about what was to be done about the incident with the Baker, and it came in the form of an encrypted email from Wilhelm.

Baker has been paid. He is happy enough with our price. Paper waiting.

From this she understood that the Movement had paid for the supplies with money, unless an I.O.U of some form was given. But she was annoyed that she wasn't being given more time to rest and that there was already another briefing waiting for her at the post office.

Outside the sun was descending, with shards of orange and red amid a blue that disintegrated into grey. There was no breeze. She stumbled along to her post office box on Sudermanplatz, wishing that there had been a twenty-four hour access box closer to her apartment. But anyway, it was safer to receive Movement mail further from where she lived. Inside the box was a yellow business sized envelope just as she'd expected.

Who was it this time?

She tucked the envelope in her knapsack and caught the subway from Hansaring to Friesenplatz and from there walked back home.

Sitting down on the couch, she took the yellow envelope out of her bag and opened it. There were two pages of a letter from her mother, containing details about the weather and tennis results. Encoded throughout she deciphered the name: Pelle Knudsen. As she rechecked the letters, the words began to blur and before her eyes a face appeared.

It is the face of my first victim, Evan. He has a neck that sags down like a turkey, streamlined rectangular glasses and stern black eyes. He's a company executive.

I'm in the restaurant pushing salad leaves around on a plate, pretending to read a novel. I have a blonde wig on, a thick layer of make-up and extra padding to make me appear ten kilograms heavier. This is it, this is my moment. All the years of working hard and I've finally made it – I am about to be a true warrior at the age of nineteen. My finger itches to pull the trigger, to eliminate this infected creature, to show my family I can be trusted.

But the waiting drags and it's 10pm and the storyline in the paperback is thin. The pig is taking his time eating his tiramisu, drinking his Shiraz, conversing with the other two men in designer suits. What level of Authenticity did such a person hold? Father had said that it had all gone, that the virus had claimed people like these and it

would spread, like a cancer. Watching him I can't help but wonder what it would be like to live in a soulless state, and I think that it must be terrible and that life would be horrible, not to feel the core. But I will send Evan back to it. Finally, when the delay is growing unnerving, he says goodbye to his two companions and rises.

I leave the money for the salad on the table and call Kolya from my mobile. 'Turkey is almost ready.'

I follow Evan outside. The humid Sydney air fused with dirt and grime smothers my skin. Beyond the city lights is blackness. Evan walks towards the underground carpark. I want to do it here on the footpath, but there are too many bystanders. Patience. Kolya in a SUV with darkened windows creeps up behind me. I pause and get in just as Evan wanders into the carpark.

Kolya and I wait by the kerb. 'Are you sure you're ready?' Kolya asks.

'Don't talk,' I reply. Words will clutter my thinking.

Two minutes, and Evan comes out in his navy Mercedes. He drives down Pyrmont Bridge Road and we are behind him. At the intersection of the Western Distributor to North Sydney, we get lucky: Evan stops at a red light and there's no other car in the second lane.

'Quick,' I say to Kolya. 'Now. Pull up beside him. Before the lights change.'

The tires screech and I wind down the window. The pistol in my hand doesn't shake. Without breathing I squeeze the trigger – Pft! One shot into his head. Evan's window shatters. Then two more – Pft! Pft! He doesn't even have a chance to turn around. The light switches to green and Kolya edges out into the perpetual drag of cars heading into the Cross City Tunnel.

Initiation complete.

Kolya's smiling, telling me what a good job I did. I'm proud: I shoved myself down, down so far, that I was able to enter Nowhere. In that place, I can do anything.

* * *

The name in the briefing was Pelle Knudsen. Amira disabled the smoke detector in her dining room, tore the two pages into pieces, put them in the kitchen sink and set them alight. When the pieces were burnt she ran the tap for three minutes.

In the living room, she flipped open her laptop and clicked on the Anonymiser icon in the toolbar to cover her IP address. She started researching Pelle Knudsen and discovered that he was the owner of one of the world's largest international furniture franchises and had an estimated net worth of around $33 billion US dollars, which made him close to the fourth richest person in the world and the richest person in Europe. He was wealthier than her two other billionaire targets, Baumann and the French media tycoon, Gerard Clément.

It took some searching but she also discovered that he was retired and lived in Epalinges, a small village outside Lausanne, Switzerland. She memorised everything including the church he attended. He was notoriously frugal, flying only economy class and driving a Volvo he'd owned for years. He was a regular contributor to charities.

Tax exemptions that help him deceive the masses and make him look good.

Amira stared at the computer screen and images of Knudsen's face. There were photos of him standing outside his furniture chain, the company logo in yellow capital letters as he gazed out into the sun with the caption: *Pelle Knudsen: self-made man*. In one picture he was pulling a ridiculous face, his mouth agape, his thin lips curling in on his teeth, his eyebrows white and bushy like Santa Claus's. He was just an old man. An easy target. She could track him down and be done with it, maybe in a matter of days. Kolya would be relieved. Father would be satisfied. She would still have her family.

There was a sudden shortness of breath, a tension so extreme it shuddered through her shoulders, her hands. A blackness intruded, as if the lights had dimmed. Then whiteness flashed, blinding her.

She was on the floor, with no idea how she had got there. What was happening to her? She staggered to her knees and groped for the glass of water left over from yesterday. Her body was cold, legs weak. This was her retribution for defying Father: panic attacks. Perhaps Kolya was right? Perhaps she was at risk.

She inhaled slowly and returned to her laptop. On virtualglobetrotting.com there was a picture of Knudsen's house. She opened a new tab and searched for the same address in Google maps. Street view showed her the narrow, conifer hedge-lined roads and houses near Knudsen's but the image of his home from the front was no longer available – he must have asked to have it removed. All she could see were pines, a silver birch and the hedges that looked around a metre high. Street view was not available from the road behind his property. Still she had a good picture to plan a more practical visit. On the northeast he had a neighbour, and then a forest with a walking trail winding through it.

She printed out some tourist information on Lausanne, Lake Geneva, the Western Alps, found out about car rental agencies and booked a return economy class train ticket to Switzerland with an open return date. Searching took about five hours, inclusive of panic attack. She still didn't know what she wanted to do, but the work was natural to her and gave her an odd sense of calm.

When she had finished she emailed Wilhelm:

I'm going on a holiday to Lausanne. Talk when I get back.

At 3pm Lukas called. She didn't pick up. She was afraid that talking to him would cloud her judgment, distract her all the more. He called again at 7pm and she had to

answer, otherwise he would persist. She told him that she was working on a painting, struggling to transfer the image in her head onto the canvas. Lukas seemed to accept this. He asked if he could help. She said she would call him when she needed a break, or some social interaction.

She spent the evening looking at maps, memorising the routes from Lausanne to Knudsen's house.

She arrived in Lausanne by train at 2.15pm and carried her kit: a small suitcase and backpack filled with some clothes, leather gloves, digital camera with 20x optical zoom for quick shots, mobile, disguise gear, make-up and mirror, notebook and pencil, skeleton keys for picking locks, small screwdrivers, a pocket knife, binoculars, her Anika Vollmer passport and wallet with credit cards, as well as a set for a Karen Murray, a paperback novel and a book about Van Gogh that hid the Glock. At the station's currency exchange office she swapped Euros for Swiss Francs. It was all these movements, these routines that she tried to keep close, not thoughts about news reports of how little Britta still was not talking.

Scooters and motorbikes were everywhere on the streets of Lausanne. Electric buses that reminded her of the trams she had been on in Melbourne, Sydney and Cologne circled a roundabout and fountain in front of the train station. She crossed the road and checked in at the four-star Hotel Continental, booking a single twin room on the third floor. The room was modest and clean. A mirror hung above a desk and she ignored her reflection. Not now. After re-packing her backpack with essential items she left the hotel, returned to the train station where she put two Swiss Francs through a slot machine and went into a 'McClean – safe and clean' toilet.

Five minutes later she emerged as a blonde with green eyes. The train station was so busy that no one, not even the toilet cleaning lady who spoke French, seemed to notice her changed appearance.

I'm Karen Murray. Leather gloves are on. For about fifteen minutes I drive north in a silver Volkswagen Golf hired from the Europcar on Avenue Louis-Ruchonnet 2, up the steep winding slopes of Lausanne. As I approach Knudsen's village the buildings become fewer and there are more houses.

In Epalinges I park the car in apartment parking and trek up along Knudsen's narrow street where hedges grow high and thick, protruding onto the road, covering a view of the houses that overlook Lake Geneva and the snow-capped Alps. The sound of a tractor in the distance and children splashing in a pool in the house opposite Knudsen's. Even from his driveway there is a limited view of the house because of the trees and bushes. At the entranceway I do not pause as there is an intercom with a worn sticker on it saying 'under security surveillance' and above is a camera. I continue past one more house until the street ends and there is a small forest of linden and pine trees. A children's swinging rope hangs from a sturdy branch. At the base is an old hacksaw, a lock box filled with water and a Gether's Pastilles container – toys of the children. I climb a linden tree. Sticks prod at me. One catches on my black top. Without gloves my hands would be scratched. My blonde wig must look like a bird's nest.

Halfway up I pull out my binoculars and within seconds locate Knudsen's horseshoe shaped house. He has a rear winter garden. I imagine him sitting in it, sipping coffee or schnapps, the sun shining through the glass, warming him. The home is large yet discreet. There is no shimmering external pool, no visible Jacuzzi. At the end of the pebble driveway is a shed and next to it a Volvo. Odd that the car isn't in the garage. He could be home. Someone could be there.

No electric or high security fence. Cameras are at the front and back doors and around the sides. I wonder whether he has dogs. There's a limit to computer research.

I sit watching, and waiting. The waiting is always the worst part. Sometimes nothing happens at all. Other times everything happens.

The sun is high, there are no clouds. The air is fresh and alive. Not muggy. Swiss air. I wonder how long Swiss people live for on average. A statistic I shouldn't be thinking about right now. If only there were clouds, I could imagine what objects they looked like in between observing Knudsen's property. The sounds of the children continue mixed with the harmonious ring of cow bells from a field behind the forest.

After an hour and fifteen minutes my bum is sore from the prickly branch, my back aches and I can't help but think of Lukas. What would he think seeing me up in a tree as a blonde? He'd laugh good-naturedly, that's what he'd do, until he found out I was planning to kill someone.

A dog barks somewhere in one of the houses. A deep bow-wow from a big dog, not a hysterical high-pitched bark from a smaller breed. Then from Knudsen's winter garden a man steps outside. He is old, stooped to his left. A stick in his right hand. Knudsen. A German Shepherd follows him to the side of the house where there is a patch of grass. The man throws the stick and the dog chases after it.

My heart drums in my body. If I had a sniper rifle I could take the old fellow out now. Yet even without a long-range weapon, this is a chance I can't let slip by. I watch him praise the dog with a tickle under the chin and my mind begins to fuzz, the world seems suddenly to be turning and I am falling, falling, falling into darkness. No, not again. Please not again.

* * *

When I wake a black spider, no larger than my thumb, is scampering across my stomach. I flick it off in panic. I feel nauseous and weak. I check my limbs but nothing seems broken. Not even falling out of a tree can break my bones.

I roll over onto my side, find my feet and climb up the tree again but Knudsen and the dog are gone. The Volvo is still in the driveway. No one is on the streets. I'm too late.

I wait for another three minutes but there is no sign of him. I decide to walk around to the street at the back of his house. Once out of the tree I make my way back onto the walking trail, cursing myself for being so clumsy and unstable, and to my surprise, Knudsen and his dog are before me.

I jump back in fright. Knudsen appears equally startled. The dog growls at me and Knudsen reins him in on the leash.

'*Excuse le chien,*' Knudsen says. 'He's not normally like this.'

I wonder if the dog can smell my weapon.

It is the perfect opportunity for me to take Knudsen out at close range. We are alone in the forest. I can easily pull my pistol out and make an exit with the hire car. I'd have to kill the dog, too. He would whine, unless I used at least two bullets. But I can't move. My feet are frozen. Knudsen gazes at me, his expression uncertain.

'*De rien,*' I quip at last. It doesn't matter.

Knudsen and his dog continue down the path, and I watch them disappear around the bend.

11

Thursday, 10 June – Friday, 11 June.

There was a big bulgy canvas before her. Lukas was pointing at it. He spoke, and at first she couldn't hear him. What was he saying? Paint me a dyke? No, that couldn't be it. Paint what you like. Paint your life. Yes, that was it. There was a thrill, a wonderful feeling and she painted a mother holding her, their faces aglow. The sensation vanished as soon as she woke. The train was trundling along.

She text-messaged Wilhelm to say that the Lausanne trip had been a failure, and he replied saying he wanted to meet her, but she called in sick.

Not long after arriving in her apartment she received a phone call. She wouldn't have answered it, except that she had hoped it would be Lukas. The display read – 'Withheld' – which should have warned her against picking up.

'Hello?' It was Father's deep voice.

'Father?' she asked, shuddering.

'What took you so long to get to the phone?'

She gulped, resenting even minor chastisement. 'I was in the laundry putting on a load of washing.'

'Why won't you show tonight?'

'I'm sick, that's all. I've been ill all night,' she replied indignantly.

There was a pause for a moment. 'What with?'

'Food poisoning,' she said tetchily, feeling the muscles in her face tensing.

‘Food poisoning?’ he scoffed.

‘I’ve been vomiting,’ she added in a rush.

Another pause. ‘When we have a weakness, we need to acknowledge it.’

She knew this was coming. Submit. ‘Yes, Father.’

‘And we all have them. You have yours and I have mine. The thing is to get these weaknesses out of us. Don’t let doubt control you – you control it. Unbelief will demobilize you.’

‘Yes, Father,’ she repeated.

‘Do you have any friends yet?’

He meant whether she had any possible new recruits. ‘No.’

‘That’s a shame, such a pity. Why not?’

‘I’ve been concentrating on work and I’ve been sick.’

Father sniffed. ‘I have not seen or heard of any recent results.’

‘I’ve been researching.’

‘I see.’

‘Research takes time.’

‘You forget I am your father, and I know you better than anyone. What’s going on?’

She was too disturbed to answer. Her legs were trembling.

‘I want to help you focus. Will you let me do that? Will you let me help you?’ She could almost see his condescending eyes peering at her over the brim of his glasses.

‘Very well, then. What kind of help do I need?’

‘Perhaps I’ll send someone out to collect you? Perhaps that’s the kind of help you need.’

‘Whatever you say, Father.’

There was a long silence between them. Finally, he spoke. ‘If you had information on your birth mother that might help your work.’

She winced.

‘Would I be right in making such an assumption?’

A direct question. How should she answer?

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘I don’t have all day.’

‘Why would you do that?’ her voice sounded small.

‘Your unknown heritage distracts you from your purpose. I trust that once you know who your birth mother is, you will realise such preoccupations are unhelpful.’

It was difficult for her to believe him. He had always been against her knowing who her birth parents were, believing it was irrelevant. Unless Members made a break with the unbelievers, he said, they were unable to be true revolutionaries. Nothing must hold a Member back. They could only have contact with unbelievers if they could be used in some way to further the objectives of the Cause.

‘That is very kind of you Father.’

‘See your mission through first. After all, we don’t want your birth mother eating the same things you do,’ he remarked. ‘People become ill so easily these days.’

The ground beneath her feet seemed to fall. She had to sit down on a dining chair. ‘I’m your daughter,’ she stammered.

‘Yes, you are.’

She imagined Father, then, paintbrush in hand, stippling her face on a canvas. ‘Do you love me?’ she asked in a whisper.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Do you love me?’

‘Of course I love you,’ he retorted. ‘No one will ever love you as much as I love you. Your friend will arrange to meet you tomorrow. Don’t cancel, be prompt. Is that clear?’

‘Yes,’ she responded, lowering her head.

The following day Wilhelm was already at the cafe out front of the chocolate museum. He was perched under a green sun umbrella, sipping coffee, wearing a black T-shirt that stretched taut over his biceps. He stared at her when she arrived. ‘Feeling better?’

‘Let’s walk,’ she said.

He paid for his drink and threw his black laptop bag over one shoulder.

They went around the small island in the shape of a large birthed ship that was home to the chocolate museum. The wind came off the water, sweeping her hair across her face. ‘The target is difficult. Far more security than the previous one,’ she said. She pushed her fringe back.

Wilhelm gazed at her. ‘Really? That doesn’t match what we know about him.’

‘I was surprised too. But his house was no welcoming committee.’

‘And?’

‘There are cameras on his property, motion detectors and dogs. A motorbike job will be best. We need to obtain details about his possible future movements.’

‘A week?’ Wilhelm asked.

‘Perhaps longer.’ She needed time to convince Kolya and Mother to break free of the Movement.

Wilhelm stopped walking and laughed. ‘No, no. You can do this in a week. You could do this in a day! What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying I can’t do it in a day or a week. I need assistance with this one. So I need you to set me up with some vehicles. A couple of cars, a motorbike. This will take time, I presume. And I’ll need to know when the target will be driving in his car, preferably alone.’

Wilhelm’s eyes flitted from Amira to the chocolate museum and back again. ‘Two weeks, maximum. Your father will not be happy about it taking any longer. It isn’t justified.’

She nodded.

'I'll see what I can find out for you,' Wilhelm said. He tapped his foot on the pavement. 'So you were ill yesterday?'

'I'm sorry.'

'First the ankle, and then food poisoning. You should take better care of yourself.' He opened his laptop bag, and took out a manilla envelope. 'I have a present for you. Here.'

She hesitated, confused over the contents. Surely not another briefing? She looked up at him puzzled. 'What is it?'

'Details,' he said. His nose glinted in the sun. 'Of her. Your birth mother.'

Astonished, she accepted the envelope, stared down at it. Then she realised this was Father's way of softening her up. He was a master puppeteer.

Yet in her hand she held information that might help her piece together the woman's face on the sled, on the ski lift. The single thread that connected the pictures in her head. 'How did Father get this?'

Wilhelm scratched an eyebrow. 'Why are you asking me? You know him. He would have pulled a few favours with the Australian adoption agency, or he may have had the information all along and didn't think it necessary to tell you.'

'Why would he let you read it?'

Wilhelm started circling the museum again and she followed closely beside him. 'You are asking me questions about your father's intentions. How do I know what all his motivations are?'

The envelope was light, and she had to grip it hard in the wind. She didn't want it to blow away, dance above the Rhine before it fell into the water, sodden. She cut the glue with a finger, pulled out the single piece of paper with the name: Elga Hinkel. Location: Berlin. Occupation: Freelance investigative journalist. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she didn't allow herself to cry in front of Wilhelm.

‘German?’ she muttered.

‘Looks that way. Now I’m off.’

Amira gazed up at him. ‘You’ll look into the research?’

‘Yes. That’s what I said I’d do.’

‘How long?’

‘Give me two-three days.’

Wilhelm walked away towards the Severinsbrücke. His stride was smooth and he looked straight ahead. She put the manilla envelope in her backpack and went in the opposite direction towards the city centre and an Internet café. The name, Elga Hinkel, replayed over and over in her mind. She wondered why there were no details of the birth father. Was it because Henry had been able to access the original birth certificate, and there was no mention of a father? There were so many questions, and she was determined to find the answers. A reflection in a bookshop window flickered: Wilhelm. Now he was wearing a baseball cap. His laptop bag hung on his back.

She couldn’t believe it. Father surely wasn’t that silly to put someone like Wilhelm on her. She was so shocked and annoyed, that she began to grind her teeth. It was important not to change her step or pace. She couldn’t let him know he’d been discovered. She turned around as usual, scanning the street behind her, only this time she did it a little more often to keep Wilhelm on his toes.

She went to a different Internet café, one she rarely frequented on Hohlenzollering near her apartment. Open twenty-four hours, seven days a week, it was a combined gaming hall, restaurant and bar. Wilhelm would expect her to use this one and she didn’t want him to know where she normally went, if he didn’t already know. She went up to the second floor where the computers were, but when she got there she was unable to think clearly about Elga Hinkel. She should have been delighted with the information. Instead, she wondered how long Wilhelm had been following her. She began to doubt herself, and the images of all her checks in Lausanne went through her

mind. No, she was sure he didn't go to Switzerland. But what about before? Had he seen her with Lukas for instance? Did he see her visit Lukas's apartment?

She paid for an hour of access and googled 'Elga Hinkel journalist'.

A few links came up. An article Elga wrote about police corruption, and one about her resigning from an editorial job five years ago to pursue investigative journalism. No articles suggested her address. She had her own website with a photo where she stood, erect in a dark purple tailored suit, smiling through thick brown-red lipstick. The make-up did nothing to fatten her bony face, or smooth over her pointy chin and the bump in the middle of her nose. A gold chain was slung around her wrinkly throat. Her bleached blonde hair was cut into a short fashionable bob, each strand perfectly in place. Her eyes were blue. Perhaps they could be Amira's.

Perhaps Amira looked more like her birth father.

Elga Hinkel also looked like she was possibly infected. Amira hoped this was not the case, that the website image was misleading. The website detailed Elga's profile, articles, journalism awards, and four books she had written. She was a foreign correspondent, for several years based in the Middle East, Africa and East Europe. More recently she had uncovered a people-smuggling racket operating in Germany and Belgium. This was a good sign that Elga was healthy, and even a sign that perhaps a person who appeared infected might not be.

She clicked on the contact link and scribbled in her notebook Elga's email address and phone number with the 030 Berlin prefix. She would not be able to send Elga a courteous email or letter by way of introduction. A response could take days or weeks. She had to see Elga in person. So she booked herself an Inter-city Express train ticket to Berlin on the Deutsche Bahn website, and left the Internet café.

Time for some fun and games, Wilhelm.

She started out jogging towards Rudolfplatz. Nothing like a bit of exercise, is there Wilhelm? The wind blew yellow leaves onto the pavers. She continued past

Neumarkt, and on to the Cologne Cathedral with its gothic architecture, constant scaffolding, ornate lace work and blackened exterior. Gradually, she picked up the pace as she went around the outskirts of the Altstadt, until she was running at about 50% capacity. Wilhelm wasn't used to running a marathon.

Still with me, Messenger boy?

Yes.

He was fitter than she thought. Stubborn lawyer.

She ran across the Hohenzollernbrücke, the Rhinepark towards the botanical gardens cable car and then back along the Rhine at 70% capacity making it very difficult for Wilhelm to keep up.

Tired yet, Wilhelm?

Doggy need a sip of water?

After an hour, she'd warmed up. Her muscles dynamic and alive. The air, the rush, flowing through her body. The morning was bright: cloudless sky, tourists lining up at the edge of the river to board a ferry. Then, as luck would have it, the last tourist climbed aboard a boat. The conductor was about to close the gate. Swiftly she purchased a ticket and scampered down the dock.

'Please!' she yelled. 'Please wait for me!'

The conductor looked miffed. 'Hurry up, then!' She ran across the plank. 'No running!' he called out to her as he closed the gate. 'Not even for pretty ladies!'

She sat down inside the ferry near a window. Outside, Wilhelm was behind a wall, hunched over, vomiting.

She called her from Berlin's Hauptbahnhof at around 4.20pm. 'Elga Hinkel,' she asked nervously.

'May I ask who is calling?' a receptionist asked.

‘Yes. Ava. Ava Black.’

‘Please hold.’

Muzak played and she gazed out at the trains rolling in and out of the glass cocoon station.

Then Amira heard her voice: the voice of her mother. ‘Yes?’ she said, sharply.

‘Frau Hinkel?’

‘Yes, you have her.’

She inhaled. ‘I need to talk to you rather urgently, Frau Hinkel. I have some information about the murders that are taking place. The murders of the billionaires.’

‘Do you just? How have you come across such information?’

‘I can’t tell you on the phone.’

Tap, tap, tap. She could hear fingers in the background tapping on a keyboard. Elga might be trying to look her up on a search engine.

‘I didn’t know who else to turn to,’ Amira said. ‘I read about how you helped those women with that human trafficking syndicate.’

Elga let out an exasperated sigh. ‘Okay, then.’ She suggested that they meet in an hour and a half at a café on Alexanderplatz. ‘And how will I know who you are?’

‘I’ll recognise you,’ Amira replied.

‘Very well, Ava, I’ll see you soon.’

Amira arrived at Alexanderplatz early. Formerly situated in the heart of East Berlin the square was a showcase of plain, bulky Communist architecture, and the concrete shaft of the toothpick TV tower looms over the Fountain of Friendship Between Peoples, the World Time Clock, the shopping facilities, restaurants and cafes. She was to meet her mother in one of these places.

The café was more of a cocktail bar with plastic plants in ceramic pots. People drank Berliner Pilsners. Women with tall cocktail glasses. The sky outside a wash of

blue. She took her seat inside on a red armchair and ordered a banana and passionfruit juice. What would she say to Elga?

Everyday I hoped that you would come and pick me up and say you had made a mistake.

Everyday I wanted you to hold me and say how much you loved me.

Waiters circled tables. They carried plates filled with burgers, currywurst, pasta and pommes frittes. Her stomach grumbled, cramped. She was starving.

Randy will never eat again.

At last her mother entered the cafe with sharp strides and shoulders confidently thrown back. She wore a bright red pantsuit with matching high heels and cherry-red lipstick. Her face was white with foundation and she held a briefcase. She surveyed the tables.

Without effort Amira stood up and raised her hand. 'Frau Hinkel!'

Amira looked through all the moving heads, the ceaseless bodies of the waiters to her mother's eyes, raw and blue. She trembled as Elga approached the table. When she was near her, Elga stuck out her right hand, pale as a moon, with glossy red fingernails. 'Ava Black?'

'Yes.' She reached out with her right hand and her skin was dark compared to Elga's. Her mother shook her hand with a firm jerk, offered a faint smile and sat down in the armchair opposite her.

Amira fumbled and almost knocked over her juice.

A waiter came to their table and Elga ordered a scotch. When the drink arrived she downed most of it in a mouthful, placed her elbows on the table, lacing her fingers together and stared her straight in the eye. 'Tell me what you know.'

Her ribs seemed to squeeze together. She searched for words and all she could wonder was how she had become such an inadequate representation of her mother, and whether Elga may already be claimed.

Elga's eyes widen. She stared at her impatiently. 'Yes?'

Her hands dropped to her side and under the table she pinched the sides of her outer thighs. 'I know this might sound ridiculous,' she began softly.

'Oh, my life is full of the ridiculous.' The look in Elga's eye was harried, as though she only wants to be at home, resting with her feet up and a glass of wine.

'Well, you see…' Amira cleared her throat. 'I was adopted when I was young and someone…'

Her mother's eyes moved about the room. She wanted to reach out and hug her. She wanted to tell her that she understood whatever her reasons were. She wanted to give her a reason to love and want her. She wanted to tell her: I am someone, look at me for fuck's sake, I'm your daughter.

Elga raised her eyebrows and flashed her eyes at Amira. 'You are getting to the murders?' Her lipstick is caking.

'I don't know how to say this,' she began again. 'Did you ever have a child you put up for adoption?'

Elga placed a hand against a cheek, astonished, her eyes lowered down over Amira's body and back up again. It was supposed to be their moment of recognition, the time where they embraced and cried and told each other everything. This was it, this was what Amira had been waiting for.

'No,' she says shrilly.

Amira pinched her thighs harder. She's in denial, that's all. Amira didn't wear enough make-up for her liking. 'Oh. Are you sure? It's just that…I'm sorry for bothering you. I should have mentioned it…'

'This isn't about the billionaire murders, is it?' she asked crisply. Her fingernails tapped on the table.

'I had to find a way to talk to you…'

Elga stood up.

Her head grew dizzy, tears threatened to leak out of her eyes. ‘I think you may be my mother,’ she blurted out. People from other tables glanced at them.

Elga flinched at her outburst. She leaned in. ‘Look, darling,’ she said, her voice a harsh whisper. ‘I’ve never had a child let alone put one up for adoption. Why would you think I am your mother?’

And she couldn’t tell her: because of my father, because he does not make mistakes. A knot formed in the back of her throat; the tears tumbled down her cheeks now, even though she didn’t want them to, especially not here in this place.

‘Did someone tell you I was your mother? What sort of sick prank is this?’ Her eyes wandered fleetingly to the waiters, the other customers. ‘Who was it?’ she asked again.

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry for disturbing you.’ She started to shake uncontrollably. She felt that everyone in the restaurant was looking at her.

Elga sighed deeply, as if she was annoyed with Amira and her tears. ‘I’m sorry, darling. Someone has given you the wrong information. I can’t have children. Never have been able to.’ Her red fingernails curled around the briefcase handle, she asked a nearby waiter to bring Amira some water. Before Amira could find words, and half-blinded by tears, she saw her red back steadily gliding away from her with a liquid-like movement until she was gone.

Amira’s head felt now as though it was floating.

I am foolish, naïve: a young idiot.

She watched herself rise, cut off from all the moving bodies and the chatter, and wandered out into Alexanderplatz with its drab greys and beiges and faded graffiti: a tired square for tired times. Elga, her non-mother, had disappeared. She looked for her among the tourists and students sitting around the fountain drinking coffee from paper cups, and reading novels, anything, to take the mind away. Among the cyclists on bicycles and business people in suits. Gone.

But leaning against the wall near the Sparkasse she saw someone – a familiar man. He stared at her and smiled. At first she couldn't believe it and she had to blink hard to check that her eyes were not deceiving her.

Kolya.

Yes, it was Kolya!

Father's pervasive eyes.

She ran towards him. She had to talk to him, to tell him about Elga, about Knudsen, about the panic attacks and how she didn't know if she truly believed in complete infection as their father had taught them. Third Warrior Brother would listen to her; he always did, even if he didn't always agree with her. But he shook his head at her.

She paused, uncertain.

He ran, heading towards the subway.

Words and emotions welled within her and she couldn't help it; she broke into a sprint, dashed down the stairs, searching for Kolya.

For an hour she looked for him, through the faces of the people waiting, disembarking, buying tickets, but she'd lost him, as she had the mother who was never hers.

12

Saturday, 12 June

She arrived back in Cologne with a hollowed-out feeling.

Her need to speak to Kolya, Mother or Lukas about everything that was happening was acute. She had never been good at sweeping her emotions under the carpet. They always ate away at her, and it was the same now.

The answering machine flickered red.

Amira clicked the listen button. The message was from three hours earlier when she would have been on the ICE.

'Hi Anika, Lukas here. I hope you are okay. The dojo is having some black belts visit from other schools from 12.30 to 2.30 this afternoon, if you're interested. I'll be there. Give me a call when you can. Bye.'

She went to bed and tried to sleep. A little bug the size of an ant scampered across the white ceiling and the shadow from the light fitting was a dark grey.

Perhaps Father did make a blunder. Perhaps his people gave him the wrong information. As if. He hadn't made a mistake. He had deliberately deceived her, fed her lies, tested her, hoping she was loyal enough not to visit Elga Hinkel. And he sent Kolya to follow her.

But Kolya must have let her see him. He wanted her to know he was there. That Father had sent him.

Was this love? How could Father mistreat her this way?

She curled her knees up to her ribcage, and clutched at herself. If only she could run away and never come back. Then she started to shake and she couldn't breathe, so she rose onto her knees and held the wall. It was cool, hard, and comforting. Only it couldn't hold her. She wanted a person and needed to know that she could defy Father and be in control. Not caring about the consequences, she leapt up, dressed in a black mini-skirt, a red lace blouse.

At the dojo, competitors faced each other and engaged in a friendly dose of sparing. There was a faint smell of sweat in the air. Lukas stood on one of the mats, launching defensive moves with an appealing sense of purpose, oblivious to everything else around him. He was winning more points than his opponent. Oh, he was good. Looked like he could withstand almost anything. Her fingers ached to touch him. Noriaki approached her.

'Your instruction is already paying off,' he said. 'You must teach me how to train people so effectively.'

'Thanks, Noriaki.'

He smiled warmly. 'Of course, it helps to have such a determined, strong student. With a big heart.'

Lukas brought his opponent down. Won the match, and helped the other guy up.

'He'll take the nationals,' she said to Noriaki.

'Yes.' Noriaki walked away to speak to another student who wasn't performing as well.

Lukas came up to her, stroking the side of his jaw. 'Hey, you.'

She had to act fast before her nerves unravelled. 'Are you finished?'

He nodded.

She stepped closer to him, her breasts touching his chest. His masculine scent enveloped her. ‘Come home with me.’

He took a slight step back and looked away. ‘I take you back to your apartment I won’t be able to keep my hands off you. It’s a bad idea.’

Her mouth set into a hard line. ‘In that case, I’ll go.’

She headed for the stairs; unbidden tears pooled in her eyes. What was she thinking? Of course he didn’t want her. Why would he?

‘Anika, wait.’ Lukas halted mid-stride. He ran a hand through his hair. ‘You say I need to learn the power of defence, and it’s true. But only against you.’ He took her by the hand and pulled her out of the dojo. ‘Maybe you’ll teach me some other time.’

He closed her apartment door behind them. The anger at Father was still there, but now she was alone with Lukas she wanted him to hold her and not let go. For him to know her completely. Would she be able to satisfy him? What would it feel like to have him inside her? Would she make a fool of herself? She had only ever been with one man, and that had not been her choice.

‘You’re sure this is what you want?’ he asked.

She was tired of being the good girl, obedient and passive; she was choosing Lukas, but she had to look like she knew what she was doing. Her fingers searched for the top button on her blouse.

He stopped her with a kiss, both sweet and haunting. How could he make her so dizzy? He tilted his face down, tracing his lips along her collarbone, the curve of her neck. His hands holding hers. Her skin tingled, and she was frozen, listening to him breathing.

He tugged at her bottom lip with his teeth. ‘The problem is that you make me lose control.’ Then he pressed his palms to her cheeks, and attacked her mouth, urgently

sliding his tongue in against hers. His body pinned her against the wall. This was the Lukas she had sensed; his decisiveness allowed her to momentarily feel safe.

Three hours later, at around midnight, they were in her bed, and Lukas rolled onto his back. The room now was mostly dark, only the soft glow of a bedside lamp. His belly rumbled. ‘Food.’

‘Men are so weak,’ she replied. Her muscles were loose, like they were falling off her bones. She didn’t care. He had held her and known part of her.

Lukas rose, slid on his underwear, his blue jeans from his bag. He went into the kitchen. An opening of cupboards, his footsteps came closer and he stood in the doorway.

‘That refrigerator needs food,’ he said. ‘Cheese, vegetables. You know, that kind of thing?’

She rolled her eyes.

‘Wait here.’

Amira propped her head on her hand. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To get something we can eat.’

She wanted to catch his arm, and bring him back to her, but he was already out of the room.

Lying in bed, she tried to think how she could best paint his shapes, his tone of skin. But all she could imagine was his throat being slit by a person in a black balaclava, with blue eyes like her own. Why did he have to leave her alone?

Fifteen minutes later, he returned with ice cream, bananas and red wine.

‘You came back,’ she said.

He filled mugs with the ice cream and sliced banana on top. Tumblers filled with wine. She was glad now that he had gone to the shop, the sweetness of the dessert would be perfect. They held up their tumblers.

'Prost,' he said. 'To us.'

'To us,' she agreed.

She swallowed some wine; it was rich, full bodied, and delicious. He handed her a mug and a spoon. Gazing at the pieces of banana, there was a sudden picture. Although she had eaten the fruit many times before, this image was both new yet familiar, like déjà vu. She wanted to believe it was the alcohol talking, but it wasn't, it was a memory, a feeling, a ripping feeling as though someone had opened up her chest.

The picture: A small boy, no older than two, stuffs his mouth with banana. But his face is blurry.

Another one. He is holding onto me, crying. 'No! No! No!'

I won't let him go, but someone is pulling him away. I can't hold onto him tightly enough…

Amira rubbed her temple, and took a large swig of drink.

'What's wrong?' Lukas asked.

Words rose up within her, words that shouldn't be spoken. 'Too much excitement,' she said.

He swung an arm around her shoulders. 'Did you get my messages while you were painting?'

She had to think for a moment, yes that's right, the last he knew she was working hard as an artist. She nodded. 'I'm sorry I didn't respond. Family problems.'

‘That doesn’t sound good. Tell me about them.’

What could she say that wasn’t a lie? She put her food and wine on the bedside table. ‘I need to get some sleep.’

‘Eat first.’ He fed her some ice cream and banana from his mug. ‘It will help you tomorrow.’

She complied, although she no longer was hungry.

‘Why won’t you talk about your family?’ he pressed.

‘Isn’t much to tell.’

‘Well, there must be something.’

‘My parents were strict,’ she said.

‘In what way?’

‘They’re kind of… religious. My brothers and I had to believe everything our parents said, without question.’

‘That must have been tough.’

She took a mouthful of ice cream, without really tasting it: he trusted her too much. Coldness was beginning to seep into her bones. She needed to redirect the conversation away from the Knoxes. ‘I feel like my birth brother and mother were taken from me, which I suppose might be normal for a child who was adopted at two, right?’

He frowned. ‘That’s young. Surely you can’t remember from when you were two?’

‘That’s what I thought. But I have these feelings, these flashes of things, that seem to come from a different world.’

‘My uncle swears he remembers when he was a baby in a cot. He was looking at one of those colourful mobiles that turns and plays music. So maybe it’s possible to have such early memories.’

‘It’s confusing because I don’t know if they are memories, dreams or if I’m just making it up. They are like pictures seared on my brain.’

‘Have you discussed this with your family?’

She laughed. ‘Only one of my brothers. The rest would think I’d flipped out.’

‘Against their religion?’

‘Yeah, something like that.’

‘You’ve said before how you want to find your birth family but haven’t been able to. I did some research. There are ways you can track them down.’

She didn’t like where this was heading.

‘They don’t seem to allow closed adoptions in Australia anymore. But there are websites you can go onto and put down your details and scan for your family. Why don’t you give it a shot? I can even help you figure out a profile for yourself, if you like.’

Oh no! She really had been too indiscreet with him! ‘My parents wouldn’t be happy if they found out,’ she mumbled.

‘How would they know about it unless you told them?’

She couldn’t tell him about Laith and Oscar. ‘I’d feel like I was betraying them,’ she said.

‘But you wouldn’t be, and besides, they should understand.’

‘I don’t think so, Lukas,’ she said, irritated. ‘Your father might, but mine wouldn’t.’

‘Why not?’

Her gaze flicked upwards. Why were they having this conversation? It was wrecking everything that went before. Couldn’t he see when to drop it? ‘I’ve told you, why.’

‘But you’re unhappy. Why not try it? Or I might be able to pull some strings in the office.’

He wasn't going to let up. She had to say something. 'Look, I can't call authorities, I can't put my name up on websites, I can't go through any of those usual routes. My family would not permit it. I can't do that to them.'

He was very quiet now, staring pensively into his tumbler. She regretted her harsh tone, the way she'd put the words. 'Lukas, I'm sorry – '

He finished his drink. 'Don't be.'

She wanted to take back her anger. She'd upset him. 'I haven't been honest with you and it's not fair. My family are different, weird, over-protective.' Her voice sounded tight and her head had begun to ache.

Lukas put down his mug on the bedside table, leaned back against the bed-head and looked at her for a long time. 'Your family won't change how I feel about you. You are beautiful, Anika.'

She had to blink several times to keep her eyes from brimming over. 'You don't know who I am. Where I've come from. What I've done.'

'You're wrong, I do know who you are.'

Her neck was stiff. 'How?' she asked.

He put his arms around her and kissed her. 'Just by being with you.'

'You're delusional,' she replied. 'Or drunk.'

He pinched her softly at the waist. 'We're a good pair, then,' he said, a broad grin on his face.

When she woke it was almost two in the morning. Lukas was gone. On the pillow beside her was a note: *Sleep well, beautiful. I have an early shift. I'll call you tomorrow. X Lukas*

Silence echoed beyond her breathing. She had slept with a non-Member, for personal reasons. An action that could be used to excommunicate her from the

Movement. But that's what she wanted anyway, wasn't it? She was filled with restlessness and a desperate need for fresh air and walking. She rose out of bed, put on her jeans, T-shirt and jacket. Grabbed her gun.

Outside was dark and there were no clouds to dim the almost full moon, the brightness of the stars. The streetlights cast an amber haze on the footpath as she walked along. She touched her lips with her fingertips. Sex with Lukas was so very different to her only other experience…

It's my sixteenth birthday. I'm on my bed, reading a novel about a female spy. A birthday present from Mother. Father comes into the room, startling me. He sits down beside me and announces that he has a surprise for me.

'Dress up nicely for it. Maybe a skirt and a touch of make-up.'

The sun coming through the window slants glaringly on Mother who appears in the doorway. I squint to see her face.

'Please, why don't we go on a picnic?' she asks him.

'No, today is an important occasion. Come, Mother, let's get out of Mira's way so she can prepare.' He casually pulls a small parcel out from a bag and leaves it on the bed. 'Happy Birthday.'

They leave and he closes the door. I pick up the present; it's wrapped in handmade paper with a floral print. I open it up and see a bottle of perfume. I have never owned one before. Mother sometimes allows me to use some of her homemade herbal essences along my collarbone. But this gift of extravagance, which I don't know how to use properly, makes me feel almost panicky. I decide on one spray to the neck. After a scent of alcohol, there is rose and jasmine. I dress in a black skirt, of mid-thigh length, and a blue, sleeveless blouse.

Once I'm ready I walk down the stairs and Mother embraces me. 'I've a birthday cake for you when you come back. Something to look forward to.'

Father drives me to a Member's house near Culburra beach. I have been here before for women's meditation sessions. It is blue weatherboard and has a mauve-coloured awning, and pots filled with petunias. As usual, the drapes are drawn to discourage onlookers.

'This is something special,' Father says, 'that will help you to be an even better Warrior. Do not disappoint me with this Mira. If for some reason you don't embrace the opportunity, there will be consequences.'

His words, and Mother's earlier mood unnerve me. What test of Father's do I have to pass this time?

Inside, I realise I am not mistaken to be so terrified. Twenty-five-year-old Dylan, one of my fitness trainers, waits on a couch. Alone. He springs to his feet as we enter the room and stares at me. Everyone in the Movement loves Dylan. He is tall and handsome, with blonde hair and a powerful devotion. But he is certainly one of my least favourite trainers, mostly because he works me so hard.

I glance downward, trying to hide behind my hair. The air suddenly seems dank, and I imagine the dim yellow light from the overhead lamp pressing against the curtains, seeking a wider release.

'I'll leave you to it then?' Father says to Dylan.

What was the it he was to leave us to? I dread the prospect of being left with Dylan on some arranged date. I don't know what to say to him, except to inquire how many bench presses he is pulling these days. 'Father, what's going on?' I ask.

‘Dylan will show you. Make sure you do as he asks. You may need to do this one day – for the Cause. You need to get used to it.’ He looks at Dylan. ‘You have an hour.’ Then as an afterthought: ‘Be gentle’.

Father leaves the house. I hear him lock the front door.

Dylan walks towards me. ‘I’m honoured that he has chosen me, that he would think me worthy.’ He lifts his hand and strokes my cheek; his fingers are rough and dry. ‘And of course, you’re very sweet.’

I recoil. ‘What are you doing?’

‘What he asked me to do. Take off your clothes.’

I study his expression; he does not blink. ‘What? No. Father wouldn’t ask you to do this.’

‘You heard what he said.’

Dylan tugs at my blouse, like a boy eager to unwrap a lolly. Up close I can see the bristles on the surface of his jaw line, threatening, waiting to burst through. ‘No, please, let me call my mother. There’s been some mistake.’

‘He doesn’t make mistakes, and besides, he told me no phone calls. His exact words. Now, come on, it’s not that bad, you’ll see.’ He lifts up my skirt. ‘You don’t know how jealous all the other boys are of me.’

Everyone knows about this but me? I slap his hand away. ‘There’s no reason for them to be jealous.’

‘Well, it’s your decision, Mira. You can walk out and leave, if you want. I’d be obliged to tell your Father. But it’s your choice.’

He puts his hands on his hips and looks out of the window, as if he doesn’t care how I decide. His mouth opens and he licks his top lip.

I look at him, trembling all over. Disobedience will lead to severe consequences. Days in solitary, or perhaps excommunication. I am powerless,

but part of me also wants to please Father, to show him I am not afraid to sacrifice my body for the Cause. That I can, and will, do anything he asks of me.

I lift my chin. ‘Isn’t there a bed or something?’

Dylan smiles at me. ‘Right this way.’

The bedroom is decorated with flowers, and the scent of incense fills the air. Sandalwood. Selena’s unmistakable touch.

‘Do you want me to help you with your clothes?’ Dylan asks.

‘I’ll do it myself,’ I reply.

He takes his jeans, T-shirt and underwear off. His body is overly muscular, his skin thin, his penis already standing erect with pulsating purple veins. Better get this over with. Hopefully it won’t take long. I undress and lie down on the bed. He kisses me and rubs his hand between my legs and my mind floats out of the room and I try to think of the birthday cake, of the paperback I am reading, anything but his cramming into me, and how I feel myself draining away.

At last he moans and spasms and it’s done.

Then, there is a creaking at the back door, and Kolya suddenly appears in the doorway. Dylan and I are naked on the bed. Quickly I scurry to find my clothes. There’s a sting between my legs and I’m conscious of the thin trickle of blood on my inner thigh. Dylan sprawls out on his back.

‘I knocked,’ Kolya says, ‘but no one answered. So I tried the backdoor.’ He looks down at me on the ground searching for clothes.

‘You weren’t supposed to be here for another two hours,’ Dylan says. ‘Your package is in the kitchen.’

‘What have you done with my sister?’ Kolya demands.

Dylan crosses his hands behind his head. ‘Ask your father.’

Kolya nears the bed and points a finger at him. ‘If you’ve hurt her…’

‘He hasn’t, K,’ I say, putting my hand on his arm to restrain him.

‘The package is in the kitchen,’ Dylan repeats, pronouncing each word evenly.

‘Get dressed, Mira. You’re coming with me,’ Kolya says.

I follow his instructions while he collects what he has come for. I do everything I can not to burst into tears, as he pulls me to his car in the driveway.

‘Get in,’ he orders.

‘Father was coming to pick me up…’

‘Get in the fucking car, Mira.’

I scramble in feeling dirty and ashamed.

Kolya starts the engine and drives. ‘Father wants you to do this?’ he asks.

‘It’s none of your business, K.’

‘How long has this been going on?’

I shake my head.

‘I’ll kill him, I’ll fucking kill him.’

‘It’s okay, K. I’m all right.’

‘You don’t look all right. You look a mess. Does Mother know about this?’

‘It’s for the Cause.’

‘You’re sixteen. You don’t even like Dylan. He’s too old for you.’

‘Maybe he cares about me,’ I say.

Kolya rolls his eyes. ‘He just wants you for the sex.’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘He doesn’t love you, Mira. Last night he was screwing another girl.’

I fight the tears back. ‘No, of course he doesn’t love me. Why would he, right?’

He looks at me. ‘Oh, Mira. That’s not what I meant. The guy is a complete prick. A wanna-be Warrior.’

I begin to cry. ‘What choice did I have?’

‘I’ll have a word with Father.’

‘Please leave it be, K.’

‘I won’t.’

His stubbornness scares me. ‘Don’t make it any worse! Please leave it alone!’

Kolya sees the distress on my face and pulls over to the side of the road. ‘Oh, Mira. What will we do with you?’ He hugs me and I sob into his arms. ‘Come on, let’s get you home and cleaned up. I won’t say anything. Don’t worry. Come now, cheer up. Mother’s been making her sausage rolls. For your birthday.’

Amira breathed in the cold night air and walked in the shadows, wondering what it would be like to let herself love Lukas. To turn away from herself towards him. She would never be able to tell him her secret, but it would all be worth it if it meant she could have a life with him. She had to find a way to get Kolya and Mother to leave the Movement. How could she convince two loyal followers to do it? She was weary with not knowing the answer. They would not leave simply because she did, and, after Randy, Father would come after them, but they could hide, at least to begin with, in her hut.

She passed an empty chip packet on the path and seconds later there was a crunch, as if someone had just stepped on it.

She was being followed. Again.

She turned down another street and caught a glimpse of Wilhelm in the side mirror of a car. He was hopeless. If he hadn't known about Lukas before, he probably did now. Let's have some fun shall we, Wilhelm?

This time it didn't take long for her to lose him. She was in the mood for running fast and for a long time. She lost him somewhere near the Cathedral, then she shuttled back. He was walking briskly to one of the pubs on Friesenstrasse, appearing determined as a bull. She was curious what he was up to, and shadowed him.

At the pub he met another man who was longhaired, middle-aged, thin and chain smoking. They talked quietly, seriously. She couldn't hear what they were saying over the chatter and noise of the other customers. The conversation lasted no more than twenty minutes. Amira guessed that this stranger was helping Wilhelm obtain stolen vehicles or to unearth information on Knudsen.

Wilhelm farewelled the stranger and strode outside the pub. Amira kept after him, she had something she wanted to say to him, and as far as she was concerned it couldn't wait until tomorrow. She followed him as he went down the street, turned right at the next corner. Trickles of people – mostly young students and couples – strolled, content with the night's drunken pleasures. Her legs moved faster as he headed towards a car parked on the side of the street. A couple sauntering further down the road laughed and called out something she didn't catch. Quickly she ran up behind him, her grip on the Glock pistol tightening while her left hand clutched his elbow.

'Hello, Wilhelm.'

He drew in his breath sharply before twisting round, spotting her and grimacing in fear.

Amira showed him her weapon. 'Get in the car,' she ordered.

He did, and she jumped in the front passenger seat beside him.

'What's this about?' he asked.

'I want to speak with you, that's all,' she reassured him.

He continued to tremble, his eyes on her face. The car started to fog up from their breathing. ‘So speak,’ his voice was more frantic. ‘This isn’t protocol.’

‘And following me around is?’

He pressed his back firmly against the car seat. His bony knees knocked against each other.

‘The information you gave me is incorrect,’ Amira said.

He coughed into his hand. ‘What?’

‘Elga Hinkel, freelance investigative journalist.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Don’t lie to me. I’m not in the mood. It’s too late at night, for one thing,’ she said.

‘Look, I pass on the information your father gives me. That’s my job, remember?’

‘Well, I’m not proceeding until I have correct information.’

His mouth flickered; he held his hands together. ‘You know what you’re doing right now, don’t you?’

‘I might have a problem,’ she replied.

He stared at her. ‘You think?’ he said sarcastically.

‘Get me the correct information or I don’t do my job. Tell Father.’

He put a hand over his chin as though he was pondering her demand. ‘You’re crazy,’ he said. ‘You ask me to be the first to throw dirt on your coffin.’

‘I want the information. Let me deal with the consequences.’

He shut his eyes, his lashes like fans on his cheekbones. ‘This is stupid. Ridiculous.’

‘My forté.’

‘Don’t do this. You won’t win.’

She took a deep breath, pulled out the Glock and pointed it at him. ‘Then tell Father the hunt is on, he can come and get me.’

Wilhelm drew his lips tight over his teeth. He pushed a key into the ignition. ‘Fine,’ he harrumphed. ‘I’ll ask him for the information. Get out of my car.’

13

Sunday, 13 June

It was eight o'clock in the morning and the rain came down in torrents, pelting the road and the balcony outside her apartment, slicing through car headlights. Amira stared at the downpour through the glass side doors, the water she had always liked. She was in her pyjamas and sipped instant miso soup from a mug. The footpaths below her apartment were deserted except for the wife of the shopkeeper across the road; she stood under the store's doorway puffing on a cigarette, as she gazed out at the wet puddles growing greasy and luminous with car oil. Nothing like Sunday rain to keep customers in their homes.

Amira sank down on the couch feeling tired and haggard, unable to sleep. She played some music through her laptop. An alternative Australian band. A little dreary for her liking, but one of Kolya's favourites, and listening to it made her feel closer to him.

She went online and found herself staring in astonishment at the breaking news in the centre-left of the screen. Another billionaire had been murdered. This time the victim was a Canadian, another media tycoon, who was killed in the living room of his apartment in Toronto. The Authenticity Movement were credited with the murder with the same segment of the manifesto being found near the body that was with Jonas Baumann. Also making news was new banking regulations in America that were said to ensure taxpayers would not have to fund future bailouts of Wall Street's risky

behaviour. Some economists criticised the bill for not going far enough, while others thought it went too far. The Movement would be paying attention to these developments, but what alarmed Amira was the Canadian murder, and that she couldn't make sense of who the killer was.

If Kolya was in Berlin on Friday it would have been tight for him to fly back to Canada and make the kill yesterday, on Saturday. Not impossible, but difficult. And what was strange was that the same pages of the Manifesto had been left with the body. She had been directed to leave the next chapters of the Manifesto – ones that were not yet public – with Knudsen, and she expected that Kolya would have been instructed to do the same with his targets. It didn't make sense.

She spooned some salty wakame into her mouth, rose and paced the room in agitation.

Kolya, in a rush to make the kill, could have made a mistake after Berlin and left the wrong pages with the corpse. Or Oscar or Laith may have been involved. But she couldn't imagine any of them making such a blunder.

There had to be a copycat killer.

Father would be pleased. She could almost see his gleaming eyes claiming victory over the hearts and minds of the public. This was essential to Resistance Phase Two.

Amira should have been delighted too. After all, this is what she and her family had worked so hard for. Instead, it rankled her that others were willing to join their fold. Perhaps she was the problem, Father was right and she was at risk. The desolation and anger built up within her. She decided she needed the shooting range. The perfect place to spend a rainy Sunday morning.

* * *

To gain her sporting shooting licence in Germany, Amira had to show up to practice sessions and training at the club in Ehrenfeld for three months before she was permitted to become a member. No legal range would allow her to pop in at will without becoming a member registered on a police database along with a weapon. She had to sign a statement that she was a trustworthy person, that she hadn't been convicted of a crime nor was bankrupt, an alcoholic, a drug addict or mentally ill. She also had to do a practical test to show that she could safely handle weapons, which she passed easily. And she had to declare that she wasn't a member of an organisation or political party that breached the German constitution. Technically, Anika Vollmer met all of those criteria. The legitimate shooting ranges didn't allow people to practice with semi-automatic or automatic weapons, only Zimmerstutzen, air rifles and small calibre rifles, but that was better than nothing. She was glad that the range stored guns for members at the club if they paid an insurance charge. She didn't want to be seen walking around Cologne carrying a rifle bag.

She appreciated the quiet of the shooting gallery, with only the popping of the rifles cracking through the air. Her firing at the electronically controlled targets was off; her thoughts were on her family, and in particular, her little sister Amelia. She didn't want her growing up the way she had.

After shooting practice she checked her mobile. There was a text message from Wilhelm.

Father in Cologne. Pub. 4pm.

The possibility of a trap was undeniable, but something had to change, and right then Amira wasn't afraid to die, to act for a scrap of hope, of belief. She was ready to be declared infected.

* * *

She arrived early at the quaint brewery and pub in Heumarkt in the Altstadt. The outside of the building was painted orange, and a black metal and brass king sitting on top of a keg hung high, protruding from the brickwork. There were stained glass windows of Karnival scenes and gnomes. Inside was crowded, and noisy with the cheerful banter of customers. Interior walls were decorated with woodwork engravings of how to make beer. The light was a dim yellow, and the air smelled of yeast and hot chips and cigarette smoke. She sat down at a booth made of dark wood at the back of the pub; it was near the rear exit. A busty woman with strands of red, purple and green hair approached carrying a tray in the shape of a wreath filled with tall glasses of beer. She pulled one out to place on the table, but Amira declined and asked for three Korns instead. The woman turned over a paper coaster wrote the order down with a biro, tallied the cost and left it on the table. She returned with the drinks. With fumbling fingers, Amira tossed one of the drinks back into her throat, feeling the burn slide down into her stomach where it fanned out into a comforting warmth. She put a coaster over the empty shot glass so that it would not be refilled.

Loud conversations buzzed around her, angry debates about football. Her Glock – close to her chest like a parasitic twin. It comforted her to have it. She sipped the second Korn, trying to make it last, and waited.

Father strode through the pub doors at 4.30pm. His eyes behind the glasses moved across the room, scanning the faces, until they landed on her. She waved and forced a smile.

‘Hello, my treasure,’ he said to her in German. He kissed her on the cheek.

Amira tightened. ‘I can’t believe you’re here in Germany.’

‘No? Well, here I am.’

He slid into the booth across from her, and stared at her one and a half empty glasses. She placed the third one in front of him. The tendons in his neck stretched taut. It was the alcohol. He didn't like it, although there wasn't a Movement ban on it.

'An authentic pub experience,' she offered.

'I'm not here for that,' Father said.

For a long time, they remained silent. He stared at her through the dim light, and she blushed, feeling that even now, she was susceptible to the way his eyes seemed to peel away all her layers. Just like when she was a child.

I am eleven. I am perched before my wooden desk in our study. My brothers sit at their desks and our pens are upright and our heads are down and we will commit the knowledge before us in our books to our brains, lest we become unthinking slaves.

Father sits in his leather chair by the window. He rests his chin on a thumb, an index finger under his nose – fingernails spotless – his stare unbroken by a blinking eyelid. I glance up, and see his silent, pondering eyes on me. Feeling shy, unravelled, not used to his attention, I look back downward, to the theories of Marx and Engels. Mother comes into the room and Father finds his feet, pacing around our desks.

'I keep telling myself I must be patient,' he says. 'Patient. Always patient.'

We children look up at him.

'Keep studying!' Mother gently urges. Our heads fall back down, to the stilted words on the page.

'I'm exhausted by the waiting: that's the truth of it. These children – will they ever grow?'

'They will,' Mother says.

Father's glare chides Mother. I can tell it's happening, the slow build up of rage, the explosion that comes after the brooding.

‘Don’t worry Father,’ I blurt out. ‘We will make you happier, you’ll see. We will be the best freedom fighters ever, just for you!’

Father nears my table, cups my small face in his hands and after several seconds, when I’m not sure if I’ve said something naughty that deserves a slap, he smiles. ‘I believe you,’ he says. ‘You are my beloved daughter.’

Amira sipped her drink and studied him over the rim of her shot glass. He looked different in the pub, older, wearier, than she remembered. He scratched his cheek above his neat beard.

‘My brother,’ Amira said, plucking up courage to break the silence. ‘The oldest one, where is he?’

‘I’m not here for your brothers,’ Father replied, a flash of anger in his eyes. He folded his hands on the table.

‘No, of course not,’ she replied. She had better control herself.

He pushed the drink aside and leaned forward. ‘Let me tell you why I am here,’ he said in a low voice. He told her how he’d come to help her with her next target, to offer her the support she needed. He spoke about the time when his mother had died and how shaken he had been, how badly he wished he could have gone to his father with his grief but his father turned only to work because he had been claimed. But he would not leave his daughter in her time of need.

Amira smiled tenatively. She had believed he would be angry with her. Now she was beginning to wonder if Randy really had been infected. Whether she had been wrong about everything.

‘Kolya,’ he said, ‘told me the reason for your present sense of helplessness. He told me about Jonas’ granddaughter.’

She was stung, hands in her lap. Kolya and she had an understanding between them. What else had he blabbed about?

'I have read about the girl's pain. It's very unfortunate. But the question you need to ask yourself is whether her agony is in vain? Is it for nothing? Or is it for the joy she will receive in the New World?'

'But she had happiness with her grandfather,' Amira mumbled. 'And I took it away from her.'

'You saved her from infection. You have given her a chance at life.' A corner of his mouth curled up, his eyes probed hers.

Amira could not answer. She sat there, stricken.

'And, I know the question about your birth family, troubles you. Your messenger tells me the information you received was incorrect.'

'I didn't think we made such mistakes,' Amira said.

He shrugged. 'We are all too human.'

'Yes,' she said.

'A source from the orphanage where you came from assured me that the information was accurate. But now that I know it isn't, I will conduct further investigations. Steal the original birth certificate if I have to.' He looked at her sincerely, even compassionately.

Amira paused, swallowed, then replied, 'I just don't know if I can go on with my task Father, that's the honest truth. I've been shaking, panicking. I don't know why.'

He reached across and patted her hand. 'I know I ask a lot from you and that sometimes you find it difficult. But Authenticity dwells within you, you are strong, I have seen it so often. You are capable of bringing in the New World; you only need to push through this doubt, this fear.'

She wanted desperately to believe him. 'What happened with Randy, Father?'

He went pale. His hands dropped into his lap. ‘He’d been claimed. He was my son, my boy, and he became infected. You should have seen him, Mira. Your heart would have been broken. All he cared about were drugs and money. I tried everything – you must believe me – to help him. But he spat in my face. Told me I was sick! He threatened our Authenticity, said he would even go to the police. What would you have me do, my beautiful daughter? Have your Mother, brothers and yourself thrown into prison? Who would look after your baby sister?’ And then something very unexpected happened; Father began to weep, quietly, in the booth.

Amira was astonished. But naturally he was as devastated as she, as Kolya. Her hands trembled and a tear tumbled down her cheek, in shame. She hated herself for criticising him, for being a disloyal, unloving daughter. She couldn’t even hand him back his handkerchief because she’d made it sodden.

‘I’m sorry, Father,’ she said. ‘I’m glad you’ve come. I don’t know what I would have done without you.’

He nodded, smiled faintly, and looked up at her. ‘There is something else,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

He sat forward. ‘I have a confession of sorts to make.’

Amira listened intently.

‘Before I started the Movement, before your Mother, I had some lady friends.’ The comment is made casually, almost carelessly.

Amira’s mind worked this over. She didn’t see its immediate relevance.

‘You must be careful who you have flings with. Romances that are light and fun at first can become heavy and burdensome, and before you know it, they can destroy you and everything that you and our family have worked so hard to achieve. The slave mentality rubs off, you see. They sometimes make you feel safe; they inadvertently

have you start thinking and feeling in slave-like ways and that's when a person can be claimed. Also, slaves talk to the police. So you must be cautious.'

She realised now why he was telling her this: Wilhelm or Kolya had seen her with Lukas and reported her.

He picked up a coaster, turned it over in his fingers. 'I know you wouldn't fall in love with a slave. They can be very manipulative.'

Amira said nothing.

He lifted up the glass in front of him and drank the Korn in one mouthful. 'Agh! Ghastly!' He pulled a face, threw back his head and laughed.

Amira chuckled because his cheeks had blossomed red, the colour of cranberry. But mostly she laughed because he hadn't excommunicated her, despite knowing about Lukas. He was giving her another life.

'Now let me buy you a decent meal,' he said. 'It looks like you need a good feed.'

14

Monday, 14 June – Wednesday, 16 June

Over the next two days he barely left Amira's side. He guided her meditation sessions. Accompanied her as she jogged, he on her bicycle. Fed her proper meals with fresh organic vegetables. Never before had she received such individual attention from him. His eyes were bright and glossy. He believed she was a fantastic Warrior – strong was the word he kept using – capable of squashing inAuthenticity like a bug. Her hand was made for holding a gun because she could shoot better than anyone he knew (except Kolya of course, no one was better than him).

He told her stories about when he was a boy letting off petrol bombs and firecrackers and how his mother had to take him fishing because his father never had the time as the virus had taken him early. He spoke of his first love, Mother, and how fortunate he was to have such a strong woman stand by his side for all these years.

'Your mother has much integrity, Mira, and she has nurtured this in you.'

She focused on the training, the preparation and listening to Father talk while she worked. For the most part her concentration didn't wane. She would think of Lukas often enough but managed to conceal the extent of her feelings. Things changed on Tuesday afternoon though when she was doing push-ups in the living room. She was up to number 123 when Father, sitting on the couch munching on an apple, asked her about the man she'd been seeing.

'What's his name?'

She stopped mid-air on number 124, her elbows bent. ‘It’s nothing serious,’ she stammered.

It was too late: Father seeing that he had caught her off-guard, smiled sourly. ‘Then why do you keep checking your mobile phone for his messages? Come on, tell me his name.’

An ache rose in her forehead. She still wanted Lukas to be her secret. But Father would not give up until he had the name. For all she knew, he already had it, and this was another one of his tests. ‘Lukas,’ she muttered.

‘And is he recruitable, do you think? If he is any good, he must be.’

Amira pushed herself up off the ground. Her throat was dry and she needed a drink of water.

Father followed her into the kitchen. ‘Well?’

‘I don’t think so, Father.’

‘Too slavish?’

She downed a full glass of water and gasped for breath. ‘I suppose.’

‘Then you need to break it off with him.’ She couldn’t do that, and Father seemed to sense it. He returned her mobile. ‘At least text him that you are busy painting. For now, you need to think about your work. Focus on one task at a time. Otherwise the fog and confusion that has plagued you will return.’

She regretted mentioning Lukas’s name; she’d been concentrating on the workout and was swept away by the good feeling of having Father as a constant companion. Nonetheless, she gave in and texted Lukas. He called her back almost immediately and Father insisted she answer it. The One stood over her as she spoke into the phone.

‘I have this amazing idea for a painting,’ she said. ‘I need some time to focus on it.’

‘I’ll bring you some food,’ Lukas said.

‘No, please don’t, I have plenty at the moment.’ She looked uncomfortably at Father. ‘Call you when I run out?’ She wanted to finish. It was painful speaking to him with Father looming over her, hanging on every word.

Lukas was silent for a moment. ‘The thing is, I’ll miss you.’

Her head whirled. ‘I know,’ she said softly. ‘Look, I have to go now. Someone’s at the door. Talk soon?’

‘Sure we will.’

She hung up, went to the pantry, but there was no chocolate.

On Tuesday evening Wilhelm had the information: Knudsen would be attending a supper the following night at his local church where a missionary from Uganda would be speaking. He would not have bodyguards protecting him. The vehicles were in place for her mission.

Father and Amira ate spaghetti bolognaise that night and finished going over the plans for the fourth and last time.

‘You are ready for this task,’ he said. ‘I believe it in my heart. When it’s finished, why don’t you come home for a while, have a rest, recover, find out about your birth family? Spend time with your baby sister.’

‘That would be wonderful,’ she replied. She would go after some serious downtime with Lukas. But there was no need to tell this to Father.

‘There’s a good girl.’ He smiled, and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

They said good-bye on Wednesday at noon. Wilhelm delivered a silver Opel in a street near her apartment. Father walked her to the car, carrying her backpack. He patted the

bag with a palm. ‘I have a little treat in here for you,’ he said. He unzipped the bag and pointed down at two prisms of Toblerone. Amira looked up at him, puzzled.

He chuckled and clapped a hand on her back. ‘To add authenticity to your Swiss experience.’

She couldn’t hide her surprise at Father’s generosity. Brand product involved and all.

‘And here.’ He handed her a box wrapped with a bow. She stared down at it, overwhelmed by his kindness. ‘Go on, open it.’

She unfurled the ribbon, unwrapped the paper. Inside the box was a print of a baby’s hand and foot, and a caption in Mother’s calligraphy writing: *For my big sister, Amira, love, your little sister, Amelia*.

‘Lots of ‘A’s for Authenticity aren’t there?’ Father grinned.

Amira was unable to find words.

Father laughed again. ‘Mother thought you’d be pleased. Now off you go, make us proud!’

She kissed Amelia’s print as if it was her salvation, and carefully put it in her backpack. Father embraced her and whispered in her ear. ‘Remember, for your family, for humanity.’

Amira climbed into the car and glanced in the rear-view mirror as she pulled away. Father stood at the kerb waving and blowing kisses at her.

I drive out of Cologne, heading south towards Lausanne. The sun glares through the windscreen. Sunglasses sit atop my nose. On the backseat is my backpack with the chocolate Father bought me and the three chicken and salad rolls he made, and my sister’s gift. African drums pound on my iPod, and I feel as though I’ve slipped into my old skin like a hand gliding into a well-used glove.

Authenticity is great, Authenticity for all people…

Driving through Cologne I pass an old cemetery, a strip of shops, a tramline, the Rhine Energie football stadium, the Center Galleria, gardeners weeding on the side of the road. Once on the Autobahn I can see flat green fields with brown bails of hay, neatly rolled and ready to be collected. After Koblenz the landscape grows more mountainous and there is an abundance of cornfields. I climb higher and the drive quickly becomes a spot-the-castle one. Near Mannheim I exit off the A5 and locate my first stop: a house with a car in the driveway. The curtains are all drawn – the signal that all is clear. All I do is change cars.

Kill the enemy wherever you find them…

The stretches of Autobahn where I can go as fast as I like are broken up by intersections that impose a speed limit, and slow moving trucks and campervans. There are Burger King and Nordsee restaurants along the way, motels near service centres, and looming above the road a sign for the furniture store that Knudsen owns.

Father embraces me, his eyes aglow. 'For Britta, so that her pain is not for nothing.'

I change cars again in Freiburg making sure it has the vignettes sticker on the windshield that pays for the Swiss road tolls, and switch on the radio. A survey has found that job satisfaction in Germany has gone down and someone wins a barbeque from a pop quiz. Near the Swiss border there are signs for sorting vehicles for customs inspections and a truck traffic jam with a tail-back of at least four kilometres. I pass the border without being stopped for a customs spot check. Almost instantly the temperature is warmer than in Germany. There is an eagle circling above the road looking for mice. I drive through long tunnels and it is only after Bern that I see through the haze the white-tipped Alps rising up from the earth, and German *Ausfahrt* signs change to the French *Sortie*. A man sells pumpkins on the side of the road.

At a farmyard near Murten in Switzerland, there are balloons at the letterbox indicating that everything is in order. In the barn there is the motorbike: a red Kawasaki Ninja, four cylinders, about 600cc. I smile to myself. This is Wilhelm's idea of a joke. It isn't the most powerful bike, but it is a good fit for my weight and strength. Under a horses' saddle in the hay is a kit with a weapon, disguise, protective motorcycle clothing and the instalment of the Manifesto that I'm to leave with the body.

I quickly change and put on the helmet with the dark shielding visor. My gloves are on my hands. I'm encased within my own little shell. I familiarise myself with the motorcycle controls. A bird prattles and cars drone in the distance. I climb onto the Kawasaki, ride towards Epalinges, and it is then, with the humming between my legs that the quivering begins. I've been on the road for seven and a half hours.

I am seven. Leaping down plains of grassland towards the beach, laughing with my brothers. We are free to run, away from the watchful eyes of our parents. The hot wind whips at the backs of our calves, and the dry, loose sand scratches our bare skin, but we don't care. We are reckless in our swimmers, our lack of hats and sunscreen. Afterwards, Mother will berate us for the sunburn. We dig deep holes and play battles in the sand dunes, and I am the Authenticity princess that my brothers pretend to fight over.

I think about Lukas, his strong gaze on me, his eyes alive, and knowing nothing of Britta's relentless screaming, so loud it could split the bike helmet off my head. His full smile and the way it offers a chance at a new life. Then there are thoughts of Randy: how did he become infected?

Father's words: 'Fight for the slaves who, weak and oppressed, can no longer fight for themselves.'

I ride past houses, weaving in and out of traffic, and just outside Epalinges, on the Route de Berne when I reach the signs for a sports centre on my left, I turn the motorcycle around, easing it up a grassy patch on the side of the road at the top of the hill. I can see the cars approaching down the street from Epalinges and Lausanne. Twenty minutes early. Plenty of time. I kill the engine and pull out a map, pretending to look at it, readying myself for Knudsen's approach.

Waiting on the strip. Terribly exposed to the eyes of those in passing cars. Potential witnesses. The longer I stand here, the more likely... I shut my eyes for a few seconds, attempting to clear my mind. When I open them I see Knudsen's Volvo approaching from down the road. He's ten minutes early. Frugal and prompt. The timing for Amira Knox is perfect.

I quickly fold the map, stuff it into my backpack, haul myself onto the Kawasaki and start the ignition. The Volvo passes me, and as expected, Knudsen is alone.

'Fight for those starving, for those without a voice, without a home!'

I twist the accelerator grip: rev, rev, rev. Suddenly Knudsen crawls down the Route du Riau; he's taking a detour. Where are you going Knudsen? This isn't the plan. He was supposed to continue down the Route de Berne before turning onto the Route de à l' Allamand. I would make the hit before he could reach the church in Montpreveyres. The abrupt change, places me in a quandary. Time is running out.

Adapt. Survive.

I speed up until Knudsen is in sight once again. He turns onto Riau-Graubon. There's a car trailing thirty metres behind us, along with a black motorcycle. Spots of sun-dappled light filter down through the surrounding pines onto the road.

Authenticity ring in this dead man's heart and in mine.

Knudsen's car is just in front of me. Speeding up, I align my motorcycle with the driver's seat. The billionaire's frail face flickers through the glass, through the changing shades of light and dark cast by the sun streaming beyond the pines. His eyes are fixed ahead, and he is mumbling. I clutch my weapon and feel through the glove the familiar trigger.

Britta's screams crack deafeningly in my ears. Her face jagged with pain haunts my view of the target. I have to consciously pull myself into the present. I point the Glock at Knudsen. He looks at me with an expression of shock and horror.

His is the face of the infected.

Now is the time. My moment.

Yet my finger won't press down on the trigger. My intentions fall fast. Press it! Easy. Breathe.

A feeling, a sense of Father taking something from me that I can't give.

Then there is a flash of blackness. A rush of movement on the other side of Knudsen's car. The black motorbike. The motorcyclist pulls out a weapon, keeping it close to his body. The visor is too dark for me to see a face. Knudsen's eyes are still on me, he doesn't see the other motorcyclist pulling a trigger.

'No!' my yelp is muffled, made inaudible, by my helmet, the zooming of the vehicles.

Pft! The motorcyclist fires once. Knudsen's face twists and distorts in pain. 'May you find peace before your moment of death,' I whisper.

Pft! The killer quickly shoots two, three times and speeds up ahead. Knudsen's car reels out of control to the right, swerving off the road and smashes into a large pine. The bonnet of the Volvo is a mangled compressed mess.

Refocus. Keep riding.

I hear the screeching halt of tires behind me. In my side-view mirror I see a woman and man leap out of a car and rush towards Knudsen.

Accelerate! Get out of here! Now!

My limbs quiver and there is no sign of the killer on the black motorcycle. I careen around a bend and then another, riding as fast as I can. For a brief period, I am lost. Knudsen's detour confuses me momentarily and it takes me valuable minutes to find the Route de Berne once again. GPS on my phone is no use; it can be tracked.

Father had Randy killed because he failed.

Will I be next?

The infected must be cleansed.

Amira rode, and the sun glared through her visor. Knudsen's killer had to be Kolya. Neither Laith nor Oscar were capable of manoeuvring a motorbike on the road while delivering accurate shots at a moving target.

Father sent Kolya to back her up. Kolya always succeeds.

After half an hour she switched on the local French radio through her iPod, and within minutes there was an emergency announcement. A woman newsreader said:

Seventy-four-year-old furniture tycoon, Pelle Knudsen has been shot dead near Lausanne by an unidentified person on a red motorcycle.

Police say the shooting happened about forty minutes ago on the Riau-Graubon, in the canton of Vaud.

They found him with three gunshot wounds to the head. He was pronounced dead at the scene by paramedics.

Homicide squad detectives interviewed two witnesses who describe the gunman as wearing black and a helmet. The suspect is believed to be anywhere from between 160cm and 180cm in height.

Police are keen to speak with anyone who saw or heard anything suspicious around the time of the murder.

Anyone with information is asked to contact the Swiss Vaud State Police.

Officials are investigating whether the Authenticity Movement carried out the killing.

Knudsen was collecting a friend to take to a local church event.'

Nothing of the black BMW motorcycle.

The witnesses must have only seen her gun.

She had seven long minutes of riding before she was at the farmhouse in Murten. There were countless other drivers on the road with their probing eyes and ears. She could see them all around her, in her mirrors. But there were no police, no sirens.

At last she arrived at the farm. She parked the Kawasaki in the shed. Gasping for breath, she ripped off helmet, jacket, protective pants, disguise, gun and tossed them into the hay under the horse's saddle, climbed into the waiting car and drove.

The news reports now revealed that police had found segments, never publicly seen chapters, of the Authenticity Movement Manifesto in Knudsen's letterbox.

Kolya.

Darkness came and the fields beyond the roads were blankets of black. Silence beckoned sleeping birds and people alike. The hum of the road and the glare from the headlights of passing cars was mighty and penetrating on her sore, tired eyes.

The woman holding me on the sled, where is her face?

All Amira could see was a gaping black hole.

She screamed out into the night and wondered if the wolves and owls could hear her.

15

Thursday, 17 June – Friday, 18 June

Father had left her apartment. There was no trace of him, except for her bed made with hospital corners, and her weights lined up in a row. A fridge full of cholesterol reducing margarine, low-fat cheese slices, milk, Greek style yoghurts tubs, and Tupperware containers filled with carrot and celery sticks. So healthy it made her want to puke. Nothing but dead vegetables and mould, when it came down to it. She wasn't hungry anyway. Angrily yanking the chocolate out of her backpack, she broke it up and flushed it down the toilet.

From her bag, she pulled out Amelia's prints, and ran a finger over them. Then she kissed the hand, the foot, each tiny yet alive – even on paper. Feeling exhausted, with a pounding headache, she needed to sleep. But it would not come. Instead, she lay awake for hours, arms tightly wrapped around her chest, the Glock underneath the pillow. The image of Knudsen's face in his car just before he died replayed incessantly in her mind… how his eyes had searched her out, and how he had looked as though he'd seen a ghost. When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of painting him at his realisation he was about to die; his skin a translucent tone, revealing his blue vein at the temple.

* * *

She woke at three in the afternoon, took a long shower and checked her letterbox. Inside, was a suspicious looking manilla envelope, the kind that typically came from Wilhelm. The weight of the envelope was light, and on the cover in Wilhelm's scrawl was simply the name 'Anika Vollmer'. There was no postage stamp. Amira went and sat on the couch, certain that whatever was inside would be best read with some support. She opened it and found a single A4 page of print. There was a neon yellow stick-it note on top with the word (also in Wilhelm's writing): *Congratulations*. She then read the details on the larger piece of paper:

Minette Blake, had children when 22. Worked as a waitress. Spent some time in Sydney. Brown hair. Blue eyes. Use caution. Stories on internet a fabrication.

The details of her birth mother.

Confusion set in. Why was Father supplying her with this information? Rewarding her even though she had failed? It didn't make sense. And what was with the plural, 'children'? The internet stories being fabricated?

There was no photo of Minette Blake and nothing about her current location. Nor was there any information on Amira's birth father. Again.

She made herself a cup of coffee and stood for a long time, gazing out the glass doors to the day beyond. Outside, wet leaves hung low on the trees. People walked with closed umbrellas in bright colours: bold oranges, lime greens, tomato reds. A toddler stomped in a puddle and was surprised when the water splashed up on his shorts. Amelia would soon be his age.

She supposed that Father was testing her yet again, dangling Minette Blake as bait this time. Luring her into some trap after learning that she didn't kill Knudsen. Most troublesome though was the possibility that Minette might actually be her mother.

Even though Father was in all likelihood up to no good, there might just be the chance…

There was a buzz at the intercom. Feeling a prickling of her scalp, she put her coffee on the dining-table and pressed the intercom button.

'Yes?'

'It's me,' Wilhelm's voice came over the static. 'I need to talk to you urgently.'

She bit the tip of her thumb pensively. 'Are you alone?'

'Yes.'

She didn't know whether to believe him.

'It's about your brother,' he said.

Amira was silent. What did he know about Kolya? If Wilhelm was alone, she should be able to handle him. Swearing under her breath she grabbed her gun and released the lock on the downstairs door. Through the peephole she could see that he was telling the truth: he was alone.

She opened the door, and gestured for him to come into the apartment. He looked hot and flustered. She frisked him while they were in the dining room. He wasn't armed. 'What is it?' she asked.

His expression darkened. 'I have something to confess to you, but you mustn't tell the One. Can I trust you?' His fingers were shaking, and she wondered fleetingly if panic was contagious.

'What is this about?' she asked.

He looked at her in despair. 'Your brother, he paid me a visit on Tuesday. When you were with your Father.'

She frowned. 'Which brother?'

Wilhelm hesitated. 'Kolya.'

Amira fell silent for a while, digesting this information. Then she looked up at Wilhelm.

‘And what did he want?’

Wilhelm cleared his throat. ‘The details of your next operation and target.’

His harried look combined with the information came as a surprise. She had assumed that Father had enlisted Kolya to kill Knudsen and that Father, and possibly Wilhelm, would have supplied her brother with the information. ‘Why?’ she asked.

Wilhelm shrugged. ‘I’m not sure. At first I didn’t speak to him. But then he flew into a rage and threatened me. He also warned me not tell anyone about his visit otherwise he would kill my wife and me. In particular I had to promise not to tell the One.’

More confusion. Her eyes narrowed on Wilhelm. ‘Why are you telling me this now?’ she asked.

‘Have you seen the news reports in the past two hours? About the black BMW motorcycle?’

Amira cringed. ‘Tell me.’

‘The witnesses claim there was a black BMW motorbike on the other side of Knudsen’s car. They can’t be certain that the shots came from the person holding the gun on the red Kawasaki. Your father knew what motorcycle you were using because he asked me about it.’

She rubbed her forehead. It was starting to spin out of control. Was it possible that Father didn’t know about Kolya in Switzerland? And that’s why he gave her the information about Minette Blake, as a genuine reward?

Kolya must have been acting by himself. For her. Amira’s heart clenched.

‘That’s why I wanted to come and ask you directly, did you carry through with your task?’

She looked at him, trying to figure out if this was part of Father’s game. But Wilhelm’s face was washed with angst and he usually wasn’t a good actor. She was

convinced that he was genuinely afraid his conversation with Kolya would somehow get back to Father.

'There was a black motorcycle,' she said conversationally. She grabbed her coffee and took a sip. 'The only thing we need to fear is if the driver comes forward as a witness.'

Wilhelm sighed, his shoulders sunk in relief. 'Your brother scared me.'

'Mmm, he has that effect.'

'Do you think the One was testing me?' Wilhelm continued.

She clapped a hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him. 'No, I don't. My brother was concerned for me. He knows I've been having a rough time of it lately. He would have been in Germany on the weekend, but I'm guessing he left when my father came, assured that I was in capable hands. He's a fine brother, the best.'

Recovering himself, Wilhelm said, 'You received my envelope?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Thought you'd want it straight away.'

She waited for him to say something more, but he did not. 'Is there something else, Wilhelm?'

'No, I suppose not. I was just scared out of my brains.'

She knew the feeling. 'Go on now, will you? You'll be all right. Your secret is safe with me.'

He left then and Amira composed herself. If Father took the reports of the black motorcycle seriously, then they would have something to worry about. Kolya, too, for violating Movement principles.

She put her gun behind the fridge, snapped open her laptop, and scanned the news websites, and sure enough Wilhelm was right, the witnesses were now saying they could not be sure if the killer was on the red or black motorcycle. Swiss police were requesting the riders of both vehicles to come forward and were now working closely

with Interpol. Forensics would know which motorcycle rider had fired the fatal shots from the entry and exit wounds. So they must not be publicly releasing the information yet in the hope the shooter would make a mistake.

Next she began searching websites for ‘Minette Blake’ and found an entry on the Australian Federal Police website under missing persons. *Sofie and James Blake. Missing/feared abducted.*

There was a photo of two toddlers, which she studied closely. A girl, dressed in a pale pink knitted dress and a boy in blue. At first glance they were unfamiliar. Both had brown hair and blue eyes. Beside the pictures were the personal details of each toddler. The year of birth corresponded with Amira’s, and the date the children were last seen, would have been when she was two years old.

Her bones stiffened and her heart pumped violently, pressing against her ribcage.

She continued to read the circumstances:

The missing twins lived with their mother, Minette Blake, and their grandmother in a suburban house in Sydney’s Western Suburbs. The twins were last seen by their mother at 1am on Wednesday 9 November after she had resettled James. About five hours later (6.30am) it was discovered that the twins were not in their beds, elsewhere inside or outside the family home. Police were contacted at 7am. Concerns are held that the twins were abducted.

A strangled gasp escaped her mouth. She checked the face of the girl again, rested her head on her hand and stared hard at the boy. The longer she looked the more something about him seemed familiar, something she couldn’t articulate. Was she imagining it or were there similarities with the toddler in her distorted images? The one who loved banana, the one in front of her on the sled, crying on a ski lift?

Her centre was crashing down. What if whoever kidnapped her killed her twin brother? How had she got away on a lucky escape and been adopted?

Huh! Listen to her!

She was already thinking like she had a twin brother, and assuming that she was Sofie Blake.

Father was wrong about Elga Hinkel. He could be wrong about Minette Blake. Her blood burned in her veins. Something was deeply wrong here, nothing added up.

Use caution. Stories on internet a fabrication.

She was running again. The afternoon was heavily overcast, the rain, no longer falling, had left the roads and pavement wet, and the wind, now settled, had released leaves from their branches. Dead leaves were littered everywhere, becoming soggy mulch. The air was cool, and the Cathedral was black against billowing silver clouds.

She ran until sweat poured down the back of her neck, under her hair. She imagined how Randy had felt when he realised that Kolya had come to kill him. Britta's mouth stitched closed. As much as Amira wanted to, she couldn't find a way to justify it. Was this the Movement? Was this Authenticity? She was beginning to doubt that there was a virus.

Then suddenly she realised he may have someone watching her. She stopped and flung herself around, scouring faces on the street for anyone who might be pursuing her. For Kolya. Please be here, brother. A couple neared her, continued to walk past her. A man in a suit, on a mobile. 'So you want chicken not beef?'

Sofie Blake.

James Blake.

Minette.

How could Mother have accepted a stolen child? Had she known? Was everything a lie?

A fabrication.

No one was tracking her.

She started running again, as fast as she could.

Her apartment was eerily quiet. She searched for any surveillance devices behind the doors and curtains, in her wardrobe, under the bed, her phone and electrical equipment. Nothing was found, so she checked over and over again.

Finally, Amira looked dejectedly at her paintings, the blank canvases and the paints she hadn't touched for what seemed like weeks. She took her clothes off, picked up a paintbrush and began painting her stomach, the part of her that she most despised. She used browns and blacks to make her skin darker, some dark olive greens. Next were her arms and legs down to her feet, her face, even her hair. The only uncovered skin was on her back, where she couldn't reach, and the soles of her feet. The paint was cool on her skin, wet and slimy; it smelled of chemicals. She gazed at her reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe door.

Anika Vollmer.

Ava Schwarz.

Amira Knox.

Sofie Blake.

A feral sprouting tree.

Amira woke on Friday afternoon, shocked that she had slept so long. Her gaze went instantly to the mobile. There were no messages.

She wanted to call Lukas. She wanted to hear the sureness of his voice and tell him everything. Would he understand? Would he protect her? How could he, when she was a murderer?

She clenched her eyes shut, felt for the back of her neck and dug her nails in. Wanting the physical pain to consume her. He will never love you, Amira. He can never know who you are.

She rose from bed slowly and moved into the living room. Flipping open her laptop, she went online and was mesmerised by the news headlines.

Stock market in chaos as Citibank's shares disappear.

Citibank's shares gone!

The articles explained how a computer hacker had simultaneously been able to sell many Citibank shares, one of America's richest banks, to untraceable buyers and to disperse bank funds, causing chaos in the American stock market. Amira's breathing became shallow and quick. Phase 2 Resistance Initiated. But there was more.

Major bank ATMs around the globe unable to function.

Even more alarming for Amira was the article that caught her eye next: *BMW Motorcyclist's Bullet Killed Knudsen*. Police experts had found that the positioning of the bullets were consistent with being fired from the right side of Knudsen's body, where witnesses had reported seeing a rider on a black BMW motorcycle. Ballistics tests had revealed that the bullets recovered from Knudsen's body had 'polygonal rifling', consistent with Glock pistols that had been used in the assassinations of Jonas Baumann and Gerard Clément.

Amira closed her laptop, removed the remnants of paint from the day before. Then she put on a load of washing, dressed, filled her backpack with wallet, keys and passport and strode out into another grey miserable day. She needed a long walk.

Wilhelm wasn't behind her. For now, it really seemed that Father believed she was a good girl, that she'd killed Knudsen. Otherwise he'd had plenty of time to come after her. But how would he react to the news about the black bike?

She checked her post office box on Sudermanplatz but it was empty. Nearby, teenagers played football in the paved square. One smiled at her. There was a whole

other world out there. She would go to Australia. Her phone rang and she placed it to her ear.

'How is the painting going?' Lukas asked.

'Great. I finished it an hour ago. Feel a bit exhausted now.'

'You need a rest. How are you going for money? Did you get caught with the ATMs being down?'

She breathed deeply, glanced down at her watch. 'No. I take it you've seen the news, then?'

'Who hasn't? You better be good, you better watch out – Au – then – tic - ity is coming!' he intoned dramatically.

There was no mention in the papers of the Movement being behind the shares or ATM machines. But Amira knew they were, just as Lukas did.

'What do you think about the Authenticity Movement?' she asked.

'They seem like a troubled cult to me.'

Her head was throbbing now and her face was suddenly hot with anger. A troubled cult. Is that how the slaves thought of them?

She was silent.

'Talk about power – that's all they want and they're trying to force their version of the truth down other people's throats,' Lukas continued. 'But they're no better than anyone else. They'd rather point a gun than hand out a loaf of bread.'

She remembered ordering the sniper rifles, and winced. She hadn't expected a conversation with him to unsettle her so much, and did not respond.

'The authorities seem to be overly focusing on the Movement right now, ' he said. 'But there are other dangerous groups around. Perhaps even more lethal.'

She was disconcerted by his observation, curious. 'Oh? Like who?'

'Just yesterday, when I was protecting someone, word came out about this international group based in a small town in North Germany. Now those guys had

serious supplies that could do some damage. I'm not talking mere fertiliser. They'd give the Movement some serious competition if it came to it.'

For a couple of moments Amira said nothing, just looking at the footballers, knowing that she would have to leave him, and not being able to tell him why or when. It would hurt her deeply; he would recover quicker than her, but she would feel the loss of his presence in her life for a long time.

'What like al-Qaeda? I thought they were old news,' she said eventually. Instinct making her probe. She wanted the information. Had to understand if the group Lukas was talking about were the very Internationals she had disappointed.

'Yeah, but al-Qaeda works with all sorts of organisations. Like this guy who calls himself Max. We think he's a Palestinian but we haven't uncovered his real identity.'

A pinprick of unease. Amira didn't believe in coincidences. What were the chances that her boyfriend knew about Max's group?

'Anyway, I was just calling to see if we could catch up.'

There was no question that she would have to see him one final time. She would unearth exactly who Lukas had been protecting, what he knew about Max. Why he had told her. 'Can you come for a walk?' she asked.

16

Friday, 18 June

They walked in the shadow of the Cathedral; the afternoon sun rested in the darkening sky of thick grey clouds. Amira swivelled around, always looking over her shoulder, checking to see if someone was watching. She had decided against bringing her weapon, concerned that Lukas the cop would notice. Now, she wished she'd taken the risk.

Lukas took her hand. 'Expecting company?'

Amira's face was set. 'So you think the Authenticity Movement is behind the Citibank affair?'

He nodded. 'They must have some fine hackers if they can break into major banks and the stock market. They could even have an insider. Just as well I don't have any shares, but it's going to start impacting interest rates, oil prices, everything. They're also obviously behind Knudsen's murder.'

She was silent as they wandered down to the promenade of gardens along the Rhine, under maples towards the heavy basalt on the trimmed, green lawn marking the old bulwark that protected the city from attackers. It was not much of a day for a walk, with a storm threatening and a heavy easterly breeze.

'They think in black-and-white terms,' Lukas was saying about the Movement. 'The 'us' versus 'them' mentality. The infected and the pure. No shades of grey. To kill

a scapegoat enemy. To kill for an idea. The Movement, the destructive ideology is worth more than the people. They brainwash their members.'

Amira pulled her hand away from Lukas'. A barge moved down the river.

There would always be this insurmountable wall between them. She would never feel comfortable to tell him everything. She had made a horrible mistake: she was falling in love with him. She should never have become involved.

He gazed out at the shimmering water, his hazel eyes appearing green in the light. His mind seemed lost on the water. She looked at him and remembered her head on his bare, smooth chest, the sweet spicy smell of his aftershave, the way he stroked her hair.

'I really missed you while you were painting,' he said. 'I know it was only two days, but still… '

She shrugged. 'I suppose that's part of life as an artist. Strike when the iron is hot, even more when it's cold.' The lie produced a flutter in her chest. Then, keeping her voice steady, she asked the question that had been swirling in her mind ever since their phone call earlier. 'Who were you protecting the other day?'

Lukas came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her. 'You know that I can't tell you that.'

She liked the warmth of his body on her back. Her fingers interlaced his. 'Is this how it is, then? How it will be?'

After a stymied pause, Lukas said, 'The State Minister for the Interior.'

She flinched. 'And you had to protect him from terrorists?'

'That's all part of the job.'

Amira turned and faced him. Her face was set. 'Have the police captured these terrorists?'

He shook his head. 'Not yet. Police are tracking them. Haven't figured out the group's political ideology. But we know they operate like arms dealers.'

Amira's gaze dropped to her shoes. Things were getting out of hand. Alarming fear blinkered in her mind. Lukas could never know about her. If he did, she would lose any positive feeling he felt for her. She couldn't have that. She wanted him to always think of her fondly. She had to make sure of it.

After a lull, Amira said, 'I'm sorry for pressing you to tell me when you're not supposed to.'

Lukas grabbed her chin, lifted her head up so their eyes were locked. 'It's okay. I needed to talk. Get some of it out. I'm not perfect. And you're a good listener.'

A lump formed in her throat. 'Do you think there would be all these terrorist groups if there was no capitalism?'

Lukas blinked. 'Capitalism will exhaust itself. Just like any system. Look at feudalism. It came, and it went. But we have to let it exhaust itself or else it will come back and people will reminisce over it rather than rejoice its death. This is what groups like the Authenticity Movement don't understand.'

She closed her eyes. Cramped tears threatened to tumble. Thoughts scrambled around in her mind. There was one thing she was coming to understand: that slaves had brains and there was so much more to the world than she had been taught. But how could she move on from the past when it stained the present?

Lukas embraced her. 'Damn it, Anika,' he said. 'Talk to me.'

Amira opened her eyes and pulled back from him. 'You wouldn't understand.'

He lashed out, grabbed her wrist. His eyes dark. 'That's bullshit.'

She made a futile attempt to jerk free. He tightened his grip. 'You don't have to prove yourself to me,' he said.

Her breathing had gone shallow. The locked emotion inside threatening to burst. Why had she agreed to train him? Slept with him? Why couldn't she just have ignored him?

Lukas chuckled. 'That's why I love you.'

Amira was puzzled. In his company, she had pretended that she was a woman who could love. It was as if she were becoming Ava Schwarz. It was too dangerous.

She glared down at his fingers on her wrist. ‘Is that what you call this?’

He paled, released her. ‘Fine. You want to live your life as a clam, go ahead. See where it gets you.’

Amira wanted to slap him. She wanted him to lift the heavy weight from her, only he wasn’t. He couldn’t. Her desire to be loved and to love him in return was impossible. Her own mind betrayed her, their disparate lives had overridden desire.

He tightened his hands into fists. ‘That family of yours has done this to you. I’d like to meet them. Show them what I think.’

Amira looked at him, her determined expression relaxing. She tried to compose herself. They were interrupted by a text message from Wilhelm.

Chocolate museum. ASAP. Next task already arrived.

‘What is it?’ Lukas asked.

Amira stood very still. Then she looked around at the few people walking along the river. The poor weather had kept most indoors. There were no faces out of the ordinary, no suspicious eyes. She was quite certain that they were not being followed. Father had believed that it was she who had killed Knudsen after all, and now he was eager to put her onto the next of the infected.

‘I have an appointment that I had forgotten about it,’ she said, tiredly. ‘A client. I have to go.’

He scooped her into his arms, leaned in and kissed her. She wanted the moment to last forever. It was easier than their discussion, the words and ways of the world that came between them.

‘Goodbye, Lukas,’ she said.

* * *

She went up the footpath beside the Rhine. Her bag on her back, like an old friend. The thought of another briefing, another round of game playing that Kolya could not necessarily pull her out of, made her feel sick. But even worse was the agony of realising she had to lose Lukas. She had to protect him and herself. At least he had a chance to live a happy life without her.

She went past the concrete flood-measuring pegel with a clock on it. The time was 2.50pm. A ferry was docked at a warf. She continued on under the Deutzer bridge. Her legs were heavy and she wondered if she would make it before it rained. She hadn't packed an umbrella. The leaves in the trees above her, rustled in the wind.

Wilhelm was loitering around the café near the chocolate museum. He wasn't sitting at a table, but stood wandering about looking at the stall that sold currywurst, nürnberger and chips. He looked a little pale, his brows stiff. In his hand was a familiar manilla folder.

He saw Amira and she stumbled over a crack in the path. She managed with a wavy gesture to straighten herself up.

'Are you drunk?' he asked disgustedly. His eyes were deeply dark.

'No,' she replied. 'Of course I'm not drunk.'

He swiftly handed her the next briefing, keeping his distance from her. She studied his face and he appeared grave.

'Still worried about the black motorbike?' she asked.

His expression grew more rigid. 'A little.'

'Look, if there's a problem with my father let me talk to him. You know I wouldn't mention Kolya.'

He shifted his weight, his eyes darted across the road momentarily, before landing back on her. ‘Yeah, I know you wouldn’t.’

She stared at him, convinced that he was acting oddly. ‘There’s nothing else that’s bothering you?’

‘No, nothing else.’

‘You’re sure? You don’t look so well.’

He wiped his brow. ‘Hope I’m not coming down with anything.’

She patted the envelope. ‘I guess I better take a look at this. Take care.’

‘Yeah, you, too.’

Wilhelm walked quickly away towards the Severinsbrücke. He certainly was in a hurry. She turned and went in the opposite direction, back down along the Rhine and Deutzer Bridge. There was the pelting of a concrete breaker hammer from the construction work in a chemical company across the river, and as a bird squawked overhead, Amira was suddenly overcome with an uneasy feeling. She stopped and opened the briefing. On the pages were segments from a Shakespeare play. And as hard as she looked she could see no code. What is this? She pivoted back and looked for Wilhelm but he was gone. There were cars driving along the road, a person walking a Labrador. Then she noticed it: a car slowly creeping. Through the tinted windows she could just make out a driver wearing a black balaclava.

The thoughts come rushed, almost as one. His position: five-lane highway, his car near footpath. Up ahead fifty metres he can turn left or continue straight to the car tunnel. I’m completely open, vulnerable. Just like Knudsen, Baumann, Clément. I don’t have a weapon. It’s at home. Because of Lukas, because of Ava, the gun is behind the fridge. I have no options. I drop the manilla envelope, jump over the brick barrier that’s chest

height, and run. Dodging the tourists on the other side of the path and the green and yellow zoo-express train.

Tyres screech to a halt, horns blare. A spray of bullets tears through the air in rapid succession, like sharp claps of thunder. An AK-47.

People scream. Dogs bark. Birds flutter out of treetops.

The animals scream inside my head.

Collisions between cars.Then the shooting quietens momentarily. My pursuer has to be out of his car.

From the corner of my eye I see him. The now unmasked driver – an unfamiliar mousey blonde male – bolts after me on foot, a pistol in hand, hidden partially by his jacket. He has changed weapons, leaving the lumbersome AK-47 in the car.

I make it under the Deutzer Bridge, cut a diagonal, past the sleeping bag of a homeless person, a bicycle hire place. I quickly check some pushbikes but they are all locked to a bike rack.

Bullets now. Pft! Pft! Pft!

A Glock.

Three down in the chamber and I'm still alive.

He's about 20 metres behind me. He is fit. He is a professional. One of Father's men. This guy could run marathons.

But he's not Kolya, otherwise I'd be dead.

The beat of my feet is like a reverberating drum in my ears. I have to trap this man; I can't keep sprinting. The damp summer air is thick and clogging.

I run, turning right into Buttermarkt. There's the Nutcracker house on my left. People. I turn left up Hafengasse stairs. A red door on the right halfway up. Try it. It's locked. Right on Auf dem Rhothenberg and the Great St Martin church is ahead. Pft! Pft! He's fifteen meters and gaining. I'm guessing his chamber has seventeen or thirty-three rounds.

Act now or be dead. I cut left down Saltzgasse and push my way into a pub, through the tables and chairs where people are having a late lunch. I head past the bar, through to the kitchen, cramped with benches, stoves, pots and pans and three cooks in white jackets and stained aprons. I grab a hot saucepan filled with caramel-glazed onions.

'What are you doing?' a chef asks me. He is a man of slight build and has a thin face. Two other workers gaze up at me from their pots.

I raise a finger to my lips – shh – and stand back, hiding behind the swinging kitchen door with the saucepan.

My attacker thrusts the door open and it swings back into me. The saucepan burns through my thin cotton T-shirt. I push the door hard, slamming it back into him, putting him off balance. Out from behind the door I lift the saucepan, drop it down and knock the weapon out of his hand. The Glock goes flying, along with several onions that splatter on the stainless steel benchtops.

'Call the police!' someone shouts.

I draw up the saucepan again but the man lunges at me with his heavy body. He crashes me up against a wall clad with hooks and hanging jackets. I wince in pain. The saucepan falls from my hand and clangs on the tiled floor. The attacker's hand sprawls over my face like a large spider. He tries to break my neck.

I flip my body around, out of his grip. His now empty hand lands on the wall and I am able to twist around until it is he, stomach pressed, who is up against the wall. I rapidly strike the small of his back with my heel. He cries out with pain at the blow but still manages to turn around, facing me. I kick his groin, stomach and chest and reach for another saucepan.

The thin-faced chef picks up the Glock and points it at us. 'Stop it!' he says. 'Right now!'

My pursuer lashes back at my legs so that they come out from under me and I am on the ground. The floor is grimy with grease and dirt and I slip on it, like slime. I look up and see a saucepan coming my way. Quickly I roll aside.

The chef with the gun runs out of the kitchen. My attacker throws plates at me topped with edible artistry. Struggling to stand on my feet, I reach for a series of lucent knives on the workbench. I throw them, and they narrowly miss, until one finally pierces his upper arm and another his chest. Possible lung rupture. Not near the heart. I don't want to kill him. I clutch a great, glimmering-bladed knife, cartwheel over a bench, and press him up against a wall, the knife at his throat.

There is the sound of meat sizzling in a pan and the aroma of burnt butter fills the kitchen.

My attacker and I both breathe heavily from our scuffle. I have the assassin where I want him…alive but helpless.

'Did Father send you? Did he?' I yell out.

He glowers at me and I recognise a determination like that in my brother Kolya. There is a will that sends my very entrails ice cold. 'Did he?' I repeat.

In one swift movement he reaches for my hand and slices the knife into his throat.

'Stupid!' I yell feebly. 'You stupid…Someone get an ambulance!'

The assassin's body falls down. I try to hold the gushing wound. 'Towels! Towels!' I yell.

Better to die than to be claimed by inAuthenticity.

Someone hands me tea towels. I tie them around his neck. But the blood is too much. I can't stop it. I hear shouting from far away, confused voices, police sirens clamour. Quickly I feel inside his pockets. In the last one I check, there are spare bullets, I take them and stand up. My shirt is painted in blood. The assistant chefs gaze at me wide-eyed: the monster.

I burst out of the back door of the kitchen into a courtyard. It's there that I see the chef who is holding the assassin's gun in one hand and in the other he is rapidly talking to someone on a mobile phone – probably the police. Fortunately for me there is no one sitting out back in the next-door beer garden and the view from other beer gardens further up near the Ostermann fountain is covered by bushes. I put my hand out to take the gun.

The chef shakes his head.

I kick him in the groin, snatch the gun out of his hand, place it under my shirt and bolt through the courtyard.

Standing still, like a shadow against a wall, I peep around at my street. Silver blue smoke plumes billow from my balcony and red hot flames flicker. Fire fighters work rapidly to contain the fire with their large hoses, police cordon off the area.

My paintings!

Gone.

My gun?

They might find it. Perhaps link it to the murders.

Father. He's given up on me. Somehow discovered I didn't kill Knudsen.

I'm being excommunicated. Cut off. Deleted.

Ms Spifanso in her shabby floral brunch coat stands on the street, one cat in her arms, another on a leash. Her whiskered face shows itself upwards to the flames. A policewoman in uniform questions her, scribbles in a notepad. I clench my fists and start running again, away from the apartment.

At first I don't know where I am running. I have lost everything and have never been more alone in all my life. But I still have a few resources, unknown to Father, which I can draw on. When I recover I will use them.

My passport and credit card are in my backpack. I find my way to a quiet corner road and leaf through the hundred and fifty Euros in my wallet. The credit card is now most likely to be useless, unless I want Laith or Oscar to find me. I look up at the dark grey sky. The streetlights are on now with their mellow glow. They aren't usually on this early in summer but the threatening storm has made the day prematurely dark. Then I remember: they know about Lukas.

Holding the gun cocked beneath my jacket I run towards his apartment. The sky is slate-grey but there is still no rain. I cover my blood stained shirt as much as possible. I search the roads, the people several times, checking for anything out of the ordinary, discovering nothing. Just as I am about to leave my shadowy corner Lukas steps out from a café.

For five minutes my eyes take in his form, his determined stride as he walks the streets of Cologne; with an outburst of dismay I realise I am destroying this man's life. He rounds a corner and I know that he is heading for his apartment.

He walks up to a white-haired old man in sandals. The two stop in the middle of the street and talk. They discuss a holiday the old man had in Poland. A cat meows and the men both turn to study the road, the intersection, seemingly concerned. Lukas passes the older man an envelope, and I know that this isn't simply a friendly meeting between neighbours. Eventually the old man pats Lukas on the back and disappears down the other end of the street.

I run and catch up with Lukas, grab him, put my hand over his mouth and pull him into a corner. Instantly, he highjacks my arm, attempts to swing me to the ground.

'Shh, it's just me,' I say.

'Shit, Anika.' He spots the blood on my shirt and the gun under my jacket. He steps aside from me. 'What are you doing?'

I grab his hand and walk fast. He isn't keeping up so I have to pull him along.

'Anika, where has the blood come from?'

I don't know how to answer him, so I keep walking.

'Anika, please… are you hurt?'

'We don't have time,' I reply.

'So where are we going?'

'To your apartment.'

When we arrive, I search the premises. 'Pack a few clothes. As much cash as you have. Passport. ID,' I say.

Lukas just stands there, does not stir. 'No. I'm not doing anything until you explain what the fuck is going on.'

'You're in danger. Get packing.'

He looks at me sharply. I feel sick. How can I have let this happen? Because I'm a monster. Some would say infected.

'Is this about your family?'

'Yes. Now do you have a passport? Has it expired?'

No answer.

I force myself to stare hard at him, despite my guilt. 'Please, Lukas. Trust me on this.'

I feel my mobile vibrate, reach it from my jacket and look down at the message. It's from Oscar. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Your boyfriend is IO. xO

I sway on my feet. Intelligence Officer.

Staring at Lukas, I consider continuing like I'm rescuing him from harm. The problem is that I'm completely pissed-off. I curse my own stupidity. None of this would have happened if I'd followed the Movement rules and had Laith and Oscar run a

security check on Lukas. But I wanted to believe in him. I shrink back, draw my gun and point it at him.

He raises his hands, eases back. His eyes flit to a corner of the room where I presume a weapon must be hidden.

'Don't even think about it,' I say.

'Let me bring you in,' he responds. 'Put you in a safe house. We'll take it from there.'

The offer is a mildly tempting fantasy. That's why he said he was a cop in the protection unit in the first place. He knew I wouldn't suspect he was IO if he told me outright he was a cop. 'No.'

'So eager to protect your family, Anika? The people who have abused you? Oh, I forgot, it's Amira, isn't it?'

'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Then explain it to me. Because I have a loving father, had a mother, and they never forced me to kill anyone. Never kept me from thinking for myself, or hated me for having my own opinions.'

'You must be special then.'

'This is not you. This isn't who you are.'

My jaw clenches. 'Rope?'

He looks down at my top again. 'How did you get the blood on your shirt? Let me tell you. Because I failed you,' his voice comes through gritted teeth. 'Because I let you go meet Wilhelm. My superiors wanted me out of the area. I shouldn't have listened. Next time I won't.'

I look quietly at his face. 'That's a nice story. Now where is some fucking rope, Lukas? Be a good boy and fetch it.'

He stands his ground. ‘We tried general surveillance but it was too risky. All your checks, you would have spotted us. Your apartment is set up like a security minefield. We had to back off, try a different approach.’

‘So enter Lukas, a ninja wannabe.’

‘You can start over.’

I laugh. ‘And, what, have the police protect me? Like they did tonight? You’re a joke.’

Lukas studies me. ‘You don’t like killing innocent people. I know who you are.’

I laugh again. ‘What about you, Lukas? Who are you? Is Lukas even your real name?’

‘Yes. The surname is fake.’ He reaches out his hand. ‘Give me the gun, Amira.’

I hold the weapon up higher, facing his head. The bastard doesn’t even flinch. ‘He has my little sister. Might get to my birth mother. Am I supposed to just forget about them? Leave him to do what he wants? Am I supposed to believe that your lame counter-terrorism operation can stop him? That’s not going to happen.’

Lukas rubs the back of his neck. His face darkens. ‘Where are they? Your sister, your birth family?’

My eyes sting. I can’t quite grasp that everyone I have loved has betrayed me. Henry was trying to kill me. Weak, passive, Edith, was letting him get away with it. Even Kolya had killed our brother. Now Lukas had trapped me. I had slept with him, and it meant nothing to him. Everything to me.

‘You lied to me,’ I say.

‘Gee, I meant to bring a stack of honesty stickers so I could hand one out to you.’ He pauses. ‘You’re a big girl now, Amira. Capable. Tough. I see it. You don’t.’

I falter. ‘Was it true about your mother?’

Searching for a reaction in his face. His eyes seem sad, lost.

‘Yes.’

A long moment of silence.

He smiles. ‘You came back for me.’

I stare at him mutinously. ‘Fuck you.’

‘I’m not being sarcastic,’ he protests. ‘Let me come with you. I’ll help you.’

Stunned he has made the offer. I feel tears coming to my eyes. Still unable to accurately judge whether his effort is genuine or phony. ‘No. You can’t.’

‘Let me show you,’ he repeats, his voice softer.

I wish I could trust him again. ‘Get some rope, damn it!’

‘How will you get your sister out?’

I gnaw at my bottom lip. It isn’t an option for Amelia to suffer my fate. ‘I’ll convince one of my family members.’

‘But what if it doesn’t work?’

The possibilities pour through my mind. ‘I must try,’ I say.

He keeps looking me straight in the eye. ‘I’m sorry I put you in this mess. I shouldn’t have. I should never have allowed us to get this far.’

A sharp stab of pain in my chest. I want to believe him, but no longer can. My voice icy, I say, ‘If you don’t get the rope now, I swear, I’ll shoot you.’

Thankfully he complies. With concerted effort, I order him to tie a knot around his feet, then a loop around one of his wrists. I twist his arms behind him, secure him tightly with the rope. Hook him onto the metal bar of an electric heater that’s turned off. Once I’m gone it will probably take him ten minutes to break free.

I change into one of his T-shirts, and a green hoodie.

He looks at me in horror. ‘You’ve swelling and purple bruises all over your body! And is that a burn?’

The burn from the saucepan wasn’t too bad. Wouldn’t even need bandaging. ‘I’m fine,’ I say. I disarm the smoke detector and set fire to my bloody clothes in the

kitchen sink. I scoop the ashes up and tip them into the bin. Let the cold water tap run for a few moments.

'You don't have any money,' he says.

I double-check his knots. Stand at the windows watching. Sweating. Agitated. Clear.

'Don't go to your locker at the dojo,' he says. 'They'll be looking for you there.'

Of course. That's where most of my spare cash supply is. Having that option closed off would add time I didn't have. But why was Lukas telling me this? Breathing deeply to gain control, for clarity of thought. Finding the zone of control was essential. Control would lead me to my birth mother, my sister. Crossing the room, I head for the front door.

'Wait a minute. There's a shoebox in my wardrobe. A red horse imprint on top. You're welcome to the contents, but not the photos.'

A trap. 'I don't want your money.'

'No. But your sister might.'

I pinch my bottom lip. 'Why are you offering to help me?'

He looks me in the eye, his pupils dilate as he speaks. 'I want you to get them. In case we can't.'

Reluctantly I stride into his bedroom, find the shoebox. Inside are photos of Lukas' mother. Her images flash in front of me. Pictures of her and Lukas, both smiling. Open, happy expressions on their faces. A family. I reach for the money at the bottom of the box. Check for a traceable security tag. Find nothing. Shove the notes in my pocket without counting them. Stride back into the living room where he is.

I stand, and stare at him.

'Get out of here, Amira. While you still can.'

Despite his lies, I feel distraught, thinking this might be the last time I ever see him. In a different world there may have been hope for us. I glance at him, not wanting to let him go, but knowing I must.

Then I'm gone, sprinting to the central train station and ten minutes later I am on a train to Kassel, in the state of Hesse – a central train interchange town for all of Germany.

A painting comes to mind: a dark background, Lukas greeting me with a kiss, while police handcuff me.

My taste buds crave chocolate, but I can't waste money. I blink back large tears and all I can do is stare out of the window of the moving train. I've shut down and don't know how to emerge. But emerge I must. This is what I'm trained for.

17

Friday, 18 June – Monday, 21 June

It was damp, cold and almost 11pm when Amira found an Internet café in Kassel. The beginning of summer and she couldn't stop shivering. But she did what had to be done. First she booked a flight from Frankfurt to Sydney using funds from her personal online account, which the Movement didn't know about. The plane would leave the next day. She used the Karen Murray name, afraid that Anika Vollmer or Amira Knox could be implicated for the killing of the man in the restaurant in Cologne. Once that was done, she searched for and found Minette Blake's email address. She couldn't locate a telephone number and so opened a new free email account and began typing in the subject line: *looking for my mother*.

Hello

Forgive me if this email comes as an unwanted surprise or raises false hopes. My name is Anika Vollmer and I am a twenty-two-year-old woman who is searching for my birth parents. I currently live in Germany but was raised in Australia.

All my life I have wanted to know more about my birth family but I was told by my adoptive parents that my adoption was closed. However, recently my adoptive father told me that I might be your birth daughter. Unfortunately, he has not given me any other information, so I really don't know whether his claim is true.

I hope that we can meet to see if I might be your missing daughter. If you are interested, please call me on…

I truly hope that we can meet soon.

Anika Vollmer

Amira read over the email, her first words to her potential mother. She was satisfied that she had written all she could and hit the send button, watching the message disappear from the outbox. No doubt Laith or Oscar would be watching Minette's computer but she had to do something. She checked her watch. Australia was ten hours ahead of Germany. That meant it would be around 9.30am on Saturday morning in Australia. She surfed the net aimlessly, lingering for a response. One hour. Two. Nothing came.

She checked into a cheap hotel, showed her fake identification and paid cash, caught the elevator up to the third floor and pushed her way down the corridor, through the brassy light, and the silence booming way too loud. Swiping the electronic key card, she stepped inside the square room, stared down at the double bed, and pulled the money Lukas had given her out of her pocket. It was two thousand Euros. It was life. No obvious pattern with the serial numbers.

She showered quickly, trying not to think about Lukas's betrayal, and the possibility that Minette would not call or respond to her email. When she was dry she watched NTV news. The screen flashed to a reporter standing outside a Swiss police station and only certain words went through to her brain.

Heiri Spirig brought in for armed robbery… detained by authorities… information about the location of the motorcycle used in the Knudsen murder… links between organised crime groups and Knudsen's killer… Spirig asked by Christoph Graber to make mechanical repairs to the motorcycle stored in a barn near Murten… motorcycle no longer there… Police trying to locate Christoph Graber.

The screen split in two with a photo of Christoph Graber, a youngish man with gelled blonde hair, and a physical description.

She turned the TV off, cleaned the gun that she had taken from her assassin, went downstairs, walked to a dark alley and dumped the weapon in a garbage bin at the back of a restaurant.

On Saturday morning Amira went to a second-hand shop and bought a few clothes and a small suitcase. She caught a train to Frankfurt and checked her email at an Internet café. There was one message in her inbox. As she opened it, she shuddered.

Hello Anika

Having my children disappear has been the saddest thing I have ever experienced. I always wonder if they are okay, and hope that somehow they can feel my love. I've been looking them for many years without any luck. I want more than anything for my twins to be alive, safe and happy.

I'm not sure what the best way of finding out if you are my daughter, Sofie. Did your father say why he thought I might be your birth mother? Could you ask him?

I have attached a recent photograph of myself, and an older one, from when I was eighteen (when I had my children). It may be too difficult or inaccurate to see if there are any physical resemblances? Perhaps you could send me a photo of yourself? If things go well (fingers-crossed) we should definitely meet.

Warm Wishes,

Minette

The first attachment was a photograph of an eighteen-year-old girl from another time with a face that could have been Amira's. Although the tones had faded, she could

see that Minette had rich brown hair resting on her shoulders. The full lips were the same and the cerulean blue eyes, an image of her own. Amira's fingers stroked her face. She opened up the next attachment of an older, plumper woman with hair just above the shoulders. The colour was more vivid in this picture. Minette still had the sensual mouth, the bright incandescent eyes.

Perhaps this woman was really her mother. What would have happened to her as Sofie? Would she be a painter?

She took a photograph of herself with her mobile. Then she emailed the picture to her new account, stripped the properties of the image, attached and sent. Within ten minutes, the phone rang. The sudden shrill knocked the wind out of her. She scrambled to compose herself.

'Anika?'

'Yes?'

'Minette Blake, from Australia.'

As these words were spoken, she tried to commit them to memory. The sound of Minette's voice was soft and kind. There were many questions she wanted to ask, but she had to push forward. 'You received my email?'

'I see myself in you,' Minette said. 'Even my husband notices the similarity.'

Amira pressed the phone firmly to her ear. 'There is so much to talk about.'

'Why does your father think I'm your mother?'

'He won't say.'

'It doesn't give us much to go on.'

'No.'

A pause. 'Maybe if you told me more about yourself?'

There wasn't time. She had to obtain Minette's details. 'I would like to meet you.'

Minette's reaction was delayed. 'I live in Sydney. I'm not sure how we could arrange it.'

'As it happens, I'm arriving in Sydney on Monday morning.'

Minette became quieter. 'Where in Australia did you grow up?'

She lowered her head. Why was Minette asking all these questions? She saw the resemblance, wasn't that enough? 'If you give me your mobile number I can call you when I'm in Australia, and we can talk more then?'

'Okay.'

Minette gave Amira the number.

Amira tried to focus and took a deep breath. She didn't want to say what was needed, but she had to prioritise her possible mother's safety. 'Minette, I know this might sound crazy but I have reason to believe that my adoptive father may try to hurt you. He can be violent, and after telling me that you were my birth mother, he said he would go after you. Is it possible for you to leave your house for a few days?'

Minette didn't respond for several seconds. 'I don't understand. Why would your father do that?' her voice was tremulous.

'I can't explain properly over the telephone or in an email. Please believe me when I tell you that you may be in danger.'

There was a silence.

'Please Minette, leave your house.'

'But why? You might not be my daughter.'

'Yes, I know. What matters is that my adoptive father thinks you are my mother and views you as a possible threat.'

'But my children were stolen, they weren't adopted.'

'Perhaps I was taken and then for some reason dumped at an orphanage. That's where my adoptive parents found me.'

'What about James?' she asked weakly.

‘I don’t know whether I have a twin brother,’ Amira replied.

‘But how do your adoptive parents know about me? Why would they want to harm me?’

‘My adoptive father has contacts. He found your name somehow.’

Minette’s breath was rushed. ‘I don’t understand. He has my address? My phone number?’

‘Minette, please. You must take me seriously. It would take me hours to explain everything I know to you. He could easily find your address and number on the Internet, on a phone directory perhaps. I know this sounds absurd and I don’t want to scare you, but I must be honest.’

‘I should go to the police?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Amira could feel the blood seizing, like ice, through her body.

Minette hesitated a moment before speaking. ‘Are you in danger?’

‘Ah…yes, I am.’

‘From your father?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who is he?’

Amira pondered how best to answer the question. ‘I can’t give you his name.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t give your contact details out to any one else – even if they claim to be your child,’ Amira continued. ‘Please check into a hotel for a few days. I will call your mobile as soon as I arrive in Sydney.’ Amira gripped her elbow, and rubbed an upper arm. ‘This first conversation between us isn’t…’ Her breath hitched.

‘Don’t think of such things,’ Minette said, her voice quite soft with a mixture of concern and awkwardness.

‘I’ll call you. Probably sometime Monday morning.’

It took her several minutes to gather herself again. So who was Minette? Whoever she was, Amira had to get to her before the One.

Amira arrived in Sydney early Monday morning, jetlagged but energised by the adrenaline. She passed through immigration, customs and security without incident. As she waited for her luggage at the carousel she checked the German news from her phone. The police were searching for a missing woman in the Cologne pub murder. They had a sketch, which had a faint resemblance to Amira. The description was equally vague and could apply to one tenth of Cologne's female population. There was also an article about the fire at her apartment. No one was injured. Police were asking residents of the building to come forward and they mentioned her by name – Anika Vollmer. Forensics were analysing the scene for what may have caused the fire.

She collected her suitcase, hired a car using Amira Knox's Australian driver's licence, and stepped out of the airport into the foggy, draughty morning. The Australian winter momentarily chilled her. Taxis and cars bustled along; the sky was grey and the air laced with petrol fumes. The city looked as impenetrable as a black hole. It would either destroy her, or give her life. As arranged, she called Minette again. It was barely 6 am.

'It's Anika here. I've landed at Sydney airport.'

'You have?' There was the sound of a TV playing in the background. Then a man's voice asking where his socks were.

She was suddenly alarmed. 'Minette, are you still at home?'

It took her a moment to answer. 'Yes, I am.'

'Why?'

‘The police were no help without the name of the person who had threatened me. I gave them your name and said you may be in danger, too,’ her voice sounded anxious. ‘All they could do was write up a report.’

Her shoulder blades pulled together tensely. ‘You still should have left your home.’

‘My husband has to work. I’ve taken the day off, but I should be working. The past two days haven’t been easy for either of us.’

‘We need to meet,’ Amira said. ‘Should I come to your place?’

There was a long silence until Minettte broke it, her voice quiet.

‘The person who snatched my children is a criminal. That’s why what you’ve told me actually makes sense. Yes, you can come and visit me.’

Minette gave Amira her address.

She was in Liverpool. As Amira drove west on the M5, she kept looking in the rear-view mirror, scanning for any signs of police or Members. Nothing.

And why the hell was she wishing Lukas were beside her?

Minette lived in a quiet cul-de-sac. Amira pulled up alongside a kerb under the shade of a gum tree. She glanced up at the ever-darkening sky over the trees. The weather was stormy, but of the kind that would hang in the air for hours. There were no individuals waiting in cars, lurking behind trees. Perhaps Minette wasn’t really her mother. Part of her hoped she wasn’t.

Amira looked across the street at Minette’s red-brick home. The garden was filled with creeping barren roses, wattle trees and a leafless jacaranda with open seedpods like mussels scattered around the base. A ute was in the driveway.

In the rear-view mirror she caught the pale image of her face, made dull by the cold, foggy morning. Peering closer, she wondered how she had become so gaunt and

emaciated. She smiled trying to forge some semblance of vigour, some quality of lovability. Have realistic expectations. Life isn't a fairy tale.

Suddenly the front door opened, then the screen door. Minette stood at the porch, her skin the colour of pale honey. She was in her forties and had thinning brown hair and wore a pale pink cotton shirt. She looked just like the lady in her picture. There were no sharp angles on her face, her lips were full and she had a cute button nose and she didn't appear to wear make-up. She gazed at her.

'Sofie? Is that you?' she called out. Her eyes were wide, hands clasped to her chest.

Overcome with a sudden unexpected gut wrenching, Amira unfastened her seatbelt and stepped out of the car, her feet falling on the asphalt.

Minette turned to her. 'Sofie?'

She raced to her, and their eyes locked. Minette stared at her hair, her lips, slowly taking her in. The penetrating gaze made her uncomfortable, and she looked away.

'I can't believe it,' Minette said.

'I know I've scared you. I'm sorry,' she replied, trembling.

Minette's arms flung around her. A sob broke from the older woman's mouth. Amira's knees felt boneless.

'Come in. Come inside,' Minette said. 'You're freezing.'

They walked into the hallway, and on the right was a glass cabinet filled with China dolls, crystal bowls, and a chess set made of bone. On the left was a coat stand, a basket filled with children's hats. A barometer that read 'much rain' hung on a wall.

'I'm a family day-carer,' Minette said, watching Amira. 'I look after children in my home for a living.'

Suddenly Amira was close to tears; all these years, her mother had been looking after other children.

'We have a visitor,' Minette called out.

A man with skinny legs, a pot belly and boyish curly hair came into the living room. His skin was well tanned.

'I'm Anika.'

Minette shuffled her feet, and offered a weak smile. She was sad now. Was it because Amira had a different identity apart from the one given to her at birth, one other than Sofie?

'This is Jack, my husband.'

He laughed. 'Well, look what the cat dragged in.'

Minette flushed pink and shook her head. 'Jack, don't be rude.'

Jack greeted Amira with a firm handshake. 'Nice to meet you.'

Amira mumbled a greeting.

'Why don't you make us a cup of tea?' Minette asked him.

Jack's eyes lit up. 'Kicking me out? That'd be right. Something exciting happens for once in our lives and I'm sent to make the tea.' He gave Amira a big grin. She smiled in return.

'Jack, please,' Minette's tone was clipped, one eyebrow raised.

'All right, all right.' Jack scuffed his feet out of the room.

Minette clasped Amira's hand and squeezed it. 'You are beautiful.'

The words were difficult for Amira to absorb. She looked down at their hands together, their skin, and she was at a loss for what to say or do.

'Let's go into the lounge room,' Minette said, leading Amira while they waited for Jack to make the tea.

Amira studied the two green suede sofas, the matching recliner, the Turkish rug beneath her feet, the boxes of toys lined up under the large bay window, the children's

books scattered on bookshelves, the flat screen TV. Everything about the room spoke of warmth, and children's laughter.

She sat in the soft recliner. Minette sat on one of the sofas next to her. There was a silence, as neither of them knew where to begin.

We haven't much time, Amira told herself. Get it over with. Speak the truth.

'You've come from Germany?' Minette asked.

'Yes, Cologne,' Amira said uselessly.

Minette nodded her head lightly, a bright smile now on her face as though a daughter – no matter what kind of a person was better than none at all. If Minette were more hardnosed, colder, less genuine (more of an Elga Hinkel or a Selena), then it would have been easier for Amira to unburden herself. But to tell this woman, would shatter her. Minette crossed her legs, and tugged at her pale pink sleeve.

'We need to talk about your father.'

Amira sat with her hand wedged between the recliner and the bottom of her thigh and she pinched herself. How could she utter words that would rip her mother away from her? A mother that she had just found? She was glad she was sitting otherwise she was sure her legs would have buckled.

Jack came in then; his coarse lizard hands balanced a tray with a teapot, cups, saucers and a plate of biscuits. 'Here you go,' he said with a wink in Amira's direction. He put the tray on the coffee table, tucked a stray curl behind his ear. 'Want me off at work?' he asked Minette. 'Or out in the shed?'

'Why not stay a bit?' Minette said.

He sat down next to her on the sofa.

'Sugar?' Minette asked Amira.

'No, thanks.'

'Milk?' Minette asked.

‘Yes, please.’ Amira pinched her thigh harder. She should not have been sitting having tea and biscuits. But how easy it was to watch Minette pour the tea with her plump hands, to accept a floral porcelain teacup from her. A cup that would be easy to break.

‘These cups are from Germany. The porcelain is from Meissen, near Dresden. They belonged to my mother. We hardly ever use them. Only for special occasions. Biscuit?’ She offered the plate of assorted biscuits. Amira selected a chocolate-coated one, and took a bite. She could have gorged on all the treats. Minette poured Jack a cup of tea without offering him any biscuits.

Then the eyes were on Amira and the biscuit became difficult to chew. She took a gulp of tea to help the sludge down.

‘Tell me, what happened to your twins?’ she asked.

Minette shifted in her seat, and for the first time since she had seen Amira, the smile disappeared from her face. ‘I had my twins when I was eighteen. A boy, James, and a girl, Sofie. But I need to begin earlier than that. Let me see.’ She paused and tugged on an earlobe. ‘I grew up here in Sydney. One of three girls. I was the youngest. When I was a teenager, I went a bit hippy. I had a few casual relationships… for a period of time.’

‘Anyway, at seventeen I worked as a waitress in a café. That’s how I met David.’

‘David?’ Amira asked.

‘Yes. He is James and Sofie’s father. He was sitting at a table by himself reading a novel. He was extremely handsome with lovely dark features, very intense and passionate. We spoke about the book he was reading: George Orwell’s *1984*. He was very intelligent.’

Jack rubbed his nose up and down. He seemed to have inched towards the biscuits.

‘David came in a few times and he eventually asked me to a movie and dinner and we started seeing each other,’ Minette continued. ‘But after a while – no, it was only after a short time really – I felt like he was only really interested in me for one thing, if you know what I mean.’

Jack’s neck looked stiff.

‘We had an attraction you see, but we had different beliefs. David was, I would say, strongly Communist, or something, and believed in world revolution. But I associated that with cruel dictators like Stalin.’

Amira woodenly swallowed some biscuit.

‘Does that make sense?’ Minette asked.

Father’s words echoed in Amira’s mind: ‘You must be careful who you have flings with. Romances that are light and fun at first can become heavy and burdensome, and before you know it, they can destroy you and everything that you and our family have worked so hard to achieve’.

‘That makes sense to me,’ Amira said, placing her tea and the remains of her biscuit down on the coffee table, feeling a sudden loss of appetite.

‘There were other problems, too. He kept our relationship a secret. He didn’t introduce me to his friends. If we went out, then it would only be the two of us. Then I found out I was pregnant with twins.’ Minette lowered her blue eyes to her stomach, as if she was remembering the life that once grew inside her.

‘Do twins run in your family?’ Amira asked.

Minette’s eyes met hers. ‘Yes, my mother was a twin.’

‘How did David react to news that you were pregnant?’ Amira asked.

‘He broke up with me.’ Minette sipped her tea. ‘Said he didn’t want anything to do with my mess.’

‘A charmer,’ she said.

‘So I had my twins, and stayed at home living with my mother – my father had died a year earlier.’

Amira stared blindly down at her lap. Had David brought her to Father? Did her parents know she was stolen?

Minette put her teacup on the coffee table. Jack patted her on the back in a reassuring way. ‘Go on, love,’ he said.

People outside the Movement could be kind and loving. They weren’t always mindless, complacent slaves.

Minette continued. James was a bit of a handful, always wanting to be fed and not sleeping properly. Sofie was an easy baby by comparison but James would sometimes wake her up. They shared a room. Then one morning when the twins were barely two they were gone from their beds. There was a search party that uncovered nothing. Police searched for David, too, but could not find anyone with his identity. The police said he must have lied.

‘But why would he have done that?’ she asked. Her voice was raspy, as she pulled out a scrunched up tissue from her sleeve and blew her nose. Amira couldn’t speak. She pinched her thigh harder.

‘There was a large media campaign. But none of it was any use.’

‘Was there ever a ransom?’ Amira asked.

‘No.’

Is it possible Minette was her mother? Was she a little girl that was snatched from her cot? Amira looked into the older woman’s eyes searching for certainty, wondering whether she was the Woman.

‘Do you have photos?’ Amira asked Minette.

Minette pointed to some photographs next to the television. ‘There are some. I’ll get more.’

Amira edged toward the photos on the chest, images that were largely washed in a discoloured tan from years of exposure. There was a picture of a snowman and Minette holding two children. The little girl was wearing a thick red coat and the little boy was in a blue one and he had matching gloves with an embroidered steam train. Both children were smiling and Minette looked delighted. The snowman had a carrot on his nose and carrot eyes. Amira looked closer and the boy had what looked like pink and white marshmallows in his hand. She swayed unexpectedly and she had to sit back down.

'You look very pale,' Jack said. 'Are you all right? Can I get you anything?'

Amira shook her head.

Minette returned to the room holding three large photo albums. They started leafing through the first. There were many old photos that Amira didn't recall. But the face of James was familiar to her. He was the boy in her memory. Near the last pages, a photograph fell loose of a young man sitting at a café drinking a coffee, smiling. He was looking at something in the distance as though he was unaware of the camera.

Amira picked up the picture and her head jerked back.

'That's David,' Minette said. 'That's the only photo I have of him. He didn't know I had it. A friend took it for me. The police put it in the papers when they were looking for Sofie and James. But he never came forward.'

'I know this man,' Amira said.

'You do?'

'This is Father, the man who adopted and raised me. Only his name isn't David, it's Henry.'

Minette blinked several times before her eyes widened in shock.

Jack's shoulders suddenly hunched up, his neck looked like it had turned to steel. 'You tell me where he is. He needs to be shown his place.'

Minette placed her hand on Jack's arm.

‘Taking children like that. He’s nothing but a criminal.’

‘Jack, please. He is Sofie’s father.’ She turned to Amira and gave a pained smile. ‘So that’s how your father knows who I am.’

Amira was groggy. Her entire life had been based upon a lie. Father had lied about everything. Why hadn’t she seen this coming? She glanced at the little boy in the photograph with the snowman. If Father took her what did he do with James? She remembered feeling separated from her birth brother.

‘I suppose David is worried I will go to the police, is he?’ Minette asked. ‘Have him arrested for kidnapping? But why would he tell you who I was?’

‘He knew I’d come for you.’

Why didn’t Father tell her she was his daughter? All this time, he knew that she yearned to know who her real parents were.

‘If he kept you, did he keep James, too? Do you have any brothers?’ Minette continued.

Amira found it hard to speak and when she did her voice was choked. ‘I have four,’ she replied. ‘But none of them are the same age as me, and I remember being separated from my birth brother. I was crying for him, for my mother. I remember that.’

‘Why would he keep you and not your brother?’ Minette asked, in a downcast voice.

Authenticity. He picked her for Authenticity. But what did he do with James?

‘Did James like bananas?’ Amira asked.

Instantly Minette threw her hands up to her lips. ‘Yes, he loved them!’

‘That’s it, we’re going to the police,’ Jack said.

Amira was unable to look at him directly. She wanted to vomit.

‘The authorities could talk to David… Henry,’ Minette said. ‘They might be able to find out about James.’

Amira's eyes twitched from Minette to Jack. She should allow them to go to the authorities, hand them the telephone or drive them to the nearest police station. But she could only stare at the floor. She didn't know what to say.

Jack pushed aside his tea and grabbed a chocolate biscuit, downed it in two bites before reaching for another. 'You should both get a DNA test done…' he began.

Her blueprint in the hands of the authorities?

'I'll have a look later on the internet and see how it's done,' Jack said, selecting another biscuit.

The way Minette kept staring at her was unnerving. 'You are so beautiful. Really beautiful. But you know what? I don't need a test to tell me you are my daughter.'

Amira brought a shaky hand to her forehead. She fought back tears. Tell them. She needed to tell them everything. Now.

'Did you grow up with a mother?' Minette asked her gently.

'Yes,' Amira replied.

'I see,' Minette said.

Silence lay between them. Jack broke it.

'Our garage is filled with presents,' he said. 'For twenty years, she's been buying those kids birthday and Christmas gifts.'

Amira couldn't help raising her eyebrows. Minette needed therapy. She wasn't the only one.

'She still has all their baby things that she brought over from her mum's place. Has a room here set up with their belongings.'

Minette blushed. 'Would you like me to show you?'

Amira wasn't sure, but she didn't want to be rude.

They went down the corridor, past the laundry, a bathroom, a toy room, their bedroom, a spare. At the very end, they came to a closed door, with a latch up high. Minette pulled it. ‘So the children I look after don’t come in,’ she said.

Inside the room, the venetian blinds had been opened but the light that streamed through was dim. The walls were painted a lemon yellow, and there was a strip of wallpaper with a repeated pattern of elephants, giraffes, turtles and lions.

‘Like the room at Mum’s,’ Minette said. ‘I can’t bring myself to change it.’ There were two cots where once, many years ago, two babies slept side-by-side. She pointed at the one with pink linen. ‘This was Sofie’s cot.’

Amira stood there staring at the cot. She could feel the emptiness of all the years gone by, the stillness of the air, the beds with nothing to fill them. Why had she come in the room? Was it just to be polite? Maybe. Or had she hoped to claim some part of her lost self? Well, that was wishful thinking.

There were shadows under Minette’s eyes she hadn’t noticed before; Minette’s pink cheeks had grown sallow.

‘I dust it with the vacuum cleaner, but I can’t wash it,’ she said. Then she crumpled and sobbed. Jack stepped towards her.

Amira looked away.

‘They even accused me…’ Minette spluttered. ‘They accused me of killing them. Burying their bodies somewhere.’ She took a tissue from her sleeve again and wiped her eyes and nose.

Now, Amira. Tell her now. Her mouth was dry, her tongue thick and lethargic. She couldn’t speak, though she should. She didn’t want to tell her mother – who had waited decades to see her – that she was a monster.

She was her little Sofie. Couldn’t she just be that?

18

Monday, 21 June

No, of course she couldn't just be little Sofie; she had wasted enough time.

'I have something I must tell you. It can't wait any longer.'

When they sat down on the couch she started to pace the room, and began to have doubts… perhaps she should wait until a DNA test was done? She scratched her throat… Oh, who was she kidding?

'What is it?' Minette asked.

'There's more to know. About Henry. About me.'

'Yes?' Jack asked. 'Go on.'

'Jack give the poor girl a chance,' Minette responded. She rose from the couch, and clasped Amira's hands as though closing any distance between them. Her touch was warm. Suddenly Amira was filled with a terrible longing.

'There's something I need to tell you, and I'll understand if afterwards you don't want me to be your daughter.' Amira gazed at Minette for several seconds. Her relentless blue eyes didn't blink.

Amira Knox. Killer.

Minette didn't relinquish her hands. Jack watched them both intently.

'I've told you that David may actually be my adoptive father, Henry. I believe he probably kidnapped me and brought me to the Kangaroo Valley where he and my mother, Edith, adopted me somehow. They also had four other adopted children.'

‘You said that you didn’t think James was with you?’ Minette said.

Amira tried to breathe steadily. ‘I don’t know for sure. Everything is so confusing. One of the boys there – Kolya – he might be my twin brother. When we were young people used to comment that we looked the same, like brother and sister. He seems to have a similar shaped face and the same coloured eyes. So there is a possibility…’

‘That Kolya is James?’ Minette’s eyes sparkled.

How could Amira tell her that they were both monsters?

‘But he is two years older than me and I remember being separated from my birth brother so I really don’t see how…’

‘But if your Father lied to you about being your biological…’

‘Exactly. It’s possible that he lied about our ages.’

A tear fell from Minette’s eye, and her smile held an infinite hopefulness that Amira realised she had seen before, on Kolya’s face.

‘But why would you think that I wouldn’t love you?’ she asked.

Jack nodded at Amira to encourage her to speak or to force the words out, she couldn’t tell which.

‘I’ve killed people.’

Their jaws dropped and there was a stark silence in the room. All Amira could hear was breath, and the lack of it.

Jack shifted in his seat. Scratched his jaw.

Minette grimaced, she looked crushed. ‘What? You’ve killed people?’ she repeated in shock.

‘Kolya has too.’

Minette was speechless. She went very pale and had to sit down.

There, Amira had done it and as far as she was concerned there was no turning back. ‘We were raised to be Authenticity Warriors,’ she continued. ‘From the very first

moment we were told that we had to serve the people, that it was our job to prevent the spread of infection.'

'You mean David is a terrorist?' Minette asked in utter confusion.

'That's such a harsh word,' Amira replied.

'But damned accurate,' said Jack.

'We thought of ourselves as freedom fighters. I suspect that's why my father stole me.'

Minette covered her mouth with a palm.

'So your adoptive mum, Edith, she is a terrorist, too?' Jack asked with an air of disgust.

'An Authenticity Warrior,' Amira replied.

'An Authenticity Warrior?' Minette said faintly. 'From the Authenticity Movement?'

Amira nodded.

Minette put her elbows on her knees and clutched her head in her hands. She sat like this for some seconds. When she finally spoke it was in a broken voice. 'My two children being forced to kill people?'

Amira plunged her hands into the pockets of her jeans. 'We weren't exactly forced,' she said. 'It was expected. Like cleaning our rooms, or helping wash the dishes. If we didn't do what was asked, we'd be punished. Long-term disobedience would mean we were inAuthentic. After a while, the sense of responsibility seeps into who you are. The difficulty is knowing how to become someone else.'

Jack offered a restrained smile. 'You serious?'

Amira met Jack's gaze.

Minette looked up. 'Who have you killed?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes, I want to know,' Minette muttered.

‘Recently?’ Amira asked. She didn’t want to speak their names. Names that had belonged to someone, once.

‘Unbelievable,’ Jack said, his face burning red.

‘Recently I have killed Jonas Baumann,’ Amira suddenly spluttered. ‘Kolya has been behind the billionaire murders in America and possibly Canada. I have also killed others.’

Minette gave her an agonised look. ‘How many people?’ she asked, her voice no more than a whisper.

Amira hesitated, glancing across at Jack. He breathed heavily through his nose. ‘Maybe two-three people,’ she said. The numbers two and three, they are small numbers, aren’t they? Among the first numbers a child learns. A person can count them on one hand.

‘Maybe two-three people?’ Jack scoffed. ‘Well, which is it?’

‘Three,’ Amira replied softly.

‘You and this Kolya are behind the billionaire killings?’ Jack asked, incredulous.

‘You and James,’ Minette said.

Amira drew another long breath before answering. Her head was spinning so fast, it was like the room was moving. ‘Yes, we are behind it. But Kolya may not be James.’

Minette’s fingers tremored. She wanted to grab hold of them to stop them, but she didn’t.

‘How would you be punished for non-compliance?’ Minette asked.

‘Father has killed one of my adoptive brothers, Randy, because he was led astray. Father ordered Kolya to kill him.’

‘It just keeps on coming,’ Jack said. His face was now a sweltering red. In contrast, Minette’s face was papery white.

Amira tried to ignore him and keep herself under control. She looked into her mother's eyes. 'I know now what I did was wrong,' she said. 'I don't want to do it anymore. That's why Father is trying to destroy me, that's why he may even come after you.'

Minette's entire body was trembling. 'And Kolya? James?' she asked.

'Kolya is a good boy. Father won't go after him. Kolya will keep going with the mission until Father says not to.'

'This Kolya is still killing?' Minette said weakly.

She nodded.

'I want to see him. I need to see him,' Minette said, firmer now. She suddenly stood upright again. 'I'll know if I just see him.'

'It won't work,' Amira said. 'I've tried to see Kolya. It will be impossible to find him; he's too good. He doesn't want to know who his birth mother is. He isn't like...he's not like…'

'You,' Jack supplied.

'No. He's not like me,' she repeated dumbly. 'Kolya has always been the best of us. Authenticity and the Movement are his passion.'

Minette began pacing the room.

'Father sent someone to kill me in Cologne,' Amira went on. 'He set fire to my apartment. He knows I want out.' Minette looked at her alarmed. She told them about her suspicions that Father was also behind the downfall of Citibank in the US.

Minette sat down again, chewed on her bottom lip. 'This is all a bit…overwhelming.'

'That's all you can say?' Jack asked. 'She's a terrorist, Mini. She might be your daughter but look at what she's done. And remember, we don't know for sure yet if she is your daughter.'

'Jack, please,' Minette said.

He glared at Amira.

‘It’s true that we don’t know for sure if I am your daughter,’ she replied. ‘But it doesn’t really matter right now. Henry knows that I’d come for you, so you are at risk because of that.’

‘All this time,’ Minette stumbled with her words. ‘All these years. I imagined the worst, of course. That the person who stole you and James, killed you both, raped you, starved you. I imagined them locking you up for years. I read stories about such children. But my children were being trained to be murderers?’ In her eyes Amira saw a battered world, in her fallen face, she clearly saw her own.

‘We better go to the police,’ Jack said, folding his arms. ‘You have to tell them everything.’

Amira’s breathing was rapid and her lips quivered. She wished Lukas were there to hold her. Even after his betrayal. It was crazy.

Minette’s eyes didn’t drop from Amira’s. ‘The victims’ families need to know what happened to their loved ones and why. You can’t keep them in the dark, Sofie. It eats away at you and there is nothing worse.’

She still thought of Amira as her Sofie.

‘I’ve been in a prison all my life,’ Amira said. She’d rather be dead than go into another one and Kolya would be the same, but she didn’t want to tell this to her mother.

Amira’s mobile beeped then, and when she read the message, blood ran quick in her veins.

‘What is it?’ Minette asked.

‘It’s Father. He wants me to call him at a certain number or he’ll kill you.’

‘Over my dead body,’ Jack said.

He didn’t realise what he was saying.

Minette stood up and nodded at Amira’s mobile. ‘Show me.’

Amira showed her the message.

‘David is afraid you’ll go to the police,’ Minette said. ‘You have bargaining power over him. He is in the weaker position. He has to let us speak to Kolya.’

‘No. We’re going to the police,’ Jack said.

‘We have to get out of here,’ Amira replied.

Jack gave Amira a cold stare. ‘You let us drink tea and munch biscuits.’

‘Pack a few things,’ Amira said. ‘Bare essentials. Your ID, credit cards, cash, mobiles. Sofie and James’ birth certificates if we have to go to the police.’

Minette took Jack’s hand and herded him towards the bedrooms.

‘You get the birth certificates down for me,’ she said. ‘I can’t reach where you’ve put them in the wardrobe.’

Amira remained in the living room, ill at the thought of talking to Father. But she had to convince him out of this insanity and find out if Kolya really was her twin. She quickly dialled the number and pressed the phone to her ear. The phone rang and then there was a click, followed by a prolonged silence.

‘Father,’ she said.

‘Amira. Come home. Now,’ he said sharply.

‘You don’t want me as a daughter anymore, why would I come home?’ she replied.

‘After all I’ve done for you? How can you be so ungrateful? You have always caused trouble and been more work than anyone else.’

Amira blinked back the tears. ‘Your world, your way of thinking – it isn’t all there is. There are better ways.’

‘You’re infected, Amira.’

‘You stole Minette’s children.’ Amira paused to catch breath. ‘Why did you never tell me you were my birth father?’

There was a deep silence on the other end of the line.

‘Are all my brothers adopted?’ she asked.

Again, no answer.

‘Or did you steal them from their parents, too, Dad? Who did you sleep with to have Randy?’

‘Randy was adopted through the proper channels. I will not argue with you over the phone. Come home immediately.’

‘You turned us into killers. For your delusional fantasies. We loved you. You were our father.’ It took all her strength to hold herself together and not break down. ‘I want to see Kolya.’

Father laughed mockingly. ‘He wants you gone just as much as I do.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I’ve had enough of this nonsense. You go to the police and we will kill your mother. I’ll send Kolya to kill her. And if you think…’

‘Who is Kolya?’ she asked.

‘You know who he is.’

‘He’s my twin brother?’

‘He wants you to come home immediately to sort yourself out.’

‘Is he my twin?’ she demanded.

‘Yes. So come home.’

‘But I remember being separated from my birth brother.’

Father sighed heavily. ‘He went to Selena first. She wanted a son. But she had problems with Kolya. He was a difficult toddler.’

Amira pressed the disconnect button. How dare he! How dare he think that Kolya and she were puppets that he could…

And how much did Mother know? Had Edith done this to her too? To Kolya…to her other brothers?

A painting: light focused on two toddlers playing in a forest, they are smiling. A man in a dark cloak behind the boy, a woman with frizzy hair at the heels of the girl.

Minette stared fixedly at her; she had entered the room without Amira noticing. She was not sure how much Minette had heard. She parted her lips to speak but then her phone pinged with a message. It was from Mother.

Mira, I need your help. I have left your father and taken Amelia. I'm terrified. I now know what he's done to you, to Randy. Please help me. Call me.

Time seemed to slow. This could be a trap, but if it wasn't, her mother and sister were alone and in danger.

'What is it?' Minette asked.

'It's my mother. She's left Father and she's afraid.' Amira picked up the phone and called Edith. When she answered, Amira could hear her crying. Minette gazed at Amira, clearly distressed.

'Mum, what's happening?' Amira asked Edith.

'Mira, I know,' she stammered. 'I know. About Randy. About you and Kolya,' she sobbed. 'Your Father, all these years I trusted him, I believed him. I've given him my whole life, and now he wants to take it all from me. Mira, he stole you! Do you understand? He had an affair with a non-Member!'

Amira listened to her wailing. She was not being deceived. 'Where's Amelia?'

'She's asleep. We're at a hotel.'

'Which hotel?'

More crying.

'Mother, please. I can't help you unless you tell me where you are.'

That seemed to comfort Edith. 'The Star City,' she said. 'The casino. I didn't think your father would look for me here.'

'Good idea.' After a moment Amira asked, 'How did you find out about all this?'

'When you came home. I saw that you were deeply unhappy. Kolya said you saw a little girl witness one of your missions. Then your father went to Cologne, he said

he had to talk sense into you. I did some digging around, asked Patrick to help. When you know someone long enough, you know what makes them vulnerable.'

'You blackmailed Patrick?' Amira asked, amazed at her mother's strength.

'Years ago, he tried to kiss me. I threatened to tell your father unless he helped me locate your birth family. As it was, he knew the true story. I thought you were both adopted through the proper channels. Your father had adoption papers. They looked real, and I wanted you, so I signed them. Mira, what will I do? I have no one outside the Movement.'

'Don't worry. What's your room number?'

'1064. It's a Pyrmont view apartment. Floor 10.'

Father would never have thought Mother capable of such extravagance. 'I'll be there as soon as I can. Don't call anyone else, don't tell anyone where you are.'

'I won't, Mira. I love you so much.'

'I'll be there soon.'

Her head was swarming like a bee's hive. Minette stared at her dumbfounded.

'I'll explain everything in the car,' she said to her. 'Are you packed?'

Jack strode into the room, a small duffel bag hoisted over his shoulder. 'We're ready.'

'Do you have a pocket knife?' Amira asked him.

He collected one from the cupboard above the refrigerator, and she put it in her pocket.

'Be careful, it's sharp,' he said.

'I don't suppose you have a gun?' Amira asked.

He looked offended. 'We're not like that,' he said.

Before they left the house, she took the photo of Father, and one of Minette with her two toddlers and put them in the back pocket of her jeans.

Jack insisted on taking his four-wheel drive. Minette sat in the front passenger seat beside him, half turned towards Amira, as she explained her conversation with Mother.

‘So your Mum, she didn’t know?’ Jack asked doubtfully.

Amira looked through the back windshield, but the road was clear. ‘Had no clue. She’s so dependent on Father – always has been. She would have just signed the adoption papers, no questions asked.’

‘You think going to her is safe?’ Minette asked.

‘No. But she needs me. I’ll make sure you and Jack are okay.’

Minette drew back, made herself look smaller. After a few moments she said: ‘I’ll meet your mother?’

Her two mothers meeting would be an awkward moment, to say the least, yet there was no choice. ‘Father told me Kolya is my twin. He is James.’

Minette sank against the seat, and stared out of the window at the morning fog, now clearing.

19

Monday, 21 June

The light in the lobby was neither dim nor bright. They walked towards the lifts leading up to the apartments, past a lounge, a café, a wishing fountain glistening with coins. They moved between glass doors. Amira pressed the up arrow. Jack breathed like he'd been jogging.

Amira hit number 10.

Minette pawed at the strap on her black handbag. Jack stared at an all-you-can-eat buffet poster on a wall. This was Amira's doing, her decision. She reached out to touch Minette, but pulled back when the lift chinked.

Floor 10.

They passed through the sliding doors and the air had a chemical citrus smell. Amira turned to Minette and Jack.

'Wait here,' she whispered. 'I'll check the area and come back when it's safe.'

Minette's chin quivered, and Jack's forehead gleamed with moisture.

'I hope you're right about this,' he said.

'Me, too.'

'Then we can all go back and live happily ever after.'

Amira padded down the carpet-lined hallway, past newspapers and trays of leftover breakfasts. The citrus smell mingled with the clogging scent of crispy bacon strips and fried eggs. Her stomach hardened against nausea. Fluorescent lighting offered

cold illumination. A TV played beyond one of the wooden doors. The corridor was empty.

Room 1064.

She stared at the polished wooden door for about two minutes and there was nothing but silence. If only Lukas was with her, that he wasn't a cop and she could hold onto him. Curse his name. Then she rapped at the door, felt for the pocketknife, and counted the seconds to nine.

Mother answered, opened the door an inch, the latch holding. Her brown eyes expanded, looked Amira over cautiously. Edith closed the door. The latch clicked and then Mother was before her in full-view. She was changed; her grey-black hair was tousled, and dark circles stood out under her frightened eyes. She wore navy pants and a lavender jumper.

'You came.'

Amira inhaled deeply, stood a foot away from her. 'Mother.'

'Well, don't just stand there, come in.'

The two women embraced, and Edith trembled in Amira's arms. She smelled of ginger and nectarine, as though she had just showered.

Amira studied her face, then looked around uncertainly. An open kitchen. Baby bottles, a tin of formula, a mug and teaspoon were by the sink. An integrated dining and living area. A hardwood table. Copies of newspapers. A large rectangular mirror on the wall. LCD television, coffee table, sofa, two modular chairs with plush cushions. Charcoal-coloured drapes. A balcony. The sound of a heater humming.

'Where's Amelia?' she asked.

'Come, I'll show you.'

Edith led her down a narrow hallway to a room where Amelia slept in the centre of a double bed. Her arms and legs sprawled open, like a small eagle in flight. Morning

light flooded in through the window, giving her a buttery glow. Pillows were at the bed's edges. Amira checked the wardrobe. A light came on, revealing baby clothes.

She turned and went into the bathroom. White tiles, marble vanity and floor. Disposable nappies, a single toothbrush, hairbrush, a glass wet around the rim, a used shower cap, a bath mat, damp, on the floor in front of the shower. In the bin, four nappy sacks. The second bedroom. King-sized bed, unmade, flannelette pyjamas, a pair of ugg boots lined up next to it, suitcase open, clothes neatly folded, bedside table with a glass of water, phone and a 'pillow menu' offering boomerang, contour foam, microfibre, latex rubber, feather and down pillows. Such opulence. Wardrobe and second bathroom: clear.

She returned to the living room and looked out of the window to the balcony and the city below. The blue sky littered with wisps of cloud. Mother leaned against the wall near the television.

'Kolya. Did you know he was my twin?'

'Yes.'

'You could have told me,' she said, 'should have.'

Mother stepped closer. 'Your father said it would create jealousy between your other brothers. I didn't know you were stolen.'

'You knew how badly I wanted to know about my birth family. You kept it from me.'

'I was afraid.'

Amira turned to her. Edith dropped her gaze to her feet. For a moment she looked like a rumpled old lady.

'My birth mother and her husband are in the hallway.'

'You brought them here?'

'Father is after them, too.'

'How much do they know?'

‘Everything.’

Edith closed her eyes, tucked her top lip under her bottom.

Amira put a hand on her arm. ‘I’ll look after you.’

She nodded stiffly.

Amira went to find Minette and Jack, and brought them into the room. She heard herself make the introductions. No one offered a hand. The air seemed to have sapped the possibility of speech. A headache was building behind her eyes.

Finally Mother asked: ‘Do you want anything to drink? Coffee? Tea?’

Minette made a small sound of assent.

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ Mother said, rescued by the routine of tea preparations.

Minette and Jack sat down at the dining table while Amira helped Mother in the kitchen, filling the kettle with tap water, opening cupboards to find mugs. She fumbled one onto a tray.

‘You look like her,’ Mother’s voice was soft.

They took the tray into the dining area, and sat down opposite Jack and Minette. The pocketknife pressed against Amira’s thigh and she shifted it slightly. They each prepared their own drink, peeling back the lids on the UHT milk, tearing open sachets, stirring their concoctions with spoons.

Armed with caffeine, Jack faced Mother square on. ‘I want to know one thing. Was wrecking my wife’s life worth it?’

Mother dropped her eyes, her pale face vulnerable. The meeting of the mothers – and Jack – was a bad idea.

Minette stared hard at her husband. ‘Drink your tea,’ she said.

A tic twitched in Mother’s cheek betrayed her anxiety. ‘I didn’t know he stole them,’ she began in a small, timid voice, unable to look anyone in the eye. ‘I would never have allowed it. I thought it was a proper adoption.’

There was a silence.

After a while, Minette enquired, ‘Is it true that you trained them as Warriors?’

Under the table Mother’s knuckles turned white.

A hot flush washed over Amira. ‘She thought it was best for us,’ she said.

Mother looked up, her eyes wet. ‘By the time I thought of leaving, it was too late. Nothing would have convinced my sons to leave the Movement. They were dedicated. I can’t tell you the number of times I planned packing our bags, but I would never leave without my children. And I was afraid.’

Jack’s stare was stony. ‘Followed him down a funnel-web hole.’

‘That’s how it was.’

Minette flipped a sachet of sugar around her fingers, threw it back on the tray.

‘Sometimes time slips away from us before we know where we are going,’ Edith said.

‘There’s been a lot of slippage,’ Jack replied. He leaned back in his wooden chair.

Amira looked at Mother and explained what happened in Cologne, the fire in her apartment and how she ended up in Sydney.

Mother listened, her eyes a glassy sheen.

‘I never thought he would take matters so far.’

Amira laid a hand on top of hers. She was cold. ‘You’re not stupid, Mother. Father manipulated all of us.’ She pulled the photo of David out from her back pocket and slid it in front of Edith.

She looked down at the picture, and winced. ‘He was young then,’ she responded.

‘That’s David, the father of my twins,’ Minette said.

Amira put the photo back in her pocket and went to get Edith a tissue from the bathroom. When she returned they were all staring into their mugs.

‘We have to decide what to do,’ Amira said, handing Mother a tissue. She pulled out her phone, and started searching news sites. Information could be leverage.

Minette poured herself another cup of tea.

‘I still think we should go to the police,’ Jack said, his mouth set in a grim line. ‘They’ll have proper DNA tests.’

Amira persevered with the websites, stumbled upon one of the most popular German news items:

Police Find Weapons Cache in Cologne House

Police found an arsenal of weapons, ammunition, grenades, missiles, rocket launchers, plastic explosives, ricin, fake IDs, mobile phones and a box of SIM cards in an early-morning raid on a suburban home in Cologne yesterday, they said.

The owners of the Rodenkirchen property, Wilhelm Fauser, 25, and his wife, Marie Fauser, 24, have been arrested on suspicion of possessing illegal firearms, explosives, other dangerous items and fake identification cards.

‘What is it?’ Mother’s whisper was on Amira’s neck.

She handed the phone to Edith. ‘My messenger, my contact in Germany, has been arrested for possession of illegal weapons.’

‘Good to know taxpayers’ money matters in some parts of the world,’ Jack said.

Mother gave Amira back her phone. ‘Will he talk?’

‘I don’t know.’

There was no more news on Knudsen or the fire in her apartment. As she was looking, her phone beeped with a message. She read it twice.

In Sydney, can we meet? Alone. K.

‘He’s sent Kolya,’ Amira muttered.

Silence.

‘I want to meet him. See if I can change his mind,’ Minette said.

‘Don’t be so naïve,’ Edith replied. Then she rose and looked off across the balcony, biting on the tip of a thumb.

‘My poor son,’ she said.

‘I’ll make him see,’ Amira replied.

‘Let me come,’ pleaded Minette.

‘He wants to meet me alone. He won’t appreciate being bombarded.’

‘Look,’ Jack said. ‘This Kolya doesn’t sound too friendly. It’s not wise to see him under these conditions.’

‘You must go to him,’ Mother said. ‘He’ll listen to you.’

Amira sent Kolya a message.

Hello, brother. Yes, let’s meet. Where? When?

Mother continued to stand gazing out across the city, while Minette carried the dirty dishes to the sink. There was a faint cry of a baby.

‘What’s that?’ Jack asked.

‘My sister,’ Amira announced.

Edith held her throat as if to hold her head up, and walked to the bedroom. She returned with Amelia, a puffy-eyed baby in a cotton jumpsuit. She seemed rounder, bones lost in the knots of baby fat. Her cheeks were flushed the colour of peaches. One dimply hand rested on Mother’s shoulder, the other was in a fist.

‘Who’d you steal her off, then?’ Jack said.

‘May I hold her?’ Amira asked.

Amelia’s fingers wrapped around her hair and she tugged, as Amira embraced and kissed her. She was astonished at how her sister had grown in such a short period of time and also at her lack of fear.

‘Hello, sweetie,’ she said. The word sounded strange on her lips, she wasn’t used to cooing over babies.

Her phone sang with another message from Kolya.

‘He wants to meet me at a restaurant in the Sydney Harbourside shopping centre. 8pm.’ The meeting was hours away and would give Kolya time to gather his forces.

‘Near the Maritime museum,’ Jack explained, looking at the message. ‘About a fifteen minute walk away – at most.’

‘I’ll change the time. Make it in an hour.’

‘You can’t face him jetlagged, exhausted, starving,’ Mother said.

‘Listen to her,’ Minette said firmly.

Minette looked across to Jack.

‘Never argue with two women, only gets you in trouble,’ he said.

She sighed heavily, and sent Kolya a message consenting to his demands.

‘Now, food,’ Edith said. ‘Let me see…’ She looked around, unsure.

Jack said, ‘Pick something from room service, and I’ll order.’

Amira shook her head, she had no desire to eat.

‘Come now, Mira,’ Mother said. Then, ‘Jack, why don’t you decide on something for us?’

Amira was annoyed at Mother deferring to him, the man, in this way. Hadn’t she learned anything?

‘Mira?’ Minette asked. ‘I thought your name was Anika?’

Amira explained the two different names.

Jack studied the menu. ‘Over twenty-five dollars for a steak sandwich!’ he exclaimed.

‘I’m paying,’ Mother responded.

The day was spent holed up in the apartment with adults who didn’t want to speak to each other, or when they did, could not find the words. They charged phones, picked at sandwhiches and chips, went to the toilet. Drunk more cups of tea and coffee. More trips to the toilet. Played with Amelia. Amira craved chocolate and couldn’t resist

the bars in the fridge. But there were not enough of them, especially because she had to share with Jack. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't sleep. They were all on edge. Like they were waiting for Armageddon. They could all feel it in the air, in the minutes and hours that ticked by, in each breath. At 6pm the waiting had stretched almost to snapping point, and Amira took her backpack from the sofa and hoisted it over her shoulders. 'I'll get there early,' she said. 'Scope out the surroundings.'

'Are you sure?' Mother asked.

'Yes.'

Minette wrapped her arms around Amira. 'I don't know what to say,' she said.

Amira thought of the empty cots in Minette's nursery. She was determined not to fall apart. 'If you don't hear from me by 11pm, go straight to the police.'

'11pm?' Sweat dripped down Jack's crumpled forehead, despite the coolness in the room.

'I need time to talk sense into him.'

Amira kissed Amelia and Mother goodbye, wondering if she would ever see them again, and if she did, where it might be, and if she didn't, whether they would join Lukas on a list of people that she had once known and loved.

Edith cupped Amira's face in her palms. 'He won't hurt you,' she said. 'I know his heart.'

Then Amira stepped away from Edith's hands, and left the apartment.

20

Monday, 21 June

The winter evening, dark, I cross Pirrama Street at the traffic light and go up the winding path to Darling Harbour. I pass the Australian Maritime Museum in safety and suck in the cold city air. A breeze from the west. The blackness lit up by neon lights, office buildings that have never heard of global warming. Water laps at boats. Monday night, only the wild, the desperate and tourists are down at the Harbour. The list could include Movement people on the prowl. I look straight across to the aquarium, up ahead to the LG IMAX theatre, and then the second floor restaurant.

At 7.50pm I can see two couples and a group of young women, laughing, pressing glasses of wine to their lips. I hurry up the stairs. A short man in a black shirt, lacquered hair, shows me to a table near a window. Hands me a menu, asks about drinks.

'Pineapple juice, for now, please. I'm waiting on someone.'

He nods, fills a glass with iced water.

Now I can see the group of women more clearly, their tight blue jeans, sparkly tops with overflowing mounds of flesh, and heels. They talk of actors, who is hot. The sexual undercurrent is rife, even if a little dull. These women are my age, maybe a little older.

The waiter comes back with the juice and a basket of bread. If only he'd bring a box of chocolates instead. I check my watch: it's 8pm. Kolya is always on time. My mobile beeps with a message, and I see it is from Mother:

Are you ok?

I reply by text: *Fine. Still waiting.*

Then I text Kolya to make sure I am in the right restaurant. Five long minutes pass before he responds.

Yes. Car accident holding me up. Still happy to meet, or prefer tomorrow?

The message is casual, just like the Kolya I know. I answer: *I'll wait. Keep me posted. Drive carefully.*

I pick at a piece of bread and wonder if Wilhelm will talk to the German police. If they'll find my number on one of his mobiles. Ten minutes pass. Twenty. The waiter returns to my table.

'Ready to order?'

'The… ah… burger and fries.' Anything to placate him.

I nudge the food around on the plate with a fork. Over half an hour. The customers talk and the music plays, and I have the feeling that I'm truly alone. There's no one watching me, no one coming for me. I call Mother to hear another voice, to know she's fine. She picks up on the fifth ring.

'Amira, are you all right?' Her voice sounds stilted and overly bright, like she's making an effort around Minette and Jack.

'I'm fine but Kolya still isn't here. How are you all?'

There's a moment of hesitation then she says, 'Fine. We're all fine. Call back in half an hour if he still isn't there?'

'Yes, I will.'

The line goes dead.

I push my plate away; lower my head into my hands. I'm tired. Feel like crying. When I look up, the people, the movement, the music, all seems so slow and I know in an instant that I have been stupid and foolish and that Mother's strange voice was not because of Minette and Jack. Kolya's moment is now, and he isn't waiting for me to convince him of anything. I pull out my purse, draw out a twenty and a ten, throw them on the table, leap up and run.

Outside the evening grows colder and the wind off the water has picked up. A canopy of black cloud conceals the stars and moon. Moisture is heavy in the air. I run past the pirate ship, the submarines towards the hotel. I dial Mother's phone but it rings out to message bank. *Call me,* I text.

How did he know where we were? Tracking via a mobile phone. He could have planted one on Minette and Jack's car. But how did he find the hotel room number? He tricked Mother, and she told him… her poor son.

Run.

Always the running.

And the searching for hunters.

It is only a matter of minutes now, maybe three, maybe less before I am at the hotel. In my ears I can hear Baumann's scream, not wanting to let go before his time.

At the hotel the lift is empty, climbs slowly. My breathing is rapid. The doors chime and part. Floor 10.

I sprint down the corridor. Room 1064. I stop. Polished wooden door. No sound. No clues. Kolya isn't that sloppy. Not like me. I swipe the electronic key-card Mother collected as a spare earlier today.

If anything happens to them, you have killed them. You have only yourself to blame.

I flick the light switches. No one is here. Amelia's bottles are still beside the sink, the luggage left abandoned. The kettle is warm, mugs are on the dining table. One, two. My eyes shift to the living room, fall to the floor next to the overstuffed chair. There is a third. Spilt coffee soaks into the thick carpet. Three mobile phones are in the bathroom bin.

Breath trapped in my chest. All at once my head rushes, and I see myself with snow below my dangling feet, on a ski lift. My brother crying and my mother holding him to her breast. The door clicks behind me. I turn slowly. He stands, lucid blue eyes shining out from the holes in his balaclava. Kolya's eyes that don't fall from mine. Eyes just like Minette's, like mine. His Beretta M9 stretched out. We both stand still. Finally I say: 'Kill me later, brother. The killing can always wait. We need to talk.'

'I am not your brother.'

'I'm not infected. I haven't been claimed!'

'No?'

'No.'

'What are you doing in Australia?' he asks.

'You already know. But you don't realise that my birth mother is also yours.'

'Father said you'd try to pull rabbits out of hats.'

'Minette had twins – a boy and a girl – who were stolen. Why would I want to fool you? People used to think we were brother and sister all the time. We looked the same. For a reason.'

'Father lied to us? Is that what you are trying to say?'

'There is more. Father is our biological father.'

Kolya cocks his head, raises the gun.

'I have photos in my back pocket. Look at them at least!'

'And entertain your lies?'

'I've no reason to lie to you.'

‘It’s too late. It doesn’t matter. Turn around.’

‘No. Just be done with it, then.’

He juts the gun further in my direction. ‘Turn around,’ he repeats, this time more firmly.

I follow his instructions.

‘Walk towards the balcony. Stop. Not too close. Hands on head. Kneel.’

I do so, shaking my head, determined not to cry, not now. I hear his stride, the swish of his black jeans as he steps up behind me. The barrel of the gun is cold on my scalp, through my hair. My only solace is that my beautiful brother is on the other end of it. The thought is at once calming and comforting. That I might leave this world, just as I had entered it, with him near me. I will not fight him, will not resist. Won’t try to swivel or kick his legs from under him. Won’t reach for his Berretta. I close my eyes and the images of Lukas come. The sessions at the dojo where we spared, his easy, natural smile, rolled into my life like a…

There’s a click. Not from a gun. A door perhaps. From one of the other rooms. A faint creeping of footsteps coming closer. Kolya doesn’t move.

The newcomer slowly reveals his face to me. His dark eyes set like steel behind the tortoishell glasses.

He looks down at me, smiles. ‘Such a horrible business… sometimes.’

I consider leaping up in one fluid motion and smacking him in the jaw. Rage and fear coursing through me. My clenched fists at my side. Kolya digs the gun more firmly into my scalp.

My eyes are locked on Father’s. ‘I’m your daughter.’

He tilts his head to one side, considers for a moment. ‘That you are.’

Father falls silent, turns to gaze out the window. My brother behind me breathes heavily. He would have wanted to make this quick.

At last Father speaks again. ‘You are an example. Disloyalty is not acceptable. You have left me with no other choice.’ His voice is robotic, without any remorse. He faces me again. ‘Threatening the Resistance is the highest violation.’

He steps closer. ‘I’m waiting for your final words, Amira.’

I look down at his leather shoes, taking a few seconds to collect my thoughts. I look up at him again.

‘I love you Kolya. Don’t feel bad about what you are going to do with me. Remember that, please.’

Father’s face remains neutral. ‘You disgust me.’

For most of my life such words would have caused me excrutiating pain. Not now that I know what he has done. I shrug.

He snarls. ‘You’ve wasted enough of my time on your petty qualms. Goodbye, Amira.’

Father strides behind me. Pats Kolya on the shoulder. ‘I have your word. Son?’

‘Yes, Father.’

I can hear him walking towards the door. ‘Your sister will now become my First Warrior Daughter.’

The sound of him opening the door, it closing behind him. If only I could jump up, race after him and throttle him. Use my hands for a purpose I believe in. Then I realise: I’m still a monster. Even now on the brink of death, he has won.

At that moment, I’m startled to feel Kolya’s fingers rifle in my back pocket, then draw out the photos, the gun no longer on my head, the sound of feet on carpet. He’s checking to make sure the front door is locked. More footsteps. Then silence, and the rustle of the photos being turned over in his fingers.

‘Father in his twenties,’ I say without lowering my hands, or turning around. ‘Mother confirmed. When he had an affair with Minette.’

‘Where did you get them?’

‘Minette’s house. Her photo albums.’

I hear a heavy sinking into a chair, followed by more silence. Then a clunking of what must be the Beretta on the coffee table.

‘You can turn around,’ he says at last.

I stand up and face him. He has taken his balaclava off, put it by his gun. His face is pale, shoulders slack, deep forehead lines like an old man’s.

‘Father admitted that he was our birth father, and that we are twins,’ I say.

Moments pause. ‘He had an affair? Betrayed Mum.’

‘Minette wasn’t even communist,’ I joke.

‘No.’

‘He arranged for us to be taken from our cots when we were two. What kind of sick bastard does that?’

For a moment Kolya’s gaze rests on the photos, frozen. I move to take a step towards him but he lifts his eyes and stares fixedly at my face. My eyes. His countenance is long in the shadow of the light. ‘Tell me something,’ he says softly. ‘Do you still believe in Authenticity? After all of this?’

I study the Beretta on the table. I’ve always thought it ironic that Kolya likes a pistol often favoured by the US military. ‘Yeah, something like it, anyhow. But I don’t believe in all the killing. The lying, stealing. Maybe I’m converting to the Ten Commandments.’

The corners of Kolya’s lips curl down offering a constrained smile. ‘Can’t believe you’re my twin.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I just never thought…’ He sinks deeper into the chair, presses the bridge of his nose between a thumb and forefinger, lowers his eyes. ‘It was insignificant to me. All this biological stuff. I had my family already, the Movement. But it was all a lie…’

‘Kolya, where’s Mother, Amelia, Minette?’

He looks up at me. ‘I don’t want to go to prison.’

‘It’s not a certainty.’ Then I realise that a casino like this one probably has cameras all over the place, in the corridors, near the lifts. They would have Kolya and I on their records, potentially Kolya carting the others away. ‘The cameras,’ I say.

‘I’m not stupid.’

‘I didn’t say you were.’

‘Oscar fixed them for me. His computers. Nothing for twelve hours. Replays.’

‘Even if they were working, anything for them to pick up?’

‘I won’t go to prison. I won’t let that happen.’ He picks up his piece, turns it in his hand.

‘Hey, we can hide,’ I say. ‘I’ve a place. Been keeping it for a time of need. Not much but something. Part of the Warrior backup system, right?’

All his bones look slack, his eyes filled with a dull falling away.

‘We can start a new life. All our training. Our own group, a non-violent one.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You always wanted to study at the Shaolin Temple. We can make it happen.’

‘What would any of it be for?’

I take a very deep breath. I don’t know what answer I can give him, but I have to say something. ‘Look, we need time to think. Take a few days to sort this stuff out. We’ll all make better decisions after a decent meal, some sleep.’

Kolya presses his lips together; he looks away, eyes hollow, down at his gun. His shoulders are hunched and he suddenly appears very small and alone.

Goosebumps rise on my arms, underneath my jacket. I couldn’t keep from pitying him. Whereas I always doubted the Movement, he had been steadfast.

I place my palm on his cheek. ‘I love you, brother. We can make it out of this, together, you’ll see.’

Kolya smiles somewhat tearfully, then his hand snaps up, grabs mine and presses it firmly on his cheek. I feel the wetness from his eyes, his cheekbone, jaw, below the mildly prickly skin. I'm afraid, recognising the depths of the downhill wave. He kisses my palm. Nods. Releases my hand.

I breathe, flooded by relief. I smile, take the gun out of his hand and put it back on the coffee table. 'We can do it,' I say. 'You'll see.'

'Yes,' he replies. His smile empty.

'It was you on the black bike.'

'Yes.'

'You tracked my Messenger? Threatened him for the information on Knudsen?'

'That's right.'

'Oh, Kolya. You didn't have to do that.'

He smiles. 'Father was ready to turn you into cow fodder if you made another mistake.'

Returning now, slowly the wave hitting the shore. 'And tonight, how did you find us?'

'Called Mother. Told her I wanted to defect and was afraid. She believed me… of course. She believes anything.'

We both think for a while, lost in our own thoughts.

'Kolya, where are they?' I ask.

His eyes are on me, clearly stung by the uncertainty, the fear in my own. 'You believe I killed them. Say it.'

'No. I don't know what you've done with them.'

'But you think me capable of murdering my little sister. A baby. My mother who rubbed my head at night when I had headaches. I killed Randy, so what difference is a few more, right?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I just think they will be worried.'

He sighs. ‘They’re here at the hotel. In another room. That Jack’s a handful.’

‘Yes, he is.’ I pause and we both laugh. He has to wipe his wet eyes with a handkerchief. ‘Come with me to get them?’

‘No, you go. I want to clean my face first. Don’t want Mother to see me like this.’

‘She won’t care.’

‘No. I’ve caused her enough anguish. You get them. I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ll knock three times. The electronic card is on the kitchen bench. Room 1035.’

‘Okay.’ I ruffle his hair.

Then, without warning, and rather awkwardly, Kolya grabs me and holds me tight like he used to to when we were little. I can’t say it’s an entirely pleasurable experience. His grip is too firm, expelling the air from my body.

I laugh. ‘I swear, one of these days, you’re going to kill me with your bear hugs.’

Now he chuckles. ‘Your luck only extends so far.’

‘Don’t be too long?’

He punches me in the upper arm and for the first time in my life I enjoy the burn. ‘Get going will you?’ he says. ‘Before Mother has a coronary.’

I turn towards the door and walk like I’m floating, my heart light, and believing that perhaps life will for once be generous, that the suffering and the pain and the senselessness will be worth something: our freedom to start anew, to find ourselves. Giddy with the thought that the sun might shine down on my loved ones and me. Mother. Amelia. Minette. Lukas. Randy. Laith. Oscar. All of them flash before me with smiles, wide and full, and I drift towards something greater than myself that has always been familiar and has always been with me, even though I have never seen it. An authentic returning. Then at the very moment when the vastness appears soothing, no

longer daunting, my hand on the door handle ready to open, his gun fires once: a whoomp of metal released. Air explodes within my chest. I turn around to see Kolya, one final time.

He is thrown to one side of the chair, blood pouring down his right temple. A mist of red on the leather chair, splattered as far as a wall near the television.

I race to him – too late – his face white as snow under the scarlet and I see him as the little boy crying on the ski lift, a fire of fear in his blue eyes… Without thought I pull myself to him, press him against me, kiss his dank face. An odour of burnt sulphur fills my nasal passages. And blood, still warm. Only this time, it is my brother's blood. Death creeps into him, just as it did to Jonas Baumann, Gerard Clément, Pelle Knudsen, and my first victim, Evan. During my whole life, Kolya's sadness, his joy, they were my own, and now he is slipping away from me. I clasp him tighter, pressing him into myself. Do not leave me alone, brother.

I sob and shake him, trying to jolt life back into him, just as Britta had done with her grandfather. His face slackens. Already he is growing cold. He doesn't move at all, not even with the effort of breath. The bullet has gone right through his brain. The way Father taught us. Better take your own life than succumb.

I don't want to let him go. I can't… I sit aimlessly for a long while not letting my arms fall from him. There is the feeling of being washed away by a wave, of being dunked successively, where there's no time for breath. I fumble for clear thought, resisting the wave, and shut his eyes. Eyelids delicate as the wings of a butterfly. Then I see a piece of paper on the table that I'm sure wasn't there before. I let Kolya slide back down onto the chair and pick up the note in his neat scrawl. *Randy had a wife. Amelia is their daughter. Find Amelia's mother and take care of them. I love you. Always. K.*

I look for a nearby pen. There isn't one. He must have written the words before he even came into the room. I fold the message and put it in my pocket.

His body is ever so still, lifeless: surrendered.

I stand, pick up the gun, and check the rounds. Only one missing. The room spins around me. I place the piece under my jacket, find the electronic card in the kitchen and walk out into the hallway, to see what awaits me in the other room. Finding people can mean losing them.

Standing in front of 1035 on Floor 10, I swipe the electronic card, the door clicks, and I press down on the door handle. The room, a replica of the one where my brother lies, is filled with muffled moans and panting, and Amelia is crying. She's alone on the carpeted floor in the living area. I gather her in my arms and keep moving. In the first room, Minette is tied to the bed and gagged. Mother is in the bathroom and Jack in the other bedroom. They are all writhing.

Alive.

Of course they are.

I untie Mother first. Her face is red from tears and fear. She gasps as I hand Amelia to her. I leave them to untie Minette and Jack. They all look at me, rubbing the skin where Kolya had tied them.

'My son?' Mother asks.

'He's gone,' I say. 'Killed himself.'

Mother's legs buckle. I catch her and Amelia, and guide them gently to the floor.

Minette stares at me with wide blue eyes of horror that I will never be able to calm. A sob of pain breaks from her lips. 'Take me to him!' she says.

She rushes out of the room, down the corridor to Kolya. Demands I give her the key. Swipes the card, and Jack and I run after her. I see her drop to the floor in shock. After several minutes she rises and crawls towards him. She traces a finger over his beautiful colourless face. Then the screams come.

The screams of the animals.

The screams of Britta.

The helpless screams of my mother as she clutches Kolya, her lost son, in her arms.

Her screams become a raw wailing.

I close my eyes.

An egg falls from a tree. It cracks on a footpath and inside I am twisted with my dead twin brother. Kolya.

‘Go.’

The voice is an urgent whisper, the voice of a ghost.

Minette’s weepy eyes clamp on mine and I see death in life. ‘Go,’ she says. ‘Now.’

I step towards her. She stands, raises a hand. ‘Leave. Take what you need.’

What I need? What is that? I think of Amelia. Kolya’s note.

Jack is in the room holding his wife on the ground. Minette, when I see her last, is bent down to Kolya.

Epilogue

I wake in the middle of the night pricked by a dream I can't remember. An animal, most likely a possum, scratches on the galvanised iron roof. The noises of the rainforest. Amelia sleeps on the mattress beside me. It is so dark I can't see her, only hear her breathing, slow and full, between Mother's snores.

I think about Kolya and Lukas and what places they are in now, replay conversations in my mind.

Then, I start thinking about the hippies who built this hexagonal house sometime in the seventies and the years of neglect that have left the external walls and floorboards in disrepair. The lack of internal dividers, bedrooms. The walls that need mending, those yet to be built. The moisture in the air feeding mould that grows on the blankets, the pillows. Some might suppose the house should be pulled down, a new one built. Why can't people be like that? Be overhauled? All the cracked and rotting planks of a wood shed, replaced afresh? Is death, as Kolya wanted to believe and as Father taught us, the only final cleansing solution for the lost?

I recall when I was a teenager and how I helped Mother lay some pavers in the backyard. They were red bricks, cobbled around the edges. I spent hours sweeping the sand into the gaps. Just when I thought I had plugged a hole, a few minutes later it would open up again. So the paver wouldn't wobble. Felt like a never-ending process. I suppose I'm been a bit like that. Hollows that always need filling.

Amelia stirs and cries.

‘Could be hungry,’ Mother croaks. ‘Or dirty nappy. Want me to get up?’

‘No, you go back to sleep.’

I grope for my torch and pick Amelia up: even through my flannelette pyjamas she is warm.

In the kitchen, I light two candles. Amelia continues to cry. Her nappy is clean. I turn the gas bottle on, get the stovetop going, pour bottled water into a saucepan, and already I am sick of this place. While I wait for the water to boil, and Amelia wails, I know we won’t be able to stay here long. We need running water and electricity. At least a generator. Paints, brushes, and canvasses.

Pale moonlight shafts through the wooden blinds. I turn to set a candle on the dining table, and notice a shadow on the couch. Large and thick, not a bush turkey or a goanna. I stop dead in the middle of the room, clutching Amelia to my chest. She becomes quiet. I lift the candle and the light flickers on his blonde hair.

He looks tired, exhausted, although his eyes are still lambent.

I move to reach for the Beretta underneath the dining table.

Lukas raises a bouquet of red roses. ‘I’ve come to make you an offer.’

I’m not about to show him my surprise. The way my heart seizes. ‘My mobile. You tracked the number when I used it in Sydney.’

‘Yes. An unexpected gift.’

‘I needed it for my mother to contact me. But I burnt the SIM card, smashed and dumped the phone before I left Sydney. Doesn’t explain how you found me here.’

‘The last location on your phone was at the hotel in Sydney. Using fake Interpol documentation, I claimed to be an Interpol officer investigating an international case relating to sex trafficking and questioned hotel staff. A cleaner saw you leave the hotel with a baby and a middle-aged woman. I knew from there you had to get off the grid, and fast. That meant in all likelihood you would want to get out of Sydney. You needed to avoid showing identification. Paying cash for transport. You’d want a bus or train. I

went to Sydney Central Station. It would have been easier if we had access to the station's CCTV footage, but we don't, and I didn't want to bring Australian authorities into the mix.'

'You went to the station and played the same Interpol card with witnesses.'

'Yes. I found out that you caught a bus to Byron Bay, then to Lismore and then to Nimbin. It wasn't easy. The track went cold from there, so I hoped you were close. Kept checking with my contacts to see if there were any flags online, but there weren't. I waited for you to come into town for food and baby supplies; almost missed you when a woman approached me trying to sell me some fancy mushrooms. Guess you felt safe living in a community that frowns upon the authorities.'

I can't help but smile. 'Why not involve the Australian secret service? It would have saved you some effort.'

'Do you want the version I told my bosses or the real reason?'

'Both.'

'The Australians might not hand you over to us despite your crimes in Germany and Europe. You are an Australian citizen. There would be a lot of red tape. Time we couldn't lose. Plus you have valuable information relating to our investigation. As sick as it sounds, we want credit for bringing the Movement undone. Germany would gain further international respect. That's the official reason. The real one is that I'm personally involved. Australian authorities could just lock you away. I needed to make sure you were safe.'

'How romantic, and completely illegal.'

'If I found you, so can your Father. You need our backing. Work with me.'

Amelia arches her back. Begins to cry. 'My sister needs feeding.'

Once the bottle is filled with formula, I sit on the beanbag that Edith and I had bought the day before. In the glow of the candlelight, Amelia grunts, kicks her legs

rapidly as she sees milk coming her way. When the teat is in her mouth she guzzles with gusto, and Lukas chuckles.

'She's a fighter,' he says. 'Like you.'

Kolya would have been equally amused. He'd have seen in this moment something to hold onto when all other belief has yielded. I stare down at my sister, into her chocolate brown eyes inherited from another, one I will return her to. A chance of rebuilding a new house. Her gaze holds mine, and as formula clots in the corners of her mouth, I am unexpectedly reminded of the little boy who turned to me on the sled – little James – with his eyes so bright.

'Looking!' he shouted. 'Looking!'