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MORTAL DICTATA

KAREN TRAVISS

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

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First published 2014 by Tor, Tom Doherty Associates, New York

First published in the UK 2014 by Tor
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-250-76710-2

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1 5 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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PROLOGUE

NEW TYNE, VENEZIA: MARCH 2553

My name is Staffan Sentzke, and I never planned to be a terrorist.

It's not the kind of life you aspire to. It was simply what I had to do. Terrorism is Earth's word for it, a moral judgment, as if your warfare's somehow noble and mine's cowardly. But it's a unit of measurement; nothing more, nothing less. When your enemy is an empire and you're just a few guys, a handful of little people, then the biggest punch you can land is called *terrorism*. That's all you've got.

Like I said, it's a measure of magnitude, not morality. And I'm really particular about measurements. I used to work in a machine shop in Alstad before Sansar was glassed by the Covenant, and I still like to make things to keep my skills fresh. Here: what do you think of this? It's a scale replica of an eighteenth-century Gustavian dining chair—I'm making a doll's house for Kerstin. Edvin says I'm spoiling her, but what else is a granddad for?

I'd give anything to be able to spoil Naomi again.

There's not a day goes by that I don't think about her. She'd be nearly forty-two now, well past the age for doll's houses, but still my little girl.

Anyway, I need to finish this chair before dinner. I use a set of dental drills for the small detail. The upholstery's the hardest thing, getting the right fabric so that the stripes are to scale. If I can't make something myself, then I can acquire what I need because I know people who can get me pretty well

anything—a scrap of satin brocade, a birch plank, even tiny brass pins.

Or a Sangheili warship. I can get one of those, too.

I think I've got one now, but I have to see Sav Fel again to iron out some details. Earth thinks it's back in business now the Covenant's collapsed. It won't be long before it tries to stick its nose into our business again. We need to be ready. And what better time to prepare than when the black market's awash with weapons and ships? When empires fall, there's always a fire sale.

For the moment, though, I'm making doll's house furniture, not arming Venezia. The workshop door opens behind me. This is the only place I'd ever sit with my back to the door, but then I know everyone who comes and goes in my own home.

"She's going to love that," Edvin says, peering over my shoulder. "Is it a set?"

"I've still got to make the matching table."

"Nice work, Dad. I wish I had your patience."

Oh, yes. Patience. I've got it in spades. When you have to wait for answers, for revenge, for justice, you can learn to wait as long as it takes.

I was forty when Edvin was born, and Hedda came along two years later. This is my second family and my second home-world. I had a wife and a daughter on Sansar, but it wasn't the Covenant that took them from me—it was my own kind. *Humans*. Maybe it was the colonial government, or maybe it was Earth's, but it was human nonetheless.

And that's how I ended up as a terrorist. That's your word for it, remember. Not mine. I bet there are UNSC personnel out there right now doing exactly what I'm doing. I'll use any means necessary, so I can't object if my enemy does the same thing. Rules of engagement are just cynical games for politicians to play. It's a war. People get killed. There's no way you can make that look reasonable.

“So did you visit your sister today?” I ask Edvin. I know what’s coming next. “What’s she made me this time?”

“She sent you some *surströmming*. She says it’ll do you good.”

“God Almighty, you’ve not brought it in here, have you?”

“No. Take it easy. I’ve set up a cordon around it.”

“Good. Otherwise I’ll have to have the place fumigated.”

“Mom said you’d say that. Just pretend it was yummy, will you? For Hedda.”

“You can have it. Just take it outside the city limits before you open it.”

I’m not much of a Swede at heart. I don’t even like pickled herring, let alone the fermented variety, and anyway, we don’t have herring on Venezia—just some oily eel-type thing that’s even worse when it’s been turned into *surströmming*. Hedda, on the other hand, clings to her diluted heritage more fiercely every year, even though she’s never seen Earth, let alone Sweden. Cultures can get pretty warped in diaspora. They become weird fossilized parodies of themselves that seem to distill their worst features, but I’m afraid Hedda’s like me. She *focuses*, and then she can’t see anything else to either side. Edvin takes after Laura. He lets things wash over him.

But they both know they had a half sister who was abducted, and that when she came back she was . . . different. And then she got sick and died. They know I think the government took her and replaced her with a double.

You think I’m crazy? Everyone did. Even me, for a while. But then I started looking, and found a few other families out in the colonies who’d lost children the same way. The kid went missing, then came back a little later, a little different, and finally went down with multiple organ failure or some metabolic disease.

So either we’re all mad, or something awful was going on long before the Covenant showed up. A few dead kids aren’t even a drop in the ocean considering the billions who’ve died in

successive wars. But they're *our kids*. Thirty-five years doesn't even begin to numb the pain. I still need to find out what happened to Naomi and why. Before I die, I want to *know*.

Damn, it's getting late. I need to finish this and call Sav Fel. It sounds too good to be true, but if he's got a warship to sell, he's come to the right place. Imagine it; he just strolled off with a vessel that can glass entire planets. Would *you* trust a Kig-Yar crew to look after your battlecruiser? The Sangheili took their eye off the ball.

Never turn your back on someone you've screwed over. You might want to make a note of that.

I smooth the tiny legs of the chair with an emery board, then blow off sawdust as fine as flour. It's going to look great when it's finished.

Edvin laughs to himself. "If your buddies could see you now . . ."

"Yeah. They say Peter Moritz knits. Real hard case."

"You want me to go check out that new shipment?"

"No, it's okay. I'll be finished soon. You've got a living to make."

What, you think terrorists sit around scheming and playing with firearms all day? We've got factories to run, food to grow, families to raise. We're pretty much like you. This is our home. We have a functioning society, and the Covenant never bothered us. We do okay. Leave us alone, and we'll leave *you* alone.

I've got time to put a coat of primer on the chair before I leave. This is one of my many regrets: I never did get around to making a doll's house for Naomi. She really wanted one. I planned to make one when I had more time. She was such a bright, happy kid, always out exploring, always with lots of friends around her, which makes it even harder to understand how nobody saw her being taken.

I want to believe she's still alive. She might not know I survived, and that's why she hasn't come looking for me. Maybe

she doesn't even know who she really is. They say that happens to kidnapped kids.

But if she's still out there somewhere, I hope she's among friends.

There. Finished. It's a lovely little chair. But now I've got to go talk to a buzzard about a warship.

CHAPTER ONE

ONI SPEC OPS AI BLACK-BOX (BBX-8995-1)

RECORDING 4/5/2553

PARTITION SECURITY FAILSAFE ACTIVATED

I don't actually *need* to record any of this, but my memory isn't what it was.

Let me put that another way. I recognize its potential fallibility after that unpleasant business of reintegrating my damaged fragment. Not that I misremember, lie to myself, or acquire false memories like humans do. I might have missing segments and damaged clusters, but what I actually recall is real, and it doesn't change or get overwritten. So, reminder to self: memory gaps hurt, a preview of death by rampancy. Second reminder to self: yes, I'm reminding myself to remind myself, because Mal says the best way to stop worrying about your inevitable demise is to dwell on it morbidly until you're so bored that you forget it.

Anyway, I'm securing this data so that it can't be retrieved by hostiles if I find myself in the same pickle again. My name is Black-Box, generally called BB: I work for Captain Serin Osman of ONI, who would have been a Spartan-II now if the program hadn't nearly killed her, and I serve with her personal black ops unit, Kilo-Five—Sangheili cultural expert Professor Evan Phillips; ODSI Marines Staff Sergeant Mal Geffen; Corporal Vasily Beloi; and Sergeant Lian Devereaux; and a Spartan-II, Naomi-010. We also have two Huragok on board, Requires Adjustment, aka Adj, and Leaks Repaired, known as Leaks. We've been covertly supplying arms to the Sangheili rebels to keep a civil war

with the Arbiter on a steady simmer, because all the time they're busy killing each other, they're not regrouping to kill humans. They're a tad disorganized since the collapse of the Covenant—job jobbed, as Mal would say—and the rebels have misplaced a battlecruiser. Like everything else, it'll end up in the wrong hands unless we go and retrieve it. Or blow it up. I'm easy.

There's also the added complication of Naomi's father showing up on Venezia. I suppose it was inevitable that the ugly past of the SPARTAN program would come back to bite us one day. Vaz and Naomi are on Venezia now, undercover. This will *not* end well.

But now I have to go bake a cake. I just need to enlist some organics. Meatbags have their uses. They have *hands*.

And, I admit, some of them are my friends.

RECORDING ENDS

ALSTAD, SANSAR, OUTER COLONIES: SEPTEMBER 10, 2517

"Honey, where's Naomi?"

Staffan Sentszke hung up his jacket and looked for his daughter's satchel and coat on the hook halfway up the wall, set as high as a six-year-old could reach. If the bus hadn't dropped her off yet, he still had time to sneak the box into his workshop. It was five days to her birthday. She was already keeping an eye on everything he did with the unblinking vigilance of a security guard.

Lena wandered into the hall, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. "Music practice, remember," she said. "She won't be back until five."

"You think she's a bit young for all these extra classes?"

"If you think she's old enough to go to school on her own . . ."

"Okay. You win that round."

“So did you get it?”

“Yeah.” Staffan put the box on the kitchen table, pleased with himself both for finding such a uniquely Naomi kind of gift and for the overtime he’d had to work to buy it. It was a mini planetarium the size of a table lamp. “I bet she can name all the stars. You can get different discs to show the northern and southern hemispheres. Even views from other planets.”

Lena opened the box and lifted out the projector. “At least she won’t think it’s the doll’s house before she opens it.” She had to move the toaster to plug the lamp into the wall socket. “Too small.”

“You think she’ll be disappointed?”

Lena flicked the switch. Sansar’s night sky came to life in the kitchen as constellations began tracking slowly across the walls and ceiling. Naomi would love it. She could leave the projector running all night if she wanted to. It was a grown-up kind of night-light for a smart little girl who was sometimes still afraid of the dark.

“No, she’ll forget all about the doll’s house as soon as she sees it,” Lena said. A slow smile spread across her face as her gaze flickered from star to star. “It’s pretty magical, isn’t it?”

“You can change the colors.” Staffan turned a dial on the side. “Look. There’s even a rainbow setting. And you can zoom in on individual stars and planets. Look.” He pressed a key and a blue-green planetary disc sprang out of the heavens. “Just like landing on Reach.”

“Okay, let’s wrap it and put it away before she gets home.”

Staffan rummaged in the kitchen drawers for scissors and tape, and noticed that the collection of tiny, handmade furniture on the shelf had grown an extra chair. Ever since Naomi had spotted the doll’s house in an expensive toy store in New Stockholm—no Daddy-I-want, no wheedling, just that rapt look on her face when she saw it—she’d been collecting all kinds of scraps, and spent hours cutting and gluing them to make

furniture. There was a table, a bed, and now a dining suite. Staffan picked up one of the fragile chairs and studied it with his own craftsman's eye, marveling at how square the angles were and how neat the glued joints.

Pride overwhelmed him for a moment. Naomi would be six in a few days. She shouldn't have had that level of dexterity or precision. Average six-year-olds were struggling with joined-up writing while his daughter was measuring angles and working out scale.

Every parent thought their child was uniquely perfect, but Staffan knew the difference between fond delusion and the realization that Naomi was a gifted child. A few months ago, an educational psychologist from the Colonial Administration Authority had visited the school to carry out batteries of tests on her class, and Naomi's teacher had told Staffan and Lena what they already knew: Naomi was exceptional, in the top small fraction of a percent—one in millions, maybe one in a billion. He just hoped that a small colony world like Sansar would have enough to offer her when she grew up.

It was funny that she was so taken with the doll's house, though. She didn't even *like* dolls. She wasn't interested in being a princess, either. There was something about the detail of the house, the creation of a separate world, that seemed to absorb her.

Staffan turned the miniature chair over in his fingers. The cushion fell off. He swore under his breath and took it out to his workshop. He'd stick it together again and hope she didn't notice, but she never missed a thing.

A dab of wood glue put the tiny cushion—the fingertip of a knitted glove—back in place. There: good as new. Then he wrapped the planetarium projector in the red-and-white striped paper that he'd sneaked into the house last week. He'd have to lock it away somewhere. Naomi had a lot of self-control for a

small girl, but she was a very curious child, always busy searching for something to do or make.

He parted the blinds with his finger to look across the yard. It was getting dark. She'd be home soon. He hid the parcel in his rifle locker and went back inside the house.

"Where's she gotten to?"

Lena stirred a pot on the stove. "I just called the school. They were running late. She's on the bus now, so I make that ten minutes."

Staffan wanted to wrap his daughter in cotton wool, but if he did then she'd grow up afraid of everything. She was smart enough to catch the right bus and not talk to strangers. She had a watch—a proper adult one, not some glittery pink toy—and the drivers kept an eye on the kids and old folks anyway. Lena didn't approve. It was one battle that Staffan had won.

He worried, all the same. Dads couldn't help themselves.

And then before I know it there'll be parties, and dating, and all that to fret about.

While he watched TV, he could hear Lena walking back and forth between the kitchen and the hall. Then the front door opened. He expected to hear Naomi's voice. But the door closed after a few seconds, and Lena came into the living room, pulling on her coat.

"I'm going to walk to the bus stop," she said. "I don't want her wandering around in the dark. Which wouldn't have happened if you'd let me pick her up."

Staffan checked his watch. Damn, it had been nearly half an hour since Lena had called the school. There was probably a perfectly good explanation. "Honey, you know she likes to feel grown-up. She's not an idiot."

"I know. But she's five."

"Six."

"I'm going. Keep an eye on the stove."

Staffan fretted for a few moments, trying to work out if this was Dad worry or rational anxiety. Naomi wasn't the kind of kid to wander off or lose track of the time. Okay, he'd do some more overtime and get her her own phone. That would keep Lena happy.

He opened the front door to take a look. The bus stop wasn't that far: he could see the string of streetlights dotted along the road in the distance and the silhouette of the climbing frames and swings in the park. He expected to see Lena and Naomi walking back across the grass, but there was just Lena. And she was running.

Oh God. Oh God, no.

Some things were instantly understood.

In the moments it took to close the distance between them, Staffan had thought a hundred terrified, stomach-churning thoughts about perverts, road accidents, ponds, and *God I should never have let her go out on her own, I shouldn't, I shouldn't, I shouldn't—*

He ran down the drive. Lena almost cannoned into him and grabbed his arm, wide-eyed and distraught. "She's *gone*. He called the depot."

Staffan could hardly breathe. "Whoa, slow down. Who?"

"The bus driver. He just called the other driver, the one on the earlier bus. He said she got off a stop early. She just got off the bus. I *told* you. I told you she was too young—"

"Then she's just walking a bit farther. Nothing to worry about." It was a lie and Staffan knew it. There was *everything* to worry about. His heart pounded. He thought immediately of his neighbors, trying to work out which of them had always seemed a bit odd. Everyone warned kids about strangers but forgot to mention it was the people they knew and trusted who were the biggest danger.

Did I do that? Did I teach her to be too trusting? Is it my fault?

Staffan fumbled in his pockets for his keys. "I'll drive back

down the route. I'll find her. You stay here in case she's taken a shortcut."

Lena was shaking. "He said she's done it before. This is your fault."

"Yeah, I knew it would be."

"If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive you."

"Jesus Christ, Lena, this isn't the time, okay? Stay here. She'll probably be back before I am."

He backed the car out of the drive and headed for the main road. Naomi would have been home by now if she'd walked that distance. *Please be all right, sweetie. Please. God? God, if you're there at all, if you're listening, you haven't done a whole lot for my family, so maybe now would be a good time to show yourself. Let her be okay. Please.* He drove along the bus route back to the school, now shuttered and in darkness, before looping around to scan both sides of the road. He didn't even pass anyone out walking. Maybe she'd taken a shortcut through the new houses that were springing up to the west of the park. He doubled back and turned into the tract.

Or maybe she cut through the construction site.

Staffan slowed to a crawl to press the receiver into his ear and call Lena, but the number was busy. She was probably ringing around Naomi's friends' moms to see if she was with them. Which direction would Naomi have taken? He drove around every possible permutation of roads he could think of, but he knew damn well that she would have been long gone if she'd actually walked through here.

So am I looking for a body? Am I? Is that what I'm doing?

He could hardly bear to listen to his own thoughts. He headed home and turned into the drive, willing Naomi to be back and in need of nothing more than a talking-to about staying on the bus and not scaring Mom and Dad, followed by being escorted to and from school for a few weeks. But Lena was standing at the front door, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“Nothing,” she said.

He wasn’t sure if it was a statement or a question. “Well?”

“Everyone’s calling their neighbors. They’re going to search for her. I’ve called the police. They’re putting out alerts.”

“I’m going back out, then.” For no good reason, Staffan was suddenly grateful that his mother was days out of communication range and Lena’s folks hadn’t spoken to him—or her—in years. It was one less set of explanations and recriminations to think about. “Someone’s got to organize this. How could she go missing between a couple of bus stops?”

It was a stupid question because the answer was both obvious and terrifying. He wished he hadn’t said it. As he checked the map of the area on his datapad, he was still thinking through the list of everyone he knew in the village, trying to work out which one was the pervert that he’d never suspected. Naomi would never have gone off with a stranger.

Or she’s lying in a ditch, hurt. Or worse.

“I’ve got to look for her,” Lena said.

“No, stay put. Someone’s got to be here to talk to the cops.”

Staffan had already covered all the roads he could think of. The places he hadn’t searched—the construction site, the stream, the farm—were the kind of hazard-ridden places where kids were found dead. In less than two hours, he’d gone from worrying if Naomi would be disappointed by her birthday present to not knowing if he’d ever see her again. Lena stood with one hand to her mouth, tearful and accusing at the same time, while he rang friends and tried to coordinate the search.

Alstad was a small place. All the kids who went to Naomi’s school were from three villages in an eight-kilometer radius. This wasn’t like a big city where a kid could vanish in seconds.

But we don’t have all the street cameras that a big city would have, either.

Someone hammered on the front door. Lena rushed to answer it, but it wasn’t the police. Twenty or more neighbors, in-

cluding a couple with dogs and night hunting scopes, stood outside, clutching flashlights and looking grim. It seemed like the entire village had turned out in a matter of minutes.

“We’ll find her, Staf,” said Jakob. He was the district councilman, the kind of guy who always stepped up with a plan. “She’s only been gone a few hours. She can’t get far. They’ve got cams on all the buses.”

It was just comforting noise. If she’d been taken by someone in a car, that meant nothing. She could be anywhere by now, unseen and unheard. Staffan gave Lena as reassuring a hug as he could manage.

“Call me if you hear anything,” he said, as if it needed saying. “I’ll keep my line clear.”

Jakob took over as if he knew Staffan was now going in circles and needed steering. He’d already divided everyone into teams and given them areas to search—the sheds and slurry pit at the dairy farm north of the main road, the construction site, and the park. Others were tasked to go door to door, asking people to look in their sheds and outhouses. Nobody suggested waiting for the police. Staffan felt useless. He wasn’t sure what the dogs would be able to achieve, either, but everything was worth trying.

Every minute that passed became the worst of his life, a steady downward path. The construction site was a list of fatal accidents waiting to befall a kid, from the holes full of water to the stacks of building materials that could fall and crush the unwary.

“She wouldn’t come in here voluntarily.” Staffan poked a long piece of wooden batten into a water-filled trench. Reflections of the security lights danced on the surface. “I know my daughter.”

While they were dragging the ditches, the construction manager showed up with half a dozen guys and started opening every storage hut and locked door, working through half-built houses with no floors or stairs. When the search party drew a blank on the site, they moved on to the occupied houses. With

every door that opened, someone offered to join the search. Even strangers cared what happened to a little girl.

Staffan's phone rang a while later, showing 20:05 on the screen. He realized he'd completely lost track of the time. His heartbeat and the strangled sound of his own breathing almost drowned out Lena's voice.

"I gave the police one of her blouses from the laundry basket," Lena said. "For the canine unit. They've called in a Pelican with thermal imaging to scan the ground."

"Yeah, well, we're going to carry on anyway," Staffan said. *Thermal imaging.* That meant they thought she was alive. That was a good sign, wasn't it? He clung to the belief like a life belt. "We've got half the village out here now. We'll find her. I promise."

Staffan went back to sit in the car for a few minutes to check the local news, just to be sure something was being broadcast and that they'd gotten the detail right. He didn't catch anything on the radio. But his datapad showed an appeal for sightings on the local news site, complete with a picture of Naomi.

A police car with a flashing light bar slowed to a stop alongside him. The driver got out and Staffan lowered the window.

"Have you found her?" Staffan asked.

"Not yet, sir." The cop's comms unit was burbling quietly on his lapel like a second conversation in the background. "The dog's tracking right now, and we've got the bus security footage, so we know that she got off at—"

"Yeah. We knew that *hours* ago."

"Look, most kids usually turn up again safe and sound. Sometimes they forget the time and go playing somewhere, and then they're too scared to face the music for being late."

"Yeah, but not Naomi," Staffan said. "Not my daughter."

He drove back to the bus stop and sat watching the police dog and its handler. The dog was wandering back and forth on

a long leash about fifty meters from the road. In the distance, flashlight beams crossed and wobbled between the trees as people searched the woods. Staffan decided he'd had enough and went to talk to the dog handler.

He stopped on the paved path. "What's the dog found? I'm her father. I want to know."

"He's picked up a trail from the bus stop, sir, but it doesn't go very far." The handler nodded in the dog's direction. "Let's not jump to conclusions. It might not be the right one."

Staffan wasn't stupid and he knew the dog wasn't, either. The trail ended abruptly a distance from the road because someone had lifted Naomi off the ground at that point. It was the only explanation.

"She's been taken," Staffan said. The words were strange and distant, completely unreal. "Some bastard's snatched my little girl. You know it."

In three hours, Naomi could have been a long way from Alstad—or dead. Staffan had no idea what to do next except *not* stand here talking a second longer. He got back into his car and just drove blindly. He should have been home with Lena, but he felt helpless, useless, *guilty*. He had to do something or go crazy.

Lena was right. He should never have let a six-year-old out on her own like that.

He headed for New Stockholm, praying one minute and swearing the next, cruising the streets while he scanned pedestrians and every single car that passed. There was no reason to think anyone would have brought Naomi here, but he didn't have a better idea. It wasn't until his phone beeped again that he snapped out of it and accepted this was all random and pointless.

"Come home," Lena said. "I can't stand everyone calling to tell me it's all going to be all right."

It was nearly midnight. It was shocking how much life could change in a matter of hours.

I could have just driven to the school and picked her up.

Why the hell did she get off the bus early?

When he got home, there were neighbors' cars still parked in the road outside, but Lena was alone, sitting in the kitchen with her arms folded on the table. She had the radio and TV on at the same time. The competing audio streams merged into a quiet babble in the background.

She looked like she'd been crying. Staffan waited for the what-ifs and if-onlies.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said. "I'm so sorry. But we'll find her. She can't just disappear like that."

"But they do, don't they?" Lena had that look on her face, the one that stopped short of saying *this is all your fault*. He didn't need reminding. "You've only got to watch the news."

Staffan knew he wouldn't get through the next hour if he let himself think that. He'd expected to find himself crying and pacing the floor, but he and Lena just sat at the kitchen table, not talking, not looking at each other, just fending off sporadic knocks at the door from well-meaning neighbors. The police called pretty well on the hour, but they had no more news.

"I should go out again," Staffan said. It'd be light in a few hours. His eyes kept closing. How could he be tired at a time like this? "I really should."

Lena poured a pot of cold coffee down the drain. "I'll go. You stay here."

"You sure?"

"I've done all the sitting and waiting I'm going to do." She took the keys. "She's out there. I know she is. I refuse to believe she's gone. Don't you dare tell me she is."

"Okay, honey. I know. I know."

Staffan had expected himself to be *more* than this somehow: more decisive, more logical, more grief-stricken, more angry. He felt like he was bargaining with fate. If he didn't actually say the words or think the worst, then it wouldn't happen. Naomi

was still alive; he'd see her again. Repeating that mantra was the only way to cope with the unthinkable.

He switched to another TV channel and rested his head on his hands, trying to think of something that he'd overlooked. Had anyone rung around the hospitals? Maybe she'd been hit by a car and they couldn't ID her.

Maybe . . .

This is crazy.

His head started to buzz. He closed his eyes for just a moment.

The phone rang and woke him. He hadn't even realized he'd fallen asleep at the table. Lena was back. She stood with the handset pressed to her ear, sobbing. "Are you sure? *Are you sure?* Oh, thank God . . ."

Staffan jumped to his feet, heart pounding, trying to listen in on the call. Lena put the phone down and cupped her hands over her mouth, eyes tight shut.

"Jesus, honey, just *tell* me."

"They've found her. She's okay. They've taken her to the hospital to check her over."

The relief was so powerful that his legs almost buckled. "Where?" He looked at the clock on the wall. It was just before six in the morning. Was he really awake? Yes, he was. The nightmare was over. "Goddamn it, you should have let me talk to them."

"She's *okay*. Come on. Let's go."

"Who took her? What did they do to her?" Staffan's dread was already giving way to a panicky anger. "I swear I'll kill the bastard if he's laid a finger on her—"

"They said she's fine. She's *safe*. Come *on*."

"What the hell happened? Where was she?"

"Five clicks southwest of New Stockholm," Lena said. "She was sitting at a bus stop. A bus driver stopped to check on her and she asked him to help her find her way home."

That was an hour or so from Alstad. “What was she doing out there?”

“No idea. She can’t remember. She didn’t show up on any other bus cams, so they’ll want to talk to her again later. She certainly didn’t walk there on her own.”

Staffan had to search for his keys. He realized he hadn’t called the factory to let them know he’d be late, either. Well, too bad. He struggled to keep his mind on the road while he tried to make sense of what he knew.

“I don’t believe it. Six in the goddamn morning? Nobody notices a kid out on her own all night?”

“Someone *did* spot her. Eventually.”

“But where was she for the rest of the time? She was gone for *twelve hours*. She couldn’t have done that on her own. What were the goddamn cops doing? They couldn’t even find her with a dog and a dropship. Useless assholes.”

Lena held up her hands to silence him. “Look, we’ll find out later. All that matters is she’s alive and she’s coming home. Just stop this. Please.”

Staffan hardly dared say it. But Lena had to be thinking it as well. “I swear if anyone’s touched her, I’m going to find him and cut off his balls. Because all he’ll get from the judge is a rap across the knuckles and his own personal social worker to—”

“Staffan. Please. *Don’t*.”

“Why aren’t they telling us what happened?”

“Because they *don’t know*. For Chrissakes. Just stop it.”

It confirmed the worst for him. Naomi was probably too traumatized to speak. When they got to the hospital, they had to wait with a woman police officer for the best part of an hour before the doctors were ready to let them see Naomi. Staffan braced himself. When he and Lena were shown into the private room, Naomi was sitting cross-legged on a metal-framed bed, hands folded in her lap, still wearing her bright red dress and blue jacket. She looked more baffled than terrified.

Lena grabbed her and crushed her in a tearful hug. Staffan had to wait to get a look in. When he cuddled Naomi, she looked at him blankly for a second, as if she was working out who he was, but then she smiled. It worried him. Maybe they'd sedated her.

"Wow, you're away with the fairies, aren't you, baby?" he said. "What did they give you?"

"Breakfast," she said. "I had eggs."

Staffan looked at the doctor. "Have you given her any drugs? She seems pretty spacey."

The doctor shrugged. He had no way of knowing what was normal Naomi. *This* wasn't. "No sedation," he said. "She wasn't agitated. And she has no injuries at all. Which is odd, given that she can't remember how she got to the bus stop. Has she ever had seizures or blackouts before?"

"No." *Seizures? My little girl?* "She's perfectly healthy. Lord knows she's had enough medical examinations at school this last year. They'd have spotted anything odd. Look, when you say no injuries . . ."

"No, she hasn't been molested, if that's what you're asking. We do check in these cases."

It was a massive relief. Staffan found himself breathing normally for the first time in what felt like forever. "Well, she's never had fits. Are you sure she wasn't drugged by whoever took her?"

"We've run a tox screen—all clear so far. And nothing on the brain scan. She just doesn't remember anything before she arrived at the bus stop, let alone anyone taking her, and she still seems disoriented." The doctor ruffled Naomi's hair and gave her a big smile. "But you ate a pretty good breakfast, didn't you, poppet?"

"Where are all the other doctors?" Naomi asked. "There were always more than this."

That made no sense at all. Staffan glanced at Lena. She looked

worried too. Just when he thought it would be enough to have Naomi back alive, it looked like they had a new problem.

“Keep an eye on her for the next few days,” the doctor said. “I’ll refer her to the consultant neurologist. It’s the memory loss that concerns me. She might just be scared of a telling-off, but let’s err on the side of caution.”

Staffan carried Naomi to the car and put her in the backseat. She was still clutching her satchel. He watched her for a moment, desperate to see some hint of the normal Naomi, but maybe that was asking too much. She opened the satchel and looked inside as if she wasn’t sure what was in there. Lena drove while he sat in the back, holding Naomi’s hand. It was more for his benefit than hers.

“No school for a few days, sweetie,” Lena said. “You’ve had a nasty fright, that’s all.”

Staffan didn’t think that Naomi would ever be too scared to tell him anything, but there was always a first time. Maybe the doctor was right; maybe she’d behaved like a little girl for a change instead of a child prodigy.

“We’re not angry with you, baby,” he said. “But did you go into town to look at that doll’s house again?”

Naomi gazed up at him, baffled. “What doll’s house?”

“Doesn’t matter.” That was weird. She couldn’t have forgotten it already. “I’ve got you something even better for your birthday.”

“Okay.” That was all she said. “Okay.”

Staffan was really scared now. There *was* something wrong. When they got home, he tucked her up in a blanket on the sofa and sat watching her for the rest of the day, frightened to take his eyes off her. Whatever had happened, she was a lot quieter than normal. When she got up to go to the bathroom, she stood in the hallway for a moment as if she was working out where it was, and Lena had to lead her upstairs. When she came back and started reading her book, she turned it over from time to

time to frown at the cover, and she didn't finish her favorite sandwich—crustless triangles filled with mashed egg, dill, and mayonnaise. Lena put her to bed early and she didn't beg for a few more minutes to finish the chapter. She didn't do anything that she usually did.

Weird. Wrong.

"Yeah, I think she's ill," Lena said, folding the blanket. "Whatever the doctor said, she's sickening for something. Flu, maybe."

"I hope that's all it is."

Lena just looked at him, arms folded. "And we'll keep a closer eye on her, because Naomi or not, we nearly lost her. She'll grow up fast enough. Until we know exactly what happened, she isn't going anywhere on her own again, okay?"

"Okay."

It was strange how Naomi had forgotten all about the doll's house. Some kids had a different fad every day, but once Naomi set her mind to something, it was hard to derail her. Perhaps she'd been into the shop after all, seen how much the doll's house cost, and realized that she was expecting a very expensive thing. Maybe she'd felt guilty about that, and was too embarrassed to come home and admit it until she'd worked out a way to change her mind without sounding like she felt her dad had let her down.

Come on, she's smart, but she's still five—okay, six. On the other hand . . . she's like her grandma. She'll pretend she didn't really want it after all.

Staffan couldn't afford the doll's house, but he could certainly make one like it. How hard could it be? He worked in a machine shop. If he could cut and grind metal to fine tolerances, he could make a wooden house and all the furniture that went in it. And he could make it special and personal for her.

But that would take time. Naomi needed something special right now. He unwrapped the planetarium lamp and put it on

the table next to her bed. She opened her eyes just as he switched it on and filled the room with drifting stars.

“There,” he said. “You’ve got the whole galaxy now. And all the galaxies beyond it. See that one? And that? Can you remember what it’s called?”

Naomi gazed up at the ceiling. She seemed mesmerized. “No. But it’s pretty.”

She could normally name the constellations. Staffan put his hand on her forehead, but she didn’t feel feverish. “We got it for your birthday. But you deserve a treat right now.”

“Thank you, Daddy. I’m sorry for not remembering.”

“It doesn’t matter, sweetheart. You’ll be right as rain before long.” He turned the dial to the rainbow setting. If she woke in the night, the first thing she’d see would be the soothing play of lights. He stroked her hair as she watched the ceiling. He had his little girl back, and right then nothing else mattered. “Just enjoy the stars.”