

## MISSING

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*Also by Karin Alvtegen*

Betrayal  
Shame

# MISSING

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*Translated from the Swedish by  
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*A*s the servants of Christ and as guardians of God's secrets, thus should we be seen and understood. Nothing more than fidelity can be demanded of such a guardian. For me, it is as nothing if mankind or any of its courts of justice should decide to condemn me, nor do I sit in judgement over myself. Indeed, I know myself to be truly without guilt, but this alone is not sufficient justification for what I do. The Lord will judge me.

No one must sit in judgement before the right time, when the Lord comes. He shall force that which has been hidden in darkness to emerge into His light and He shall make known all councils of the heart.

Then God will praise each one as he or she deserves.

Thank you Lord for my courage. You have listened to me, heard my prayers and directed me on the right path.

Let me be Your instrument. Let me execute the sentences due to those who have sinned.

*Let my beloved meet with You and be with  
You always.*

*Then will my hope return.*

*Then will I find peace.*

The green suit had a classy label and no one who looked her over could have guessed that it cost less than one hundred kronor at Oxfam. The waist button on the skirt had been replaced by a safety-pin, but no one would notice.

She called the waiter and asked for another glass of white wine.

One empty table away, tonight's target was sitting on his own. She hadn't begun her act and wasn't yet able to judge how aware he was of her.

He was just getting on with his starter.

There was plenty of time.

She swallowed a mouthful of wine from her refilled glass. The wine was dry, cool to perfection and probably quite expensive. She had no idea of the price. It didn't matter.

She looked at her man surreptitiously and felt, rather than saw, that he was staring at her. Over the edge of the wine glass, she let her glance swivel in his direction and meet his, but then, marking mild disinterest, she allowed it to wander across the room.

The Grand Hotel's French dining-room was really a magnificent place. She had been there three times before, but tonight had to be the last visit for a while. Pity, because they put out fresh fruit in the bedrooms. The towels were exceptionally thick and laid on in such quantity that it seemed risk-free to let a couple slip into your briefcase.

Still, it was unwise to challenge fate. It would be a disaster if the staff recognised her.

He was looking at her again, she could sense it. She quickly pulled out her diary from the briefcase, checking today's date. How irritating . . . Impatiently, she tapped on the table-top with her immaculate red nails. Two different meetings at the same time – how could she have allowed herself to be double-booked? Worse, with two of her largest customers!

She observed him out of the corner of her eye. He was still watching.

A waiter walked past her table and she hailed him.

'You wouldn't have a phone I could borrow, please?'

'Of course, madam.'

She kept following the waiter with her eyes as he walked over to the bar counter, returning to her table with a cordless phone.

'There you are, madam. Please dial nine to get a line.'

'Thank you.'



She leafed through her diary to find the right number before dialling.

'Hallo, this is Caroline Fors, my company is Swedish Laval Separator. I'm so sorry but I've managed to get myself snarled up tomorrow morning – a double booking. I just wanted you to know that I'll be with you, but about two hours later than we agreed.'

*'Twenty, twenty-five and thirty. Pip.'*

'Good. I'll be there as soon as I can. Bye for now.'

She sighed and wrote *salamiwurst 14.00 hours* on the line just below *basement flat* and closed her diary.

By chance their eyes met just at the moment she took another drink from her wine glass. She felt sure of his complete attention by now.

He smiled at her.

'Got a problem?'

She too smiled but shrugged her shoulders, a little embarrassed.

'Easily done,' he said sympathetically, looking her over. He was edging close to her carefully positioned bait now.

'Are you alone or are you waiting for someone?'

His eyes were fixed on her.

'No, I just liked the idea of a glass of wine or two before going back to my room. It's been a long day.'

She picked up her diary and put it into

her briefcase. This was it, nearly done. She would hook him soon. When she had replaced her briefcase on the floor, she saw him pushing away his emptied plate and raising his glass to her.

‘Would you mind if I joined you?’

Already – and she had barely begun her fishing trip. With a little smile, she got ready to beach her catch. She mustn’t be too quick, though. Playing hard to get for a while always worked a treat. She hesitated for a couple of seconds before answering his question.

‘That would be nice, but I’m really about to call it a day.’

He rose, picked up his wine glass and sat down opposite her.

‘I’m Jörgen Grundberg. Pleased to meet you.’

He held out his hand to her, she shook it and introduced herself.

‘Caroline Fors.’

‘That’s a lovely name for a lovely lady. I’d drink to that.’

On his left hand a thin wedding ring caught the light.

‘Cheers.’

The waiter was bringing Mr Grundberg’s main course, but stopped short when he realised that his guest had gone away. Jörgen Grundberg waved to him.

‘Here I am. The view’s better from over here, don’t you agree?’

Her smile was rather forced, but happily Mr Grundberg did not seem particularly sensitive to people's feelings.

A white plate with a silver cover was put down on the table between them. He shook open the decoratively folded linen napkin and draped it over his lap. Then he rubbed his hands together. This guy clearly enjoyed his food.

'Aren't you going to eat anything?'

She could feel her stomach rumbling with hunger.

'No, I don't think so.'

He lifted the silver lid and a gorgeous smell of garlic and rosemary wound its way into her nostrils. She could feel saliva filling her mouth.

'Come on, of course you must have something to eat.'

He wasn't looking at her now. Instead he was focusing his attention on the delicate operation of cutting pieces off the fillet of lamb.

'You must eat to keep up your strength,' he said, moving a laden forkful towards his mouth. 'Didn't you learn that at your mother's knee?'

As likely as not, her mother had said so and much else besides. That alone was a good reason for declining. But by now she was really very hungry and the bowl of fruit in her room did not seem so tempting any more.

While he was chewing, he called the waiter who came immediately, but was kept standing

by until Grundberg had finished his mouthful of food.

‘Another one of these for the lady. Charge it to room 407.’

He smiled at her and waved his key-card in front of the waiter.

‘Room 407.’ The man went away.

‘I hope you don’t mind?’

‘I’m perfectly able to pay for my own food, you know.’

‘Of course you are. I just thought I’d better pay to make up for being so pushy.’

With pleasure, to be sure.

She drank some more wine. The guy was almost too good to be true. Ran on autopilot. There he sat, chomping away at his lamb fillets, totally absorbed by the food as far as she could see. In fact, for the moment he seemed to have forgotten that he had company at the table.

She observed him. About fifty years old, she guessed. His suit was expensive and since he’d just ordered two meals, without a second thought, even though it was the Grand’s French dining-room, his bank balance must be more than favourable.

Good. He was perfect.

He looked as if he was used to eating well. His neck wouldn’t stay contained inside his collar and had oozed outside it at a point just above the knot on his tie.

Overall, his appearance might have deceived an untrained eye, but she was far too acute: he was obviously an upstart. For one thing, his table manners told even a casual observer that no one had spent much time teaching him how to eat politely. No one had tapped his elbow when he let it rest on the table and no one had taken the trouble to tell him off for putting the knife in his mouth.

Lucky him.

He was actually using the first-course cutlery for his main course.

He had almost finished by the time her plate arrived. The waiter removed the silver cover and she had to use quite a lot of will power not to follow Jörgen Grundberg's example and go all out for the food. She cut off a small piece of fillet and chewed it carefully. Meanwhile he shamelessly used the blade of his knife to scrape up the last dribble of sauce and transfer it to his mouth. She swallowed.

'This is really very good. Many thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

He burped, trying to conceal it behind his napkin, and pushed his plate away. Then he pulled a blister-pack from a white medical-looking box, squeezing out one capsule. He swallowed it with a gulp of wine.

'Well, now, "Swedish Laval Separator" – that's quite something.'

He put the box back in his pocket, and she

carried on eating, but shrugged her shoulders lightly. This bit was always tricky.

‘What about you? What do you do?’

She couldn’t believe how well this worked, every time. Maybe all men in expensive suits are clones of the same ancient forefather. As soon as a man in a halfway decent career was given a chance to speak about his own successes, he would forget everything that seemed to have interested him just minutes earlier.

‘Import trade. Mostly in electronics. I check out new gizmos and if I believe in them, I buy the rights and start up production in Latvia and Lithuania. You’d be surprised, but production costs can be reduced by up to two-thirds if one only . . .’

He was happily rabbiting on about his brilliant business ideas. All she needed to do was look at him and nod at regular intervals. She was enjoying her meal, letting garlic and rosemary absorb her mind fully.

When her plate was empty and she looked up at him again, she realised he had stopped talking. Now he was watching her. High time to start with stage two. She had half a glass of wine waiting, but it couldn’t be helped.

‘That was wonderful. Thank you so much.’

‘You were quite hungry after all, weren’t you?’

She put her knife and fork down on the plate. At least someone at this table had been

taught how to signal the end of a meal correctly.

He seemed ridiculously pleased with himself, smiling contentedly.

‘Working out what a woman really needs is one of my specialities.’

She wondered if that held true for his wife as well. Then she folded her napkin.

‘It’s a shame, but now it’s definitely time for me to say goodnight. Thank you again, both for the pleasant company and the nice meal.’

‘I’d like to tempt you to share a little night-cap upstairs.’

His eyes met hers over the edge of the glass.

‘I appreciate the offer, but no, I can’t. I’ve got a long day ahead tomorrow.’ Before he could stop her she waved to the waiter, who responded instantly.

‘My bill, please,’ she said.

The waiter bowed politely and began clearing the table. He eyed Grundberg’s crossed knife and fork.

‘Have you finished, sir?’

The barely audible irony in his voice made her hide a smile in her wine glass, but it was lost on Grundberg, who merely nodded without spotting the barb.

‘Now, you must let me pay for this. That’s what we agreed.’

He tried to put his hand over hers but she pulled it away in time.

'I must pay for my wine, though.'

The waiter left. She took hold of her handbag, which had been hanging over the back of her chair.

He didn't want to back down.

'No, don't think of it. No arguments now.'

'Thank you – but you can't really stop me, you know.'

He had begun to irritate her and she had sounded more aloof than she intended. Grundberg was smiling at her. This was the wrong time to cool his ardour and so she smiled back at him. She put her handbag on her knees and opened it to find her wallet. It didn't take long to search the two compartments.

'Oh God, no!'

'What's the matter?'

'My wallet's gone.'

She rooted in her handbag again, frantically. Then she hid her face in her left hand and sighed deeply.

'Take it easy now. Are you sure it couldn't be in your briefcase?'

She allowed this suggestion to sink in, giving both of them, especially him, new hope. Then she put the briefcase on her lap. He couldn't see what was inside, which was just as well. He might have been troubled to find that Caroline Fors had nothing in her briefcase except her diary, a pack of frankfurters and a Swiss army knife.



‘No, it isn’t here either. Oh God! Someone must have stolen it.’

‘Now, now. You must take it easy. I’m sure all this can be fixed easily enough.’

The waiter returned with two bills on a small silver tray, and Grundberg hurriedly produced his American Express card.

‘Take both off this.’

The waiter looked at her to get permission and she nodded briefly. He turned and left.

‘I’ll pay you back as soon as I . . .’

‘No problem. Don’t worry about a thing.’

She hid her face behind her hand again.

‘And I had my hotel voucher in the wallet. Dear God, I haven’t even got a room. This is terrible.’ She placed a lot of emphasis on the last bit. Abjectly, she shook her head.

‘You must let me help. Just you stay here and I’ll have a word with the reception people.’

‘But I couldn’t possibly ask you to . . .’

‘Of course you can. We’ll deal with anything that needs settling once you’ve sorted out the business with your lost wallet. No hurry at all. Now, you just sit back and relax. I’ll see to this.’

He got up and went off to the reception desk.

She drank some wine. Cheers!

In the lift, and then all the way to her room, she almost went over the top with gratitude. He

had brought two shots of whisky and, outside her door, made one final attempt.

‘Sure you haven’t regretted saying no to that night-cap?’

This time he even winked at her.

‘It’s sweet of you, but I must get on the phone at once. I’ve got to cancel my cards and put a stop on the accounts.’

Even to him, this was an acceptable reason. He gave her one of the glasses of whisky and sighed.

‘What a shame.’

‘Some other time, perhaps.’

He sniffed a little and produced her keycard. She took it from him.

‘Truly I’m so very grateful.’

She wanted to get into that room quickly now and put the card into the slit in the door. He put his hand on top of hers.

‘I’m in 407, remember. You know where I am if you change your mind. I’m a light sleeper.’

He didn’t give up easily. Gently, using all the self-control she could muster, she pulled his hand away.

‘I won’t forget.’

The card didn’t work. The lock-release click didn’t happen. She tried again. He smiled.

‘Goodness. You must have got my card. Who knows, maybe it’s an omen?’

She turned and looked at him.

He was holding her card between thumb and

index finger. She felt an unmistakable wave of bad temper mounting inside her. She took the plastic card from him and put his into his jacket pocket. Her door opened easily this time.

‘Good night.’

She stepped into her room and began pulling the door to. He stood there looking at her like a disappointed kid. No sweeties after all. And he had been exceptionally decent to her, it must be said. Maybe he deserved at least a little something to cheer him up. She lowered her voice.

‘I’ll be in touch if I begin to feel lonely.’

His face lit up like a sun and with that sight facing her she finally closed the door and locked it from the inside.

Have a nice life.

She couldn't wait to get her wig off. Then she opened both the bath-tub taps full on. Her scalp was itching and she leaned forward, running her fingers through her hair. When she straightened up, she observed her face in the mirror.

Life had left its marks. She was only thirty-two, but could easily have been ten years older. That would actually have been her own guess. Many disappointments had etched a fine mesh of wrinkles round her eyes, but she was still good-looking. Or, at least, good-looking enough to attract men like Jörgen Grundberg, and she aspired to nothing more.

The tub had filled almost to the brim and when she lowered herself into the hot water, some of it was slopping over the side. She reached over the edge to try to save her suit, which she'd let drop on the bathroom floor. Instead, her movement set up a wave-motion and more water spilled onto the floor. She would have to try to dry the suit on the hot towel-rail.

She leaned back, enjoying the bath. This was the kind of thing that gave life meaning. If one's ambitions were modest, that is. At least living out of a rucksack had taught her to appreciate the small things in life that others took so much for granted. Lots of people didn't even notice many simple sources of pleasure.

Once, she too had led that kind of life, so she knew what she was talking about. Though it was getting to be a long time ago.

She had been Miss Sibylla Wilhelmina Beatrice Forsenström, the Chief Executive's daughter. That Sibylla had had a bath every day, as a matter of course, as if it had been a human right. Maybe it should be. Still, it had taken losing the opportunity to make her value the whole experience.

Sibylla Wilhelmina Beatrice Forsenström.

It wasn't so strange that she'd never managed to fit in. She had been given a life-long handicap as a christening gift.

Sibylla.

Even the dullest of the children in Hultaryd's school reached unexpected intellectual heights in their efforts to invent new rhymes on her name. It didn't help that the Burgers 'n' Bangers stall in the main square had the same name and helpfully drew attention to it by displaying 'Sibylla' on a back-lit sign. This added sausages – and many rude variants – to the range of useful allusions to build jokes round. When it

got out that she was called Wilhelmina Beatrice as well, everyone's imagination seemed to know no bounds.

Our child is unique! No doubt. But then, aren't all children?

Her parents' stratagem worked on one level at least. In spite of their daughter spending years in the local school, which was full of common children from the lower classes, there wasn't the slightest risk of her getting mixed up with them.

Sibylla's mother had always made a point of emphasising how special her daughter was, which of course gave Sibylla's schoolmates every justification for ostracising her. It mattered very much to Beatrice Forsenström that Sibylla should know her position in the social hierarchy, but it mattered even more that everyone else should know it too. Nothing had any real worth to her, unless others valued it too and preferably found it very desirable. Beatrice derived her greatest pleasure from arousing admiration and envy.

Almost all the parents of her fellow pupils were working in her father's factory. Mr Forsenström was a leading member of the Local Council and his pronouncements weighed heavily. Most of the jobs and much else in Hultaryd depended on his say-so and all the children knew this. On the other hand, they were too young to be serious about the employment market and anyway most of them hoped for more in life than

stepping into their parents' shoes. They didn't want to spend their lives minding a machine at Forsenström's Metal Foundry and felt they could get away with a bit of name-calling in the school corridors.

Not that Mr Forsenström cared one way or the other.

Managing the successful family firm kept him very busy. He had no time to concern himself with bringing up children and he wasn't interested anyway. The excellent carpets in the Forsenström mansion showed no trace of a path beaten by him to Sibylla's room. He left for work in the morning and came back in the evening. He ate at the same dining table, but was often engrossed in thought or checking through accounts and other documents. Sibylla never had a clue about what went on behind his correct façade. She just finished her food properly, leaving the table as soon as she was given permission.

'Very well, Sibylla. You may go to bed now.'

Sibylla rose and reached for her plate to take it to the kitchen.

'Sibylla, please. Gun-Britt will clear the table later.'

But at school they always had to tidy up after their meals. It was really hard to remember which rules to follow there and which ones applied at home. She left the plate where it was and went over to her father.

‘Good night, Daddy.’ She kissed him quickly on the cheek.

‘Good night.’

Sibylla walked towards the door.

‘Sibylla. Haven’t you forgotten something?’

She turned and looked at her mother.

‘Aren’t you coming upstairs to say good night?’

‘Really, darling. It’s Wednesday. You know tonight is a Ladies’ Club meeting. When will you learn?’

‘I’m sorry.’

Sibylla went to her mother and kissed her too quickly on the cheek. It smelled of powder and day-old perfume.

‘If there’s anything you need, ask Gun-Britt.’

Gun-Britt was the maid. She took over when Mrs Forsenström didn’t have time to cook or clean or help Sibylla with her homework. Goodness gracious, she had to think of her charity work, after all. Without Mrs Forsenström, how would the little children in Biafra fare?

Sibylla remembered envying these far-away children, who were so scared and upset that nice ladies from the other side of the Earth spent their time worrying about them. When she was six years old, she felt she’d better do something to make herself more interesting: becoming just as scared as these other children seemed a good idea so she decided to sleep one night in the large, dark and spooky attic in



their house. She took her pillow, tiptoed up the stairs and went to sleep on a pile of old rugs. Gun-Britt found her there in the morning and had to tell on her to Beatrice, of course. The recriminations took more than an hour and the scene got on Beatrice's nerves so badly that she had a migraine attack that lasted for several days afterwards. This was Sibylla's fault, of course.

There was at least one thing she could thank her mother for. After almost eighteen years in the Forsenström home, she had developed an almost uncanny ability to analyse the mental states of people around her. Sheer instinct for self-preservation had attuned her to respond to the slightest shifts like a living seismograph, always alert to her mother's every whim and quick to predict likely causes of bad temper. She remained remarkably sensitive to the body language and verbal signals of people around her. This, as it happened, was of great help in the life she'd ended up leading.

The water in the tub was getting cool. She got out, shaking off drops of water and all these memories too. A beautifully thick, soft dressing-gown was hanging over the heated towel-rail next to the tub, and she wrapped herself in it and went to inspect her room. There was an American soap on the TV. It was accompanied by lots of canned laughter but turned out to be really funny. She settled down

to watch it for a while, carefully going through her nail-varnishing routine in the meantime.

Always clean and tidy – Rule Number One.

Sticking to this rule set her apart from most other homeless people she knew. Being aware of it had allowed her to take one step away from the kind of misery that crushes all hope.

What mattered was *what you looked like*. As simple as that.

Respect was the preserve of people who appeared to live by the social norms – the citizens who didn't differ too much from the rest. If you didn't manage to fit in, you were treated accordingly. Weakness is a provocation in itself. People are scared silly when confronted with others without pride. Shameless behaviour is an affront. Surely no one would behave like that unless they deserved to be what they were? Everyone has a choice, so what's your problem? Do you like wallowing in your own shit? Fine, but don't expect other people to care.

Not to care, maybe, but if you're good you might get a cut from the taxes we pay, beggar's alms so that you don't actually starve to death. We're not monsters, you know. Month after month, we keep shelling out to help types like you. But don't imagine it means that you can hang around our underground stations and shove your filthy hands under our noses to demand still more cash handouts. It's a fucking awkward imposition, you know.

We mind our own business – how about you minding yours? If you've got any complaints about what's done for you, we suggest you sod off and get a job. No place to stay? Get real – do you think a good fairy brought us our homes? Besides, if it's such a problem, how about us building an institution to house people like you? No drifting about any more.

Not near my place of course. No way. Got the children to think of, you know. The last thing we need are a lot of useless junkies hanging out in our neighbourhoods, stealing and shooting up and losing syringes all over the place. Somewhere else, by all means.

She rubbed herself all over with white skin lotion and looked longingly at the bed. Still, it was wonderful just sitting here, warm and clean, knowing a soft, inviting bed was waiting for her. She would be able to sleep undisturbed the whole night through.

She decided to stay up to enjoy the anticipation of it for a little longer.