

Haka

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ONE

Finland, Tomorrow

Lahti

Julia Noussair leaned with her palms against the bathroom tile wall and lowered her head, allowing the water to run over herself in small rivulets. She closed her eyes and imagined standing in a warm summer rain. Julia concentrated on hearing only the beating of her heart and the rushing of the water. Unlike, say, an athlete preparing for a competition, in order to succeed at her job Julia had to achieve a calm state of mind devoid of any expectation. This included accepting the dangers arising from the situations that would confront her. She belonged to a top secret undercover police unit.

Julia pulled the shower door open and stepped in front of the mirror with drops of water beading on her milk chocolate-colored skin. She wiped the steamed glass, revealing her reflection. It was the reflection of a thirty-five-year-old Egyptian-Finnish woman. Her 170-centimeter-long body was classically feminine, but upright and wiry like that of a long-distance runner. In her jade-green eyes was an attractively roguish look, and her eyebrows arched over them like wings. Her lips knew how to flash a ravishing smile, but that was not part of the role that Julia once again intended to play.

She looked deep into the eyes of her mirror image: once again it was time to find that other personality behind her eyes, the life she had been living for close to two months now. Julia pulled her chestnut-brown hair back against her head. She had already gotten used to this hair, which only barely came to her collar bone, although just a few months ago it had been half-again as long. The use of make-up and a well-groomed appearance, which were otherwise matter-of-course for Julia, were not a part of her character.

Julia walked from the bathroom into the bedroom. The balcony door was open, and the floor-length white curtains rippled in the wind. The light gently filtering through the venetian blinds behind the curtains flowed across Julia's bare body like the beams of a light scanner. There was still time before she must leave, and she allowed the breeze circulating through the room to dry her skin.

The apartment was a rented two-bedroom in Merrastorni in the Mikkula neighborhood. The off-white walls were completely blank, in keeping with the furnishing of the apartment, and the typical thin sort found in prefab buildings. Julia's neighbors through the walls were a retired restaurateur with a Thai wife and a single mother who often exceeded the bounds of comicalness with the loudness of her love life. The two-bedroom was one of the many rented apartments kept by the undercover unit where police personnel could stay as required by their fake identities.

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The units specializing in undercover operations functioned completely apart from the other police units, and little was known of their activities or existence. The police used undercover operations mainly in investigating drug crimes. In the beginning Julia infiltrated gangs that trafficked in milder substances and illegal growth hormones, usually as a buyer.

The New York terror attacks had far-reaching effects on the drug trade even in the Nordic countries. Retaliatory bombing by the United States in Afghanistan destroyed the majority of the country's most important poppy plantations, as a result of which you couldn't get heroin in Finland either. In addition to pharmacy break-ins, the use of amphetamines also increased. The capture of the major players in an amphetamine smuggling ring guaranteed Julia's acceptance into a recently-formed undercover unit that specialized in uncovering terrorism and crimes associated therewith.

Julia accepted the job gladly, because the couple of years she had spent with dealers and junkies had taxed her emotional reserves more than was apparent on the surface.

Julia kept away from undercover work for a couple of years, but for the Mona Knaup & Lauri Varta incident, the head of the unit, Luukas Huhtala, called her from behind her desk.

The German-born Knaup had piqued Interpol's interest due to her connections with Islamic extremists, and according to intelligence reports had banded together with one Lauri Varta. Varta was a familiar story for the police; his name had come up a couple of times in connection with suspicions of illegal arms dealing and arrests in his circle of acquaintance, but Varta had succeeded in keeping his own record clean. Finding out what connected him to Knaup was the task of Huhtala's group.

Evidence produced by intelligence work indicated drug trading with the probable aim of financing radical elements or, with a very low probability, for the carrying out of an independent terrorist act. It was uncovered that Varta and Knaup had joined forces with a

motorcycle gang that smuggled amphetamines, among other groups.

As was often the way in these operations, slow, deliberate investigation and waiting was replaced by a decisive opportunity in an instant.

A prior informant for the Customs Bureau and the police, one Antti Tikka, had gotten in contact with Lahti customs detective Kari Mauronen more than a month ago.

Tikka had been bouncing around the Lahti underworld for his entire adult life. He had begun his criminal career with kiosk break-ins and motor-vehicle thefts. During his first long jail sentence he had found within himself the skills of a natural born PR-man and decided to leave the field work to his colleagues. Tikka had achieved the reputation of a guy who convicts on weekend furlough could turn to in search of cheap drugs and even cheaper women. He kept up his network of contacts and knew how to guide anyone seeking a specific criminal skill to precisely the right person.

Tikka had been listed on the so-called police informer register for several years, and his knowledge of drug deals going on in the Päijät-Häme area had led to significant drug seizures.

Tikka had told Mauronen that he had been offered the opportunity to arrange an ecstasy deal between Lauri Varta and a trustworthy buyer. Mauronen saw that the long-awaited opportunity to nab Varta had come.

A week later, under Mauronen's surveillance, Antti Tikka got in contact with Varta. When he announced that he would not be able to deliver the ecstasy tablets he had promised after all, Mauronen thought he had reached another dead-end.

But this time he thought wrong.

Varta was ready to sell half-a-kilo of "other stuff" for three grand." Tikka knew that he meant amphetamines.

Varta and Tikka agreed to a preliminary meeting on the same evening in the restroom of a restaurant at the Mikkola shopping center. After three more phone conversations they settled on a meeting time of half past five.

Mauronen held a quick conference with his subordinates and the head of the drug crime unit, Juhani Asikainen, and the head of the undercover unit, Luukas Huhtala. The arrest operation was coordinated between these three organizations. As an experienced undercover buyer, Julia was given the field portion of the operation. She played the part of a reseller, because junkies rarely handled single deals for three thousand Euros. Antti Tikka had assured Varta that the trading partner he had lined up was experienced in deals in this price range.

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Julia pulled on her jeans, which were nearly worn through at the knees. She seated her holster insider her waistband and attached its clip to her belt. The DeSantis Pro Stealth holster sat on the right side of her hip, virtually unnoticeable. The holster also had a place for an extra magazine. Julia had always used a nine millimeter Glock 17, specifically the new version of the weapon where rails for a tactical light had been carved into the frame dust cover and the front edge of the grip had been sculpted more ergonomically with finger grooves. It was an exceptional pistol straight from the factory assembly line, but Julia had had a few improvements made to her own weapon: the trigger pull had been reduced and the firing pin replaced with a model that made it possible to discharge the weapon even under water. Julia had had the plastic sights changed out for fixed steel sights with self-illuminating tritium vials acting as the sighting dots.

Julia checked to make sure the magazine was full and loaded a round into the chamber. She pushed the plastic polymer-framed pistol into its holster and pulled her shirt down over the grip.

She sat on the bed and picked up a book lying on the nightstand. Behind the cover page was taped a photograph of Julia's five-year-old son Alek. Julia kept nothing else related to her true identity in her rented apartment. Alek's picture was an anchor to the world that Julia wanted to protect in her work. The boy represented everything that Julia considered unstained and genuinely good.

Julia looked at the picture and was able to feel the soft touch of her child's hair in the tips of her fingers. Alek always got upset when his hair was mussed, and the thought of this made Julia smile to herself. She put the picture back behind the cover page and folded the page in place. It was time to leave.

The stairway stank strongly of the sort of cleaning solution that was most assuredly never used in wealthier high-rises. Perhaps because their staircases had to be cleansed of urine and vomit considerably less frequently. Julia strode across the black-tiled hallway to the exterior door of the building.

A rust-red 1970's Volvo drove up the gentle slope into the building parking lot.

The driver seemed to be practically leaning on the horn to drive the children playing in front of him out of the way. A boy riding a wheelie on the rear wheel of his bicycle waved his middle finger at him. The boy rode recklessly across the path of the car, kicking its nose as he passed. The hooligan had ridden down the driveway to Vanhatie Street before the driver of

the Volvo even had time to yell after him.

Julia dug a bandanna out of the breast pocket of her bomber jacket and wrapped it around her head as she walked leisurely to meet the Volvo. The car stopped in front of her and idled. Julia opened the shotgun side door and nodded in greeting to the driver.

“Shitless brats,” Antti Tikka grumbled. “See if it left a mark.”

Julia glanced at the front of the car and shook her head.

“Shitless brats,” he said again. Julia sneered and got in the car.

Tikka swung the Volvo around and looked once more to see if he could spot the boy who had displayed such aggravating impudence.

“I’d throw the little pissant to the dogs...” He continued to mutter as he sped irritated out of the parking lot.

The thirty-five-year-old Tikka could best be described by imagining what Walt Disney’s Goofy would look like as a person. The gangly and constantly dumbfounded-looking Tikka took off driving toward the shopping center. He had on a pair of Bermuda shorts from a flea market and a stone-washed jean jacket adorned with a Van Halen back patch.

Julia took her Nokia mobile phone from her jacket pocket and opened its cover.

“Give me your phone,” Julia said without turning to look at him.

Tikka glanced at what Julia was up to, immediately comprehending.

“No!! No, no, no, we didn’t say anything about that,” Tikka hollered, as if he were going to catch the plague.

“You sure are wound up,” Julia snapped. “Varta trusts you. There isn’t any risk.”

Tikka glanced out the side window and rubbed his eyes. He reached into his jacket pocket and extended his mobile to Julia. She exchanged the SIM card with the other phone and turned the device on to make sure it worked before extending it back to Tikka. The phone had a transmitter built in.

“Shit...” Tikka hissed, shaking his head. “I’ve never had to carry a mic before...”

“I don’t understand what’s so hard about this,” Julia needled. “You informers are whores about everything else.”

“Not all whores do everything,” Tikka replied indignantly “For this you could maybe like do up my record a little.”

“Don’t start dreaming just yet,” Julia snorted. “You’re just broadening your repertoire.”

“Is that Latin for anus?” Tikka huffed.

“You do have a way with words,” Julia laughed, patting him encouragingly on the shoulder.

“Thanks a lot,” Tikka grimaced. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

In Finnish police law, technical surveillance was considered a secret means of coercion, the use of which required a judicial warrant. Julia had only used listening devices a couple of times in previous operations.

Usually the justification for it was ensuring the safety of police personnel—not the later use of the recordings in legal proceedings. The judiciary was noticeably more flexible when the act in question was a drug offense or preparations for a crime related to terrorist activities.

Technical surveillance equipment was divided into two categories: digital recorders attached to the body or transmitters. Neither was a perfect option. A recorder took down the voice more cleanly, but attaching a device larger than a transmitter to the body was not always possible, let alone sensible. On the other hand, a transmitter could be built into a mobile phone or an MP3 player. The problem was that the device itself was not a recorder, but rather a relatively short-range radio transmitter, and thus the signal receiver had to stay at a close distance.

This was not always possible, and in the cases when it was, the radio signal could still be disturbed or, in the worst case scenario, be discovered. However, in this case there was no fear of something like that happening. Luukas Huhtala would be keeping watch on the situation from a delivery van parked in the shopping center parking lot.

The forty-year-old senior detective didn’t fit the stereotypical cadet school valedictorian in exterior appearance. His black hair, combed in a part, was always in need of fixing, and his drowsy, nut-brown eyes often looked like he had just woken up from a deep sleep. This was of course only an outer shell, which worked to Huhtala’s advantage.

This man assigned to lead the undercover unit had gotten his stripes in the state security police, where he still served in the unit specializing in terrorism prevention. Known as a steely-nerved professional, Huhtala was a loner devoted to his work who had always done things his own way and gotten serious results.

* * *

Spring was very late. The weather had been chilly and rainy for weeks. The leafless tree trunks swaying in the wind looked like corpses that had died standing up and which someone was trying without success to shake awake. Further accentuating the dreariness of the high-rise housing development landscape was difficult, but apparently not impossible.

The heavy cloud formations of the threatening sky lolled as if the lines holding them up would break at any moment.

Julia watched as the landscape, made up of all of the different shades of gray, sped by. Raindrops began to fall on the windshield, and a glance at the horizon revealed that they were only the opening number for a deluge that waited a few kilometers away. The Mukkula shopping center, officially named Ostari, was divided into two parts: the new and the old. The new part also stayed constantly new, because at regular intervals it was extinguished in full blaze and rebuilt once again.

According to unconfirmed rumors, the fires sometimes started in the shopping center's kebab-pizzerias, whose frequently changing owners decided in hopes of insurance money to allow the fires in their deep fat fryers to spread without molestation.

Tikka stopped his Volvo in front of the old half of Ostari. The meeting with Varta had been arranged for Restaurant Nisse, on the terrace of which the regular crowd sat in spite of the weather. It was twenty-five after five. The rain had already picked up appreciably.

"And remember," Julia began. "Fix it so the deal goes down out here in the parking lot."

"In this weather?" Tikka groaned. "What tune will I play him?"

"You'll say that I would rather take care of business in the rain than the men's piss bin."

Tikka climbed out of the car into the rain. Julia leaned back against the seat, turned the radio on, and watched her informer jog-trot limply toward the bar.

There were at least thirty cars in the parking lot. Julia glanced through the mirror at the off-white Volkswagen delivery van far behind her and to the left, liking the idea that Luukas was backing her up.

When it was a couple of minutes after the half hour, a dark blue BMW glided up in front of the Nisse terrace. The passenger side door opened. A medium-height Lauri Varta stepped out dressed in a black leather jacket and white pants. He wasn't carrying anything. The long-legged, somewhat under thirty-year-old man strode swiftly to the restaurant door, glanced behind himself casually and disappeared inside. It was impossible to make out in any detail the figure who remained behind the steering wheel.

Julia ground her teeth together, gaze fixed to the restaurant door. She tried to look as relaxed as possible as she waited, but in her mind she was cursing the hiatus she had taken from undercover work, the effects of which she was now feeling in her nerves.

After waiting for about five minutes, Julia saw Lauri Varta and Antti Tikka step out of the bar. Tikka nodded to Julia, and she climbed out of the Volvo to meet the men walking towards her. The natural expression of Varta's sharp-featured face was intent, lips pressed

together tightly, brow creased.

Luukas Huhtala followed the situation from in front of his receiver as it developed.

“Where are the goods?” Julia’s voice asked in Huhtala’s ear piece.

Varta opened his phone, called a number programmed into his speed dial, only allowing it to ring once.

The three liter motor of the Beamer parked in front of the restaurant roared into life, and the car glided over next to the Volvo. Out stepped Varta’s companion and new wife, a few years the man’s senior, Mona Knaup.

For a person suspected of terrorist activities, Mona was entirely normal looking—but nevertheless remarkably slim in her features and weighing at most fifty kilos. The German woman’s shoulder-length hair hung free and she wore black-rimmed eye glasses. She was dressed in an anorak and jeans and was carrying a faded pink shoulder-bag, which she handed to her husband. Varta opened the cover flap and extracted a package tightly rolled in garbage sack plastic and aluminum tape.

Luukas Huhtala rubbed his jaw as he stared at the small liquid crystal display in front of him which showed the video picture from the camera positioned behind the back window of the delivery van. He was waiting for Julia’s signal—the signal to strike that would trigger the arrest.

Julia hefted the package at about waist height, judging its weight to be very close to half a kilo. She felt something leaking from under the tape and sniffed her fingers.

“Barbecue sauce,” Varta laughed. “There are a couple of layers of that and garlic mustard around the package. In case of dogs.”

Julia sneered and pulled her bandanna off of her head. She never could have planned the package dripping the chef’s special sauce, and now it really did look like Julia was just taking off her head covering to wipe her fingers.

In reality this was the signal to strike that Luukas had been waiting for.

“Let ‘er rip,” Huhtala said into his wired microphone.

Two police cars appeared in the parking lot as if out of nowhere.

Mona Knaup felt her heart hammering against her windpipe. Her eyes darted between the cars and her rapidly disappearing escape routes.

Despair spread through her mind like the contents of a spilled inkwell.

No. This can’t be happening.

The people sitting on the Restaurant Nisse terrace looked on open-mouthed as the police reached the quartet standing next to the rust-red Volvo in seconds.

Four policemen dressed in official overalls dove out of their vehicles.

“Police! Freeze!”

Lauri Varta, Tikka, and Julia raised their hands immediately.

Mona made a break for it.

Time seemed to stand still, the woman’s running seeming unnaturally fast. The exclamations of Lauri and the police did not seem to reach her. Mona only heard humming in her ears. It was the confusion of pure adrenaline, swallowing up every sound from the surrounding environment. Driven by panic she ran through the rain toward the new half of the shopping center, pushing aside the bystanders standing frozen in the parking lot.

Julia shouldn’t have done it.

Her job was to play her role of the fake drug buyer to the end and leave everything related to the actual arrest to her colleagues.

She shouldn’t have taken off after Mona Knaup.

Without any clear thought, pelted by the rain, Mona lunged inside through the door of the Valintatalo grocery.

She smashed head-on into an elderly man carrying a load of full shopping bags and crashed on top of him in front of the cash registers.

The man only realized he should be afraid when he saw Mona getting up.

The expression on her face burned into the man’s mind: her eyes were on fire, but everything behind them was as cold as ice.

Out of the back pocket of her jeans she pulled a razor and for a moment stared the prone man in the eyes. Mona was like a she-wolf evaluating whether or not the prey she had brought down was worth killing.

“Don’t...” the man managed to whisper, eyes wide in horror.

Mona sprang up, clutching the handle of the razor. She glanced around frantically, her wet, red hair plastered to her face, her chest heaving in time with her frantic breathing.

The back door.

Mona ran between the registers into the store, ignoring the store employees crouching behind their workstations.

The customers waiting in line at the registers rushed out and nearly knocked Julia down as she ran to the door of the store. She tried to spot Mona, but without success.

Julia couldn’t be sure if Mona was armed. She pulled out her Glock and slipped into the store.

Two policemen ran across the parking lot toward the store, but they didn’t have time to

catch Julia before she set off on her reckless mission.

The man Mona had knocked down, trembling and in shock, was crawling toward the door. Julia didn't stop to help him.

A monitor above the registers showed the images of the security cameras. The screen was divided into four sections, which changed pictures automatically every few seconds.

There. Julia caught a glimpse of Mona near the freezer aisle at the back of the store.

Julia ran between the rows of shelves, keeping low. Mona was two aisles away.

Then Julia heard crying. The crying of a child.

Still crouching, Julia took a hand mirror from the shelf of hygiene products in front of her, tore it out of the plastic, and carefully pushed in beyond the lower edge of the shelf. Neither Mona nor the crying child were visible.

Julia eased herself from behind the shelf and took new cover on the next aisle. Again she used the mirror.

My God... Julia thought, and she felt as if a tourniquet had been tightened around her chest.

Mona walking in a circle dragging a little girl behind her.

Mona Knaup had crossed the line. The line beyond which there was only despair, sorrow, and unpredictable violence. She was a cornered predator, who would not hesitate to resort to the basest means in order to ensure her own survival.

Julia wiped the water that was dripping from her forehead and swallowed to clear the sudden constriction in her throat.

She took off her jacket and put the Glock back in its holster. She left the hem of her t-shirt behind the pistol grip.

Julia took one deep breath, stood up in very careful movements, and stepped out from behind the shelves. She would not have believed what a terrible act Mona Knaup had prepared herself for.

The soaking wet woman had the little girl by the neck, holding a razor against her neck. Mona had collapsed in front of the storage room door, as if her legs had given out in the final meters of a race. She fidgeted restlessly, constantly adjusting her sitting position. The skin on her face was tightened to the breaking point.

The girl, sobbing in abject fear, was ten years old at the outside.

Julia began walking carefully toward the wrecked ball of nerves that was Mona and the girl she had snatched up as a human shield.

Julia kept her hands visible and hoped that Mona would interpret this as a gesture of

peace. She knew that there was no point in even attempting to negotiate with a person in Mona's state, but it was imperative to try to calm the situation down somehow.

"Mona," Julia said quietly.

Mona jumped and the razor made a tiny slit in the girl's cheek. The pupils of Mona's eyes were points the size of pinheads and her expression at once fearful and adamantly defiant. She was not able to form words, but instead yelped like a dog whose tail had been stepped on.

Julia stopped and avoided looking Mona directly in the eyes.

"Mona, let's let the kid go, OK?" Julia said in a peaceful voice. "Everything is just fine here."

Mona began to pull herself onto her feet, bracing her back against the wall. Her thin arms clutched the hysterically weeping child even tighter. The razor shook in Mona's grasp just millimeters away from the girl's right eye.

"There's nothing wrong..."

"Halt die Klappe, Fotze!"

Mona's squawk made Julia stop dead in her tracks.

"Fick dich! FICK DICH!"

Mona's yell filled the deathly quiet store. Her arms jerked about involuntarily, but she managed to keep the razor under control.

"Mona, we can do exactly what you want," Julia began, finding that the words stuck in her throat.

"You will all die..." Mona muttered, mucus dripping onto her lips.

Julia did not react to her defiance. She kept her gaze on the child without saying anything. Mona began to sob, and Julia hoped that the last shred of humanity that had to remain in this woman who had been driven to the edge was gaining the upper hand.

Mona did not allow her agony to turn to crying. She cried out and forced herself to keep it together. Julia did nothing but listen, wait, and pray that Mona would come to her senses. Carefully she raised her gaze to Mona, who was dragging the little girl about like a doll, and saw that she was smiling calmly.

"I am a sword," Mona whispered.

The razor moved to the girl's throat. Mona flicked her wrist and the blade bit into the soft skin, bright blood welling out onto the front of the child's shirt.

In a split second Julia had her pistol in firing position. She pulled the trigger twice, but so fast that there was only one explosion sound.

Both bullets hit Mona Knaup in the head. The first pierced her nasal sinus, but ricocheted

off of the bones protecting the brain and flew out above the her right ear. The second bullet hit the brain stem directly and in that moment snuffed out all life in Mona's body.

She fell backwards and crashed back-first through the glass door of the freezer.

The girl came loose from Mona's lifeless hands and slumped onto the floor of the store. She wasn't moving anymore either.

Julia rushed to the child and knelt next to her. Blood flowed from the gash in her neck, but the blade had not managed to reach the carotid artery. Her pulse was barely discernible; the child had already lost a lot of blood.

"Don't give up, little one," Julia prayed. "Dear God, don't do this... Please..."

Julia tore her t-shirt off and bound it with shaking fingers around the girl's neck. She clutched the unconscious child in her arms trying to wipe the sticky blood from her face and hair.

"Help!" Julia's cry came from deep in her diaphragm.

"Help me!"

* * *

Julia Noussair was the first woman who had ever tried to get into the police tactical force, the Karhus.

The physical fitness entrance exam had been more of a mental stress challenge. She didn't want the label of a women's libber, which some of her colleagues were ready to brand her with.

Julia's quest to gain entrance into the completely male-dominated SWAT team was considered in certain circles to be little more than feminist petulance, but Julia, who passed the entrance examination with flying colors, demonstrated that she was able to do at least as much as the male applicants.

Basic training had just begun when she broke both of her legs in an accident. Julia was the last to admit that sometimes—very rarely, but sometimes—her ambition turned into trying to prove something.

At her training partner's bachelor party, the best man had arranged as part of the entertainment the opportunity for the group to go skydiving. As a member of the Skydive Lahti jumping club, Julia had more than a hundred jumps behind her, and the accident could have happened to anyone. Julia was in the final approach of her jump when she crashed into the chute of another jumper in the formation at twelve meters up. Julia's chute collapsed,

losing its lift and dropping her straight down onto the surface of the field. Julia knew she had lost her chance to make it into the Karhus.

On the final stretch of her convalescence, Julia had a conversation with her superior, senior detective Tuomo Rekola. He remembered that Julia had once been interested in undercover work.

Julia didn't hesitate with her response for even two seconds.

The methods of the undercover units were closer to intelligence work than what is generally thought of as law enforcement work. Julia was assigned a veteran of the state security police as her trainer, Lieutenant Joel Nelsson. The face of this man in his seventieth year was like it was covered with bark-tanned leather. The expression of the gray-blue eyes flashing behind his steel-rimmed glasses was like a cat: cunning and constantly monitoring its environment.

When conversing with Nelsson it felt like he could see straight into the mind of whomever he was speaking with. His thick hair contained the entire spectrum of gray, and in places it was even stark white. Nelsson's trademark, a thin mustache, was always well kempt.

Nelsson, who had an eternally irritated air about him, didn't talk much, but his breathy voice, the sort that would have been used to sell tobacco and whiskey in America, forced you to listen to each and every one of his carefully chosen words. Julia was one of the very few people who had seen beneath the shell of that hermit of a police lieutenant. Nelsson also had a soft side to his nature, but he did not share it with anyone. Similarly, no one ever got to know anything about Nelsson's private life. Yet it was simply impossible to imagine him as a man who after work took his family to the supermarket to buy the groceries for the weekend.

Deserving of his reputation as a hard ass, Nelsson represented the old school, having served in top secret assignments in cold war Finland, which he wasn't allowed to speak about even now. He had picked up techniques from both eastern and western intelligence officials and was a master in skills that would have been the envy of professional criminals. Nelsson was known by the nickname "the Chameleon," because he was such a good mole that he never had to resort to disguise in order to blend into different environments.

Julia had sometimes wondered why Nelsson had gotten stuck at the rank of lieutenant with all of that experience. A satisfactory explanation for this was never found, but according to the story that circulated only half in jest, Nelsson was considered a threat to national security so he was kept under lock and key and only taken out when he was needed to train some new recruit in the secrets of undercover work. More likely, the old devil had stepped on more than a few toes during the course of his colorful career and had, with his—to put it

mildly—unconventional work habits, fallen out of favor with every chief director of police who had held the office. After Julia’s training was complete, the old man had disappeared as if the earth had opened up and swallowed him whole.

In her first undercover unit, Julia was the only one who had been through Nelsson’s training, but in her next assignment it turned out that the unit commander, Luukas Huhtala, was another of Nelsson’s disciples.

Julia got on famously with Luukas from the very beginning. They valued each other as colleagues and friends. Suddenly they found themselves in an interesting situation: in the middle of a workplace romance that was a surprise to both of them.

Julia and Luukas were united by ambition, and as dating turned to relationship and affection to love, the line between work and their private life was always crystal clear. Both had discharged their duties impeccably without giving the smallest room for criticism.

Until now.

Belonging to an undercover unit saved Julia from being dragged through the media, but the Mukkula sting, which had turned into a fiasco and ended in tragedy, dragged the reputation of the police into the mud once again. Staying anonymous didn’t ease Julia’s pain one bit. She knew she had acted wrongly, but on the other hand she also knew she had looked into the eyes of a child killer and prevented her from taking the life of that innocent girl.

The video taken on the mobile phones of the customers sitting on the terrace of Restaurant Nisse first spread on the Internet and later on the television channels. It was impossible to make out the individuals in the blurry recordings, but the actions of the unknown undercover cop in chasing down the suspect gave rise to widespread official indignation.

Even though Julia had saved the life of the girl Mona Knaup had snatched, that didn’t prevent the crucifixion of the police for excessive use of force. This was the opportunity that those who had once criticized police undercover work as “mimicking American TV shows” and “an abuse of police authority” had been waiting for. It was so easy to pigeonhole things as black or white when you didn’t have to have anything to do with them yourself.

Luukas Huhtala didn’t let the muck-raking get on his nerves. He had been in similar situations before and knew that those who most eagerly sought the spotlight with their opinions had their own motives for seeking the attention that their hypocrisy would bring. The undercover unit would of course become the object of an official inquiry, but Huhtala knew that neither his nor any of his subordinates’ heads would end up on the block.

There were people at the top levels in the police force who understood the rules that cops and robbers was played by these days. The hullabaloo would die down over time, and in a year no one would remember what the tabloids had so colorfully named the “Mukkula Bloodbath.”

Luukas was sure that Julia would get over what had happened quickly too. She would just need a little time, and that would be afforded her by taking a vacation of the sort she hadn't had since Alek was born.

But there was one person who would not forget and would not forgive.

Lauri Varta did not intend to forget the woman who had made Mona Knaup a martyr.

He meant to have his revenge on Julia Noussair.