

THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD

THIS **LAND**
IS NO
STRANGER

A Nordic Thriller

Sarah Hollister & Gil Reavill

**FREE
EXCERPT**

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Gil Reavill

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CHAPTER ONE AND THREE



I

Scandinavian Airlines Flight SK904 approached Stockholm's Arlanda airport after an eight-hour trans-Atlantic journey from Newark. The red-eye left Veronika Brand thoroughly exhausted. She had not slept. Most of the other passengers took advantage of the long trip to check out, sleep masks in place. She felt alone in the darkened cabin. She hoped at least someone in the cockpit remained awake.

Tall, light-haired, thirty nine years old, Brand had no doubts about fitting in with the native population of Sweden. It was the land of her ancestors, at least on her mother's side of the family, the Dalgrens. She had never before visited. Whatever bits and pieces she knew of the language had come from summers spent with her Swedish immigrant grandparents, who kept a farm in upstate New York. In her own mind, the affinity with the country was more theoretical than real.

Brand had found herself on a plane to Stockholm because of a series of unconnected events that had happened within a space of a few weeks back home.

Home. New York, well, New York was part of the problem. She had to get out. Recently her career as a New York City police detective had cratered spectacularly. Due to a chain of bad choices involving politically connected figures in the NYPD, she had been suspended after fourteen years on the force.

At the same time her job troubles were happening, Brand's speed habit kicked itself up a few notches. She'd been juggling multiple Adderall scripts at once, as well as occasionally skimming off pills seized in drug busts. The medication was ubiquitous, overprescribed, used legally and illicitly. An addict always imagines other addicts are everywhere. To Brand the whole NYPD, from the brass to the file clerks, seemed jacked up on speed like a corps of Nazi blitzkriegers. Amphetamine made for a very energetic style of policing.

On a bleak afternoon on Manhattan's Upper West Side, she had experienced a stark, crossing-the-line moment with her pill habit. It was finals week for local high school students. Brand knew the little privileged brats would be well supplied with meds for their study sessions. She braced a half dozen teens on Columbus Avenue, cleaned out their backpacks for baggies of Addy, then sent them on their way with a kick in the pants.

Standing there in the weak winter sunshine, counting her confiscated beans, she spilled a few onto the sidewalk. Instantly she was on her knees scrambling to scoop them up. As her knuckles scraped the cold concrete, Brand suddenly stopped, realizing it was all too much. Tears welled in her eyes. Lately she had been reduced to three modes of being: drunk, tweaked, or weeping. Job troubles exacerbated her pill habit, and vice versa. She was spiraling down, but she couldn't stop.

One final development had sent her flying out of Newark to Sweden, hurtling over the Atlantic Ocean in the dark. As she parked her suspended ass in her lonely Murray Hill apartment, feeling shell shocked amid the smoking ruins of her life, her cell phone rang. The number displayed indicated a foreign caller. Aware of various phone scams that were proliferating, she told herself not to answer. She would never know why she did.

The voice came through in Swedish. The caller sounded older than old. The words didn't belong on a telephone, but on a wax cylinder. The voice of god, provided god was a woman. It spoke a cadence of syllables that Brand didn't understand.

"Du måste komma hit. Jag har en hemlighet som du måste se."

The tone was hoarse and insistent. Foreign on the one hand and somehow naggingly familiar on the other. Brand puzzled out what she could. *Du måste komma hit.* "You have to come here." *Hemlighet?* What was that? "Something at home?"

"I'm sorry, um, I don't speak..."

The person on the other end of the line stammered in frustration. "*Kom hit!*" she rasped, then, in accented English, a command: "Come here!"

The line went dead. Brand tried to figure it out. What had just happened? The phone was still in her hand when it rang again.

Another, different voice, a little sunnier. "Hello, is this Veronika Brand?" Brand had been hearing an ancient oak tree. Now here was the breeze whistling through the leaves.

The second voice was that of her second cousin, Sanna Dalgren. Veronika knew her. The two had met briefly a single time, over coffee during a tourist visit Sanna had made to New York City. Brand had cut short the meeting, pleading work pressures, but in truth had felt unnerved by her foreign cousin's

unflinching gaze. Since then she had been included in Sanna's pointless family emails, all in Swedish which Brand had little interest in translating. She left the communications mostly unanswered, and vaguely considered blocking them.

Sanna identified the person Brand had heard initially as the clan's matriarch, Elin Dalgren. The sister of Brand's grandfather, the woman would soon turn ninety-five years old. Sanna informed Brand that Elin Dalgren wanted especially to invite the American detective to her upcoming birthday celebration.

"You've never met," Sanna said.

"No," Brand responded. "I didn't quite get the Swedish. It sounded as though it were something like an emergency."

Her cousin gave a musical laugh. "Oh, no, nothing like that. *Mamma* said she had some family secrets to tell you. Probably cake recipes."

Sanna Dalgren told Brand Elin's ninety-fifth birthday would be the occasion of a family reunion. "We would love to invite you over here to meet your Swedish relatives."

Just when New York City had turned radioactive on her, the phone call from her relatives offered Brand an escape. She didn't really want to go. What she wanted to do was lock the door of her Manhattan apartment, climb into bed and pull the covers over her head. When she gazed into her immediate future, she saw disciplinary hearings, cold shoulders in the precinct house, perhaps media coverage, public disgrace.

She didn't really believe any of the powerfully connected cops she had gone up against would have the stones to move against her physically. But the possibility couldn't be discounted entirely. Walking the streets of Manhattan, she found herself checking her back. In the past few weeks a faint whiff of danger had marked her days. Her enemies were high up in the NYPD hierarchy. They could sink her.

The situation was untenable. Brand felt uncertain whether her Swedish escapade was a flying to or a fleeing from. She couldn't shake the suspicion she was attempting a geographical cure for her professional difficulties. But she also continued to hear the urgency in an old woman's voice, a summons that sounded as though it came from the edge of the grave.

So, Sweden. At 9:30 in the morning local time, on the day after she had left New York, the Scandinavian Airlines plane swung into its glide path. Brand heard somewhere that air travelers came in three types, window seats for dreamers, aisle seats for achievers, middle seats for the passive and hapless. Though she had an aisle seat for the flight, she felt misplaced. She didn't know where she fit. Out on the wing, perhaps?

Through the windows opposite appeared glimpses of the landscape below, not the expected winter wonderland but a dour countryside of sullen, February gray. Sunlight seemed to be having some difficulty punching through to the earth.

The cabin lights came on and everywhere around her the dead awakened. Brand experienced the moment of landing as a snapping back into a real-world ho-hum perspective after the magic of flight.

The plane taxied to the gate. Her fellow passengers listened for the chime and watched for the seatbelt light to go off, then jumped to their feet like a collection of jack-in-the-boxes. They began aggressively flipping open the storage spaces over their seats, hauling out their luggage and claiming a place in the line to disembark.

Slinging her carry-on over her shoulder, Brand exited the plane. The Arlanda terminal seemed almost eerily empty of people. She reunited with her duffel bag at baggage claim, then proceeded to customs. Brand was well aware her baggage contained items of contraband that could land her into trouble. That included a baggie of evidence-room Adderall she had filched in New York. She would just have to bull her way through. In the face of authority she prided herself on maintaining an absolute, dead-eyed calm. Approaching customs she could have been hooked up to a heart-rate monitor without seeing a blip.

A uniformed agent motioned Brand over. The woman had curly brown hair and to Brand's eyes looked vaguely un-Swedish.

"Could you please remove your head covering?" the agent asked in perfect English.

Brand took off her black knit watch cap. She offered the agent both her U.S. passport and her NYPD badge wallet.

"Just the passport," the agent directed. But the move had its effect. Brand thought she detected a glimmer of respect in the young woman's eyes. "You're a police officer?"

"A detective, yes," Brand said.

"How long is your stay in Sweden?" she asked.

"A week." A white lie. Her plans were open-ended. Brand didn't know how long she'd be in the country.

"The reason for your visit? You're not on a criminal case, are you?"

"No, no," Brand said. "A family reunion."

The agent broke her official manner to smile broadly. "You have relatives here? Where will you be staying?"

"Um, I don't know how to say it exactly. Härjedalen? I think it's a county or, they call it a *kommun*? Somewhere named Jämtland, I think? I can get the address."

The agent gave a negative shake of her head. “It is also called a *landskap*,” she said helpfully. The agent released the strap on the duffel bag and lifted the first few items from their tightly packed home. The agent’s non-committal glance inside went no further and the depths of Brand’s duffel remained unsearched.

“Ask your family why in the world they scheduled a get-together in Sweden in February,” the agent said, releasing the duffel back to Brand with a smile. “Enjoy your visit.”

The halls of the Arlanda terminal were filled with large mirrors. Brand caught a view of herself in one of them. She winced at how much of a stereotypical New Yorker she appeared: black sweatshirt, black jeans, black boots. As if there were no other color in the universe. She had recently chopped her blonde hair short, and wondered if she made for an ominous figure. The Grim Reaper. She almost laughed. All she lacked was a scythe.

Cored out as Brand was, her journey wasn’t over. She had a six-hour car trip ahead of her. Lukas Dalgren, one of Brand’s countless second cousins, had arranged to pick her up at Arlanda. He and his family would immediately bring Brand to the clan’s homestead in western Sweden, near the border to Norway. In the flurry of emails prior to the trip, she had pleaded to be allowed a stopover at a hotel, for a day of rest or even two, to give herself a chance to decompress. The dates wouldn’t make sense if that was the plan, she was told.

“You will sleep on the drive,” Sanna Dalgren informed Brand in an email message. Brand had immediately regretted agreeing to come to Elin Dalgren’s birthday celebration. Her arrival became an event. A “homecoming,” Sanna termed it.

Marshaled by her cousin, the extended Dalgren clan had started bustling around, organizing, planning, scheduling. Brand came to understand she was more well-known among them than they were to her. She was a New York City police detective. Like on television.

“We told her you are coming from America in honor of her birthday,” Sanna wrote to Brand in an email. “We know you don’t want to disappoint her. Your visit is something *mamma* lives for.”

The whole concept of cousinage left Brand a bit cold. She never saw herself as much of a family type of girl. She wasn’t even a Dalgren. She was a Brand. There were issues between herself and her own mother, Marta, who had been born a Dalgren, and with her maternal grandparents, Klara and Gustav. Hints of estrangement between branches of the family, unspoken but real, hovered in the background.

As directed, Brand was to meet cousin Lukas outside the terminal. They

would coordinate via text exchanges. But as soon as she emerged from the terminal she realized the plan would not come off. Her phone refused to recognize the Stockholm cell networks offered to it. No signal, no texts, no calls.

Secretly she felt relieved. She would check into a hotel, get a good night's sleep, pick up her family responsibilities tomorrow. Rent a car, drive herself.

The airport's public address system had been periodically spitting out unrecognizable phrases in Swedish. She heard her own name pronounced in clear unaccented English.

"Veronika Brand, please meet your party in the passenger pick-up area. Veronika Brand, please meet your party in the passenger pick-up area."

Brand found herself standing among other milling travelers in, yes, the passenger pick-up area. But where was Lukas?

A few traffic lanes away a young male stood with a phone cocked to his ear. His head was shaved clean. The two of them caught each other's eye at the same instant. Lukas Dalgren put his cellphone in his pocket. He raised a hand in greeting.

"*Hallå*, Veronika," he called out. He wore an expensive mid-length brown cashmere overcoat and narrow, elegantly cut trousers. He stood beside a midnight silver Tesla sedan.

Brand crossed to him, slipping slightly on the frozen roadway of the air terminal. Her cousin moved forward.

"Black ice, Veronika," he said. "Be careful. Your shoes are wrong."

My shoes are wrong? Brand wore flat-soled slouch boots.

"You need some more like mine." The man's footwear featured deep, serious-looking treads. "I should ask now how was your flight? I'm taking a class in American-style small talk," he explained sheepishly.

The trunk of the Tesla magically opened without any obvious push of a button on Lukas's part. Brand hefted in her duffel bag herself. She noticed the car held no passengers. She searched her mind for the names of Lukas's wife and children. Her memory proved too fogged to function.

"Isabella and the girls went separately," he said.

The two of them experienced an awkward moment as they both approached the driver's side door of the sedan. "Okay if I drive?" Brand asked.

The request stopped Lukas Dalgren cold. He halted mid-step, like a cartoon character.

"You drive? But it is my car."

"I get terribly car-sick unless I am behind the wheel," Brand explained. "Do you mind?"

Brand could see at once that Lukas did indeed mind. "You are exhausted

from the flight,” he said. “You don’t want to fall asleep while driving.”

“I slept on the plane,” Brand lied. She wondered if she looked as worn out as she felt.

“I’d rather you do not drive,” Lukas said firmly. “The vehicle is brand new.”

“Then you probably don’t want me to vomit inside it,” Brand said. They stood facing each other in front of the driver’s side door.

“I did not expect this,” Lukas said, exasperated.

“I can go ahead and rent my own car, if you prefer.” Brand wondered if this would be possible. She didn’t have an international driver’s license. Was one necessary in order to get a rental car in Sweden? She didn’t know. Lukas Dalgren looked as though his gleaming, polished head might explode.

“It’s okay.” Brand spoke softly. The technique was one she had picked up in her former life as a street cop, two simple words uttered confidently and directly but in a quiet, non-confrontational undertone. Pronounced the right way, the phrase brought everyone back to earth. She had employed the strategy often to defuse explosive situations.

“How will you know where to go?” Lukas asked. His manner resembled that of a petulant child.

“You’ll tell me,” Brand said.

Heaving a theatrical sigh, Lukas offered up the expensive vehicle’s key fob.

3

During the six-hour drive north from Stockholm to the reunion, Brand was startled to see a sign for a turn-off that read “Oslo.” Could that be Oslo, Norway? She realized she had no real grasp of the geography.

The seemingly endless journey wore on. The Tesla did not motor—it purred along soundlessly. Brand felt herself losing the battle against sleep. Next to her Lukas leaned his head against the passenger side window. His eyes were closed but she couldn’t tell if he was awake or asleep. She quickly slipped a tablet of Adderall into her mouth. She had come to like the bitter taste of the drug.

The sun hovered no more than a finger's width above the horizon. The oblique angle beamed its feeble rays directly into Brand's tired eyes. But by two-thirty dear old *Sol* appeared ready to give up the ghost. Sunset came with a spectacular slash of orange, set off by a purple belt of cumulus cloud.

Pretty, yes, but disconcerting. It was still the middle of the day! She had the whole night to look forward to. Her panicked interior clock struggled to adjust. She looked at her watch. Eight-thirty in New York City, time to start the day. Brand had been awake for twenty-two hours. And quite literally, miles to go before she slept.

Darkness rose to engulf the countryside. The lakes lost the light last. Brand still caught indistinct glimmers of their icy surfaces, dull silver coins scattered over the landscape. The air became black and impenetrable. Everyone spoke of the Land of the Midnight Sun. They failed to mention the other side of the equation, the midnight dark that arrived too early in the afternoon.

Four hours in, the terrain changed. The highway climbed into a range of foothills. Occasionally they passed through a village. She saw houses but no people.

"In America we have ghost towns," Brand commented. "Here you have a ghost district." Lukas didn't answer. He was asleep. She had spoken to no one.

A heavy snow began to fall. Visibility narrowed to the twin tunnels of the Tesla's headlights. There was no longer traffic. The sense of an all-encompassing stillness made Brand slow the car, pull over, and stop. She powered down the driver's side window. An out-of-time feel took over the moment. She wondered if the Swedes had a word for the sound that falling snow makes during a blizzard.

The storm dropped a veil over the whole scene. They seemed to be nowhere. It was peaceful, death-like. Snow-laden branches drooped over the roadway. She switched off the headlights. The white-out of the blizzard instantly turned black. The surrounding darkness was as complete as any Brand had ever experienced. She hurriedly turned the headlights back on.

Attempting to raise her window again, Brand mistakenly gave a short blip to the one on the passenger side. The glass moved against Lukas's resting head. He was rocked awake.

"Sorry," Brand said.

Sleepily the man peered out at the blizzard and smiled.

"Welcome to Härjedalen, Veronika," he said. "Do you want me to take over the driving?"

"No," she replied quickly.

“Just keep a watch for any stray moose that might come our way.”

“Moose...?”

“The big creatures will be out in this. They look to avoid deep snow with those long wobbly legs. That’s what brings them out of the woods. They look for paths, plowed roads. You don’t want to meet one head on. In Sweden, all vehicle models are road-tested to see if they will withstand a direct collision with a moose.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“They don’t use a real moose in these tests, do they?”

Lukas looked at her. Brand wondered if he could read drug use in the clench of her jaw. “No, Veronika, no live animals are harmed. This is Sweden, after all. Though rare, such collisions do happen. They say if you don’t die from the impact, then the harsh acids exploding from the stomach of the moose will kill you all the same.”

Now it was Brand’s turn to stare over at Lukas. She put the Tesla in gear. The car sped up as one ghost moose after another emerged from the surrounding forests.

Gradually they drove out of the storm. Lukas directed her off the highway onto smaller secondary roads.

A half hour later he pointed out the driveway to the Dalgren homestead. As she turned into the lane, an unexpected wave of emotion crashed down on Brand. She almost let out a sob.

The ancestral home of her Swedish grandfather. Brand had never been there before, but somehow the house and its surrounding outbuildings felt disturbingly familiar. Could she be nostalgic for a place she never visited?

Memory drew her back to her childhood. She knelt on a plush green sofa in the New York farmhouse parlor of her grandparents, gazing at the black and white photograph that hung on the wall above. The scene in the photo, at once homey and foreign, exerted a power on her young self that Brand had wholly forgotten. Eight-year-old Veronika Brand imagined an entire fantasy world around the photograph, a cozy place out of one of her favorite childhood books, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House in the Big Woods*. She recalled the intensity of the fantasy, how it dominated her youth.

“I haven’t thought about this place for years,” she murmured.

She was entering into the photo for real. Brand saw a large, two-storied house, painted with the traditional *falu* red sealant. Its corner moldings were trimmed with white, carrying over the white of the wood-framed peaked windows, the attic roofline. Beyond the main house stood another smaller but nearly identical residence. Further back were several barns, also painted

falu red. Small square windows ran along their exterior walls.

The haze of wind-blown snow appeared pink in the headlights of the Tesla. A dozen vehicles parked alongside the lane in front of the house. "Pull in there," Lukas told her, directing Brand to an open spot. His eyes brightened with anticipation. She herself experienced speed jitters. The drug rode on top of her exhaustion, not quite canceling it out. She suddenly wished to be elsewhere.

They emerged from the warm, well-lit interior of the car into the frozen dark. Early evening. As she stepped out, the snow crunched beneath Brand's boots. The passing storm had scattered the clouds overhead. Numberless stars spangled the sky. She stood staring upward. Her breath formed frosty clouds in the night air. When they approached the front door, it swung open as if on its own, throwing out a rectangular spill of yellow light.

"*Hej*, hello, hello!"

A chorus of welcome greeted Brand as she entered. She had heard of the older group of Dalgren siblings but was not prepared for the complex web of cross-generational relations that was now assembled in her honor. There was no doubt she belonged to this tribe; even to a person as pale as she, they appeared white as snow. A woman she recognized as Sanna Dalgren stepped forward from among the foreign relatives and took both Brand's hands in hers. Sanna hugged her.

"*Det här är vår berömda kusin från Amerika!*" she announced to the crowd. Lukas, entering the room behind Brand, translated. "She calls you our famous American cousin!"

The greetings were general and enthusiastic. "Here is my brother, Folke," Sanna said in accented English. She brought forward a slouch-shouldered man who wore a bashful expression on his face.

"You are tall!" Folke exclaimed. His English was likewise inflected with a Swedish lilt.

Brand remembered her grandmother's attempts to teach her the native tongue, instruction which she fiercely resisted. She had a first-generation mother and immigrant grandparents, but she herself wanted only American English, American expressions, everything American. Still she could not escape the sounds of those three, Klara, Gustav and Alice, at the kitchen table late at night, balancing saucers of coffee in their palms, sipping the tepid liquid in the most un-American way. A peculiar tradition for cooling coffee to the perfect temperature that had never translated beyond the first generation. The rise and fall of the Swedish language sounded like singing. Even the raves and shouts of Gustav were rhythmic.

"I tell her I don't recognize her without her long-flowing hair," Sanna

gushed. “So striking!”

“Oh, hardly,” Brand responded.

Sanna’s brother Folke clumsily half knelt in front of Brand, before dropping something at her feet. Brand drew back sharply, almost losing her footing.

“*Nej, nej,*” he mumbled. No, no. Brand realized he had only been trying to give her a pair of embroidered wool slippers, to get her to remove her wet boots and put the slippers on.

“This is how we do it in Sweden,” he said in English, sweeping his hands in a low gesture at the rest of the feet that stood around her.

She removed her boots and stepped into the slippers. They looked to be handmade. Sanna took charge, guiding her in among the assembled relatives. Brand confronted a room full of people, most of them sitting in a variety of chairs that looked as though they had been specially brought in for the occasion.

The word *skål* sounded like a bell. Every glass in the room rose. Brand had as yet no glass to answer with, so she simply gestured awkwardly. As a newcomer, she was expected to introduce herself. She lost herself amid a flurry of names and faces.

“*Enn-why-pee-dee Blue!*” exclaimed an older man named Jörgen, the husband of a Dalgren cousin. Brand understood him to mean *NYPD Blue*, the classic American TV program. He grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. “I am a large fan! Large fan!”

“Everyone!” Lukas called out. “Our dear cousin Veronika is not familiar with our customs. And she knows not any Swedish, so we will have a good opportunity to try out our language skills.”

“I apologize,” Brand said. “With my grandparents, I should have ...” She trailed off, uncertain what she meant to say.

“When I finish loading the luggage at Arlanda,” Lukas announced, “lo and behold Veronika climbs directly into the driver’s seat of my Tesla!”

Murmurs rose from his audience.

“Naturally, I objected,” Lukas continued. “But ‘I have to drive,’ she says. ‘I make it a practice never to ride as a passenger.’”

“I’m sorry,” the star of the anecdote interjected. “It’s simply that I tend to get carsick if I am not behind the wheel.”

“Oh, she is an American!” a voice exclaimed. “They must always be in the driver’s seat.”

Eventually, Brand managed to edge away from Sanna and duck the seemingly endless introductions. She took a moment for herself, leaning against the warm brick of the expansive fireplace. The heat emanating from an invisible source had no means of escape, turning the old family homestead

into a shield against the wind howling on the other side of the walls.

Once more Brand felt herself transported back in time. She recalled the chill on certain childhood mornings, when she would wake under a mountain of blankets in the farmhouse in upstate New York. She loved the cozy sense of lying in bed, watching her exhalations turn to cloudy vapors. Her austere grandmother, Klara Dalgren, would try and extract her from the warmth and security of her sleep cave.

“*Följ med, Veronika,*” the old woman would say. But Brand resisted, anticipating the shock of that first bare foot against the cold floor. Her protests about leaving the warmth of her bed went unheeded.

Across the crowd Brand now spotted a hunched, ancient soul—Elin Dalgren, the youngest sister of Brand’s grandfather Gustav, and the sister-in-law of her grandmother, Klara. The last living sibling of the 12 or 13 that had once dominated the area. Hers had been the unintelligible scratch of a voice on the trans-Atlantic telephone call that had summoned Brand to Sweden. A shrunken, Yoda-like presence, Elin held herself apart from the hub-bub of the reunion.

Brand had the odd sense of being pinned by the old woman’s gaze. Elin’s eyes were rheumy and cloudy with cataracts, but they fixed upon the American visitor with a spooky fierceness. Brand looked around. No one stood nearby, no one else who could be the possible target of Elin’s stare. She raised her hand against her chest. *Me?* she wanted to ask. The primordial eyes still bore down on her. Brand waved tentatively, and got no response.

It was an illusion, she decided, a product of her exhaustion. Elin Dalgren was not looking at her at all. The woman seemed to exist, her grand-niece thought, as a totem, a reminder, a last living witness of events that had occurred long ago. The large easy chair in which she sat threatened to swallow her up. One gnarled hand rested atop an artfully carved wooden cane.

Amid the gusts of party chatter, Brand noticed a figure who appeared as much of an outsider as herself, a man about her age, maybe a little younger. He stood apart, narrow-shouldered and composed. A gentle, ironic expression played across his face. She hadn’t caught his name. An odd thing, but she noticed that he would appear sitting in one of the cane chairs lined against the wall, but when Brand glanced over again a few moments later he had disappeared. Then he would reappear elsewhere, on the other side of the room. Like the innocent childhood game of musical chairs, she thought.

The formal atmosphere loosened. The dozen children present buzzed around the room. The younger ones seemed unimpressed by the visitor from America. Many of the adults wished to share drinks with Brand, pushing tiny glasses of clear liquid upon her, toasting her with red-faced enthusiasm.

“*Skål!*” The theme of the evening. She could not refuse. The fiery liquor ploughed into her exhaustion like a landslide in progress. She felt obliged to speak at least a few polite words to Elin Dalgren, but then she would have to find a place to sleep.

At that moment the old woman surprised everyone by rapping her cane loudly on the wooden floor. Despite how frail Elin looked, there was obvious strength in her. Though the children paid little mind, much of the adult chatter in the room stopped.

Brand took a few steps toward Elin, but Sanna formally guided the New York detective to the older woman. Brand had the annoying sense that her busy-body cousin somehow wanted to control or stage-manage the interaction. Before Sanna could say a word Elin reached out and captured one of Brand’s hands, gripping it hard.

“*Klara,*” she muttered.

“*Nej, Elin, inte Klara,*” Sanna said. “*Klaras dotterdotter!*”

Relatives gathered around them, eager to hear the exchange.

“*Jag vet varför hon är här,*” the old woman declared.

Sanna translated. “She says she knows why you are here.”

“She spoke to me on the phone,” Brand said. Summoning her.

“She’s very old,” Sanna said. She turned back to Elin and spoke a quick sentence in Swedish. “I say to her that you are here for the reunion.”

“*Nej, nej,*” Elin said, shaking her head slowly, still staring up at Brand. “*Hon är här för att döda djävulen.*”

The whole company erupted into laughter. Sanna broke in among the general merriment. “My *mamma* says you are here in Sweden to arrest the bad men,” she told Brand.

“Watch out! Watch out,” exclaimed Jörgen, the gent who had proclaimed himself a fan of *NYPD Blue*. He cocked his finger and made an explosive shooting sound with his mouth.

Elin Dalgren looked as if she very much wanted to say more. Her wrinkled, age-puckered mouth moved spasmodically, attempting to form words. It was painful to watch. She fretted and turned anxious.

Sanna intervened, made a shooing motion to the family before helping the old woman to her feet. The two slowly made their way out of the room. Before they disappeared Elin Dalgren stopped and turned, sending one more look in Brand’s direction.

Her expression disturbed Brand. The old woman is afraid of something, she thought.

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