

# THE CHILDREN'S NETWORK



By Jane Bürgermeister

## ONE

Austria, 2006.

Petra Landrup didn't expect it. It was Christmas Eve. Her three adult children weren't set to arrive with their families until 6 pm. And she couldn't think of anyone else who would want to visit her at that late hour. It wasn't as if their chalet was on a road with lots of traffic. It wasn't even close to the ski area. Perched on a remote mountain ridge, it was just about the last place for a gate crasher.

Heinrich would just have to go and see who it was, she thought to herself, continuing to gift wrap her presents.

Ignoring the buzzing, she picked up a box with a toy fire engine. Her three-year old grandson, Rudi, would tear apart the gift paper in five seconds flat. There really wasn't any point in expending a lot of time and energy on creating a work of art. Yet, wasn't it this kind of family routine and everyday normality which she missed so much at her job as Minister of Interior in Vienna?

She cut off some strips of sell tape and stuck them down at perfect angles. Satisfied, she smoothed over the corners of the bright sheet of paper featuring Santa Claus, reindeer and sleighs. She had just picked up a gold ribbon when the doorbell buzzed yet again, this time even louder.

"Heinrich. Can you go see who it is?" she called out.

No reply.

Looking through a doorway, she saw her husband rocking back and forth in his chair in front of the crackling log stove. He was staring into the flames, holding a cocktail

glass full of a raspberry-coloured liquid. Typical, she thought, turning back to the wooden table covered with sheets of wrapping paper, ribbons and tissue paper.

Buzz... buzzzz.

She drew a sharp breath. Frustrated, she put down the scissors and walked off to answer the front door.

The scent of pine branches, baked biscuits and candles filled the hall, bringing back to her mind's eye the traditional Christmas holidays she had enjoyed as a child growing up in Innsbruck. Her life style had changed dramatically after she had become an Olympic gold medal swimmer and married Heinrich, a wealthy businessman. She had joined the "jet set" and started to rub shoulders with the financial and political elite. One of her husband's acquaintances had persuaded her to enter politics. Her sport's fame, her clean-cut family image and good looks proved to be a vote catcher for the conservative party. She had found herself promoted to the Minister of Interior in record time. But she hated the job. The powerful civil servants who really ran the ministry gave her to understand she had nothing to contribute. She did not have the knowledge or competence to grasp the issues, let alone make any decisions. She was just a pretty face for the media, the gift wrapping paper presented to the voters.

The most virulent attacks had come in August when she had asked to see highly classified files on a paedophile kidnapping case. A girl called Katja Paschke had escaped from her captor's dungeon after eight years. The case had made headlines around the world. As the Minister of Interior, she regularly had to give press briefings on developments. But she soon realized she was being kept out of the information loop. Key documents were being withheld from her. Only with a great deal of effort had she managed to obtain testimonial statements made by the girl on her escape from the dungeon of the paedophile, Werner Prohaska. When she finally got hold of some of the files classified as top secret, she was shocked to the core: the girl's statements pointed to a web of pedophilia, snuff films, violent pornography and sex slavery often involving children in state-run homes. Katja Paschke had named top people. Attached to her statement was a perfunctory report by a psychologist Friedrich Maximilian saying the girl had

been under extreme mental stress and her statements could be classified as fantasy.

What struck Petra was the absence of any will to investigate. Everything had been done to shut down the debate. That made her suspicious. During a cocktail party three days earlier, she had confided her concerns to her party chief. He had promised to look into the matter in the New Year. That wasn't good enough for her. She didn't want to be involved in a cover up of a crime as serious as that. Instead, of presents at Christmas, Paschke had been raped in chains. She decided to hand in her resignation as soon as she went back to work in January. After all, she was 65, though a daily swim had kept her unusually fit. At the front door, she glanced into a mirror framed with silver tinsel. A robust-looking woman looked out of the glass. She smiled, pleased with herself.

After sliding the steel chain into a bar, she opened the front door just wide enough to see who was on the doorstep. An icy wind blew snowflakes through the gap. She blinked and saw two men dressed in the red uniforms of first responders. One of them was carrying a small medical bag. The blue lights of an ambulance flashed in front of the dark silhouette of mountains.

"Mrs Landrup?"

The medic stepped forward into the light of a lamp shining above the front door. His skin was yellowish. His eyes were pale blue. They seemed to consist only of pupils. For a second, she felt like a prey in the crosshairs of a sniper.

"Yes."

"Dr Bauer has sent us."

"Dr Bauer?"

"She said you need heart check up."

"A check up? Now? But it's Christmas Eve," she stuttered recovering from her surprise.

"Your health has to come first. We've been ordered to take you to hospital in Tarnitz for a heart scan."

Petra grew angry and confused.

"Sorry, I'm expecting visitors in an hour. Dr Bauer didn't say anything to me. I just had a little twinge around my heart. It was very kind of Dr Bauer to pay me a house visit this morning but I'm fine."

She was about to close the door when the medic took out his mobile phone.

"You'd better talk to Dr Bauer yourself," he said.

He punched in a number, muttered a few words into his phone, and then handed it through the gap. Petra put the phone to her ear. Dr Bauer, her house physician of two years, was on the other end.

"But, Mrs Landrup, you don't think I would have you go for a heart scan on Christmas Eve if it wasn't necessary?" Dr Bauer said. "...I sent an ambulance because driving in this snow and darkness to Tarnitz is so difficult. I noticed your husband was already in the...err...festive mood when I paid my house call this morning."

Petra bit her lip. To her irritation, Heinrich had started mixing cocktails just after breakfast, and his tipsy state had been painfully obvious. Nevertheless, the slightly mocking tone of Dr Bauer, a thirty-something woman with a severe hairstyle, got on her nerves.

"I find the idea of heart scam strange, Dr Bauer!" Petra said impatiently. "It's Christmas! All the hospitals are understaffed at this time of year. I can't imagine a worse time to have a check up. Surely, it can wait a couple of days."

"Key personnel are always there for emergencies. The hospital at Tarnitz has the right equipment. Your health has to come first...You are in an important position."

"I feel fine. It was just a twinge."

"I'm afraid it could be far worse. A scam will give us vital information. I insist you go for an examination immediately."

Petra handed back the mobile phone, defeated.

After she told Heinrich the news, she put on her a warm, three-quarter length jacket and walked out into the icy twilight. The pine trees were bowed down under the weight of snow. Between the trees, the lights of a ski lift on the opposite mountain were visible. Clinging to Heinrich's arm, she walked down the frozen path to the ambulance.

Her heart was hammering at 1000 beats per minute. It was stressing her out so much to think she was about to miss Christmas Eve with her family, it was giving her real heart trouble. Why the hell was she going along with this? She wondered. She felt fine. She wanted so much to finish wrapping the presents, and then sit by the wood stove, wait for her children and grandchildren to arrive before serving dinner...

Reaching the rear of the ambulance, Petra hesitated. The patient compartment was a chilling reminder of what hospitals were like. There was a bench covered in green nylon on one side. Opposite, there was a movable stretcher with an aluminum frame. A cold strip light illuminated the ventilation equipment, oxygen administration equipment, oxygen tubing, resuscitators, valve masks, monitoring equipment and the defibrillator. At the thought she would have to spend Christmas in hospital, her stomach turned over in a sickening flip. She turned to Heinrich.

"Is this really necessary?" she asked. "Can't the check wait a day or two? I can go to Tarnitz tomorrow or on Boxing Day?"

He shrugged.

"Don't worry, dear. Everything will be okay! "

He sounded drunk. Just when she needed him most, he was as drunk as punch.

The first responder looked at Gunter standing in his pullover in the snow. His mouth creased into a smile. However, his pale blue eyes remained as hard as ever.

"Can I help you, Mrs Landrup?" he said, politely.

"No, thanks, I'm fine."

With a heavy sigh, Petra climbed into the rear of the ambulance. She sat down on the green bench. The medic stamped his heavy snow boots on the metal steps and climbed in after her. He closed the doors, and then sat down beside Petra.

There was a crackle on a two-way radio. The driver in front muttered something. Gears shifted and the ambulance accelerated away. Restless, Petra scanned her surroundings. She could hear the faint buzzing of one of the pieces of equipment. Her eyes flew around the compartment. They rested on the movable stretcher. She noticed a rigid cervical collar on the head rest. There were also arm and leg straps allowing for a patient to be immobilized.

"Why don't you lie down, Mrs Landrup?" the first responder with the yellowish skin said, pointing at the stretcher with the straps and collar.

"I'm okay, really."

The first responders started to communicate with each other in whispers and hand signals.

"It's better for you to rest and lie down," the man with the yellow skin said again, this time more firmly.

"I'm fine. I'm sure the heart scan will show that."

The medic looked at her with his pale blue eyes, and smiled. Next, he started to rummage around in his small medical bag. Petra saw how he took out a pair of surgical gloves and put them on. He took out a disposable syringe and stripped away the safety cap. He pushed down the plunger. With his free hand, he took out a plastic vial. It was filled with a colourless liquid. He broke off the seal. He placed the syringe in the open end of the vial. He pulled the plunger back, drawing up the liquid into the syringe.

"This will help you relax," he said.

Petra drew a sharp breath.

"I feel fine. I wish I had never mentioned the twinge to Dr Bauer. It's nothing."

"Really, this will help you relax."

"I'm not taking the injection. The doctors should diagnose my heart problem and prescribe medication if I really need it."

The medic fixed his blue eyes on her. His expression had changed. There was no more friendliness. His hard and menacing stare scared the hell out of her. He moved closer to her, holding the syringe up in his hand. The silhouette of the needle was visible against the cold background light. For a second, Petra sat there, paralyzed. Then, the realization flashed through her mind. She had been lured into a trap. *She should have guessed it would not have been that easy. THEY would not just let her resign. She had found out too much. Some very powerful people wanted her out of the way.* Christmas was the ideal time to dispense of someone. There would be very few personnel at the hospital. They'd lured her into a cunning trap. They were all in. Dr Bauer as well. She had been betrayed by those she had trusted. But cunning, deceit and cruelty were the characteristics of the network.

Next, the medic reached out his arm and made a grab at her.

It all happened so fast she did not have time to think. The adrenaline started to pump through her and her reflexes kicked in. She lunged at the door handle and gave an almighty push. The rear doors flew open. She threw herself out into the swirling snow. Her footing slipped as she touched down on the icy surface of the road. Next thing she knew she was lying face down in snow. There was a screech. The ambulance driver had braked too fast. The vehicle had slipped out of control. It spun across the frozen top of the road. It came to a halt after careering into a snow drift.

Petra was shaking all over. She turned her head from side to side and scanned the isolated stretch of mountain road. The light was fading fast. The clouds were low. Snow was falling. To her left, the lights of the village of Annanberg shimmered like the embers of a fire in the valley. The Christmas decorations in the market square were so bright she could see them even from that elevation. The low temperatures carried over the voices of people. She could hear laughter and lively voices of

revelers at the market stalls drinking hot spiced as well as the ring of church bells.

She pulled herself to her feet and started to run as far as she could heading for the slope leading down to the village. Visible as a black streak against the white background of snow were some pine trees. The trees about 50 metres away would offer cover and concealment. If she made it that far! She clambered over the metal barrier at the side of the road. On the other side, her feet sank down into snow. She felt as if she was wading knee deep through powder. She was breathing very fast. Her lungs felt like they were filling up with frost.

She heard one of the medics cry out.

"Idiots! Stop her!"

She was scared out of her mind and just kept moving.

"Shoot!"

She turned round. A split second later she saw the flash as the bullet left the end of a muzzle. A bullet whizzed past her head.

"Don't!" Someone cried. "You think we can explain away a bullet wound?"

The medics started running as fast as they could. Petra ran on. Sweat was pouring down her face. She unzipped the top of her jacket to let the air circulate. The medics were in hot pursuit. They were frantically chasing her down and catching up. Dazed and confused, she just ran on. She heard heavy breathing behind her. Next, she felt a sharp blow between her shoulders. She fell down, thrown to the ground. A snow boot struck her in the face. There were more blows to her head. She lay there with her chin, nose and forehead in the snow. Blood was trickling down her face. Bright red blood covered the snow. The two medics lifted her from the ground and carried her back to the road. They placed her on the movable stretcher. Petra was only half conscious of how they lifted the stretcher up into the patient compartment, sliding it in on the stretcher rails.

The medics scanned the area one last time, climbed in and closed the doors behind them.

The ambulance drove off. Petra tried to move her arms but couldn't. She rolled down her eyes and saw that the medic with the yellow skin and pale blue eyes was standing over her. He was securing her arms to the side of the stretcher with a steel rod, strap and buckle. The other medic was pulling the two straps across her lower legs. She was trapped.

She was bleeding from her nose. The red liquid poured out and covered her mouth, making it difficult for her to breath. She coughed and spluttered.

The medic leaned over her. He was so close she could see his pale blue eyes and black pupil hovering right above her. Next, he unzipped her jacket. He unfastened the wrist closures. He rolled the sections of her jacket to the side. He rummaged around in his bag and took out a knife. She could see it glint by the neon light as he held it over her chest. Her heart rate increased. Sweat covered her skin. The medic grasped her pullover with one hand and brought the knife down with the other. He pulled the knife down and cut her pullover from the top to the bottom. The cuts were a rapid and jerky, tearing apart her beige cashmere fabric. He pushed the sections of the pullover to the side and unfastened the buttons of her blouse. He started at the top and worked his way down to the bottom. He pulled apart her blouse and picked up his knife again. He cut both shoulder straps of her brassier and peeled them away from the body.

Petra heard the voices of people laughing and talking outside. The ambulance had slowed down, moving through the Christmas market. She heard the voices of the choir drift across from the church.

"Heilige Nacht."

She heard people calling out to others to make way for the ambulance. She tried to scream for help. Immediately a hand came down and covered her mouth. She found it difficult to breathe. The ambulance accelerated away.

Lights through the trees, falling stars, slipped over the shining, reflecting surface of the ambulance. Flattened on

the windscreen, the reflections of momentary pleasures of the Christmas market slid past. No one could see inside. She was in the middle of a big crowd. But they couldn't see her in her prison. The black glass was impenetrable. No ordinary person could imagine the psychopathic cunning of people who disguise murder by using an ambulance and medical team. The voices grew distant

The wind howled around.

The medic put on a pair of surgical gloves. He took out a syringe and filled it with a colourless liquid. The needle flashed as he held it up and checked it. His pale blue eyes bore into her as he searched for the right spot on her chest. He plunged the syringe the needle into her heart area. The needle pierced her chest cavity. Petra felt an agonizing stab.

Within seconds, she felt a wave of nausea and vomit rippling through her body. Her heart was about to explode. She flailed around with her arms and legs but the straps held her down. Her breathing became laboured. Her eyes became blurred. She felt as if she was entering a dark tunnel.

"She's still alive," said the medic.

Still wearing his rubber gloves, he reached for her carotid and felt for the pulse on her bare skin.

"I'll give her another 5 mg! How long till we're in Tarnitz?"

"She has to be in a bad enough a state to justify an immediate transport to St Pölten. By that time, she will be dead."

"It won't look like a rupture of the aorta."

"It's messy but it's better than a bullet wound! Axel is on duty in Tarnitz and Templer in St Pölten. All the medical documents will say a rupture of the aorta. Just get on with it. I can't keep circling the hospital without drawing attention."

The medic administered another injection. Petra groaned. A wave of nausea moved through her body. Her chest expanded

upward and out. Within a short period of time, she had had a heart attack.

"That's it. She's going!" the medic said, watching a display, providing real-time info on Petra's heart-rate.

"Clean up the mess! There's blood all over the place."

The medic threw the syringe into a plastic box with a hazard label. He took some paper towels. Quickly, he ran them over the areas covered in blood. He carefully peeled away his surgical gloves and dropped them into a contamination waste bag. He took some sterile wipe pads and swiped them over all the surfaces.

By the time, the ambulance reached Tarnitz all traces of the murder had been removed. According to plan, the doctor on duty, one of the network, ordered Petra to be sent to St Pölten immediately given her severe state. On the way there, the medic administered another injection.

Altogether Petra's death struggle last one and a half hours. When the ambulance reached St Pölten hospital she was dead. The cardiologist diagnosed a ruptured aorta. The pathologist filled out the appropriate papers. There would be no questions from the state prosecutor in St Pölten or Vienna. The Minister of Interior in Austria had been murdered but the cover up, as usual, had gone smoothly. The new minister of interior was one of the network, one of the very worst involved in drugs, paedophilia, forced prostitution, pornography. He was the man Petra had confided her concerns just a few days earlier unaware of his connections.

## TWO

December, 2009, Vienna

"Far be it for me to tell a man of your experience who is in charge, Inspector Karl," said the Oberstaatsanwaltschaft Wolfgang Neugebauer.

Behind his steel-rimmed glasses, his eyes *blazed with displeasure*.

"...But my position gives me the authority to make all the decision concerning the Paschke case, not you. And I have decided to close it. The Justice Ministry has approved my decision. Cabinet secretary Max George is also satisfied that all the evidence has been examined. Only one little detail remains to be cleared up: the witness statement of Ischtar Sejna. That's why I asked you here this evening."

Bald and with white beard covering the lower part of his fleshy face, Neugebauer sat behind his desk behind a barricade of files, arrogant, like the untouchable man he was, forcing Inspector Franz Karl to stand in front of him like a school boy.

Neugebauer was a powerful man. Born in St Pölten, he had studied law at Vienna University. He was a member of a secretive student fraternity and a freemason lodge. He had climbed up the slippery career pole in the state prosecutor's office to become the chief state prosecutor for all crimes in Vienna and the surrounding area. Officially, he belonged to the Social Democrat Party. But he enjoyed the very best connections to top politicians in all the political parties, including the far right Freedom Party. In fact, the far right Justice Minister Dietrich Böhmer, a member of his fraternity and freemason lodge, had promoted him to his current position in 2001. Neugebauer was given all the sensitive cases to handle.

Whether it was the issue of a far right minister accused of being involved in bank scams or a union leader of taking bribes or aristocrat of taking cuts in privatization programmes, Neugebauer controlled and commanded the investigations. Neugebauer's principal activity seemed to be to ensure that people with the right connections never faced any charges no matter how serious their crimes were and how much evidence there was.

An outward sign of his immense power was the size of his office in the Justice Palace in the Museumsstrasse with a spectacular view over the historical centre of Vienna. It was a huge ornate rooms with high ceilings, chandeliers, parquet floors and paneled doors. Oil paintings depicting historical figures belonging to Austria's imperial past. The Parliament, Ringstrasse and Hofburg Gardens, all brightly lit up at this late hour, were visible through a whirl of snow. A black freezing wind banged against the windows.

*"A young girl witnessed the kidnapping of the Paschke in 1998 and has said that she had seen two men pull her into a white van," said Neugebauer.*

*"Yes, and during a number of interviews conducted over years, she has never changed her statement," said Karl. "That is another piece of evidence that more than one man was involved in abducting Katja Paschke."*

*"Katja Paschke has always insisted there was only one man involved."*

*"I suspect she is afraid of retribution."*

*Neugebauer sighed.*

*"I've arranged for Paschke and the witness to come together in a final meeting. Statement can be set against statement. The meeting is to be an informal one, not requiring statements under oath. I'm confident Ischtar will see reason and admit she saw only one man and we can close the case."*

Karl wished he was able to lie and tell Neugebauer the meeting was a great idea. He knew any objections would spell trouble. But asking questions was his jobs.

"This kind of person-to-person meeting you are planning is an ideal opportunity to pressurize Ischtar Sejna into retracting her statement," he said. "A meeting like this isn't part of standard investigative procedure."

"Of course it is."

"That's new to me. Let's suppose I, for example, find evidence a mugger has inflicted injuries on a victim in the form of blood, a knife and witness statements, can I ask the mugger and his fixers to be brought face to face with his victim in a private interview? The victim suddenly retracts his statement under pressure. Can I ignore all the other physical and testimonial evidence of an assault, such as a bloody knife and a wound, and say the victim wasn't mugged? No. The criminal justice system involves piecing all the relevant physical and testimonial evidence together."

Neugebauer glared at him, angrily. But his voice was quiet.

"That evidence shows that there was a lone kidnapper, Prohaska."

"Herr Oberstaatsanwalt," Karl said, drawing a deep breath. "There is a great deal of evidence that there was a second man involved independently of the statement of Ischtar. Other facts corroborate her version. It would have been impossible for Prohaska to drive the white van and hold Paschke down at the same time because of the layout of the driving area. In addition, there is the fact that Prohaska stopped in a wood and phoned a number of people to inform him of the kidnapping. Paschke has described that in detail. There is plenty of evidence that a paedophile ring is involved, including Prohaska's friend Ernst Holzer. Many witnesses report seeing Paschke, Prohaska and Holzer during the time when she was allegedly a captive in a dungeon. She was seen with them when they were renovating a new flat. She was even seen skiing with them. The usual procedure would be to charge Holzer, open a trial and allow for all the evidence to be scrutinized. Ischtar and Katja Paschke can make sworn statements in court. There is absolutely no valid reason to confront them with each other's statements in an informal meeting and close the case on that basis."

"As for the witness, Ischtar, it's clear she isn't reliable. She was a young girl, confused and saw something that wasn't there. She keeps insisting she saw a second man but Paschke herself has denied it. What would be her motive?"

Karl heard the disappointment in Neugebauer's voice. An involuntary feeling of guilt came over him. Guilt and anxiety. The next step would be a formal reprimand and a punishment. He summoned up all his courage, though it seemed like they were going around in circles. A familiar feeling.

"Fear of retribution, as I said," said Karl. "If there was a second man and we haven't caught him, or even looked for him, he's still at large."

"Speculation like that has no basis," he said.

"No basis? There are good reasons to think that Prohaska was murdered by Holzer. He was the last person to see Prohaska in his car. He changed his statement three times. Why shouldn't Paschke be afraid of Holzer? He's walking around scot free."

"Nonsense! Prohaska committed suicide."

"The scene of the alleged suicide looked very contrived. If Prohaska had really thrown himself underneath an S Bahn, his body should have been mangled by the train's guard. Instead, his head was severed from his body cleanly. He had no wallet on him, no money, no mobile phone. Who goes out without any of these things?"

"The pathologist says it was suicide. What more evidence do we need?"

"But the police at the crime scene failed to collect information such as the temperature of the body at the time of discovery."

Neugebauer leaned back in the chair and eyed him with a cold and contemptuous stare. In an arrogant tone, he gave him to understand once more that the case was closed.

"I find your attitude in general very uncooperative, Inspector Karl," he said in an angry voice.

"With all due respect, Herr Dr Hofrat, I could say the same about you. I was never allowed to see the statements which Paschke made after her escape. I have never been allowed to question Paschke on my own without her team of lawyers. Why does she need all these lawyers?"

"The psychiatric opinion is that this is all too much for her... A victim also has rights."

"I can read the statements she made after her escape...Why are they highly classified?"

"I've seen the statements and can tell you they don't contain anything of any relevance. Personal matters, private things no young girl would like revealed."

"No young girl likes to be the victim of a paedophile ring."

"You think I don't know that. I'm a father and grandfather. I know what it's like to worry when a child comes home from school five minutes late. *Why put Katja Paschke through more of an ordeal than is necessary. She has been through enough as it is. It's a huge psychological strain for her to constantly have her version of events called into question. I think we owe it to her to close the case as soon as possible. It's been dragging on for far too long thanks to your constant interventions.*"

"My job is to make constant interventions as you call it, gather evidence and information and find the truth."

Neugebauer's anger exploded.

"I advise you, no I am telling you, Inspector Karl, to drop this case. There was only one lone wolf Wolfgang Prohaska. Our police resources are limited. We can't spend another four years investigating every detail of Katja Paschke's kidnapping. The public expect us to have success. This has been one of the most high profile cases in Austria and the world. You have become something of a celebrity thanks to this case. To believe you are hunting down a paedophile ring is glamorous, no? Much more glamorous than admitting only one man is involved and he is dead. You want to arrest people, make a big name for yourself before you retire. But you are not going to make

a fool of me. I would hate to see your unblemished record marred with a disciplinary measure for a lack of cooperation. But that is what you will face and worse if you refuse to close the case"

Next, the double doors opened. One of Neugebauer's secretaries walked in high heels. She eyed Karl with even more contempt than Neugebauer. She knew he was in serious trouble with the higher ups in the chain of command. To be in trouble with the higher ups was about the worst crime anyone could commit. Karl had annoyed just about everyone right up the chain of command to the Minister of Justice by asking too many questions.

"Herr Dr Hofrat, Katja Paschke has arrived with her lawyers. Everything is ready for the meeting."

"Good. Is Ischtar Sejna there."

"Yes. Herr Dr Hofrat, I wonder if you would just sign these letters so they can go out before Christmas."

*Neugebauer signed the papers his secretary placed before him with an ink pen.*

*Karl's gaze wandered over to window. He saw the snow falling outside. The wind blew at the full force and shook the Christmas lights on the trees on the Ring. The storm added to his sense of demoralization. How had it come to this? He was a police inspector with forty years of experience in investigating crimes, and celebrated as one of the best. But now a case on a heinous crime was about to be shut in spite of the existence of many open questions?*

*Neugebauer picked up a file from his desk and walked out of his office, ushering Karl along.*

*He sailed past his secretaries sitting behind their desks, partly hidden by plants. Christmas cards and tinsel added a festive touch to their workplaces. Karl followed him in silence through a labyrinth of corridors and into a large room lit up a chandelier.*

*Katja Paschke with long blond hair and a pale face. was sitting in silence on one side of a table surrounded by five or six sharp-suited lawyers. Paschke seemed pale and*

preoccupied. Karl looked for a chance to talk to Paschke. But she was under constant supervision. She avoided looking him in the eye. She knew the truth. If she talked, the case would be solved. The paedophile ring knew that too.

Her star lawyer Gabriel Lansky had turned up in an expensive suit, and Rolex watch as usual. He represented some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in Austria. He was checking his Blackberry and looked totally unconcerned.

Karl was puzzled. Why would Lansky be so unconcerned? Where was the doubt, the fear, the possibility that Ischtar would throw a spanner in the works and stick to her claim that she had seen two men? And why was Lansky so anxious to close the case? Why didn't he insist on the prosecution of Holzer? There was more than enough evidence that Holzer had seen Paschke many times during her captivity. As her lawyer, he should be interested in obtaining justice for her.

Next, the door opened. Ischtar Sejna walked in with her father and two police men at her shoulder. She was small with long, black hair, liquid brown eyes and an open and honest face. She was wearing a white jacket and brown trousers. She lived in a council estate close to Paschke and both girls had gone to the same primary school. In the meantime, Ischtar had started an apprenticeship in a supermarket.

Faced with so many powerful people, she became very nervous.

*"So, ladies and gentlemen," said Neugebauer. "Let's get the show on the road. I propose we keep our meeting short. It's getting late and we all have better things to do like our Christmas shopping!"*

*Neugebauer directed Paschke and Ischtar to sit down opposite each other on either side of a large, square table. The lawyers circled the two girls like sharks. A secretary sat ready to type the statements into a laptop.*

Karl watched the scene. Something was very wrong.

*"Now what did you see on the morning of the kidnapping, Ischtar?" said Neugebauer. "Do you remember?"*

*"I will never forget it," said Ischtar. "I remember going to school in the morning. On my way, I saw a white van. Two men jumped out. They grabbed Katja Paschke. She fought like crazy. One of the men had a baseball cap. He turned to look at me. Our eyes met. I was so scared. I'll never forget that look. The two men pulled Katja Paschke into the van and drove off."*

Neugebauer turned to Paschke.

*"And what did you see, Katja?"*

Katja's voice trembled. She lowered her eyes.

*"I saw one man. One man pulled me into the van. There was only one man."*

The seeds of doubt were planted in Ischtar's mind. *Karl saw that Paschke was hiding her true feelings.*

Neugebauer leaned towards Ischtar, obviously pressuring her to agree to a version of events he did not agree with.

*"How come your statement contradicts that of Katja Paschke in that case?" he asked, peering at her with hostile contempt.*

Ischtar shrugged, confused.

*"I don't know."*

*"You saw only one man."*

*"I saw two."*

*"Do you want to insult Katja? Hasn't she been through enough?" asked Lansky, stepping forward impatiently.*

*"Tell her, you saw one man, Katja."*

*"I saw one man," said Paschke as ordered.*

*"There you see! One man!" cried Neugebauer.*

Ischtar was frightened. She looked at Neugebauer, not sure what to do. She saw that it was a burden for her to insisting that she had seen two men and felt sorry that she was causing them so much trouble.

"I guess I must have got it wrong," she finally said, apologetically.

Neugebauer stepped forward.

"There we have it. Please put that down on paper."

The secretary typed up the statement and printed it out. Paschke and Ischtar signed.

"The case is closed," Neugebauer said, picking up the signed statements and putting them into his file.

Delighted, Lansky escorted Paschke out of the room.

Neugebauer turned to Karl, satisfied.

"I know it is more glamorous to believe a paedophile ring is involved, but sometimes life is more mundane."

Neugebauer walked off. Karl stood there. The meeting had been a stunt. He despised himself for allowing himself to be a part of it.

Ischtar's father came up to him, his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

It's a disgrace how my daughter has been treated, Inspector," he said. "She's treated like she is the guilty one. That's the way it has been from day one. All she did was tell the truth."

"The Oberstaatsanwalt Neugebauer is in charge," Karl said. "I'm sorry there is nothing I can do."

As he watched Ischtar and her father leave, he felt bitter. It would have been better for the people to have had no judges than to have had such corrupt judges. The people went to court to find justice only to find the criminals sitting there. Because they were poor and could defend themselves, their children become the prey of a paedophile network, were raped and had to spend years

incarcerated and, if they escaped alive, they never saw justice. The paedophiles controlled the justice apparatus.

### THREE

When Karl arrived at his office the next morning, the first email from Neugebauer had arrived. It informed him that there would be a press conference about the Paschke case in the Ministry of Justice at 11 am that morning. He was requested to be present, but expected to adhere to the "communications guidelines". These stated that only he and the Minister of Justice could make statements or take any questions from the journalists.

The next email came shortly afterwards. It ordered him to pack up all the Paschke files and send them for storage in the basement of the Ministry of Justice. A top secret classification would safeguard all files from illegal disclosures. Neugebauer also informed him that the police officers belonging to the special investigation team, the SOKO Paschke, were to be assigned to different jobs. Karl himself was to be assigned to a provincial police post close to Graz in the New Year and return to the beat.

Karl looked at the email glumly. He just couldn't resign himself to the fact that the villains would get away with such a serious crime. There had to be a way of nailing them. There had to be a way of getting justice.

*He had only been called in 2008 after there had been complaints about the initial inquiries in 2006. It had been determined by a commission led by judge Ludolf Flick that a second full-scale investigation was needed. A special team was set up. Karl had been appointed as an experienced police investigator. He had approached the case like all other cases making routine inquiries to learn the facts about the kidnapping. But he had soon found out that it was impossible to conduct a systematic and impartial investigation. State prosecutors in charge and officials in the Interior Ministry were interested in only one thing - shutting down the debate. Key physical and testimonial evidence which he needed to solve the crime had been withheld from him.*

Requests to question certain witnesses including a German called Thorsten Vogel, who claimed to have had pornographic material apparently featuring Paschke as well as evidence that Paschke had aborted a child by Prohaska at 15 years had been turned down. Requests to conduct surveillance or obtain bank or telephone records were routinely rejected. In August 2009, Neugebauer had made a massive intervention to shut down the investigation altogether, transferring responsibility to the state prosecutor Thomas Müller in Graz and setting a date for the case to be formally closed.

His team had been given three tiny rooms. They were packed with equipment, files and computers. On a normal day, two or three members of his team would be in the office looking through evidence, making calls or writing reports while the other six or seven would be out conducting inquiries or the surveillance of suspects. But that morning, the only person in the office was the most junior police officer Alexander Maier - and he was preparing for the Christmas party tomorrow before the team broke up.

Karl told him about the order to pack up all the files and send them for storage in the Justice Ministry by the end.

"I guess the farewell party will have to wait," he muttered, putting down a box full of Christmas decorations. "Do you want me to keep a copy of the evidence, Inspector?"

Karl hesitated. There was a spy in his team. Files often vanished. He suspected it could be Alexander.

"No. The case is closed."

He said. But he had no intentions of handing his notebook and personnel USB stick over. They contained a chronological written record of the whole case as well as copies of documents, laboratory examinations photographs and sketches of crime scenes. The police unit charged with the first investigation had failed to find, collect and preserve evidence at the house of Prohaska in Strassburg or at the scene of his alleged suicide in north Vienna. Karl had pieced together all the evidence

describing the crime scene, noted where each piece of evidence was located and what was missing.

A police sergeant came in, looked at him with hostility, and told him Ludwig Paschke, the father of Katja Paschke, was at the duty desk and wanted to speak to him urgently.

Karl dreaded the meeting. But he did not have the heart to refuse to see him. *He put his note books and USB sticks into a drawer of his desk and locked it. And then went down to the duty desk.*

The building was a classic 1970s office design. With grey walls, suspended ceilings and integrated strip lighting, it had about as much charm as a prison. A few Christmas decorations added a festive touch. There was even a Christmas tree close to the duty desk. Ludwig Paschke was waiting in the station entrance behind bullet proof glass in the area in front of the duty desk. The police station was a fortress-like building with 24 inch thick walls, blast and gas proof windows and doors and a basement built like a bunker out of reinforced concrete. The entrance area was guarded by video cameras and police officers sitting behind reflective glass at a duty desk.

Karl gave a signal. There was a buzz. The police man at the duty desk opened the electronically operated door.

Paschke walked in, looking very confused and upset. Karl led Koch into a separate room.

"What's going on, Inspector Karl? Katja said the case is closed," Ludwig Paschke said...

"That is what the Oberstaatsanwalt Neugebauer told me," said Karl.

"How can it be closed? Holzer is still all out there."

"I objected," said Karl. "But I was overruled."

"Surely, there is something you can do."

"It's blocked at every level, right up to the Ministry of Justice. They all want this case shut."

"Because they are all in on it!" cried Paschke. "They pressured Katja to say she saw only one man. She knows too much. They are threatening her. Her lawyer, the police, Neugebauer. Holzer is just walking around scot free. He can easily threaten Katja. There are plenty of reasons to think he murdered Prohaska. You yourself did a graphology test of Prohaska's so called suicide note and found out that the hand writing was Holzer's! And what about Katja's child? The girl she had in captivity? Are they holding the child hostage and using her against Katja? There's plenty of evidence that the girl living with Holzer's sister is Katja's child. What kind of future does she face if she is in the hands of this ring?"

"I understand how you feel. I wish I could have done more. But I'm just an inspector under orders."

"It's a scandal. It's because they are so many powerful people in on it. Prohaska told Katja that there was no point in her trying to escape because the police and politicians were all in on it. He was right. There is a network of incredible evil involving the police, state prosecutors, journalists and the social services and charities. Even the doctors at Vienna General Hospital are in on it. I am her father. But I wasn't allowed by the doctors at the hospital to speak to Katja after she escaped. That paedophile Holzer was the only one allowed to see her. He was allowed to speak to her on the phone for hours on end. How come? This Holzer turns up at the hospital and no one asks any questions about his relationship to Paschke. I ask myself: why don't they want anyone to talk to Katja? What does Katja know that is so dangerous? Who is involved in this ring?"

"I am very sorry. If there are any developments I will let you know?"

"So that's it!" said Koch, angry and confused. "They've gotten away with this crime. They are just walking around scot free and we, Katja and me, have to deal with the nightmare."

"How is she?"

"She's very depressed. Who could blame her? The only reason the paedophiles let her live was so that she could go on all the TV shows giving false evidence to protect

them. Who wants to lie to protect the people who tormented you and deprived you of your childhood, your freedom, a normal development? The worst one is that journalist at the ORF Feuerwehr. It's obvious from the way he looks and talks to Paschke that he's one of them. It's like they talk in a secret code. He basically tells her what she has to say in front of the cameras."

"So I heard."

"These people have absolutely no emotions, no remorse, no conscience. I walked up to Holzer and he just laughed at me and told me that kids like that kind of thing. They think that raping children is normal. They say children want it, all little girls are really little Lolita's who want to have sex with disgusting old men at six. Egon Schiele did it. Alfred Loos did it. Ludwig Wittgenstein did it. The laws protecting children from this kind of sexual exploitation are bourgeois in their view. But the one thing they don't do is give those kids any choice. If they are poor or vulnerable, they are exploited ruthlessly and then tossed aside. And they don't care about what happens to the child afterwards, what damage they cause to their development, how they ruin their chances for normal, happy lives, what happens to the parents."

"It's always the way," said Karl." Criminals always have a way of making their victims responsible. The selective interpretation of reality to fit their preconceived ideas is a characteristic of psychopaths. Together with an animal cunning."

"Well, I'm not going to rest until justice is done. The truth has to come out. Katja can't keep living this lie. Everyone knows she's lying. People come up to her on the street and call her a liar. But it's not her fault! If nothing is done, I'm going to file a civil suit. I'll just have to find the money. They know I'm poor. Holzer has loads of money. He even inherited two of Prohaska's flats. He was given the flats for nothing, an IOU for money he claimed Prohaska owned him. The court expert valued the properties at about a tenth of their real cost at just 16,000 and 20,000 euros. Holzer is set to make a fortune when he sells them."

"I am really sorry," said Karl, shaking his hand and showing him out.

The time had come for him to go to the press conference in the Ministry of Justice. He met Neugebauer in the ante room. He gave everyone a prep talk before they walked together into a room where a posse of media awaited them. Neugebauer smiled triumphantly. But for him it was a walk of shame.

He walked in to the room, carrying a file, and made his way under the gaze of the journalists and camera crew over to the front together with the Minister of Justice, a flighty woman who didn't seem to have a clue what was going on. Standing behind a podium, Neugebauer explained the reason for closing the Paschke case. He told untruth after untruth. The breadth of the betrayal has left Karl feeling bitter and bereaved.

"Inspector Karl and his team have done a great job in tying up all the last loose ends. It's a very good day for the Austrian police," Neugebauer said, smiling. "We can finally close one of the most terrible crimes in recent memory. The justice system is committed to doing everything to ensure that children are safe in Vienna. There will be no tolerance for paedophiles."

The journalists didn't ask lot of questions. But one young man dared to ask whether Ischtar Sejna had changed her statement because of pressure.

"At no point has anyone ever been put under pressure," Neugebauer said vehemently. "This has been one of the most independent and thorough investigations ever."

He intercepted a question directed at Karl and angrily rejected a suggestion that there had been flaws with the investigation.

"Our police investigation was very professional," Neugebauer said.

Karl did not agree with their findings. But by standing there, he was giving the impression that he did. The heinous crimes of a paedophile ring had been covered up. When the press conference was over, he left the building and walked and walked until he had put a big distance between himself and the Ministry of Justice.

## FOUR

Heavy snow was falling. The flakes glittered in the bright light of the market stalls. Shielded by the wooden roof of a stall, Karl stood at a table leaning over his notebook. The Christmas market lights were bright enough for him to be able to read his entries on Holzer - and also see the steam rising up from the mug of punch he had just bought. As soon as the punch had cooled down enough, he took a gulp of the hot wine. Feeling warmer, he opened a new page and wrote Holzer's name at the top of it. Then he began writing in key information he had collected about this man, focusing on his close relationship to Prohaska. Holzer also had links to a colonel in the militia who was the head of the international rotary club and a leading freemason according to his mobile phone records. Holzer had a string of convictions for drugs and violence and seemed to be a go between the criminal underworld and high society, procuring children and women for violent sex. He had no visible source of income, but he enjoyed a millionaire's lifestyle owning several properties and flash cars. Karl was convinced that this man held the key to solving the paedophile ring.

Karl had just filled up the page when his brother, Stefan, came up to him. He had just driven up from Graz to do some Christmas shopping and had arranged to meet Karl at the Christmas market in Spittelberg after he had finished work. A crowd thronged the market stalls selling wooden toys, handicrafts, candles, and art works. All the same, Stefan, laden down with presents for his family, found his brother without much trouble in the narrow, cobbled street.

"Want another punch?" Stefan said, pointing at his brother's empty mug.

"Why not? The Paschke case has been closed. I have nothing much to do."

"I read all about it in the Kronen Zeitung," Stefan said, turning to look at a board where the prices of the various types of punch had been chalked up.

"Blimey! Are those the prices in Vienna nowadays?" he muttered, shaking his head. "Six euros for one punch? The price of everything is going up, especially petrol. But our pay checks stay the same."

But Karl didn't seem to hear. He was focused on his notebook.

Stefan put down his bags filled with presents, and dived into the crowd which had gathered around the front of the stall. When he returned with two mugs of punch, he looked frazzled.

"Six euros and you still have to queue for ten minutes!" he muttered, putting down the steaming mugs together with a copy of the Kronen Zeitung.

The headline read: "Paschke case solved."

"Aren't you pleased, Franz?"

"How could I be? The decision to close the investigation has the appearance of law and is backed with power. But in reality it's a violent perversion of justice."

"Oh?"

"There's plenty of evidence that Prohaska wasn't alone. Others were involved in the abduction of Katja Paschke. But Neugebauer pressured me to fall in line and agree to the narrative that there was one person involved. He made it clear that any more inquires were off bounds."

"You think Neugebauer was behind that noose you found hanging on your office door? That was a big red flag! It was a death threat. Why are they so afraid of a proper investigation?"

"That's what I ask myself," Karl said, sipping his punch.

"Must be powerful people involved."

"Exactly."

"You should watch your back. Remember that piece of rope or noose you found hanging from your office door."

"And there's a spy in my team...Files keep vanishing. But I've made a copy. It's all on this USB stick here," Karl said.

He dug his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a silver USB stick.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep on investigating?"

"What?"

"I won't be able to look at myself in the mirror if I walk away. I don't need to ask for permission from corrupt justice officials to investigate a crime. I can do it myself."

"Could you get some help from the media?"

"You mean, journalists like that Christopher Feuerwehr at the ORF who is all over Paschke? The media is under the control of the same corrupt politicians who are involved in all these crimes."

"I just think you might be taking on more than you can chew."

"Someone has to stand up to them. I was speaking to Ludwig Paschke and he was really upset. His daughter was taken from him, raped, forced to perform sado masochistic acts for eight years and all because Koch was too poor to stop it and had too few political connections. He couldn't afford the private detectives and expensive lawyers needed to pursue the case in the courts."

"What about Paschke's mother?"

"She's been exploiting her daughter from day one."

"I saw those pictures of Katja as a young girl dressed like a prostitute."

"Plenty of witnesses saw the mother bring Katja to a fitness centre and send her into cubicles with a series of men, including Prohaska."

"Do you think she knew it was him?"

"If she did, she was afraid to say anything. Prohaska was known in the sado maso scene for his violence. There was a case where he whipped a prostitute comatose as part of a bondage game. His partner, Ernst Holzer, is even worse."

"So, basically, Ludwig Paschke is on his own."

"Paschke's mother is luring other vulnerable children into paedophile rings. Her other daughter seemed to be employed as a scout for potential victims in youth camps. The local police inspector, who had played such an inglorious role in overlooking a hot tip from a police dog handler about Prohaska in 1998, is working at the same youth camp sponsored by the City of Vienna youth department."

"Poor children! Sold as sex slaves by the City of Vienna!"

"It makes me sick to the stomach. Children's homes and youth groups should be the refuge for children but they are actually the prisons of the children. They are left helpless against the predators in authority, the beasts of prey who lust after their innocence and their blood, and who occupy the positions of power like Hosnek at the Magistrat 13 in Vienna. If the kids complain, they are psychiatrized or sent abroad and the abuse is much worse."

"What kind of people are they? Who could do this kind of thing to women and children?" muttered Stefan.

Karl stood there, staring ahead, absolutely still.

"I mean, they seem to him to be almost demonic, Satanic. What has gone so wrong with them? Is it their upbringing? Mind you, there's so much egoism, greed and selfishness even in ordinary people."

"Sure, but studies show even newly born babies have a clear sense of right and wrong. When shown pictures of people who either hit or harm others and people who help them, babies invariably chose the helpful characters over the harmful ones. That proves that a sense of altruism is

innate to all human beings. The ability to empathise with others in pain is inborn and natural."

"So what happens to turn some people into such monsters?"

"Who knows? Neurological studies show that people's brains change depending on their thoughts and emotions and actions. If we don't use parts of our brain, they wither and die. It's just like muscles of our body. The brains of people who habitually think only selfish and materialistic thoughts change. Those parts of their brain responsible for empathy and moral reasoning just wither and die away. Evil is the absence of goodness, said St Augustine."

"What strikes me is that people like Prohaska seem to be so vain," said Stefan, sipping some punch. "They are so very eager to make an impression on others with flash cars, to be admired, flattered, the centre of attention. They want the best clothes, the best holidays and the best homes. They are the ultimate materialists. Everything seems to be outside them, objects, people. They seem to have no internal capacity left to feel emotions or make moral judgements. I can always spot that type by their eyes. The eyes of these people are dead. It doesn't matter how much they smile, their eyes remain dead. What beats me is how they are able to work so well together."

"Psychopaths share a common mindset."

"I don't know, Franz. It's almost as if we're dealing with demonic evil, an off-world force that can't be explained, the Devil himself, the archetypal murderer and liar. It comforts me to know that God is far higher than they are and far more powerful. God is higher than all the chancellors and vice chancellors, the ministers, presidents, bankers and CEO. Divine justice will protect those who need it."

"Divine justice needs a helping hand. I have some time on my hands over Christmas. I'm going to start doing some investigative work."

"Aren't you going to come to Graz?"

"No, I'm going to tail Holzer and find out who really is behind this whole ring. If necessary, I'm going to take sick leave. They want to send me to some out of the way

post. But they're not going to get rid of me as easily as that."

"What about Heidi and your daughter? What are they going to say if you stay in Vienna over Christmas?"

"My ex wife will be really pleased if I stay away. I'm going on holiday with Hanni in February."

"I think you should use the time to relax."

"Take away justice, goodness and truth and there is nothing left worth living for."

## FIVE

Franz Karl hadn't conducted a close surveillance of anyone for more than twenty years. He was nervous as hell when he left home to stake out Holzer the Thursday before Christmas. Usually, a minimum of three police officers were involved in any police surveillance effort, and he wondered how he would manage on his own. Although he didn't have any help, he had one advantage: he had accumulated an enormous amount of information about Holzer's daily routine. That allowed him to predict his behavior.

Examining his data, he saw that Holzer was a regular visitor of a sado maso club in Meidling, one of the blackest parts of Vienna, known for forced prostitution and perverse pornography. Holzer would go there once a week. It was always on Thursday around midday. He would leave with holdalls. He would drive out of Vienna and return the following evening. Karl had put in several requests for members of his team to follow Holzer out of Vienna to find out where he was going. But Neugebauer had turned them all down. He had told him there were no reasonable grounds for suspecting Holzer and the team should stop tracking him.

Determined to find out who Holzer was meeting, Karl parked in his pedestrian Volkswagen Golf on the sidewalk of a busy road opposite the club at ten o'clock in the morning. He had made sure to take lots of supplies and equipment with him, including warm clothing. He wanted to be prepared for all eventualities.

He had just poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos flask when he saw Holzer's ruby red BMW 740 drive up to the club and park in a side street. He recognised Holzer immediately from his familiar leather jacket and his jaunty way of walking. He grabbed some binoculars from the back seat and zeroed in. He adjusted the eyepieces to allow for the maximum magnification. Holzer's face

appeared before his eyes in 10 power magnification like something out of a nightmare. Holzer glanced around him and then walked into the door of a seedy club with neon lights. Karl put down the binoculars and took out his notebook and recorded what he had observed. If the past was anything to go by, Holzer would leave the club in 30 minutes or so with holdalls. He would drive off, heading out of Vienna on the motorway in the direction of St Pölten.

Karl stared at the club, glancing now and then at his watch. After 35 minutes, Holzer came out of the club. He was carrying a black hold all.

As soon as he saw Holzer was heading to his car, Karl eased his car out into the traffic. Holzer had a habit of driving very fast, making sudden bursts of acceleration, and weaving in and out of traffic. That made it very difficult for anyone to follow him in heavy traffic without attracting attention. He decided to drive on ahead, blend in with the traffic flowing down the motorway and allow Holzer to overtake him.

Karl moved into the outside lane driving very fast. He only dropped his speed when he was clear of the city limits and rolling through hills and woods. He moved back into the second lane and eased in in front of a heavy goods vehicle, easy out now and then to check the motorway behind him in his rear view mirror. After about ten minutes, he glimpsed Holzer's red BMW in his rear mirror. He fell back in in between two lorries for concealment.

Holzer's car passed him on the outside lane, driving along sedately albeit at the speed of about 120 kilometres an hour. When Holzer was far enough up ahead, Karl eased out onto the outside lane keeping four or five cars between him and his target. As soon as Holzer came closer to the first major junction, Karl gained some ground. He wondered if Holzer would head off to St Pölten but he didn't. He kept on driving. Karl eased in behind a lorry, pulling out now and then just enough to check that Holzer was still in his sight. Approaching a motorway stop, Holzer suddenly lost speed and swung in, forcing Karl to brake. Disguised by the other traffic peeling off into the motorway stop, he trailed Holzer's car, parking behind a petrol station. He observed Holzer get out of the car but without carrying his holdalls. He walked into a fast food joint and came

out carrying sandwiches and a cup of coffee. In the meantime, snow had started to fall. For once, Karl was glad the weather was so bad. He pulled out again ahead of Holzer and raced on down the motorway, disguising himself in the traffic around and waiting for Holzer's car to pass him.

Holzer kept driving on passing Linz, Wels and Salzburg. When he crossed the frontier into Germany, Karl was beginning to wonder where he was heading.

By now, twilight was falling. Heavy snow flurries made for poor visibility. Keeping Holzer in sight in weather like that required lots of concentration and Karl was starting to feel fatigued.

Holzer headed down the E60 motorway towards Munich. He left the motorway at Bad Reichenhall. Instead of heading into the town itself, he turned off a lonely road which wound up into the mountains. Karl stayed as far back as he could. He scanned his maps and GPS and saw there was nothing much a head in the way of houses or buildings.

Up ahead, he saw Holzer's car turn off and drive through the gate of a walled estate. Karl rolled by the gate. Aware that there might be video cameras monitoring the entrance, he didn't slow down. About five hundred metres up the road, he parked his car and grabbed a torch from the backseat and his laptop. He powered up the computer. He typed in the name of the road into the Google search engine. A satellite map of the area blinked on the screen. The satellite imagery allowed him to see the details of a large house and the area surrounding it without any snow. He zoomed in to look at the roads and wooded areas and the terrain. It occurred to him he could be able to get close to the house if he went through the wooded area. He studied the satellite imagery. He saw an old footpath and a road.

He zoomed out and scanned the area for places which would allow him to observe the house. A mountain ridge overlooked the valley. It looked like a good observation post. Next, Karl made a quick Google search using key words to see whether he could find out the owner of the chalet or anything about it but drew a blank.

He drove at high speed to the ridge he had identified. He parked in the snow behind some trees. Through the windscreen he had a superb view of the house as well as the access road leading. The chalet with a brightly lit panorama window, terraces, steps and balconies reminded him of something from a James Bond movie.

He grabbed some binoculars from the back seat and conducted a quick scan of the chalet. He zeroed in on the chalet, focussing on the brightly lit panorama window, the steps leading to the front door and the drive. A number of cars were parked in the snow in front. Through the sights, he saw Holzer's red BMW. He adjusted the eyepieces to allow for the maximum magnification. But he could not make out the vehicle registration numbers from this distance. He put down the binoculars and took out his notebook and recorded what he had observed.

He spent another hour observing the chalet through his binoculars, taking ten minute rests in between ten minute viewing periods to munch his sandwiches and drink some tea. He saw no sign of any security personnel or any other special security measures. There was no reason for Holzer and his friends to be concerned about their security: if they were in any trouble they could always call the police and the state prosecutor...

He tuned in to the local radio to listen to the weather forecast. Heavy snowfall and temperatures dropping to minus 3 were predicted. Heavy snow was falling. That meant his tracks would be covered by morning.

As soon as it was dark, Karl drove over to the place he had identified as the best approach route. He parked beside a wall. He had brought with him plenty of clothes for cold weather, including a waterproof white jacket and trousers and a cap.

He put them on. He removed all the items from his pockets which could make a noise when he moved. He put on a white winter jacket. He removed a badge which had a shiny surface. He took out his weapon, a semiautomatic pistol, which he was authorized to carry as a police man. Every year, he did a police firearms course to keep his shooting

ability sharp and he was confident he would be able to defend himself as a last resort.

He was no longer the fittest person and hauling himself back of the wall required violent exertion but he finally clambered over. Pausing on the top of the wall, he noticed that the drop on the other side was steep. He estimated it was about five metres. He went back to his car and took some mountain climbing equipment out of his boot. He fastened one end of a rope to the bumper of his car. He hauled himself back onto the wall, let down the rope and climbed down. He landed in deep snow. He stopped, looked and listened. There was no one around. He attached a fluorescent market to the bottom of the rope to allow him to pick it out more easily in the dark when he returned.

The wood gave him plenty of natural cover. The wood line was close to the chalet leaving just a 50 metre stretch of open ground to reach the back of the chalet. His white jacket allowed him to blend in with the snow. Staying low, he moved slowly and cautiously up to the chalet. The walls and steps of chalet provided plenty of opportunities for concealment. He moved carefully over to a brightly lit window. He observed the inside of the room from a squatting position. He could hear the sound of voices talking. Next, he saw Holzer himself walk into the room together with another man, the former Minister of Interior and MEP Ulrich Waldhäusl. That same moment, a man rose from a leather chair by the fire. He recognised one of the most powerful politicians in Austria, the governor of Lower Austria Manfred Muller.

It was like the crime shows on TV. He had cracked the case by following the chief suspect to a meeting and learning vital information. He could have done it long ago if Neugebauer had not kept blocking his respects. He had made a big breakthrough without much effort. It seemed almost too easy.

He couldn't hear what they were saying and he wasn't about to hang around. His presence must not be detected or even suspected by Holzer. He scanned the door and drive for any sign of someone approaching. Then he moved slowly and cautiously over to the parked vehicles. The snow was falling more heavily.

Using the other cars as concealment, he moved around the vehicles parked in a row and noted down the vehicle registration numbers. He noted that two of the BMWs had registration plates belonging to Munich regional government. As soon as he had finished, he headed back to his car, about a thirty minute walk. He was already very cold. The temperature was dropping fast.

He stopped, looked and listened. He moved quickly over the snow to the woods. When he had reached the cover of the trees, he took out his binoculars and scanned the brightly lit windows once more. From this angle he could see more clearly the interior of the large room with the panorama window. He saw several men standing around talking by the fire, holding glasses. He increased the magnification. He recognised the face of the Bavarian politician Edmund Kracher. He followed his tracks back through the wood and found the rope. Back in his car, he scanned the chalet again through his binoculars. There was no sign of any disturbance. The cars were still parked outside. He decided to drive back to Vienna. Observing the chalet at night would just tire him out. Tailing any of the cars would require concentration - and he had no more of that. It was only then, driving back to Vienna that he realised the enormity of what he had found out.

## SIX

"If anything happens to me, you'll have to carry on where I stopped," Karl said, pouring his brother a glass of wine.

"You've started to make me worried," Stefan said, leaning his arms on the table on the terrace of Karl's flat in Graz. It was a warm evening in July.

"It's getting more and more dangerous. I have to be prepared for everything. The gang will stop at nothing," Karl said, putting down the bottle of Gelber Muskateller and sitting down.

"Who is it, Franz? Who is behind it all?"

"The ring goes all the way to the top, to the very top and it is international in scope. The Holzer and Prohaska ring goes to the Interior Ministry. In fact, the Interior Ministry organises paedophile child abduction operations, both in Austria and abroad for the political and financial elite. Selected children are kidnapped, degraded for perverse purposes, filmed and murdered in the production of snuff movies for the international child pornography trade or they are ritually sacrificed in Satanic rituals. Top politicians are clients and agents of this ring, including Ulrich Waldhäusl and Manfred Muller. Holzer is their contact man. He is the pimp. At least a hundred children in the care of the social services had even been sent abroad to work as sex slaves or to make sex or snuff videos. Other kids in care are hired out for sex parties. Holzer organises these. It looks like the network killed Petra Landrup in 2006 because she had found out too much."

"I can't believe it!" said Stefan. "It's like something out of a horror film. Are you sure? Are you sure people like Muller and Waldhäusl are involved? It's just unbelievable."

"They are just a small part. The core of the group is a hunting association. Most of the financial and corporate elite belong to the group..."

"So you know more names?"

"That's what makes it so dangerous. I have to investigate powerful people on my own. It's a gigantic network with overlapping circles. The president is involved in another ring and he has links to the British royal family and rich bankers. Some of the other politicians are involved in sado maso sex. Young au pairs from Eastern Europe are lured to Vienna with an offer of a job. They end up being tortured to death."

Stefan just shook his head, horrified.

"I think most people feel there is something radically wrong with the country, especially with all these toxic swine flu jabs and the bank scam. But this? This degree of deceit, lies and evil? It's just terrible to think of what so many children have to go through."

"Just in case the worst happens, I've stored all the information I've collected in the past few months on this USB stick and on a laptop. I'm going to hide the stick in a coffee cup in the children's room. I'm pretty sure Katja Paschke knows everything. She's being pressured. I was only allowed to interview her once. Her star lawyer was present. He was like a guard dog. Whenever I got to close, he'd shut me down or Katja would hurry to the toilet. I'm pretty sure she's afraid of Holzer. He was involved in the death of Prohaska. He knew Katja. Holzer is the key."

"Do you really think they'll do something to you?"

"I'm under surveillance all the time. I wouldn't be surprised if you suddenly hear that I've committed suicide right here in my own flat using my pistol."

"They won't get away with that!"

"They'll say I was depressed or something. My ex wife is in the police, and she is easy enough to pressure. The police, pathologist and state prosecutors will cover it up like they always cover up these murders."

"If something like that happens, who should I go to? The media? Peter Pelz?"

"You have to spread the information wide. I don't know who to trust, certainly not the media. Ludolf Flick seems honest enough, mind you."

"I'll do what I can. You can depend on me if it comes to that. God willing, it won't. But if it does, I will do whatever is in my power. Take away justice, goodness and truth and there is nothing left worth living for."

"Take away justice, goodness and truth, and humanity has no future, at all," said Karl, looking at the night sky.