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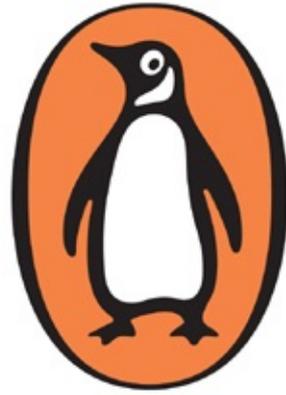
ÅSA LARSSON

THE BLOOD SPILT

'A nail biting,
suspense-filled mystery'

Sunday Telegraph





Penguin

ÅSA LARSSON

The Blood Spilt

Translated by Marlaine Delargy

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See, where the Lord comes out from his dwelling-place, holds the nations of the world to account for their guilt! Earth shall disclose the blood spilt on it, and no more cover its dead.

—ISAIAH 26:21

Hold they shall not, your terms with death, your compact with the grave; when the flood of ruin sweeps past, it shall leave you prostrate.

It will carry you away as it passes; pass it will, suddenly, in the space of a day and a night, and the very alarm of it will make you understand the revelation at last.

— ISAIAH 28:18– 19

I am lying on my side on the kitchen sofa. Impossible to sleep. At this time of year, in the middle of summer, the nights are so light they allow you no rest. The clock on the wall above me will soon strike one. The ticking of the pendulum grows louder in the silence. Smashes every sentence to pieces. Every attempt at rational thought. On the table lies the letter from that woman.

Lie still, I say to myself. Lie still and sleep.

My thoughts turn to Traja, a pointer bitch we had when I was little. She could never settle. Walked round and round the kitchen like a restless soul, her claws clicking on the lacquered wooden floor. For the first few months we kept her in a cage indoors to force her to relax. The house was constantly filled with the sound of “sit” and “stay” and “lie down.”

Now it's just the same. There's a dog in my breast who wants to jump up every time the clock ticks. Every time I take a breath. But it isn't Traja who's inside me ready to pounce. Traja just wanted to trot around. Get rid of the restlessness in her body. This dog turns her head away from me when I try to look at her. She is filled with evil intent.

I shall try to go to sleep. Somebody should lock me in. I ought to have a cage in the kitchen.

* * *

I get up and look out of the window. It's quarter past one. It's as light as day. The long shadows from the ancient pine trees along the edge of the yard extend toward the house. I think they look like arms. Hands stretching up out of their restless graves and reaching for me. The letter is lying there on the kitchen table.

* * *

I'm in the cellar. It's twenty-five to two. The dog who isn't Traja is on her feet. She's running around the edges of my mind. I try to call to her. Don't want to follow her into this untrodden territory. My head is empty on the inside. My hand takes things off the wall. Different objects. What do I want with them? The sledgehammer. The crowbar. The chain. The hammer.

* * *

My hands place everything in the trunk of the car. It's like a puzzle. I can't see what it's meant to represent. I get into the car and wait. I think about the woman and the letter. It's her fault. She's the one who's driven me out of my mind.

* * *

I'm driving the car. There's a clock on the instrument panel. Straight lines with no meaning. The road is carrying me out of time. My hands are clutching the wheel so tightly that my fingers are hurting. If I kill myself now they'll have to cut the steering wheel out of the car

and bury it with me. But I'm not going to kill myself.

* * *

I stop the car a hundred meters from the shore where she keeps her boat. I walk down to the river. It's shining and quiet, waiting. There's the faint sound of lapping water beneath the boat. The sun is dancing on the ripples caused by a salmon trout coming to the surface to eat flies. The mosquitoes are swarming around me. Whirring around my ears. Landing round my eyes and on the back of my neck and sucking blood. I don't take any notice of them. A sound makes me turn around. It's her. She is standing no more than ten meters from me.

* * *

Her mouth opens and forms itself around words. But I hear nothing. My ears are sealed up. Her eyes narrow. Irritation springs to life in them. I take two tentative steps forward. I still don't know what I want. I am in the territory beyond all sense and reason.

She catches sight of the crowbar in my hand. Her mouth stops moving. The narrow eyes widen once again. A second of surprise. Then fear.

I catch sight of the crowbar myself. My hand whitens around the steel. And suddenly the dog is back. Enormous. Paws like hooves. The hair is standing up from the back of its neck all the way down to its tail. Teeth bared. It's going to swallow me whole. And then it's going to swallow the woman.

* * *

I've reached her. She looks at the crowbar as if she were bewitched by it and so the first blow strikes her right on the temple. I kneel down beside her and lay my cheek against her mouth. A warm puff of air against my skin. I haven't finished with her yet. The dog rushes out like a mad thing, straight for everything in its way. Its claws rip the earth, leaving great wounds. I am rampaging. I am racing into the far country that is madness.

And now I am lengthening my stride.

Pia Svonni the churchwarden is standing in her garden smoking. She usually holds the cigarette the way girls are supposed to, between her index and middle fingers. But now she's holding it firmly between her thumb and her index and middle fingers. There's a hell of a difference. It's nearly midsummer, that's why. You get kind of crazy. Don't want to sleep. Don't need to either. The night whispers and entices and draws you in, so you just have to go outside.

The wood nymphs are putting on their new shoes, made of the finest birch bark. It's a real beauty competition. They forget themselves and dance and sway in the meadows, even though a car might pass by. They wear out their shoes while the little ones stand hidden among the trees, watching with huge eyes.

Pia Svonni stubs out the cigarette on the base of the upturned flowerpot that serves as an ashtray and drops the stub through the hole. She suddenly decides to cycle down to Jukkasjärvi church. Tomorrow there's a wedding there. She has already done the cleaning and made everything look nice, but now she has the idea of picking a big bunch of flowers for the altar. She'll go out into the meadow beyond the churchyard. Buttercups grow there, and globe flowers and purple cranesbill in a haze of cow parsley. And forget-me-nots whisper along the edge. She pushes her cell phone into her pocket and pulls on her tennis shoes.

The midnight sun casts its glow over the yard. The thin light falls through the fence and the long shadows from the slats make the lawn look like a homemade rag rug, woven in stripes of greenish yellow and dark green. A flock of thrushes is screeching and playing havoc in one of the birch trees.

* * *

The whole way down to Jukkasjärvi is one long downhill run. Pia pedals and changes gear. Her speed is lethal. And no helmet. Her hair streams out behind her. It's like when she was four years old and used to swing standing up on the old swing made out of a tire in the yard until it felt as if it were going to swing right round. She cycles through Kauppinen where some horses gaze at her from under the trees. When she passes the bridge over the river Torne she can see two little boys fly-fishing a little way downstream.

The road runs parallel with the river. The village is sleeping. She passes the tourist area and the restaurant, the old Konsum supermarket and the ugly community center. The old folk museum's silvery timber walls and the white veils of mist on the meadow in front of the fence.

At the far end of the village, where the road runs out, is the wooden church, painted Falun red. A smell of fresh tar comes from the roof timbers.

The bell tower is part of the fence. To get into the church, you go in through the bell tower and walk along a stone path that leads to the church steps.

One of the blue doors to the bell tower is standing wide open. Pia clammers off her bicycle and leans it against the fence.

It should be closed, she thinks, walking slowly toward the door.

Something rustles among the small birch trees to the right of the path down to the rectory. Her heart races and she stops to listen. It was only a little rustle. Probably a squirrel or a shrew.

The back door of the bell tower is open as well. She can see straight through the tower. The door of the church is also open.

Now her heart is really thumping. Sune might forget the door of the bell tower if he's been celebrating—after all, it's the night before midsummer's eve. But not the door of the church. She thinks about those kids who smashed the windows of the church in town, and threw burning rags inside. That was a couple of years ago. What's happened now? Pictures flash across her mind. The altarpiece sprayed with graffiti and piss. Long slashes with a knife on the newly painted pews. Presumably they've got in through a window, then opened the door from the inside.

She moves toward the church door. Walks slowly. Listens carefully in every direction. How has it come to this? Little boys who ought to be too busy thinking about girls and fiddling with their mopeds. How have they turned into queer-bashers and thugs who set fire to churches?

When she passes the porch she stops. Stands beneath the organ loft where the ceiling is so low that tall people have to stoop down. It's silent and gloomy inside the church, but everything seems to be in order. Christ, Laestadius and the Sami maiden Maria glow from the altarpiece, unblemished. But still something makes her hesitate. Something isn't right in there.

There are eighty-six corpses beneath the floor of the church. Most of the time she doesn't think about them at all. They are resting in peace in their graves. But now she can feel their unease rising up through the floor, pricking like needles under her feet.

What's the matter with you? she thinks.

The aisle of the church is covered with a red woven carpet. Exactly where the organ loft ends and the ceiling opens upward, something is lying on the carpet. She bends down.

A stone, she thinks at first. A little white splinter from a stone.

She picks it up between her thumb and index finger and walks toward the sacristy.

But the door to the sacristy is locked, and she turns to go back down the aisle.

As she stands at the front by the altar, she can see the lower part of the organ. It is almost completely covered by a wooden partition that goes across the church from the ceiling, and hangs down one third of the height of the ceiling. But she can see the lower part of the organ. And she can see a pair of feet hanging down in front of the organ loft.

Her first lightning thought is that somebody has come into the church and hanged themselves. And in that very first split second she is angry. Feels it's inconsiderate. Then she thinks precisely nothing. Runs down the aisle and past the partition, then she sees the body hanging in front of the organ pipes and the Sami sun symbol.

The body is hanging from a rope, no, not a rope, a chain. A long iron chain.

Now she can see dark stains on the carpet, just where she found the splinter of stone.

Blood. Can it be blood? She crouches down.

Then she understands. The stone she is holding between her thumb and her index finger. I

isn't a stone at all. It's a splinter from a tooth.

Up onto her feet. Her fingers lose their grip on the white shard, she almost flings it away from her.

Her hand fishes the phone out of her pocket, punches in 112.

The lad on the other end sounds so bloody young. While she's answering his questions, she tugs at the door to the organ loft. It's locked.

"It's locked," she says. "I can't get up there."

She races back to the sacristy. No key to the organ loft. Can she break down the door? What with?

The lad on the other end of the phone makes her listen to him. He tells her to wait outside. Help is on the way, he promises.

"It's Mildred!" she shouts. "It's Mildred Nilsson hanging there! She's our priest. God, she looks so terrible."

"Are you outside now?" he asks. "Is there anyone nearby?"

The boy on the phone talks her out onto the steps of the church. She tells him there isn't a soul in sight.

"Don't hang up," he says. "Stay with me. Help is on the way. Don't go back into the church."

"Is it okay if I have a cigarette?"

That's all right. It's all right to put the phone down.

Pia sits down on the steps of the church, the phone beside her. Smokes and notices how calm and collected she feels. But the cigarette isn't burning properly. She finally notices that she's lit the filter. After seven minutes she hears the sirens from a long way off.

They got her, she thinks.

Her hands begin to shake. The cigarette jerks out of her grip.

The bastards. They got her.

Rebecka Martinsson climbed out of the taxi boat and looked up at Lidö country house hotel. The afternoon sun on the pale yellow facade with its white decorative carving. The big garden full of people. Some black-headed gulls from nowhere screeched above her head. Persistent and irritating.

Where do you get the energy, she thought.

She gave the taxi driver a tip that was much too big. Compensation for her monosyllabic answers when he'd attempted to talk.

"Big party," he said, nodding toward the hotel.

The whole law firm was assembled up there. Almost two hundred people milling around. Talking in groups. Detaching themselves and moving on. Handshakes and air kisses. A line of enormous barbecues had been set out. Members of staff dressed in white were laying out a barbecue buffet on a long table covered with a linen cloth. They scurried between the hotel kitchen and the table like white mice in their ridiculously tall chef's hats.

"Yes," replied Rebecka, and hoisted her crocodile skin bag onto her shoulder. "But I've got through worse things."

He laughed and pulled away, the prow lifting out of the water. A black cat slunk silently down from the jetty and disappeared into the tall grass.

Rebecka set off. The island looked tired after the summer. Well trodden, dried out, worn out.

This is where they've walked, she thought. All the families with children, carrying their picnic blankets, all the well dressed, tipsy people from the boats.

The grass was short and turning yellow. The trees dusty and thirsty. She could imagine what it would look like in the forest. No doubt there were heaps of bottles, cans, used condoms and human feces under the blueberry bushes and ferns.

The track up to the hotel was as hard as concrete. Like the cracked back of a prehistoric lizard. She was a lizard herself. Just landed in her spaceship. Wearing human clothing on her way into the trial by fire. Trying to imitate human behavior. Look at people around her and do the same. Hope the disguise wouldn't gape at the neck.

She had almost reached the gardens.

Come on, she said to herself. You can do this.

After she'd killed those men in Kiruna she'd carried on with her job at the law firm of Meijer & Ditzinger as usual. Things had gone well, she thought. In fact they'd gone completely to hell. She hadn't thought about the blood and the bodies. When she looked back now to the time before she was signed off on sick leave, she couldn't actually remember thinking at all. She'd thought she was working. But in the end all she was doing was moving paper from one pile to another. True, she was sleeping badly. And wasn't really there, somehow. It could take an eternity just to get ready in the morning and get to work. The catastrophe came from behind. She didn't see it before it landed right on top of her. It was just a simple merger and acquisition case. The client had been wondering about the period of notice on a local rental agreement. And she'd given completely the wrong answer. All the

files with all the contracts right under her nose, but she hadn't understood what they said. The client, a French mail order company, had demanded compensation from the firm.

She remembered how Måns Wenngren, her boss, had looked at her. His face blood red behind the desk. She'd tried to resign, but he wouldn't agree.

"It would look terrible for the firm," he'd said. "Everybody would think you'd been pushed out. That we were letting down a colleague with psychological... who isn't very well."

She'd staggered out of the office that same afternoon. And when she stood on Birger Jarlsgatan in the autumn darkness with the lights of the expensive cars swishing past and the tastefully decorated shop windows and the pubs down on Stureplan, she was suddenly overcome by a strong feeling that she'd never be able to go back to Meijer & Ditzinger. She'd felt as though she wanted to get as far away from them as possible. But it didn't turn out like that.

She was signed off on sick leave. For a week at a time, first of all. Then for a month at a time. The doctor had told her to do whatever she enjoyed. If there was anything she liked about her job, she should carry on doing that.

The firm's criminal caseload had begun to increase significantly after Kiruna. Her name and picture had been kept out of the papers, but the name of the firm had appeared frequently in the media. And it had produced results. People got in touch and wanted to be represented by "that girl who was up in Kiruna." They got the standard response that the firm could provide a more experienced criminal lawyer, but that girl could sit in and assist. In this way the firm got a foothold in the big trials that were reported in the press. During that time there were two gang rapes, a murder with robbery and a complicated bribery and corruption case.

The partners suggested she should carry on sitting in on the cases while she was on sick leave. It didn't happen very often. And it was a good way of keeping in touch with the job. And she didn't need to do any preparation. Just sit in. But only if she wanted to, of course.

She'd agreed because she didn't think she had any choice. She'd embarrassed the firm, got them involved in a compensation claim and lost a client. It was impossible to say no. She owed them, and she nodded and smiled.

At least she managed to get herself out of bed on the days she was sitting in court. Usually it was the accused who drew the first glances from the jury and the judge, but now she was the main attraction in the circus. She kept her eyes fixed on the desk in front of her and let them look. Criminals, magistrates, prosecutors, jurors. She could almost hear them thinking: "so that's her..."

She'd arrived at the gardens in front of the hotel. Here the grass was suddenly fresh and green. They must have had the sprinklers going like mad during the dry summer. The scent of the last dog-roses of summer drifted inland on the evening breeze. The air was pleasantly warm. The younger women were wearing sleeveless linen dresses. The slightly older ones covered their upper arms with light cotton cardigans from I Blues and Max Mara. The men had left their ties at home. They trotted back and forth in their Gant trousers with drinks for the ladies. Checked out the charcoal in the barbecue and chatted knowledgeably with the kitchen staff.

She scanned the crowd. No Maria Taube. No Måns Wenngren.

And one of the partners was heading toward her—Erik Rydén. On with the smile. "Is that

her?”

Petra Wilhelmsson watched Rebecka Martinsson coming up the track toward the hotel. Petra had only just started with the firm. She was leaning against the railing outside the entrance. On one side of her stood Johan Grill, also new to the firm, and on the other side stood Krister Ahlberg, a criminal lawyer in his thirties.

“Yes, that’s her,” confirmed Krister Ahlberg. “The firm’s very own little Modesty Blaise.”

He emptied his glass and placed it on the railing with a little bang. Petra shook her head slowly.

“To think she killed somebody,” she said.

“Three people, actually,” said Krister.

“God, it makes my hair stand on end! Look!” said Petra, holding her arm up to show the two gentlemen in her company.

Krister Ahlberg and Johan Grill looked carefully at her arm. It was brown and slender. A few very fine hairs had been bleached almost white by the summer sun.

“I don’t mean because she’s a girl,” Petra went on, “but she just doesn’t look the type to..

“And she wasn’t. She had a nervous breakdown in the end. And she can’t cope with the job. Sits in on the big name criminal trials sometimes. And I’m the one that does all the work she gets left behind in the office with the cell phone switched on just in case something comes up. But she’s the star.”

“Is she a star?” asked Johan Grill. “They never wrote anything about her, did they?”

“No, but in legal circles everybody knows who she is. Sweden’s legal circle isn’t very big, as you’ll soon find out.”

Krister Ahlberg measured out a centimeter between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He noticed that Petra’s glass was empty, and wondered if he ought to offer to get her a refill. But that would mean leaving little Petra alone with Johan.

“God,” said Petra, “I wonder what it feels like to kill somebody.”

“I’ll introduce you,” said Krister. “We don’t work in the same department, but we went on a course together on commercial contract law. We’ll just wait until Erik Rydén’s let her out of his clutches.”

* * *

Erik Rydén took Rebecka in his arms and welcomed her. He was a stocky man, and his duties as host were making him perspire. His body was steaming like a bog in August, surrounded by a miasma of Chanel Pour Monsieur and alcohol. Her right hand patted him several times on the back.

“Glad you could come,” he said with his broadest smile.

He took her bag and gave her a glass of champagne and a room key in return. Rebecka looked at the key ring. It was a piece of wood painted red and white, attached to the key with a clever little knot.

For when the guests get drunk and drop them in the water, she thought.

They exchanged a few remarks. Gorgeous weather. Ordered it especially for you, Rebecka

She laughed, asked how things were going. Bloody great, just last week he'd landed a big client, something in biotechnology. And they were about to start negotiations on a merger with an American company, so it was all go at the moment. She listened and smiled. Then another latecomer arrived, and Erik had to carry on with his duties as host.

A lawyer from the criminal cases department came over to her. He greeted her as if they were old friends. She searched frantically through her mind for his name, but it had vanished into thin air. He had two new employees trailing after him, a girl and a boy. The boy had a tuft of blond hair above the kind of brown face you only get from sailing. He was a bit short with broad shoulders. Square, jutting chin, two muscular arms protruding from the rolled-up sleeves of his expensive jumper.

Like Popeye the sailorman, styled by experts, she thought.

The girl was blonde as well. Her mane of hair firmly anchored by a pair of expensive sunglasses on top of her head. Dimples in her cheeks. A cardigan that matched her short-sleeved jumper was hanging over Popeye's arm. They said hello. The girl chirruped like a blackbird. Her name was Petra. Popeye was called Johan, and he had some sort of elegant surname, but Rebecka couldn't remember it. That's how things had been for the last year. Before, she'd had compartments in her head where she could file information. Now there were no compartments. Everything just tumbled in, and most of it tumbled straight out again. She smiled and managed a handshake that was just firm enough. Asked who they were working for at the office. How they were settling in. What they'd written their essays about and where they'd done their articles. Nobody asked her about anything.

She moved on between the groups. Everybody was standing there at the ready, a ruler in their pocket. Measuring each other. Comparing everybody else with themselves. Salary. Where they lived. Name. Who you knew. What you'd been doing during the summer. Somebody was building a house in Nacka. Somebody else was looking for a bigger flat now they'd had their second child, preferably on the right side of Östermalm.

"I'm a complete wreck," exclaimed the house builder with a cheerful smile.

Somebody who had just become single again turned to Rebecka.

"I was actually up around your home turf back in May," he said. "Went skiing from Abisko to Kebnekaise, had to get up at three in the morning while the snow was still firm enough. During the day it was so wet you just sank right through it. All you could do was lie in the spring sunshine and make the most of it."

The atmosphere was suddenly strained. Did he have to mention where she came from? Kiruna forced its way into the circle like a ghost. All at once everyone was gabbling the names of other places they'd been. Italy, Tuscany, parents in Jönköping, Legoland, but Kiruna just wouldn't disappear. Rebecka moved on, and everybody breathed a sigh of relief.

The older associates had been staying in their summer cottages on the west coast, or in Skåne, or out in the archipelago. Arne Eklöf had lost his mother, and told Rebecka quite candidly how he'd spent the summer quarrelling about her estate.

"It's bloody true," he said. "When the Lord turns up with death, the devil turns up with the heirs. Can I get you another?"

He nodded toward her glass. She refused. He gave her a look that was almost angry. As if she'd refused further confidences. Presumably that was exactly what she'd done. He stomped

off toward the drinks table. Rebecka stayed where she was, gazing after him. It was a strain chatting to people, but it was a nightmare standing there on her own with an empty glass. Like a poor pot plant that can't even ask for water.

I could go to the bathroom, she thought, glancing at her watch. And I can stay in there for seven minutes if there isn't a queue. Three if somebody's waiting outside the door.

She looked around for somewhere to put her glass down. Just at that moment Maria Taub materialized at her side. She held out a little dish of Waldorf salad.

"Eat," she said. "Looking at you frightens me."

Rebecka took the salad. The memory of last spring flooded through her when she looked at Maria.

* * *

Harsh spring sunshine outside Rebecka's filthy windows. But she has the blinds pulled right down. In the middle of the week, on an ordinary morning, Maria comes to visit. Afterward Rebecka wonders how come she opened the door. She should have stayed under the covers and hidden.

But. She goes to the door. Hardly conscious of the doorbell ringing. Almost absentmindedly she undoes the security lock. Then she turns the catch of the lock with her left hand while her right hand pushes down the door handle. Her head isn't connected to anything. Just like when you find yourself standing in front of the refrigerator with the door open, wondering what you're doing in the kitchen anyway.

Afterward she thinks that maybe there's a sensible little person inside her. A little girl in red Wellingtons and a life jacket. A survivor. And that little girl had recognized those high heels tip-tapping along.

The girl says to Rebecka's hands and feet: "Ssh, it's Maria. Don't tell her. Just get her up and make sure she opens the door."

Maria and Rebecka are sitting in the kitchen. They are drinking coffee, just on its own. Rebecka doesn't say much. The pyramid of dirty dishes, the drifts of post and junk mail and newspapers on the hall floor, the crumpled sweaty clothes on her body say everything there is to say.

And in the middle of all this her hands begin to shake. She has to put her coffee cup down on the table. They are flailing about like mad things, like two headless chickens.

"No more coffee for me," she tries to joke.

She laughs, but it comes out more like a discordant hacking noise.

Maria looks her in the eyes. Rebecka feels as though she knows. How Rebecka sometimes stands out on the balcony looking down at the hard asphalt below. And how she sometimes can't make herself go out and down to the shops. But has to live on whatever she happens to have in. Drink tea and eat pickled gherkins straight from the jar.

"I'm no shrink," says Maria, "but I do know things get worse if you don't eat and sleep. And you have to get dressed in the mornings and go out."

Rebecka hides her hands under the kitchen table.

“You must think I’ve gone mad.”

“Honey, my family is crawling with women who’ve got Nerves. They faint and swoon, have panic attacks and hypochondria the whole time. And my aunt, have I told you about her? One minute she’s sitting in a psychiatric ward with somebody helping her get dressed, the next she’s starting up a Montessori nursery. I’ve seen it all.”

The following day one of the partners, Torsten Karlsson, offers to let Rebecka stay in his cottage. Maria used to work with Torsten in the business law section before she moved over and started working for Måns Wenngren with Rebecka.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” says Torsten. “It would save me worrying whether somebody had broken in, and driving up there just to do the watering. I ought to sell the place really. But that’s a load of hassle as well.”

She should have said no, of course. It was so obvious. But the little girl in the red Wellingtons said yes before she’d even opened her mouth.

Rebecka ate some of the Waldorf salad dutifully. She started with half a walnut. As soon as she got it into her mouth, it grew to the size of a plum. She chewed and chewed. Got ready to swallow. Maria looked at her.

“So how are things?” she asked.

Rebecka smiled. Her tongue felt rough.

“Actually, I have absolutely no idea.”

“But you’re okay about being here this evening?”

Rebecka shrugged her shoulders.

No, she thought. But what can you do? Force yourself to go out. Otherwise you’ll soon end up sitting in a cottage somewhere with the authorities after you, terrified of people, allergic to electricity and with a load of cats crapping indoors.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It feels as if people are checking me out when I look away. Talking about me when I’m not there. As soon as I come along, the conversation kind of starts afresh. You know what I mean? It seems as if it’s ‘Tennis, anyone?’ in a mad panic as soon as they see me coming.”

“Well, it is,” smiled Maria. “You’re the firm’s very own Modesty Blaise. And now you’ve gone to stay out at Torsten’s place and you’re getting more and more isolated and peculiar. Of course everybody’s talking about you.”

Rebecka laughed.

“Oh, thanks, I feel much better now.”

“I saw you talking to Johan Grill and Petra Wilhelmsson. What did you think of Miss Spin? I’m sure she’s very nice, but I just can’t take to somebody whose backside is up between her shoulder blades. Mine’s like a teenager. It’s kind of liberated itself from me and wants to stand on its own two feet.”

“I thought I heard something dragging along the grass when you turned up.”

They fell silent and gazed out over the channel where an old Fingal was chugging along.

“Don’t worry,” said Maria. “People will soon start to get really pissed. Then they’ll come weaving over to you wanting to chat.”

She turned to Rebecka, leaned in close and said in a slurring voice:

“So how does it actually feel to kill somebody?”

* * *

Rebecka’s and Maria’s boss Måns Wenngren was standing a little way off, watching them.

Good, he thought. Nicely done.

He could see Maria Taube was making Rebecka Martinsson laugh. Maria’s hands were waving in the air, twisting and turning. Her shoulders moved up and down. It was a wonder she could keep her glass under control. Years of training with upper-class families, presumably. And Rebecka’s posture softened. She looked brown and strong, he noticed.

Skinny as a rake, but then she always had been.

Torsten Karlsson was standing a little way to the side behind Måns studying the barbecue buffet. His mouth was watering. Indonesian lamb kebabs, kebabs of beef fillet or scampi with Cajun spices, Caribbean fish kebabs with ginger and pineapple, chicken kebabs with sage and lemon, or Asiatic style, marinated in yogurt with ginger, garam masala and chopped cucumber, along with lots of different sauces and salads. A selection of red and white wines, beer and cider. He knew they called him “Karlsson on the roof” at the office, after the character in Astrid Lindgren’s books. Short and stocky, his black hair sticking up like a scrubbing brush on top of his head. Måns, on the other hand, always looked good in his clothes. There was no way women told him he was sweet, or that he made them laugh.

“I heard you’d got a new Jag,” he said, pinching an olive from the bulgur wheat salad.

“Mmm, an E-type cabriolet, mint condition,” answered Måns mechanically. “How’s she getting on?”

For a split second Torsten Karlsson wondered whether Måns was asking how his own Jag was getting on. He looked up, followed the direction of Måns’ gaze and landed on Rebecka Martinsson and Maria Taube.

“She’s staying up at your place,” Måns went on.

“She couldn’t stay cooped up in that little one room apartment. She didn’t seem to have anywhere to go. Why don’t you ask her yourself? She’s your assistant.”

“Because I’ve just asked you,” snapped Måns.

Torsten Karlsson held up his hands in a don’t-shoot-I-surrender gesture.

“To be honest, I don’t really know,” he said. “I never go out there. And if I am there we talk about other things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, about putting fresh tar on the steps, about the red Falun paint, about her plans to replace all the putty round the windows. She works all the time. For a while she seemed to be obsessed by the compost.”

The expression on Måns’ face encouraged him to go on. Interested, almost amused. Torsten Karlsson pushed his fingers through the black mop of hair on his head.

“Well,” he said, “first of all she set about building. Three different compost bins for garden and household waste. Bought the rat proof kind. Then she built a rapid compost heap. She practically made me write down how you had to layer it all with grass and sand—pure science. And then, when she was supposed to go on that course on corporate taxation in Malmö, you remember?”

“I do, yes.”

“Well, she rang me up and said she couldn’t go, because the compost was, now how did she put it, there was something the matter with it, not enough nitrogen. So she’d fetched some household waste from a nursery nearby, and now it was too wet. So she’d have to stay at home and scatter and drill.”

“Drill?”

“Yes, I had to promise to go out there during the week she was away and drill down through the compost with an old hand drill—the kind you use to make holes in the ice. The

she found the former owners' compost heap a little way into the forest."

"And?"

"There was all sorts in there. Old cat skeletons, broken bottles, all kinds of shit... so then she decided to clean it. She found an old bed behind the outhouse with a kind of mesh base. She used that as a huge sieve. Shoveled the stuff onto the bed and shook it so the clean compost fell through. I should have brought along some of our clients and introduced them to one of our promising young associates."

Måns stared at Torsten Karlsson. He could see Rebecka in his mind's eye, rosy cheeks, hair standing on end, frantically shaking an iron bed on top of a pile of earth. Torsten down below with wide-eyed clients dressed in dark suits.

They both burst out laughing at the same time and almost couldn't stop. Torsten wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Although she has calmed down a bit now," he said. "She isn't so... I don't know... the last time I was there she was sitting out on the steps with a book and a cup of coffee."

"What book was it?" asked Måns.

Torsten Karlsson gave him an odd look.

"I didn't think to look," he said. "Talk to her."

Måns knocked back his glass of red wine.

"I'll go and say hello," he said. "But you know me. I'm crap at talking to people. And even worse at talking to women."

He tried to laugh, but Torsten wasn't smiling.

"You have to ask her how she is."

Måns blew air down his nose.

"I know, I know."

I'm better at short-term relationships, he thought. Clients. Cab drivers. The checkout girl in the local shop. No old conflicts and disappointments lurking just under the surface like tangled seaweed.

* * *

Late summer's afternoon on Lidö. The red evening sun settling over the gentle contours of the rocks like a golden bowl. One of the archipelago cruise boats slips by out in the channel. The reeds down by the water put their heads together and rustle and whisper to each other. The sound of the guests chatting and laughing is carried out over the water.

Dinner has progressed to the stage where cigarette packets have appeared on the tables. It was okay to stretch your legs before dessert, so it wasn't quite so crowded around the tables. Sweaters and cardigans that had been tied around waists or slung over shoulders were now slipped over arms chilled by the evening air. Some people were paying a third or fourth visit to the buffet, standing and chatting to the cooks who were turning the spitting kebabs over the glowing charcoal. Some were well on the way to being drunk. Had to hold on to the railings when they went up the steps to the toilets. Waving their arms about and spilling cigarette ash all over their clothes. Talking just a bit too loudly. One of the partners insisted

on helping a waitress carry out the desserts. With great authority and a gentlemanly flourish he relieved her of a big tray of vanilla cream tartlets with glazed red currants. The tartlets slid alarmingly toward the edges of the tray. The waitress gave a somewhat strained smile and exchanged a look with the cooks who were busy at the barbecue. One of them dropped what he was doing and hurried to the kitchen with her to fetch the rest of the trays.

Rebecka and Maria were sitting down on the rocks. The stones were releasing the heat they'd stored up during the course of the day. Maria scratched a mosquito bite on the inside of her wrist.

"Torsten's going up to Kiruna next week," she said. "Did he tell you?"

"No."

"It's this project with the Jansson Group Auditors. Now that the Swedish church has separated from the state, it's an interesting client group to link up with. The idea is to sell a legal package, including accounting and auditing of the Swedish church assets all over the country. Offer help with just about everything, 'how do we get rid of Berit and her fibromyalgia,' 'how do we reach an economically sound deal with entrepreneurs,' the whole package. I don't really know, but I think there's a long-term plan to work together with a broker and grab the capital administration. Anyway, Torsten's going up to give the sales pitch to the church council in Kiruna."

"And?"

"You could go with him. You know what he's like. He'd think it was really nice to have some company."

"I can't go to Kiruna," exclaimed Rebecka.

"No, I know that's what you think. But I'm wondering why."

"I don't know, I..."

"What's the worst that could happen? I mean if you bumped into somebody who knows who you are? And what about your grandmother's house, you miss that, don't you?"

Rebecka clenched her teeth.

I can't go there, that's just the way it is, she thought.

Maria replied as if she'd read her mind.

"I'm going to ask Torsten to ask you anyway. If there are monsters under the bed it's just as well to put the light on and turn over onto your stomach and have a look at them."

* * *

Dancing on the hotel's stone terrace. Abba and Niklas Strömstedt pouring out of the loudspeakers. Through the open windows of the hotel kitchen comes the sound of porcelain crashing and the rush of water as the plates are rinsed before they go into the dishwasher. The sun has taken her red veils down into the water with her. Lanterns hang from the trees. A crush around the outdoor bar.

Rebecka walked down to the stone quay. She'd danced with her table companion then crept away. The darkness placed its arm around her and drew her close.

It went well, she thought. It went as well as anybody could expect.

She sat down on a wooden bench by the water. The sound of the waves lapping against the jetty. The smell of rotting seaweed, brine and diesel. A lamp was reflected in the shiny black water.

Måns had come over to say hello just as she was about to sit down at the table.

“How’s things, Martinsson?” he’d asked.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? she thought.

His wolfish grin and the way he called her by her surname was like a great big stop sign: No confidences, tears or honesty.

So it was head up, feet down and an account of how she’d painted the window frames out at Torsten’s place with linseed oil. After Kiruna it had seemed as if he cared about her. But when she couldn’t work any longer he’d completely disappeared.

You’re just nothing then, she thought. When you can’t work.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel path made her look up. At first she couldn’t make out a face, but she recognized that high-pitched voice. It was that new girl, the blonde one. What was her name again? Petra.

“Hi Rebecka,” said Petra, as if they knew each other.

She came and stood far too close. Rebecka suppressed the urge to get up, shove her out of the way and scurry off. You couldn’t really do that sort of thing. So she stayed put. The foot on the end of the leg that was crossed over the other leg gave her away. Jiggled up and down in annoyance. Wanted to run away.

Petra sank down beside her with a sigh.

“God, I’ve just had three dances one after the other with Åke. You know what they’re like. Just because you work with them they think they own you. I just had to get away for a bit.”

Rebecka grunted some kind of acknowledgment. In a little while she’d say she needed the bathroom.

Petra twisted her upper body toward Rebecka and tilted her head to one side.

“I heard about what happened to you last year. It must have been terrible.”

Rebecka didn’t reply.

Wait for it, thought Rebecka nastily. When the quarry won’t come out of its hole, you have to lure it out with something. It ought to be some little confidence of your own. You hold out your own little confession and swap it for the other person’s secret like a bookmark.

“My sister had a terrible experience like that five years ago,” Petra went on when Rebecka didn’t speak. “She found their neighbor’s son drowned in a ditch. He was only four. After that she went a bit...”

She finished the sentence with a vague hand movement.

“So this is where you are.”

It was Popeye. He came over to them with a gin and tonic in each hand. He held one out to Petra, and after a microsecond’s hesitation offered the other one to Rebecka. It was actually for himself.

A gentleman, thought Rebecka tiredly, putting the glass down beside her.

She looked at Popeye. Popeye was looking greedily at Petra. Petra was looking greedily at

Rebecka. Popeye and Petra were going to feast on her. Then they'd go off and have sex.

Petra must have sensed that Rebecka was about to run away. That the opportunity would soon have passed her by. Under normal circumstances she would have let Rebecka go, and thought to herself that there'd be other times. But right now too many drinks from the bar and too many glasses of wine with the food had clouded her judgment.

She leaned over toward Rebecka. Her cheeks were shiny and rosy when she asked: "So, how does it feel to kill a person?"

* * *

Rebecka marched straight through the middle of the crowd of drunken people. No, she didn't want to dance. No, thank you, she didn't want anything from the bar. She had her overnight bag over her shoulder and was on her way down to the jetty.

She'd managed to deal with Petra and Popeye. Assumed a thoughtful expression, gazed out over the dark water, and replied: "It feels terrible, of course."

What else? The truth? "I have no idea. I can't remember."

Maybe she should have told them about those totally pathetic conversations with the therapist. Rebecka sitting and smiling at every meeting and in the end nearly bursting out laughing. What can she do? She just doesn't remember. The therapist very definitely not smiling back, this is no laughing matter. And finally they decide to take a break. Rebecka is welcome to come back at some point in the future.

When she can't work anymore she doesn't get in touch with him. Can't bring herself to do it. Pictures the scene, sitting and weeping because she can't cope with life, and his face, just enough sympathy to cover the what-did-I-tell-you expression.

No, Rebecka had answered Petra like a normal person, it felt terrible but that life must go on, however banal that might sound. Then she'd made her excuses and left them. It had been fine, but five minutes later the rage hit her, and now... Now she was so angry she could have ripped a tree up by the roots. Or maybe she should lean against the wall of the hotel and push it over like a cardboard box. Just as well for blondie and her little friend they weren't still down on the quay, because she'd have kicked them into the water.

Suddenly Måns was right behind her. Beside her.

"What's going on? Has something happened?"

Rebecka didn't slow down.

"I'm leaving. One of the boys in the kitchen said I could borrow the skiff. I'll row across."

Måns uttered a snort of disbelief.

"Are you crazy? You can't row across in the dark. And what are you going to do when you get to the other side? Come on, stop. What's the matter with you?"

She stopped just before the jetty. Spun around and growled.

"What the fuck do you think's the matter?" she asked. "People asking me what it feels like to kill a person. How the hell should I know? I didn't sit there writing a poem while it was going on, analyzing how I felt. I... it just happened!"

"Why are you angry with me? I didn't ask you, did I?"

Suddenly Rebecka was speaking very slowly.

“No, Måns, you don’t ask me anything. Nobody could accuse you of that.”

“What the hell,” he replied, but Rebecka had already turned on her heel and stomped off onto the jetty.

He dashed after her. She’d thrown her bag into the skiff and was untying the mooring rope. Måns searched around for something to say.

“I was talking to Torsten,” he said. “He told me he was thinking of asking you to go up to Kiruna with him. But I told him he shouldn’t ask.”

“Why?”

“Why? I thought it was the last thing you needed.”

Rebecka didn’t look at him as she answered.

“Perhaps you’d allow me to decide what I need and don’t need.”

She was beginning to become vaguely aware of the fact that people nearby were tuning in to her and Måns. They were pretending to be busy dancing and chatting, but hadn’t the general murmur of conversation dropped a little? Maybe now they’d all have something to talk about next week at work.

Måns seemed to have noticed as well, and lowered his voice.

“I was only thinking of you, I do apologize.”

Rebecka jumped down into the boat.

“Oh, you were thinking of me, were you? Is that why you’ve had me sitting in on all those criminal trials like some kind of tart?”

“Right, that’s enough,” snapped Måns. “You said yourself that you didn’t mind. I thought it was a good way of keeping in touch with the job. Get out of that boat!”

“As if I had a choice! You could see that if you bothered to think about it!”

“Stop doing the bloody criminal cases, then. Get out of the boat and go upstairs and get some sleep, then we’ll talk in the morning when you’ve sobered up.”

Rebecka took a step forward in the boat. It rocked back and forth. For a moment the thought went through Måns’ mind that she was going to clamber out onto the jetty and slap him. That would be just perfect.

“When I’ve sobered up? You... you’re just unbelievable!”

She placed her foot against the jetty and pushed off. Måns considered grabbing hold of the boat, but that would cause a scene as well. Hanging on to the prow till he fell in the water. The office’s very own comedy turn. The boat slipped away.

“Go to bloody Kiruna then!” he shouted, without paying any attention to who might hear him. “You can do what you bloody well like as far as I’m concerned.”

The boat disappeared into the darkness. He heard the oars rattling in the rowlocks and the splash as the blades slid into the water.

But Rebecka’s voice was still close by, and had gone up a pitch.

“Tell me what could possibly be worse than this.”

He recognized the voice from those endless rows with Madelene. First of all Madelene’s

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