



Last Will: A Novel (The Annika Bengtzon Series)

By Liza Marklund



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From “the Queen of Scandinavian crime fiction” (Henning Mankell), the latest installment in the internationally bestselling series starring investigative reporter Annika Bengtzon.

The inspiration for the hit film series, *Annika Bengtzon: Crime Reporter*, now available on Netflix.

HOW FAR WILL A MADMAN GO TO ATTAIN THE ULTIMATE PRIZE?

In the midst of a brutal Scandinavian winter, a member of the Nobel Prize committee is gunned down in the city of Stockholm.

Reporter Annika Bengtzon, who made eye contact with the killer just seconds before the shots were fired, is the key witness. Because of the sensitivity of the crime, police issue a gag order on her immediately—and she is forced to figure out on her own why an American assassin known only as “the Kitten” ordered the hit. With her marriage falling to pieces and her job on the line, Annika quickly finds herself in the middle of a violent story of terror and death, the roots of which date back centuries. The research all leads her to the same man: a rich and famous industrialist responsible for one of the world’s most coveted gifts, who died a tragic and mysterious death. If Annika wants to learn the truth, she risks uncovering secrets that some will do anything to protect.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Utterly convincing and genuinely entertaining. The reader is certainly given her money's worth, when Marklund serves up hard-hitting effects and sensational rarities, from bloody murder methods to the heroine's lethal threatening of little slimy boys."

—*Politiken* (Denmark)

"*Last Will* is the sixth installment with crime reporter Annika Bengtzon in the leading role. And she certainly stands her ground; the hunt for the murderer is terribly suspenseful."

—*Aftenposten* (Norway)

"Fast-paced, suspenseful chapters are alternated with more light-hearted fragments in this well-paced narrative. With this novel, Marklund confirms her position as a writer who knows her craft. She gracefully hits the mark, and comes out fine of every storm."

—*Boek* (Netherlands)

About the Author

Liza Marklund is an author, journalist, and goodwill ambassador for UNICEF. Her crime novels, featuring the relentless reporter Annika Bengtzon, instantly became international hits and have sold millions of copies in thirty languages worldwide. She lives in Stockholm, Sweden, and Marbella, Spain, where she is at work on the next installment in the series. Visit her website at LizaMarklund.com.

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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10

Nobel Day

The woman known as the Kitten felt the weight of the weapon dangling under her right armpit. She tossed the cigarette to the ground, lifted her skirt, and thoroughly crushed the butt with the underside of her high-heeled sandals.

Try to find any DNA on that if you can.

The Nobel festivities had been going on inside the banqueting rooms of the City Hall for three hours and thirty-nine minutes now. The dancing was underway, and she could make out the sound of the music in the chill of the street. The target had left the table down in the Blue Hall and was walking up the flight of steps toward the Golden Hall. The text message she had just received on her cell phone had given her the target's position, as precisely as possible under the circumstances.

She sighed and recognized how irritated she felt, and gave herself a mental slap. This job required concentration. There was no room for existential worrying or thoughts of alternative careers. This was all about basic survival.

She forced herself to focus on the immediate future, on the sequence of events she had memorized by going over it again and again until she was bored stiff by it, certain that the job would be carried out successfully.

So now she set off with light and measured steps, one two three, the salt and gravel rough under the thin soles of her sandals. The temperature had fallen below zero, forming patches of ice on the ground, a detail she had hoped for but hadn't been able to take for granted. The cold made her hunched and pale, and was making her eyes water. If they looked red it would be no bad thing.

The police officers in their uniforms and yellow tunics were positioned where they should be, two on each side of the archway that formed the entrance to the Stockholm City Hall. She calibrated her internal resources.

Time for mark number one: pale and beautiful, frozen and cold, cell phone in her hand. Ta dah, showtime!

She stepped into the archway just as a group of happy revelers rolled up from the other direction. The group's voices jangled in the cold air, their happy laughter echoing. The indirect lighting along the façade of the building threw shadows over their cheerful faces.

She looked down and reached the first police officer at the same time as the raucous men started yelling for a taxi. When the cop made an attempt to talk to her she threw out her arms and pretended to slip. The policeman reacted instinctively, the way men do, and he caught her flailing arm in a gentlemanly fashion. She muttered something embarrassed in incomprehensible English, withdrew her cold hand and glided off toward the main entrance, thirty-three measured steps.

So fucking easy, she thought. This is beneath my dignity.

The flagged courtyard of the City Hall was full of limousines with tinted glass, and she spotted the security guards from the corner of her eye. People were streaming out of the building, breath pluming from their mouths in cones. Straight ahead, beyond the cars and the garden, lay the glittering black waters of Lake Mälaren.

She skipped up to mark number two: the entrance to the Blue Hall. An elderly man was blocking the doorway and she had to stop. The man stood to one side to let out a group of elderly women who were following him, and she had to bite her tongue and stand there shivering in the cold while the old fossils creaked out into the courtyard. One intoxicated gentleman said something impertinent as she slipped into the cloakroom with her cell phone in her hand but she ignored him, just left him in her wake and made it to mark number three.

Annika Bengtzon stood up from table number fifty as her dinner partner, the managing editor of the journal *Science*, held her chair for her. She noticed that her legs were a bit unsteady. Her shawl was on the point of sliding down onto the floor and she clutched it more tightly round her waist. There were so many people, so many swirling colors everywhere. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy hurry past her table. God, he was handsome.

"It's been a pleasure," the editor said, kissing her hand before vanishing into the crowd. Annika smiled politely. Maybe he had been a bit upset when she turned down his invitation to dance.

She fiddled with her shawl and checked the time. She didn't have to get back to the newsroom just yet. Anders Wall, the financier, slid past with his wife, as the head of Swedish Television moved in the opposite direction.

Then she felt someone stop right behind her, and she looked round to see Bosse, the reporter for the other

main evening paper.

“How many stars do you give the starter?” he said quietly with his lips far too close to her ear.

“Four skulls and crossbones,” Annika said, standing quite still, her bare shoulder against the front of his jacket. “How many points does Princess Madeleine’s neckline get?”

“Two melons,” Bosse said. “The speech by the guy who got the prize for medicine?”

“Eight sleeping pills ...”

“May I?”

He bowed dramatically. Annika looked round quickly to make sure the man from *Science* was nowhere nearby. Then she nodded. She quickly pushed her elegant evening bag inside her larger bag and hoisted it onto her shoulder.

Her grandmother’s best shawl was draped over her lower arms, and as Annika’s skirt crunched, Bosse took her hand and led her toward the steps leading to the Golden Hall. They sailed between the tables, between the flowers and crystal glasses. Annika had skipped most of the wine, just tasting it so she could report on it (which was frankly an insult to the readers, seeing as she didn’t know a thing about wine). Even so, she still felt a bit giddy, a bit too light on her feet. She took Bosse’s arm as they started to ascend the staircase, holding up her skirt with her other hand.

“I’m going to trip,” she said. “I’ll fall on my ass and roll all the way down and knock the legs out from under some important politician.”

“No one has ever fallen down these stairs,” Bosse said. “When they were building it the architect, Ragnar Östberg, made his wife walk up and down it in an evening gown for a whole week, while he adjusted the steps to make sure you could glide up and down and never fall. The staircase has worked beautifully ever since, but his wife snapped and demanded a divorce.”

Annika laughed.

Soon she would have to leave the party and go write it up back in the newsroom. Soon the spell would be broken, soon her flowing long dress would turn into a top from H&M and a polyester skirt with enough static electricity for it to do a passable job as a vacuum cleaner.

“It’s completely crazy, really, being part of something like this,” she said.

Bosse put his hand on her arm and guided her up the last steps the same way the winner of the chemistry prize had just done with the queen.

They emerged onto the long balcony overlooking the Blue Hall, then had to fight their way through the crowd surrounding a drinks table just outside the doors to the Golden Hall.

“One for the road?” Bosse asked, and she shook her head.

“One dance,” she said, “then I have to go.”

They stepped into the Golden Hall, the fantastic banqueting hall whose walls were covered with artworks and mosaics made with real gold. The orchestra was playing but Annika couldn't hear the music, it was all just a tapestry of sound. All that mattered was that she was here and Bosse had his arm round her back and she was spinning round and round, the golden mosaics swirling.

The vaulted ceiling, limestone floors: the woman known as the Kitten was inside the building itself. Silk crunched and stretched across full stomachs, cravats rubbed against red necks. She slid unnoticed among the other evening gowns, no need to look around. In recent months she had been on a number of guided tours, in three different languages, through the halls and galleries of the City Hall. She had taken pictures and carefully studied the whole arena, she had been on test runs, even test slips, and she knew the exact length of her stride and where she could catch her breath.

It was a pretty impressive building, she had to admit. The architecture was the best thing about this job.

Twelve steps into the Blue Hall.

She stopped under the six-pointed stars of the pillared walkway and collected herself before entering the dizzying space of the hall, 1,526 slightly asymmetrical square meters, the aftermath of the meal, people crowding onto the marble floor, the light sparkling from thousands of glasses. The royal couple were gone, and the security staff had of course gone with them. She allowed herself a brief moment of contemplation, and realized that she would rather have taken part in the dinner than have to do her job. The theme of the meal had been Nordic winds, which actually sounded rather disgusting, but she liked the way it had all been set out.

Damn, she thought, I really have to come up with some other profession.

Oh well. Mark number four. Turn right, narrow shoulders, a quick glance.

She stepped out from the paired granite pillars and set off toward the staircase, ten steps in her high heels. She could hear the music from the Golden Hall clearly now.

A moment later a man was standing in front of her saying something incomprehensible. She stopped and took a step to the side, and then another. The bastard wasn't letting her through, and she was forced to push her way past him and hurried up the forty-two steps, each one thirteen centimeters high, thirty-nine centimeters across.

Then the long balcony of the Blue Hall, seven doorways into the Golden Hall, seven doorways leading to the great works of art in there, *The Queen of Lake Mälaren* and *Saint Erik*.

She skipped on, pushing her way through, efficient now, warm and quick, past doorway after doorway until she reached the very last one. The music was louder, a key change; it was getting close to the end of the piece, and she walked right out among the crowd of dancing partygoers. Now she really had to keep her focus.

For the first time during the whole of this job she felt the familiar tickling sensation, the crackling rush that sharpened her senses, the swaying sense of satisfaction. The millions of mosaic pieces shimmered in her eyes, cutting into her head; she looked round, the musicians over by the ugly *Queen of Lake Mälaren* on the far side were building up to the crescendo. Her eyes scanned the clothes, the people, she had to locate the target *now*.

And there it was.

Right there, on a direct line from mark number five to mark number six, dancing and jigging about. Ha!

Ninety seconds from now. She fired off a text to her wingman, raised her right arm, opened her evening bag and dropped her cell phone in, then felt for the pistol.

At that moment she was jolted by a laughing figure moving just to the left of her, what the fuck? The floor slid for a moment; she lost her balance and took another unplanned step, feeling her heel sink into something soft and her elbow jab at someone's ribs, then a yelp of pain in her ear.

The sound came so unexpectedly that she looked up and stared into a pair of heavily made-up eyes that were reflecting both annoyance and pain.

Shit! Fuck!

She looked quickly away and took the final steps.

The weapon was heavy and solid in her hand. It felt good, and the concentration that finally, finally filled her made all the sounds around her fade away; she was calm and clear. She raised the bag toward the dancing couple, aiming at the man's leg, the first shot. The sound was scarcely audible, the recoil manageable. The man sank to his knees, leaving the woman unshielded. She raised the bag, aimed at the woman's heart, and fired the second shot.

Her hand let go of the weapon, the ruined bag dangling from its strap once more; she refocused her gaze on the oak door, eight steps to the oak door that symbolized the next mark, one two three four five six (now the screaming started) seven eight, made it, and pulled the door open with no problem. It closed silently behind her, four steps to the service lift, two floors down, and then three steps down the slope to the service entrance.

Her focus started to relax, the wonderful rush started to disintegrate.

Not yet, for fuck's sake, she said angrily to herself. This is the tricky bit.

The cold was paralyzing as she stepped out into the south pillared arcade. Ninety-eight slippery, cold bastard steps toward the water, a hundred-meter dash.

The guards in the courtyard stiffened and in unison raised one hand to their ears, oh shit. She'd expected to get a bit further before they found out what had happened. She pulled the gun from her bag as she let the door of the service entrance close behind her. Three guys were guarding the side facing the water; just as planned, she shot them one by one, intending to render them harmless, not necessarily to kill.

Sorry boys, she thought, nothing personal.

A bullet fired from somewhere behind her hit the granite pillar beside her, chipping off a shard of stone that hit her in the cheek, and the unexpected pain made her flinch. She quickly crouched down, pulled off her shoes, and ran.

Her sense of hearing was coming back and she could make out the roar of the powerful outboard motor.

She left the shadows and turned sharply to the right through the garden, frozen grass crunching beneath her feet, cutting into her like needles. Shots were coming from somewhere behind her and she was flying, darting and flying, with the pistol and shoes in her hands as she tried to hold her skirt up.

The sound of the engine cut off as the boat swung in alongside the City Hall.

Winds of ice cut into her skin as she threw herself down the granite steps.

The waves of Lake Mälaren were hitting the hull and splashing over the sides as she landed awkwardly in the stern of the boat.

The feeling of triumph vanished almost immediately and was replaced by a restless irritation. She felt her cheek, damn, she was bleeding. As long as it didn't leave a scar. And it was cold as fuck as well.

Only when the tower of the City Hall had disappeared behind them and she was taking off her evening gown did she realize that she had lost one of her shoes.

Detective Inspector Anton Abrahamsson's baby was three months old and had colic. The child had been screaming day and night for eight weeks now and he and his wife were at their wits' end. He was able to go off to work and get a break sometimes, but it was worse for his wife. Anton tried vainly to comfort her over the phone: "It has to stop sometime, darling. Has he burped? Have you tried Minifom?"

The emergency call came through to the communications office of the Security Police just as Anton's wife started to sob with exhaustion.

"I'll be home as soon as I can," Anton Abrahamsson said, hanging up on his despairing spouse and angrily snatching up the emergency call. His reaction could probably be explained by the fact that the call didn't come from either the bodyguard unit or any of their own units, but from the regular police.

Which meant that the regular police force, whose primary duties were to look after the traffic and keep curious bystanders away from crime scenes, had a better grasp on the security situation than the Security Police.

That was Anton Abrahamsson's first conclusion.

The second dawned on him a second later:

Someone's going to end up in serious shit because of this.

The third made the hairs on his arms stand up:

Shit. They're here now.

I have to call the paper, Annika thought.

She had ended up lying face down on the dance floor, the marble ice-cold against her bare arms. A man was throwing up in front of her, another was standing on her hand. She pulled it away without any sense of pain. A woman was shrieking somewhere to her right, skirts brushed over her head. The orchestra stopped playing in the middle of a note, and in the sonic vacuum the screams echoed like an icy wave around the Blue Hall

and out into all the rooms of the City Hall.

Where's my bag? she thought and tried to get up, but was knocked on the head and sank back down.

A moment later the people around her vanished and she was being lifted up out of the crowd of people, a dark-gray suit sitting her down with her back to the rest of the hall. She found herself staring at a dark oak door.

I have to get hold of Jansson, she thought, and tried to look round for her bag. She'd left it by the copper doors leading to the Three Crowns Chamber, but all she could see now was a mass of people milling about and dark-gray men rushing in.

Her knees started to tremble and she felt the familiar rush of angst but managed to hold it at bay, this isn't dangerous, this isn't dangerous. She forced herself to take deep breaths and see the situation for what it was.

There was nothing she could do.

The mosaic figure on the far wall stared at her encouragingly, its snake-hair floating around its face. A fat woman in a black lace dress turned her eyes up and fainted dead away beside her. A young man was shouting so loudly that the veins on his neck were standing out like rubber bands. A drunk old man dropped his beer glass on the floor with a crash.

I wonder where Bosse's got to? she thought.

Her pulse slowed down, the carpet of noise in her head slowly began to fragment, and she could make out words and phrases again. She could hear calls and orders, mostly from the dark-gray suits. They were talking in steel-plated voices into wires that snaked from their ears toward their mouths, then down into inside pockets and trouser linings.

"The service elevator is too small, the gurney won't go in—we'll have to take it out through the ceremonial entrance in the tower."

She could make out the words, but not who was saying them.

"The building's secure, over. Yes, we've separated the witnesses and are in the process of emptying the banqueting halls."

I have to get my bag, she thought.

"I have to get my bag," she said out loud, but no one heard her. "Can I get my bag? I need my cell phone."

She turned round. The mass of people was moving slowly now, like ants before the first frost. A white-clad woman came running in from the Three Crowns Chamber, pushing a gurney in front of her, then a man with another gurney, then several men with stethoscopes and oxygen masks and drips. Further away in the Golden Hall the Nobel banquet guests stood like a wall, faces white, their mouths black holes. All the screaming had stopped and the silence was deafening. Annika could make out the fragmented sound of quiet talking from the white coats, then the bodies were loaded onto the gurneys, and only then did Annika notice the man, the man who had fallen on the dance floor: he was conscious, moaning. The woman was lying completely still.

A moment later they were gone.

The noise rose again with ear-splitting force and Annika took her chance. She slunk past two suits and managed to reach her bag. One of them grabbed hold of her just as she was fishing out her cell phone.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said with unnecessary force, and she shook herself free.

She rang Jansson’s direct line in the newsroom and got three short beeps in response.

Network busy.

What the ...?

Contacts, press, Jansson, press.

Bleep bleep bleep. Network busy.

Contacts, press, Jansson, press.

Network busy.

Annika looked round, trying to find help. Nobody noticed her.

“Your name?”

A man in jeans was standing in front of her, holding a pad and pen.

“Sorry?” Annika said.

“Criminal Investigation Department, can I have your name? We’re trying to figure out exactly what happened. Did you see anything?”

“I don’t know,” Annika said, looking over at the blood on the marble floor, already dark and congealing.

No angels, she managed to think, thank god the angels are keeping quiet.

She shivered and realized that she had dropped her shawl, her grandmother’s best shawl that she had worn back when she was a housekeeper at Harpsund, the prime minister’s country estate. It was in a heap on the floor next to the vivid pool of blood.

Dry cleaners, Annika thought. Hope it’s okay.

“My name’s Annika Bengtzon,” she said to the police officer. “I’m covering the Nobel banquet for the *Evening Post*. What happened?”

“Did you hear the shots?”

Shots?

Annika shook her head.

“Did you notice anyone suspicious in connection with the shots?”

“I was dancing,” she said, “it was crowded. Someone pushed into me, but nothing suspicious, no ...”

“Pushed? Who was doing the pushing?”

“A woman, she was trying to get through, and she stood on my foot.”

“Okay,” the policeman said, writing something in his pad. “Wait here and someone will come and get you for questioning.”

“I can’t,” Annika said. “I’ve got an article to write. What’s your name? Can I quote you?”

The man in jeans stepped closer to her and pressed her up against the wall.

“You’re going to wait right here,” he said, “until I get back.”

“Not on your life,” Annika said in a voice that threatened to turn into falsetto.

The police officer groaned and dragged her into the Three Crowns Chamber.

My deadline, Annika thought. How the hell am I going to get out of this?

Editor in chief Anders Schyman had just settled into the sofa in his living room with his wife and an Almodóvar film when the night editor rang.

“There’s been shooting at the Nobel banquet,” Jansson said. “At least five people have been shot, we don’t know if they’re alive or dead.”

Anders Schyman looked at his wife, as she pressed in vain on the remote to get the right subtitles.

“It’s the round button,” he said, showing her at the same time as the night editor’s words landed in his head.

“Annika Bengtzon and Ulf Olsson from pictures are there,” Jansson said. “I haven’t been able to contact them, the mobile network’s jammed. Too much traffic.”

“Tell me again,” Schyman said, signaling to his wife to pause the film.

“Too much traffic on the mobile network; one thousand three hundred people trying to make calls from the City Hall at the same time, and it’s gone down.”

“Who’s been shot? At the Nobel banquet?!”

His wife opened her eyes wide and dropped the remote on the floor.

“Some were security guards, but we don’t know about the others. The ambulances headed off, sirens blaring, toward Sankt Göran Hospital a few minutes ago.”

“Damn!” Schyman said, sitting up straight. “When did this happen?”

He glanced at his watch, 10:57 PM.

“Ten minutes ago, fifteen at most.”

“Is anyone dead?” his wife asked, but he hushed her.

“This is mad,” he said. “What are the police doing? Have they arrested anyone? Where were the shots fired? Inside the Blue Hall? Where were the king and queen? Haven’t they got any fucking security in that building?”

His wife laid a calming hand on his back.

“The police have sealed off the City Hall,” Jansson said, “no one can get in or out. They’re questioning everyone and will start to let people out in half an hour or so. We’ve got people on their way to get eyewitness accounts. We don’t know if they’ve arrested anyone, but they’re certainly still looking for more people.”

“What do things look like in the rest of the city?”

“They’ve stopped all the trains, and the main roads out are blocked off, but planes are still taking off from Arlanda. There aren’t many flights left this evening. We’ve got people heading for the Central Station, the motorways, pretty much everywhere.”

His wife gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then got up and left the room. Pedro Almodóvar’s women disappeared into an indeterminate future, their impending nervous breakdowns on hold.

“Have the police said anything?” Anders Schyman asked. “Terrorism, extremists, any suggestion of a threat?”

“They’ve announced a press conference, but not until 1:00 AM ...”

Someone shouted in the background and Jansson disappeared for a moment.

“Well,” he said when he came back on the line, “things are pretty hectic here. I need some quick decisions: how many extra pages can we add? Can we hold back some of the ads? And who do you think we should get in to do the lead article?”

The darkness hung heavily outside the editor in chief’s living room; he could see his own reflection in the glass and heard his wife running a tap out in the kitchen.

I’m starting to get old, he thought. I’d rather spend the evening with Antonio Banderas and Carmen Maura.

“I’m on my way,” the editor in chief said.

Jansson hung up without replying.

His wife was standing by the counter making a cup of tea; she turned around and kissed him when she felt

his hands on her shoulders.

“Who’s been killed?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” he whispered.

“Wake me up when you get home,” she said.

He nodded, his lips touching the back of her neck.

The Kitten changed to a higher gear and accelerated cautiously. The little motorbike growled encouragingly, its headlight playing over the graveled tarmac of the path.

This really was too damn easy.

She knew that any sense of superiority wasn’t good, it increased the risk of carelessness.

But in this case there were no more difficulties. The rest was just a walk in the park.

The job itself had been presented to her as a challenge, and that was what had interested her. After an initial check she had realized how simple it would be, but that wasn’t something she had any intention of revealing to her employer. Negotiations had taken place with the understanding that the job was extremely dangerous and difficult, which had obviously had a decisive effect on the size of her fee.

Ah well, she thought. You wanted it to be spectacular. Okay, hope you like it.

She swung into a narrow bikeway. A branch struck her helmet; it was black as the grave. Stockholm was usually described as a major city, a metropolis with glittering nightlife and a functioning security service, which was a laughable exaggeration. Everything outside the city center itself seemed to consist of scrappy patches of woodland. There was a chance that the couple with the dog had seen her and her wingman head off in different directions on their bikes, but since then she hadn’t seen a single person.

A major city, she thought scornfully, as she rode past a deserted campsite.

She rolled her shoulders; she was still freezing. Her thick jacket couldn’t really thaw her out, and the boat trip in her evening gown had practically frozen her.

Well, now that wretched silk outfit was at the bottom of the lake together with her bag and eight bricks. The sack was made of netting, so the water would rinse through the material, and any biological evidence would be washed away in a few hours. She still had the gun, as well as the one shoe and the cell phone. She was planning to get rid of those somewhere in the middle of the Baltic.

The thought of the other shoe preyed on her mind.

It had her fingerprints on it, she was sure of that. The shoes had been clean of evidence when she set out on the job, but before that last sprint she had taken it off, held it in her hand.

God knows where she’d dropped it.

There was light ahead of her and she realized she had reached the only inhabited road along the whole of the shore. She forced that damn shoe out of her mind, changed down a gear and turned off the path and up onto the road. Streetlights shone among the tightly packed houses. She let the motorbike roll down the slope, following the shoreline. A few youngsters were hanging about by a jetty; they glanced idly at her, then went on laughing and kicking at the gravel.

She knew that all they saw was a single person of uncertain gender on a small motorbike, wearing dark jeans and a helmet with a visor, no memorable features, nothing to stick in the mind.

The street came to an end and she rolled on into thin forest again, glancing quickly at her watch.

She was slightly behind schedule, only a minute or so, because of the frost. The evening she had timed the journey it had been raining, but the road hadn't been slippery.

She accelerated gently, and a moment later it happened.

The tires lost their grip on the ground and she felt the bike disappear from beneath her. Her left leg took the first blow and snapped like a matchstick just below the knee. Her shoulder hit next and dislocated instantly, then she felt a thud as her head hit the ground, thinking: I haven't got time for this.

When she came to again she was lying facedown on the ground.

What the hell had happened?

Pain was pulsing through her whole left side, from her head to her toes. The motorcycle was still growling somewhere behind her, its headlight shining into the trees.

She groaned. Fucking fuck. What was she going to do now?

She pulled off her helmet and lay her cheek against the frozen ground for a few seconds, forcing her brain to clear.

At least the bike was still working: she could feel the vibrations of the engine through the ground. But she was in worse shape. Her leg was broken and her shoulder was bugged. Carefully she flexed the right side of her body.

It seemed okay.

She sat up with her left arm hanging uselessly by her side. The joint was dislocated; she'd seen it happen to other people but had never had it happen to her before. Her leg was excruciatingly painful: she could feel the shaft of the bone pressing against the skin just below her left knee.

She shuffled backward until she felt a narrow tree trunk behind her, and groaned again.

The list of possible options she had to choose from was shrinking pretty damn fast.

Using her right side she dragged herself upright, and with a well-judged motion threw herself forward, letting her shoulder hit the tree trunk.

Holy fucking shit!

The pain as her shoulder popped back in was almost unbearable; she had to cling onto the tree with her healthy arm to stop herself from fainting.

When she had pulled herself together she flexed the fingers of her left hand, gently moved her arm, and realized it was working. But there was nothing she could do about her leg.

She leaned down carefully and caught hold of the helmet. Carefully she hopped over to the motorbike, pulled it upright and, with a great deal of effort, hoisted herself up. She had to bite her lip as she put her left foot on the pedal. The pain brought her out in a sweat as she adjusted her position on the seat.

For a moment she wasn't sure which direction she should be going in. The forest looked the same; she couldn't tell where she had come from.

Shit, shit, shit!

She looked at the time, thirteen minutes behind schedule.

Her wingman would wait for half an hour in the boat out at Torö, then she had given him orders to set off for Ventspils.

Fear hit her like a dagger in the chest.

Would this crappy job up at the bloody North Pole turn out to be her last?

She put the helmet on, dropped the visor and put the bike in gear. She turned and rode in what she hoped was a southerly direction, with her left knee jutting out at an indescribably wrong angle.

Annika trudged after the police officer through the winding passageways of the City Hall until they reached a long corridor. In the distance she could make out chandeliers hanging from heavy roof beams, but here there was nothing but gloom, shadows, and silence.

Irritated, she sped up and walked past the police officer.

"How long is this going to take?" she asked, looking at her watch.

"I'll see if this is where he meant," the officer said, stopping. He took hold of her upper arm as if she were a suspect, someone who was likely to make a break for it. She pulled free as the officer knocked on a door bearing a sign saying this was the Bråvalla Room.

"If I wanted to get away I'd already have done it," she said.

Inside sat two officers in plain clothes, along with a reporter Annika recognized from television news. The reporter was crying so much that her shoulders were shaking. One of the officers let out such an angry yell that Annika's officer almost hit his own nose as he hurried to shut the door.

"Not that room," he said, the tips of his ears starting to glow.

They carried on walking in an odd silence, passing gray doors in gray walls, then the broad opening to an office where another bout of questioning had just begun with a member of the Swedish Academy. Annika couldn't hear what was being said, but she saw the police officer making notes and the Academician nervously fingering the leg of his chair.

I have to remember, she thought. I have to be able to describe this afterward.

She noted that the scene was also being observed by Ragnar Östberg, architect of the City Hall, whose bronze bust watched over events with a concerned expression.

Did you have any idea that something like this could ever happen in your building? Annika wondered, then was stopped once more by the police officer's damp fist.

"Can you wait here a moment?"

"Do I have any choice?" Annika said, turning away.

It was brighter here. She could see the details more clearly: marble busts above the doors, bronze hinges and door handles, ostentatious chandeliers.

"Look, I need time to write up my story," she said, but the officer had already slid off down the corridor.

A door opened and someone was standing there calling her name. Light flooded out of the doorway, falling over a painting on the other side of the corridor. She went in without saying anything.

"Close the door behind you."

The voice made her stop.

"I might have guessed you'd be here," she said.

Detective Inspector Q was unshaven, his features more drawn than usual.

"I asked to be able to take care of you myself," he said, sitting down at the end of a heavy oak table. "Sit down."

He gestured for Annika to take a seat on his left, turned on a tape recorder, and poured himself a glass of water.

"Interview with Annika Bengtzon, reporter on the *Evening Post* newspaper, date of birth and full name to be noted later, conducted by Q in the Small Common Room of the Stockholm City Hall, on Thursday, December 10, at ..."

He paused for breath and ran his hand through his hair. Annika settled carefully into a black-framed chair with red-leather upholstery, glancing up at the somber gentlemen in oils who were staring down at her from their heavy frames.

"... at 11:21 PM," he concluded. "You saw someone acting suspiciously in the Blue Hall at approximately 10:45 this evening, is that correct?"

Annika let go of her bag on the floor and clasped her hands in her lap, listening to the traffic of central Stockholm rumbling somewhere in another world.

“I don’t know that she was acting suspiciously,” Annika said.

“Can you describe what happened,” the detective inspector asked.

“It was nothing special,” Annika said in a voice that was now slightly shrill. “I haven’t got time to sit here making small talk. I didn’t see anything special at all, I was dancing and I just got pushed by a girl. It’s hardly reasonable that I should have to sit here when the whole newsroom is waiting for me and my article ...”

The detective inspector leaned forward and turned off the tape recorder with a little click.

“Now listen, you headline-chasing bitch,” he said, leaning toward her, his eyes clouding over. “This isn’t the time to be egocentric. You’re going to tell me what you saw, exactly as you remember it, right here, right now. It was only half an hour ago, and you were one of the people standing closest when it happened.”

She stared back for a moment, then looked away, her gaze sliding over the heavy leather-bound books on the dark oak shelves. Then she nodded.

Did he really just call her a *headline-chasing bitch*?

“We’ll question you more thoroughly later,” Q said quietly, sounding friendlier and more tired now. “Right now we need a description. Take it chronologically, from the moment you saw this person, and leave us to work out what’s important.”

He started the tape recorder again. Annika cleared her throat and tried to relax her shoulders.

“A woman,” she said, “it was a woman who pushed me, with her elbow; then she stood on my foot.”

“What did the woman look like?”

The room was collapsing on top of her, with its heavy oil paintings and dark oak bookcases. She put her hands over her eyes and heaved a sigh.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Her cell phone started to ring; the sound made her pull herself together. They waited in silence for it to stop.

“Okay, let’s try it a different way,” Q said when it had finally fallen silent. “Where were you when she pushed you?”

She summoned up the music, the glamour, the happiness, the darkness, the crush.

“On the dance floor, I was dancing. At one end of the Golden Hall, not the one with the orchestra, the other end.”

“Who were you dancing with?”

Confusion and shame washed over her and she looked down at her lap.

“His name’s Bosse, he’s a reporter for the opposition.”

“Blond guy, quite well built?”

Annika nodded, still staring at her lap, her cheeks hot.

“Can you answer verbally, please.”

“Yes,” she said, slightly too loudly, and straightened her back. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Might he have seen anything?”

“Yes, obviously, although I don’t think she trod on him.”

“And then what happened?”

Then what happened? Nothing else. Nothing at all, that was all she saw.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I turned my back on her and didn’t see anything else.”

“And you didn’t hear anything?”

The hubbub? The music? Her own breathing?

“Only a couple of *poufs*.”

“*Poufs*?”

“Muffled noises, sort of, like puffs of air. I turned around and saw a man slump to his knees. He was dancing with a woman and she looked surprised when he just collapsed like that—she looked up and she looked at me and then she looked down at her chest and then I looked as well and saw she was bleeding—it was sort of pumping out and she looked up again and looked at me and then she slumped to the floor and everyone started screaming ...”

“When did the second *pouf* come?”

Annika glanced at Q.

“The second?”

“You said ‘a couple of *poufs*.’”

“Did I? I don’t know. There was a *pouf* and then the woman was looking at me and then there was another *pouf*—yes, two *poufs*, I think ...”

“How far away were you from the couple when they fell?”

She thought for several seconds.

“Two meters, two and a half maybe.”

“The woman who pushed you, did you see her as they fell?”

Had she? Had she seen a woman? Had she seen shoulder straps?

“Shoulder straps,” Annika said. “She had narrow shoulder straps. Or a bag with a narrow strap.”

Q nodded and made a note in his pad.

Annika pressed her fingertips to her eyelids and tried, searching through images, moods—was there anything there behind the noise?

Bosse’s hand had been scorching through the fabric on her back, Bosse’s hand holding her so tightly to him that she could feel his cock against her stomach, her own hand behind his neck, that was what she felt, that was what she remembered. The music was there like an apron, dull, neatly ironed, but it was only there to conceal them, so they could hold on to each other in the glittering golden light.

“I was elbowed in the side,” she said hesitantly. “And someone stood on my foot. I don’t know which came first.”

Her cell phone started to ring again.

“Turn it off,” Q said, and she clicked to end the signal.

It was Jansson, of course.

“Was it done on purpose, you being trodden on?”

She put down her mobile, now on silent, and looked up in surprise.

“Definitely not,” she said. “There was a big fat man trying to boogie right next to us, and he knocked into the woman and she bumped into me.”

Something happened in Q’s eyes, a little flicker of interest.

“Did she say anything when she bumped into you?”

Annika looked down the bookcase, to a leather-bound volume of council protocols from 1964, the way she had looked down at the woman, the woman with the shoulder straps.

“She was looking for something in her bag,” Annika said. “The strap was quite short so she had to lift her arm up a bit to fish it out, like this ...”

She raised her right arm and showed how she was looking for something in an imaginary evening bag.

“What color was the bag?”

“Silver,” she said, to her surprise and without hesitation. “It was matte silver-colored. The shape of an envelope, like an electricity bill or something.”

“What did she take out of her bag?”

Annika looked away from the protocols from 1964, searching and searching.

Nothing, just the pain in her foot.

“It hurt,” Annika said. “I let out a yelp. She looked up at me.”

Annika nodded hesitantly.

“Yes,” she said, convincing herself, “she looked up at me, right at me.”

“Did she say anything?”

Annika gazed out across the polished table.

“She had yellow eyes,” she said. “Completely cold, yellow eyes, almost golden.”

“Yellow?”

“Yes, golden yellow.”

“And how was she dressed?”

She shut her eyes again and heard the throb of the music, seeing the shoulder strap before her. It was blood-red, unless it was the bleeding woman’s dress that was red? Or the blood? Unless the shoulder strap was white, maybe, white as snow against brown skin, unless the shoulder was pale and the strap dark?

“I don’t know,” she said, perplexed. “My memories are sort of black and white, and then they change, like they’re negatives or something, I really don’t know ...”

“Yellow eyes, could they have been lenses?”

Lenses? Yes, of course they could have been lenses, unless they weren’t actually yellow, but green?

Q’s cell phone started to vibrate, and a genuine Eurovision song rang out, “My Number One,” the Greek song that won a few years ago. The detective inspector glanced at the display and muttered “have to take this.” He switched off the tape recorder and turned toward the closed door as he spoke.

He went on and on, his voice rising and falling. Annika had to get up and move away, drawn by the sound of traffic seeping in through the gaps between the windows. Slowly she breathed out onto the cold windowpane, and the view vanished for a moment, and when it returned she could see Hantverkargatan, the street she lived on, and beyond that the Klara district of Stockholm, trains thundering past, and the old Serafen health center over to the left.

Her health center! Her doctors, where she had been with Kalle only that morning, another ear infection.

So close, in another reality, just four blocks from home.

She felt her throat constrict—oh God, I don't want to move!

"The victims have been identified," Q said, pulling her back into the room. "Maybe you recognized them?"

She went back to the chair on shaky legs, perched on the edge and cleared her throat.

"The man was one of the prizewinners," she said. "Medicine, I think. I don't remember his name off the top of my head, but I've got it in my notes."

She reached for her bag to indicate that she could find out, just an arm's length away. She stopped halfway through the gesture.

"Aaron Wiesel," the detective said. "An Israeli, he shared the prize with an American, Charles Watson. The woman?"

Annika shook her head.

"I'd never seen her before."

Q rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"Wiesel's in surgery in Sankt Göran's right now. The woman was Caroline von Behring, chair of the Karolinska Institute's Nobel Committee. She died on the dance floor, pretty much instantly."

All warmth vanished from her hands, cold eating in through her fingers and into her bloodstream, making her joints seize up. With an effort she pulled up the shawl that had fallen behind her and draped it over her shoulders again.

Her eyes as she was dying, *she was looking at me when she died.*

"I have to go now," she said. "I'm really sorry, but I've got an awful lot to do."

"You can't write about this," Q said, leaning back heavily in his chair. "Your observations about the woman who pushed you match the description of the fleeing killer. You're one of our key witnesses, so I'm imposing a ban on disclosure, effective as of now."

Annika was halfway out of her chair, but sank down again.

"Am I under arrest?" she asked.

"Don't be stupid," Q said, as he got up, clutching his cell phone in his hand.

"Disclosure bans only happen during arrest procedures," Annika said. "If I'm not under arrest, and no one else has been arrested, how can you impose a ban on disclosure?"

"You're not as smart as you think," Q said. "There's another form of disclosure ban, according to chapter twenty-three, paragraph ten, final clause, of the Judicial Procedure Act. It concerns the accounts of key

witnesses and can be imposed by the head of an investigation where a serious crime is suspected.”

“Freedom of speech is protected by the constitution,” Annika said, “and that carries more weight. And you’re not the head of the investigation—in a case like this that would have to be a public prosecutor.”

“No, you’re wrong there as well. A head of this investigation hasn’t been appointed yet, so I’m acting head right now.”

Annika stood up angrily and leaned over the table.

“You can’t stop me saying what I saw!” she said in a shrill voice. “I’ve got the whole article in my head, I can write a fucking brilliant eyewitness account out of it, three double pages easily, maybe four—I saw the murderer in the act of killing, I saw the victim die ...”

Q spun around toward her, pressed his face right up to hers.

“For God’s sake!” he yelled. “You’ll get a fine so big you won’t know what hit you if go ahead with this. Sit down!”

Annika fell silent and sat down with a bit of a thump, hunching her shoulders. Q turned his back on her and dialed a number on his cell phone. She sat in silence beneath the huge portraits as Q made his call and gave angry orders about something.

“You’re putting me in an impossible position if I can’t write anything,” Annika said.

“My heart bleeds,” Q said.

“What are my bosses going to say?” Annika went on. “What would your bosses say if you refused to investigate a crime because I said you couldn’t, because I have to write about you?”

Q sat down again with a deep sigh.

“Sorry,” he said, and gave her a slightly guilty look, then paused for a moment before saying: “Ask me something, and I might be able to give you an answer.”

“Why?” Annika said.

“Because you can’t write about it anyway,” he said, smiling for the first time.

She thought for a moment.

“Why couldn’t anyone hear the shots?” she asked.

“You could hear them. You said so.”

“But only as little *poufs*.”

“A pistol with a silencer would fit into the sort of oblong bag you described. And you don’t remember anything else about her appearance? Her hair, or her clothes?”

Eyes, just eyes and the shoulder straps.

“She must have had long hair, otherwise I would have remembered, but I don’t think there was anything special about it. Dark, I think. I don’t think it was loose, maybe it was tied up somehow? And her dress—she must have been wearing an evening dress? I didn’t notice anything odd, so I suppose she must have looked like everyone else? How did she get into the Golden Hall, do you know?”

Q looked through his notes.

“We’re checking to see if she could have been on the guest list, but we don’t really know. There are other witness statements saying that it could have been a man dressed as a woman. What do you think about that?”

A man? Annika snorted.

“It was a girl,” she said.

“How can you be sure?”

Annika looked over at the protocols from 1964.

“She looked up at me, so she must have been shorter than me. How many men are that short? And she moved quickly, easily.”

“And men don’t?”

“Not in that sort of stiletto heel. It takes a lot of practice to move as easily as she did.”

“And you saw her heels?”

Annika stood up and hoisted her bag onto her shoulder.

“No, but I’ve got the bruise one of them made on the top of my right foot. Please, can I call you later tonight?”

“And where do you think you’re going?”

She stopped against her will, stifled in spite of all the air in the room.

“The newsroom. I have to go and talk to them. Unless you can stop me from working as well?”

“You have to go down to the profiling unit of National Crime and put together a photofit of the killer.”

Annika threw out her arms.

“Are you mad? I’ve got a deadline in a couple of hours. Jansson must be tearing his hair out by now.”

Q walked up to her, looking completely desperate.

“Please,” he said.

The door opened and a uniformed officer walked into the Small Common Room. For a moment she thought it was the same man who had escorted her to the interview, but it was a different one, similar, another one from the same breed, a stereotypical example of a broad-shouldered, thoroughly Swedish graduate from the police training course.

She stopped in the doorway, turned and looked at the detective inspector.

“Did you really call me a *headline-chasing bitch*?” she said.

He waved her out of the room without looking up.

She pushed past the stereotype, fished out the wire of her earpiece, and pulled her cell phone from the depths of her bag. The young police officer looked like he was about to protest, but she fixed her eyes on the end of the corridor and swept away from him without deigning to look at him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Jansson snarled before she had a chance to say anything.

“Questioning,” she said quietly, holding the microphone a millimeter from her mouth. “I had a sort of close encounter with the killer, they reckon she trod on my foot.”

She could feel the pain each time she took a step.

“Great, the eight and nine spread. What else have you got?”

“Hey,” the police officer behind her said, “who are you talking to?”

She sped up, but just in front of the opening to the large office she stumbled over the hem of her dress and dropped her earpiece. Her shawl slid onto the floor and the raw draft of the corridor swept over her, settling on her skin like a damp towel. She shivered and looked around; the Academy member had been replaced by two stewards in white jackets with their backs to her.

“Annika?” Jansson said as soon as she popped the earpiece back in.

“I can’t write anything, Q has given me a disclosure ban. I could probably be charged just for talking to you about the killer. I have to go over to Kungsholmsgatan for further questioning.”

“Okay, put your cell phone away.”

Annika spun round and looked at the police officer.

“Listen,” she said, “I’m going to talk as much as I damn well like on this cell phone. If you don’t like it you can arrest me.”

She turned and carried on walking, away from the bitter cold.

“The term ‘arrest’ doesn’t apply in a situation like this within the Swedish judicial system,” the policeman said.

“Call the paper’s lawyers and find out exactly what I can and can’t say,” Annika said into the microphone.

“How’s it looking? Is there anything particular you’re missing?”

She could hear Jansson tearing his hair; she shared his frustration and wished she could do something to assuage it.

“Everything. Everyone else has already got text and pictures up on their websites, and we’ve only got the stuff from the main news agency. When will you be back here?”

“Don’t know, but I’ll be there as soon as I can. How much did Olsson manage to get?”

Jansson groaned quietly.

“Nothing. He thought the angle was wrong and the light too poor, so he didn’t take any pictures.”

“You’re kidding.” Annika said.

The policeman held a door open for Annika and she emerged onto the balcony overlooking the Blue Hall, right beside the first doorway to the Golden Hall.

“Not really. Nothing of his material is useable. We’ve got no pictures, basically.”

Annika felt her heart sink.

It wouldn’t be the photographer who took the blame, it was always the reporter, especially if it was her, and especially right now. It was only three weeks since she had forced the editor in chief to publish an article revealing that the family that owned most of the paper were dictatorial extortionists.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Anything with blood and policemen ...”

Annika ended the call and turned off sharply to the left. She was inside the Golden Hall before the stereotype had time to react and tell her to stop.

The whole of the banqueting room was bathed in light from the powerful lamps of the forensics team. In the far distance, beneath a headless St. Erik, the result of confusion over the height of the ceiling when the hall was built, two men were crouching beside the spot where the woman had died.

Annika raised her cell phone, activated the camera function on the edge of the phone, and pressed *take picture*. She took another two steps, *take picture*, five more, *take picture*.

The police officer grabbed the top of her arm but she pulled free.

She jogged ten paces, *take picture*, the forensics officers noticed her and looked up in surprise, *take picture*.

“Okay, you’re leaving right now,” the police officer said, picking her up physically so that she lost contact with the floor, and he carried her out onto the balcony, not putting her down until they were over by the staircase. She could feel the stone floor under her feet, and she suddenly realized she was standing on the very spot where members of the royal family and the Nobel Prize winners always had their pictures taken

before their long, gliding progress down one of the most famous staircases in the world.

How different it was for them, she thought, looking out over the remains of the dinner for one thousand three hundred guests. Earlier that evening the prizewinners had gazed out over meticulously laid tables and immaculately dressed guests, sparkling crystal and porcelain with real gold rims, flowers and trumpets.

The Blue Hall with its mute brick walls was desolate now, left more abandoned to its fate than ever before. The top table had been cleared, but the rest of the plates were still there, food congealing on soiled tablecloths. Napkins lay scattered across plates as well as on the floor; the chairs were all over the place, some of them tipped over. At 10:45 all activity in the Blue Hall had ceased, time had stopped, and the moment when the next tables were to have been cleared never arrived.

“How long will the City Hall be closed off?” Annika asked.

“As long as necessary. Where are your outdoor clothes?”

There was a uniformed officer in the cloakroom. He handed over Annika’s padded jacket with an expression of deep disappointment at the role he had been allocated.

“I had a bag with my shoes in it as well,” Annika said. “Black boots.”

The policeman’s frustration seemed boundless as he went back to look for the bag. Annika turned around and pulled out her cell phone. While the officer was searching the racks, she brought up the pictures of the Golden Hall and pressed *send*.

She stared fixedly at the shell-shaped bronze lamps of the hallway as the message glided away through the pitch-black winter night and landed in the *Evening Post*’s server.

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