



**THE
GIRL WHO
KICKED
THE HORNET'S
NEST**

A NOVEL

STIEG LARSSON

Author of the Number One Best Seller

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO



ALSO BY STIEG LARSSON

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
The Girl Who Played with Fire

**THE GIRL WHO
KICKED THE
HORNET'S NEST**

Stieg Larsson

Translated from the Swedish by Reg Keeland



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PART 1

Intermezzo in a Corridor

APRIL 8–12

An estimated 600 women served during the American Civil War. They had signed up disguised as men. Hollywood has missed a significant chapter of cultural history here—or is this history ideologically too difficult to deal with? Historians have often struggled to deal with women who do not respect gender distinctions, and nowhere is that distinction more sharply drawn than in the question of armed combat. (Even today, it can cause controversy having a woman on a typical Swedish moose hunt.)

But from antiquity to modern times, there are many stories of female warriors, of Amazons. The best known find their way into the history books as warrior queens, rulers as well as leaders. They have been forced to act as any Churchill, Stalin, or Roosevelt: Semiramis from Nineveh, who shaped the Assyrian Empire, and Boudicca, who led one of the bloodiest English revolts against the Roman forces of occupation, to cite just two. Boudicca is honoured with a statue on the Thames at Westminster Bridge, opposite Big Ben. Be sure to say hello to her if you happen to pass by.

On the other hand, history is reticent about women who were common soldiers, who bore arms, belonged to regiments, and took part in battles on the same terms as men, though hardly a war has been waged without women soldiers in the ranks.

CHAPTER 1

Friday, April 8

Dr. Jonasson was woken by a nurse five minutes before the helicopter was expected to land. It was just before 1:30 in the morning.

“What?” he said, confused.

“Rescue Service helicopter coming in. Two patients. An injured man and a younger woman. The woman has gunshot wounds.”

“All right,” Jonasson said wearily.

Although he had slept for only half an hour, he felt groggy. He was on the night shift in the ER at Sahlgrenska hospital in Göteborg. It had been a strenuous evening.

By 12:30 the steady flow of emergency cases had eased off. He had made a round to check on the state of his patients and then gone back to the staff bedroom to try to rest for a while. He was on duty until 6:00, and seldom got the chance to sleep even if no emergency patients came in. But this time he had fallen asleep almost as soon as he turned out the light.

Jonasson saw lightning out over the sea. He knew that the helicopter was coming in the nick of time. All of a sudden a heavy downpour lashed at the window. The storm had moved in over Göteborg.

He heard the sound of the chopper and watched as it banked through the storm squalls down towards the helipad. For a second he held his breath when the pilot seemed to have difficulty controlling the aircraft. Then it vanished from his field of vision and he heard the engine slowing to land. He took a hasty swallow of his tea and set down the cup.

Jonasson met the emergency team in the admissions area. The other doctor on duty took on the first patient who was wheeled in—an elderly man with

his head bandaged, apparently with a serious wound to the face. Jonasson was left with the second patient, the woman who had been shot. He did a quick visual examination: it looked like she was a teenager, very dirty and bloody, and severely wounded. He lifted the blanket that the Rescue Service had wrapped around her body and saw that the wounds to her hip and shoulder were bandaged with duct tape, which he considered a pretty clever idea. The tape kept bacteria out and blood in. One bullet had entered her hip and gone straight through the muscle tissue. He gently raised her shoulder and located the entry wound in her back. There was no exit wound: the round was still inside her shoulder. He hoped it had not penetrated her lung, and since he did not see any blood in the woman's mouth he concluded that probably it had not.

“Radiology,” he told the nurse in attendance. That was all he needed to say.

Then he cut away the bandage that the emergency team had wrapped around her skull. He froze when he saw another entry wound. The woman had been shot in the head, and there was no exit wound there either.

Jonasson paused for a second, looking down at the girl. He felt dejected. He often described his job as being like that of a goalkeeper. Every day people came to his place of work in varying conditions but with one objective: to get help.

Jonasson was the goalkeeper who stood between the patient and Fonus Funeral Service. His job was to decide what to do. If he made the wrong decision, the patient might die or perhaps wake up disabled for life. Most often he made the right decision, because the vast majority of injured people had an obvious and specific problem. A stab wound to the lung or a crushing injury after a car crash were both particular and recognizable problems that could be dealt with. The survival of the patient depended on the extent of the damage and on Jonasson's skill.

There were two kinds of injury that he hated. One was a serious burn case, because no matter what measures he took the burns would almost inevitably result in a lifetime of suffering. The second was an injury to the brain.

The girl on the gurney could live with a piece of lead in her hip and a piece of lead in her shoulder. But a piece of lead inside her brain was a trauma of a wholly different magnitude. He was suddenly aware of the nurse saying something.

“Sorry. I wasn’t listening.”

“It’s her.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Lisbeth Salander. The girl they’ve been hunting for the past few weeks, for the triple murder in Stockholm.”

Jonasson looked again at the unconscious patient’s face. He realized at once that the nurse was right. He and the whole of Sweden had seen Salander’s passport photograph on billboards outside every newspaper kiosk for weeks. And now the murderer herself had been shot, which was surely poetic justice of a sort.

But that was not his concern. His job was to save his patient’s life, irrespective of whether she was a triple murderer or a Nobel Prize winner. Or both.

Then the efficient chaos, the same in every ER the world over, erupted. The staff on Jonasson’s shift set about their appointed tasks. Salander’s clothes were cut away. A nurse reported on her blood pressure—100/70—while the doctor put his stethoscope to her chest and listened to her heartbeat. It was surprisingly regular, but her breathing was not quite normal.

Jonasson did not hesitate to classify Salander’s condition as critical. The wounds in her shoulder and hip could wait until later, with a compress on each, or even with the duct tape that some inspired soul had applied. What mattered was her head. Jonasson ordered tomography with the new and improved CT scanner that the hospital had lately acquired.

Jonasson had a view of medicine that was at times unorthodox. He thought doctors often drew conclusions that they could not substantiate. This meant that they gave up far too easily; alternatively, they spent too much time at the acute stage trying to work out exactly what was wrong with the patient so as to decide on the right treatment. This was correct

procedure, of course. The problem was that the patient was in danger of dying while the doctor was still doing his thinking.

But Jonasson had never before had a patient with a bullet in her skull. Most likely he would need a brain surgeon. He had all the theoretical knowledge required to make an incursion into the brain, but he did not by any means consider himself a brain surgeon. He felt inadequate, but all of a sudden he realized that he might be luckier than he deserved. Before he scrubbed up and put on his operating clothes he sent for the nurse.

“There’s an American professor from Boston working at the Karolinska hospital in Stockholm. He happens to be in Göteborg tonight, staying at the Elite Park Avenue on Avenyn. He just gave a lecture on brain research. He’s a good friend of mine. Could you get the number?”

While Jonasson was still waiting for the X-rays, the nurse came back with the number of the Elite Park Avenue. Jonasson picked up the phone. The night porter at the Elite Park Avenue was very reluctant to wake a guest at that time of night and Jonasson had to come up with a few choice phrases about the critical nature of the situation before his call was put through.

“Good morning, Frank,” Jonasson said when the call was finally answered. “It’s Anders. Do you feel like coming over to Sahlgrenska to help out in a brain op?”

“Are you bullshitting me?” Dr. Frank Ellis had lived in Sweden for many years and was fluent in Swedish—albeit with an American accent—but when Jonasson spoke to him in Swedish, Ellis always replied in his mother tongue.

“The patient is in her mid-twenties. Entry wound, no exit.”

“And she’s alive?”

“Weak but regular pulse, less regular breathing, blood pressure one hundred over seventy. She also has a bullet wound in her shoulder and another in her hip. But I know how to handle those two.”

“Sounds promising,” Ellis said.

“Promising?”

“If somebody has a bullet in their head and they’re still alive, that points to hopeful.”

“I understand. . . . Frank, can you help me out?”

“I spent the evening in the company of good friends, Anders. I got to bed at 1:00 and no doubt I have an impressive blood alcohol content.”

“I’ll make the decisions and do the surgery. But I need somebody to tell me if I’m doing anything stupid. Even a falling-down drunk Professor Ellis is several classes better than I could ever be when it comes to assessing brain damage.”

“OK, I’ll come. But you’re going to owe me one.”

“I’ll have a taxi waiting outside by the time you get down to the lobby. The driver will know where to drop you, and a nurse will be there to meet you and get you scrubbed in.”

“I had a patient a number of years ago, in Boston—I wrote about the case in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It was a girl the same age as your patient here. She was walking to the university when someone shot her with a crossbow. The arrow entered at the outside edge of her left eyebrow and went straight through her head, exiting from almost the middle of the back of her neck.”

“And she survived?”

“She looked like nothing on earth when she came in. We cut off the arrow shaft and put her head in a CT scanner. The arrow went straight through her brain. By all known reckoning she should have been dead, or at least suffered such massive trauma that she would have been in a coma.”

“And what was her condition?”

“She was conscious the whole time. Not only that; she was terribly frightened, of course, but she was completely rational. Her only problem was that she had an arrow through her skull.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I got the forceps and pulled out the arrow and bandaged the wounds. More or less.”

“And she lived to tell the tale?”

“Obviously her condition was critical, but the fact is we could have sent her home the same day. I’ve seldom had a healthier patient.”

Jonasson wondered whether Ellis was pulling his leg.

“On the other hand,” Ellis went on, “I had a forty-two-year-old patient in Stockholm some years ago who banged his head on a windowsill. He began to feel sick immediately and was taken by ambulance to the ER. When I got to him he was unconscious. He had a small bump and a very slight bruise. But he never regained consciousness and died after nine days in intensive care. To this day I have no idea why he died. In the autopsy report, we wrote brain haemorrhage resulting from an accident, but not one of us was satisfied with that assessment. The bleeding was so minor, and located in an area that shouldn’t have affected anything else at all. And yet his liver, kidneys, heart, and lungs shut down one after the other. The older I get, the more I think it’s like a game of roulette. I don’t believe we’ll ever figure out precisely how the brain works.” He tapped on the X-ray with a pen. “What do you intend to do?”

“I was hoping you would tell me.”

“Let’s hear your diagnosis.”

“Well, first of all, it seems to be a small-calibre bullet. It entered at the temple, and then stopped about four centimetres into the brain. It’s resting against the lateral ventricle. There’s bleeding there.”

“How will you proceed?”

“To use your terminology, get some forceps and extract the bullet by the same route it went in.”

“Excellent idea. I would use the thinnest forceps you have.”

“It’s that simple?”

“What else can we do in this case? We could leave the bullet where it is, and she might live to be a hundred, but it’s also a risk. She might develop epilepsy, migraines, all sorts of complaints. And one thing you really don’t want to do is drill into her skull and then operate a year from now when the wound itself has healed. The bullet is located away from the major blood vessels. So I would recommend that you extract it, but . . .”

“But what?”

“The bullet doesn’t worry me so much. She’s survived this far and that’s a good omen for her getting through having the bullet removed too. The real problem is here.” He pointed at the X-ray. “Around the entry wound you have all sorts of bone fragments. I can see at least a dozen that are a couple of millimetres long. Some are embedded in the brain tissue. That’s what could kill her if you’re not careful.”

“Isn’t that part of the brain associated with numbers and mathematical capacity?” Jonasson said.

Ellis shrugged. “Mumbo jumbo. I have no idea what these particular grey cells are for. You can only do your best. You operate. I’ll look over your shoulder.”

Mikael Blomkvist looked up at the clock and saw that it was just after 3:00 in the morning. He was handcuffed and increasingly uncomfortable. He closed his eyes for a moment. He was dead tired but running on adrenaline. He opened them again and gave the policeman an angry glare. Inspector Thomas Paulsson had a shocked expression on his face. They were sitting at a kitchen table in a white farmhouse called Gosseberga, somewhere near Nossebro. Blomkvist had heard of the place for the first time less than twelve hours earlier.

There was no denying the disaster that had occurred.

“Imbecile,” Blomkvist said.

“Now, you listen here—”

“Imbecile,” Blomkvist said again. “I warned you he was dangerous, for Christ’s sake. I told you that you would have to handle him like a live grenade. He’s murdered at least three people with his bare hands and he’s built like a tank. And you send a couple of village policemen to arrest him as if he were some Saturday night drunk.”

Blomkvist shut his eyes again, wondering what else could go wrong that night.

He had found Lisbeth Salander just after midnight. She was very badly wounded. He had sent for the police and the Rescue Service.

The only thing that had gone right was that he had persuaded them to send a helicopter to take the girl to Sahlgrenska hospital. He had given them a clear description of her injuries and the bullet wound in her head, and some bright spark at the Rescue Service got the message.

Even so, it had taken over half an hour for the Puma from the helicopter unit in Säve to arrive at the farmhouse. Blomkvist had gotten two cars out of the barn. He switched on their headlights to illuminate a landing area in the field in front of the house.

The helicopter crew and two paramedics had proceeded in a routine and professional manner. One of the medics tended to Salander while the other took care of Alexander Zalachenko, known locally as Karl Axel Bodin. Zalachenko was Salander's father and her worst enemy. He had tried to kill her, but he had failed. Blomkvist had found him in the woodshed at the farm with a nasty-looking gash—probably from an axe—in his face and some shattering damage to one of his legs which Blomkvist did not bother to investigate.

While he waited for the helicopter, he did what he could for Salander. He took a clean sheet from a linen cupboard and cut it up to make bandages. The blood had coagulated at the entry wound in her head, and he did not know whether he dared to put a bandage on it or not. In the end he fixed the fabric very loosely around her head, mostly so that the wound would not be exposed to bacteria or dirt. But he had stopped the bleeding from the wounds in her hip and shoulder in the simplest possible way. He had found a roll of duct tape and had used it to close the wounds. The medics remarked that this, in their experience, was a brand-new form of bandage. He had also bathed Salander's face with a wet towel and done his best to wipe off the dirt.

He had not gone back to the woodshed to tend to Zalachenko. He honestly did not give a damn about the man. But he did call Erika Berger, editor in chief of *Millennium* magazine, on his mobile and told her the situation.

“Are *you* all right?” Berger asked him.

“I'm OK,” Blomkvist said. “Lisbeth is the one who's in real danger.”

“That poor girl,” Berger said. “I read Björck’s Säpo report this evening. How should I deal with it?”

“I don’t have the energy to think that through right now,” Blomkvist said. Security Police matters were going to have to wait until the next day, even if the report could help vindicate Lisbeth.

As he talked to Berger, he sat on the floor next to the bench and kept a watchful eye on Salander. He had taken off her shoes and her pants so that he could bandage the wound to her hip, and now his hand rested on the pants, which he had dropped on the floor next to the bench. There was something in one of the pockets. He pulled out a Palm Tungsten T3.

He frowned and looked long and hard at the hand-held computer. When he heard the approaching helicopter he stuffed it into the inside pocket of his jacket and then went through all her other pockets. He found another set of keys to the apartment in Mosebacke and a passport in the name of Irene Nesser. He put these swiftly into a side pocket of his laptop case.

The first patrol car from the station in Trollhättan arrived a few minutes after the helicopter landed. Next to arrive was Inspector Paulsson, who took charge immediately. Blomkvist began to explain what had happened. He very soon realized that Paulsson was a pompous, rigid drill-sergeant type. He did not seem to take in anything that Blomkvist said. It was when Paulsson arrived that things really started to go awry.

The only thing he seemed capable of grasping was that the badly damaged girl being cared for by the medics on the floor next to the kitchen bench was the triple murderer Lisbeth Salander. And above all, it was important that he make the arrest. Three times Paulsson had asked the urgently occupied medical orderly whether the girl could be arrested on the spot. In the end the orderly stood up and shouted at Paulsson to keep the hell out of his way.

Paulsson had then turned his attention to the wounded man in the woodshed, and Blomkvist heard the inspector report over his radio that Salander had evidently attempted to kill yet another person.

By now Blomkvist was so infuriated with Paulsson, who had obviously not paid attention to a word he had said, that he yelled at him to call Inspector Bublanski in Stockholm without delay. Blomkvist had even taken out his mobile and offered to dial the number for him, but Paulsson was not interested.

Blomkvist then made two mistakes.

First, he patiently but firmly explained that the man who had committed the murders in Stockholm was Ronald Niedermann, who was built like a heavily armoured robot and suffered from a disease called congenital analgesia, and who at that moment was sitting in a ditch on the road to Nossebro tied to a traffic sign. Blomkvist told Paulsson exactly where Niedermann was to be found, and urged him to send a platoon armed with automatic weapons to pick him up. Paulsson finally asked how Niedermann had come to be in that ditch, and Blomkvist freely admitted that he himself had put him there, and had managed only by holding a gun on him the whole time.

“Assault with a deadly weapon,” was Paulsson’s immediate response.

At this point Blomkvist should have realized that Paulsson was dangerously stupid. He should have called Bublanski himself and asked him to intervene, to bring some clarity to the fog in which Paulsson was apparently enveloped. Instead he made his second mistake: he offered to hand over the weapon he had in his jacket pocket—the Colt 1911 Government model that he had found earlier that day at Salander’s apartment in Stockholm. It was the weapon he had used to disarm and disable Niedermann—not a straightforward matter with that giant of a man.

After which Paulsson swiftly arrested Blomkvist for possession of an illegal weapon. He then ordered his two officers to drive over to the Nossebro road. They were to find out if there was any truth to Blomkvist’s story that a man was sitting in a ditch there, tied to a MOOSE CROSSING sign. If this was the case, the officers were to handcuff the person in question and bring him to the farm in Gosseberga.

Blomkvist had objected at once, pointing out that Niedermann was not a man who could be arrested and handcuffed just like that: he was a maniacal killer, for God’s sake. When Blomkvist’s objections were ignored by

Paulsson, the exhaustion of the day made him reckless. He told Paulsson he was an incompetent fool and yelled at him that the officers should fucking forget about untying Niedermann until they had called for backup. As a result of this outburst, he was handcuffed and pushed into the back seat of Paulsson's car. Cursing, he watched as the policemen drove off in their patrol car. The only glimmer of light in the darkness was that Salander had been carried to the helicopter, which was even now disappearing over the treetops in the direction of Göteborg. Blomkvist felt utterly helpless: he could only hope that she would be given the very best care. She was going to need it, or she would die.

Jonasson made two deep incisions all the way down to the cranium and peeled back the skin around the entry wound. He used clamps to secure the opening. An OR nurse inserted a suction tube to remove any blood. Then came the awkward part, when he had to use a drill to enlarge the hole in the skull. The procedure was excruciatingly slow.

Finally he had a hole big enough to gain access to Salander's brain. With infinite care he inserted a probe into the brain and enlarged the wound channel by a few millimetres. Then he inserted a thinner probe and located the bullet. From the X-ray he could see that the bullet had turned and was lying at an angle of forty-five degrees to the entry channel. He used the probe cautiously to prise at the edge of the bullet, and after a few unsuccessful attempts he managed to lift it very slightly so that he could turn it in the right direction.

Finally he inserted narrow forceps with serrated jaws. He gripped the base of the bullet, got a good hold on it, then pulled the forceps straight out. The bullet emerged with almost no resistance. He held it up to the light for a few seconds and saw that it appeared intact; then he dropped it into a bowl.

"Swab," he said, and his request was instantly met.

He glanced at the ECG, which showed that his patient still had regular heart activity.

"Forceps."

He pulled down the powerful magnifying glass hanging overhead and focused on the exposed area.

“Careful,” Ellis said.

Over the next forty-five minutes Jonasson picked out no fewer than thirty-two tiny bone chips from around the entry wound. The smallest of these chips could scarcely be seen with the naked eye.

As Blomkvist tried in frustration to manoeuvre his mobile out of the breast pocket of his jacket—it proved to be an impossible task with his hands cuffed behind his back, nor was it clear to him how he was going to be able to use it—several more vehicles containing both uniformed officers and technical personnel arrived at the Gosseberga farm. They were detailed by Paulsson to secure forensic evidence in the woodshed and to do a thorough examination of the farmhouse, from which several weapons had already been confiscated. By now resigned to his futility, Blomkvist had observed their comings and goings from his vantage point in Paulsson’s vehicle.

An hour passed before it dawned on Paulsson that his officers had not yet returned from their mission to retrieve Niedermann. He had Blomkvist brought into the kitchen, where he was required once more to provide precise directions to the spot.

Blomkvist closed his eyes.

He was still in the kitchen with Paulsson when the armed response team sent to relieve the first two officers reported back. One had been found dead with a broken neck. The other was still alive, but he had been savagely beaten. The men had been discovered near a MOOSE CROSSING sign by the side of the road. Their service weapons and the marked police car were gone.

Inspector Paulsson had started out with a relatively manageable situation: now he had a murdered policeman and an armed killer on the run.

“Imbecile,” Blomkvist said again.

“It won’t help to insult the police.”

“That certainly seems to be true in your case. But I’m going to report you for dereliction of duty and you won’t even know what hit you. Before I’m

through with you, you're going to be celebrated as the dumbest policeman in Sweden on every newspaper billboard in the country."

The notion of being the object of public ridicule appeared at last to have an effect on Inspector Paulsson. His face was lined with anxiety.

"What do you propose?"

"I don't propose, I *demand* that you call Inspector Bublanski in Stockholm. This minute. His number's in my mobile in my breast pocket."

Inspector Modig woke with a start when her mobile rang at the other end of the bedroom. She saw to her dismay that it was just after 4:00 in the morning. Then she looked at her husband, who was snoring peacefully. He would probably sleep through an artillery barrage. She staggered out of bed, unplugged her mobile from the charger, and fumbled for the Talk button.

Jan Bublanski, she thought. *Who else?*

"Everything has gone to hell down in Trollhättan," her senior officer said without bothering to greet her or apologize. "The X2000 to Göteborg leaves at 5:10. Take a taxi."

"What's happened?"

"Blomkvist found Salander, Niedermann, *and* Zalachenko. Got himself arrested for insulting a police officer, resisting arrest, and possession of an illegal weapon. Salander was taken to Sahlgrenska with a bullet in her head. Zalachenko is there too, with an axe wound to his skull. Niedermann got away. And he killed a policeman tonight."

Modig blinked twice, registering how exhausted she felt. Most of all she wanted to crawl back into bed and take a month's vacation.

"The X2000 at 5:10. OK. What do you want me to do?"

"Meet Jerker Holmberg at Central Station. You're to contact an Inspector Thomas Paulsson at the Trollhättan police. He seems to be responsible for much of the mess tonight. Blomkvist described him as an Olympic-class idiot."

"You've talked to Blomkvist?"

“Apparently he’s been arrested and cuffed. I managed to persuade Paulsson to let me talk to him for a moment. I’m on my way to Kungsholmen right now, and I’ll try to work out what’s going on. We’ll keep in touch by mobile.”

Modig looked at the time again. Then she called a taxi and jumped into the shower for a minute. She brushed her teeth, pulled a comb through her hair, and dressed in long black pants, a black T-shirt, and a grey jacket. She put her police revolver in her shoulder bag and picked out a dark-red leather coat. Then she shook enough life into her husband to explain where she was off to, and that he had to deal with the kids in the morning. She walked out the front door just as the taxi pulled up.

She did not have to search for her colleague, Criminal Inspector Holmberg. She assumed he would be in the restaurant car, and that is where she found him. He had already bought coffee and sandwiches for her. They sat in silence for five minutes as they ate their breakfast. Finally Holmberg pushed his coffee cup aside.

“Maybe I should get some training in some other field,” he said.

Some time after 4:00 in the morning, Criminal Inspector Marcus Erlander from the violent crimes division of the Göteborg police arrived in Gosseberga and took over the investigation from the overburdened Paulsson. Erlander was a short, round man in his fifties with grey hair. One of the first things he did was to have Blomkvist released from his handcuffs, and then he produced rolls and coffee from a thermos. They sat in the living room for a private conversation.

“I’ve spoken with Bublanski,” Erlander said. “Bubble and I have known each other for many years. We are both sorry that you were subjected to Paulsson’s rather primitive way of operating.”

“He succeeded in getting a policeman killed tonight,” Blomkvist said.

Erlander said: “I knew the man personally. He served in Göteborg before he moved to Trollhättan. He has a three-year-old daughter.”

“I’m sorry. I tried to warn Paulsson.”

“So I heard. You were quite emphatic, it seems, and that’s why you were cuffed. You were the one who exposed that billionaire financier Wennerström last year. Bublanski says you’re a shameless journalist bastard and an insane investigative reporter, but that you just might know what you’re talking about. Can you bring me up to speed?”

“What happened here tonight is the culmination of the murders of two friends of mine in Enskede, Dag Svensson and Mia Johansson. And the murder of a person who was no friend of mine . . . a lawyer named Bjurman, also Lisbeth Salander’s guardian.”

Erlander made notes between taking sips of his coffee.

“As you no doubt know, the police have been looking for Salander since Easter. She was a suspect in all three murders. First of all, you have to realize that Salander is not only not guilty of these murders, she has been a victim in the whole affair.”

“I haven’t had the least connection to the Enskede business, but after everything that was in the media about her it seems a bit hard to swallow that Salander could be completely innocent.”

“Nonetheless, that’s how it is. She’s innocent. Period. The killer is Ronald Niedermann, the man who murdered your officer tonight. He works for Karl Axel Bodin.”

“The Bodin who’s in Sahlgrenska with an axe in his skull?”

“The axe isn’t still in his head. I assume it was Salander who nailed him. His real name is Alexander Zalachenko and he’s Lisbeth’s father. He was a hit man for Russian military intelligence. He defected in the seventies, and was then on the books of Säpo until the collapse of the Soviet Union. He’s been running his own criminal network ever since.”

Erlander scrutinized the man across from him. Blomkvist’s face was shiny with sweat, but he looked both frozen and deathly tired. Until now he had sounded perfectly rational, but Paulsson—whose opinion had little influence on Erlander—had warned him that Blomkvist had been babbling on about Russian agents and German hit men, hardly routine elements in Swedish police work. Blomkvist had apparently reached the point in his story at which Paulsson had decided to ignore everything else he might say. But there was one policeman dead and another severely wounded on the

road to Nossebro, so Erlander was willing to listen. But he could not keep a trace of incredulity out of his voice.

“OK. A Russian agent.”

Blomkvist smiled weakly, only too aware of how odd his story sounded.

“A *former* Russian agent. I can document every one of my claims.”

“Go on.”

“Zalachenko was a top spy in the sixties and seventies. He defected and was granted asylum by Säpo. In his old age he became a gangster. As far as I understand it, it’s not a unique situation in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse.”

“OK.”

“As I said, I don’t know exactly what happened here tonight, but Lisbeth tracked down her father, whom she hadn’t seen for fifteen years. Zalachenko abused her mother so viciously that she spent most of her life in a nursing home. He tried to murder Lisbeth, and through Niedermann he was the architect of the murders of Svensson and Johansson. Plus, he was behind the kidnapping of Salander’s friend Miriam Wu—you probably heard of boxer Paolo Roberto’s title bout in Nykvarn, as a result of which Wu was rescued from certain death.”

“If Salander hit her father in the head with an axe she isn’t exactly innocent.”

“She has been shot three times. I think we could assume her actions were on some level self-defence. I wonder . . .”

“Yes?”

“She was so covered with dirt, with mud, that her hair was one big lump of dried clay. Her clothes were full of sand, inside and out. It looked as though she might have been buried during the night. Niedermann is known to have a habit of burying people alive. The police in Södertälje have found two graves in the place that’s owned by Svavelsjö Motorcycle Club, outside Nykvarn.”

“Three, as a matter of fact. They found one more late last night. But if Salander was shot and buried, how was she able to climb out and start wandering around with an axe?”

“Whatever went on here tonight, you have to understand that Salander is exceptionally resourceful. I tried to persuade Paulsson to bring in a dog unit —”

“It’s on its way now.”

“Good.”

“Paulsson arrested you for insulting a police officer. . . .”

“I will dispute that. I called him an imbecile and an incompetent fool. Under the circumstances, neither of these epithets could be considered wide of the mark.”

“Hmm. It’s not a wholly inaccurate description. But you were also arrested for possession of an illegal weapon.”

“I made the mistake of trying to hand over a weapon to him. I don’t want to say anything more about that until I talk to my lawyer.”

“All right. We’ll leave it at that. We have more serious issues to discuss. What do you know about this Niedermann?”

“He’s a murderer. And there’s something wrong with him. He’s well over six feet tall and built like a tank. Ask Paolo Roberto, who boxed with him. He suffers from a disease called congenital analgesia, which means the transmitter substance in his nerve synapses doesn’t function. He feels no pain. He’s German, was born in Hamburg, and in his teens he was a skinhead. Right now he’s on the run and he’ll be seriously dangerous to anyone he runs into.”

“Do you have an idea where he might be heading?”

“No. I only know that I had him neatly trussed, all ready to be arrested, when that idiot from Trollhättan took charge of the situation.”

Annika Giannini woke with a start. She saw that it was 5:58 a.m. She had her first client meeting at 8:00. She turned to look at her husband, Enrico, who was sleeping peacefully and probably would not be awake before 8:00. She blinked hard a few times and got up to turn on the coffeemaker before she took her shower. She dressed in black pants, a white polo shirt, and a muted brick-red jacket. She made two slices of toast with cheese, orange

marmalade, and a sliced avocado, and carried her breakfast into the living room in time for the 6:30 television news. She took a sip of coffee and had just opened her mouth to take a bite of toast when she heard the headlines.

One policeman killed and another seriously wounded. Drama last night as triple murderer Lisbeth Salander is finally captured.

At first she could not make any sense of it. Was it Salander who had killed a policeman? The news item was sketchy, but bit by bit she gathered that a man was being sought for the killing. A nationwide alert had gone out for a man in his mid-thirties, as yet unnamed. Salander herself was critically injured and at Sahlgrenska hospital in Göteborg.

Annika switched to the other channel, but she learned nothing more about what had happened. She reached for her mobile and called her brother, Mikael Blomkvist. She only got his voicemail. She felt a small twinge of fear. He had called on his way to Göteborg. He had been tracking Salander. And a murderer who called himself Ronald Niedermann.

As it was growing light, an observant police officer found traces of blood on the ground behind the woodshed. A police dog followed the trail to a narrow trench in a clearing in a wood about a quarter of a mile northeast of the farmhouse.

Blomkvist went with Inspector Erlander. Grimly they studied the site. Much more blood had obviously been shed in and around the trench.

They found a damaged cigarette case that seemed to have been used as a scoop. Erlander put it in an evidence bag and labelled the find. He also gathered samples of blood-soaked clumps of dirt. A uniformed officer drew his attention to a cigarette butt—a filterless Pall Mall—some distance from the hole. This too was saved in an evidence bag and labelled. Blomkvist remembered having seen a pack of Pall Malls on the kitchen counter in Zalachenko's house.

Erlander glanced up at the lowering rain clouds. The storm that had ravaged Göteborg earlier in the night had obviously passed to the south of the Nossebro area, but it was only a matter of time before the rain came. He

instructed one of his men to get a tarpaulin to cover the trench and its immediate surroundings.

“I think you’re right,” Erlander said to Blomkvist as they walked back to the farmhouse. “An analysis of the blood will probably establish that Salander was shot and buried here, and I’m beginning to expect that we’ll find her fingerprints on the cigarette case. Somehow she managed to survive and dig herself out and—”

“And somehow get back to the farm and swing an axe into Zalachenko’s skull,” Blomkvist finished for him. “She can be a moody bitch.”

“But how on earth did she handle Niedermann?”

Blomkvist shrugged. He was as bewildered as Erlander on that score.