

JENS LAPIDUS

## TOP DOG

Jens Lapidus is a criminal defense lawyer who represents some of Sweden's most notorious underworld criminals. He is the author of the Stockholm Noir trilogy, three of the bestselling Swedish novels of this past decade: *Easy Money*, *Never Fuck Up*, and *Life Deluxe*. He lives in Stockholm with his wife.

**ALSO BY JENS LAPIDUS**

*Easy Money*

*Never Fuck Up*

*Life Deluxe*

*Stockholm Delete*

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Translated from the Swedish by Alice Menzies



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SWEDISH WOMEN'S WEEKLY  
EXCLUSIVE MINGLE AT BUCHARDS EXHIBITION

*CoolArt and Buchards threw an exclusive launch party last night, in celebration of their unique art. The event saw Prince Carl Philip and his graphic designer friend Joakim Andersson mingling alongside Stockholm society and the big names of the art world.*

*Our reporter also spotted a couple of newcomers to the Stockholm collectors' scene: youthful financier Hugo Pederson and his beautiful wife, Louise. The stylish pair are said to have a keen interest in art, and sources tell us that they have built up a sizable collection of contemporary pieces despite having only been collecting for two years.*

*"I've always loved the fragile, the complex," Mr. Pederson cheerily told our reporter.*

*Mr. Pederson works for investment firm Fortem, and has rapidly become a great patron of a number of artists.*

*"If you're lucky enough to earn a bit of money, you also have to give back," he continued, heading off to mingle alongside his equally engaged wife.*

*Johan W. Lindvall, 2007*



# Prologue

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Adan dragged the aluminum ladder over to the back of the building and peered up at the balcony. The apartment was on Nystadsgatan: first floor—it shouldn't be too hard to unfold the ladder, lean it against the balcony, and climb up. But still, fuck—he felt like he was about to shit himself. Genuinely. He could just see it: him at the very top of the bastard ladder with a brown stain on his ass.

He had actually stopped doing jobs like this. He was nineteen now and too old for break-ins: it was the kind of thing they used to do at the end of high school. Plus: it was beneath him now. But what was he meant to do? If Surri told you to do something, you did it.

They had known each other since kindergarten, lived on the same block, played on the same teams—their fathers had even been neighbors back in the old country. “We were like everyone else in Bakool. We didn't care about one another more than we needed to,” Adan's old man used to say. “But everyone here thinks we're like family, like we're the same person.”

His father was both right and wrong: Surri *was* a brother. But he still acted like a dick.

Adan could feel the chill of the ladder through his gripper gloves. Gloves: he had kept that part of the routine from before—his prints were guaranteed to be saved in a database somewhere. He

braced himself; there was a lot of him to haul over the railing: he had to weigh at least 240 pounds. Still, the screwdriver was light in his hand, and the grip felt comfortable—as though his fingers had actually been longing to use it, despite his living a completely ordinary life these days. Drove a delivery van for his dad's boss, ate popcorn and watched *Luke Cage* and *Fauda* with his girl at night. It was just that two weeks earlier, he had been asked if he wanted to earn a little extra dough. Nothing illegal, just a one-day job for old times' sake. You were crazy if you said no to that kind of thing.

It was all those German bastards' fault. What Surri had wanted was for Adan to travel down to Hamburg and pick up one of the new 7 Series BMWs. It was a done deal: you could get a 730d for under 100,000 euros there, then sell it without any trouble for 150,000 back in Sweden. The only problem: you couldn't register too many cars to yourself in any given year, otherwise the tax authorities would come sniffing. And that was where Adan came in.

He had taken the train down to the southern tip of Denmark; a one-way ticket was 599 kronor, and he had spent the entire journey listening to Spotify on his new Beats headphones, keeping a tight grip on the fanny pack Surri had given him, and staring out of the window. A million kronor in euro notes weighed almost nothing. He had never spent so long on a train before, but it was actually pretty sweet. He never got bored of watching the scenery outside. It flew by: frosty fields, wooded areas, and small towns where people seemed to collect rusty wrecks and old planks of wood. He wondered how they made a living.

He'd had no trouble finding the car place, signing the documents, and negotiating with the salesman, who even spoke a bit of Arabic—it wasn't Adan's language, but he knew enough to be able to say a few friendly phrases. It felt sweet to sink back in the black leather seat, start the engine, and cruise back to Sweden. He drove different pickups every day, but never BMWs. This car

didn't just *look* like it had class—you could feel the quality in the details, too. The smell of leather, the feeling when he ran his fingers over the dashboard, the weight of the doors, and the faint, comforting sound when they closed. He had thought about Surri, the guy did everything with style—even his balaclavas came from sick French designers. One day, Adan might even be able to afford a car like this. But, right then, his plan had been to drive all evening and night. He wanted to get the BMW home without having to check in to a motel.

It was on the highway outside of Jönköping that he first heard it: a hollow scraping noise that definitely didn't sound good. He had pulled over two miles later. Climbed out, inspected everything, but he couldn't see a thing. The sound had returned the minute he pulled away. After another twelve or so miles, a warning light had come on. "Brake Fault." What did that mean? Shit—he didn't know if he could even keep driving. He had slowed down, causing a line of traffic behind him; he was going forty in the seventy-five lane. The car sounded terrible. Another five or so miles later, he had pulled into a gas station and asked if the assistant could come out and check the car. The kid had spots all over his face and looked like he was five years younger than Adan, but he had immediately started shining a flashlight at the rims of the tires.

"Looks like your brake pads are pretty much gone," he had said. "You can't drive another inch in this car. Shame with such a sick ride, by the way."

That had been the end of the upside: Adan had had to pay a recovery van to tow the car to the next garage. It had taken five weeks to fix and cost forty grand. But there was also a risk it was pulling to one side, they said. Adan had called the seller in Germany and yelled at him, but the guy had pretended he didn't even speak English. In the end, Surri had a valuation on the piece of crap car: he wouldn't even get six hundred thousand for it.

"How could you be so thick not to even check the car before you signed?"

The lock on the balcony door gave way with a click and Adan pushed it open. Surri had been clear: “The cops are keeping our guy who rented the place in custody, but they haven’t found the shit there. So if you break in and find what’s mine, we can write off half your debt. You know how much I blew on that car.”

Adan had squirmed. “Is anyone living there?”

“Fuck that. There won’t be anyone home tomorrow night, either way.”

Adan thought back to one day in the yard when they were younger. Surri had fallen from the jungle gym, dropped like a little rock and cut his knee. To them, it seemed like a river of blood had come flooding out, and the cut was full of gravel. His friend wouldn’t stop crying. “I’ll help you. C’mon, let’s go to my place, I think my dad’s there,” Adan had said in as gentle a voice as he could. They were six at the time, and Adan knew that his father could mend Surri’s knee. Sure enough, he had—his father had cleaned the wound and applied the biggest Band-Aid they had ever seen. As they drank chocolate milk, ate cookies, and watched *Toy Story* on DVD afterward, Surri had said: “Your dad’s better at that than mine.”

It was a two-bedroom apartment. Adan switched on the light in what had to be the living room and saw a green sofa, a glass-topped coffee table, and a bookcase. There was also what looked like a projector of some kind. In both bedrooms, there were narrow, unmade beds. People had to be living there—why else would there be newspapers on the coffee table and a T-shirt hanging over the back of a chair?

At the same time, the place was also barely furnished, so maybe they just slept over here every now and then. He picked up the garbage can in the kitchen, peered down at an empty milk carton, and caught the scent of something he definitely recognized: stubbed-out weed.

He went through the kitchen cabinets and the fridge. The person or persons living there had plenty of chips and sour cream, but no normal food. He peered into the oven and the dishwasher, got down onto the floor and shone his flashlight beneath the sink and behind the fridge. It was dusty.

People could be imaginative sometimes, but he didn't find a thing. He lifted the cushions from the sofa, ran his hand beneath the sheets and the mattresses in the beds. There was a bag on the floor in one of the bedrooms, and he rifled through it—spotted a few more T-shirts, four pairs of boxers, and some socks. He climbed onto the coffee table and shone his flashlight into the air vent in the wall. Nothing.

He couldn't see a thing.

Back in the living room. Adan got down onto all fours and peered beneath the sofa, shone the flashlight behind the bookcase.

The guy who rented the place before these people must have screwed Surri over—there was nothing here, or maybe the cops had found it after all. It wasn't really Adan's problem anymore. Not that Surri would see it that way.

And then he heard something. A noise from the hallway.

No, it was in the stairwell, on the other side of the door. He could hear voices out there.

Before Adan had time to think, he heard the key rattling in the lock. *Shit*—someone was on their way into the apartment. He turned out the lights in the living room.

He could hear people talking in the hallway now. Two voices, a girl's and a guy's. Maybe he should just jump out and beat them up, whoever they were. But no—he wasn't like Surri. He wasn't a *tough* guy.

He crawled behind the sofa.

The voices grew clearer. The girl was talking about someone called Billie. The guy mumbled something about a party. "Almost party time."

Adan lay perfectly still, trying to keep calm and quiet. He should

go back to Hamburg and kill that BMW salesman with his own bare hands—this was all his fault.

Then he heard a door close. It sounded like it might have been the bathroom door, judging by the distance. Was this his chance? He could hear only the girl's voice now; she was humming some tune. The guy was probably in the toilet. It sounded like the girl had come into the living room. Then silence. Adan wasn't even breathing, just trying to listen. The padding of feet. Puffing sounds. Then more footsteps, out, toward one of the bedrooms.

Now.

He got up: the living room was empty. He took two long strides toward the balcony door. He wasn't thinking, wasn't reflecting. Just acting. He tore open the door. Didn't look back. Stepped out onto the balcony. Closed the door behind him. Sucked in the fresh air.

He jumped over the railing.

He threw himself down. No, he fell.

Like Surri from the jungle gym.

The darkness felt safe, but it was far too cold out. His gloves were as thin as paper.

Adan leaned against the tree. He was trying not to put any weight on his right foot, which he had really hurt in the fall—the bastard might even be broken. All the same, he didn't want to leave. The ladder was lying on the ground in front of him: he had dragged it behind him as he limped away over the snow. Surri would go crazy when he told him he hadn't found anything. Still: it had to have been Surri's own guy who'd screwed him over. Adan *had* searched everywhere.

He had been standing here for four hours now. Just waiting. Hoping the pain in his foot would go away. The lights were on in the apartment. Strange colors lit up the walls, and the music poured out from the balcony doors, which opened every now and then. There were so many people inside—he could see them through



the windows like blurry backup dancers on some televised talent show.

At some point tonight, the idiots in there would have to leave, or at least go to bed. At some point, the chips and dip would run out. Then he would put the ladder back in place and climb up onto the balcony again. Search the place one last time.

He wouldn't be able to stand here all night—his foot was in too much pain—but he could hold out a while longer.

He wasn't really a warrior.

But he could wait.

There were nineteen people in the little living room, but they had invited at least as many more. Roksana really wanted the place to be packed tonight—for her and Z's housewarming. She hoped people would think it was a good opportunity to party. They would come, wouldn't they?

Young Thug tunes thundered out of the sound system she had borrowed from Billie—and which Z had linked up to SoundCloud on his phone. Thuggy delivered—his listless, droning voice in a melodious riddim rap. It was a full-body experience, a dive into a warm, swirling, glittering sea of styles and sounds. Roksana glanced around the room again: Did people like the tunes? Were they having fun? Was the atmosphere good?

People had brought their own drinks. Bottles of sparkling wine lined up on the coffee table. Roksana had explicitly asked for it in her Messenger invite: *Bring bubbles! Roksana & Z will supply the tunes, party, and nibbles.* She hoped it hadn't sounded too forward.

The nibbles consisted of peanuts and chips, but Roksana had dribbled some truffle oil into the sour cream—and everyone said it was the best dip they had ever tasted. Still, the food wasn't exactly the main event—the focus was on the party, and the party was fueled by the music. The sound system, the choice of songs, the mix. Z had even managed to get ahold of a smoke machine and a mini-laser show. They hadn't had time to put up any pictures or

posters, so it was perfect, the best use for a white wall. The ironic smoke hung around the sofa like a cloud, and Roksana thought it felt like she was in a club, a super exclusive one. The only difference was that they were missing a DJ booth and that the people still arriving would have to wade through a hallway full of Roshe Runs and retro-inspired Vans. It was Z who had insisted on the no-shoe policy. "If we're going to do this, we need to limit the amount of cleaning we have to do afterward. Because I suck at cleaning. Have I ever mentioned that?"

Roksana didn't know what Z had or hadn't said—they hadn't exactly planned to move in together. Still, it should work out. Z was a good guy.

She checked Instagram and Snapchat to see whether anyone had uploaded anything from the party. But no, so far their event hadn't made it into that territory. Please, people, she thought, you like the party, don't you? Can't you just dance, even a little bit, a few of you, at least? And take some photos.

The apartment was pretty big, 560 square feet, but it was on Nystadsgatan in Akalla, which was pretty far out from central Stockholm and from Södertörn University, where she was studying. But Roksana hadn't had any other choice. She had been renting a room from Billie before, on Verkstadsgatan in Hornstull, until Billie had decided to become polyamorous and have three of her partners living there at the same time. Z had suggested that they rename that part of town Whore-nstull. But for Roksana, it wasn't a joke; there just hadn't been room for her—plus, she couldn't cope with one of the guys playing cheesy Swedish pop on Billie's stereo all day, not even ironically. As luck would have it, Z had been kicked out of his sublet that same week. He had spent three days sleeping on his gran's sofa and had been an inch away from a serious mental breakdown.

Roksana was standing between Z and Billie. All around her, the guests were mingling. A few were rocking gently in time with the

music. She didn't want to watch them too openly—it would be too obvious. She checked Instagram and Snapchat again. Maybe they thought she was boring, just sticking with her besties; maybe her besties thought she was beige for just sticking with them.

She had her hair up in honor of the evening, and she was wearing her new silver Birkenstocks. Other than that, she was wearing her usual blue jeans and a white T-shirt she had found at her mom and dad's place. Billie moaned about it sometimes, but Roksana stuck to her usual look; her style icons were George Costanza and practically everyone from *Beverly Hills, 90210*. The whole thing was a middle finger to trends and fashion ideals.

Billie was in a great mood—that was a good sign. She was wearing Adidas pants, a loose long-sleeved T-shirt, a choker, and a soft Gucci cap on top of her pink hair. She had even dyed her underarm hair pink—“To celebrate you guys,” she claimed. It was hard to believe that she would be starting a law degree in just a few days' time. Roksana was glad that Billie had left all her boyfriends and girlfriends at home—she was always more relaxed without them. She was Roksana's oldest and probably closest friend, but after their recent problems, she didn't really know quite where they stood.

Billie pulled out a carton of cigarettes. “What's the deal here? Do I have to go out to the balcony, or is it OK if I smoke in here?”

Z looked up again. “Hell no. The smoke gets into the curtains and bedsheets. Roksy and I have talked about this.”

Billie rolled her eyes. “But you don't even have any curtains.”

Z was firm. “Makes no difference. Smoking indoors isn't cool.”

“Is this going to be some kind of clean living place or what?”

Roksana laughed. “Yeah, only plant-based, organic food. Forks over knives, you know the drill. And no plastic sets foot inside the front door.”

Z pulled out a ziplock bag and a pack of OCB Slims.

“Anyone want their own joint? I've got plenty.” He held up the bag. “You know there's a golden rule when it comes to marijuana.

Keep sativa and indica separate. Both are subspecies of cannabis, but the plants look completely different, different thicknesses of leaves and all that, but who cares. The important thing is the effect: it's like night and day. Indica's your regular couch stoner variety. Like, it gives the right high for someone who wants a PlayStation and chill feeling. But this is a twenty-four-month sativa, the Châteauneuf-du-Pape of weed. It doesn't get any better than this."

Z carefully separated the grass on the rolling paper. "You smoke this, you get high. Then you smoke some more and get even higher. There's no ceiling, I swear."

That was all beginner's bullshit. The difference between sativa and indica wasn't always clear, but Z loved putting words to things, chatting away. It was who he was: he couldn't just keep up with the world—he had to be able to describe what was going on, narrow it down, understand it in terms of categories and structures. Sometimes, it felt more like a competition.

Roksana took the joint Z held out to her and took a deep puff. "Have you finished mansplaining yet?"

They laughed, Z too. "You know what I'm like," he said.

Z was nice, in his own special way: he saw patriarchal structures as clearly as he saw the principles of weed; he didn't just understand society's patterns, he was also aware of his own position in the power hierarchy. A man who explained things to women. A man who always knew what was what. A man who began 90 percent of his remarks with the words "So, it's like this . . ."

The hours passed. Erik Lundin mixed nicely with Lil B in a sweet fade to Rihanna—a bit unexpected, but shiiit, she was good—and then something completely different that only Z knew about: apparently their name was Hubbabubbaklubb. People were bouncing on the floor, free spirit dancing in the corners, bobbing in time with the music. Z's little laser show beamed geometric shapes onto the walls. There were empty plastic glasses and broken chips all over the table. Rizla papers and wine bottles strewn on every other

surface. She might even have seen a rolled-up banknote—people were too obvious sometimes; it wasn't cool.

They had to be having fun now? Roksana checked her phone for the two hundredth time. The only thing that had been uploaded was a screenshot of Z's playlist, accompanied by a cigarette emoji and the words *smoke w every day*.

Roksana had warned the neighbors, so they should be okay, she and Z weren't exactly planning to have parties like this every weekend. Plus, for some reason, she got the impression that the guy they were subletting the place from, David, didn't care all that much. So long as he got his money, he was happy, though the strong smell of weed that was probably lingering in the stairwell might raise questions. One of the neighbors had told her that the guy who lived in the apartment before them had caught the police's attention. They had apparently arrested him and raided the place a few weeks earlier, but then they had handed the apartment back over to David. Roksana didn't care; David had said they could live there for as long as they wanted, so she didn't care who had been in the apartment before, or what they'd used it for. The important thing was that people thought she and Z were doing things right now.

That it was a good start to her mini collective with him.

A good start to the term.

Her friends had gone. Too early, it felt like. Roksana tried to stop the thoughts swirling through her head: Had she been too much of a cliché when she told them she was thinking of studying in Berlin? Hadn't she been nice enough?

The living room looked like a war zone. The rug in the kitchen was damp; there was weed on the windowsill. She wondered how Z would cope with the cleaning afterward.

Billie said: "Shit, everyone just disappeared, including my ride. Guess a lot of them wanted to see Ida Engberg."

Z was on the sofa. "Ida Engberg, she's the absolute bomb.

Maybe we should go, too?" Z was so high on his so-called twenty-four-month sativa that he probably couldn't even stand up straight.

"We need to clean and air this place. But you go if you want. It's cool with me," said Roksana.

Billie's pupils were as big as the cosmos. "I can help you clean up the worst of it."

"How were you planning to get home, then? Taxi?"

"Nope."

"First metro into town?"

"Nope."

"Kayak?"

Billie laughed.

Roksana opened the balcony doors wide. She didn't feel drunk anymore, and only a little bit high, but the cool, fresh air still came as a surprise—it was like her mind had been rinsed with mineral water. She peered out at the shadowy trees: the apartment was on the first floor—it wasn't all that far to the ground. She could make out a thin dusting of snow down there, but right beneath the balcony it looked like someone had torn up the grass, and she could see footsteps leading away in the darkness.

Billie could get home however she wanted; it wasn't Roksana's problem.

"I saw that you had a fold-up bed in the closet. Can I sleep here?"

Roksana turned around. The room really was a mess; someone had knocked over a bong, and the water had seeped out beneath the coffee table—but she couldn't stop her heart from skipping a beat: Billie wanted to stay over.

"Don't you have to get home to Fia, Pia, Cia, Olle, and whatever they're called?"

"You sound a bit heteronormative right now and fascist."

"I didn't mean it like that. But you did actually kick me out of your place. And now you want to sleep here."

"We have to question the prevailing norms, and that also applies to the way we speak. Words are authoritarian instruments in the

gender power balance . . .” Billie grinned at herself. Her mouth was crooked; it always had been. “But I’m so sleepy. And it’s ages since we had breakfast together.”

They opened the closet door. A musty smell hit Roksana. There wasn’t a light inside, but Z used the flashlight on his phone to shine a beam of light over a cardigan and a denim jacket that Roksana had hung up. He was okay with Billie staying over, too.

There was something off about the closet. Roksana didn’t know what it was, but it gave her bad vibes.

“Can I borrow your phone?” She shone the light onto the wall. The closet was almost empty, with nothing but the bed, her two pieces of clothing, and a few abandoned hangers dangling from the clothes rail inside. The smell wasn’t actually musty; it was more like old wood and stale air. But she suddenly realized why the space had given her a bad feeling—and it wasn’t the booze or the weed she had smoked. No, something wasn’t right. The bathroom had to be on the other side of the wall, but, if that was the case, the closet should have been bigger. The angles were all wrong. The architect must’ve been tripping. Something was built weirdly in there.

And then she started to knock. Even now, she realized that she wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t had the cocktail of drink and drugs that she’d had earlier. She knocked on the inner wall. She knocked everywhere, at the bottom, in the middle, higher up—like she was searching for hidden treasure somewhere. Roksana stood on her tiptoes and felt the top of the plywood sheet behind the clothes rail. She managed to push her fingers in above it. It creaked.

“Z, help me with this. I think this wall is loose.”

Z staggered into the closet. Billie watched them from outside.

Z: high *and* tall.

“Pull it a bit,” said Roksana.

Z yanked the wooden sheet. It moved. The entire wall came loose and fell down on top of them.

Roksana managed to raise her hands in time; somehow she had

been expecting that very thing to happen. The board was thin and light, not even half an inch thick.

“What the?” Z groaned. It had hit him on the head.

They peered into the space that had opened up in front of them: narrow, maybe five square feet in total. There were two boxes inside.

Roksana suddenly felt focused, sober: the fresh air from the open balcony doors had made it all the way inside. Cool. Clarifying. What was this hidden space?

She bent down and picked up the box closest to her, which was roughly eleven by eleven inches wide.

Z was on his feet now. “Is this some kind of self-storage place or what?”

She placed the box on the living room floor.

It was easier to see in there. The cardboard box wasn’t taped shut.

Z leaned forward. Billie did, too. Roksana bent down and folded back the flaps.

They all stared at the contents.

*What the fuck?*