

A close-up photograph of a person's face, heavily covered in white powder or makeup. The person's eyes are closed, and their mouth is slightly open. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the powder.

# MISSING

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**Sweden's "Queen of Crime"**

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**T**HE GREEN SUIT had a classy label and no one who looked her over could have guessed that it cost less than one hundred kronor at Oxfam. The waist button on the skirt had been replaced by a safety-pin, but no one would notice.

She called the waiter and asked for another glass of white wine.

One empty table away, tonight's target was sitting on his own. She hadn't begun her act and wasn't yet able to judge how aware he was of her.

He was just getting on with his starter.

She swallowed a mouthful of wine from her refilled glass. The wine was dry, cool to perfection and probably quite expensive. She had no idea of the price. It didn't matter.

She looked at her man surreptitiously and felt, rather than saw, that he was staring at her. Over the edge of the wine glass, she let her glance swivel in his direction and meet his, but then, marking mild disinterest, she allowed it to wander across the room.

There was plenty of time.

The Grand Hotel's French dining room was really a

magnificent place. She had been there three times before, but tonight had to be the last visit for a while. Pity, because they put out fresh fruit in the bedrooms. The towels were exceptionally thick and laid on in such quantity that it seemed risk-free to let a couple slip into your briefcase.

Still, it was unwise to challenge fate. It would be a disaster if the staff recognised her.

He was looking at her again, she could sense it. She quickly pulled out her diary from the briefcase, checking today's date. How irritating... Impatiently, she tapped on the tabletop with her immaculate red nails. Two different meetings at the same time—how could she have allowed herself to be double-booked? Worse, with two of her largest customers!

She observed him out of the corner of her eye. He was still watching.

A waiter walked past her table and she hailed him.

'You wouldn't have a phone I could borrow, please?'

'Of course, madam.'

She kept following the waiter with her eyes as he walked over to the bar counter, returning to her table with a cordless phone.

'There you are, madam. Please dial nine to get a line.'

'Thank you.'

She leafed through her diary to find the right number before dialling.

'Hallo, this is Caroline Fors, my company is Swedish Laval Separator. I'm so sorry but I've managed to get myself snarled up tomorrow morning—a double booking. I just wanted you to know that I'll be with you, but about two hours later than we agreed.'

*'Twenty, twenty-five and thirty. Pip.'*

'Good. I'll be there as soon as I can. Bye for now.'

She sighed and wrote *salamiwurst 14.00 hours* on the line just below *basement flat* and closed her diary.

By chance their eyes met just at the moment she took another drink from her wine glass. She felt sure of his complete attention by now.

He smiled at her.

'Got a problem?'

She too smiled but shrugged her shoulders, a little embarrassed.

'Easily done,' he said sympathetically, looking her over. He was edging close to her carefully positioned bait now.

'Are you alone or are you waiting for someone?'

His eyes were fixed on her.

'No, I just liked the idea of a glass of wine or two before going back to my room. It's been a long day.'

She picked up her diary and put it into her briefcase. This was it, nearly done. She would hook him soon. When she had replaced her briefcase on the floor, she saw him pushing away his emptied plate and raising his glass to her.

'Would you mind if I joined you?'

Already—and she had barely begun her fishing trip. With a little smile, she got ready to beach her catch. She mustn't be too quick, though. Playing hard to get for a while always worked a treat. She hesitated for a couple of seconds before answering his question.

'That would be nice, but I'm really about to call it a day.'

He rose, picked up his wine glass and sat down opposite her.

'I'm Jörgen Grundberg. Pleased to meet you.'

He held out his hand to her, she shook it and introduced herself.

'Caroline Fors.'

'That's a lovely name for a lovely lady. I'd drink to that.'

On his left hand a thin wedding ring caught the light.  
'Cheers.'

The waiter was bringing Mr Grundberg's main course, but stopped short when he realised that his guest had gone away. Jörgen Grundberg waved to him.

'Here I am. The view's better from over here, don't you agree?'

Her smile was rather forced, but happily Mr Grundberg did not seem particularly sensitive to people's feelings.

A white plate with a silver cover was put down on the table between them. He shook open the decoratively folded linen napkin and draped it over his lap. Then he rubbed his hands together. This guy clearly enjoyed his food.

'Aren't you going to eat anything?'

She could feel her stomach rumbling with hunger.

'No, I don't think so.'

He lifted the silver lid and a gorgeous smell of garlic and rosemary wound its way into her nostrils. She could feel saliva filling her mouth.

'Come on, of course you must have something to eat.'

He wasn't looking at her now. Instead he was focusing his attention on the delicate operation of cutting pieces off the fillet of lamb.

'You must eat to keep up your strength,' he said, moving a laden forkful towards his mouth. 'Didn't you learn that at your mother's knee?'

As likely as not, her mother had said so and much else besides. That alone was a good reason for declining. But by now she was really very hungry and the bowl of fruit in her room did not seem so tempting any more.

While he was chewing, he called the waiter who came immediately, but was kept standing by until Grundberg had finished his mouthful of food.

'Another one of these for the lady. Charge it to room 407.'  
He smiled at her and waved his key-card in front of the waiter.

'Room 407.' The man went away.

'I hope you don't mind?'

'I'm perfectly able to pay for my own food, you know.'

'Of course you are. I just thought I'd better pay to make up for being so pushy.'

With pleasure, to be sure.

She drank some more wine. The guy was almost too good to be true. Ran on autopilot. There he sat, chomping away at his lamb fillets, totally absorbed by the food as far as she could see. In fact, for the moment he seemed to have forgotten that he had company at the table.

She observed him. About fifty years old, she guessed. His suit was expensive and since he'd just ordered two meals, without a second thought, even though it was the Grand's French dining-room, his bank balance must be more than favourable.

Good. He was perfect.

He looked as if he was used to eating well. His neck wouldn't stay contained inside his collar and had oozed outside it at a point just above the knot on his tie.

Overall, his appearance might have deceived an untrained eye, but she was far too acute: he was obviously an upstart. For one thing, his table manners told even a casual observer that no one had spent much time teaching him how to eat politely. No one had tapped his elbow when he let it rest on the table and no one had taken the trouble to tell him off for putting the knife in his mouth.

Lucky him.

He was actually using the first-course cutlery for his main course.

He had almost finished by the time her plate arrived. The waiter removed the silver cover and she had to use quite a lot of will power not to follow Jörgen Grundberg's example and go all out for the food. She cut off a small piece of fillet and chewed it carefully. Meanwhile he shamelessly used the blade of his knife to scrape up the last dribble of sauce and transfer it to his mouth. She swallowed.

'This is really very good. Many thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

He burped, trying to conceal it behind his napkin, and pushed his plate away. Then he pulled a blister-pack from a white medical-looking box, squeezing out one capsule. He swallowed it with a gulp of wine.

'Well, now, "Swedish Laval Separator"—that's quite something.'

He put the box back in his pocket, and she carried on eating, but shrugged her shoulders lightly. This bit was always tricky.

'What about you? What do you do?'

She couldn't believe how well this worked, every time. Maybe all men in expensive suits are clones of the same ancient forefather. As soon as a man in a halfway decent career was given a chance to speak about his own successes, he would forget everything that seemed to have interested him just minutes earlier.

'Import trade. Mostly in electronics. I check out new gizmos and if I believe in them, I buy the rights and start up production in Latvia and Lithuania. You'd be surprised, but production costs can be reduced by up to two-thirds if one only...'

He was happily rabbiting on about his brilliant business ideas. All she needed to do was look at him and nod at regular intervals. She was enjoying her meal, letting garlic and rosemary absorb her mind fully.

When her plate was empty and she looked up at him again, she realised he had stopped talking. Now he was watching her. High time to start with stage two. She had half a glass of wine waiting, but it couldn't be helped.

'That was wonderful. Thank you so much.'

'You were quite hungry after all, weren't you?'

She put her knife and fork down on the plate. At least someone at this table had been taught how to signal the end of a meal correctly.

He seemed ridiculously pleased with himself, smiling contentedly.

'Working out what a woman really needs is one of my specialities.'

She wondered if that held true for his wife as well. Then she folded her napkin.

'It's a shame, but now it's definitely time for me to say goodnight. Thank you again, both for the pleasant company and the nice meal.'

'I'd like to tempt you to share a little night-cap upstairs.'

His eyes met hers over the edge of the glass.

'I appreciate the offer, but no, I can't. I've got a long day ahead tomorrow.' Before he could stop her she waved to the waiter, who responded instantly.

'My bill, please,' she said.

The waiter bowed politely and began clearing the table. He eyed Grundberg's crossed knife and fork.

'Have you finished, sir?'

The barely audible irony in his voice made her hide a smile in her wine glass, but it was lost on Grundberg, who merely nodded without spotting the barb.

'Now, you must let me pay for this. That's what we agreed.'



He tried to put his hand over hers but she pulled it away in time.

‘I must pay for my wine, though.’

The waiter left. She took hold of her handbag, which had been hanging over the back of her chair.

He didn’t want to back down.

‘No, don’t think of it. No arguments now.’

‘Thank you—but you can’t really stop me, you know.’

He had begun to irritate her and she had sounded more aloof than she intended. Grundberg was smiling at her. This was the wrong time to cool his ardour and so she smiled back at him. She put her handbag on her knees and opened it to find her wallet. It didn’t take long to search the two compartments.

‘Oh God, no!’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘My wallet’s gone.’

She rooted in her handbag again, frantically. Then she hid her face in her left hand and sighed deeply.

‘Take it easy now. Are you sure it couldn’t be in your briefcase?’

She allowed this suggestion to sink in, giving both of them, especially him, new hope. Then she put the briefcase on her lap. He couldn’t see what was inside, which was just as well. He might have been troubled to find that Caroline Fors had nothing in her briefcase except her diary, a pack of frankfurters and a Swiss army knife.

‘No, it isn’t here either. Oh God! Someone must have stolen it.’

‘Now, now. You must take it easy. I’m sure all this can be fixed easily enough.’

The waiter returned with two bills on a small silver tray, and Grundberg hurriedly produced his American Express card.

'Take both off this.'

The waiter looked at her to get permission and she nodded briefly. He turned and left.

'I'll pay you back as soon as I...'

'No problem. Don't worry about a thing.'

She hid her face behind her hand again.

'And I had my hotel voucher in the wallet. Dear God, I haven't even got a room. This is terrible.' She placed a lot of emphasis on the last bit. Abjectly, she shook her head.

'You must let me help. Just you stay here and I'll have a word with the reception people.'

'But I couldn't possibly ask you to...'

'Of course you can. We'll deal with anything that needs settling once you've sorted out the business with your lost wallet. No hurry at all. Now, you just sit back and relax. I'll see to this.'

He got up and went off to the reception desk.

She drank some wine. Cheers!



In the lift, and then all the way to her room, she almost went over the top with gratitude. He had brought two shots of whisky and, outside her door, made one final attempt.

'Sure you haven't regretted saying no to that night-cap?'

This time he even winked at her.

'It's sweet of you, but I must get on the phone at once. I've got to cancel my cards and put a stop on the accounts.'

Even to him, this was an acceptable reason. He gave her one of the glasses of whisky and sighed.

'What a shame.'

'Some other time, perhaps.'

He sniffed a little and produced her keycard. She took it from him.

‘Truly I’m so very grateful.’

She wanted to get into that room quickly now and put the card into the slit in the door. He put his hand on top of hers.

‘I’m in 407, remember. You know where I am if you change your mind. I’m a light sleeper.’

He didn’t give up easily. Gently, using all the self-control she could muster, she pulled his hand away.

‘I won’t forget.’

The card didn’t work. The lock-release click didn’t happen. She tried again. He smiled.

‘Goodness. You must have got my card. Who knows, maybe it’s an omen?’

She turned and looked at him.

He was holding her card between thumb and index finger. She felt an unmistakable wave of bad temper mounting inside her. She took the plastic card from him and put his into his jacket pocket. Her door opened easily this time.

‘Good night.’

She stepped into her room and began pulling the door to. He stood there looking at her like a disappointed kid. No sweeties after all. And he had been exceptionally decent to her, it must be said. Maybe he deserved at least a little something to cheer him up. She lowered her voice.

‘I’ll be in touch if I begin to feel lonely.’

His face lit up like a sun and with that sight facing her she finally closed the door and locked it from the inside.

Have a nice life.



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