

## CHAPTER 1

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Lisbeth Salander was on her way back to her cell from the gym and the showers when she was stopped in the corridor by the warden. Alvar Olsen was blathering on about something, gesticulating wildly and waving a set of papers. But Salander could not hear a word he said. It was 7.30 p.m.

That was the most dangerous time at Flodberga Prison. 7.30 p.m. was when the daily freight train thundered past, the walls shook and keys rattled and the place smelled of sweat and perfume. All the worst abuses took place then, masked by the racket from the railway and in the general confusion just before the cell doors were shut. Salander always let her gaze wander back and forth over the unit at this time of day and it was probably no coincidence that she caught sight of Faria Kazi.

Faria was young and beautiful, from Bangladesh, and she was sitting in her cell. From where Salander and Olsen stood, all Salander could see was her face. Someone was slapping Faria. Her head kept jerking from side to side, though the blows were not that hard – there was something almost routine about them. It was clear from Faria's humiliated expression that the abuse had been going on for a long time, and had broken all will to resist.

No hands were raised to try to stop the slapping, and in Faria's eyes there was no indication of surprise, only a mute, dull fear. This terror was part of her life. Salander could see that just by studying her face, and it matched what she had observed during her weeks at the prison.

"Will you look at that," she said, pointing into Faria's cell.

But by the time Olsen had turned to look it was over. Salander disappeared into her own cell and closed the door. She could hear voices and muffled laughter in the corridor and outside the freight train clanging by, shaking the walls. She stood in front of the shiny washbasin and narrow bed, the bookshelf and desk strewn with pages of her quantum mechanical calculations. Did she feel like doing more work on loop quantum gravity theory? She realized she was holding something and looked down at her hand.

It was the same sheaf of papers that Olsen had been waving around, and that did, after all, make her a little curious. But it was some sort of rubbish with coffee cup rings all over the cover page, an intelligence test. Ridiculous. She hated to be prodded and measured.

She dropped the papers which spread like a fan on the concrete floor. For a brief moment they vanished from her mind as her thoughts went back to Faria Kazi. Salander had not seen who was hitting her. But she knew perfectly well who it was. Although at first prison life had not interested Salander, reluctantly she had been drawn in, decoding the visible and invisible signals one by one. By now she understood who called the shots.

This was called the B Unit, the secure section. It was considered the safest place in the institution and to a visitor that might have been how it seemed. There were more guards, more controls and more rehabilitation programmes here than anywhere else in the prison. But anyone who took a closer look would realize there was something rotten about the place. The guards put on an act, exuding authority, and they even pretended to care. But in fact they were cowards who had lost control, and they had ceded power to their chief antagonists, gang leader Benito Andersson and her mob.

During the day Benito kept a low profile and behaved much like a model prisoner, but after the evening meal, when the inmates could exercise or receive visits, she took over the place. At this time of day her reign of terror was uncontested, just before the doors were locked for the night. As the prisoners roamed between cells, making threats and promises in whispered tones, Benito's gang kept to one side, their victims to the other.

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The fact that Salander was in prison at all was a major scandal. But circumstances had hardly been on her side, nor had she put up a very convincing fight. The interlude seemed absurd to her, but she also thought she might just as well be in jail as anywhere else.

She had been sentenced to two months for unlawful use of property and reckless endangerment in the dramatic events following the murder of Professor Frans Balder. Salander had taken it upon herself to hide an eight-year-old autistic boy and refused to cooperate with the police because she believed – quite rightly – that the police investigation had been betrayed. No-one disputed that she went to heroic lengths to save the child's life. Even so, Chief Prosecutor Richard Ekström led the case with great conviction and the court ultimately found against her, although one of the lay judges dissented. Salander's lawyer, Giannini had done an outstanding job. But she got virtually no help from her client so that in the end she did not stand a chance. Salander

maintained a sullen silence throughout the trial and she refused to appeal the verdict. She simply wanted to get the business over with.

At first she was sent to Björngårda Gård open prison, where she had a lot of freedom. Then new information surfaced, suggesting there were people who wanted to harm her. This was not entirely unexpected, given the enemies she had made, so she was transferred to the secure wing at Flodberga.

Salander had no problem sharing space with Sweden's most notorious female criminals. She was constantly surrounded by guards, and no assaults or violence had been reported in the unit for many years. Records also showed that an impressive number of inmates had been rehabilitated. But those statistics all came from the time before the arrival of Benito Andersson.

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From the first day Salander arrived at the prison, she faced a variety of provocations. She was a high-profile prisoner known from the media, not to mention the rumours that spread through the underworld. Only a few days earlier, Benito had put a note in her hand which read: FRIEND OR ENEMY? Salander had thrown it away after a minute – it took about fifty-eight seconds before she could be bothered to read it.

She had no interest in power struggles or alliances. She concentrated on observing and learning, and by now she felt she had learned more than enough. She stared blankly at her bookshelf, stocked with the essays on quantum field theory she had ordered before she landed inside. In the cupboard on the left were two changes of prison clothes, all stamped with the initials of the Prison Service, plus some underwear and two pairs of gym shoes. There was nothing on the walls, not a single reminder of life on the outside. She cared no more for the surroundings in her cell than she did at home on Fiskargatan.

Cell doors were being shut along the corridor and normally that meant some freedom for Salander. When the noise died down, she could lose herself in mathematics – in attempts to combine quantum mechanics with the theory of relativity – and forget the world around her. But tonight was different. She was irritated, and not just because of the abuse of Faria Kazi or the rampant corruption in the unit.

She could not stop thinking about the visit six days earlier from Holger Palmgren, her old guardian from the time when the authorities had decided she was incapable of taking care of herself. The visit had been a major production. Palmgren hardly ever left his apartment in Liljeholmen and was entirely dependent on carers and assistants. But he had been adamant. The social service's subsidized transport service brought him in his wheelchair, wheezing into an oxygen mask. Salander was glad to see him.

She and Palmgren had spoken of old times and he had become sentimental and emotional. There was just one thing that had troubled Salander. Palmgren told her that a woman by the name of Maj-Britt Torell had been to see him. She used to be a secretary at St Stefan's psychiatric clinic for children, where Salander had been a patient. The woman had read about Salander in the newspapers and brought Palmgren some documents which she believed he might find interesting. According to Palmgren it was more of the same old horror stories about how Salander had been strapped to her bed in the clinic and subjected to the worst kind of psychological abuse. "Nothing you need to see," he said. Even so, something must have stood out, because when Palmgren asked about her dragon tattoo and Salander mentioned the woman with the birthmark, he said:

"Wasn't she from the Registry?"

"What's that?"

"The Registry for the Study of Genetics and Social Environment in Uppsala? I thought I read that somewhere."

"The name must have been in those new documents," she said.

"You think so? Perhaps I'm just muddling it all up."

Perhaps he was. Palmgren had grown old. Yet the information stuck in Salander's mind. It had gnawed at her while she trained on the speedball in the gym in the afternoons and worked in the ceramics workshop in the mornings. It gnawed away at her now as she stood in her cell looking down at the floor.

Somehow the I.Q. test which lay spread across the concrete no longer seemed irrelevant, but rather a continuation of her conversation with Palmgren. For a moment Salander could not grasp why. Then she remembered that the woman with the birthmark had given her all kinds of tests in those days. They always ended in arguments and eventually with Salander, at the age of just six, escaping into the night.

Yet what was most striking about these memories was not the tests or her running away, but the growing suspicion that there was something fundamental about her childhood she did not understand. She knew she had to find out more.

True, she would soon be outside again and free to do as she wanted. But she also knew she had leverage with Warden Olsen. This was not the first time he had chosen to turn a blind eye to abuses, and the unit he headed, still a source of pride in the prison service, was in a state of moral decay. Salander guessed she could get Olsen to give her access to something no-one else in the prison was allowed – an internet connection.

She listened out for sounds in the corridor. Muttered curses could be heard, along with doors being slammed, keys rattling and footsteps tapping off into

the distance. Then silence fell. The only noise came from the ventilation system. It was broken – the air was stifling, unbearable – but still humming away. Salander looked at the papers on the floor and thought about Benito, Faria Kazi and Alvar Olsen – and the woman with the fiery birthmark on her throat.

She bent to pick up the test, sat down at the desk and scribbled out some answers. Then she pressed the intercom button by the steel door. Olsen picked up after a long interval, sounding nervous. She said she needed to talk to him right away.

“It’s important,” she said.