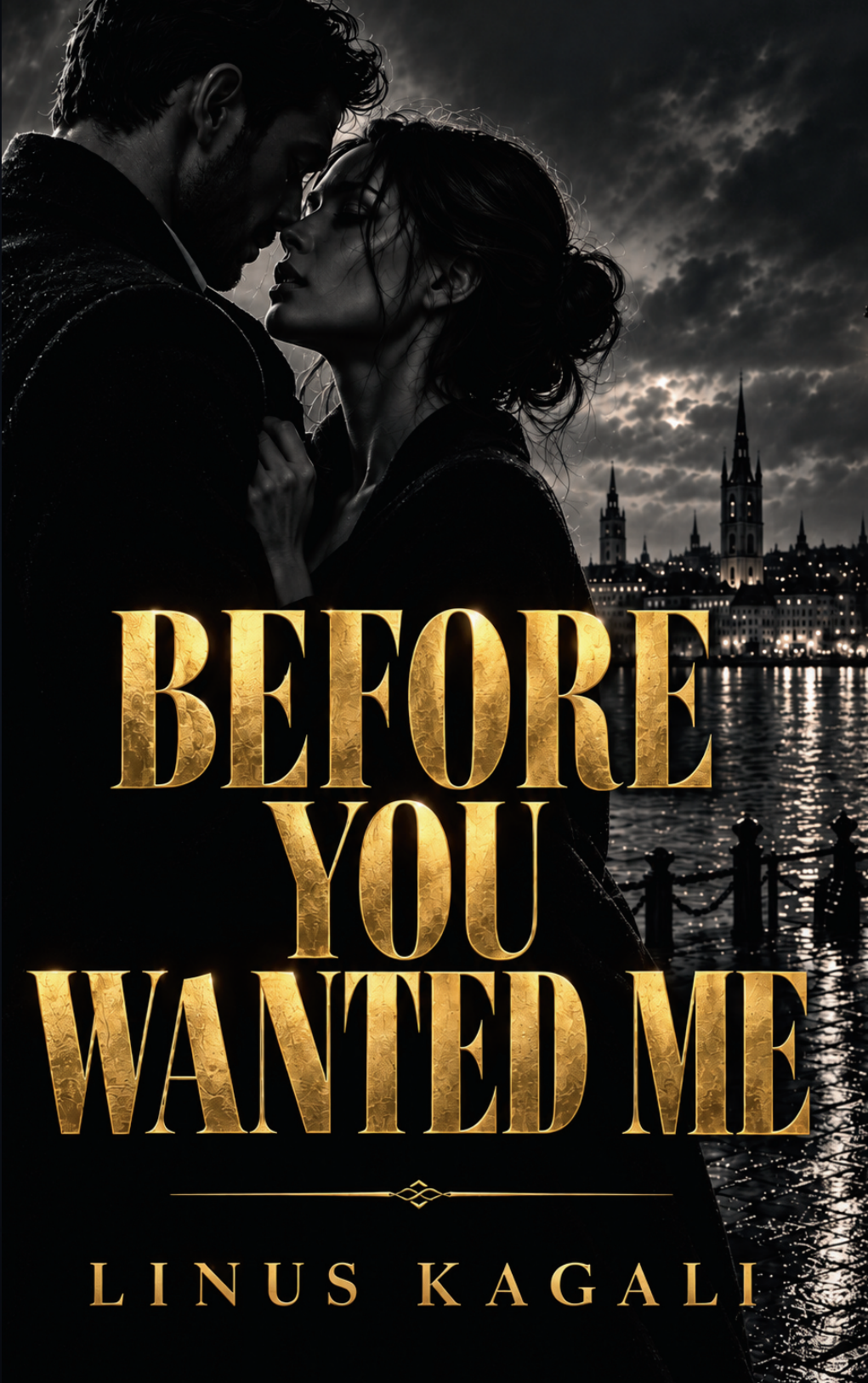




BEFORE YOU WANTED ME

LINUS KAGALI

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A NOVEL

LINUS KAGALI

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Written by Linus Kagali

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CHAPTER ONE

The Second Meeting

Rain had been falling over Stockholm since four that afternoon. By seven, Nybroviken had dissolved into reflections: headlights drawn into pale ribbons, red taillights trembling across the asphalt, windows burning above the black water like glimpses into sealed lives.

Elin Sjöberg stood beneath the awning of a hotel she had no intention of entering and watched the doorway across the street.

She gave herself three seconds.

Later, she would remember the pause more clearly than the reception itself. During those three seconds she could still have turned away. She could have gone home, poured a glass of wine and left two proud men to destroy an acquisition neither of them could admit they wanted to save.

Instead, she crossed the road.

A taxi hissed through a puddle behind her. Cold rain found the space between her collar and her neck, and the shock of it made her quicken her step.

Once she entered the building, a man she had never met would look at her as though she were late. Much later, when almost everything between them had become difficult to divide into accident, desire and design, she would return to the same question.

Had she chosen to cross, or had someone already chosen for her?

The private reception occupied the upper floor of a narrow building near the water. There was no sign outside, no press line, no sponsor's name repeated against a photographic wall. Everyone had been invited because someone else wanted them in the room.

Warmth closed around Elin as soon as she entered. Wool coats vanished into the cloakroom. Crystal touched crystal with discreet little sounds. People lowered their voices without being asked, as if wealth were a condition best protected from echoes.

Elin surrendered her dark-blue coat and studied the room before the room had time to arrange itself around her. The first five minutes of any gathering told her more than the final hour. Exits. Distances. Faces. Who stood alone, and who wanted to be seen standing alone.

She recognized a former ministerial adviser, two technology founders, a gallery owner she had met in Copenhagen, and Martin Eklund, chairman of Nordhavn Logistics. His acquisition had brought her there.

Officially, the deal was failing because of governance. In reality, two men in their sixties had stopped speaking after one of them moved a chair during a board dinner. People preferred to believe that large decisions required large causes. Elin had built a career on the humiliating truth that pride could move more money than strategy.

"Ms. Sjöberg."

She turned.

Martin approached with the strained brightness of a man who had spent the day insisting nothing was wrong.

"You came."

"You asked me to."

"I wasn't certain you would."

"That usually means you hoped I would."

His smile became real for the first time. "There's someone I want you to meet."

Elin followed his glance.

A man stood near the windows, one hand in his trouser pocket, the other resting loosely around a glass of water. Three people were speaking to him. He said nothing, yet the pace of the conversation seemed to belong to him.

That was the first thing she noticed.

The second was the care with which he appeared careless. Dark suit. White shirt open at the throat. No tie, no obvious display, nothing she could accuse of trying too hard. Even his stillness felt chosen.

He looked across the room.

His attention found her and stopped.

The expression was too precise to be surprise. He did not smile or offer the courteous half-nod of strangers introduced at a

distance. For perhaps half a second, he looked at her with recognition.

Something low in Elin's body tightened before her mind supplied a reason.

The man said a few words to his companions, set down his water and came toward her.

"Elin," Martin said, "this is Axel Falk."

Axel kept his eyes on her. "You changed your coat."

Martin laughed because he assumed he had missed a joke.

Elin did not. "Excuse me?"

Axel glanced toward the cloakroom and back. "The black one suited you better."

Martin looked between them. "You two know each other?"

"No," Elin said, at the same moment Axel said, "Apparently not."

Martin laughed again, more faintly this time.

Elin studied Axel. She had met charming men before, men who entered a conversation already performing and used eye contact as a form of pressure. Axel did neither. He simply waited, as though she were the one who had forgotten something.

"Where do you think we met?" she asked.

Martin's smile faded. He had finally realized he was standing inside someone else's conversation.

Axel considered her question. "Interesting."

"What is?"

"You asked where. Most people would ask whether we'd met."

A waiter passed with champagne. Axel took a glass and offered it to her.

Elin left it between them. "I know whether I've met someone."

"Do you?"

His voice carried no flirtation. The absence irritated her more than flirtation would have.

Martin cleared his throat. "I should find the others."

Neither of them stopped him.

When he had gone, Elin said, "You're confusing me with someone else, or you're trying to make me think you are."

Axel took a small sip of champagne. "Which would bother you more?"

"The second."

"Why?"

"The first would be a mistake. The second would be work."

The answer almost drew a smile from him. "Then I hope I'm mistaken."

He gave the untouched champagne to a passing waiter.

Elin noticed. "You knew I wouldn't take it."

"I noticed you didn't."

"Those aren't the same thing."

"No."

He let the word remain where a less disciplined man might have rushed to fill the silence. Elin noticed the warmth of the room, the distance between his shoulder and hers, the faint rain-darkened wool of his jacket. Her body had begun collecting details without asking permission.

Axel looked toward the gathering. "Eklund brought you because he thinks the problem is personal."

"It is personal."

"Everything becomes personal eventually."

"That sounds like something consultants say before billing by the hour."

This time he smiled. It changed him only slightly, which was enough to make her understand that restraint, rather than coldness, had shaped his face until then.

"Do you always decide this quickly whether you dislike someone?" he asked.

"I haven't decided."

"That sounds expensive."

"For whom?"

"Whoever is waiting."

A bell sounded from the dining room, and the guests began moving toward the long table. Axel stepped aside to let her pass.

As Elin moved in front of him, his scent reached her: cedar, perhaps, or bergamot; clean wool; something warmer beneath both. Her attention stayed a fraction too long.

At dinner, Axel sat six places away.

Relief came first. Irritation followed because relief implied an effect she was unwilling to grant him.

The older woman beside Elin introduced herself as Birgitta and confessed, before the first course arrived, that she hated gatherings like this.

"Everyone knows exactly what they want from everyone else," Birgitta said.

Elin unfolded her napkin. "That makes it easier."

Birgitta laughed. "You must be the consultant."

Across the table, Axel heard her. One corner of his mouth shifted.

Elin caught him looking and raised an eyebrow. He looked away first. The small victory pleased her more than it should have, and for the next few seconds she could feel the pleasure of it in her mouth whenever she tried not to smile.

A server leaned between two chairs with a bottle of wine just as one of the guests shifted. The base of a glass caught the server's wrist. Axel caught the glass before it struck the table, moved his chair back to give her room and returned his attention to the man beside him. There was no flourish, no pause in which gratitude could gather around him. The server murmured thanks. Axel nodded once.

Elin watched longer than the incident deserved. Axel had not checked who saw.

Birgitta followed her gaze. "Dangerous man."

Elin turned. "You know him?"

"Never met him."

"Then how do you know he's dangerous?"

Birgitta buttered a piece of bread with grave concentration. "I'm seventy-two. I'm allowed to confuse prejudice with wisdom."

Elin laughed. Axel looked over, and this time he found her still smiling. For one unguarded second, neither of them appeared interested in winning.

Then Martin began speaking about the acquisition, and the room returned to work.

The meal deteriorated quickly. Martin and Lars Hammar, the opposing chairman, avoided one another with such

determination that everyone else began compensating with unnecessary conversation.

Elin watched a hand close too firmly around a wineglass, a joke repeated because one man had failed to laugh, and a woman from the legal team lower her eyes whenever compensation was mentioned. Nothing dramatic happened. Everything useful did.

Across the table, Axel was reading the same room.

Their eyes met. He glanced toward Lars, then toward the legal adviser, and back to Elin. The sequence formed a question.

She gave the slightest shake of her head. Too early.

Axel lowered his gaze and waited.

The ease of that silent exchange unsettled her. They had known each other for less than an hour, yet he had understood the boundary of her answer. Worse, she had understood his question.

Twenty minutes later, Lars interrupted Martin over something trivial, and the room tightened.

Elin set down her fork. "Mr. Hammar, what did Martin promise you privately that disappeared from the written agreement?"

Silence reached every end of the table.

Martin stared at her. Lars produced a short, dismissive laugh.

"That's absurd."

Elin waited.

Lars looked at Martin a fraction too long.

There.

Martin's expression changed. Across the table, Axel remained still.

"This is hardly the place," Lars said.

"That depends on whether you want the acquisition."

"Lars," Martin warned.

"You said the Göteborg division would remain independent for three years."

The blood left Martin's face. "That was before the restructuring."

"You gave me your word."

"And you moved the headquarters proposal without telling me."

"There was no headquarters proposal."

Voices overlapped. Nobody raised his voice; what happened was less civil and more revealing. Elin let the argument breathe. People often told the truth only after losing control of how elegantly they were telling it.

Within ten minutes, governance had disappeared from the dispute. The acquisition was failing because two men who had known each other for twenty-seven years each believed the other had humiliated him first.

That could be repaired. Money was harder. Pride was expensive, but negotiable.

When dinner broke apart, Elin escaped toward the side room where coffee was being served. She had almost reached it when a cup appeared beside her.

Axel held it out. Black coffee, softened with a little milk. No sugar.

She looked at the cup, then at him. "Don't."

"Drink coffee?"

"Make a performance out of knowing things."

His eyebrows lifted. "I watched you order one downstairs."

"I didn't order coffee downstairs."

Axel went still. The hesitation lasted only a moment, but it was the first thing about him that did not look chosen.

He lowered his eyes to the cup. "You're right."

Attention moved beneath Elin's ribs, colder and sharper than attraction. "How did you know?"

He placed the cup on the table between them. "I don't know."

She almost laughed. "That's your answer?"

"It's the true one."

"Convenient."

"Truth often is. That's why people distrust it."

The coffee remained untouched. A faint skin was already beginning to form across its surface.

"Have you been researching me?" Elin asked.

"Yes."

The direct answer disrupted the accusation she had prepared. She folded her arms. "Why?"

"Martin sent me your profile."

"That tells you where I studied and what I charge."

"It also mentions a lecture you gave in Malmö about decision fatigue."

"You watched it?"

"Parts of it. You were wrong about one thing."

Despite herself, Elin smiled. Criticism was an invitation she knew how to accept. "What?"

"You said people become worse at making decisions as the number of available choices increases."

"They do."

"Sometimes."

"Most of the time."

"Only when they care about the difference."

Elin leaned against the table. "Your argument is that excess choice causes no fatigue when the choices are meaningless."

"My argument is that desire reduces complexity."

The sentence entered the space between them with an intimacy his tone refused to acknowledge.

"That sounds less like behavioral economics," she said.

"It probably is."

"What does it sound like?"

Axel glanced toward the dining room. "Something less respectable."

A waiter entered carrying a tray, and the moment closed before Elin had decided what she wanted from it. Axel stepped away.

"Are you leaving?" she asked.

"I have another meeting."

"At ten at night?"

"Some people make worse decisions after ten."

"And you?"

He lifted his coat from the back of a chair. "I make different ones."

Elin watched him put it on and button it. The movement should have been ordinary. Her awareness made it otherwise.

"Axel."

He looked back.

"You said I changed my coat."

"I did."

"You've never seen my other coat."

BEFORE YOU WANTED ME

*Elin Sjöberg knows how people make decisions.
Axel Falk knows how to influence them.*

When they meet at a private Stockholm reception, the attraction between them is immediate—and strangely familiar. Axel seems to know things about Elin he should not know. A forgotten hotel key, an impossible memory, and a trail of carefully engineered coincidences soon force her to ask a dangerous question:

Did she choose him—or was she chosen for him?

As desire deepens into obsession, Elin discovers a hidden world of behavioral research, private histories, and experiments designed to manipulate what people want. But the closer she comes to the truth, the harder it becomes to separate manipulation from genuine feeling.

*Because Axel may have studied desire.
He may even have used it.
But neither of them planned to fall in love.*

BEFORE YOU WANTED ME is a seductive psychological romance about desire, control, consent—and what remains when two people finally stop trying to predict each other.

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