

# **Anxious People**

# **(i)**

## INTRODUCTION

#### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FREDRIK BACKMAN

Backman was born and raised in southern Sweden, in the Stockholm suburbs. As a young man he wrote for the Swedish newspaper *Helsingsborgs Dagblad*, and he also began keeping a blog in 2009. The material for his first novel, *A Man Called Ove*, first appeared on his blog. When the novel was finally published in 2012, it became an overnight sensation: it was translated into 25 languages, became an international bestseller, and was on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for 42 weeks. Backman has since written several other novels that have been hits in Sweden and internationally, including *My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She's Sorry*, *Beartown*, and *Britt-Marie Was Here*. *A Man Called Ove*, *Beartown*, and *Anxious People* have been adapted for film and television since their publication. Backman lives in Stockholm with his wife and two children.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The global economic crash that led the man to jump off the bridge is, presumably, the Great Recession, which began in the United States in 2007-08. Due to a variety of factors, including not enough oversight in the banking industry, the entire banking sector crashed and was eventually bailed out in September of 2008. As the American economy is one of the largest in the world and therefore has immense sway on the global economy, many developed countries—including Sweden—also suffered a recession. While the U.S. was officially in a recession for 19 months, Sweden's recession lasted 15 months. Another thing the novel touches on is immigration to Sweden. Recent estimates suggest that about 15 percent of Sweden's population is foreign-born, and about 5 percent of Swedish people are born to two immigrant parents. This has led to anti-immigrant sentiment from various Swedish political parties, as well as an increase in violence against immigrants. Finally, Anxious People also highlights people's (particularly younger people's) willingness to speak openly about their mental health and seek help for it. The novel highlights the generational divide most clearly as it describes retiree Roger wanting to essentially ignore and discredit his formally diagnosed burnout, which the World Health Organization added to its International Classification of Diseases in the spring of 2019. In contrast, Nadia, a psychologist in her 20s, sees her history with suicidal thoughts as an asset as she helps patients dealing with some of the same things she did.

#### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Backman's novels, like Anxious People, feature groups of people with seemingly little in common coming together to form communities and friendships. <u>A Man Called Ove</u> and My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She's Sorry are perhaps most like Anxious People in this regard. Anxious People is also one of many contemporary novels for readers of all ages that tackles mental health issues (including suicide) and portrays talk therapy in a positive light. All the Bright Places by Jennifer Niven is a young adult novel that tackles suicide and bipolar disorder, while Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson highlights eating disorders. Novels like Emily Henry's People We Meet on Vacation, and the nonfiction book by therapist Lori Gottleib Maybe You Should Talk To Someone, portray the positive effects of talk therapy. Other novels that consider aspects of parenting and marriage (from the good and heartwarming to the significantly less so) include titles like Justin Torres's We the Animals, California by Edan Lepucki, The Adults by Caroline Hulse, and The Wife by Megan Wolitzer.

#### **KEY FACTS**

• Full Title: Anxious People

• When Written: 2018

• Where Written: Stockholm, Sweden

 When Published: 2019; the first U.S. translation was published in 2020

• Literary Period: Contemporary

Genre: Novel

Setting: A small town in Sweden

- **Climax:** The narrator reveals that Jim allowed the bank robber to escape, and Jim finally lets Jack in on this.
- Antagonist: Fear, anxiety, the modern world, and ostensibly the bank robber's husband and boss are all antagonists.
- Point of View: Third Person Omniscient

#### **EXTRA CREDIT**

**Let's Strike a Deal.** When Backman sold his first novel, <u>A Man Called Ove</u>, he stipulated that the publisher would also have to publish his nonfiction book, *Things My Son Needs to Know About the World*.

Reaching Out. There are a variety of resources for people who are experiencing suicidal thoughts, or who have friends who are struggling (though resources vary by country and locality). In the United States, 988, the phone number for the national suicide prevention hotline, was officially made toll-free in July 2022 and now functions much like calling 911 for other



emergencies does.

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# **PLOT SUMMARY**

Ten years ago, a man lost everything in a stock market crash. He wrote a **letter** to a woman in a bank who denied him a loan to pay his debts telling her "everything he wanted her to know," and then he stood on a **bridge**. A teenage boy, Jack, tried to talk him down—but the man jumped anyway. A week later, the woman, Zara, watched as a teenage girl, Nadia, climbed the railing to also jump off the bridge. Jack pulled Nadia to the ground with such force that she was knocked unconscious. They don't see each other again after this, but Zara picks up Nadia's wallet and observes from a distance as Nadia trains to be a psychologist and returns to practice in her hometown. Jack, meanwhile, becomes a policeman and works in the same town alongside his dad Jim, who's also an officer.

Zara holds on to the letter the man wrote her; she's afraid to open it and confirm that it was her fault he jumped. Eventually, she begins attending counseling sessions with Nadia. Nadia soon realizes that Zara's biggest problem is that she's lonely. When she suggests that Zara find a hobby, Zara tells her that she's started going to viewings of middle-class apartments. Secretly, Zara has been attending apartment viewings since the man jumped, but she only visits apartments with balconies and a view of the bridge.

In the present, a woman—the future bank robber—discovers that her husband has been cheating on her with her boss. Not wanting to make a fuss for her daughters' sake, she moves out. But without a job or savings, she can barely afford to rent an apartment for 6,500 kroner per month. Her situation gets increasingly dire, and her husband threatens to take sole custody of the girls if the woman can't keep her apartment. Things come to a head when the woman learns that her older daughter believes her parents are fighting over her. So, the day before New Year's Eve, the woman puts on a ski mask and, armed with a stolen pistol she believes is a toy (but which is actually real), she tries to rob a bank for 6,500 kroner. However, she makes the mistake of trying to rob a cashless bank. When the young teller, London, tells the robber this, the robber panics and runs across the street into the first door she sees. At the top of the stairs, the robber enters an apartment, which is open because it's for sale and the viewing is today. Seeing no other choice, the robber takes the prospective buyers hostage.

Jack and Jim are the first on the scene. They've never dealt with a hostage drama before, so they're both unsure of what to do. After consulting Google, they decide to try to make contact with the robber—but when they stumble upon a box of Christmas lights that Jim thinks looks like a bomb, Jim insists they leave the building. He calls their bosses in Stockholm. Jack

is enraged; he wants to prove himself and save everyone in the apartment. The special negotiator begins the long drive from Stockholm.

In the apartment, things aren't as dire as Jack and Jim believe they are. Zara is there, and when the robber waves the gun at her, Zara is just shocked to learn she doesn't really want to die. A retired couple, Roger and Anna-Lena, want to buy the apartment to renovate and then sell again; while a younger couple, Ro and Julia, are looking for a new apartment since Julia is having a baby soon. They're all fighting when the robber enters the apartment. The robber asks that everyone lie down and be quiet so she can think, but everyone refuses. Estelle suggests they all introduce themselves and, when she claps her hands in glee, everyone falls to the ground, terrified the pistol went off.

Julia has to use the bathroom, but it's locked. Suddenly, Anna-Lena becomes agitated. Finally, a man in only underwear, socks, and a rabbit's head opens the bathroom door and introduces himself as Lennart. Anna-Lena confesses that she's been hiring Lennart for a year now: he makes scenes at apartment viewings so nobody wants to buy the apartments, which allows Roger to negotiate better deals on the apartments. She just wants Roger to feel successful and useful. Secretly, she wants to stop flipping apartments and have a real home again. Enraged, Roger goes to sit in the hall, while Anna-Lena goes into the walk-in closet to sob privately. Ro and the robber join Roger, while Julia joins Anna-Lena in the closet.

In the hallway, Ro admits that she's afraid to move because her dad usually advises her when she makes purchases. He has dementia, though, and can't check out this apartment. Roger, recognizing himself in Ro, suggests that Ro and Julia buy the apartment—there's nothing wrong with it, and Ro will learn to fix things like baseboards soon enough. The robber shares that she has daughters and assures Ro that Ro will be a good parent.

In the closet, Julia tries to comfort Anna-Lena (Julia thinks Roger is an "emotionally challenged old fart"). However, Anna-Lena dashes this perception when she explains that Roger is actually very sensitive, noble, and caring. The women realize their spouses are actually very similar—both use a hair dryer to dry their pubic hair, for instance—and they realize they have a lot in common, too.

Estelle, who says that her husband Knut is parking their car, asks if anyone is hungry. When Ro points out that the police are always willing to buy pizza for hostages in movies, Roger agrees to organize a pizza order. He ties the pizza order to a lime and throws it off the balcony. It hits Jack in the head. Jack and Jim realize that when they take the pizzas up to the apartment, they can slip a phone into a pizza box so the special negotiator can call the robber and negotiate with them.

Meanwhile, in the apartment, Estelle joins Julia and Anna-Lena in the closet. She scandalizes Anna-Lena when she digs through



a trunk and pulls out a bottle of wine, but the older women share the bottle. The three women discuss parenting and marriage, and Anna-Lena assures Julia that she'll be a fine parent, as kids mostly just need chauffeurs. Then, Anna-Lena reveals that she worked as a top analyst for a big American company. Roger kept putting his engineering career on hold to care for their kids while she kept getting promoted, and he never got to reach his full potential. Now, she's trying to make him feel needed. Very drunk now, Estelle admits that she once had an affair with her neighbor; they exchanged books in the elevator until he died, but it never went any further than that. With coaxing, she also reveals that Knut is dead, not parking the car. The women decide they should help the robber.

Meanwhile, the robber is alone in the hallway and feels increasingly hopeless. Just as she begins to lift the pistol and wonder if she'd kill herself if it was real, Zara appears and tells the robber not to do anything silly. Disturbed that she might be becoming empathetic, Zara retreats to the balcony to listen to death metal through her headphones. Lennart joins Zara on the balcony. Zara finds Lennart, whose head is still stuck in the rabbit head, easy to talk to. She tells him about how the finance industry is too strong: it destroys people who just want to live their lives and turns apartments into investments, not homes. She sends Lennart inside to go put pants on.

Lennart lost his pants, so he knocks on the closet and asks to borrow some. Estelle is drunk and is also smoking by now; the smoke is going up through a mysterious vent in the ceiling. The vent begins to cough—and when Lennart gets up to look, he gets his rabbit head unstuck (it remains in the vent) and pulls the real estate agent down with him when he falls. The agent reveals that she's been hiding since the hostage drama began. Lennart's fall causes the fake blood packet he carries to burst, covering the living room rug in blood.

The pizzas arrive, and Jim defies Jack by sneaking up to the apartment while Jack is on the phone with the special negotiator, trying to get a look at the supposed bomb from the building across the street. Though Lennart and Roger argue over who should open the door in the ski mask (all the hostages have agreed to help the robber), the robber insists on opening the door herself. After giving the hostages the pizza, she sits on the landing with Jim—who feels very sympathetic, as the robber looks exactly like his daughter, Jack's sister, who's addicted to heroin. Overcome with emotion as the robber tells her story, Jim suggests that the robber sneak into the empty apartment across the landing, which is for sale and being sold by the same real estate agent as this one. He'll tell his colleagues the robber is male—they've all assumed the robber was male, anyway. The robber asks for fireworks in exchange for letting the hostages go; Estelle has mentioned how much Knut loved fireworks.

The robber returns to the apartment, but the agent doesn't have a key to the neighboring apartment. Estelle, however,

reveals that this is *her* apartment, and the one across the landing belonged to her lover—and she still has the key. After Jim's fireworks show ends, the hostages head downstairs. The robber leaves the apartment once they're gone and, with a wave from Jim, slips into the neighboring apartment. The special negotiator calls the phone (which is still in Estelle's apartment) to speak to the robber, but the phone is on vibrate. Its vibration causes the pistol to go off, and when Jack storms the apartment a moment later and sees the blood, he's convinced that the robber shot himself and is hiding somewhere in the apartment, dying.

Jack and Jim interview the hostages at the police station, but the hostages all insist they know nothing and that the robber was in the apartment when they left. After searching the apartment again and finding the rabbit head in the vent, Jack realizes the robber must've posed as the agent and left the apartment with everyone else—she's at the station. But after Jack harasses the agent to tell him he's right, Jim pulls Jack into the hall and tells him the truth. Jack lets the witnesses go out the back and tells the journalists and the backup agents from Stockholm that they lost the robber.

Julia and Ro buy Estelle's lover's former apartment, while the robber and her daughters move in with Estelle. Zara visits Nadia and asks her to help her read the man's letter, which says, "It wasn't your fault." Zara quits her job in the bank, gives away her fortune, and starts a relationship with Lennart. In the spring, she sends Jack a letter directing him to Nadia's office. Jack recognizes Nadia, and she's shocked and thrilled to find the person who saved her. In 10 years, they'll tell people how it felt to smile at each other the first time.

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# **CHARACTERS**

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

**The Bank Robber** – The bank robber is a 39-year-old woman who, after trying and failing to rob a cashless bank, takes nine people at an apartment viewing hostage. However, she's a sympathetic character: she's going through a nasty divorce, as her husband cheated on her with her boss, and her boss subsequently fired her. Unable to find another job and therefore unable to pay rent, the robber tries to rob the bank because she fears her ex-husband will take her daughters away from her if she can't pay rent and doesn't have a stable place to live. Her recent instability is particularly difficult for the robber to accept, as the robber's mom was an alcoholic and the robber vowed to never become a parent and then to never become a "chaotic parent." Throughout the hostage drama, the robber reiterates that she doesn't want to hurt anyone and even tries to let people go at various points. The robber also incorrectly believes her pistol is a toy and begins to raise it to her head, though Zara tells the robber not to do anything "silly." In the



end, the hostages and Jim help the robber escape into the apartment across the landing, and the robber begins renting Estelle's apartment from her, effectively for free.

**Zara/The Woman** – Zara is an extremely wealthy woman in her mid-late 50s who runs a bank. Ten years ago, she denied a man a loan, and this contributed to the man's choice to jump off a bridge and die by suicide. But before he died by suicide, the man sent Zara a letter, which Zara has carried around for the past decade. Afraid to learn that it was her fault and that she's a bad person, Zara doesn't open the letter. And curious to understand what makes some people jump while others don't, Zara regularly attends apartment viewings of apartments with balconies and a view of the bridge. Not long before the hostage drama begins, Zara begins seeing Nadia for counseling sessions—ostensibly because she can't sleep, but also because she witnessed Jack save Nadia from jumping soon after the man died. During the hostage drama, Zara remains aloof and apart from her fellow hostages. However, she connects with Lennart, and the two ultimately initiate a romantic relationship. Throughout the novel, Zara expresses grief that the financial system abuses people's trust and dreams. Ultimately, after reading the man's letter and discovering that he didn't blame her, she quits her job and gives her fortune away to an organization that supports kids who have lost family members to suicide.

Nadia/The Psychologist/The Girl - Nadia is a psychologist whom Zara sees. As a teenager, she also tried to die by suicide by jumping off the same **bridge** as the man—but Jack pulled her off the edge. This experience galvanizes Nadia's desire to study mental health, specifically the difference between people who do decide to take their own lives and those who don't. And normally, Nadia finds that her own struggles with mental health and suicidal ideation help her to serve patients working through the same feelings she once did. Nadia is calm, compassionate, and often utterly bewildered by Zara. However, the two ultimately form a trusting—if sometimes awkward and adversarial—relationship over the course of Zara's counseling sessions. At the end of the novel, several months after the hostage drama, Zara finally reveals that she witnessed Jack pull Nadia off the ledge and helps Jack and Nadia to reconnect. It's implied that the two begin a romantic relationship after this.

Anna-Lena – Anna-Lena is Roger's wife; they plan to buy the apartment as an investment property. Initially, Anna-Lena reads as subordinate and deferential: she's not used to anyone (not least Roger) listening to her, so she voices all her thoughts. However, Lennart notes that she's probably the best-educated person at the viewing, as she worked as the top analyst for an industrial firm for years. Since her career was going so well, Roger consistently put his on hold to care for their kids, something that Anna-Lena feels guilty about since retiring. Desperate to make Roger feel needed, competent, and useful, Anna-Lena hides that she wants a home (rather than to flip

properties). She also hides that she's been hiring Lennart, a professional interrupter, to make scenes at apartment viewings to make Roger believe that his negotiating tactics work. However, this all comes out during the hostage drama, when there's no way to explain away Lennart's presence at the viewing. Anna-Lena is the first to suggest that the hostages help the robber, as she knows what it's like to feel trapped by one's mistakes. Though she and Roger are still unwilling to discuss their marital problems by the end of the novel, the narrator implies that the two will make up.

**Roger** - Roger is a retired engineer who, along with his wife Anna-Lena, plans to buy the apartment as an investment property. Though Roger comes off as an entitled person, the novel reveals he's actually very noble and extremely anxious about being good enough for Anna-Lena. Throughout his life, Roger consistently put his career on hold as Anna-Lena was promoted—and now, after being forced into retirement, he runs the show to try and prove that he's capable and needed. To help him in this regard, Anna-Lena begins hiring Lennart, a professional interrupter, to disrupt apartment viewings; this allows Roger to negotiate better deals on the apartments. But when Roger discovers what Anna-Lena has been doing, he feels impotent and useless. According to Anna-Lena, these feelings are also compounded by the fact that Roger and Anna-Lena's children don't want to have kids of their own, and Roger's life would have meaning again if he could be a grandfather. Though Roger isn't a very verbal man, he does love Anna-Lena. While the couple isn't yet ready to speak about their marital problems by the end of the novel, Roger invites Anna-Lena to see a movie (rather than the documentaries he usually prefers), which makes both of them feel loved and supported.

Julia - Julia is Ro's wife and one of the prospective buyers of the apartment. She's heavily pregnant and is constantly fighting with Ro. Some of this has to do with the fact that Julia's pregnancy has made her belligerent and combative, but she reveals to Anna-Lena and Estelle that she's also having second thoughts about her relationship with Ro. However, the novel implies that many of Julia's concerns really stem from her anxiety about becoming a parent and how parenthood will affect her relationship with Ro—as Julia notes at several points, she and Ro are good at fighting, but they're even better at making up after a fight. She also says explicitly that she loves "being boring" with Ro. Though Julia begins the novel by making snap judgments about people, specifically about Anna-Lena and Roger, hearing their stories teaches her to be less judgmental. She also becomes one of the loudest advocates for helping the robber. Ultimately, Julia and Ro decide to buy the apartment across the landing from Estelle's, and they and their son remain friends with Estelle, the robber, and the robber's

**Ro** – Ro is Julia's wife and one of the people viewing the apartment for sale. Though Ro is nonwhite and was born



outside of Sweden, her birthplace is never specified. A very anxious person, Ro rejects the apartment—and has rejected almost two dozen prior to this one. This causes strife between Ro and Julia, but Ro is unwilling to tell Julia the truth: she's afraid she's not a good enough partner, and she's also already grieving her dad, who has dementia and can no longer talk her through making such big decisions. She's also anxious because she and Julia are expecting a baby in the next few weeks, and she's baffled by how serious Julia has become about parenthood and afraid that she doesn't know enough to be a good parent. Julia, however, insists that Ro is going to be a fantastic parent, mostly because Ro has the sense of humor of a nine-year-old. This is because as a child, Ro and her family fled a warzone and had to evade snipers in helicopters—and Ro's entire family turned to humor to process that trauma. Ultimately, Ro and Julia buy the apartment across the hallway and have a son.

**Lennart/The Rabbit** – Lennart is a middle-aged actor who also runs a side business called No Boundaries Lennart, LTD. In addition to performing in local productions of Shakespeare plays, Lennart works as a "professional interrupter" for his side business. This means that in addition to doing (bad) entertainment at kids' parties, he goes to apartment viewings and poses as, for instance, a drunk neighbor throwing food or, as in the apartment viewing in the novel's present, a man sitting on the toilet in only his underwear and a rabbit's head. Anna-Lena has been hiring him for about a year so that Roger can negotiate better deals on the apartments they flip. However, Lennart is more of a romantic than his side business might suggest. He tells Zara that he's honestly rooting for Anna-Lena and Roger, and he notes that there's a lot of love in the world, as evidenced by how many apartments aren't for sale. Lennart is immediately taken with Zara, and the novel implies that the two begin a romantic relationship in the months after the hostage drama.

**Estelle** – Estelle is a woman in her late 90s who, unbeknownst to the other apartment viewers until the end of the hostage drama, actually lives in the apartment for sale. A widow who lost her husband of "forever," Knut, in the last few years, Estelle is lonely and asks specifically for an apartment viewing on the day before New Year's Eve so she has company at what used to be one of her and Knut's favorite times of the year. For much of the hostage drama, Estelle insists that Knut is still alive and is outside parking the car. Throughout the day, she comforts the robber, insists on feeding people, and dispenses sage advice about marriage and parenting. Her advice includes to never say purposefully hurtful things to one's spouse and to never enter an argument hoping to win. Eventually, after getting drunk on several bottles of wine, Estelle admits that she had an affair—she and her neighbor exchanged books in the elevator—and that her lover gave her the key to his apartment across the hall. She helps the robber escape across the hallway

and, after the hostage drama ends, allows the robber and her daughters to live with her, essentially for free.

The Real Estate Agent/The Realtor – The real estate agent is selling both Estelle's apartment and the apartment across the landing. She works for the House Tricks Real Estate Agency, whose tagline is "HOW'S TRICKS?" The narrator makes it clear that the real estate agent is very bad at her job: in addition to being insufferably annoying and parroting her agency's tagline at every opportunity, she does a poor job staging the apartment and chooses an objectively bad day to hold the viewing. Roger also resents her for having incorrect information on the apartment's floor plans. For much of the novel, the agent is absent—she was collecting herself in the closet when the robber took the prospective buyers hostage, and she climbed into the attic vent to hide and remains there for much of the hostage drama. This leads Jack to briefly believe that there was never a real estate agent at the viewing and that the robber escaped the apartment by posing as the agent, as the agent was still hiding when the hostages sent their pizza order down to the police.

**Jack/The Young Policeman/The Boy** – Jack is the younger policeman on the scene of the hostage drama. He works with his dad, Jim, and the two don't get along well: Jack is efficient and believes in doing his job correctly, while Jim takes a more relaxed view. Despite their fraught relationship, though, Jack has refused jobs in Stockholm in favor of sticking close to his dad. Ten years before the novel begins, teenage Jack unsuccessfully tried to talk a man out of jumping off a **bridge**—and a week later, he saved Nadia from doing the same thing. Saving Nadia inspired him to become a police officer; he believes his work will allow him to save people. This desire to save people motivates Jack to put his all into the hostage drama, especially after its conclusion, when it looks (to an outside observer) like the robber (whom Jack believes is male) shot himself and is injured and hiding. But when Jim reveals to Jack that he helped the robber escape, Jack demonstrates what a "good son" he is by taking responsibility for losing the robber. Later in the spring, Zara sends Jack a letter directing him to Nadia. It's implied that Jack and Nadia fall in love once they become aware of their past connection.

Jim/Jack's Dad/The Older Policeman – Jim is the senior policeman on the scene of the hostage drama. He works with his son, Jack, and though Jim loves his son, the two seldom get along. Unlike Jack, Jim thinks computers are magic and makes sure every report he writes is a story, as he wanted to be a writer when he was younger. He's also still grieving his wife's death. Jim is far more concerned with doing the right thing than with doing his job well. As he and Jack manage the hostage drama, Jim is bumbling and inefficient—though later, it's revealed that this is on purpose. Jim defies Jack to take pizzas up to the robber and the hostages, and there, he speaks to the robber. As the robber looks so much like his daughter, Jack's



sister, who's addicted to heroin, Jim sympathizes with the robber and helps her escape. He thus spends much of the day lying to Jack as Jack genuinely tries to figure out what happened to the robber. Ultimately, though, Jim tells Jack the truth. Though Jim might not be able to voice how proud he is of Jack, the narrator makes it clear that he is immensely proud of him.

Jack's Mom/Jim's Wife – Jack's mom and Jim's wife is deceased in the novel's present, and her death looms large over both her son and husband. In life, she worked as a priest and picked fights with and offended everyone, whether they were religious or not. She was adamant that it was her job to protect and defend the poor, the weak, and anyone who was suffering. At home, she was also a jokester and was fond of doing things like putting cornflakes in Jim's slippers, telling bad jokes, or sticking her finger in Jim's mouth when he yawned. Though Jack didn't share his mother's faith, she taught him the importance of helping people. She encouraged him to become a policeman.

Jack's Sister – Jack's sister and Jim's daughter is seven years older than Jack. She never appears in person in the novel, as she's addicted to heroin and lives almost a 24-hour drive away from the small town where Jack and Jim live. The narrator states that it's impossible to tell when her substance abuse began, but since she became addicted, she's stopped coming home—though she semi-regularly asks Jack for money to fly home, she never actually comes. Several years before the novel begins, Jack liquidated his savings to send her to rehab, but she didn't complete the program, and Jack never got his money back. He stopped chasing her after this, while Jim continues to hope that his daughter will one day come home. Jim is motivated to help the robber in part because she resembles his daughter, and Jim's wife insisted that her family members help "the ones they can."

The Man on the Bridge – Ten years before the novel begins, the man died by suicide by jumping off a **bridge**. He'd put all his money into investments, and when the housing market crashed in the United States, he lost everything. Devastated when Zara wouldn't grant him a loan to pay his debts and disheartened by his perception that society judges even great parents only by their parenting mistakes, he wrote Zara a letter and went to the bridge. Though teenage Jack tried to talk him down, the man jumped anyway. And though Zara spends the following 10 years convinced that the man's letter will blame her for his choice, the letter actually tells Zara that it wasn't her fault. The man's suicide also inspired Nadia to consider jumping off the bridge, though Jack pulled her off the railing before she could jump.

The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters – The robber's daughters are six and eight years old, and they adore their mother. Their nicknames, the monkey and the frog, came from how they moved when the robber was pregnant with

them, and the robber only ever calls her daughters by their nicknames. The robber and her husband often comment that they don't deserve such good kids—the girls seldom, if ever, fight and never make each other feel bad. However, the robber becomes very concerned for her daughters' emotional wellbeing during the divorce, especially once she realizes that her older daughter (incorrectly) believes that her parents are fighting over her. The robber ultimately chooses to rob the bank for her daughters' sake, highlighting the lengths that parents, within the world of the novel, will go to in order to protect their kids.

The Bank Robber's Mom – The bank robber's mom never appears in the novel's present, as she died years before the novel begins. An alcoholic, the robber's mom was a "chaotic parent." For instance, she bought alcohol with all the money the seven-year-old robber earned selling magazine subscriptions to fund Christmas dinner, and she taught the robber to lie to hide how bad things were at home. Her example led the robber to never want children and, when the robber ultimately had her daughters, to vow to never be a chaotic parent like her mother. The robber's mom also took a dim view of her daughter's future, as she insisted that daughters of alcoholics never grow up to find true love or be romantic at all.

**London** – London is the 20-year-old bank teller at the bank the robber attempts to rob. She's deeply unhappy, lives most of her life online, and acts as though she's about 14 years old, so she's rude and dismissive to the robber and everyone else she encounters. However, when Ro invites her for coffee after the police let the witnesses go, the novel implies that London and Ro will become friends. London is also deeply moved when the robber writes her an apology letter in the weeks after the attempted robbery, though she refuses to admit how much it affects her until she's much older.

The Special Negotiator – The special negotiator is a police officer from Stockholm who is called in to manage the hostage situation. He has experience negotiating with hostages, so the bosses believe he'll have a better chance of successfully negotiating with the robber than Jack and Jim. However, the last hostage situation the special negotiator dealt with ended when the hostage taker shot himself—and though the special negotiator counsels Jack and Jim over the phone, he gets stuck in traffic and doesn't reach the small town until well after the hostage drama has ended. The special negotiator thinks highly of Jack and believes that Jack is being silly for turning down job offers in Stockholm.

**Knut** – Knut is Estelle's deceased husband. Estelle explains that they were married "forever," and they loved making each other laugh more than anything. He also made a point to always drop Estelle off close to their destination before he parked the car. Because of this, to feel less lonely in the novel's present, Estelle sometimes pretends that Knut is still alive and is just out parking the car.



**The Neighbor** – The neighbor was Estelle's lover and neighbor across the landing; he's deceased in the novel's present. Estelle never shares his name, but they were both avid readers and eventually, they began swapping books and notes in the elevator. Ultimately, the neighbor gave Estelle a key to his apartment, but Estelle believes he would've liked it if she visited him. She never did, but when he died, she kept the key. In the present, Estelle gives the neighbor's key to the bank robber so she can go hide in the neighbor's old apartment to evade the police.

#### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Julia's Mom** – Though Julia's mom never appears in person in the novel, Julia shares several tidbits of her mom's advice with Estelle and Anna-Lena, such as to marry someone who's funny.



# **THEMES**

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own colorcoded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## PARENTING AND FEAR

Anxious People tells the story of a bank robbery gone awry—the robber flees the bank and ends up taking nine people at an apartment viewing

hostage. However, the robber's reason for trying to rob a bank isn't selfish or attention seeking. Rather, the robber is in the middle of a nasty divorce and has fallen on hard times, and she fears that if she doesn't come up with enough money to pay her rent, a lawyer is going to take her two young daughters away from her. Anxious People explores parenthood from a variety of different ages and life stages, but it overwhelmingly presents being a parent as simultaneously the most terrifying thing a person can do—as well as the most fulfilling. The bank robber, for instance, just wants to do what's right for her daughters, which leads to her questionable decision to rob a bank. Ro and Julia, two hostages who are married and expecting a baby soon, are already terrified of parenthood: Ro tells the robber and Roger, a retiree, that she already finds updating her phone too taxing, and children require a lot more attention and can get into far more danger than her phone can. The narrator also describes the heartbreak that parents experience as their children grow up, begin rejecting their parents' affection for them, or make choices their parents don't approve of or understand. Anna-Lena laments that her and Roger's two adult children don't want to have kids of their own, and she's certain this reflects poorly on her and Roger's parenting. Being a parent, the novel repeatedly shows, is a heartbreaking job, and

one that naturally comes with feeling afraid that one is never doing enough—or doing anything correctly. And this continues well after one's children are grown.

And yet, the novel offers glimpses into the parent-child relationship that suggest that against that backdrop of fear, parenthood is extremely fulfilling. Anna-Lena tells Julia that Roger would feel important again if only he could be a grandfather, and to illustrate her point, she asks if Julia has ever held a preschooler's hand. Anna-Lena says, "You're never more important than you are then." And though the bank robber herself never intended to become a parent due to having grown up with an alcoholic mother, she nevertheless lives for every moment she gets to spend with her daughters. Indeed, spending time with her daughters is so vitally important to the robber that it ultimately leads her to attempt to rob a bank. And this, Anxious People suggests, is the true power of being a parent: it may be frightening, but within the world of the novel, it's worth doing almost anything to continue to be there for one's children.



## MARRIAGE, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNICATION

married (or, in the bank robber's case, are in the process of getting a divorce). As such, Anxious People shows a variety of marriages in many different stages—and degrees of health. Overwhelmingly, Anxious People shows that marriage requires hard work, sacrifice, and most importantly, a willingness from both parties to communicate openly and honestly. None of the couples in the novel are able to do this all the time. Anna-Lena and Roger, a retired couple, are at odds after Roger spent years putting his job on hold to care for their kids while Anna-Lena worked a high-powered job. Since retiring, Anna-Lena has stepped back and now allows Roger to dictate the course of their lives. So, they adopt a shared hobby of buying apartments together, renovating them, and then selling them. But though Anna-Lena is unhappy doing this, after watching Roger sacrifice so much for her, she feels unable to tell him the truth: that she wants a home, not an investment property. Julia and Ro, a much younger couple, fight all the time—in part because Julia is pregnant and her "personality when she [is] drunk [is] exactly the same as Julia's personality when she [is] pregnant" (that is, belligerent and combative), and in part because Ro is afraid to move. Ro's dad suffers from dementia, and she feels unable to commit to buying an apartment if her dad can't check it out first and tell her it's going to be okay. But just like Anna-Lena, Ro isn't able to voice this to her spouse, so she and Julia remain at odds for much of

However, the novel presents fighting as a normal part of marriage and not inherently something devastating. Estelle, an elderly woman who lost her husband Knut sometime before

the novel.



the novel begins, offers Julia and Anna-Lena the advice that couples just have to be better at making up than they are at fighting. This, she explains, is what allowed her and Knut to share a happy decades-long marriage. Marriage, the novel suggests, is seldom without conflict, but it can remain happy and fulfilling when partners are willing to communicate and work together to ensure each other's happiness.



#### MENTAL HEALTH AND CONNECTION

Anxious People deals closely with issues of mental health and suicide. Several characters witnessed or were otherwise involved when, 10 years before the

novel begins, a man died by suicide by jumping off a **bridge**. One of those people, a young teen named Nadia, almost jumped off the bridge a week after the man did—but Jack, who later becomes a policeman, pulls her off the ledge. This inspires Nadia, in her adult job as a psychologist, to study the difference between the man who jumped and all the people who, despite also experiencing depression or mental anguish, choose *not* to jump. The novel suggests that the difference is much smaller than most people would like to think it is, as experiencing mental illness, including suicidal ideation, is far more common than people realize or want to acknowledge.

While the novel highlights the importance of receiving professional help for one's mental illness, it also highlights the positive impact that strangers can have on a person's mental health (and more broadly, their life). When Jack saves Nadia, he's just a stranger—and yet, he saves her life. Further, the narrator insists it's a perfectly normal human instinct to do as Jack did and pull a stranger clearly intending to jump back off the ledge. Zara only discovers by chance, when the bank robber points the pistol at her, that she doesn't actually want to die. And later, Zara stops the bank robber from turning the pistol on herself in a moment of desperation. Jack, Nadia, Zara, and the robber are all strangers when they step up to help one another, and yet, the novel suggests, it's these fleeting connections with strangers that can ultimately make all the difference and lead people who are suffering down a path toward recovery and healing.



#### THE MODERN WORLD

As Anxious People considers its characters' mental health, their thoughts on parenting, and their marriages, the novel overwhelmingly ties these

issues to the modern world. The narrator insists that in today's fast-paced world, who doesn't sometimes feel alone, behind, and afraid? Being human is hard enough in any situation, but Anxious People proposes that for all the good things that have come out of modernity, modernity still makes life more stressful than it perhaps needs to be. For instance, in describing an average parent's inner monologue, the narrator notes how it

can often feel like everyone else's kids but one's own know how to swim and that every other parent out there actually knows what they're doing with their jobs or their kids. This perception, the narrator suggests, isn't usually true—most people feel just as intimidated by others who seem to have it more together than they do—but the perception still makes people feel less capable and more afraid.

Additionally, the novel highlights how many modern systems that were created to improve people's lives, such as the banking system, actually abuse people's trust and dreams. Both the bank robber and the man who jumps off the bridge, for instance, run into the unfortunate fact that banks often refuse to lend people money if people don't have money in the first place—which doesn't help when one is in a situation like the robber or the man, where they've recently lost all they have and just need a little help to get back on their feet. Zara, who runs a bank and denied the man a loan, crystallizes the issue with the banking industry when she says that people don't buy homes anymore and instead, they buy investments. She's referring to the fact that few people pay off their mortgages in the modern era, and so they never truly own their own homes. A mortgage is often required to buy a home, but owing so much money to a bank that doesn't have its customers' best interests at heart puts homeowners at risk: in a market downturn, homeowners suffer, not the banks. So, while Anxious People certainly celebrates society's progress (such as that Ro and Julia, a lesbian couple, are able to marry and have a baby together without fuss), it also portrays many aspects of modernity as annoying and stressful at best, if not downright exploitative and harmful.



#### **ASSUMPTIONS**

Nearly every character in *Anxious People* makes assumptions about other people. Most everyone assumes that Zara, a wealthy older woman, couldn't

possibly be interested in buying the apartment she's looking at. And Jim and Jack, the police officers tasked with handling the hostage drama, assume for much of the novel that they're dealing with a dangerous and armed male bank robber. In some cases, people's assumptions are correct; Zara, for instance, truly has no interest in buying the apartment. But in more cases than not, Anxious People suggests that people's assumptions aren't correct (at least not in their entirety), and that making assumptions about other people only leads to mistakes and misunderstandings. The most egregious assumption that the novel encourages even the reader to make is that the robber is male—the narration avoids using any pronouns to refer to the robber until more than halfway through the novel, and Jim and Jack, assuming the robber is male, use masculine pronouns in witness interviews with the hostages. This assumption, however, leads Jack, in particular, to believe that the robber shot himself and is hiding somewhere in the apartment, which



isn't true.

Setting aside one's assumptions and being willing to listen to people tell their stories, on the other hand, is something Anxious People suggests is one of the best ways to help people, show them respect, and even form relationships. When Jim comes face-to-face with the bank robber and learns that she only tried to rob the bank because she feared she'd lose custody of her daughters if she couldn't pay rent, he's motivated to help her escape. Perhaps most meaningfully, hearing the robber's story motivates Estelle, the elderly owner of the apartment, to step in and help the robber with her housing troubles. And many of the hostages, having gone through the hostage drama together and gotten to know one another, part as friends. Thus, Anxious People highlights the positive outcomes that can happen when people are willing to question their assumptions, listen to what people have to say, and connect honestly with people, rather than judging them.

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# **SYMBOLS**

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

# THE BRIDGE

The bridge is a symbol for connection, though this isn't at all clear at first—one of the first things the novel shares with readers is that 10 years ago, a man died by suicide by jumping off the bridge. That man may have used the bridge to die by suicide, but as Roger, a retired engineer, says, it wasn't the bridge's fault and, in fact, bridges exist to bring people together. Though Roger means this literally (in that bridges physically connect people on different sides of a body of water), throughout the novel, the narrator highlights how the bridge and the man's suicide unwittingly bring a number of very different people together to form meaningful bonds, as well. The bridge brings Jack, who tried unsuccessfully to talk the man down, to Nadia, a girl who tried to jump a week after the man—and whom Jack saved. Zara, who runs a bank, believes she caused the man to die by suicide by denying him a loan, and she spends the next decade carrying the letter the man left her in her purse and secretly following Nadia's trajectory to becoming a psychologist. Zara also develops the hobby of attending apartment viewings of apartments with balconies and a view of the bridge, which ultimately brings her into contact with the bank robber and the other hostages in the apartment. The narrator highlights this symbolism when they suggest that Anxious People might be a story about a bridge—it's not necessarily a story about negative things like a hostage drama or a bank robbery, but about the positive connections people form when they come together and listen to one another's stories.

## **ZARA'S LETTER**

Zara's letter represents the dangers and consequences of isolation, silence, and being unwilling to connect with others. Ten years before the novel begins, Zara denied a man a loan. The man wrote her a letter and then died by suicide by jumping off a **bridge**. In the novel's present, Zara still hasn't opened the letter—she's afraid that it will confirm that the man's suicide was her fault and that she's a bad person. She carries around immense guilt for her role in the man's choice to take his own life, but Zara is too proud and afraid to share any of these feelings with anyone. However, throughout her counseling sessions with Nadia, Zara feels compelled to hand over the letter, which she believes will "explain everything." This highlights how much Zara wants to connect with others, even as she denies ever wanting this—and how much her fear and anxiety about her perceived moral standing hold her back from connecting to other people.

It's only after the hostage drama, when Zara meets Lennart and connects somewhat with the other hostages, that she takes the letter to Nadia and asks Nadia to open it for her. And what the letter says—that the man's suicide wasn't Zara's fault—symbolically sets her free. Knowing it wasn't her fault, and that she's been needlessly torturing herself for a decade, pushes Zara to quit her unfulfilling job, give her fortune away, and even help Nadia and Jack connect with each other. Additionally, Zara's final appearance in the novel shows her dropping the letter itself off the bridge—and then getting in Lennart's car (it's implied the two are romantically involved by this and plan to stay together for a while). Divesting herself of the letter gives Zara the freedom and the confidence to finally pursue a romantic relationship after years of loneliness, anxiety, and fear, and the novel implies that Zara becomes a much happier person after she finds a way to connect with others.

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# **QUOTES**

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Washington Square Press edition of *Anxious People* published in 2021.



## Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Sometimes it hurts, it really hurts, for no other reason than the fact that our skin doesn't feel like it's ours. Sometimes we panic, because the bills need paying and we have to be grownup and we don't know how, because it's so horribly, desperately easy to fail at being grown-up.

Because everyone loves someone, and anyone who loves someone has had those desperate nights where we lie awake trying to figure out how we can afford to carry on being human beings. Sometimes that makes us do things that seem ridiculous in hindsight, but which felt like the only way out at the time.

One single really bad idea. That's all it takes.

**Related Characters:** The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters, Anna-Lena, The Bank Robber, Roger, Lennart/The Rabbit, Jim/Jack's Dad/The Older Policeman

Related Themes:







Page Number: 2

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

In the novel's first chapter, the narrator describes how hard it is to be human, particularly in the modern day. The narrator highlights how pain and love can motivate people to do some pretty ridiculous things and act on some bad ideas—such as the bank robber's choice to try to rob a bank and then take nine people hostage at an apartment viewing. The cadence of this passage creates a feeling of anxiety in the reader as they're asked to consider bills, existential dread, and how to continue trying to keep loved ones happy and satisfied in their relationship. However, alongside this anxious feeling, the narrator also makes it clear that everyone experiences this anxiety, even possibly the reader. It's normal, the narrator suggests, to feel pain and panic, and it's also normal to, for instance, get behind on one's bills and thereby "fail at being grown-up."

It's this kind of dread, and how easy it is to make mistakes, that the narrator suggests drives people to come up with outlandish ideas that seem entirely absurd to anyone but the person who comes up with them. Aside from the robber trying to rob the bank, Anna-Lena's choice to hire Lennart to try to boost Roger's confidence is one more of these bad ideas that stems from anxiety and loving another person so much. Ultimately, it's revealed that Anna-Lena didn't need to try so hard—and as Jim later points out, the robber would've had legal and government help to find housing and keep custody of her daughters. Still, the novel's opening chapter highlights how easy it can be to overlook what is, ultimately, the simple answer to many of life's problems (such as asking for help) and come up with wild fixes instead.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

•• So you would have tried to talk to him, gain his trust, persuade him not to do it. Because you've probably been depressed yourself, you've had days when you've been in terrible pain in places that don't show up in X-rays, when you can't find the words to explain it even to the people who love you. Deep down, [...] a lot of us know that the difference between us and that man on the bridge is smaller than we might wish. Most adults have had a number of really bad moments, and of course not even fairly happy people manage to be happy the whole darn time. So you would have tried to save him. Because it's possible to end your life by mistake, but you have to choose to jump.

**Related Characters:** The Man on the Bridge, Jack/The Young Policeman/The Boy, Nadia/The Psychologist/The Girl

Related Themes:





Related Symbols:



Page Number: 11

## **Explanation and Analysis**

The narrator is encouraging readers to imagine themselves coming across a man on a bridge who's clearly poised to jump, a situation that, the novel later reveals, Jack experienced 10 years before the novel's present. Again, the narrator in this passage makes it clear that it's very normal for people to feel emotional pain and for their mental health to suffer at times. This kind of pain, the novel suggests, can be difficult to explain to other people—and in some cases, it can lead people to consider taking their own lives. The point remains, though, that it is normal to sometimes feel unhappy, if not depressed, and that this is something that many people experience. However, as the novel goes on to show, fewer people are willing to talk about their mental health struggles, which contributes to people like the man on the bridge feeling isolated and hopeless.

Still, though mental health issues aren't a common conversation topic, the novel insists that people still possess the desire or even the instinct to try to keep one another alive. This is part of being a good person and a contributing member of society, the novel suggests—not trying to talk someone down off the ledge reflects poorly on the person making the choice to do nothing. With this, the novel highlights how important even strangers can be to protecting people and keeping them safe (and in some cases, alive). Anyone, the novel shows through Jack, Nadia, and Zara's storylines, can try to save another person, even if that person is a total stranger.



## Chapter 10 Quotes

•• "Do you know what the worst thing about being a parent is? That you're always judged by your worst moments. You can do a million things right, but if you do one single thing wrong you're forever that parent who was checking his phone in the park when your child was hit in the head by a swing. We don't take our eyes off them for days at a time, but then you read just one text message and it's as if all your best moments never happened. No one goes to see a psychologist to talk about the times they weren't hit in the head by a swing as a child. Parents are defined by their mistakes."

**Related Characters:** The Man on the Bridge (speaker), Jack/The Young Policeman/The Boy, The Bank Robber, The Bank Robber's Mom

Related Themes:







Related Symbols:



Page Number: 21

## **Explanation and Analysis**

As Jack tries to talk the man out of jumping off the bridge, the man tells Jack the worst thing about parenthood: that "Parents are defined by their mistakes." Jack is a young teen at this point, so he doesn't fully grasp the significance of what the man is saying. However, the man implies that he—like so many of the other parents in the novel—feels like he's made irreparable mistakes with his children, and that he's forever seen as a bad person because of those mistakes. This implication helps flesh out the idea that the novel presents later, which is that parenthood is defined by fear—in this case, the fear of doing the wrong thing, or making a mistake, and being judged for it.

Interestingly, though the man seems to imply that his and others' children will one day need counseling because of the times that their parents looked away during an important moment, the bank robber muses later that it's impossible for her personally to hate her mother. This suggests that there's perhaps more wiggle room than the man thinks there is. Put simply, seeking counseling because of how one's parents behaved doesn't necessarily mean the child doesn't still love their parent. But the man, in his depression, doesn't seem fully able to grasp this at this point.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

•• Because you'd never rob a bank, so you haven't got anything in common with this bank robber.

Except fear, possibly. Because maybe you've been really frightened at some time, and so was the bank robber. Possibly because the bank robber had small children and had therefore had a lot of practice being afraid. Perhaps you, too, have children, in which case you'll know that you're frightened the whole time, frightened of not knowing everything and of not having the energy to do everything and of not coping with everything.

Related Characters: The Bank Robber, The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters

Related Themes:









Page Number: 53

## **Explanation and Analysis**

After walking through all the reasons why readers probably have nothing in common with the bank robber (they'd never steal or lie, for instance), the narrator reveals the one thing that readers may have in common with the robber: having experienced fear. Fear, the novel suggests, is something that all people experience, regardless of who they are or where they live. But parents are a certain subset of people who, within the novel's logic, experience far more fear than the average person. The man on the bridge highlighted one of the reasons that parents experience so much fear earlier: people judge parents by the mistakes they make. But on the whole, the novel suggests that few parents actually know what they're doing in terms of their jobs or their kids, and as the narrator hints at here, it's difficult to keep up and exhausting to feel so afraid all the time.

Drawing out these connections between readers and the bank robber also highlights that the robber isn't some faceless "bad guy." Rather, the robber is someone that readers can—and should—empathize with. She's a person who has made a mistake due to feeling overwhelmed, something that many people have experienced to varying degrees.

## Chapter 26 Quotes

•• In the meantime Zara was standing in the elevator. Halfway down she pressed the emergency stop button so she could cry in peace. The letter in her handbag was still unopened, Zara had never dared read it, because she knew the psychologist was right. Zara was one of the people who deep down wouldn't be able to live with knowing that about herself.



Related Characters: Zara/The Woman, Nadia/The Psychologist/The Girl, The Man on the Bridge

Related Themes:





Related Symbols:



Page Number: 97

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Zara is leaving a counseling session; she and Nadia had been discussing whether "bad people" know they're bad. Nadia suggested that most people one might consider bad justify their choices due to not being able to live knowing they're not good people. And Zara, this passage reveals, fears she's a bad person because she believes she's responsible for the man's choice to jump off the bridge a decade ago. Learning this about Zara begins to chip away at the assumptions that readers have been encouraged to make about her, such as that she's unfeeling, classist, and selfish. After all, readers have already witnessed a flashback chapter in which Zara essentially blamed the man for his own misfortune (he lost everything when the Great Recession hit the United States in 2007-08). However, even if Zara genuinely thought it was the man's fault at the time, her intense wave of emotion and fear in this passage makes it clear that she feels remorse and guilt for her role in the man's choice to take his own life.

Zara and readers, of course, don't yet know that the letter actually tells Zara the man's death isn't her fault. But with this in mind, it's easier to see how Zara allows her fear that she's responsible to trap and even hurt her. Though counseling begins to help Zara open up to someone else and ultimately helps her form a close enough relationship with Nadia to later ask for help in reading the letter, at this point, Zara is suffering alone—much the same way the man did in the days and weeks before he jumped off the bridge. This highlights how isolating fear and shame can be, while also beginning to show how much Zara has in common with the novel's other characters.

## Chapter 28 Quotes

•• When you've been together for a very long time, it's the little things that matter. In a long marriage you don't need words to have a row, but you don't need words to say "I love you," either. Once when they were at IKEA, very recently, Roger had suggested when they were having lunch in the cafeteria that they each have a piece of cake. Because he understood that it was an important day for Anna-Lena, and because it was important to her it was important to him as well. Because that's how he loves her.

Related Characters: Anna-Lena, Roger

Related Themes: //





Page Number: 111

## **Explanation and Analysis**

At the apartment viewing, Anna-Lena and Roger easily slip into fighting—though the narrator assures readers here that while they can fight at the drop of a hat, Anna-Lena and Roger also love each other and show their love in other ways. The important day they observe with cake in this anecdote is having visited every IKEA in Sweden—something that, incidentally, Anna-Lena and Roger have done because Anna-Lena is going along with Roger's desire to renovate and flip apartments, something that she doesn't exactly want to do. However, Anna-Lena believes that the only way to show Roger she loves him is by sharing this hobby with him, just as Roger tries to show Anna-Lena his love here by suggesting the cake.

On the whole, this passage highlights how people in longerterm marriages often end up with their own languages, spoken and otherwise, to show each other their love. But the downside of this, the novel suggests, is that when people stop using their words to express their emotions and desires, those desires never actually make it to the surface. It's not until later, when Anna-Lena is forced to admit that she's tired of flipping apartments, that she and Roger begin the difficult task of speaking honestly and openly with each other.

## Chapter 36 Quotes

•• "Do you mean to say that...but...what about all my negotiations with the Realtor? All my tactics?"

Anna-Lena couldn't meet his gaze.

"You get so upset when you lose a bid. I just wanted you to...win."

She wasn't telling the whole truth. That she had become the sort of person who just wanted a home. That she wanted to stop now. That she'd like to go to the movies occasionally and see something made-up instead of yet another documentary on television. That she didn't want to be a shark. She was worried that the betrayal would be too much for Roger.

Related Characters: Roger, Anna-Lena (speaker), Lennart/ The Rabbit

Related Themes: (??)









Page Number: 154

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Anna-Lena has just been forced to admit that she's been secretly hiring Lennart, a "professional interrupter," for a year. This has helped Roger to successfully bid on apartments to flip, though he had no idea his success isn't fully attributable to his "tactics."

While the entire situation is humorous—hiring a "professional interrupter" to sit on the toilet in a rabbit's head to scare buyers off is patently funny, and Roger's single-minded belief in his negotiation skills is similarly humorous—this passage is nevertheless extremely sad. This is because it highlights the dangers of not being willing to speak openly with one's spouse. Because Anna-Lena doesn't feel comfortable admitting to Roger that she wants a home rather than yet another investment property, she's stuck living a life that doesn't actually make her happy. She fears that Roger won't love her if they don't share a hobby (in this case, renovating and flipping apartments together), and yet, she can't bring herself to say that she's not having fun flipping apartments anymore.

The novel makes it clear that Anna-Lena is doing what she feels she must do to keep her marriage alive, but the question then becomes whether Anna-Lena actually had to go to such lengths to keep Roger happy. After all, at the end of the novel, Roger invites Anna-Lena to see a movie and they seem prepared to patch things up between them—so was hiring Lennart truly necessary? This question, though, raises a point that the novel makes many times over: that living in the world, particularly the modern world, is extremely hard. And because of how hard it is to be a successful person, and because it's so easy to fail, people often find themselves in places where they feel they must do something patently ridiculous in order to stay afloat. The novel implies at various points that those ridiculous things are almost never necessary. But the fact remains that when a person is afraid, vulnerable, and struggling, objectively strange things begin to look like really good ideas—or indeed, a person's only choice to get by.

"Stockholm" is, after all, an expression more than it is a place, both for men like Roger and for most of the rest of us, just a symbolic word to denote all the irritating people who get in the way of our happiness. People who think they're better than us. Bankers who say no when we apply for a loan, psychologists who ask questions when we only want sleeping pills, old men who steal the apartments we want to renovate, rabbits who steal our wives. Everyone who doesn't see us, doesn't understand us, doesn't care about us.

**Related Characters:** Roger, Anna-Lena, Lennart/The Rabbit, Zara/The Woman, The Man on the Bridge, Nadia/The Psychologist/The Girl

Related Themes: (27)







Page Number: 156

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Roger and Anna-Lena have just gone to different parts of the apartment after it came out that Anna-Lena has been hiring Lennart to bolster Roger's negotiating tactics with real estate agents. Throughout the novel, characters use "Stockholmer" as a catch-all phrase for people who, as the narrator notes here, "get in the way of our happiness."

While the novel is very upfront about the fact that "Stockholmers" are annoying, it's also worth considering the underlying implications in this passage: that oftentimes, those people who don't understand are just trying to do their jobs, and that the existence of "Stockholmers" is actually a normal and expected part of living in modern society. For instance, when the narrator refers to bankers who refuse loans as "Stockholmers," it's an indirect reference to Zara, who refused the man on the bridge a loan—an event that precipitated the man's suicide. But Zara wasn't trying to be mean or hurt the man. Rather, she was just doing her job and on paper, the man didn't qualify for a loan. Similarly, Zara was asked to seek counseling from Nadia in order to get another prescription for her sleeping pills. It's a psychologist or counselor's job to ask questions that will help their clients come to a better understanding of how their minds work; Nadia isn't being purposefully obnoxious to Zara as she asks Zara to think about morality, issues plaguing the world, and uncomfortable emotions.

And yet, the fact that Nadia and Zara were just doing their jobs doesn't take away from the fact that their jobs nevertheless mean they're very annoying—or perhaps even harmful—to other people. Being a person in the world, the novel suggests, means learning to deal with one's "Stockholmers" and see them not as bad guys out to get people, but as fellow people doing their jobs and struggling just as hard to get by.



## Chapter 38 Quotes

•• "Since [Julia] got pregnant everything's become so serious, because parents are always serious and I suppose we're trying to fit in. Sometimes I don't think I'm ready for the responsibility—I mean, I think my phone is asking too much of me when it wants me to install an update, and I find myself yelling: 'You're suffocating me.' You can't shout that at a child. And children have to be updated all the time, because they can kill themselves just crossing the street or eating a peanut! I've mislaid my phone three times already today, I don't know if I'm ready for a human being."

Related Characters: Ro (speaker), Julia, Roger, The Bank Robber

Related Themes: (\*\*)







Page Number: 163

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Sitting on the hallway bench with Roger and the bank robber, Ro admits that she's afraid of becoming a parent because she's concerned she can't handle the responsibility. First, it's worth noting that Ro is willing to come out and admit her fears to complete strangers, while it's implied that she and Julia, who are married, haven't had this conversation at such length. This highlights the important role that strangers can play in helping other people. Indeed, soon after this, Roger recognizes himself in Ro and tells her that she's going to be just fine and should buy the apartment. Ro ultimately listens to Roger, but it's implied that he (or another kind stranger) is probably the only person who could've gotten through to her.

At the moment, Ro feels somewhat estranged from Julia because Julia has gotten "so serious." It makes Ro feel like it's inappropriate to voice her fears, no matter how valid her fears might be. The specifics of Ro's fears also imply that the fear the novel suggests plagues all parents begins well before a child is even born. In this sense, though Ro feels totally alone in her fears, within the world of the novel, she's totally normal. This also implies that Julia might feel exactly the same way, something that the novel indeed confirms later. But because Ro and Julia aren't willing to communicate openly with each other about these fears, their relationship suffers in the short-term.

## Chapter 40 Quotes

•• "There were so many cars there that it took the younger man twenty minutes to get to the part of the garage where we were parked. Roger refused to move the car until he got there. [...] [Roger] replied that it didn't mean he'd change his mind about the economy or fuel taxes or Stockholmers. But then he said that he realized that in the young man's eyes, Roger must look just like that politician on television [...] And Roger didn't want the man with the beard to think that meant they were all exactly the same."

Related Characters: Anna-Lena (speaker), Julia, Roger

**Related Themes:** 





Page Number: 174

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

Anna-Lena is telling Julia an anecdote meant to illustrate how principled and moral Roger is, as Julia suggested a few minutes ago that Roger is "emotionally stunted" as well as a cold, mean person. Anna-Lena prefaces the story by noting that on the news that morning, a politician from Roger's party said Swedish people should stop helping immigrants.

Anna-Lena's story cuts into Julia's assumptions and shows that to the contrary, Roger is indeed a kind, generous member of society who doesn't allow his political leanings to justify mistreating immigrants (the young man is coded as a nonwhite immigrant). The fact that Roger doesn't want the young man to think that all older white Swedish men think the same—and think poorly of him—makes it clear that Roger is well aware that people make assumptions, and that oftentimes, those assumptions aren't helpful. He knows, on some level, that people look at him and see what Julia sees: an older, conservative man who believes that white, Swedish-born Swedish people are better and more deserving than immigrants. By going out of his way to help the young man get a parking spot, Roger dashes that perception. He illustrates that assumptions often fail to grasp who a person really is on the inside.

•• "I just wish Roger could feel important again."

Julia didn't seem to follow the logic.

"Grandchildren would make him feel important?"

Anna-Lena smiled weakly.

"Have you ever held a three-year-old by the hand on the way home from preschool?"

"No."

"You're never more important than you are then."



**Related Characters:** Anna-Lena, Julia (speaker), Roger, Ro. Lennart/The Rabbit, The Bank Robber, The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters

Related Themes:





Page Number: 177

## **Explanation and Analysis**

In further explaining why she's been hiring Lennart, Anna-Lena says she just wants Roger to feel important, since Roger will never get the chance to feel important as a grandfather. Anna-Lena and Roger's two adult children are firm that they don't want to have kids of their own, a choice that Anna-Lena and Roger respect but in no way understand. With this, Anxious People suggests that the fear and the pain parents experience doesn't end when one's children grow up. Rather, as kids grow and begin making choices their parents don't agree with or even understand, parents experience more of a different kind of pain: not feeling as connected to their child, or as needed, as they did when that child was little.

At various points throughout the novel, the narration makes it clear that being a parent is a terrifying prospect. However, it also goes to great lengths, as it does here, to show that being a parent is something that a majority of its parent characters find fulfilling—to the point that, for instance, the bank robber is willing to do anything for her daughters, including rob a bank. Here, Anna-Lena suggests that there's a particular kind of sadness and uselessness that Roger (and other people in his situation) feel when they learn that they're never again going to get to play a huge role in a child's life. The magic of that role, Anna-Lena implies, is that they don't actually have to do much—simply holding the child's hand and making sure they get home from school safe is enough to turn the adult into a god in that child's eyes. Julia hasn't had her baby yet, so she's not fully aware of the hugely important role she'll play in her future son's life.

## Chapter 53 Quotes

•• "Apartments aren't supposed to be investments," Zara replied gloomily.

"What are they supposed to be, then?"

"Homes."

"Are you some sort of communist?" the rabbit chuckled.

Zara felt like punching him on the nose for that, but instead she pointed between his ears and said: "When the financial crisis hit ten years ago, a man jumped off that bridge because of a property market crash on the other side of the world. Innocent people lost their jobs and the guilty were given bonuses. You know why?"

"Now you're exaggerat—"

"Because people like you don't care about the balance in the system."

Related Characters: Zara/The Woman, Lennart/The Rabbit (speaker), The Man on the Bridge

**Related Themes:** 





Related Symbols:



Page Number: 233

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Zara and Lennart are on the balcony, arguing about the value of Lennart's job as a professional interrupter. As Lennart sees it, he's just helping people make a good investment when they buy an apartment. But in Zara's mind, this is totally missing the point—that apartments are supposed to be homes, not just investments. In other words, apartments are places where people plan to spend most of their time, raise their families, and dream their dreams. Looking at an apartment as an investment devalues the apartment as a home. This is, perhaps, a surprising view for someone like Zara to have, as she works in a bank and sells loans and mortgages to people for a living. But the fact that she says this at all highlights that she's changing to become more empathetic and less enamored with the banking and finance industries than she was in her younger years.

Indeed, Zara expresses outrage at how the banking and finance industries essentially condemn people, like the man on the bridge, without a single thought for what they're actually doing. The man had invested in American property markets with a bank's help, and when the Great Recession hit and the market crashed in 2007-08, he lost everything. But rather than admit that they had a role in causing the crash, the bankers told the man that it was his fault he lost



everything—that he shouldn't have given them his money. As Zara understands it, the bankers who told the man it was his fault (including her) cruelly chose not to accept that they were ruining a man's life. They might not have been able to foresee the man's choice to take his own life soon after, but they should've known, she implies, that they were going to fundamentally change his life—and not for the better.

• She was no longer talking to Lennart, but exactly who she was talking to probably wasn't clear even to her, but it felt like she'd been waiting ten years to yell at someone. Anyone at all. Herself most of all. So she roared: "People like you and me are the problem, don't you get that? We always defend ourselves by saying we're only offering a service. That we're just one tiny part of the market. That everything is people's own fault. That they're greedy, that they shouldn't have given us their money. And then we have the nerve to wonder why stock markets crash and the city is full of rats..."

Related Characters: Lennart/The Rabbit, Zara/The Woman (speaker), The Man on the Bridge

Related Themes: 🥵



Page Number: 235

## **Explanation and Analysis**

As Zara and Lennart argue on the balcony, Zara loses her temper and shouts, ostensibly at Lennart but possibly also at herself. She can no longer ignore how the banking and financial industries systematically destroy people's lives and then blame their customers for destroying their own lives, something that allows readers to track Zara's moral and emotional development over the novel. While 10 years ago, when she denied the man on the bridge the loan, she insisted she was just doing her job, now she realizes that her job isn't as moral and upstanding as she once thought. Rather, she's coming to believe that she and her colleagues are the bad guys.

The issue, Zara believes, is that the system isn't set up to serve borrowers, the people it's ostensibly supposed to work for. Rather, banking and finance only serve the banks. So, Zara and her colleagues are able to say that they're just doing their jobs when they offer people loans that people can't actually afford—but the fact remains that they're selling a product that she finds morally repugnant. She suggests that Lennart is doing much the same thing with his professional interrupter side gig. He too can say that he's just offering a service that people want—but the bigger question, Zara implies, is why do people think they need or

want that service to begin with? Doesn't that point to a bigger problem with the system? With this, Zara suggests that she thinks it's now time for her, if not the rest of the financial sector (and Lennart), to take responsibility for their roles in ruining people's lives. Laypeople, she implies, are mostly innocent—they enter into loans or business agreements with Lennart and his ilk believing that the people they're working with have their best interests at heart. Condemning them for being naïve isn't something Zara thinks is appropriate. Rather, she not-so-subtly implies that it's high time for the industry itself to change to better serve people, not bankers.

## Chapter 56 Quotes

•• "What did you used to do?" the young woman asked. Anna-Lena filled her lungs, simultaneously hesitant and proud.

"I was an analyst for an industrial company. Well, I suppose I was the senior analyst, really, but I did my best not to be."

"Senior analyst?" Julia repeated, instantly ashamed of how that sounded.

Anna-Lena saw the surprise in her eyes, but she was used to it and didn't take offense.

Related Characters: Julia, Anna-Lena (speaker), Roger,

Estelle

Related Themes: (77)







Page Number: 251

## **Explanation and Analysis**

In the course of Julia, Anna-Lena, and Estelle's conversation in the closet, Anna-Lena shares that before she retired, she worked as a senior analyst for a big industrial company. Julia is surprised to hear this because Anna-Lena doesn't come off as the sort of person Julia expects to be "the senior analyst." Anna-Lena isn't used to people listening to her, and viewing her and Roger's relationship from the outside, Julia in particular assumed that Anna-Lena has always been a subservient housewife supporting Roger in his career. In fact though, the opposite is true: Roger consistently put his career on hold so he could care for their kids and allow Anna-Lena to pursue her career. This illustrates yet another example of how making assumptions clouds a person's judgement of others and keeps them from truly getting to know or understand other people. Julia gains new respect for Anna-Lena hearing about her job, and hearing Anna-Lena speak so admiringly about Roger throughout their conversation leads Julia to show Roger much more grace



and kindness than she did before learning his and Anna-Lena's stories.

## Chapter 58 Quotes

•• "Ro's going to be a brilliant mom. She can make any child laugh, just like my mom, because their sense of humor hasn't developed at all since they were nine."

"You're going to be a brilliant mom, too," Estelle assured her.
[...]

"I don't know. Everything feels such a big deal, and other parents all seem so...funny the whole time. [...] I don't actually like all children. I thought that would change, but I meet my friends' children now and I still think they're annoying and have a lousy sense of humor."

[...]

"You don't have to like all children. Just one. And children don't need the world's best parents, just their own parents. To be perfectly honest with you, what they need most of the time is a chauffeur."

**Related Characters:** Julia, Estelle, Anna-Lena (speaker), Ro, Julia's Mom

Related Themes:





Page Number: 258

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

When Julia, Estelle, and Anna-Lena's conversation turns to Ro and Julia's marriage and their soon-to-arrive baby, Julia admits that she's afraid she's not going to be a good enough parent. Immediately, what shines through here is Julia's admiration for Ro. She admires Ro for having such a good sense of humor, and she's fully convinced that Ro is going to be a great mom. Readers know that Ro is also grappling with fears that she's going to be a terrible parent, so hearing such a glowing review come from Julia is interesting. It highlights that Ro and Julia aren't effectively communicating with each other, which keeps them from being able to connect over their shared fears and, hopefully, help each other feel better.

Then, as Ro did earlier, Julia expresses concern that being a parent is "such a big deal" and that it's so easy to mess up. Her fears are further compounded by the fact that she doesn't generally like kids. Anna-Lena, though, suggests that while it's normal for parents to feel afraid and incompetent, parenting really isn't as big of a deal as Julia fears it is. What

kids need is love and support (and as Estelle notes later, to be taught not to be menaces on public transit). They need someone to drive them around as they get older and make sure their basic needs are met. Hearing this from Anna-Lena, who's raised two children herself, helps calm Julia's fears.

They fled across the mountains, in the middle of winter, and the children each had to carry a sheet, and if they heard the sound of helicopters they were supposed to lie down in the snow with the sheet over them, so they couldn't be seen. And their parents would run in different directions, so that if the men in the helicopter started firing, they'd fire at the moving targets. And not at...and I didn't know what to..."

[...] [Ro's] parents had taught her during their flight through the mountains that humor is the soul's last line of defense, and as long as we're laughing we're alive, so bad puns and fart jokes were their way of expressing their defiance against despair.

Related Characters: Julia (speaker), Ro, Anna-Lena, Estelle

Related Themes:





Page Number: 261

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Julia tells Anna-Lena and Estelle Ro's story of fleeing a warzone as a young child, a story Ro told Julia the first night they went home together. This heartbreaking experience, Julia knows, is what caused Ro and her family members to develop their specific brand of humor.

The simple fact that Ro's parents told their children to lie under sheets while the adults sacrificed themselves is an extreme example of what the novel suggests is the common parental goal to protect one's children. Just as the bank robber was willing to risk arrest and criminal charges to rob a bank so she could keep custody of her kids, Ro's parents were willing to sacrifice their lives so their kids could survive and hopefully thrive. Julia, as a white Swedish person, has never really had to think about how far parents (including herself once her baby is born) might go to protect their kids, which increases the impact of the story for her.

This anecdote also reminds Julia of why she loves and admires Ro, particularly her sense of humor. Her sense of humor emerged out of a dark, terrifying time when death could've been right around the corner. But in order to keep going, Ro's family decided, they needed to focus on what was funny, whether that be puns or fart jokes. So, while Julia occasionally finds Ro's sense of humor grating and



unserious, she also remembers here where Ro's childish sense of humor came from. And with this, she reminds herself again why she chose Ro as her partner, and why Ro is going to be a great parent—even if it doesn't always seem like Ro is taking things seriously.

## Chapter 61 Quotes

•• "Yes, let's have something to eat. This has all turned out to be rather pleasant, hasn't it, getting to know each other like this? And that's all thanks to you!" Estelle beamed.

"I'm sure the police won't shoot you. Not much, anyway," Anna-Lena said comfortingly.

"Why don't we all go outside with you? They won't fire if we all leave at the same time!" Julia insisted.

"There must be a way out, if it's possible to sneak into a viewing, then it must be possible to sneak out," Lennart pointed out.

"Let's all sit down and make a plan!" Roger demanded.

Related Characters: Estelle, Anna-Lena, Julia, Lennart/The Rabbit, Roger (speaker), The Bank Robber

Related Themes:





Page Number: 277

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

The robber has just suggested that she give herself up, but the hostages all encourage her to at least wait until they've had pizza. Even more notable, however, is the fact that all of the hostages now see the robber as a friend and someone that they can and should protect. This speaks to the power of listening and sharing stories between strangers. Estelle in particular encapsulates this idea: the hostage situation has essentially turned into a daytime party between friends. The robber and the hostages began this day as strangers, and the hostages also began the hostage drama terrified of the robber. But after spending several hours together, sharing their fears and dreams and the robber's reasons for trying to rob a bank in the first place, things have changed for people. The robber isn't a faceless bad guy whom the hostages believe deserves to be arrested and imprisoned. Rather, she's one of them. She's a person who made a mistake for misguided but noble reasons, and they don't believe she should be punished just for making a mistake.

## Chapter 62 Quotes

•• "I just said Knut was parking the car because I get lonely sometimes. And it feels better to pretend that he's on his way. Especially at this time of year, he always used to like New Year, we used to stand at the kitchen window watching the fireworks. Well...we used to stand on the balcony for years...but I couldn't bring myself to go out there after something that happened down on the bridge ten years ago. It's a long story."

Related Characters: Estelle (speaker), The Bank Robber, Knut, The Man on the Bridge, Jack/The Young Policeman/ The Boy, Zara/The Woman, Nadia/The Psychologist/The

Related Themes: (A) (B)









Related Symbols:

Page Number: 282

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Estelle has just revealed to the robber that Knut is deceased and has been for some time; he's not on the street parking. Her reasoning for saying Knut was just parking the car, though, highlights how lonely Estelle is—and more broadly, how lonely many people are in modern society, which is far more individualistic than it has been in the past. Earlier, Estelle described for readers how her daughter and grandkids appreciate her phone calls, but they don't think much about her. So, without Knut around to keep her company, Estelle is pretty much alone without any support. Soon after this, the novel reveals that this is actually Estelle's apartment, and that she requested an apartment viewing today essentially so she could have company at what used to be a really happy time of the year for her. While this is an unorthodox way of essentially throwing a party, Estelle gets exactly what she wants: companionship and new friends.

Then, it's also significant that Estelle mentions that she and Knut only watched fireworks from their balcony after "something [] happened down on the bridge." What she's referring to is, presumably, the man on the bridge's suicide. That the man's death affected Estelle so strongly—it made her balcony feel unwelcoming—highlights that the man's death likely affected many more people than the novel introduces readers to. This also situates the bridge again as a symbol for connection. Now, it connects Estelle specifically to Zara, Nadia, Jack, and the man on the bridge, highlighting again that strangers often have more in common with one another than they think. The trick, the novel shows, is just getting to know strangers, rather than



making assumptions about them that keep people from making meaningful connections.

## Chapter 65 Quotes

**♥**♥ Because it wasn't Lennart who opened the door when Jim showed up with the pizzas. It was the bank robber, the real bank robber. Both Roger and Lennart had insisted on being allowed to wear the ski mask, but after a long pause she had said no. She had looked at them, her voice gentle with appreciation, and then given them a determined nod.

"Obviously I can't set a good example to my daughters and teach them not to do idiotic things now. But I might at least be able to show them how you take responsibility for your actions."

Related Characters: The Bank Robber (speaker), Lennart/ The Rabbit, Roger, Jim/Jack's Dad/The Older Policeman, The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters

Related Themes:







Page Number: 291

## **Explanation and Analysis**

Though both Lennart and Roger offered to pose as the robber/hostage taker to speak to the police, the real robber insists on doing it herself. That Roger and Lennart offer to potentially get themselves in legal trouble to save the robber speaks to how close all the hostages and the robber have become since the hostage drama started. While Roger began the day afraid and aghast that he suddenly became a hostage, he now sees the robber as a person he cares about and doesn't want to see hurt. This is because, over the course of the day, he's listened to her story—and her story of needing rent money so her kids don't get taken away moved him.

Then, the robber insists that she's simply being the best parent she knows how to be by taking responsibility for the robbery and for the hostage drama. This makes it very clear that parents, within the world of the novel, aren't perfect. They make mistakes, whether that be robbing a bank or looking at one's phone for a minute and missing an important milestone or injury. Still, though, the robber hopes that her daughters will be able to learn from her example that when you make questionable decisions that are also illegal, you should expect to pay the price.

•• "What did you need the money from the bank robbery" for?"

The desperation on her face revealed the chaos in her heart as she said: "To pay the rent. I needed six thousand five hundred. My husband's lawyer was threatening to take the girls away from me if I didn't have anywhere to live."

Jim held onto the handrail to stop himself collapsing as his heart broke. Empathy is like vertigo. Six thousand five hundred, because she thought she'd lose her children otherwise. Her

"There are rules, legislation, no one can just take your children away from you simply because...," he began, then thought better of it and said: "But now they can...now you've held up a bank and..." His voice almost gave out as he whispered: "You poor child, what have you got yourself mixed up in?"

**Related Characters:** Jim/Jack's Dad/The Older Policeman. The Bank Robber (speaker), The Monkey and the Frog/The Robber's Daughters, Jack's Sister

Related Themes:









Page Number: 294

## **Explanation and Analysis**

As Jim and the robber sit on the stairs outside the apartment, the robber tells Jim her story and reveals what she needed the robbery money for. It's worth keeping in mind here that Jim is so empathetic to the robber in part because she looks so much like his daughter, Jack's sister, so he's primed to be sympathetic and want to help even before he hears her story.

As an outsider, Jim can see instantly that the robber didn't do what she should've done. Earlier, the novel insisted that she needed to go to the authorities and the welfare office, and that doing that might have helped her avoid her current situation. But now, he sees how her shame and general unwillingness to ask for help has trapped her: she felt her only choice was to rob a bank, and now she's stuck dealing with the consequences of that. This speaks again to how difficult life is in the modern world—the robber's path to getting help hasn't been easy or straightforward because today's systems aren't set up that way. Instead, she has to work very hard to get anything she needs.

In speaking to the robber, Jim also learns that all his assumptions about who the robber was (that the robber is male, a "masked gunman," dangerous, and unpredictable) are wildly off-base. Instead, the robber is just a scared woman trying to do whatever she can for her kids. Learning this spurs Jim to decide to help the woman by lying about her identity and suggesting that she sneaks into the



apartment across the landing. Once again, the novel highlights the power that stories and honesty have to bring strangers together, develop empathy, and encourage strangers to help support one another.

## Chapter 66 Quotes

•• "Sometimes I think that when you live together for a very long time, and have children together, life is a bit like climbing trees. Up and down, up and down, you try to cope with everything, be good, you climb and climb and climb, and you hardly ever see each other along the way. You don't notice that when you're young, but everything changes when you have children, and sometimes it feels like you hardly ever see the person you married anymore. You're parents and teammates, first and foremost, and being married slips down the list of priorities. But you...well, you keep climbing trees, and see each other along the way."

Related Characters: Anna-Lena (speaker), Roger, Julia, Ro, Estelle, Lennart/The Rabbit, The Bank Robber

**Related Themes:** 





**Page Number: 300-301** 

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

The hostages are all eating pizza, and Julia has approached Anna-Lena to commend her for trying to make Roger feel needed and wanted by hiring Lennart. Using the metaphor of climbing trees together, Anna-Lena describes how she and Roger got to the point where they are now, where they're both so out of sync with each other that it almost seems impossible to fix. Broadly speaking, Anna-Lena touches on the strain that jobs, outside commitments, and particularly children put on a marriage. Both people's attention is divided: they can only pay so much attention to their spouse, given all the other things that they also have to focus on. Especially when Anna-Lena notes that couples who are also parents become "parents and teammates, first and foremost" and then stop focusing on being partners, she clearly lays out how kids can change a marriage.

While this metaphor helps Anna-Lena conceptualize how she and Roger ended up where they are now, it's also worth applying this framework to the robber's marriage. Like Anna-Lena and Roger, the robber and her husband were busy "climbing trees"—and the robber didn't notice until it was too late that her husband had stopped climbing and begun an affair with her boss instead. While Anna-Lena doesn't offer any remedies for this situation (which she

implies is very common), this does serve as a warning to readers and Julia to focus on their relationships, even as their attention is pulled elsewhere as life goes on.

•• "This isn't just an apartment, it's my home, I don't want to hand it over to someone who's just going to be passing through, to make money from it. I want someone who's going to love living here, like I have. Maybe that's hard for a young person to understand."

That wasn't true. There wasn't a single person in the apartment who didn't understand perfectly.

Related Characters: Estelle (speaker), Lennart/The Rabbit, The Real Estate Agent/The Realtor, Roger, Anna-Lena, Julia, Ro, Zara/The Woman

Related Themes: 🥵





Page Number: 305

## **Explanation and Analysis**

After Estelle admits that the apartment belongs to her, she explains why she posed as a prospective buyer: she wants to vet whoever's going to buy her apartment and make sure that they want it for what she believes are the right reasons. As Estelle describes the sort of person she'd ideally like to purchase her apartment, she mirrors what Zara has said before about apartments being homes, not investments. There are those—like Anna-Lena and Roger—who do look at apartments as investments, as they regularly flip apartments. But most people, Estelle believes, want what she had: a place to raise their family, dream, and live their lives. When she offers that this is perhaps only something that older folks will understand, she also gestures at something Zara said earlier: that people used to pay off their mortgages and own homes, but that this doesn't happen so much anymore. Essentially, she assumes that younger buyers would be looking for an investment, while someone closer to her age would be looking for a home. In fact, the opposite is true at this viewing: Ro and Julia want a place to raise their baby, while retirees Anna-Lena and Roger want an investment. Even Estelle, this shows, makes assumptions about other people that are in no way correct.



## Chapter 67 Quotes

"You're a good police officer, son," Jim will say, looking down at the ground. He'll want to add but an even better person, but won't be able to bring himself to say it.

"You're not always such a damn good police officer, Dad," Jack will grin up at the clouds. He'll want to add but I've learned everything else from you, but the words won't quite come out.

They'll go home. Watch television. Have a beer together. That's enough.

**Related Characters:** Jim/Jack's Dad/The Older Policeman. Jack/The Young Policeman/The Boy (speaker). The Bank Robber, Jack's Mom/Jim's Wife, Anna-Lena, Roger

Related Themes:







Page Number: 312

## **Explanation and Analysis**

After the hostage drama is all over, Jim and Jack compliment each other but don't say all they'd really like to say. First, the fact that Jim wants to say that Jack is a wonderful person shows that Jim and Jack's mom have done a good job raising a child who, in adulthood, now understands the value of doing the right thing. Jack resents his dad a little bit for stymying the hostage and bank robbery investigation, but Jim has also told Jack the truth and Jack understands why Jim did what he did to save the robber. Jack even confirms this when his unspoken thought is that he's learned everything except for how to be a policeman from his dad.

This passage also makes the case that though communication is important in relationships, it's not always necessary to voice one's love or appreciation out loud. It's enough, the novel suggests, for Jim and Jack to think highly of each other, and to show that by spending quality time together. This also helps readers understand that Anna-Lena and Roger will probably be okay once the novel ends. Though neither of them feel able to verbally apologize, they go see a movie together. And this is something the novel suggests is also "enough" to get their relationship back on track.

## Chapter 69 Quotes

•• But you know what, Zara? I've learned that it helps to talk about it. Unfortunately I think most people would still get more sympathy from their colleagues and bosses at work if they show up looking rough one morning and say 'I'm hungover' than if they say 'I'm suffering from anxiety.' But I think we pass people in the street every day who feel the same as you and I, many of them just don't know what it is. Men and women going around for months having trouble breathing and seeing doctor after doctor because they think there's something wrong with their lungs. All because it's so damn difficult to admit that something else is...broken. That it's an ache in our soul, invisible lead weights in our blood, an indescribable pressure in our chest."

**Related Characters:** Nadia/The Psychologist/The Girl (speaker), Zara/The Woman

Related Themes:





Related Symbols:



**Page Number:** 319-320

#### **Explanation and Analysis**

In Nadia and Zara's final counseling session, Nadia admits that she doesn't have a good way to describe panic attacks, but this doesn't mean that it's not still important to talk about them and other mental health issues. In this passage, Nadia essentially describes how far mental healthcare has come—and how far it still has to go before people can consistently get the care they need. First, Nadia suggests that society systematically discredits and devalues mental health issues, even though they are real problems and illnesses that affect millions of people. She goes so far as to suggest that people are more sympathetic to hangovers—something a person gets because they chose to drink to excess—than they are to a mental illness like anxiety, which isn't usually something the sufferer can control or make disappear. Talking about these things, Nadia seems to suggest, will help erase some of this stigma and help more people feel comfortable seeking out the help they need for their anxiety.

As Nadia describes hypothetical people trying to seek a diagnosis for a physical ailment when what they're actually struggling with is anxiety, she again highlights how in modern society, physical ailments are thought of as real and important—while mental health issues, on the other hand, sometimes don't even show up on people's radar. This is tricky because as Nadia notes, anxiety can show up with physical symptoms, like chest pain or pressure. Essentially,



she insists that people need more tools and more words to be able to talk about how they're feeling so that they don't waste their time or money getting their lungs checked out. Indeed, throughout their counseling sessions, Nadia has given Zara some of the words to describe what she's feeling. With this, the novel highlights the importance of mental healthcare and the positive effects it can have on a person's life. After all, right after this, Zara finally asks Nadia for help reading the letter the man on the bridge wrote her 10 years ago, a sign of Zara's improving mental health.

## Chapter 70 Quotes

• The man who sent it to her ten years ago wrote down everything he thought she needed to know. It was the last thing he ever told anyone. Only four words in length, no more than that. The four biggest little words one person, anyone at all, can say to another:

It wasn't your fault.

By the time the letter hits the water Zara is already walking away, toward the far side of the bridge. There's a car parked there, waiting for her. Lennart is inside it. Their eyes meet when she opens the door. He lets her put the music on as loud as she wants. She's planning to do her utmost to get tired of him.

**Related Characters:** The Man on the Bridge (speaker), Zara/The Woman, Lennart/The Rabbit

Related Themes:





Related Symbols:





**Page Number:** 322-323

**Explanation and Analysis** 

The novel finally reveals what the man on the bridge wrote in his letter to Zara. This happens as Zara drops the letter off the bridge, symbolically letting go of the pain, fear, and suffering she's forced herself to feel since receiving the letter.

The man's letter reveals clearly that he feared Zara would blame herself for his choice to take his own life. Telling her that it wasn't her fault was intended to help Zara feel at peace and as though she could move on and continue living her life. This is why the narrator describes the note as "The four biggest little words one person, anyone at all, can say to another." But instead, Zara's fear and her unwillingness to connect with anyone led to her holding onto the letter for a decade, terrified of what she might read once she opened it.

That these "four biggest little words" come from someone who is effectively a complete stranger—and that finally reading them changes Zara's life so dramatically—again highlights the important role that strangers can play in helping others. It doesn't matter that the man never gets a name; he's a stranger, but his words still end up freeing Zara. Similarly, his choice to take his own life devastated her. All of this suggests that people, even strangers, are far more connected than many people realize.

Finally, as Zara lets the letter go, she symbolically lets go of her fear and suffering. After doing this, she has the capacity to turn toward Lennart, with whom she's now in a romantic relationship. The novel makes it clear that Zara never would've made it to the point where she's willing to even consider romance without first addressing the letter and the huge burden it put on her. In fact, she's even allowing Lennart to help her by presumably driving her to the bridge and then picking her up after she's dropped the letter. This shows how much Zara's community has grown since the hostage drama: she's now a person integrated into the community and willing to connect with others.





## **SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS**

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## **CHAPTER 1**

It was simple, really. All it took to get to this point—a bank robbery, a hostage drama, and a bunch of police officers ready to storm an apartment—was a really bad idea. So, this story is mostly about idiots. However, one must remember that it's easy to call other people idiots if you forget how hard it is to be human. People have to cope with so much. They have jobs, they pay taxes, and they have to remember their Wi-Fi password. People fall in love and pretend they're normal and are good parents. Sometimes people panic. Failing at being a good person is so easy. Everyone who loves someone can be pushed to make a choice that is terrible in hindsight—but seems like the only option in the moment.

The novel's introduction presents several conflicting ideas: first, that there are bad things happening (such as the hostage drama and a bank robbery), but then, that readers should sympathize with the person or people responsible for instigating these bad events. After all, the narrator suggests, those people are not so different from readers, who also may struggle to remember their Wi-Fi password and make other mistakes. This primes readers to see whoever's responsible in a sympathetic, understanding light—they're not a bad person, they just made a really bad choice.





For instance, earlier this morning, a 39-year-old resident of a medium-size town left home with a pistol, a bad idea in hindsight. This person planned to rob a bank, but that didn't go as planned. So, remembering their alcoholic mother's advice to run if you're not smart enough to do something right the first time, the bank robber ran, terrified, across the street and through the first door they saw. Once they got in, they discovered the only place to go was up the stairs.

There is a singular bank robber, and this passage highlights how frightened the robber is. This makes them a sympathetic figure, especially when combined with the aside that they grew up with an alcoholic mother. They perhaps come from difficult circumstances—or at the very least, have fallen on hard times if they feel the need to rob a bank.



The bank robber is your average 39-year-old, one who eats cheese and carbs instead of working out. They were out of breath when they reached the top of the stairwell and stumbled into an apartment, which was for sale and full of prospective buyers. This is how the story turned into a hostage drama. The drama went on for a few hours until the robber finally released the eight hostages, and the police stormed the apartment—but by then, the robber was gone.

The bank robber looks increasingly normal and relatable as the narrator describes their cheese and carb habit—this makes them "average" and possibly more like the reader. It's also revealed that the hostage drama portion wasn't intentional; the robber never intended to frighten people. Further, this passage sets up a mystery: where does the robber go after releasing the hostages?





#### **CHAPTER 2**

Ten years before the hostage drama, a man stood on a **bridge**. This story isn't about him so readers shouldn't think about him now. Readers just need to know that the man stood there, staring at the water below and thinking about ending his life.

At this point, it's unclear what this man has to do with the robber or the robbery/hostage drama. But the fact that he's standing on a bridge is somewhat concerning, as he seems to be considering dying by suicide. Introducing the man and then leaping back to the hostage drama creates a sense of unease and uncertainty for the reader.





Now, it's the afternoon of the day before New Year's Eve in a medium-size town. A young policeman is in an interrogation room with a real estate agent, and the questioning isn't going well—it takes the officer too long to understand that the Realtor's agency is called House Tricks real estate agency, and their tagline is "How's Tricks?" The officer is certain the Realtor is babbling and traumatized. He's not in the best mood either; his boss's boss's boss is sending a team from Stockholm to investigate the hostage situation, even though the local police are totally competent.

The young policeman asks if the day before New Year's Eve isn't an odd day for a showing. Ignoring the officer asking if the apartment has any hidden closets or passageways, the Realtor describes the open floor plan and light, bright atmosphere. It's also a great spot for kids. Then, the officer asks about the bank robber, and why he (the robber) took the prospective buyers hostage. The Realtor says it's because the apartment is open plan; the robber could point the gun at all of them at once. Steadying himself and wishing he'd chosen a different profession (his dad disapproves, while his mom, a priest, totally gets it), the officer says they need to know about hiding spots because they believe the robber is still in the apartment.

The young officer is annoyed because it seems to him like his bosses don't trust him to handle the hostage situation, though he's certain he can do it just fine on his own. This may influence how he interacts with the real estate agent, as he may be less accommodating than usual. But in believing that the Realtor is "babbling and traumatized," rather than taking their attempts to advertise their business seriously, the officer does the same thing his bosses are doing to him: discrediting the agent.



The Realtor provides some comic relief, and it's becoming clearer that perhaps the officer has the right idea: this isn't a person he should take too seriously. For instance, the Realtor totally misses the point when the officer asks why the robber took hostages. The officer is looking for a motive, not a literal description of why the open floorplan makes it easier to scare people with a gun. Noting that the robber might still be in the apartment increases the tension: nobody knows where the robber is, but the police are trying their best to find out.



## **CHAPTER 4**

The narrator explains that truthfully, the robber released the Realtor and the seven prospective buyers all at the same time. The eight hostages walked downstairs and got into police cars, while the policeman waited in the stairwell for his colleague. The special negotiator called the robber's phone, but moments later the police stormed the apartment and found it empty. Either one of the hostages helped the robber escape, or the robber is still in the apartment.

The novel introduces more intrigue here as the narrator suggests that the hostages may have helped the robber escape—does this explain the Realtor's absurd babbling? Or, as the police seem to fear, is the robber still hiding in the apartment? This remains a mystery for now, but it's worth noting that the narrator (and perhaps the police) seems to be jumping to conclusions about what might have happened.





## **CHAPTER 5**

Now it's time to return to the man on the **bridge**. That man wrote a note and mailed it, dropped his kids at school, and then stood on the bridge. Ten years later, a bank robber fails to rob a bank and holds eight people hostage at an apartment viewing. A person can see the bridge in question from the balcony's apartment. This all has nothing to do with the reader—except that the reader is a decent person who obviously would've tried to talk the man down off the bridge. The reader has no doubt been depressed before, and everyone knows that there's not much distance between themselves and the man on the bridge. Readers would've tried to save the man.

The novel begins to use the bridge as a central symbol around which other elements of the story rotate. In this case, the story highlights this by noting that one can see the bridge from the apartment's balcony. However, more importantly, the narrator again suggests that people have more in common with one another than they often think they do. Additionally, the narrator proposes that deep down, most people are good and want to help others. These core beliefs about human nature continue to help readers see the novel's characters as sympathetic—and perhaps a lot like the reader.









The young policeman is massaging his forehead when the real estate agent asks how he got the huge lump on his forehead. The policeman explains he got hit in the head and asks if the robber seemed comfortable handling the pistol. Breezily, the Realtor says the pistol was clearly a toy; they all knew that. The Realtor isn't joking and adds that she wasn't frightened at all. The policeman goes to get the Realtor water, though she says she doesn't want any.

The implication here is that the pistol wasn't actually a toy—again, the Realtor (and seemingly, the other hostages) is making assumptions based on little or no evidence. Meanwhile, the policeman seems to simply need a break from this frustrating interview. He's human too, and he's looking for a socially acceptable reason to excuse himself from this interaction.







## **CHAPTER 7**

The narrator shares that the hostages genuinely don't know what happened between when the robber freed them and when the police stormed the apartment. But once the robber was gone, the special negotiator from Stockholm called the robber to try to come to an agreement. The robber didn't answer, though—and a shot rang out in the apartment. When the police stormed the apartment, they discovered puddles of blood.

Readers, it seems, won't learn much more than the hostages for now; indeed, this scene asks more questions than it answers. However, assuming the robber did turn the gun on themselves, and this is where the blood came from, this creates more tension—an already serious situation just got even more dire.



## **CHAPTER 8**

The young policeman bumps into an older policeman in the staff room. Due to their age difference, they have very different priorities, and their relationship is complicated. The older officer offers the younger one coffee, but the younger one refuses like he's been offered something disgusting. Trying to lighten the mood, the older officer asks how the interview is going and if the younger officer is okay. Irritated, the younger officer snaps that he's fine and definitely doesn't need any help with the interview.

For now, the older officer seems like he's genuinely trying to help, though he doesn't know how to connect with his younger colleague. Noting that these two officers' relationship is "complicated" is interesting, as it suggests there's more to their fraught relationship than just the generational divide and divergent opinions about coffee.







Once the younger policeman leaves the staff room, the older policeman sits and sips his coffee. He's a stereotypical older man in that he doesn't know what to say to a young man to show he cares—but he can see the young man is hurting. Noticing that the younger officer's shoes left blood spots on the floor, the older officer wipes them up. The older officer is shaking, and he's definitely not okay.

Being of an older generation (part of which, this implies, means that the older officer isn't comfortable expressing comfort or emotions to others) means that the older officer can't connect, so he can't help his colleague. The fact that he's shaking and not okay suggests that he too could benefit from making a connection with his colleague.







Moments after the young policeman returns to the interview room and begins to pull out a crumpled sheet of paper to show the real estate agent, the older policeman shuffles into the room. The older officer offers his help, but the younger officer snaps that this is so unprofessional. The Realtor, perking up, introduces herself to the older officer, saying that she's from the "HOUSE TRICKS Real Estate Agency, HOW'S TRICKS?" Sharply, the younger officer tells the agent to sit down. The older officer asks if the younger one has shown her the drawing or asked about the pistol, and the agent pipes up that the gun wasn't real.

This passage reveals that the older officer doesn't just not know what to say. He also doesn't know how to respect the younger officer's authority and give him the space to conduct the interview. The younger officer's frustration with his colleague's behavior, in turn, leads to him being even shorter with the Realtor than he was previously. The Realtor continues to read as out of touch, as though she's possibly not taking this seriously.





Surprised, the older policeman observes the younger policeman hasn't told the real estate agent yet. The younger officer begins to explain, but the older officer interjects: the bank robber shot himself. The Realtor's mouth goes dry as she whispers that everyone could've died. The older officer suggests they start the interview again and takes the young man's notes, while the young man goes to the hallway to hit his head against the wall. The older officer wishes he knew what to say. This is exactly why he didn't want his son to be a police officer.

Revealing that the officers are related explains some of the conflict between them: boundaries become blurry, and as the two officers demonstrate, working with family can create more strife. However, it's also worth considering that because the young officer is the older officer's son, the older officer might have good reasons readers aren't yet privy to about why he thinks his son shouldn't be an officer. Indeed, in this passage, it seems like the older officer is trying to protect his son from emotional pain.







## **CHAPTER 10**

Ten years ago, the first person the man on the **bridge** saw was a teenage boy. That boy ran to help, since his mom was a priest, his dad was a policeman, and he believed you should help people when you can. The boy started talking to the man. Kindly, the man said he had two kids and shared the worst thing about being a parent: you can do everything right for weeks, but people will judge you for the one thing you do wrong. "Parents are defined by their mistakes."

It's possible this boy is the younger police officer, given that his dad is a policeman. If this is true, this passage reveals that the younger officer wants to help people. The man's insistence that parents are judged by their mistakes suggests that he thinks parents aren't judged all that fairly. As the narrator has already made clear, everyone makes mistakes—so why are parents specifically judged so harshly?







The man continued. He told the boy he'd had a great job and then set up his savings in a real estate investment company. This was so his kids wouldn't have to work so hard when they get older. He explained that he, like everyone else, was just pretending he knew what he was doing. His kids believed it, for a while. And then there was a financial crisis, a New York bank went bankrupt, and the man lost everything. The man drove his teenage kids to school, and his heart broke when they rolled their eyes at his "I love you." Then, he climbed onto the **bridge**. The boy believed then that he was going to save the man—but the man jumped anyway.

The man makes it clear that he, probably much like the older officer, cares about his kids. He just wants to help them have a comfortable life. However, he's unable to do this in the face of big global events that affect everyone, in this case the Great Recession that began in the U.S. in 2007-08. Realizing his kids don't think he's a saint—they rolled their eyes when he told them he loved them—is, this passage shows, enough for this man to decide that he no longer has anything worth staying alive for.









Ten years later, in the present, the young policeman stands outside the interview room, while his dad sits inside with the real estate agent. The young officer's mom was right: he and his dad shouldn't have worked together. She was also convinced that the young officer never got over seeing the man on the bridge jump. Maybe that's true. The young officer spends his days now working hard, running until he's exhausted, and drinking. He still has nightmares in which he can hear his scream. Earlier today, the young officer was the first one through the apartment door after the pistol went off. He feared the robber had jumped off the apartment's balcony, but there was no evidence that this happened.

The fact that the young officer's mom didn't want her husband and son working together may add more credence to the idea that the older officer has a habit of undermining his son's authority—she may have seen this kind of a situation coming. It also seems like she's correct that the young officer hasn't gotten over seeing the man jump from the bridge. The young officer is clearly still trying to process trauma that seems to seriously affect his day-to-day life and even causes him to jump to conclusions, such as that the robber jumped off the balcony.









## **CHAPTER 12**

Back in the interview with the real estate agent, the older policeman awkwardly explains that the young policeman is his son. He adds that his wife didn't want them to work together, as she thought he was overprotective. Blushing, the officer says his son is really too sensitive to be a police officer. His son saw a man jump off a **bridge** 10 years ago, and now his son wants to save everyone, even the bad guys like the bank robber. Then, the officer reminds the real estate agent that everything is being recorded and offers her a child's drawing to identify. She doesn't recognize it, but the officer says it's a monkey, a frog, and either a giraffe or a horse (he votes giraffe).

The older officer's reminder to the agent that everything is being recorded seems more like a reminder to himself. Now, he can't escape the fact that he's spoken about such personal topics with a witness, as they're now in the official record of the hostage situation. However, the fact that the man voices these facts and thoughts suggests that even if he didn't witness the man jump off the bridge, he's still traumatized by seeing (and not being able to help) his son struggle so much to process what he saw.







The narrator says that truthfully, the man on the **bridge** didn't make the boy want to be a policeman. It was the teenage girl who stood on the bridge a week after the man—"the one who didn't jump."

The fact that a girl didn't jump off the bridge offers some hope that not everything is awful. The young officer wasn't motivated by his failure, but rather, what seems like a success.



## **CHAPTER 13**

One of the officers throws a coffee cup at the wall, where it breaks and stains the wall. The older policeman's name is Jim, and his son, the younger officer, is Jack. They are, as usual, sitting at their desks across from each other, typing up the notes about what they did that day. They don't get along, as they come from different generations: Jim thinks computers are magic, while Jack takes computers for granted. Jack writes his report, while Jim carefully crafts stories (he wanted to be a writer in his youth). They both have photos of the same woman—Jim's wife and Jack's mom—on their desks.

The narrator doesn't identify which officer threw the coffee cup—but Jack seems the more likely culprit, given how frustrated he is with the situation. Here, the narrator highlights examples of the officers' generational differences, such as how they view computers, and attributes their interpersonal problems to these differences. However, previous passages have insinuated that it's really Jim's overprotectiveness that causes problems, not just that he sees computers as magic.





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Jim also has a picture of Jack's older sister on his desk, but she never comes home for Christmas. This is the biggest difference between the two men: Jack doesn't chase his sister anymore. It's impossible to tell when her substance abuse started, but a few years ago, Jim discovered that Jack had liquidated his savings to send his sister to rehab. But she checked herself out after two weeks, and he never got his money back. She sometimes calls asking for money to fly home, but though Jack sends the money, she never comes.

Learning that Jack liquidated his savings to try to help his sister shows that he tried to put his parents' advice to help anyone he can into practice. But when she checks herself out and continues to ask for money, Jack discovers that perhaps his sister is someone he can't actually help. This also suggests that helping people isn't one-sided: the person receiving help has to want it for that help to work. Jack's sister and the man on the bridge didn't want help, but perhaps the girl who didn't jump did.



Now, Jim watches Jack type. Jack is clearly frustrated; he wants to prove himself to the bosses before the Stockholm folks show up. Earlier, Jack stormed into the staff room and snarled that one of the witnesses knows something—and how can they lie when the robber might be dying? Now, Jim throws his coffee cup. He's even more frustrated than Jack, since he can't help his son. Jim cleans up the mess while Jack fetches them both fresh coffee (he knows this means a lot to his dad). Jim apologizes for interfering in the interview, and they return to their work. The narrator reveals that they're both right: the witnesses aren't telling the truth.

This passage and previous passages have highlighted that a key part of being a parent is wanting to help one's child. Jim is compelled to throw his coffee cup because in this instance, he can't help—though it's not entirely clear why he can't help, as a police officer with the same access to witnesses and such as Jack. But the narrator continues to emphasize that in this situation, it's the police versus the witnesses—the witnesses are the ones foiling the police's efforts.



## **CHAPTER 14**

Jack begins his interview with a young woman named London by suggesting she sit in a chair, not on the floor. London snaps that her phone charger won't reach that far and complains about the awful reception at the station. She continues to insult Jack, but he finally asks if she's who was working at the bank when the bank robber came in. As she answers Jack's questions with, "Correct," she explains that she's miming "perverted commas" so that if this transcript ends up on the internet, everyone will think she's ironic instead of dumb. With prodding, London says she's a temp employee at the bank (which is cashless), but she's studying to be a bartender.

Though Jack and London don't seem to be too far apart in age, they're still having a very hard time connecting. For her part, London isn't taking the interview seriously. This raises the question of whether London is one of the witnesses who the narrator has said isn't telling the truth, and if her belligerence is therefore calculated. London's attachment to her phone highlights her youth, as well as the fact that it may be her smartphone that's keeping her from connecting with Jack.





## CHAPTER 15

Stepping back in time to earlier that morning, the day before New Year's Eve, the masked bank robber walks into a bank. However, they make the mistake of choosing a cashless bank—so when they wave the pistol around and slide a note to London asking for 6,500 kroner, London scoffs that the bank has no cash. The bank robber feels very old, mostly because London, despite being 20, acts like she's about 14. London behaves the way she does because she's miserable. She has no real friends and spends her time watching celebrities ruin their lives. By now, the bank robber feels stupid and is ready to apologize and walk away—but then London threatens to call the police. The bank robber runs away.

Anxious People takes place in Sweden, hence the novel's use of kroner, Swedish currency. Sweden also leads the world in moving toward a cashless society, which is why the bank is cashless. Overwhelmingly, younger people in Sweden prefer more modern cash-free payment and banking options, while older generations prefer cash. As the bank robber learns that the bank is cashless, they must confront that the world is continuing to change and leave them and people of their generation behind.





Back in the present, London's witness interview continues. Jack asks if London can tell him anything specific about the robber's appearance, such as if he was tall or short. London declares this a "superficial question" and says Jack has "a really sick binary view of gender," and she refuses to say whether the robber was tall or short (describing people's height can make people feel bad). She says her first impression of the robber was that they were a "complete moron." The robber only wanted 6,500 kroner, and what robber does that? They clearly had a special reason to ask for that amount. Jack then shows her the child's drawing, which she thinks depicts a frog, a monkey, and an elk. Then, she returns her attention to her phone—a celebrity couple is getting divorced.

London is oddly caught up in using descriptors that won't make people feel bad for as rude as she's being to Jack. Further, she doesn't describe the robber in kind, glowing terms either: she implies they were in no way intelligent if they didn't know the bank was cashless (and therefore impossible to rob). Then, the way London accuses Jack of having a "sick binary view of gender" is humorous, but there might be more to it. Either London is very up to date on current gender politics, or it's possible Jack is wrong about the robber's gender.





## **CHAPTER 17**

The truth is that the bank robber is an adult, and this says more than anything about their personality. Adults are supposed to know everything—and every adult is certain that they're the only one faking it. Just as the bank robber runs into the street after trying to rob the bank, they run into a police officer walking past. London hasn't called the police yet, so nobody is looking for the robber, but the robber panics anyway. And that officer is actually a traffic warden, so they couldn't have arrested the robber anyway. The robber runs through the first door they see, up the stairs, and into an open apartment. There, they wave their gun around and say that maybe this is a hostage situation now. The robber apologizes; they're having a "complicated day."

The narrator makes it clear that being an adult in today's world is inherently stressful. Every adult, they suggest, has no idea what they're doing and yet feels compelled to pretend that they do. This becomes increasingly hard for the robber to do after being confronted with an unexpectedly cashless bank, and things seem to spiral out of control from there. Further, the robber seems to be too stressed to make accurate judgments about their surroundings, as when they're unable to identify the traffic warden or that they're entering an apartment building.









Within minutes, the journalists are in front of the apartment building thanks to London; unable to speak civilly to the emergency phone operators and explain the situation, she posts about the robber on Twitter. The police get there a few minutes later, after the postman visiting the apartment building calls his wife, who then calls the police. Just as the robber closes the apartment door, a child's drawing of a monkey, a frog, and an elk falls from their pocket. And London is right: normal robbers ask for a million dollars, but anyone who nervously asks for exactly 6,500 kroner has a reason.

Though Jack insisted the local police force is competent, that seems increasingly optimistic if it takes such an unlikely string of events to alert them to the robbery and the hostage situation. The fact that the robber carries a child's drawing in their pocket suggests that they might have children—and this, perhaps, is why they need exactly 6,500 kroner.







The only thing the bank robber and the man on the **bridge** 10 years ago have in common is "moral hazard." This is a banking term that describes how banks behave so immorally that it's basically a risk for them to *try* to be moral. The man on the bridge gave his money to a bank to invest, and he took out new loans to pay the old ones. Then the market crashed, and it turned out nothing was secure. The bank insisted that nothing is risk free, and the man shouldn't have given them his money.

Banks, the novel makes clear, are the real bad guys of the story—they play games with people's dreams and money, and they never have to answer for their crimes. Further, they go so far as to blame customers, like the man, for being naïve enough to trust them. The market crash, again, likely refers to the 2007-08 Great Recession that began in the U.S., in part because of not enough regulation in the banking industry.



The man went to a different bank to borrow money to pay his debts. But the woman there said he had suffered "moral hazard." She explained it as two people sitting on a creaking branch, and the person sitting closest to the trunk has the saw. The bank, she said, was going to saw off the branch to save itself, condemning the man. She then refused to loan him money. When the man said it wasn't his fault, she retorted that he shouldn't have given the banks his money.

The woman's metaphor highlights just how immoral banks are: in this scenario, it's nothing to banks to condemn customers to death or injury while blaming them for trusting the bank to keep their word.





The robber has never heard of moral hazard, but the robber's mother once said that you can make God laugh by telling Him your plans. The robber understood, even at age seven, that their mom never planned to get drunk but always did anyway. The child robber swore to never drink and never grow up; they succeed at one of those things. The seven-year-old robber also learned about moral hazard that Christmas, when their mom kneeled down and said "it" wasn't their fault. Slowly, the child realized that the money they got from selling magazines so their mom could buy Christmas food didn't go to food, and their mom drunkenly said the robber shouldn't have given her money. The bank robber still thinks about how it's impossible to hate your mom.

The robber becomes increasingly sympathetic as readers gain more insight into their childhood and backstory. The robber didn't have a parent they could rely on, though the implication is that children should be able to rely on their parents—just like customers should be able to rely on banks to take care of their investments. Still, despite experiencing their mother's neglectful behavior, the robber believes that it's somehow impossible to hate one's parent. For now, at least, the robber frames love between parents and children as something innate and fixed.





The bank robber and the robber's mom were evicted from their apartment a few months later. The robber vowed to not become a parent. When they became a parent anyway, they swore they wouldn't be a "chaotic parent." God laughed. The man on the **bridge**, meanwhile, wrote the woman at the bank a **letter**, writing "exactly what he wanted her to hear." He jumped that day, and the woman has been carrying the letter in her purse for the last decade. Today, she meets the bank robber.

The robber seems to believe that they're a "chaotic parent" like their mother because of whatever led them to rob a bank, events that are still a mystery to the reader. The woman at the bank seems to be dealing with immense trauma and guilt for what she perceives as her role in the man's suicide. She also becomes the connecting link between the bridge, the man, and the robber.









Jim and Jack are the first officers on the scene at the hostage situation, just because the town is so small, and nobody wants to work the day before New Year's Eve. The journalists are already there. Neither man knows what to do, but Jim points out that Jack took a course on "active listening" recently. Jack points out that to listen actively, they need to be able to speak to the hostage taker—but there's no ransom or note. Jim surreptitiously googles what to do in a hostage situation. Jack is annoyed. He knows his bosses will just want to call Stockholm, so he asks Jim what Google says. According to Google, one must find out who the hostage taker is and what he wants.

The fact that Jack and Jim have to consult Google to figure out what to do cuts into Jack's earlier assertion that he and his police department are competent. Clearly, in this situation at least, he isn't. However, Jack's desire to prove himself shines through here. He wants to be able to make this work and save the people the robber took hostage. And now Jim goes out of his way to try to help his son figure this out, in much the same way he does later in the afternoon during the interviews.





## **CHAPTER 20**

The narrator asks the reader to consider the bank robber robbing the bank. This obviously has nothing to do with the reader, since the reader is "normal" and "decent" and agrees that people shouldn't lie, steal, or kill. There are a few exceptions: you can lie to your kids about the chocolate you ate and if you get the opportunity, you should kill Hitler. Stealing, though, gets a little trickier. Is it okay to steal if it's something small, and you have to? Is it okay to rob a bank if you think you have to, and nobody will get hurt? Probably not, so readers have nothing in common with the bank robber—except fear. Anyone who has small kids, like the bank robber, knows being a parent is terrifying all the time.

This passage begins by allowing readers to feel like they're superior to the robber and have nothing in common with them. Still, though, the narrator encourages readers to have empathy by guiding them through these thought exercises about when it might be okay to steal. The implication here is that perhaps the robber is stealing something small, and perhaps they think they have to and believe no one will get hurt. In the end, though, the narrator insists that if readers have kids, they should be very familiar with the fear that seemingly motivated the robber to rob the bank. The robber, it seems, will go to great lengths for their children.





The bank robber left home this morning, not realizing their youngest daughter put the drawing of a monkey, the frog, and the elk in the robber's pocket. The little girl and her sister never fight, and their parents used to whisper that they didn't deserve such good kids. Now, since the divorce, the girls live with each parent on alternating weeks. They're with their nonrobber parent this week, and though they don't know it, they're listening to news reports about the bank robber parent in the car.

Readers get a bit more insight into the bank robber's situation: they're currently going through, or have recently gone through, a divorce. Ending a marriage can be a huge, upsetting event in people's lives, and it seems like this may have been the case for the robber. The girls seem very affectionate toward their bank robber parent, as evidenced by slipping this drawing into their parent's pocket.





On weeks they live with their robber parent, the daughters take the bus places and giggle about their robber parent being an elk when they run for the bus, since that parent has absurdly long legs. Kids notice stuff like that; it makes them good bullies. But the strangest thing about being a parent is that your kids love you, no matter what. And the bank robber, who only calls their kids by their nicknames—monkey and frog—would do anything for the girls.

Finally, readers learn the real significance of the child's drawing: it depicts the two daughters and their robber parent. This passage offers some hope too, as it reiterates that kids always love their parents. The robber's choice to rob the bank, then, will not put their daughters' love in jeopardy.



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Readers, of course, still wouldn't ever rob a bank, but has the reader ever been in love? Love makes people do ridiculous things, like get married and have kids. The marriage seems to be going well and then, one day, like the bank robber, perhaps you uncover infidelity, and everything goes south. The robber's spouse had been cheating with the robber's boss, so the robber went from being married and employed on a Friday to divorced and unemployed by Monday. But the robber's spouse asked the robber to not make a scene, for the children's sake. So the robber didn't call a lawyer. They just left the apartment, since the apartment was only in their spouse's name, and they didn't want to make a fuss.

Keep in mind that the novel has stated at several points that the bank robber will do anything for their kids. Here, this means that they get what seems like the worst lot in their separation, as they don't get to stay in the apartment or keep their job. The robber's spouse, indeed, seems to almost weaponize the robber's love for their kids by asking them to not make a scene—this is how they can exert power over the robber in the divorce. And not hiring a lawyer so as to not make a scene also means that the robber is going through this divorce alone, without legal counsel. And as the novel has already stated, adults don't know everything, and so the robber might be more prone to making mistakes without some professional guidance.







The robber didn't ask for government assistance. They tried to buy an apartment, but banks won't lend to people who don't have money. They had to rent, which requires four months' rent as a deposit. Then, the robber got a letter saying the other parent applied for sole custody of their daughters, given that the robber didn't have housing or a job. The robber then went to go pick up their things from the storeroom at their spouse's apartment and realized they had no place to take said things. They dug out some blankets from a neighbor's storeroom and found a toy pistol, which made them feel safer. They slept in the storeroom for a week, until an apartment near the **bridge** came up for 6,500 kroner per month. The robber figured they could sell everything and get a job to pay the next month's rent.

The robber discovers the same thing that the man who jumped off the bridge did: that banks want to see a credit history and a steady income; they deny loans and other types of assistance to people with nothing. This highlights how the modern banking system isn't actually set up to help people who need help. Remember that Jim has already shared that the robber's pistol was, in fact, real. Sweden has strict laws regarding who can possess weapons and why, so the robber is likely already in violation of some important rules just by possessing the pistol.



The robber was unsuccessful. The narrator notes that in situations like these, you're supposed to go to the authorities. But the robber remembers sitting at the welfare office with the robber's mother, and the robber remembers how good addicts' kids get to be at lying to cover up their parent's faults. And the robber is afraid the welfare office will take their daughters away, and all the robber needs is a chance. The robber found a job—but the job doesn't pay until they've worked two months. They went to ask for another loan to get by, but the bank again refused. It makes no sense.

The robber is too haunted by their past and how their mother's behavior affected them to do what the narrator suggests is the right thing and go to the authorities. As things start to look more and more desperate, the robber becomes increasingly intent on doing things all on their own and not asking for help. And once again, they run into the fact that banks aren't set up to help people in dire situations.







The robber struggled on, hoping to keep their daughters from seeing how stressed they are. The girls could see anyway. The robber has spent their whole life promising not to be a chaotic parent, and here they are. On the day before New Year's Day, the robber puts the latest letter from the lawyer in their pocket next to the eviction notice from the landlord. They cut holes in a black hat and try to rob a cashless bank, believing they can just return the money once they get paid. They just need one month to get on their feet. But now, the pistol is real, a drawing of an elk and a frog and a monkey is in a stairwell, and an apartment rug is bloody.

The way the narrator frames this passage suggests that things just spiraled out of control—the robber never planned for this to happen, and now they're stuck. The novel makes it clear that it really doesn't take much to end up like the robber, suggesting again that there's less difference between readers and the robber than readers might like to think. This encourages readers to sympathize with the robber rather than judge them.







The box is just a box of Christmas lights, not a bomb. This box is on the floor below the apartment where the hostage drama is taking place. When the postman ran downstairs after seeing the masked robber enter the top-floor apartment, he tripped over the box, so some of the wires are sticking out now. It really looks like Christmas lights, but to Jim, it looks like a bomb. Jim and Jack are on the street, trying to figure out how many people are in the building. Jack's bosses call and agree to let Jack and Jim enter the building to try to contact the robber, warning them to beware of explosives and such. Jack isn't bothered, but Jim is Jack's father, and he's worried for his son. When they encounter the box, Jim hisses that it's a bomb and calls Stockholm. Jack won't forgive him for this.

This passage highlights an incidence of dramatic irony: readers know the box is just Christmas lights, but the characters don't know this, and so chaos ensues. At first, it seems like Jack is going to get the opportunity to prove himself to his bosses, but Jim destroys that opportunity by calling Stockholm. However, it's worth noting that Jim is just trying to protect his son, not dash his dreams. He's trying to be a good parent, but as the novel has already shown, being a good parent is a difficult, messy endeavor.





The bosses decide to call in backup from Stockholm, but the special negotiator who calls Jack explains that he'll be on the road a while, since it's the day before New Year's Eve. The special negotiator orders Jack to "contain the situation" for now. This is enraging, especially since Stockholm is full of idiots. Jim tries to apologize to Jack, but Jack snaps for him to try to call the people in the other apartments. Jim contacts a man who's clearly fighting with his wife, as well as the couple who owns the apartment across from the one for sale. But the fighting couple isn't home. (The couple is breaking up because their juicer is the wrong color, and they'll sell the apartment soon using a real estate agency with a corny name.) Things spiral out of control from here.

Now, Jack has to make the best of the situation. It seems likely that Jack's bad mood begins here, when Jim deprives him of the opportunity to prove himself, and worsens as the day progresses. As Jim calls the various couples who live in the building, the novel continues to highlight that for lots of people, romantic relationships are difficult. Both couples Jim speaks to are fighting—one so badly that they plan to separate. The robber is clearly in good company in experiencing marital issues, though they remain isolated and never learn for sure that they're not alone in this regard.









## **CHAPTER 22**

Standing in the apartment doorway, the bank robber tries really hard to not point the pistol at anyone, but they accidentally point it at a woman named Zara. Zara is in her 50s and beautifully dressed—she's clearly rich. But oddly, Zara isn't afraid to have a pistol pointed at her. Other people in the apartment are terrified. One woman shrieks that they're being robbed, which isn't true; the robber didn't intend for *this* to be a robbery. So the robber feels insulted when the woman tells her husband, Roger, to get his money out. The bank robber then catches sight of the reflection in the window. Everyone reflected back is afraid, but the robber is clearly the most frightened. The robber realizes *they*, not the others, are the real captive here. Sirens sound below.

The bank robber doesn't want to hurt anyone, and their terror and hopelessness is palpable in this chapter. Nobody understands their intentions (they're just trying to escape their actual attempted robbery), and it becomes abundantly clear that they're trapped now. By this, the robber means that they've gotten in way deeper than they intended. Now, when the police finally catch them, they'll be guilty of trying to rob a bank and taking people hostage—crimes they genuinely have little interest in committing.





That afternoon, Jim interviews Zara at the police station. She refuses coffee and says it's "stupid" to ask why she was at the apartment viewing. It was an apartment viewing, after all. Jim notes that Zara looks too wealthy to be interested in the apartment, and she accuses him of believing in the middle-class fiction that people can ever be too rich. Then, she says she'll simplify: a "lunatic with a gun" held her and other people hostage, and the police still managed to lose the robber. Trying to make friends, Jim jokes that it never really seems like a buyer's marker or a seller's market; it seems like it's always the bank's market. Everyone hates banks, and bankers make way too much money while normal people struggle. Zara asks why Jim thinks the rich should be punished and reveals that she runs a bank.

Zara comes off as so wealthy as to be blind to how most people who aren't as well off live—the idea that people can have too much money seems like a fairy tale to her. Jim's bumbling demeanor doesn't help, though, as he unwittingly insults Zara by not considering that she herself might work in finance, the very industry he insults as he tries to make friends. She also insinuates that the police are far less competent than the police would like to believe, since they've now lost the robber by later in the afternoon.





## **CHAPTER 24**

Though Zara could afford the apartment (her couch probably cost about as much), she wasn't interested in buying it. She went to the showing earlier, but even her superior demeanor couldn't hide the "lurching grief inside her."

While this passage confirms that Jim was right to suspect that Zara didn't want to buy the apartment, her reason for going to the showing remains unknown. However, this reveals that she's hurting—and her emotional pain is, perhaps, ruling her life.





Readers must understand that Zara recently began seeing a psychologist, as Zara has the kind of career where eventually you need someone to tell you what else you can do with your life. Stepping back in time to Zara's first disastrous appointment, Zara notices a framed photo of the psychologist's mother and asks how psychologist's relationship to her mom was, and whether any of the psychologist's patients have committed suicide. Zara wants to know if the psychologist is any good and can help her with her trouble sleeping; her doctor won't give her more sleeping pills unless she starts counseling. She denies that her job has anything to do with her insomnia.

The implication that this passage makes right away is that it is Zara's job that leads to her seeking counseling; needing sleeping pills is beside the point. However, the fact that Zara denies this later in the passage suggests that Zara isn't particularly self-aware or reflective. Indeed, this comes through clearly as Zara insults the psychologist's competence and flat-out refuses to talk about herself. She seems to believe she knows exactly how the psychologist-patient relationship is supposed to work, though she seems to miss the mark.





During the second session, Zara asks how the psychologist would describe panic attacks. When the psychologist uses computer terms to describe them, Zara insists that the psychologist's parents are programmers and asks if the psychologist is ashamed to work with "fripperies" when her parents did meaningful work. The psychologist, offended, asks why Zara is here. Zara says she needs sleeping pills.

Zara only sees psychology as useful in that undergoing counseling is a hoop she must jump through to get her sleeping pills. She doesn't see it as a valuable tool that can help people cope with trauma or develop healthier thinking habits. Indeed, referring to mental health as "fripperies" devalues the field and plays into incorrect, outdated stereotypes about psychology and mental health.





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The psychologist quickly realizes that Zara is suffering from loneliness. But she starts asking questions about, for instance, what Zara thinks the world's biggest problem is. Zara answers, "Poor people." During their third session, the psychologist realizes how unwell Zara is after Zara abruptly says she has cancer. Zara reveals that this is a joke, but "that's how [she's] feeling." The psychologist can't sleep that night. Zara considers showing the psychologist the **letter** in her bag, which explains everything.

Put simply, the psychologist believes it's a lack of connection that causes Zara to feel so anxious and terrible. Zara's joke about cancer is darkly humorous, but it also suggests that she feels as though something (presumably her role in the man's suicide) has condemned her, as a terminal cancer diagnosis might. But even as Zara opens up to the psychologist this little bit, she refuses to take the final step of admitting that she denied the man a loan and still feels immensely guilty and responsible for his death.





During their fourth session, Zara stares at the painting on the psychologist's wall of a woman staring out to sea. They discuss what the woman is thinking and if she's happy. Zara insists happiness is beside the point: people need purpose, and most people want money, not happiness. Zara also wonders if the woman in the painting is considering suicide—doesn't everyone, at some point? When the psychologist asks what stops people from actually killing themselves, Zara says it's a fear of heights. Unsure if Zara is joking, the psychologist asks if Zara has hobbies. Zara seems to suddenly break and leaves abruptly. The psychologist stares at the painting, which she painted. She never noticed that the woman in it is standing on a bridge.

Zara simultaneously dismisses certain aspects of mental health—such as the need to feel happy and fulfilled—while also acknowledging that lots of people have more in common than they think, simply because experiencing periods of poor mental health is so common. For now, the psychologist isn't entirely sure how to manage Zara. When the psychologist asks Zara if she has hobbies, she's essentially asking if Zara anything in her life that makes her happy—and it seems, from Zara's reaction, that Zara doesn't. Noting that the woman in the psychologist's painting is on a bridge reinforces the bridge's symbolism as a connecting force: here, it highlights what Zara noted earlier in the passage, that perhaps lots of people occasionally entertain suicidal thoughts.



## **CHAPTER 25**

In the continuation of Zara's interview with Jim, Jim admits he feels silly for saying what he said about banks. He asks Zara again to describe the robber, anything she remembers about him. Zara says Jim obviously knows the robber is male. Otherwise, having a pistol pointed at you is traumatic, and she doesn't remember anything else. She has nothing to share when Jim shows her the child's drawing, and she's confused when Jim asks where she was in the apartment during the hostage drama. He explains that Jack thinks a hostage helped the robber. It's odd that Zara was at the viewing at all and didn't seem afraid when the robber pointed the gun at her.

It's hard to parse Zara's tone when she says that obviously, Jim knows the robber is male. She clearly doesn't think highly of Jim, but it's not clear at all if she knows something about the robber that Jim doesn't and just isn't willing to say so. Then, Jim subtly implies that Jack suspects Zara, as she clearly didn't want to buy the apartment and therefore had no discernable reason to be at the viewing.



Jim's accusation offends Zara, so Jim moves on to asking how many people were in the apartment. Zara says she was there, there was the real estate agent, two couples, and the rabbit. But she's certain nobody helped the robber, since they were all idiots. Jim then asks if the robber shot himself on purpose or by accident and explains that the floor is covered in blood. Zara asks where the blood is in the apartment and then says, "Oh." She threatens to call her lawyer.

Zara seems to assume that she's smarter than Jim and everyone else in the apartment, an assumption that may or may not be true. Again, Zara hides her emotions well when she asks about the blood on the floor. So, it's impossible to tell if she indeed finds this concerning, especially since she immediately jumps to asking for legal representation.





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Jim asks once again why Zara was at the apartment, and she reveals that viewing middle-class apartments is her hobby. She likens it to heroin or capturing baby birds; it's a "forbidden attraction." Finally, she says she wasn't afraid of the pistol—which she knew was real—because she'd thought about killing herself for a long time. She was just surprised to realize in that moment that she didn't want to die.

Readers now learn that Zara indeed has a hobby—and it's darkly comical that she views middle-class apartments as a "forbidden attraction." This passage also reveals just how mentally unwell Zara has been, if it's only when the pistol was pointed at her that she discovered she wanted to live. It's still unclear, though, why she'd reveal such a personal revelation to Jim, whom she dislikes.







#### **CHAPTER 26**

Returning to Zara's past counseling appointments, when Zara and her psychologist meet next, Zara reveals that she has found a hobby: attending "viewings of middle-class apartments." It's shocking to encounter people who plan to renovate with "the same hands [they] eat with." Zara snorts at the psychologist's slack jaw; people like the psychologist get upset by the silliest things. When the psychologist, after hearing Zara describe some of the times she's offended people, suggests that Zara stop getting into conflicts, Zara says conflicts are great. If she gets into conflicts, she can win.

This conversation reveals that the psychologist and Zara really have very little in common. The psychologist is, presumably, one of those middle-class people Zara finds so fascinating, while Zara's perverse fascination with the middle class is in turn almost unbelievable to the psychologist. But then, Zara begins to get a bit more personal. However, noting that she likes winning does raise the question of whether winning actually serves Zara. For instance, did she feel like she won when she denied the man the loan?





The psychologist asks Zara what she does with her money. Zara says she buys "distance from other people." Then, the psychologist asks why Zara likes her job. Zara explains that she's an analyst, not an economist; analysts make money all the time, while economists only earn when the bank's customers are doing well. After arguing a bit more, Zara says that only weak people (like the psychologist) like their jobs. At this, the psychologist suggests they end for the day.

Zara seems unaware of what she's doing, but she begins to explain why she's so lonely: she goes out of her way to distance herself from other people. Notice that she cleverly doesn't answer the psychologist's question about why she likes her job. However, she again implies that being happy isn't something worth caring about—or possibly, she doesn't think she deserves to be happy.





Before she goes, Zara asks if the psychologist thinks there are bad people, and if bad people know they're bad. The psychologist says she believes there are bad people, but most people can't live with knowing they're bad, and so they justify the bad things they do. Zara almost reaches for the **letter** in her purse, and she almost confesses that she's been looking at apartments for 10 years. But she says nothing. Once Zara is gone, the psychologist searches for apartments in the area. She doesn't know, though, that Zara has specific criteria: they must have balconies, and they must have a view of the **bridge**. Meanwhile, Zara stops the elevator and sobs in it. She's never read the letter in her purse because her psychologist is right: she won't be able to live knowing she's a bad person.

This passage reveals that Zara's apartment viewing outings began after the man jumped off the bridge. Looking at the bridge from apartment balconies comes off as some kind of penance that Zara believes she must serve to make up for her role in the man's death. This also shows readers that Zara believes she's a bad person, which may explain Zara's strange responses to the psychologist's questions—she seems to be going out of her way to avoid doing or saying anything that forces her to confront this.







Ten years ago, a man wrote and mailed a **letter** to a woman at the bank and then jumped off a **bridge**. A week later, a teenage girl, Nadia, stands on the bridge. There's nothing obviously wrong with her; she's just sad all the time and feels like she has nothing in common with other people. Nobody notices her standing on the bridge—except for teenage Jack. He's been visiting the bridge daily since the man jumped, and now, he races forward and pulls Nadia to the ground so hard that the impact knocks her unconscious. She wakes up in the hospital later and tells the nurses that she was trying to get a picture. From this day forward, Nadia tries to understand the difference between herself and the man who jumped. She eventually becomes a psychologist. She learns to cope with her sadness and tries to be kind.

Despite Nadia's belief that she has nothing in common with other people, as a teenager she seems a lot like Zara—sad, lonely, and disconnected. In fact, it seems possible that she grows up to be Zara's psychologist, which would again highlight that the bridge is a symbol of connection. Jack's demeanor in the novel's present, though, suggests that while Nadia seems to have been able to come to terms with this traumatic experience, Jack perhaps hasn't. Jack and Nadia then present differing ways of dealing with trauma and grief: Nadia has learned and healed, while Jack is still mired in his negative emotions.



Jack and Nadia never see each other again after that; Nadia isn't even sure Jack exists. The experience they shared, though, solidifies Jack's desire to become a police officer. Nadia trains to be a psychologist and, 10 years later, moves back home. She has a patient named Zara, and Zara gets caught up in a hostage drama—in an apartment with a balcony and a view of the **bridge**. Zara is at the apartment because 10 years ago, the man who jumped wrote her a **letter**. Zara has been carrying that letter with her everywhere, but she's only been to the bridge once. It was a week after the man jumped, and she watched a boy rescue a girl who got up to jump.

Being able to stop Nadia from jumping helps Jack see that he is capable of doing good in the world. He wasn't able to save the man, but he did unwittingly give Nadia an experience that inspired her later career in psychology. That Zara witnessed Jack save Nadia reinforces that the bridge is a connecting force. It also offers some hope to Zara that life isn't all bad—there's still good in the world, even if the man did jump.







Zara found Nadia's wallet and has been secretly following Nadia since. She's been watching the **bridge**, from apartment balconies, for 10 years—perhaps she's afraid that if she actually goes to the bridge, she'll jump. She wants to know the difference between the man and Nadia, but she hasn't opened the **letter** because she doesn't want to know that it was her fault. This whole story is complicated—maybe it's not even about a bank robbery or a hostage drama. Maybe it's about a bridge.

Wondering if Zara might jump if she actually went to the bridge highlights the true extent of Zara's "lurching grief." Her unread letter shows how trapped she is by fear and anxiety about her role in the man's death. She's still grieving for him. Suggesting that the story is actually about a bridge implies that this book isn't so much about negative things, like the man's suicide or the bank robbery. Instead, it's about the random connections strangers form with one another.







### **CHAPTER 28**

Back on the day before New Year's Eve, the apartment showing is a disaster before it begins because the real estate agent is awful. There's a bowl of limes on the coffee table, but the apartment is full of books and drawings the owner's grandchildren drew. Zara immediately knows the agent is an amateur: only a serial killer would want to live here. Prospective buyers want to see how *they* would fit here, not how the current resident lives. She circles the apartment and then goes onto the balcony and stares at the **bridge** until she shakes. Inside, she can hear two married couples arguing.

As Zara describes what prospective buyers want to see in a well-staged apartment, she thinks of the apartment as something of a blank slate. People should, she believes, be able to project their dreams and futures onto the apartment—not learn that the current owner has artistic grandchildren. Put simply, she looks down on this sort of connection and believes it's better for buyers and sellers to stay aloof and distant.



The older couple, Anna-Lena and Roger, are recently retired. They're the people who write detailed one-star reviews of household gadgets, whether they've tried the gadgets or not. Anna-Lena observes aloud that the green curtains are a disaster; she's used to nobody listening to her. Roger, meanwhile, kicks the baseboards (which are loose because he kicked them). In a whisper that everyone can hear, Anna-Lena says the other couple doesn't look like they can afford the apartment, and Zara is clearly too rich to want this apartment. Roger reminds Anna-Lena to say that this place needs serious renovation and to tell the Realtor that she can smell mold. These two never fight anymore—unless they're fighting all the time.

Anna-Lena seems to agree with Zara—she expects apartments for sale to not have any personal touches in them. She also humorously makes wild assumptions about the other prospective buyers in the apartment, though the fact that she does this because she's not used to anyone listening to her suggests that not all is well in her marriage to Roger. Indeed, at this point, Roger seems somewhat self-centered and controlling. Indeed, asking Anna-Lena to say that the apartment smells moldy is an attempt to manipulate the other buyers into backing down.





From the balcony, Zara can hear Anna-Lena and Roger. She's staring at the **bridge**, crying, and feeling nauseous as she tries to decide if she'd like to jump. Then, she hears the other couple, Julia and Ro. Julia is pregnant. Ro walks around with her phone in the air, complaining that there's no signal. Julia snaps that they have to decide what to do with the birds (Ro has pet birds, and Julia wants a bigger apartment so she doesn't have to listen to both them *and* Ro snore at night). Ro brushes this off, which infuriates Julia: they've looked at 20 apartments in two weeks, and Ro doesn't seem to want to move. Brightly, Ro runs off to measure the "hobby room," which is actually a walk-in closet. She picks up a new hobby every few months; currently, she makes cheese.

Zara is oddly nonjudgmental as she listens to Anna-Lena, Roger, Julia, and Ro inside the apartment—perhaps her grief and emotional turmoil keeps her focused on herself, rather than on judging other people. Julia and Ro are, like Anna-Lena and Roger, fighting. And their fighting seems oddly similar: Ro seems to be purposefully not listening to Julia. However, her refusal to consider what to do with the birds and the possibility that she doesn't want to move suggests that she's also dealing with some inner turmoil that, at this point, she's not yet willing to voice to her spouse.





Meanwhile, Anna-Lena is critiquing the IKEA pillows on the couch. Anna-Lena and Roger have been to every IKEA in Sweden. In IKEA, she knows Roger loves her—recently, he suggested they get cake after shopping on a significant day. Roger walks over and loudly snaps that the Realtor didn't have to label the second bedroom a "child's bedroom" on the plan; anyone can sleep there. Roger hates children's bedrooms, so when they walk through the children's section at IKEA, Anna-Lena asks him questions to distract him from his grief.

The big question this passage raises is why, exactly, Roger hates children's bedrooms—does he hate children? Or is he grieving, like Zara, but for a child's loss? He and Zara may have more in common than they think. Then, Anna-Lena also shows here that her and Roger's relationship is tenderer and more loving than it initially seemed. They both show the other they care, even if, to outsiders, they look like they're constantly fighting.







Ro asks Roger to borrow his tape measure, and he and Anna-Lena tell her absolutely not. Shocked, Ro returns to Julia and says she hates this apartment. Just as Zara walks in from the balcony, Julia shouts at Ro that she won't leave until they buy this apartment. She'll have the baby on the floor if she has to. Everyone is silent, but Zara is the only one who's seen the bank robber. Then, Anna-Lena notices the robber and shouts that they're being robbed. She tells Roger to get his wallet out, but he doesn't have cash. He asks Zara if she has cash. She derisively says she's not a drug dealer. The bank robber says this isn't a robbery—that they're only having a complicated day.

Roger and Anna-Lena very clearly don't want to connect at all, for any reason, with other prospective buyers. This seems to totally shatter Ro's confidence, as well as makes her even less willing to move. Roger and Zara's exchange about having cash is humorous, but it also reflects Sweden's move to going almost entirely cashless. Cash, Zara implies, is for people who don't want illegal purchases tracked (and she throws in a helping of classism as well).







In Anna-Lena's witness interview with Jack later that afternoon, she refuses to speak. She finally mentions that the robber entered the apartment, but then says Jack should speak to Roger, who has a better memory. Jack asks if Roger and Anna-Lena didn't intend to settle in the apartment, since Roger called it a "good investment." He explains that they're trying to come up with motives, as someone helped the robber. Anna-Lena says Zara looked suspicious, but ancient Estelle certainly had nothing to do with it. She and Roger never help anyone at viewings, as it's war. Roger is a great negotiator; they buy apartments, renovate them, Anna-Lena decorates them, and then they sell. When Jack observes that Anna-Lena looks like she's crying, she says it's been a long day.

Anna-Lena's interview is a bit all over the place, which may be because, as Zara noted in her witness interview, it's traumatic to have a gun pointed at you. However, note that Anna-Lena isn't fixating on the robbery or the hostage aspect of her day—rather, she's far more caught up in defending (or condemning) the other hostages and in describing her relationship to Roger. She also explains why she and Roger refused to lend Ro their tape measure: they see buying apartments as "war," and other prospective buyers as their enemies.







Anna-Lena says that she and Roger like sharing projects, and Roger is more sensitive than he looks. But he thinks she's boring, which is why they need projects to do together. Jack asks about the other people at the viewing. Anna-Lena says that they were all looking for homes, which makes them emotional idiots—she and Roger look for investments, not homes. Denying she's crying, Anna-Lena says Roger does most of the thinking. Roger is like a shark he saw once in a documentary that has to keep moving or it dies—and that's how their marriage has turned out, too.

Anna-Lena's anxiety about the future of her marriage is palpable here. She seems to fear that she's not good enough and that if she doesn't keep moving with Roger, he'll leave her behind. But what she says isn't particularly well thought-out; it reads more as ramblings—in fact, Anna-Lena sounds like the emotional one here, rather than the other prospective buyers.





Jack tries to get the interview back on track, but Anna-Lena says that Roger doesn't want to stay married to her. She explains that they've been visiting all the IKEAs in Sweden, and they recently visited the last one. To mark the occasion, Roger suggested they get cake. He's very romantic, and he doesn't hate children. Jack is confused, but Anna-Lena says she distracts Roger in the children's section because he loves kids so much. When Jack apologizes for Anna-Lena and Roger not being able to have kids, Anna-Lena says they have two. But neither of their children wants kids. They must've been terrible parents if their kids don't want to have kids. Everything is her fault. She wants a home, and she shouldn't have paid for the rabbit.

Anna-Lena continues to add context throughout her witness interview. She shares that Roger is grieving that he's never going to be a grandfather. This highlights the difficulty of being a parent when one's kids grow up and make choices their parents don't understand or agree with—in this case, his kids' choices cause Roger immense grief. Anna-Lena, though, is mostly upset because she believes her marriage is ending. Noting that she wants a home (rather than an investment) aligns her with the other buyers she previously mocked—and situates her on the opposite side of Roger.









Back in the apartment, during the not-robbery, Roger says he doesn't have any money. Anna-Lena thinks that nobody ever understands Roger, so she stands behind him and mimes what he just said. The bank robber asks for quiet and says they don't want money, but Zara disapprovingly says the robber needs to be specific. Roger isn't taking this entirely seriously, so he asks if this is a robbery or a hostage situation. Anna-Lena mimes a gun over Roger's shoulder, and the robber sighs like parents do when the kids are fighting in the backseat. The robber asks everyone to lie down so they can think, but everyone refuses. Finally noticing that Julia is pregnant, the robber says she can go. Roger suggests the robber let everyone go, except for him and the real estate agent.

The robber is ostensibly the person in control here, like a parent—they have a gun, after all. But being in charge of this group of potential buyers, the novel shows, is about as simple as corralling children, especially since all the buyers are fighting among one another. The fact that Anna-Lena doesn't think anyone understands Roger may be part of their marriage problems: she underestimates him and so ends up undermining him, doing much the same thing that Jim does to Jack.







Julia shouts that she's not letting Roger put in an offer on the apartment while the rest of them leave. Ro anxiously argues that the robber has a pistol, and they can't take chances. But Julia's personality while pregnant is extremely belligerent, and she refuses to leave. Roger asks the robber what they want—do they want the apartment? He realizes how ridiculous he sounds as the bank robber starts to sob. Anna-Lena says loudly that the apartment smells like mold.

When the robber begins sobbing, it reinforces the observation that they made earlier. The robber is the true hostage here, especially since nobody else is taking this very seriously. Indeed, Julia and Roger are far too interested in fighting with each other to take much interest in the high emotional tenor of the room.





Estelle, an old lady whom nobody has noticed yet, shuffles to the robber and offers them a glass of water. She explains that she's looking for an apartment for her daughter; her husband, Knut, is parking the car. Estelle asks if the robber planned to rob the cashless bank across the street. When Zara sarcastically says, "Smart," the robber shouts that they didn't know, and they just need time to think. Roger shouts that he wants information.

Estelle begins to change the tenor in the room by expressing care for and interest in the robber. The fact that nobody has noticed her yet highlights that up until now, this has in no way been the point of the viewing. People are here to fight each other for the apartment, not learn about one another and possibly express concern.







In the silence that follows, Estelle suggests they all introduce themselves. The robber refuses to give their name, but everyone else does. Estelle claps her hands—and afraid the pistol went off, everyone else falls to the ground. The robber thanks Estelle. It takes Anna-Lena a minute to realize that she can't breathe because Roger threw himself on top of her to protect her.

Estelle continues to change how the prospective buyers interact. Now that they know one another's names, they can continue to learn more about one another and not just fight over the apartment. In this passage, Anna-Lena also gets another overt clue that Roger loves her when he protects her.







Jim is interviewing Estelle. He apologizes, but she says this has been great—nothing happens when you're almost 90. Jim shows Estelle the child's drawing of the monkey, the frog, and the elk, but Estelle knows nothing about it. She explains that she was there with Knut, who was parking the car. Jim asks about the other people at the viewing, and Estelle says she only spoke to those women "from...you know...from Stockholm." She winks, but Jim doesn't know what she means. Estelle says she's referring to Julia and Ro, who are having a baby together even though they're both from Stockholm. Jim asks if she's referring to the fact that they're gay, but Estelle says there's nothing wrong with that—she loves that people can love who they want. She also really likes Stockholm, even though she's married to Knut and likes "the usual."

Unlike everyone else who was at the viewing, Estelle seems to have had a great day—perhaps because she tried to make friends, rather than alienate the other prospective buyers. The way she talks about Julia and Ro being able to marry and have a baby together is humorous, but it also touches on one positive thing that's come with the modern era: more gay and lesbian couples are able to legally marry and have children now than at any other point in Estelle's long life. Still, though Estelle is outwardly being nice, notice that she's alienating Jim with her euphemistic language.







### **CHAPTER 32**

Back in the hostage drama, police sirens start to go off outside, and the bank robber runs onto the balcony and curses. Photos circulate of the "masked gunman" following this. The robber runs back inside to find Julia getting up; Julia snaps that she has to use the bathroom. Ro pats the robber's leg and says that Julia is just sensitive because she's pregnant. Julia shouts for Ro to stop making friends. To explain, Ro tells the robber that Julia's upset because Ro is the sort of person to stop eating fish sticks after seeing the dolphins at the aquarium. The robber says their daughters, who are six and eight, are like that. Zara criticizes the robber for trying to rob a bank, but the robber says they just need time to think. Life wasn't supposed to turn out like this.

Technically, the robber is a "masked gunman." But they're not actually interested in hurting anyone—as they say later in the passage, they never planned to end up in this position. This term, thus, grossly misrepresents the robber's actions. Ironically, as Julia warns Ro to not make friends, Ro does just that by sharing with the robber that she's a (sometimes annoyingly) sensitive person. And when the robber mentions their own daughters, they and Ro get to share a moment of connection.







Zara pulls out her phone so they can call the police and be done, but Ro says there's no signal. Ro muses that maybe that's okay; kids who grow up without screens are supposed to be smarter. Zara points out that Ro needs to be able to call for help if someone slips a peanut through the mail slot and the baby chokes on it. Julia returns and rolls her eyes. She says the bathroom is occupied. The robber tugs at the bathroom door—and that's how this turns into a story about a rabbit.

As Ro connects with the robber, she warms a bit to the apartment, highlighting how connection makes Ro feel more comfortable and secure. Zara ruins the moment with her hilariously dark and farfetched choking scenario, highlighting that she isn't interested in connecting with others—yet.







Continuing her witness interview, Estelle says she's sure Stockholm is pleasant, and Knut isn't prejudiced, either. Jim asks about Ro and Julia. Estelle says they were arguing, and it was cute; Roger and Anna-Lena were arguing too, but it wasn't cute. Roger and Anna-Lena were arguing about the rabbit, which is a long story. They were arguing about how bankers and Stockholmers were manipulating the housing market. Jim clarifies: gay people are manipulating the housing market? Estelle says that's a terrible thing to say; she was referring to Stockholmers, not "Stockholmers." Jim is confused, but Estelle continues. She recalls that everyone was arguing. Also, Ro was looking at the walk-in closet. Jim notes that on the plans, the closet is tiny. He asks if it's big enough for someone to hide in. Estelle supposes it is.

Once again, Estelle seems outwardly nice to Jim—but she's confusing him more than she's giving him pertinent information, except perhaps when she mentions the walk-in closet that doesn't match the plans. As Estelle talks about Anna-Lena and Roger's argument, she uses "Stockholmers" to refer to wealthier city folk who buy property in smaller towns, thereby driving up the markets in those small towns. She also implicates bankers like Zara, highlighting again how the modern banking and real estate systems don't actually do much to help people.





#### **CHAPTER 34**

The bank robber asks the hostages if they think someone is in the bathroom. Zara asks if the bank robber's parents were siblings and Ro tells Zara to stop being mean. Julia tells everyone to shut up, even Zara. Meanwhile, Roger helps Anna-Lena up. He begins knocking on the walls. Anna-Lena loves it when he does this: it's like he expects the wall to knock back. But suddenly, Roger stops knocking and marches to the bathroom door. Anna-Lena cries for him to stop and begs him not to open the door. Roger has no idea why she's so scared. Zara knocks on the bathroom door, and someone knocks back.

Because Ro and the bank robber already connected over their discussion of the aquarium, Ro is now willing to stand up for the robber when Zara insults them. Anna-Lena's love for Roger shines through as she muses about how much she loves it when he knocks on the walls. She finds his quirks charming and heartwarming. But something is clearly wrong, given Anna-Lena's distraught reaction as it becomes increasingly clear that someone is in the bathroom.





### **CHAPTER 35**

Jack is interviewing Roger at the police station. After arguing about Roger's bleeding nose and why the police have notes about Anna-Lena (they've interviewed her too), Jack asks where the bank robber might be hiding. Roger says the real estate agent was an idiot, as the plans didn't account for an extra three feet between the walls. He thinks the apartment and the other one across the hall used to be one apartment, before real estate agents and banks and Stockholmers started jacking up prices. Jack rolls his eyes and asks if Roger isn't complicit in that, since he and Anna-Lena flip investment properties. Roger snaps that he's a good negotiator—or he thought he was. He asks if Jack has notes that Roger used to be an engineer. He worked for years but apparently, that doesn't matter.

Recall that in her witness interview, Anna-Lena expressed fear that Roger didn't want to be with her anymore. However, Roger's protectiveness over his wife here suggests that this perhaps isn't true. Still, Roger shows that he's the sort to make sweeping assumptions about people's intelligence and motives, as when he implicates the real estate agent, banks, and Stockholmers for the odd way the apartments were divided. Then, it becomes clear that Roger, like nearly everyone else in the hostage situation is hurting. He feels like his life's work doesn't matter, and this makes him feel useless.









Julia tells the bank robber to give her the pistol: she needs to shoot the lock out of the bathroom door. The bank robber argues and then, a voice in the bathroom says, "don't shoot." When the door opens, it reveals a middle-aged man dressed in underwear, socks, and a rabbit head. He says he's just doing his job. The man is clearly a real Stockholmer, not an idiot like Jim and Jack mean when they use "Stockholmer," or gay like Estelle means when she says "Stockholmer." He asks Anna-Lena to tell them to not shoot. Roger stares at Anna-Lena, who's sobbing. She says this is Lennart, and it's not what Roger thinks. Roger asks if Lennart is another prospective buyer.

It reveals just how committed Roger is to his and Anna-Lena's apartment-flipping scheme when his first thought is that Lennart is another prospective buyer. The assumption that Anna-Lena seems to make is that Roger will infer that she and Lennart are sexually involved, which, if she's to be believed, isn't actually what's happening. It is, however, very unclear what's going on between Anna-Lena and Lennart—and what Roger has to do with it.





When Anna-Lena can't answer, Roger lurches for Lennart. Ro and Julia hold him back. This upsets Anna-Lena. Retirement hasn't been easy for Roger, as his bosses forced him to retire—and it was a shock for Roger to discover that the business kept on working fine without him. The pain of that has made him a bit slow on the uptake. As Roger shouts at Lennart, Zara tells the bank robber to take charge and shoot the rabbit in the leg. The robber refuses. Lennart begs the robber not to shoot. He says that his head's stuck, and that he's with Anna-Lena.

Zara's command to shoot the rabbit is an oblique reference to Looney Tunes's Elmer Fudd, whose catchphrase is "kill the wabbit." This injects some humor into an otherwise tense scene, especially since Zara seems to have no idea what she's referencing. This passage also portrays Roger as a victim who is, in many ways, not getting what he wanted out of life. He wanted to keep working, and now, he wants to figure out what Anna-Lena has been doing with Lennart.







Roger has never been a man of many words, but he loves Anna-Lena. He knows her mirrored cabinet in the bathroom is important to her, so he always installs it first in a new apartment and makes sure the hinges stay tight. But now, she's saying that Roger was never supposed to find out. She says she and Lennart met on the internet and it "just happened." Roger asks the bank robber how much they want for shooting Lennart. Anna-Lena shrieks that a murder might make the price per square foot go up.

This passage makes it clear that people don't necessarily need to use their words to show a partner they love them. Roger shows Anna-Lena he loves her by tending so closely to her cabinet. Anna-Lena's actions—or at least what it seems like her actions were—show Roger that she isn't fully invested in their relationship. It still looks like she and Lennart are romantically or sexually involved.



Anna-Lena reveals that things between her and Lennart have been going on for a year, and it's all been for Roger's sake. Lennart tells Roger that he's a professional interrupter. Handing Roger a business card, he says that sometimes he's the alcoholic neighbor. This is the most expensive package: he sits on the toilet in the rabbit head. People don't forget what they see when they open the bathroom door, so they don't buy the apartment. Anna-Lena asks if Roger remembers the apartment last year with the drunk neighbor throwing spaghetti. That was Lennart. Roger realizes that his negotiating tactics don't actually work. Anna-Lena says she just wanted Roger to win. She doesn't say that she just wants a home.

Finally, readers learn that Anna-Lena and Lennart's relationship isn't sexual—Anna-Lena has been hiring him to make Roger feel good, powerful, and needed. In a way, she is trying to show Roger that she loves him, but this message is not getting through in the moment. Instead, Roger simply feels bad about himself and betrayed by Anna-Lena. However, note that Anna-Lena isn't being fully truthful here. She's turned to hiring Lennart because, for whatever reason, she's unwilling to tell Roger that she wants to stop flipping apartments.









Roger paces, kicks the baseboards, and then rushes Lennart and knocks him to the ground. Julia helps Lennart up and tells him to get out of the bathroom. Roger's nose is bleeding, but he rejects Anna-Lena's offer of a tissue and strides into the hallway. Anna-Lena walks into the closet and sits on a stool. She doesn't notice the cold air blowing in.

In this moment, Anna-Lena and Roger are wholly unwilling to try to talk to each other. They're both still reeling from Roger finding out about Lennart and Anna-Lena's betrayal. Being so wrapped up in her own emotions causes Anna-Lena to ignore something readers should pay attention to: the draft in the closet.



"Stockholm" isn't just a place. It's a catch-all for people who are irritating, superior, and don't understand. Everyone has Stockholmers in their lives, even people who live in Stockholm. Everyone in the apartment is silent until the bank robber says, "forgive me" and "sorry." Everyone hears, and they all know what it's like to make a mistake. Everyone needs to be allowed to forgive someone.

Lennart is a born-and-bred Stockholmer, but he's also Roger's "Stockholmer" in this scenario. When the bank robber apologizes, they give everyone else an opportunity to forgive them—but not necessarily the person they're really mad at. So, Anna-Lena and Roger remain at odds, but they're perhaps softened a bit by hearing the robber apologize.





### **CHAPTER 37**

Back in his interview with Roger, Jack tries to get the conversation back on track. But Roger says that people like the rabbit are manipulating the market and that everything is fake—even his former employers were pretending. Roger says some doctor said he was burnt out, and he spent his entire last year at work working on made-up projects. His bosses just felt sorry for him. Anna-Lena is doing the same thing now with the rabbit. Jack asks if the space between the walls in the apartment is big enough for a grown man to stand in. Roger says there's probably about three feet of dead space because whoever split the apartments is an idiot. Jack leaves to speak to Jim.

Burnout was deemed an official diagnosis in 2019. Roger is older, and he doesn't appreciate this change to the world—as he sees it, it just led to his job coddling him until they finally forced him to retire. In this sense, Roger doesn't see acknowledging mental health problems—which encompass burnout—as a positive thing. As Jack learns that there's dead space between the apartments' walls, it seems more likely to him that the robber is there, injured. He remains focused on trying to save the robber, rather than on listening to Roger's tale of woe.





### **CHAPTER 38**

Returning to the hostage drama, Roger stands in the hallway, one hand on the door and the other on his bleeding nose. The bank robber tells him he can go if he wants and then offers him cotton balls; their daughters often get nosebleeds. Roger puts a cotton ball in each nostril, and then he and the robber sit at either end of the bench. Finally, the robber apologizes for involving everyone. They just needed 6,500 kroner to pay rent, and they planned to give the money back with interest. Roger knocks on the wall and asks if they were going to get a fixed or variable interest rate.

The bank robber is really losing their appetite for trying to control the hostages in any way. But along with this, they're also becoming more open about their situation and willing to help others, as by offering Roger the cotton balls. Roger humorously doesn't help by asking what kind of an interest rate the robber planned to get. This is one more thing, the novel might suggest, that adults in today's society supposedly should know about, but that most actually don't.









When she comes out of the bathroom, Julia angrily asks Ro if she really let Anna-Lena go off on her own after her "emotionally challenged old fart of a husband" yelled at her. Ro asks if they're talking about Roger, or if Julia is actually mad at her. Julia stalks off toward the closet. Ro nervously grabs a lime off the coffee table and starts to eat it. To avoid Zara, she squeezes herself in between the robber and Roger on the hall bench (she's bad about boundaries, just like her dad, and he taught her everything she knows).

Ro apologizes for Julia calling Roger "emotionally challenged" and says that Roger and Anna-Lena aren't headed for divorce. Roger is shocked (and didn't hear Julia). Before Ro can stop herself, she admits that she finds divorce late in life romantic. Dejectedly, she says Julia always said she was too positive, but Julia has gotten so serious since she got pregnant, and Ro isn't sure she's ready for the responsibility of parenthood—she even feels like updating her phone is too much to handle. Roger warns Ro not to let Julia give birth here, as it'll drive up the price per square foot.

After a minute, Ro says she doesn't want to buy this apartment until her dad can look at it, since he checks out everything she buys first to see if it's a good choice. But he's not coming, as he has dementia. The bank robber offers condolences. After talking more about her dad, Ro says she's going to be an awful parent. The bank robber says this isn't true, but Ro says she knows nothing about kids, can't make decisions, and is scared all the time. Roger knows exactly what she means. He feels useless and impotent since finding out about the rabbit. Quietly, he says Ro and Julia should buy the apartment, which is in fine shape except for the loose baseboards. Ro says she doesn't know how to fix baseboards, but Roger says she'll manage.

Julia is making a lot of assumptions that readers might already guess aren't true: Roger isn't a man of many words, but the narrator has made it clear that he does genuinely love Anna-Lena. With the married couples fighting and physically separated, every person in the apartment now has the opportunity to get to know some new people. Ro forces the issue by squeezing in where she doesn't really fit.







Whether she means to or not, Ro trivializes the very difficult time that Anna-Lena and Roger are going through. To Anna-Lena and Roger, the possibility of divorce isn't at all romantic. But then, Ro gets a bit more vulnerable and reveals that she's speaking out of nervousness. She finds the prospect of parenthood daunting, and it also sounds like she's questioning her relationship with Julia as they prepare to add a child to their family.







It's not entirely clear, but it seems likely that Ro's admission about her dad isn't something she feels comfortable talking about with Julia. However, she's able to tell two complete strangers about it, highlighting the important role that strangers can play in a person's life. This admission then allows Roger a moment to connect, as he sees himself in Ro. So, he's able to step into the role of Ro's dad for a moment and tell her that the apartment really is fine—and that she, Julia, and their baby will also be fine.





### **CHAPTER 39**

At the police station, Jim is getting coffee when Jack races in and says the robber is hiding in the wall. They return to the apartment—and the narrator warns readers that they are missing something obvious. At the apartment building, Jim and Jack discuss how bad of a job the officer who's supposed to be keeping the journalists away is doing. In the apartment, Jack knocks on the wall and Jim, not knowing what else to do, studies the contents of the abandoned pizza boxes. Finally defeated, Jack says "he" isn't here, cursing. Trying to help, Jim suggests Jack check the closet, which is a walk-in, not the tiny space the plan denotes. Jack is enraged Jim didn't mention this before. He hits his heads on hangers as he enters the closet, but Jim is right: the closet is big.

Jack remains fully motivated to find the robber and make sure they get the medical care they need—but once again, he's thwarted. It's somewhat ironic that Jim and Jack speak so poorly of the officer standing watch in the building, especially when Jim in particular comes off as so wildly incompetent. The fact that Jim didn't share long ago that the closet is a walk-in makes his relationship with Jack even more fraught than it already was. Jack now feels like the sole person trying to genuinely put together the mystery—though, as the narrator notes, he and Jim are missing something (though what they're missing is saved for later).







Back in the hostage drama, Julia knocks on the closet door, where Anna-Lena is hiding and lets herself in. Julia suggests they both are tired of everyone else in the apartment, so they have a lot in common. Anna-Lena likes this idea; she hasn't had anything in common with anyone but Roger for a while. They discuss how Julia is doing and how the robber seems scared, and then Anna-Lena says she seriously hurt Roger. Julia is skeptical, but Anna-Lena says he's just "sensitive and principled." As an example, she describes one time that Roger waited 20 minutes to move the car in a parking lot when a young man with a black beard asked if he could have the space. Unconvinced this story will reveal anything nice about Roger, Julia says she knows men like Roger, and Roger is the one with the problem, not Anna-Lena.

Anna-Lena must have led a pretty isolated life for the last little while if Roger is the only person her with whom she has anything in common. Julia fully believes that Roger is an entitled, unfeeling jerk—and the story that Anna-Lena begins to tell about Roger and the young, bearded man seems poised to prove her point. Julia seems to believe that Roger's "principles" justify spending 20 minutes making sure this man (who's coded as a nonwhite immigrant) doesn't get a parking spot and generally feels unwelcome in Sweden. She also believes that Roger is also sexist, since she speaks to Anna-Lena like Anna-Lena is Roger's victim.







Returning to her parking lot story, Anna-Lena says Julia doesn't understand. On the news that morning, a politician from Roger's party had said they should stop helping immigrants. Then, later that day, the young man caught Roger and Anna-Lena heading back to their car and asked for Roger's parking spot. The lot was so busy that it took the man 20 minutes to get there. Roger noticed the man had kids in the car, and he waited. After the man took their spot, Roger told Anna-Lena that he didn't want the young man to think that all older men were just like the politician. Julia deems this both sweet and ridiculous, but Anna-Lena says it's possible to disagree about politics but still love someone. Julia knows this; she and Ro also vote for different parties.

When Julia lets Anna-Lena finish, she and readers learn that Roger is actually very noble—he wants to make sure that immigrants feel welcome in Sweden, and if it takes waiting 20 minutes in a crowded parking lot to do that, so be it. On some level, Anna-Lena understands the significance of this story. She told it, after all, to convince Julia that Roger is a good person. But when she simplifies the main point down to the idea that you can be happily married to someone of a different political party, she seems not to grasp how funny she's being. Indeed, she seems to be trying to convince herself that she and Roger's marriage will be okay, despite their current argument.







Anna-Lena says she never should've deceived Roger, but she just wanted him to feel good about himself. All she wants is a home. She reveals that they've been together since she was 19, and Julia asks how they do it. Anna-Lena says they love each other until they can't live without each other—and then if they stop loving each other for a bit, they can't live without each other. Ro's parents have been together 40 years, and the thought of being with someone that long horrifies Julia a bit, no matter how much she loves Ro. Waving a hand, Julia says Ro drives her crazy. Anna-Lena says Roger drives her crazy too; he uses her hairdryer to dry his pubic hair. Julia says Ro does the same thing.

Anna-Lena's intentions are good. In a way, she did exactly what Roger did in the parking lot: she's trying to be a good person and help someone, but her methods are just a bit out there. Julia is much younger than Anna-Lena and hasn't been married nearly as long, so the concept of being with someone for decades is barely conceivable to her. But Anna-Lena shows her that longevity in a marriage is possible, especially if both parties go out of their way to support each other (and ignore their partner's less attractive quirks).





Julia and Anna-Lena smile at each other and all they have in common. Anna-Lena says she and Roger have two kids who don't want to have children of their own. Anna-Lena says that she wishes Roger could feel important again. Julia doesn't understand, but Anna-Lena says a person is never more important than when they're holding a three-year-old's hand. The women sit silently, shivering in a draft.

Finally, Anna-Lena gets at what's really bothering Roger: that she can't possibly make him feel as important as caring for another child could. Julia isn't a parent yet, so she doesn't fully understand the extent to which kids tend to idolize their parents and guardians. As the robber mused earlier, it's impossible for her to hate her mother—but this is something Julia will only find out later, after her baby is born. And again, readers should take note of the draft, though the characters continue to ignore it.





#### **CHAPTER 41**

Estelle approaches Roger, the robber, and Ro in the hallway and asks if she can make them something to eat—people usually keep food in the freezer. The robber says they don't want to be any trouble, and Ro suggests they order pizza. Sadly, the robber says they don't have enough money to order pizza. For the first time, Roger looks curiously at the robber and asks what their plan was.

Estelle is acting more like a host than a hostage, which both lightens the mood and helps relieve some of Ro and Roger's stress. The robber, though, takes this as one more reason to think of themselves as a failure, since they seem to believe it's fully their responsibility to feed their hostages.





The robber says they don't have a plan. They just need rent money, since they're getting divorced and a lawyer said they'd take the robber's daughters away. It's probably best if they give themselves up. Ro suggests the police would shoot the robber, and Roger agrees. Suddenly determined, the robber says they're a "failure and an idiot" and walks toward the door. They can't do anything right, so the police might as well shoot them. Ro gets in the robber's way; she knows how it feels to always get things wrong. Ro tells the robber they can't give up, and she points out that in films, the police always order pizza for hostages. Roger is disbelieving, and his eye is twitching. He stares at the closet door as though trying to sense Anna-Lena's presence, and then he says he'll organize the pizza order.

Everything seems lost for the robber—they're going to lose their kids and now, they're in deep trouble with the law. Ro and Roger, though, are beginning to develop empathy for the robber and see the robber as a fellow human being. They (particularly Ro) also now see the robber as someone relatable, since they've made mistakes, too. With this, Ro realizes something the narrator has encouraged readers to understand: that not much separates any law-abiding citizen from ending up a lot like the robber.









### **CHAPTER 42**

Later in the afternoon, Jack and Jim are digging through the closet without success. They find a collection of empty wine bottles, men's suits, and old dresses. Neither notices the draft, but Jack notices that it smells faintly of cigarette smoke. He taps on the ceiling until he finds an old air vent, and then he sticks his head through it. The draft is coming from the narrow passageway in the attic, and there's something fluffy in the way. Cursing, Jack pulls out the head of a rabbit costume.

In the hostage drama storyline, which takes place earlier in the day, cigarettes haven't made an appearance yet—and Lennart is still stuck in his rabbit head. This passage foreshadows what's to come. Further, the fact that Jack and Jim both miss the draft at first suggests that they are people like any other—and like the hostages who sat here hours ago, they're also capable of missing pertinent information.





In the hostage drama, Roger goes onto the balcony and shouts at the police that they need supplies. Jim asks if they need medical supplies—and won't stop talking long enough to listen to Roger say they're hungry. Jack shouts for Jim to be quiet, but Roger swears and goes back inside. He pulls out his notepad and demands that the robber give him their pizza order. The robber doesn't know what they want. (Being an adult isn't all it's cracked up to be—you have to make choices about everything, and getting a divorce means you have to make choices about wallpaper and dishes again.) Annoyed, Zara says the robber has to make demands. The robber says they just want to go home to their daughters, so Roger says he'll order the robber a capricciosa.

Jim mistakenly assumes that since someone has taken people hostage, the robber has hurt the hostages and hostages are going to need medical attention. Jack isn't able to step in and employ what he learned in his active listening course before Roger gives up. Meanwhile inside the apartment, the robber again reveals how much the divorce has upended their life and made things excruciatingly difficult. Their desires are simple—get home to their kids—but they have to worry about so much more, like where they're going to live and eventually, picking out new dishware.









Turning to Zara, Roger asks what she wants. Zara has never had pizza before and has very specific tastes, but Roger says he'll get her the most expensive pizza. Estelle seems worried about making a decision quickly, so Roger puts her down for a capricciosa. Ro asks for a kebab pizza and then knocks on the closet door to get Julia's order. Julia asks for Hawaiian, but without pineapple or ham. She then opens the closet door and says Anna-Lena will have the same as Roger. Roger surreptitiously writes a new note since the original one is now wet, and he gruffly orders Lennart a capricciosa, though Lennart is a vegetarian. Then, he ties the pizza order to a lime and tosses it to the police; the lime hits Jack in the forehead.

It's ironic that Zara berated the robber earlier to make a choice, when she now refuses to do just that. Again, Zara and the robber are very different, but in this case, they have a lot in common. Julia shouting out Anna-Lena's pizza order is a painful moment for Roger. Anna-Lena wants to make Roger feel useful and needed by sharing hobbies and interests with him, so asking for whatever he's getting is a way of her saying that she's still trying to keep their marriage afloat. It shows Roger she still cares and is genuinely trying to help him.





#### **CHAPTER 44**

Jack tries to shimmy into the vent, but he gets stuck, and Jim has to pull him back out. They both fall to the floor, with the rabbit head rolling between them. Jack says nobody could get through there and goes to the living room to curse and pace. Jim joins him a moment later and finds Jack staring at the half-burnt ski mask in the grate. In the kitchen, Jim finds pizza covered in plastic wrap in the fridge—who does that during a hostage drama? Trying to cheer Jack up, Jim asks how the robber could've lost so much blood. But the officer standing guard in the hall interrupts: the blood on the floor is stage blood.

Jim and Jack are so confused as they peruse the crime scene because they don't see what they expect to see. Aside from the blood, all signs point to a cozy get-together between friends, which they believe isn't at all the same as a hostage situation. Readers, of course, realize that the hostages made friends hours ago, but Jack and Jim haven't been able to parse that from their witness interviews. That the blood is fake also throws a wrench in their beliefs—it suggests that nobody's dead or even injured. The hostage drama was, perhaps, just a fun time for everyone—and somehow, blood got on the floor.





Jim and Jack search the apartment again, "Staring at everything but still seeing nothing." Studying the small table next to where the police found the pistol, Jack asks where they found it when they stormed the apartment. Jim says it was on the little table, and Jack says they've been thinking about this all wrong.

What Jack and Jim don't see is that the hostages weren't afraid, even of the bank robber. Jack is starting to put things together, but for now, readers are left to wonder what, exactly, he believes has happened.





In Jack's witness interview with Julia and Ro, the women insist on doing their interview together. Julia and Ro bicker with each other and Jack as they share that they were in the apartment the whole time. When Jack asks where they were when the pizza was delivered (that's the last time they know for sure the robber was in the apartment), Julia and Ro argue about the difference between a chaise lounge and a divan. Julia says that they all—Estelle, Zara, Lennart, Anna-Lena, Roger, Ro, and herself—were in the apartment when they ate pizza. The real estate agent was there too. Ro and Julia then argue about if it's appropriate to eat food in fridges at apartment viewings, and they say that everyone—including the real estate agent but not the robber—came downstairs when the robber freed them.

Similar to Roger, Zara, and Anna-Lena, Julia and Ro are conspicuously unwilling to answer any of Jack's questions about the robber or the hostage drama. Instead, their interview seems (like Roger and Anna-Lena's) to be a place for them to air their relationship grievances. Their fight, however, does seem a bit exaggerated, and it's unclear at this point if this is because the hostages are all legitimately more worried about their relationships than about the hostage drama, or if there's something strategic to their behavior.





### **CHAPTER 46**

Earlier in the day, the local police force was given, as Jim called it, a "special telephone thingy which gets a bloody signal where there isn't a bloody signal" to send into the apartment for the robber. Now, Jack asks Jim if Jim actually turned the phone's ringtone on, or if he left it on vibrate. Jim might have left it on vibrate. Jack touches the table that the phone was on, which is rickety. He then looks at the wall—and finds the bullet. Jack says the robber didn't shoot himself, and he realizes the robber wasn't in the apartment when the pistol fired. Jim doesn't get it, so Jack explains that the vibrating phone caused the pistol to fall and fire; the stage blood has likely been here since long before then.

The language Jim uses to describe the special telephone highlights how out of touch he is with the modern era. Just as with computers, he thinks of the phone as magic. However, the phone isn't impervious to user error: Jim was still easily able to make a mistake and not turn the phone's ringtone on before it went to the robber. As Jack pieces together how the pistol went off, he and readers can infer that the robber is probably totally fine. But this, of course, doesn't answer where the robber is.





Jack and Jim sink onto the couch and Jack calls himself an idiot. He asks Jim to tell him how many people were in the apartment, and with Jack's help, Jim counts nine people, including the real estate agent. Jack waits for his dad to get it, but Jim never gets it. Jack's mom used to laugh at this sort of thing. They both miss her, and it's because of her that they both keep trying to improve their relationship. When she died, Jack was already firm in his beliefs—he didn't believe in God, even though his mom was a priest—but he still prayed to God to spare her before she died. And when she died anyway, he promised his mom he'd take care of Jim. He called his sister, a heroin addict, to tell her about the funeral and send her money. She still didn't come.

Jack starts to talk as though it's totally obvious what happened, but either Jim doesn't get it or he's being purposefully obtuse. Bringing up Jack's mom lets readers in on one of the people that kept Jack and Jim together. They were both motivated by their love for this woman, and Jim even considered practicing Christianity for her sake. Now, her memory motivates Jim and Jack to keep working on their relationship, as frustrating as this can be sometimes for both of them.









Jack and Jim have been on their own since then. They still send Jack's sister money when she asks. They both wonder what kind of police officer can't help their own family members, and what kind of god makes a priest sick. Now, Jack remembers asking his mom how she could stand to sit with dying people. She told him that it's the same way you eat an elephant: one bite at a time. She said you can only do so much to help, and that has to be enough.

Back in the present, Jim asks Jack to explain. Jack notes that there were supposedly nine people in the apartment, but the pizza order only asked for eight pizzas. The real estate agent must be the robber *posing* as a real estate agent—she walked out onto the street with everyone else and pretended to be a victim.

Jack's mom tried to teach Jack the value of setting boundaries: there's only so much you can do in a difficult situation, and she insinuated that it won't end well if Jack stretches himself so thin that he can't take care of himself. Interestingly, Jack seems to be actively going against his mother's advice in the novel's present, as he throws himself so fully into trying to solve this case.





The theory Jack comes up with seems probable, given that readers have seen no evidence of a real estate agent at the apartment viewing thus far. However, it's also worth noting that Jack is assuming he's right, something the novel has subtly suggested in varying ways isn't a good way to find the right answer.



### **CHAPTER 47**

The bank robber is sitting alone in the hall, listening to the people she took hostage. They're so different from her: they'll be victims the moment they walk out of this apartment, while the robber will end up in prison for years. She pulls off her mask and thinks that hopefully, her daughters' dad will teach the girls to lie and say their mom is dead, rather than in prison. The robber barely notices herself gripping the pistol harder and putting her finger on the trigger. She wonders if she'd shoot herself if the pistol was real. But before she can finish the thought, Zara gently lowers the pistol.

As the robber unmasks herself, the novel finally begins to use gendered pronouns and confirm that she's female. The novel has been encouraging readers to go along with the police (who have used male pronouns in witness interviews to ask about the robber) in assuming the robber was male. With this, readers get another lesson in why making assumptions isn't always the best way to learn new information. Then, as the robber lifts the gun (which readers and Zara know is real), this creates tension—might she actually shoot herself by accident?—but Zara, uncharacteristically, steps in to help.





Zara has tried not to think of anything since the hostage drama started. She's been in constant pain for the last 10 years, so this what she usually does. But seeing the robber alone with the pistol reminds Zara of a counseling session where the psychologist said that people tend to try to cure chaos with chaos: they keep going in the hope that some unlikely solution will emerge when really, they're just going to crash. So, Zara tells the robber the kindest thing she can think of: "Don't do anything silly." The robber smiles weakly. Zara goes onto the balcony and puts headphones on. Later, she tries pizza and hates it.

It's so painful for Zara to exist because she believes she's responsible for the man's suicide a decade ago. Now, though, Zara gets a second chance to try and do the right thing. Her choice to step in and tell the robber not to do anything silly is, in a way, akin to Jack having saved Nadia from jumping off the bridge. Both Jack and Zara have now gotten a second chance to try to save someone. Perhaps this will spur Zara to try to allow herself to feel things so she can heal. This passage also reveals that for all Zara's evasion tactics during her counseling sessions, she does take Nadia's advice seriously.





Jack leaps out of the police car and races into the interview room, ignoring Jim's attempts to get him to calm down. The real estate agent tries to give her spiel, but Jack roars that he knows who she is: she's the robber, and there was never an agent in the apartment.

Notice that Jack doesn't try to ask questions to get the agent to admit that she's the robber. Rather, he assumes and gives her no way to defend himself. This makes it seem even more likely that he's wrong.



### **CHAPTER 49**

It's idiotic of Jack to not have realized everything from the start. Maybe it's his mom's fault, in that thinking about her so much today has distracted him. When she was alive, she was always fighting with people, Jack especially. She used to travel abroad to do volunteer work and once, she got caught up in a riot and someone stabbed her. She called home as soon as she could, but Jack had already seen the incident on TV, and he angrily asked why she never thought about her family. Jack's mom knew he was just afraid and concerned, but she told him that boats are meant to leave the harbor. She was impossible to argue with, and when she died, the world changed forever.

Thus far, the novel has shown readers how its parents are often afraid for their children's wellbeing. But this anecdote about Jack and his mom shows that the opposite is also true: Jack seems to have regularly feared for his mom's safety. But this fear, and the fighting it causes between Jack and his mom, is also something the novel frames as somewhat normal between parents and children. It's a sign of how much they love and care for each other.



All this to say, when Jack and Jim are standing out on the street waiting for the negotiator from Stockholm, they're thinking about Jack's mom and what she'd do. When the lime/pizza order hits Jack in the head, they call the negotiator and suggest that this is the best way to get in contact with the robber. Jack swears that the bomb in the hallway isn't really a bomb, and he insists that the robber is just scared, not dangerous. He asks to talk to the robber but doesn't say that he's sure he can save everyone. The negotiator is still stuck in traffic, so he gives Jack the go-ahead, as long as Jack gets a phone to the robber so the negotiator can call him.

Remember that Jack's mom always told her family members to help who they can. In the hostage situation, Jack wants to help all the hostages, but he's pretty sure that he can at least help the robber. Notably, as Jack and the negotiator discuss the robber, Jack is looking critically at the information in front of him to come to a conclusion. He's not assuming—and readers know that in this situation, Jack is right. The robber is just scared.





Jack asks what they do if the robber won't open the door or take the phone—the robber hasn't behaved rationally so far. Jim suggests they stick the phone in a pizza box, and the negotiator agrees that this is a good idea. Jack says it was his dad's idea, which embarrasses Jim. Jim orders the pizzas and asks for a uniform too. When the pizzas are ready, Jack and Jim argue about who's taking the pizzas in. Jim begins changing in the street and says that Jack's mom wouldn't forgive him if he let Jack go. Jack points out that Jim was her husband, but Jim says she was Jack's mom.

It may be embarrassing for Jim to have Jack make sure Jim gets credit for his idea, but this does highlight how much Jack does love and appreciate his dad. As the men argue over who gets to take the pizzas in, they invoke an old argument: should parents sacrifice themselves for their kids, or should kids sacrifice themselves? Jack seems to know very well that Jim and his mom believe that parents should sacrifice for their kids, which is why he ultimately stops fighting Jim and allows his dad to put on the delivery uniform.







Back in the interview room, the real estate agent's face goes white. She looks ready to cry as Jack says that the agent knows nothing; real estate agents can't possibly be this bad at their job. The agent looks to Jim for help, but Jack bangs his fists on the table and says that nobody else mentioned the agent. She asked for fireworks to distract the police and walked out with everyone else. He demands the truth.

Though the Realtor's reaction suggests Jack might be correct, it's worth noting that the narrator and Zara already said that the real estate agent was objectively bad at their job. So, this would certainly be a neat way to tie up how the robber got out of the apartment, but at this point, it's impossible to tell if Jack is right.



### **CHAPTER 51**

The narrator explains that the truth is seldom complicated. People just want it to be complicated so if they work it out ahead of time, they feel smart. This story is about a hostage drama, a **bridge**, idiots, and an apartment viewing. It's also a love story.

This passage seems to imply that Jack isn't correct; somehow, the right answer is simpler than the robber posing as a real estate agent. But by noting that this is a love story, too, the novel also offers some hope that things are going to start looking up for the characters in romantic relationships.





When Zara sees the psychologist for the last time before the hostage drama, she arrives uncharacteristically early. She accuses Nadia of being vegan when she notices her lunch of kale. Nadia asks why Zara is so ready to throw money away to talk about Nadia, not Zara. Zara says she'll explain herself next time—maybe. Turning away to count the windows in the building across the street, Zara asks why Nadia hasn't suggested antidepressants. Nadia explains that antidepressants often smooth out highs and lows, and she thinks Zara needs to feel *more* feelings, not fewer, because she thinks Zara is lonely. Zara asks what will happen if she kills herself. Nadia says Zara won't do that, since she said she'd come for her next appointment.

Zara remains evasive, but she's becoming a bit more open. Now, she's willing to admit that she does have thoughts and feelings and might someday be willing to talk about them, which contrasts greatly with her past attempts to cover up any indication that she ever feels anything. As Nadia explains why she thinks antidepressants aren't the right choice for Zara, she implicitly suggests that Zara is already on the right track by starting counseling. Zara is already slightly less lonely because she talks to Nadia on a regular basis, and hopefully, Zara will be able to start connecting with others, too.





Nadia says she trusts Zara and believes that Zara is afraid of hurting people. She thinks Zara is more empathetic and moral than she lets on, which deeply offends Zara. Zara insults veganism again, and Nadia points out that she changes the subject whenever they get close to talking about feelings. Nadia asks if Zara mocks veganism and environmentalism because it's the opposite of the finance industry. Zara snaps that she's defending the economic system, which people have made too strong. She points out that these days, nobody pays off their mortgages. Banks offer financing rather than loans, and apartments turn into investments rather than homes. She thinks the divisions between rich and poor keep getting bigger and nobody, not even the rich, feel rich. All you can do is borrow money to buy an expensive version of what you already have.

Despite Zara's offense when Nadia suggests she's empathetic and moral, Zara does come off as both of these things as she describes how the finance industry has essentially made it impossible for people to genuinely achieve their dreams. She implies that modern banking and finance systems make it so that the goalposts are constantly moving for the average person. Now, this means that people never actually own their homes. This also helps explain why, for instance, the man lost everything in the market crash—homeowners lose out because they don't own their homes, and the banks look out for themselves.







Zara can barely breathe when Nadia asks if Zara feels guiltier about the people she's lent too much money to or the ones she hasn't lent to at all. Snorting, Zara returns to mocking veganism and acts like she's ready to leave. Nadia asks if Zara can tell her one personal thing before she leaves, like if Zara has ever been in love. Zara says she plays death metal very loud when she gets home, because it's "so loud that it makes your head silent." Nadia writes Zara the name of a pair of good headphones so she can get the same effect elsewhere, and maybe then Zara can get out more and meet people. In the elevator, Zara thinks about the loans she's granted and refused. Then she presses the emergency stop button.

Readers know that Nadia's question no doubt strikes a nerve for Zara—she blames herself for the man's suicide because she denied him the loan that would've saved him financially. But Zara isn't yet willing to admit this to anyone, and so she's relegated to sobbing in the elevator alone rather than reaching out to Nadia. This passage also explains where Zara got her headphones, which shows again that Zara does take her sessions with Nadia seriously and values Nadia's opinion.





#### CHAPTER 52

Back in the hostage drama, Jack wants to contact the bank robber in any way that doesn't involve Jim going up with the pizzas. It'd be easier to know for sure the bomb isn't a bomb if it wasn't his dad going in. So, Jack tells the negotiator that before his colleague goes in, he'd like to go into the building across the street to see if he can see into the stairwell. The negotiator thinks, but doesn't say, that he's impressed that Jack referred to his dad as his colleague. They remain on the phone as Jack climbs the stairs and explains that there are no other officers to help; the two officers he called in as backup are drunk and waiting for their wives to drive them in. He explains that people take New Year's Eve seriously here.

In this passage, Jack walks a fine line between being an almost overprotective son and a cool, calculating colleague who just so happens to work with his dad. His fear, moreover, mirrors the fear he felt earlier for his mom, in the flashback about his mom getting hurt in a riot abroad. This highlights that within the novel, kids, too, experience fear and want to care for their parents. That the negotiator thinks so highly of Jack for referring to his dad as just a colleague may explain why Jack is trying so hard to be so professional. He wants to impress his superiors, and being an officer first and a son second impresses them.





Then, Jack asks if the negotiator has been involved in a hostage situation before. The negotiator says he has; the hostage-taker let the hostages go after four hours of talking. By now, Jack can see in the window across the street that there's a box labeled "CHRISTMAS"; there is no bomb. The negotiator describes how, in the last situation, he ended up telling the hostage-taker a crude joke, just to keep the conversation going. Jack stops suddenly: there's a woman in her 50s on the balcony of the hostage apartment, wearing headphones. She looks bored and not at all afraid. Jack reiterates that they're not dealing with a pro—the robber tried to rob a cashless bank after all. Then, the negotiator reveals that the last hostage-taker shot himself.

At first, the negotiator seems to be trying to show off to Jack that he's capable of fixing this situation, just as he did in the last one. But then, as the negotiator reveals that the last hostage-taker died by suicide, it gives new meaning to Jack's mom's advice for people to help who they can. The negotiator couldn't help that person, and there's no real guarantee that the negotiator is going to be able to help the robber, either. Seeing what seems like Zara looking bored on the balcony highlights again that the police are misreading the situation—nobody is in real danger. Interpreting Zara's expression as bored, meanwhile, suggests that they're also misjudging her, as she's currently wracked with grief and regret.





As Jack heads back downstairs, the negotiator asks why Jack turned down the job offer in Stockholm. The negotiator says he spoke to his boss before he left today, and she said Jack is the best but keeps turning down her job offers. Jack snorts that Stockholmers think everything revolves around their city, but the negotiator says he grew up in a town so small that people from Jack's town were the Stockholmers. He asks if Jim knows about the job offer. Just then, Jack notices that Jim isn't still on the street. Jack curses and hangs up.

For someone who wants to prove himself and make a good impression, it's a bit surprising that Jack has refused multiple job offers in Stockholm. This suggests that something—perhaps his dad, or perhaps his dislike of Stockholmers—is keeping him in his small town. If love for Jim is keeping Jack at home, it would imply that Jack is actually more invested in his relationship with his family members than in his career.





When Jack sees Zara, she's just stepped onto the balcony after telling the robber not to do anything silly. Zara feels shocked and uncomfortable—is she developing empathy? She sanitizes her hands, counts windows, and puts her headphones on. The music drowns out everything in her head, and it's so loud she doesn't hear Lennart (who's still in his underwear and the rabbit head) step out and tap her headphone. He offers her a cigarette (there's a hole he's certain he can smoke through). Zara refuses and tries to get out of talking to Lennart, but he keeps tapping on her headphone to ask why she's here. He asks if she's "on safari"; he's been doing his job long enough to recognize people who are just curious.

Zara is used to seeing through people, not having them see through her—and Lennart's comment enrages her. But instead of saying something mean, she asks if Lennart is cold. He insists he isn't, so she puts her headphones back on. But Lennart taps again on her headphone to share that he's an actor. He just disrupts apartment viewings as a side business because the "cultural sector" is in a rough spot. Zara accuses him of thinking capitalism is good only when artists benefit from it. She says he's manipulating the economic system and says that apartments aren't supposed to be investments. They're supposed to be homes. Angrily, Zara says that a man jumped off a **bridge** 10 years ago when the property market crashed on the other side of the world. Innocent people were hurt and the guilty got bonuses—all because people like Lennart "don't care about balance in the system."

Lennart chuckles, tells Zara to calm down, and says the financial crisis was the banks' fault. Zara has spent enough time with wealthy middle-aged men to know what Lennart will say next, so she says it herself: he doesn't care about the apartment's seller or Anna-Lena or Roger, and the housing market is a construct, which means he doesn't have any responsibility. And like all men, he'll then tell her about 1902 in Hanoi, when the city offered residents rewards to kill rats and people started breeding rats. This is supposed to prove that people are selfish and untrustworthy. Then, people like her and Lennart (who are the real problem) can say that it's never their fault. They say people are greedy and never should've given them money.

Zara is so worried about whether she's starting to become empathetic that she experiences various symptoms of anxiety. Interestingly, Nadia has suggested that Zara is more empathetic than Zara wants to admit, and now readers are seeing that Nadia was likely right. Zara wants to help people and do the right thing, but in her job, she doesn't often have the opportunity to do that. Lennart is obnoxious, but it's also worth commending him: he's the first person Zara is willing to speak to who isn't a mental health professional.





Through her counseling sessions with Nadia, Zara has shown readers that she's very good at reading people and looking for context clues. But few people can do that to her (and though Nadia does, to some degree, she keeps her thoughts about Zara quiet). As Zara lays into Lennart, it's humorous—he's clearly not singlehandedly making buying an apartment unattainable for most people. But still, she gets at what the novel suggests are some uncomfortable truths about how apartments and mortgages function in the modern era. Having a mortgage means that a homeowner doesn't actually own their home—the bank does. So, people who are just trying to house their families are the ones who get hurt when things go south, as the banks, Zara notes, only look out for themselves.





Though Zara briefly began to talk about how poorly she thinks of the financial sector in her counseling sessions with Nadia, she's opening up to Lennart far more than she ever did to Nadia. She implies that Lennart should care about Anna-Lena, Roger, and the apartment's seller, if only because they're fellow people just trying to get by. As Zara sees it, people aren't as greedy as men have continually told her they are. Anna-Lena, after all, is just trying to help Roger feel needed, while Roger is working hard to seem competent.











By now, Lennart is laughing, and he tells Zara that she wins. Quietly, she points out that Anna-Lena and Roger are just postponing a divorce, and this must make Lennart happy because then they'll have to buy two apartments. Lennart says this isn't true. He believes in love and after going to so many apartment viewings, he knows there's a lot of love in the world—just look at all the apartments that *aren't* for sale. That this answer isn't ridiculous annoys Zara, but she pulls out two cigarettes and sticks one in the rabbit's mouth.

After a minute, Lennart says that Anna-Lena is one of his favorite clients. She just wants to make Roger feel needed, and everyone assumes that she's oppressed and sacrificial. But she used to be a senior analyst, and Roger put his career on hold to care for their kids while she kept getting promoted. By the time it was Roger's turn to focus on his career, he was too old. Now, she's trying to make it up to him by renovating apartments when she just wants a home. Zara feels like telling Lennart everything, like how she counts windows and likes spreadsheets and thinks the economic system is so strong that it's crushing everyone. Lennart asks what Zara is listening to, but Zara suggests he put pants on before the police storm the

apartment. This isn't the most poetic love story, but Zara and

In the previous passage, Zara suggested that she and Lennart are a lot alike: both heartlessly manipulating people like Anna-Lena and Roger, without any thought for their feelings or wellbeing. But Lennart shows here that he thinks more highly of people than Zara thought he did. Further, the fact that Zara doesn't write off his answer as "ridiculous" suggests that she agrees with him—she is, perhaps, becoming more empathetic than she'd like to admit.





Anna-Lena has already shown readers (through her anecdote about Roger helping an immigrant man get a parking spot) that he's not as gruff and uncaring as he seems. But here, Lennart says people also misjudge Anna-Lena and underestimate her intelligence and her drive, as well as how much she loves her husband. She's even subsuming her own desires to help Roger feel useful. It's not entirely clear why Zara feels compelled to spill everything to Lennart—perhaps it's just surprising that he doesn't seem afraid of her like everyone else. But the narrator makes it clear that the two have connected, and that Zara will, for possibly the first time, fall in love.





### **CHAPTER 54**

Lennart are hooked.

Estelle knocks on the closet door and asks Julia if she'd like a snack before the pizzas arrive. Touched, but secretly hoping Estelle will decline, Julia invites Estelle inside. Estelle sits on a trunk, says she's thrilled that they have a female bank robber, and asks what Julia and Anna-Lena have been talking about. When Anna-Lena says they were talking about marriage, Estelle enthusiastically says she's been married to Knut "forever" and says that you stay married that long by fighting for it. She advises that you have to listen to each other, but not so much that you can't forgive each other. Unhappily, Julia says that she and Ro used to get along super well, and they were really good at making up, but she's not so sure about things anymore.

For being so intent on making sure everyone is fed and comfortable, Estelle is pretty oblivious to Julia hoping she won't enter the closet. However, as soon as she joins the conversation, she offers yet another perspective on marriage. As someone who's enjoyed a longer marriage than either Anna-Lena or Julia, Estelle has had more time to think and practice how to interact with Knut in order to keep things moving. All women, though, seem to suggest that fighting is a normal part of being married—assuming couples are willing to forgive.



Thoughtfully, Estelle says that she and Knut decided long ago that they could fight, but they could never say anything intentionally hurtful—eventually one of them would win, and marriages can't survive when one person wins. Estelle begins digging in the chest, which offends Anna-Lena. Anna-Lena's displeasure disappears when Estelle pulls out wine. Julia explains that she can't drink at all while pregnant and remembers how Ro told the midwife once that she was drinking for three. She bursts out laughing as Estelle drinks from the bottle and passes it to Anna-Lena. Anna-Lena explains to Estelle that both Ro and Roger are idiots.

Again, Estelle suggests that fighting is par for the course in a marriage. The important part is being willing to fight in such a way as to not cause permanent rifts in a marriage. Estelle's comfort in this apartment is also something to note—she's either very nosy to feel okay about getting into people's wine and offering to dig through a stranger's freezer, or she may have more of a relationship to the apartment than she's let on thus far.







Estelle says Knut isn't an idiot, but she wishes he were here so she wasn't alone. Julia asks how she knew there would be wine in the chest, and Estelle explains that she hides wine in the closet at home, a habit Knut used to think was silly. She amends this to say that Knut *still* thinks it's silly. She adds that someone who doesn't want to look like an alcoholic would hide their wine in the closet. Anna-Lena points out that alcoholics have empty bottles, not a wine stash, and Estelle says, tears in her eyes, that Knut would've agreed. Gently, Julia asks Estelle if Knut isn't really parking the car.

As Estelle and Anna-Lena share the bottle of wine, they lose some of their inhibitions. Anna-Lena, for instance, no longer is so caught up in following proper apartment viewing etiquette; she's far more interested in chatting with her new friends. Julia picks up on the fact that Estelle's language betrays that Knut probably isn't out parking the car—and likely hasn't been around for some time.







### **CHAPTER 55**

In Jack's interview with Lennart, they argue about whether Lennart was in a production of *The Merchant* of *Venice* or *The Merchant* from *Venice*, and then Jack asks Lennart to stick around in case he has more questions later. Then, Jack asks about the fireworks the robber asked for: this was a really unusual request. Lennart notes that it's actually unusual to take people hostage. Then, Lennart asks if other hostages—namely Zara—are still at the station. She's the first person he hasn't been able to read, and he's good at reading people. Laughing, Jack says Jim always says that you marry "the one you don't understand. Then you spend the rest of your life trying."

Like the other hostages, Lennart is surprisingly cagey when it comes to talking about the robber; saying why the robber wanted fireworks seems, on the surface, like a pretty benign thing to share. When Lennart asks after Zara, it highlights the narrator's insistence that this is a love story as well as a hostage drama. Lennart is, as the narrator noted earlier, "hooked," and he's now fully focused on trying to figure out Zara.







### **CHAPTER 56**

Estelle thinks about death. She remembers Peter Pan saying that "To die will be an awfully big adventure." That may be so, but not when you're the person who's left behind. She misses making Knut laugh so hard he spit his breakfast out, and she tells Julia and Anna-Lena that Knut is dead. But he always dropped her close to their destinations while he parked. Anna-Lena asks if Estelle is really looking for an apartment for her daughter, and Estelle says she isn't. Her daughter lives with her teenage grandkids, and they like it when Estelle calls on their birthdays, but they don't really care about her. Estelle says she goes to viewings to listen to people dream, and she describes how Knut spent his last years in a care home. She'd go and read to him. At the end, she'd read to herself.

Estelle reads as very lonely now that Knut is gone. She has a cordial relationship with her daughter and grandkids, but she doesn't have anyone to make laugh or to make her laugh. In many ways, she's like Zara: she attends apartment viewings not to scope out the apartment, but so she can meet other needs. Estelle has already made friends with Julia and Anna-Lena, so this offers some hope that Estelle might be able to maintain these relationships after the hostage drama ends.









Anna-Lena says that "working life" goes so fast, and when Julia asks, she says she was a senior analyst for an industrial company. Julia's surprised look doesn't offend her, and she explains that she didn't want to be in charge. However, her boss said it's best to lead by letting other people do what they're capable of, so Anna-Lena tried to be a teacher. Lots of her subordinates didn't know she was their boss until she retired, and she liked that. Julia observes that Anna-Lena is full of surprises. Then, suddenly sad, Anna-Lena says that people assume she's lived life in Roger's shadow, but he turned down promotions since her job was going so well. It was always supposed to be his turn soon, but his turn never came.

Just as Julia judged Roger earlier, she can't hide that she's also been judging Anna-Lena and thinking of her as a subservient housewife. But really, it sounds more like Anna-Lena worked in a job more akin to Zara's, although in a different industry. Unlike Zara, though, Anna-Lena describes working very, very hard to form close, trusting relationships with her subordinates and not lording her power over them. But being so good at her job did come at a cost: she was never able to give Roger "his turn" while they were both employed.







Estelle opens the chest again and pulls out cigarettes. Anna-Lena scoffs about what kind of people live here, and Julia patiently explains that she doesn't smoke. Estelle says you used to just cut down when you got pregnant, but parents today are so concerned about affecting their children—they think everything their child does wrong is their fault. Julia suggests they probably make different versions of older generations' mistakes. Then, Estelle says she used to smoke on the balcony, but about 10 years ago a man jumped off the **bridge**. It happened while she abandoned her cigarette outside to look at something on the news.

Estelle seems to think that parents today take their role far too seriously. Julia, though, suggests that parenting hasn't meaningfully changed all that much in the last 50 years or so—the culture has changed, but parents still make the same mistakes with their kids. As Estelle reveals that she quit smoking on the balcony after the man jumped, the novel reveals one more connection characters have to the bridge. It seems increasingly like the novel's characters are all somehow connected to the bridge—and thus, to one another.







Julia says it's not Estelle's fault that the man jumped, but Anna-Lena says it wasn't the **bridge**'s fault, either. She explains that Roger found the incident upsetting, because he was an engineer who built bridges. News coverage of the man's suicide seemed to blame the bridge, but Roger believes that bridges exist to bring people together. Julia finds this both odd and romantic, and because she's hungry and tired, she blurts that she and her fiancée went to Australia a few years ago to bungee jump off a bridge. That fiancée, she explains, wasn't Ro. As Julia says this, Jim is on his way up the stairs.

It's perhaps surprising to hear Roger, such a gruff and uptight person, express such a romantic idea about bridges. And in a way, he's totally right: bridges exist to bring people together across a body of water. But his assertion can also be applied more metaphorically. For instance, it's possible to see now that the narrator is correct, and perhaps this is a story about a bridge. It's a story about how people reacted differently, but also very similarly, to the man's suicide.







#### CHAPTER 57

Before Jack entered the building across the street, he told Jim to wait. But Jim, of course, doesn't follow Jack's order. Instead, he takes the pizzas up to the apartment and speaks to the bank robber.

This chapter mostly builds tension and intrigue: if Jim spoke to the bank robber, why hasn't he corrected Jack that the robber is actually female?





Julia immediately regrets mentioning her fiancée, so she tells Estelle and Anna-Lena to forget it. But Estelle pulls out another bottle of wine and says they have time for long stories. Julia says that her fiancée always wanted to experience new things, like bungee jumping off bridges, and Julia wanted to be bored. So, she came home from Australia a week early and kissed Ro. Giggling, Julia says that she's a florist and met Ro when Ro came into her flower shop. She says Ro was beautiful, and Estelle agrees: Ro is "exotic." Sighing, Julia ignores this and says that Ro kept coming to buy tulips, and she always made Julia laugh. Julia told her mom about Ro, and Julia's mom said that "the funny ones" last a lifetime.

With a bottle of wine gone, Estelle and Anna-Lena are getting into the groove. This is looking much less like a hostage drama now, and way more like a drunken, fun night among friends. As Julia describes ending her previous relationship and beginning her relationship with Ro, she implies that successful couples want at least some of the same things, at least when it comes to big stuff (like whether to travel lots or stay home and be bored). Julia's mom also suggests that having a sense of humor is essential to a long-lasting relationship.



When Estelle asks about Julia's parents, Julia says that Julia's mom cleaned offices and her dad "hit women." Julia and her mom walked out, and her mom never let her hate her dad. And then, when Julia told her mom about Ro, Julia realized Ro was the real thing. So, while her fiancée was in Australia, Ro came into the shop and made Julia laugh so hard she spit in Ro's face. They went out for a drink, and Julia got so drunk she got into a fight with the security guard and told him that Ro was her girlfriend. Julia broke up with her fiancée and has loved being bored with Ro ever since. Estelle says Julia's mom was right, thinking about several authors who wrote about the necessity of laughter and companionship.

Julia's phrasing is interesting as she describes her parents: she suggests her mom did a lot of work to keep Julia from hating her dad. This contradicts what the robber said earlier about being unable to hate her neglectful mother. It's unclear, though, whether this is a gender-specific thing (it's impossible to hate mothers but not fathers), or if not all crimes parents commit are created equal. Hearing the story of Ro and Julia's first date from Julia's perspective after hearing it from Ro's earlier allows readers to see once again how things change depending on a person's perspective.







Remembering Julia's mom's reaction when Julia shared that she was pregnant, Julia says that Ro will be a great mom. She has a nine-year-old's sense of humor and can make any kid laugh. Estelle says Julia will be great, too, but Julia admits she's not so sure—she doesn't like playing, and she doesn't even like most children. Anna-Lena says parents only have to like their own kids, and what kids really need are chauffeurs. Estelle says gently that as long as Julia is going to protect her child, sing to it, and teach it to not be a menace on public transit, she'll be a great mom. Unable to stop herself, Anna-Lena says she hated the poop.

Recall that Ro is currently overcome with worry that she's not going to be a good mom. It's interesting, then, that Julia feels the exact same way—and yet, there's little indication that Ro and Julia have spoken about this to each other. For now, it seems almost easier to admit these fears to complete strangers than to someone they know so well and love so much. Both Anna-Lena and Estelle suggest that parenting isn't as difficult (and doesn't need to be as anxiety-inducing) as so many parents in the novel seem to find it. They suggest that kids don't actually need that much—and so parents in the novel are probably doing better than they think they are.







Estelle says that Julia will be a great mom—and that she's a great wife. Julia says she nags Ro so much, but Ro does still make her laugh. Smiling and fumbling over her words, Julia says the first time she and Ro went home together, they entered Julia's apartment and sheets she'd left hanging to dry hit Ro in the face. Ro flinched, and Julia nagged her to tell her what was wrong. Eventually, Ro shared that when her family fled over the mountains to get to Sweden, the kids each carried a sheet so when they heard helicopters, they could hide under them and blend in with the snow. The parents planned to run to distract the snipers in the helicopters. Somehow, Ro grew up to be a person who laughs. Her parents taught her to fight despair and cruelty with puns and fart jokes.

Ro's story of fleeing a warzone is heartbreaking. Her parents' plan to distract the snipers to save the children reinforces the novel's insistence that parents will do anything for their kids. In Ro's case, her parents also taught her the value of humor, which in turn makes her the ideal partner for Julia, according to Julia's mom. As Julia tells this story, she also remembers how much she loves Ro and why she entered this relationship with Ro to begin with. Speaking to Anna-Lena and Estelle—connecting with strangers—may help improve Ro and Julia's marriage, as it reminds Julia of what she has.







After a few moments of silence, Estelle blurts that she had an affair that Knut never knew about. Anna-Lena is convinced this is all getting out of hand, but Julia wants to know what happened. Estelle says Knut wasn't a reader, but she was. The other man, her neighbor, also read and soon, they started swapping books in the elevator. This progressed to leaving notes in the pages. Blushing, Estelle admits that they never had sex, but once, the neighbor gave her a book with the key to his apartment inside. He wanted her to have a key, just in case. He died a few years later and Estelle went to the apartment showing when his kids sold it. Then she went home to Knut. Estelle says she always planned to end the night with the same person she started with.

It doesn't seem like Estelle has told many (or any) people about her affair. But like Julia, she's feeling less inhibited in strangers' company, and the story of her affair allows her to offer another perspective on marriage. Knut wasn't able to fulfill her need for a reading buddy, so she ended up turning to her lover to fill that need. However, in other ways, she remained faithful to Knut and never intended to leave or hurt him. In fact, this is likely why she never told him about her affair: she figured it would be intentionally hurtful to share, and so she kept up their agreement to not purposefully hurt each other.





Anna-Lena has never had an affair; she was always too busy rushing between work and home, and she always felt like she was failing in both places. So, Anna-Lena is the first to suggest that they should help the bank robber. Estelle suggests that since there's no real estate agent in the apartment and the police will certainly expect one, the robber can pose as the agent and walk out with the rest of the hostages. Just as Julia gets up to go tell Ro the plan, Lennart knocks on the door and explains that he needs to borrow a pair of pants; he accidentally lit his on fire earlier.

Though Anna-Lena began the novel ready to fight anyone and everyone, here she finds that she's becoming more sympathetic and willing to help others. Thus, it starts to look like a good idea to help the robber, since it's clear to everyone by now that the robber doesn't want to hurt them and just made a mistake. It also starts to look like Jack was right to suspect that the real estate agent isn't real and is just the robber in disguise.







Lennart joins the women in the closet, where Estelle is now smoking. Anna-Lena gives Estelle a dirty look, but Estelle says the smoke will go out the vent. Coughing nervously, she says she's pretty sure there's an air vent—but when she stops coughing, someone continues to cough. Julia drags the ladder to the back of the closet and Lennart starts to climb up. The real estate agent is sitting in a cramped space above the hatch.

Just as when Estelle was talking about Knut as though he's still alive, her language is interesting here—how does she know about the vent? This suggests she's more familiar with the apartment than she's letting on. Then, the real estate agent's appearance shows clearly that the robber and the Realtor aren't the same person—Jack is wrong.





Back at the police station, Jack is shouting at the real estate agent to tell him why she asked for fireworks and where the *real* real estate agent is. The real estate agent is, of course, the actual real estate agent, but Jack isn't ready to accept this yet. That would mean he's missed something obvious. Finally, Jim suggests they take a break, but Jack snarls that the robber fooled Jim when he went up with the pizzas. Jack refuses to give up.

Readers now know that Jack is wrong and so is unfairly lashing out at the real estate agent. The obvious thing that Jack is missing, though, remains a mystery. Still, it's worth noting that he seems to blame this mishap on Jim, as he essentially blames Jim for letting the robber fool him when he took the pizzas up.



### **CHAPTER 60**

Stepping back to when Jack gets downstairs after speaking with the negotiator, Jim is emerging from the other building. Jim insists the bomb was just Christmas lights, and he says he spoke to the bank robber. He tells Jack what happened, but readers should know that Jim isn't a great storyteller. Thinking of his wife the entire time, Jim climbed up the stairs, checked the empty apartment, and then knocked on the correct apartment door. A man in a suit and ski mask, whose accent changed multiple times and was neither tall nor short, opened the door a crack. Jim admitted to being a police officer, asked if anyone was hurt, and then asked what the robber's demands were. The robber disappeared into the apartment for a minute, returned, and asked for a good fireworks show. But Jim is a bad storyteller—so this might not be what actually happened.

Flagging for readers that Jim isn't a great storyteller lets readers know to take this story with a grain of salt. To believe Jim's story, it seems almost like Lennart posed as the robber—as an actor, he may have a wide variety of accents to pull from. And Jim seems to have believed Lennart and not questioned why a robber would ask for fireworks in exchange for letting hostages go. But more than just encouraging readers to take this story with a grain of salt, the narrator suggests that this might not have happened at all—that perhaps, Jim is lying. For now, what actually happened isn't at all clear.



#### CHAPTER 61

Roger is right: the two apartments on the top floor used to be one, and it was eventually split using "creative solutions" like the ventilation duct and the double wall. The vent hasn't been used in years, but it's just the right size for a small, scared real estate agent. When Lennart sticks his head into the vent, his rabbit head gets stuck and comes off. Lennart falls off the ladder, the agent tumbles out of the vent on top of him, and Anna-Lena also falls over. Roger, Ro, and the bank robber rush over when they hear the noise, and once everyone is standing, Anna-Lena shrieks that Lennart is bleeding. He groans, trips, and a bag of blood flies out of his hand and onto the living room floor. He explains it's an optional add-on for this service. Anna-Lena and Julia ask him to put pants on.

This passage clears up several mysteries, such as how the rabbit head ended up in the vent, where the blood came from, and where the agent has been. When Roger, Ro, and the robber all run to check on the noise, it highlights how much this diverse group of people has come to care about one another—a crash is enough to bring them all running to make sure everyone is okay.







Lennart comes out of the closet, dressed, just as Zara comes in from the balcony. To her surprise, she doesn't hate him. Roger turns to the real estate agent and asks where she's been. She explains that she was nervous for the showing, so she hid in the closet—and then the bank robber came in and she was so afraid that she climbed up into the vent. Suddenly remembering herself, the agent asks, "HOW'S TRICKS?" and asks if anyone would like to offer on the apartment. Roger asks why this viewing is happening on the day before New Year's Day. The agent says the seller requested it, and House Tricks Real Estate Agency works every day.

That Zara doesn't hate Lennart once Lennart is clothed highlights that the attraction is mutual—Zara is also taken with him. It's humorous when the agent picks herself up so fast and resumes her fast-talking salesperson persona, as she totally ignores that she's in the middle of a hostage drama. When she notes that the seller requested a showing on this day, it recalls London saying earlier that robbers who ask for exactly 6,500 kroner have a reason. Perhaps the seller also had a reason to choose this specific day.







Annoyed, Julia shuts the balcony door and decides to light a fire in the fireplace while they wait for the pizzas. Looking around at her hostages, the bank robber sighs that they can all go. She'll let the police take her; she just needed rent money so her ex-husband wouldn't take her daughters away. She's sobbing by now. Julia, Anna-Lena, and Estelle suggest that they can fix this, and Ro and Estelle insist they wait for the pizzas. Estelle leads the robber away to help set the table and Zara gives Julia her lighter without Julia having to ask. Roger gruffly asks if Julia knows how to light a fire. Julia is ready to snarl at him, but after hearing everyone else's stories, she decides to generously ask Roger to show her how. They decide to do it together.

Though the bank robber would love for this to just be a social event, she can't ignore that she's fundamentally different from her hostages. She's a criminal now, and she'll have to face the consequences of trying to rob a bank and taking people hostage. This passage sets the robber's plight aside for now to instead focus on how the hostages are continuing to strengthen their relationships. Zara is now willing to help out, and Julia is going out of her way to not treat Roger like he's a mean, crotchety old man. Julia in particular has learned the value of listening and learning what strangers are all about before judging them.







Though Roger insists the damper is open, the fire smokes until Julia opens the damper. She and Roger start laughing. They both say the other's wife is nice, and then Roger says that Julia and Ro should buy the apartment. Julia says Ro doesn't want it, but Roger says Ro is just afraid she's not good enough. After a moment, Julia says that Roger doesn't have to prove himself to Anna-Lena. He is good enough. They both stare into the fire and get smoke in their eyes, and then Jim knocks on the door.

When Roger laughs, he essentially admits that he was wrong about the damper—which seems like a big step for him. Both Roger and Julia can then tell the other that they don't have to feel so insecure in their lives and relationships. After getting to know the other's spouses, they can both see how in love the other couple is. And hearing this from a stranger is enough to bring both Roger and Julia to tears, though they blame it on the smoke.



### **CHAPTER 62**

The robber says she'll get the door, but Roger and Ro protest. Roger offers to get the door and Julia says this is a great idea: the police will assume a man tried to rob the bank. Lennart offers to open the door, since he's an actor. Roger and Lennart argue over who will go to the door, and Lennart tells Roger to be angry with him, not with Anna-Lena. Anna-Lena begs Roger to let Lennart get the door, and Roger agrees.

It's humorous that Roger and Lennart fight over who's going to get the door, but this also highlights that everyone in the apartment—including Roger, one of the most skeptical people there—is willing to help the robber now. They see her as a fellow person who made a mistake, and they don't want to see her suffer needlessly for it.







Just then, the robber apologizes to Estelle: she remembers that Knut was parking the car, and he must be worried. Estelle says Knut is dead and has been gone a while. She explains that she said he was parking the car because she gets lonely, especially this time of year. She and Knut used to love watching fireworks off the balcony at New Year. Zara spoils the mood by noting that most people commit suicide on New Year's, not Christmas. With this, Roger, Lennart, and the robber exchange looks. The apartment door opens, and Jim is outside. He goes back downstairs later and tells Jack he spoke with the robber.

After connecting with Julia and Anna-Lena in the closet, Estelle is now willing to come clean about the fact that she's very lonely. As she mentions how much she and Knut used to love watching fireworks together, it suggests that the robber's choice to demand fireworks later might have to do with Estelle. Zara's mention of the most popular times for people to attempt suicide brings the mood down, but it also makes it clear that unhappiness exists all the time—even at otherwise happy times of the year.





#### **CHAPTER 63**

Jack storms out of the interview room, leaving Jim with the real estate agent. Jim passes her a glass of water, and she says she's not the robber. Nodding, Jim puts a hand on her shoulder and says he knows. He looks ashamed. He plays with his wedding ring when he picks his hand up; he still won't take it off. He silently muses that the most difficult thing about death is "the grammar." Jim's wife will never be angry again or put cornflakes in Jim's shoes. Now, she was a jokester, and she is dead.

Jim's shame is a red flag that he knows more than he's letting on. However, the fact that he's worrying his wedding ring and thinking of his wife suggests that he may have tried to follow her advice to help people in whatever he chose to do. As he considers the "grammar" of death, he plays with the same thing Estelle did by saying that Knut was just downstairs, parking the car. He doesn't want to always be reminded that his wife is gone, never to joke again.







Jim joins Jack in the hallway. Jack says the real estate agent must be the robber. Jim says the robber wasn't in the apartment when Jack stormed in, but she also didn't leave with the hostages. Jack asks how Jim knows, and finally, Jim tells the truth.

Readers don't know yet what the truth is, but this passage confirms that Jim knows more than he's let on thus far. In addition, this scene frames Jim's decision to tell Jack this new information as Jim letting Jack down, since presumably, Jack definitely won't be able to prove himself to the bosses now.





#### **CHAPTER 64**

The hostage drama ends without fanfare for the hostages, who are shown out the back of the police station. On the stairs, Zara, Lennart, Anna-Lena, Roger, Julia, Ro, and the real estate agent stare at one other. Roger asks what the police asked everyone else, and Ro declares that she and Julia played dumb. Then, Anna-Lena asks if the robber is okay—she saw an officer in the stairwell when they left, and it seemed unlikely the robber would get into the other apartment. Roger asks who helped the robber out if it wasn't them, but Estelle gets a text from the robber. She's okay.

The hostages make it clear that they were purposefully being obnoxious and unhelpful during their interviews because they wanted to help the robber. They also reveal that the robber planned, at least, to sneak into the other empty apartment across the landing, though it's not clear if this actually happened or not. Overall, though, the hostages' camaraderie highlights what can happen when strangers get to know one another and learn to listen.







London steps out of the station a few minutes later, but she's clearly anxious and lonely. Estelle asks if she's okay, and Julia asks if she was afraid. Ro invites London to get a coffee. London says she doesn't like coffee, but Ro says they can find her something else. Julia says that she'll follow soon. A few days later, London gets a letter from the bank robber, apologizing. It means more to her than she can admit.

Unlike the hostages, London wasn't in on purposefully obstructing the interview—and yet, she unwittingly helped the robber. Things start to look up for London here as she makes a friend in Ro and gets an apology from the robber. Hopefully this experience teaches London to treat people with more kindness and generosity than she has thus far.



Julia hugs her fellow hostages, and Estelle says she'd like to give Julia a book. Julia says that maybe they can exchange books in the elevator—she and Ro are going to buy the other empty apartment. This makes Roger laugh, and hearing Roger laugh makes Anna-Lena so happy that she has to sit down.

This scene implies that Estelle lives in the apartment where the hostage drama takes place, which would explain why she knows about the wine, the cigarettes, and the vent. It also suggests that she got exactly what she wanted today: she connected with new friends at what was once a happy time of year with Knut.



### **CHAPTER 65**

Stepping back in time to earlier in the day, Jim comes downstairs and tells Jack about his conversation with the bank robber. But he doesn't mess up the story because he's bad at telling stories. Rather, he's just a really good liar. So, stepping back more to his meeting with the robber, Lennart doesn't open the door when Jim knocks on the door. The bank robber does, after telling the hostages that she has to do this. She needs to show her daughters how to take responsibility for one's actions.

Here, the narrator begins to explain why Jim has perhaps been such a bumbling policeman as he and Jack have searched the apartment again—he chose to lie to Jack about his meeting with the robber. As the robber insists on speaking to Jim herself, she feels she's doing the best she can as a parent given the circumstances. Hopefully, she reasons, her daughters will learn something from her mistake and not judge her too harshly.





When the bank robber opens the door, her hair is the same color as Jim's daughter's. They both notice that neither of them has removed their wedding rings. The robber asks if Jim is a policeman; she didn't think the police would send an actual delivery guy up. She takes the pizzas, the pistol dangling in one hand, and Jim asks how she is. She says it hasn't been the best day, but nobody's hurt. Jim asks her to put the pistol down, and she asks to take the pizza to the hostages—it's been a long day for them. When she returns to the door, Jim is shocked to hear people laughing inside the apartment.

Jim likely feels moved to help the robber because she resembles his daughter so much—and he can't help his daughter, but perhaps he can help the robber. Getting so close to the apartment is also an odd experience for Jim, as he never expected to hear hostages laughing inside. The hostage situation, of course, has turned into something entirely different—everyone in the apartment is now new friends.





Jim asks how the robber ended up here. She says she doesn't know where to start. Jim brushes a tear off her cheek and tells her one of his wife's favorite jokes: how does one eat an elephant? A bit at a time. The robber laughs that her daughters would like the joke. They both sit on the landing, and Jim says his wife loved bad jokes and causing trouble. She took some verses in the Bible literally and defended everyone who needed help. She's dead now. Now, Jim says, it's the robber's turn to tell her story.

In describing how his wife tried to help everyone she could, Jim confirms that he's trying to channel his wife and make her proud by treating the robber like a fellow person, rather than a hardened criminal. He's no longer making assumptions about the robber that might make it harder to help her. Instead, he wants to hear her story so he can finally work with all the information.









The robber says her husband kicked her out; he's having an affair with her boss, and since the apartment is only in his name, he got to keep it. She didn't want to make a fuss for their daughters' sake. The girls are with their dad now, but they were going to celebrate the New Year together. Jim asks what the robber needed the money for. She explains that she needed rent money, since her husband's lawyer is threatening to take her children away if she doesn't have a place to live. At this, Jim's heart breaks. He starts to say that nobody can take her children away for not having a place to live—but now that she's held up a bank, things are different. Jim asks how she got here.

The robber's story is heartbreaking: she went to all this trouble for her daughters, and now she's ended up in more trouble than when she started. This is especially difficult for Jim to hear, as a father who's spent the whole novel trying to protect his own son from harm and disappointment. As the robber tells her story, she also echoes Nadia's assertion that people erroneously try to fix chaos with chaos. The robber kept going with an elaborate scheme, and now, she's stuck paying the price.







The robber says she's an idiot; she didn't want to make a fuss and thought she could sort it all out. But she's ready to give up now, and the pistol's not real. Jim, failing to see anyone but his daughter in the robber's face, says that the robber will still end up in prison. He knows her story is sympathetic, but you can't just let people run around with guns and rob banks and not arrest them. Jim decides he just won't catch her.

Now, Jim runs up against the unfortunate fact that the law often doesn't care about a person's reason for breaking the law. What matters is that they broke the law, and they'll be punished accordingly. Jim, though, does what he can to help by acting like a caring person, not a law enforcement officer.







Noticing the House Tricks Real Estate Agency sign on the apartment door, Jim says that he spoke to the couple in the apartment across the landing earlier. They're splitting up because they're "young and on the internet." Privately, the robber thinks that the worst thing is that she still loves her husband—but maybe she's no fun, so maybe he was right to leave her. Jim continues to say that the couple was using a real estate agency with a silly name, and if the real estate agent is still inside, maybe she has keys. Maybe the robber can hide in the other apartment, so the police won't find her when they police storm up here. Jim shrugs that the police aren't that good here, and they can't break down doors without a reason. He notes, too, that they've been assuming the robber's a man.

Though there's still likely a decade or two of difference between Jim and the robber, they both see the couple in the apartment across the way as young and naïve—but conveniently so, in this case. And Jim also suggests that in this situation, the fact that the police have incorrectly assumed the robber is male will work in her favor and allow her to escape. The robber is still struggling to process the end of her marriage, even as she's seen the proof that her husband is no longer on her team and is, in fact, her enemy.









The robber asks why Jim is helping her. Jim says his wife always quoted someone who said something to the effect of even if the world ends tomorrow, he'd still plant an apple tree today. Jim tells the robber to get going; his son Jack, who's also a police officer, will be the first through the door. He also says that what he and his wife always had in common is that they wanted to save the ones they could. When the robber says she's not sure if she deserves to be saved, Jim tells her to get back to him in 10 years and then tell him he was wrong. As Jim turns to go, the robber asks him to wait: she'd like to make a demand. She wants fireworks for Estelle, who used to watch them with her deceased husband. Jim nods, goes downstairs, and lies to Jack.

Jim's wife quoted Martin Luther, the face of the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century. The gist, as Jim sees it, is that it's important and worthwhile to help, even if it ultimately won't matter in the grand scheme of things. Then, when Jim says he and his wife wanted to save the ones they could, it's an oblique reference to the fact that right now, Jim can't save his daughter—but he can, perhaps, save the robber. When the robber asks for fireworks for Estelle, it highlights the strength of the bonds that the robber has formed with her hostages over the course of the hostage drama.











When the bank robber goes back inside the apartment, almost everyone is laughing (except for Roger, who's arguing with the real estate agent about the incorrect apartment plans). Zara and Lennart are standing by the window. Zara doesn't seem to hate Lennart—and he seems to adore her.

The scene in front of the bank robber again highlights the positive, fulfilling relationships that sprung up as a result of the hostage drama. Even Zara, who spent most of the time refusing to engage with people, seems poised to fall in love.





Julia spots Anna-Lena standing alone and gets up to tell her that hiring Lennart to boost Roger's confidence was weird but very romantic. Anna-Lena says Roger should've had a chance to get promoted. But being married and having kids is like climbing trees: you both climb and climb and sometimes you don't see each other, but you keep climbing. She always figured they'd end up on the same branch, but life went so fast, and Roger never got his turn. Julia says Julia's mom says to never apologize for being good at something. Anna-Lena deems this wise.

Anna-Lena's tree metaphor mirrors how the robber has described her marriage: she thought life was fine and she and her husband were on the same page, but in the end, it turned out they weren't. Anna-Lena and Roger are still married, but Anna-Lena feels like she and Roger will still have to work hard to end up on the same proverbial branch. Still, Julia suggests that Anna-Lena shouldn't regret having had such a fulfilling career—she still has time, after all, to work on her marriage.



Several loud bangs break the ensuing silence, and Lennart exclaims that there are fireworks going off outside. Jim is setting them off by the **bridge** and fortunately, he likes fireworks. Everyone stands on the balcony to watch, and Estelle thanks the robber and says Knut would've liked this. The robber apologizes for all the trouble and holds Estelle's hand.

Setting the fireworks off near the bridge symbolically ties all the police and everyone in the apartment to the bridge—now, it's more clearly a symbol for connection. The fireworks also allow the robber and Estelle to strengthen their relationship, suggesting that they can perhaps remain friends when this is all over.



When the fireworks are over and everyone goes back inside, the robber tries to discreetly signal to the real estate agent. But the agent is arguing with Roger about how much Julia and Ro should pay for the apartment. Finally, the agent snaps that she can go lower, but only because she's selling the apartment across the landing in two weeks. Seeing everyone's curious looks, she explains that you can't sell two apartments in the same building at once, but the other apartment is the same, though it has a smaller closet. Julia asks if the agent has the keys and looks at the robber. Scoffing, the agent says she doesn't. The bank robber's heart falls.

Having recognized many of his own insecurities in Ro, Roger has now stepped into a surrogate father role to her. Since Ro's dad isn't around to check out the apartment and okay it, Roger is making sure the Realtor doesn't try to cheat or otherwise hurt Ro and Julia's chances. When it comes out that the agent is also selling the apartment across the landing, Julia seems to have the same thought that Jim and the robber did. But everything seems lost when the agent says she doesn't have the key.









Estelle chirps that she had an affair once as she opens another bottle of wine. She repeats this as she stares into the robber's eyes, and she explains that her lover liked books while Knut liked music. The robber says she also likes books. Estelle says all people make mistakes, like her affair with her neighbor. He gave her a key, and she kept it. Running her hands along her bookcase, a book falls out, open. A key bounces on the floor.

It's easy to write Estelle off at first, given how drunk she is. But she ultimately reveals that she's familiar with the apartment's food offerings and wine storage because this is her apartment—and she has the key to the apartment across the landing. She also indirectly makes the case that good things can come of people's mistakes. She has the key because she mistakenly had an affair—and perhaps good things can also happen for the robber.







Panting, Estelle says that when Knut got sick, they signed the apartment to their daughter, but she doesn't want to live here. Estelle has been here alone ever since, and finally, her daughter convinced her to sell. So she contacted an agent and asked for a viewing the day before New Year's Eve so she could have company. She pretended to be a buyer so she'd know who bought it. This is her home, after all, and she wants to sell to someone who will love it. Estelle confirms that her lover was the neighbor in the apartment across the landing—and the new owners never changed the locks. The bank robber is speechless, but Estelle tells her to go hide and then go home to her daughters. Everyone agrees to lie to the police for her.

This passage explains why Estelle has been so keen to get to know everyone: she's extremely lonely and essentially just wanted to throw a party. Then, she also echoes what Zara has said about apartments being homes, not investments. If she's going to sell, she needs to know that this is going to be a home for the buyers—even if they do have to take out a mortgage to afford the apartment. As the hostages all agree to lie to the police, they again show how transformative the hostage drama has been for them. They've come out with new friends and a greater appreciation for getting to know complete strangers.





The bank robber tries to argue—but before she can leave, Jim knocks on the door. Roger grouses that with a policeman outside, the robber can't sneak over. Zara suggests they try to bribe him, but the robber keeps her conversation with Jim a secret. She tells everyone to walk out so they can tell the truth: that she was in the apartment when they left. Estelle puts the pizza in the fridge and gives the robber her phone number. Later, when Jack comes upstairs, Jim is still in the stairwell. He tells his son that the robber is still in the apartment. Then, Jim picks up the drawing in the stairwell.

The robber gives the hostages a small gift by making sure they can all tell the truth that they left her in the apartment. This means that in their witness interviews, all they have to do is distract Jim and Jack and share this one important fact with the police. When Estelle gives the robber her number, it confirms that the two will remain friends after this, another good thing to come of the hostage drama.





Earlier, Ro found the special phone in a pizza box, put it on the table, and then forgot about it. After the rest of the hostages left, the robber wiped her prints off of the pistol and set it on the table next to the phone. She threw her ski mask in the fire and left the apartment. She showed Jim the key and said she didn't tell anyone about him helping her. Jim wouldn't let her apologize, so she entered the other apartment. Jim was left in the stairwell, hoping his wife would be proud or at least not angry. Then Jack came upstairs, the negotiator called the phone, and the pistol went off.

Here, readers learn that it was really a complete accident that the pistol went off, as Ro never mentioned the special phone to anyone after she took it out of the box. This is a particularly difficult situation for Jim. He doesn't seem to fear losing his job over his actions; rather, what's most important to him is that his wife would agree that he did the right thing. This speaks too to the strength of Jim and his wife's marriage. Even after she's gone, he tries to impress her





### **CHAPTER 67**

Now, in the present, Jim has told Jack the truth. Because Jack is a good son, he works on coming up with a plan. He ushers the witnesses out the back door and then, ignoring Jim's arguments, steps out the front and tells the reporters that he's solely responsible for losing the bank robber. Jack takes the blame, and Jim feels awful. The detectives from Stockholm arrive the next morning and, since nobody was hurt and nothing was stolen, they return to Stockholm. Jim tells Jack he's a good policeman and thinks (but doesn't say) that Jack is an even better person. Grinning, Jack says that Jim isn't a great officer, but he doesn't say that he's learned everything from him.

Jack's actions show that it's not just parents who sacrifice themselves for their children. In this situation, Jack sacrifices his reputation and his chance to impress his superiors in order to save his dad from getting in trouble. Still, the men seem perfectly happy with this outcome. They both admire the other, though for different reasons. And Jim also gets proof that he's done a good job raising a kind, loyal, thoughtful son as he watches Jack gracefully take responsibility for the police response.





On the back steps of the police station, Estelle hugs everyone but Zara (who blocks her attempt). Julia invites Estelle to have coffee with them, but Estelle refuses. She tells the agent she doesn't want to sell, and the agent says that's lovely. Lennart says all the apartments not for sale are pretty romantic. Estelle is thrilled: she's going to be neighbors with Julia and Ro, and she and Julia will swap books. She already knows what to give Julia first.

In the following weeks and months, Ro will lose her dad. Ro's mom will find a reason to live in another man: Julia and Ro's son. Ro and Julia will remain quirky, and the monkey and the frog will visit them every day and love them. Julia and Ro will argue and make up, and they're always better at making up than at fighting.

Back in the present, Zara hurries off the steps to avoid more hugs. Lennart follows her and asks if she'd like to share a taxi. Zara has never shared a taxi in her life, but she tells Lennart he can sit in the front. Anna-Lena is still sitting on the steps, and Roger sits down next to her. She wants to apologize, but it's hard. Instead, she suggests they go to IKEA and look at the countertop he's interested in. Roger mumbles that maybe they could go see a movie instead. They hold hands in the theater. It feels like "coming home" for Anna-Lena, and like "being good enough" for Roger.

Estelle walks back home and calls her daughter to tell her not to worry about the apartment. Estelle is going to have to give up smoking, because a young woman (the robber) is moving in and won't let her smoke in the closet. Really, the woman is renting the apartment from Estelle's daughter while Estelle rents a bedroom for the full 6,500 kroner. There's a drawing of a monkey, a frog, and an elk on the fridge, which Estelle stole from Jim. This family watches fireworks from the balcony every New Year's Eve until, finally, Estelle dies. Ro, Julia, and their son attend her funeral, and as teens, the monkey and the frog smoke in the closet. And in a basement storage area where the bank robber once slept, a would-be bank robber can't rob a bank because someone stole his pistol.

Things couldn't have turned out any better for Estelle. Thanks to the hostage drama, she now has a community again in her building. And thanks to Roger's nudge, Ro and Julia now feel prepared to commit to buying an apartment. Buying their apartment also puts them in the category of "romantic" apartments that Lennart describes: they'll be there for a while, living their lives.









For now, it's unclear where the monkey and the frog will live, but this highlights that they and the robber will remain a part of Ro and Julia's life long after the hostage drama is over. And Ro and Julia will, the narrator reveals, be able to patch up their marriage and continue to fight fairly for years to come.



Zara and Lennart seem poised to begin dating each other, something that will further pull Zara out of her shell and connect her to other people. Anna-Lena and Roger, on the other hand, strengthen their relationship by not trying so hard to impress the other. As they accept that they're both enough and take the other's dreams seriously, they, too, seem prepared to revive their commitment to each other.



Estelle does what she can to pay the robber's kindness with the fireworks forward. She, the robber, and the robber's daughters form their own chosen family in the apartment and continue to support one another until Estelle passes. The fact that Estelle stole the drawing from Jim highlights her understanding that the robber did everything for her daughters—now, she'll have the reminder of what she's working for on her fridge, where she can see it every day. And the unexpected positive outcome of the robber's attempt to rob the bank is that no banks actually end up getting robbed, a small but delightful detail.









It's snowing outside, and Nadia is on the phone with her dad. When Nadia hangs up, Zara knocks at the door and lets herself in. She's holding a **letter**. Confused, Nadia asks if they have an appointment, but then she notices Zara is trembling and looks ready to burst. Finally, Zara asks if Nadia likes her job and if she's happy. Nadia says she's happy enough—then, she asks why Zara is really here.

Zara says that in an earlier session, Nadia asked her why she likes her job. Zara has had time to think, and she realizes that she liked her job because she believed in it. She believes in banks: they make things slow and keep people from making decisions that are too terrible. The housing market is going to crash again, and the banks will say people were greedy, though most people aren't. They just want something to cling to and a place to raise their kids. Nadia asks if something happened since their last session, but Zara can't answer. Instead, she says that bank employees used to know how the bank made money. Now, maybe three people in each bank know that. She was one of them, so she's handed in her notice. Zara's not sure where to go now, but Nadia says this is a good place to start.

Zara falls silent. Eventually, Nadia says that Zara once asked her to describe panic attacks, and she doesn't think her answer was very good. She doesn't have a better answer now, but she knows it helps to talk about it. Lots of people suffer from anxiety, but society isn't sympathetic to anxiety sufferers. When a person has anxiety, their brain convinces them that they are going to die—but they're not. Zara adds, "Yet!"

Zara tries to make more jokes, but she finally begins crying out of terror. Hesitantly, she lets go of the **letter**, and Nadia picks it up. Zara can't say that she came here the first time exactly 10 years after the man jumped. She can't say that she needs someone to read what the man wrote and then stop *her* from jumping. Zara wants to tell Nadia about witnessing Jack save her, but she can't. Nadia wants to hug Zara, but instead, she opens the envelope and pulls out a four-word note.

This is the first time that readers have seen Zara ever take her letter out of her purse, which makes it clear that something has changed for her. It's also notable that Zara expresses interest in Nadia's happiness, something that Zara has written off as pointless previously. The hostage drama seems to have had a significant effect on Zara.





Notice how in this passage, Zara mostly speaks in the past tense; Zara liked her job, and she no longer has it. She's become disillusioned with her job, and while she still thinks banks have a place in the modern world, she's no longer willing to be one of those people who blames others for dreaming and wanting to make a life for themselves. It's also noteworthy that Zara is willing to admit weakness, as when she admits she's not sure where to go from here. However, now that Zara is more willing to open up to Nadia, this offers hope that Zara will continue to improve and experiment with connecting with others.





Nadia carefully names what Zara has felt for years: crushing anxiety. She suggests that in today's society, people aren't good enough at talking about how they feel, and this makes people feel alone and more afraid than they need to be. Again, the remedy for this, she insinuates, is connecting with others.





This is also the first time that Zara has ever allowed herself to cry in front of another person, a mark of how much she's come to trust Nadia. She's also finally able to ask for help reading the letter, which suggests that Zara is ready to, as the robber did, take responsibility for her actions and figure out if she truly was at fault.







The ice covering the **bridge** sparkles. Zara almost looks like she's ready to jump, but anyone who knows her and what she's gone through recently knows she won't. Then, "she lets go." The wind catches the paper, and finally, Zara's fingers can stop struggling to hold that **letter**. Ten years ago, the man wrote everything he wanted Zara to know. His letter was only four words, but they're "the four biggest little words" someone can say to another person: "It wasn't your fault." Zara is walking away before the letter hits the water. She climbs into Lennart's car, and he lets her play the music loud. Zara plans to try to get tired of him.

Though Zara has felt responsible for the man's death for a decade, it's worth noting that it's nobody else's fault when someone chooses to die by suicide. By dropping the letter off the bridge, Zara symbolically lets go of this burden. It's also significant that she then gets into Lennart's car—she's willing now to connect with others.







### **CHAPTER 71**

It's not entirely true that a person's personality is made up of past experiences—people want to believe that they can make better choices tomorrow. The girl (the robber) always thought it was weird that she couldn't be mad at the robber's mom. Once, her mom slurred to the girl that she'd never be a romantic because "children from broken homes don't believe in everlasting love." The girl told her mom she was wrong, and the girl turned out to be right: only romantics rob banks for their children's sake.

It's not entirely clear if the narrator believes that people can become a better person by making better choices tomorrow. However, the novel has shown that people do have the capacity to change: Zara has asked for help with her letter, for instance. This seems to suggest that people, such as the robber, can change. Indeed, she's overcome the circumstances of her birth and has defied her mom's expectations to become a romantic willing to do anything for her kids. In this way, she's the exact opposite of her own mother.









The girl (the robber) grew up and had daughters of her own, a monkey and a frog. She tried to be a good parent, wife, and person, but she was shocked when she discovered her husband's infidelity. A few weeks ago, as the elk, the monkey, and the frog walked across the **bridge**, the girls stopped to lock a padlock to the bridge to symbolize their love for each other and their mom. Their mom was crushed: they must fear that the divorce will cause her to stop loving them.

The robber demonstrates here just how much her daughters motivate her. She wants to make sure that they feel safe and secure, unlike she did when she was a kid. However, the girls' choice to put a padlock on the bridge does highlight that the bridge symbolizes connection, not disunity.



The next morning, the mom (the robber) found a notebook in her oldest daughter's backpack. It fell open to a story titled "The Princess with Two Kingdoms." It's about a princess who lives in a castle. The princess finds a hole in the floor and discovers a magical world down below, where all the animals are happy. But then she discovers that the magical world exists between two kingdoms, one ruled by a king and the other by a queen, who are fighting horribly. The princess discovers that the king and queen are her parents, and they are fighting over her. Finally, the princess disappears, knowing that without her, there's nothing to fight over—and everything will be saved. Reading this, the mom's heart broke.

The robber can tell from her daughter's story that her daughter is having a hard time working through her parents' divorce. It also suggests that her daughter is far more aware of the strife between the robber and her husband than the robber thought (or hoped). This causes the robber's heart to break because, in part, it suggests to the robber that she's not doing a good enough job of, as she said earlier, "not making a fuss" about the divorce for her kids' sake. It's unclear how much better the robber could've done, but she still seems to take a lot of the blame on herself.







The mom (the robber) got her daughters to school that day. She didn't fight her ex-husband or her ex-boss or make a fuss, trying to protect her daughters. The day before New Year's Eve, she left home with a pistol. Now in the present, that same evening, she's picking up her daughters and tells them she's had a normal day. As they cross the **bridge**, she puts a hand on her older daughter's shoulder and says that the divorce isn't her fault. That night, as they fall asleep in Estelle's apartment, the daughter tells her mom that she's a good mom.

This chapter shows again how the robber went out of her way to try to protect her daughters. She made questionable choices, got caught up, and thanks to Jim, is now able to go home to her daughters and continue being a present, loving parent. By moving in with Estelle, the robber will be able to give her girls the stability she wants to give them. And she gets the confirmation that she's not doing as poorly as she feared. Her daughter loves and admires her—no matter what the robber has done.



#### **CHAPTER 72**

It's a few days after New Year's Day, and a woman (the robber) leaves a building with her two daughters, laughing. Then, suddenly, the woman stops. Her daughters keep bouncing and trying to climb her—they haven't seen the police car yet with Jim and Jack inside. Silently, the robber begs them to not do this in front of her daughters. The car slowly drives past.

The robber has expressed willingness to take responsibility for her actions, but her main goal is protecting her daughters. She doesn't want them to have to suffer the trauma of seeing their mother arrested and imprisoned, so this moment is extremely tense for her.





Jim says he gets it if Jack wants to arrest the bank robber, but Jack says he just wanted to see her so they can say they both let her go. After a minute, Jim says he knows Jack got a job offer in Stockholm, and he thinks Jack should take it. Jack refuses, and Jim says not to refuse for his sake. Jack lies that he has other reasons not to take it. Really, he just knows that his mom would say that there are worse reasons to turn down a job.

Jim wants Jack to be able to chase his dreams, even if that means Jack moves to Stockholm for work. However, the hostage situation—and Jim's choice to help the robber—seems to have reminded Jack that it's also important to prioritize his relationship with his dad.



Jack asks if Jim wants coffee: he thought they could drive to see his sister. It'll be her birthday soon, and maybe she'd like to come home. They spend the next day driving and knock on her door. Maybe she'll go with them—and maybe she won't. Little kids love their parents just because their parents belong to them, and perhaps this doesn't change when kids get older. All Jack's mom asked was that her family members do their best and save who they can.

Perhaps inspired by Jim's choice to help the robber, Jack decides it's time to make one final attempt to help his sister. They can't force her to accept their help, but they can let her know that they'll always be here for her, whenever she's ready. In suggesting the trip, Jack also strengthens his relationship with Jim, as Jim has never fully given up on his daughter. So, Jack is following his dad's lead here.









### CHAPTER 73

It's now spring, and Jack gets out of an elevator, very confused. Earlier, he got a letter with this address, a floor, and an office number on it. There was also a photo of the **bridge** and another sealed envelope with a name on it. Zara recognized Jack when she saw him at the police station—and she suspected that, like her, he'd been reliving those moments on the bridge over and over again.

While Zara carried around the man's letter for a decade and allowed it to trap her until she let it go, she hopes she can use a letter of her own to similarly free Jack. This suggests that Zara now realizes how futile it is to dwell on the one person she (and Jack) wasn't able to help. Rather, she's decided it's better to try to, as Jack's mom would say, help who she can.







Jack knocks on the office door. It's been 10 years since a man jumped and a young woman didn't. As soon as Nadia opens the door, Jack recognizes her and "his heart turns to confetti." Leaning against the doorframe, he hands her the envelope with the **bridge** photo and her office address, and the other envelope with her name on it. Inside Nadia's envelope is a note from Zara: "You saved yourself. He just happened to be there."

Zara effectively frees both Jack and Nadia by bringing them together at last. Now, Jack can see how much his choice to save Nadia has improved her life, and Nadia finally solves what's been a huge mystery in her life up to this point. Zara also reminds Nadia that Nadia is the one in control, and she always has been. Jack might've pulled her back, but the fact remains that Nadia had the choice to jump—and she didn't.



Nadia loses her balance and Jack catches her. She asks if he's the one who saved her and then sinks into her chair. Nadia has spent years wondering who saved her, and now she doesn't know what to say. Jack looks around the office, noticing a photo of Nadia with a group of kids. They're all wearing T-shirts for a charitable organization that funds camps for kids who have lost family members to suicide. Nadia goes every year. She doesn't know yet that Zara has just donated most of her fortune to the charity. Instead, she and Jack sit across from each other and smile. In ten years, they'll tell people how it felt to smile at each other the first time.

The novel's final passage shows that Nadia, Jack, and Zara have now all found their way. Zara has turned to philanthropy in addition to bringing Jack and Nadia together, suggesting that she now sees the value in funding and supporting mental health outreach efforts. The implication is that Jack and Nadia will go on to enjoy a long romantic relationship together, thanks to Zara's letter—and really, thanks to the bridge. The bridge, in the novel's final chapter, brings these two final people together, highlighting the many different ways that people can connect over something as ordinary as a bridge and as tragic as a man's death.







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