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The Sandman

Written by Lars Kepler

Translated from the Swedish from Neil Smith

Published by Blue Door

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THE SANDMAN

LARS KEPLER

Translated from the Swedish by Neil Smith



blue door

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HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Blue Door 2014

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Originally published in 2012 by Albert Bonniers Förlag, Sweden, as *Sandmannen*

Lars Kepler asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HB ISBN: 978-0-00-746778-5
TPB ISBN: 978-0-00-746779-2

Typeset in Electra LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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It's the middle of the night, and snow is blowing in from the sea. A young man is walking across a high railway bridge, towards Stockholm. His face is as pale as misted glass. His jeans are stiff with frozen blood. He is walking between the rails, stepping over the sleepers. Fifty metres below him the ice on the water is just visible, like a strip of cloth. A blanket of snow covers the trees and oil tanks in the harbour are barely visible; the snow is swirling in the glow from the container crane far below.

Warm blood is trickling down the man's lower left arm, into his hand and dripping from his fingertips.

The rails start to sing and whistle as a night-train approaches the two-kilometre-long bridge.

The young man sways and sits down on the rail, then gets to his feet again and carries on walking.

The air is buffeted in front of the train, and the view is obscured by the billowing snow. The Traxx train has already reached the middle of the bridge when the driver catches sight of the man on the track. He blows his horn, and sees the figure almost fall, then it takes a long step to the left, onto the oncoming track, and grabs hold of the flimsy railing.

The man's clothes are flapping around his body. The bridge is shaking heavily under his feet. He is standing still with his eyes wide open, his hands on the railing.

Everything is swirling snow and tumbling darkness.

His bloody hand has started to freeze as he carries on walking.

His name is Mikael Kohler-Frost. He has been missing for thirteen years, and was declared dead seven years ago.

*Secure Criminal Psychology Unit
Löwenströmska Hospital*

The steel gate closes behind the new doctor with a heavy clang. The metallic echo pushes past him and continues down the spiral staircase.

Anders Rönn feels a shiver run down his spine when everything suddenly goes quiet.

As of today, he is going to be working in the secure criminal psychology unit.

For the past thirteen years, the strictly isolated bunker has been home to the ageing Jurek Walter. He was sentenced to psychiatric care with specific probation requirements.

The young doctor doesn't know much about his patient, except that he has been diagnosed with: 'Schizophrenia, non-specific. Chaotic thinking. Recurrent acute psychosis, with erratic and extremely violent episodes'.

Anders Rönn shows his ID at level zero, removes his mobile and hangs the key to the gate in his locker before the guard opens the first door of the airlock. He goes in and waits for the door to close before walking over to the next door. When a signal sounds, the guard opens that one too. Anders turns round and waves before carrying on along the corridor towards the isolation ward's staffroom.

Senior Consultant Roland Brolin is a thickset man in his fifties, with sloping shoulders and cropped hair. He is standing smoking under the extractor fan in the kitchen, leafing through an article on the pay gap between men and women in the health-workers' magazine.

'Jurek Walter must never be alone with any member of staff,' the consultant says. 'He must never meet other patients, he never has any visitors, and he's never allowed out into the exercise yard. Nor is he . . .'

'Never?' Anders asks. 'Surely it isn't permitted to keep someone . . .'

'No, it isn't,' Roland Brolin says sharply.

'So what's he actually done?'

'Nothing but nice things,' Roland says, heading towards the corridor.

Even though Jurek Walter is Sweden's worst-ever serial killer, he is completely unknown to the public. The proceedings against him in the Central Courthouse and at the Court of Appeal in the Wrangelska Palace were held behind closed doors, and all the files are still strictly confidential.

Anders Rönn and Senior Consultant Roland Brolin pass through another security door and a young woman with tattooed arms and pierced cheeks winks at them.

'Come back in one piece,' she says breezily.

'There's no need to worry,' Roland says to Anders in a low voice. 'Jurek Walter is a quiet, elderly man. He doesn't fight and he doesn't raise his voice. Our cardinal rule is that we never go into his cell. But Lefte, who was on the night-shift last night, noticed that he had made some sort of knife that he's got hidden under his mattress, so obviously we have to confiscate it.'

'How do we do that?' Anders asks.

'We break the rules.'

'We're going into Jurek's cell?'

'You're going in . . . to ask nicely for the knife.'

'I'm going in . . .?'

Roland Brolin laughs loudly and explains that they're going to pretend to give the patient his normal injection of Risperidone, but will actually be giving him an overdose of Zypadhera.

The Senior Consultant runs his card through yet another reader and taps in a code. There's a bleep, and the lock of the security door whirrs.

‘Hang on,’ Roland says, holding out a little box of yellow earplugs. ‘You said he doesn’t shout.’

Roland smiles weakly, looks at his new colleague with weary eyes, and sighs heavily before he starts to explain.

‘Jurek Walter will talk to you, quite calmly, probably perfectly reasonably,’ he says in a grave voice. ‘But later this evening, when you’re driving home, you’ll swerve into oncoming traffic and smash into an articulated lorry . . . or you’ll stop off at the DIY store to buy an axe before you pick the kids up from preschool.’

‘Should I be scared now?’ Anders smiles.

‘No, but hopefully careful,’ Roland says.

Anders doesn’t usually have much luck, but when he read the advert in the *Doctors’ Journal* for a full-time, temporary but long-term position in the secure unit of the Löwenströmska Hospital, his heart had started to beat faster.

It’s only a twenty-minute drive from home, and it could well lead to a permanent appointment.

Since working as an intern at Skaraborg Hospital and in a health centre in Huddinge, he has had to get by on temporary contracts at the regional clinic of Sankt Sigfrid’s Hospital.

The long drives to Växjö and the irregular hours proved impossible to combine with Petra’s job in the council’s recreational administration and Agnes’s autism.

Only two weeks ago Anders and Petra had been sitting at the kitchen table trying to work out what on earth they were going to do.

‘We can’t go on like this,’ he had said, perfectly calmly.

‘But what alternative do we have?’ she had whispered.

‘I don’t know,’ Anders had replied, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Agnes’s teaching assistant at her preschool had told them that Agnes had had a difficult day. She had refused to let go of her milk-glass, and the other children had laughed. She hadn’t been able to accept that break-time was over, because Anders hadn’t come to pick her up like he usually did. He had driven straight back from Växjö, but hadn’t reached the preschool until six o’clock. Agnes was still sitting in the dining room with her hands round the glass.

When they got home, Agnes had stood in her room, staring at the wall beside the doll’s house, clapping her hands in that introverted way she had. They don’t know what she can see there, but she says that

grey sticks keep appearing, and she has to count them, and stop them. She does that when she's feeling particularly anxious. Sometimes ten minutes is enough, but that evening she had to stand there for more than four hours before they could get her into bed.

The last security door closes and they head down the corridor to the only one of the isolation cells that is being used. The fluorescent light in the ceiling reflects off the vinyl floor. The textured wallpaper has a groove worn into it from the food trolley, one metre up from the floor.

The Senior Consultant puts his pass card away and lets Anders walk ahead of him towards the heavy metal door.

Through the reinforced glass Anders can see a thin man sitting on a plastic chair. He is dressed in blue jeans and a denim shirt. The man is clean-shaven and his eyes seem remarkably calm. The many wrinkles covering his pale face look like the cracked clay at the bottom of a dried-up riverbed.

Jurek Walter was only found guilty of two murders and one attempted murder, but there's compelling evidence linking him to a further nineteen murders.

Thirteen years ago he was caught red-handed in Lill-Jan's Forest on Djurgården in Stockholm, forcing a fifty-year-old woman back into a coffin in the ground. She had been kept in the coffin for almost two years, but was still alive. The woman had sustained terrible injuries, she was malnourished, her muscles had withered away, she had appalling pressure sores and frostbite, and had suffered severe brain damage. If the police hadn't followed and arrested Jurek Walter beside the coffin, he would probably never have been stopped.

Now the consultant takes out three small glass bottles containing yellow powder, puts some water into each of the bottles, shakes them carefully, then draws the contents into a syringe.

He puts his earplugs in, then opens the small hatch in the door. There's a clatter of metal and a heavy smell of concrete and dust hits them.

In a dispassionate voice the Senior Consultant tells Jurek Walter that it's time for his injection.

The man lifts his chin and gets up softly from the chair, turns to look at the hatch in the door and unbuttons his shirt as he approaches.

'Stop and take your shirt off,' Roland Brolin says.

Jurek Walter carries on walking slowly forward and Roland quickly closes and bolts the hatch. Jurek stops, undoes the last buttons and lets his shirt fall to the floor.

His body looks as if it was once in good shape, but now his muscles are loose and his wrinkled skin is sagging.

Roland opens the hatch again. Jurek Walter walks the last little bit and holds out his sinewy arm, mottled with hundreds of different pigments.

Anders washes his upper arm with surgical spirit. Roland pushes the syringe into the soft muscle and injects the liquid far too quickly. Jurek's hand jerks in surprise, but he doesn't pull his arm back until he's given permission. The Senior Consultant closes and hurriedly bolts the hatch, removes his earplugs, smiles nervously to himself and then looks inside.

Jurek Walter is stumbling towards the bed, where he stops and sits down.

Suddenly he turns to look at the door and Roland drops the syringe. He tries to catch it but it rolls away across the floor.

Anders steps forward and picks up the syringe, and when they both stand and turn back towards the hatch they see that the inside of the reinforced glass is misted. Jurek has breathed on the glass and written 'JOONA' with his finger.

'What does it say?' Anders asks weakly.

'He's written Joona.'

'Joona?'

'What the hell does that mean?'

The condensation clears and they see that Jurek Walter is sitting as

if he hadn't moved. He looks at the arm where he got the injection, massages the muscle, then looks at them through the glass.

'It didn't say anything else?' Anders asks.

'I only saw . . .'

There's a bestial roar from the other side of the heavy door. Jurek Walter has slid off the bed and is on his knees, screaming as hard as he can. The sinews in his neck are taut, his veins swollen.

'How much did you actually give him?' Anders asks.

Jurek Walter's eyes roll back and turn white, he reaches out a hand to support himself, stretches one leg but topples over backwards, hitting his head on the bedside table, then he screams and his body starts to jerk spasmodically.

'Bloody hell,' Anders whispers.

Jurek slips onto the floor, his legs kicking uncontrollably. He bites his tongue and blood sprays out over his chest, then he lies there on his back, gasping.

'What do we do if he dies?'

'Cremate him,' Brolin says.

Jurek is cramping again, his whole body shaking, and his hands flail in every direction until they suddenly stop.

Brolin looks at his watch. Sweat is running down his cheeks.

Jurek Walter whimpers, rolls onto his side and tries to get up, but fails.

'You can go inside in two minutes,' the Senior Consultant says.

'Am I really going in there?'

'He'll soon be completely harmless.'

Jurek is crawling on all fours, bloody slime drooling from his mouth. He sways and slows down until he finally slumps to the floor and lies still.

Anders looks through the thick reinforced glass window in the door. Jurek Walter has been lying motionless on the floor for the last ten minutes. His body is limp in the wake of his cramps.

The Senior Consultant pulls out a key and puts it in the lock, then pauses and peers in through the window before unlocking the door.

‘Have fun,’ he says.

‘What do we do if he wakes up?’ Anders asks.

‘He mustn’t wake up.’

Brolin opens the door and Anders goes inside. The door closes behind him and the lock rattles. The isolation room smells of sweat, but of something else as well. A sharp smell of acetic acid. Jurek Walter is lying completely still, with just the slow pattern of his breathing visible across his back.

Anders keeps his distance from him even though he knows he’s fast asleep.

The acoustics in there are odd, intrusive, as if sounds follow movements too quickly.

His doctor’s coat rustles softly with each step.

Jurek is breathing faster.

The tap is dripping in the basin.

Anders reaches the bed, then turns towards Jurek and kneels down.

He catches a glimpse of the Senior Consultant watching him anxiously through the reinforced glass as he leans over and tries to look under the fixed bed.

Nothing on the floor.

He moves closer, looking carefully at Jurek before lying flat on the floor.

He can't watch Jurek any longer. He has to turn his back on him to look for the knife.

Not much light reaches under the bed. There are dustballs nestled against the wall.

He can't help imagining that Jurek Walter has opened his eyes.

There's something tucked between the wooden slats and the mattress. It's hard to see what it is.

Anders stretches out his hand, but can't reach it. He'll have to slide beneath the bed on his back. The space is so tight he can't turn his head. He slips further in. Feels the unyielding bulk of the bed-frame against his ribcage with each breath. His fingers fumble. He needs to get a bit closer. His knee hits one of the wooden slats. He blows a dustball away from his face and carries on.

Suddenly he hears a dull thud behind him in the isolation cell. He can't turn round and look. He just lies there still, listening. His own breathing is so rapid he has trouble discerning any other sound.

Cautiously he reaches out his hand and touches the object with his fingertips, squeezing in a bit further in order to pull it free.

Jurek has made a short knife with a very sharp blade fashioned from a piece of steel skirting.

'Hurry up,' the Senior Consultant calls through the hatch.

Anders tries to get out, pushing hard, and scratches his cheek.

Suddenly he can't move, he's stuck, his coat is caught and there's no way he can wriggle out of it.

He imagines he can hear the sound of shuffling from Jurek.

Perhaps it was nothing.

Anders pulls as hard as he can. The seams strain but don't tear. He realises that he's going to have to slide back under the bed to free his coat.

'What are you doing?' Roland Brolin calls in a brittle voice.

The little hatch in the door clatters as it is bolted shut again.

Anders sees that one pocket of his coat has caught on a loose strut. He quickly pulls it free, holds his breath and pushes himself out again.

He is filled with a rising sense of panic. He scrapes his stomach and knee, but grabs the edge of the bed with one hand and pulls himself out.

Panting, he turns round and gets unsteadily to his feet with the knife in his hand.

Jurek is lying on his side, one eye half-open in sleep, staring blindly.

Anders hurries over to the door and meets the Senior Consultant's anxious gaze through the reinforced glass and tries to smile, but stress cuts through his voice as he says:

'Open the door.'

Roland Brolin opens the hatch instead.

'Pass the knife out first.'

Anders gives him a quizzical look, then hands the knife over.

'You found something else as well,' Roland Brolin says.

'No,' Anders replies, glancing at Jurek.

'A letter.'

'There wasn't anything else.'

Jurek is starting to writhe on the floor, and is gasping weakly.

'Check his pockets,' the Senior Consultant says with a stressed smile.

'What for?'

'Because this is a search.'

Anders turns and walks cautiously to Jurek Walter. His eyes are completely shut again, but beads of sweat are starting to appear on his furrowed face.

Reluctantly Anders leans over and feels inside one of his pockets. The denim shirt pulls tighter across Jurek's shoulders and he lets out a low groan.

There's a plastic comb in the back pocket of his jeans. With trembling hands Anders checks the rest of his tight pockets.

Sweat is dripping from the tip of his nose. He has to keep blinking hard.

One of Jurek's big hands opens and closes several times.

There's nothing else in his pockets.

Anders turns back towards the reinforced glass and shakes his head. It's impossible to see if Brolin is standing outside the door. The reflection of the lamp in the ceiling is shining like a grey sun in the glass.

He has to get out now.

It's taken too long.

Anders gets to his feet and hurries over to the door. The Senior Consultant isn't there. Anders peers closer to the glass, but can't see anything.

Jurek Walter is breathing fast, like a child having a nightmare.

Anders bangs on the door. His hands thud almost soundlessly against the thick metal. He bangs again. There's no sound, nothing is happening. He taps on the glass with his wedding ring, then sees a shadow growing across the wall.

His shiver runs up his back and down his arms. With his heart pounding and adrenalin rising through his body, he turns round. He sees Jurek Walter slowly sitting up. His face is slack and his pale eyes are staring straight ahead. His mouth is still bleeding and his lips look weirdly red.

Anders is shouting and pounding at the heavy steel door, but the Senior Consultant still isn't opening it. His pulse is thudding in his head as he turns to face their patient. Jurek Walter is still sitting on the floor, and blinks at him a few times before he starts to get up.

'It's a lie,' Jurek says, dribbling blood down his chin. 'They say I'm a monster, but I'm just a human being . . .'

He doesn't have the energy to stand up and slumps back, panting, onto the floor.

'A human being,' he repeats.

With a weary gesture he puts one hand inside his shirt, pulls out a folded piece of paper and tosses it over towards Anders.

'The letter he was asking for,' he says. 'For the past seven years I've been asking to see a lawyer . . . Not because I've got any hope of getting out . . . I am who I am, but I'm still a human being . . .'

Anders crouches down and reaches for the piece of paper without taking his eyes off Jurek. The crumpled man tries to get up again, leaning on his hands, and although he sways slightly he manages to put one foot down on the floor.

Anders picks up the paper from the floor, and finally hears a rattling sound as the key is inserted into the lock of the door. He turns and stares out through the reinforced glass, feeling his legs tremble beneath him.

'You shouldn't have given me an overdose,' Jurek mutters.

Anders doesn't turn round, but he knows that Jurek Walter is standing up, staring at him.

The reinforced glass in the door is like a screen of grainy ice. He can't see who's standing on the other side turning the key in the lock.

'Open, open,' he whispers as he hears breathing behind his back.

The door slides open and Anders stumbles out of the isolation cell. He stumbles straight into the concrete wall of the corridor and hears the heavy clang as the door shuts, then the rattles as the powerful lock responds to the turn of the key.

Panting, he leans back against the cool wall. Only then does he see that it wasn't the Senior Consultant who rescued him but the young woman with the pierced cheeks.

'I don't know what happened,' she says. 'Roland must have lost it completely, he's always incredibly careful about security.'

'I'll talk to him . . .'

'Maybe he got ill . . . I think he's diabetic.'

Anders wipes his clammy hands on his doctor's coat and looks up at her again.

'Thank you for letting me out,' he says.

'I'd do anything for you,' she jokes.

He tries to give her his carefree, boyish smile, but his legs are shaking as he follows her out through the security door. She stops in the control room, then turns back towards him.

'There's only one problem with working down here,' she says. 'It's so damn quiet that you have to eat loads of sweets just to stay awake.'

'That sounds OK.'

On a monitor he can see Jurek sitting on his bed with his head in his hands. The dayroom with its television and running machine is empty.

Anders Rönn spends the rest of the day concentrating on familiarising himself with the new routines, with a doctor's round up on Ward 30, individual treatment plans and discharge tests, but his mind keeps going back to the letter in his pocket and what Jurek had said.

At ten past five Anders leaves the criminal psychology ward and emerges into the cool air. Beyond the illuminated hospital precinct the winter darkness has settled.

Anders warms his hands in his jacket pockets, and hurries across the pavement towards the large car park in front of the main entrance to the hospital.

It was full of cars when he arrived, but now it's almost empty.

He screws up his eyes and realises that there's someone standing behind his car.

'Hello!' Anders calls, walking faster.

The man turns round, rubs his hand over his mouth and moves away from the car. Senior Consultant Roland Brolin.

Anders slows down as he approaches the car and pulls his key from his pocket.

'You're expecting an apology,' Brolin says with a forced smile.

'I'd prefer not to have to speak to hospital management about what happened,' Anders says.

Brolin looks him in the eye, then holds out his left hand, palm up.

'Give me the letter,' he says calmly.

'What letter?'

'The letter Jurek wanted you to find,' he replies. 'A note, a sheet of newspaper, a piece of cardboard.'

'I found the knife that was supposed to be there.'

'That was the bait,' Brolin says. 'You don't think he'd put himself through all that pain for nothing?'

Anders looks at the Senior Consultant as he wipes sweat from his upper lip with one hand.

'What do we do if the patient wants to see a lawyer?' he asks.

'Nothing,' Brolin whispers.

'Has he ever asked you that?'

'I don't know, I wouldn't have heard, I always wear earplugs.' Brolin smiles.

'But I don't understand why . . . ?'

'You need this job,' the Senior Consultant interrupts. 'I've heard that you were bottom of your class, you're in debt, you've got no experience and no references.'

'Are you finished?'

'You should give me the letter,' Brolin replies, clenching his jaw.

'I didn't find a letter.'

Brolin looks him in the eye for a moment.

'If you ever find a letter,' he says, 'you're to give it to me without reading it.'

'I understand,' Anders says, unlocking the car door.

It seems to Anders as if the Senior Consultant looks slightly more relaxed as he gets in the car, shuts the door and starts the engine. When Brolin taps on the window he ignores him, puts the car in gear and pulls away. In the rear-view mirror Brolin stands and watches the car without smiling.

When Anders gets home he quickly shuts the front door behind him, locks it and puts the safety chain on.

His heart is beating hard in his chest – for some reason he ran from the car to the house.

From Agnes's room he can hear Petra's soothing voice. Anders smiles to himself. She's already reading *Seacrow Island* to their daughter. It's usually much later before the bedtime rituals have reached the story. It must have been a good day again today. Anders's new job has meant that Petra has risked cutting her own hours.

There's a damp patch on the hall rug around Agnes's muddy winter boots. Her woolly hat and snood are on the floor in front of the bureau. Anders goes in and puts the bottle of champagne on the kitchen table, then stands and stares out at the garden.

He's thinking about Jurek Walter's letter, and no longer knows what to do.

The branches of the big lilac are scratching at the window. He looks at the dark glass and sees his own kitchen reflected back at him. As he listens to the squeaking branches, it occurs to him that he ought to go and get the shears from the storeroom.

'Just wait a minute,' he hears Petra say. 'I'll read to the end first . . .'

Anders creeps into Agnes's room. The princess-lamp in the ceiling is on. Petra looks up from the book and meets his gaze. She's got her

light brown hair pulled up into a ponytail and is wearing her usual heart-shaped earrings. Agnes is sitting in her lap and saying repeatedly that it's gone wrong and they have to start the bit about the dog again.

Anders goes in and crouches down in front of them.

'Hello, darling,' he says.

Agnes glances at him quickly, then looks away. He pats her on the head, tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, then gets up.

'There's food left if you want to heat it up,' Petra says. 'I just have to reread this chapter before I can come and see you.'

'It all went wrong with the dog,' Agnes repeats, staring at the floor.

Anders goes into the kitchen, gets the plate of food from the fridge and puts it down on the worktop next to the microwave.

Slowly he pulls the letter out of the back pocket of his jeans and thinks of how Jurek repeated that he was a human being.

In tiny, cursive handwriting, Jurek had written a few faint sentences on the thin paper. In the top right corner the letter is addressed to a legal firm in Tensta, and simply constitutes a formal request. Jurek Walter asks for legal assistance to understand the meaning of his being sentenced to secure psychiatric care. He needs to have his rights clarified, and would like to know what possibility there is of getting the verdict reconsidered in the future.

Anders can't put a finger on why he suddenly feels unsettled, but there's something strange about the tone of the letter and the precise choice of wording, combined with the almost dyslexic spelling mistakes.

Thoughts about Jurek's words are chasing round his head as he walks into his study and takes out an envelope. He copies the address, puts the letter in the envelope, and sticks a stamp on it.

He leaves the house and heads off into the chill darkness, across the grass towards the letter-box up by the roundabout. Once he's posted the letter he stands and just watches the cars passing on Sandavägen for a while before walking back home.

The wind is making the frosted grass ripple like water. A hare races off towards the old gardens.

He opens the gate and looks up into the kitchen window. The whole house resembles a doll's house. Everything is lit up and open to view. He can see straight into the corridor, to the blue painting that has always hung there.

The door to their bedroom is open. The vacuum cleaner is in the

middle of the floor. The cable is still plugged into the socket in the wall.

Suddenly Anders sees a movement. He gasps with surprise. There's someone in the bedroom. Standing next to their bed.

Anders is about to rush inside when he realises that the person is actually standing in the garden at the back of the house.

He's simply visible through the bedroom window.

Anders runs down the paved path, past the sundial and round the corner.

The man must have heard him coming, because he's already running away. Anders can hear him forcing his way through the lilac hedge. He runs after him, holding the branches back, trying to see anything, but it's far too dark.