THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BIG BAD WOLF

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CHAPTER ONE

More RAM Now!

The invitation came in the form of a letter delivered to Ulf Varg, senior detective in Malmö's Department of Sensitive Crimes, driver of a classic silver Saab, and owner of a hearing-impaired dog known as Martin. It arrived with one other letter, an unsolicited offer from a local building company to renew his windows and, in their words, 'Do away with chilly draughts forever with our one-hundred-year guarantee'. That was absurd, thought Ulf, and smiled at the very thought. How could any firm seriously offer a century's guarantee in a world as uncertain, and as temporary, as ours? Not only would the customer be long gone by the time the guarantee expired, but the firm itself would doubtless have ceased trading. Nothing lasts forever, Ulf reminded himself: everything we see around us, people, buildings, roads, even Sweden itself would in due course disappear, leaving only traces to puzzle future archaeologists, if there were to be any. Sweden . . . We thought of our countries as permanent, but they were not. Whatever happened to Tanganyika? Countries and

civilisations waxed and waned; populations moved or died out; empires crumbled, their throne rooms deserted, their grumbling legions evaporated. Would people still speak Swedish in two or three hundred years?

No, the guarantee made no sense, other than as a cheap boast of the sort that some manufacturers might make about their over-hyped products. Ulf had recently fallen for one of these when he purchased a toothbrush which it was claimed had the effect of lifting plaque through the action of the rare and special material of which the bristles were made. It was not clear to him how this worked, and he regretted the purchase almost immediately, especially as it cost four times what a normal toothbrush cost. He would feel the same, he imagined, about new windows, even those with a one-hundred-year guarantee.

He tossed the building company's letter into the bin. But then he reminded himself that the builders, a father-and-son team, were no more than doing their job, trying to make a living in a hard world, and he mentally apologised to them. He was sorry, but new windows were not a priority for him right at the moment.

He retrieved the letter from the bin. It had been printed on cheap paper, but care had been taken with the design. At its head, underneath the name of the company, *Northern Windows*, was a photograph of the proprietor and his son. Their names were printed in italics: *Mikael* and *Loke*. Mikael was the father, who looked somewhere in his forties – although Ulf always found it difficult to estimate ages with any accuracy – and Loke was the son, who appeared to be in his early twenties, if that. Mikael, the text then explained, had worked abroad on construction before returning to Sweden to set up his own company. Loke had served an apprenticeship with a firm in Stockholm and, on its completion, had joined his father in the window business. Loke was a keen ice-hockey player, it was revealed, a sport at which his father had once been an amateur coach. Then the text turned

to windows and the need to replace them from time to time. *No window lasts forever,* the letter warned. That could be a recurring line in a poem, Ulf thought: *no window lasts forever.*

Ulf smiled. If no window lasted forever, was it wise to offer a one-hundred-year guarantee? He looked at the photograph once again. These two men were honest. He had been a detective long enough to develop that sixth sense that only long experience with erring humanity could engender: that instinct that told one when people were honest and when they were not. Care had to be taken about judging on facial appearance, but it was one of the factors that could be taken into account. Faces revealed internal processes – of course they did. We talked about looks of anguish, or haunted looks, or looks of regret. These all pointed to emotional states within. And so it was with honesty: the anxiety brought about by dissemblance could easily be translated into a small furrow here, a shifting of the gaze there. You just had to be ready to spot the signs.

Ulf thought: I never have to solicit business. I sit at my desk and my work comes to me. These two have to go out, like fishermen casting their nets upon the water, and hope that they attract clients. They can never be sure that anybody will respond, and it is easy to see how that might lead to desperation and the offering of one-hundred-year guarantees. That was entirely understandable.

He folded the letter before slipping it into the drawer in which he kept odds and ends for which he had no other particular place. Some of his windows did need attention, now that he came to think of it, and he remembered that a year or two ago he had even bought sandpaper and a tin of white paint to do something about it himself. But it had gone no further than that, and he had forgotten about it. His own handiwork, of course, would never be guaranteed for a year, let alone a century. Perhaps he would get in touch with *Northern Windows* and ask them to take a look.

He examined the second envelope. His name and address had

been handwritten, which intrigued him. Physical letters were rare enough in an age of electronic communication, and had largely disappeared, just as physical banknotes had done in Sweden. Letters had become special, and one with a personal aspect to it would always be more interesting than the dull missives of officialdom – tax demands, insurance premium reminders, and so on.

He slit open the envelope and extracted the letter within. 'Dear Ulf,' he read, 'It's over twenty years now since that day when we walked out of the Gymnasium on our last day of school. Remember? And since then a lot has happened in our lives. But now a few of us – Per and Margarita, as well as myself – have decided to organise a class reunion. It won't be anything big – just a lunch. We are hoping to invite the current principal to come and speak to us about the plans that the school has for the future. It's much bigger now and I think it's doing well. The invitation is attached and gives the details. Please let me know if you can make it – we hope you can! Best regards, Harald (Olavson).' There was a brief postscript written in a different-coloured ink. 'PS I went on to work in aviation: a landing-gear company. It pays the rent and is reasonably secure, which is all one can ask for, really. I heard that you became some sort of detective. *Selective Crimes*, Per said. Maybe you'll explain when we meet.'

Ulf looked out of the window. Harald Olavson. Of course. He saw him now, on the racing bike that he sometimes rode to school. He was remarkably thin – one of those people who seemed to carry not an ounce of spare flesh – and even the skin on his face seemed to be pulled tight, like parchment. That must have been because there was no subcutaneous fat. People said that if Harald stood side on to you, you might easily just not see him, he was so thin and insubstantial. And then Per, who had an extraordinary memory for facts and figures. They called him *Guinness*, after the *Guinness Book of Records*. And Margarita, whose ambition it had been to go to medical school and become

a doctor. She had succeeded at that, Ulf remembered, and become an army doctor. He had seen her photograph in the paper, taken when she was serving with a Swedish peacekeeping force in Mali. He would be interested in asking her about that, and could do so at the reunion, he thought. He would certainly want to attend, even though the date conflicted with an arrangement he had made with Juni, the veterinary receptionist he was now seeing. He had offered to take her to a jazz concert at which a well-known saxophonist would be performing, a player considered to be one of the best alto saxophonists in Europe.

She had been lukewarm about going – she had never liked saxophones, she said – and would probably be relieved when he suggested a change of plan. He had been surprised by her distaste for the saxophone: how could anybody dislike an instrument that Rossini, no less, had said produced the most beautiful of all sounds? Or not be interested in the invention of a man called Adolf Sax, who devised elaborate keywork that would have given rise to envy in the heart of even the most accomplished of plumbers? He would work on that. The saxophone was so versatile an instrument, and Ulf thought that he might introduce Juni to its full range, including its repertoire of early music. It was wrong to think – as he felt she did – that the sax was only about jazz.

He pulled out his phone and began to write an email. Harald had given his address, and Ulf now typed his response. He would love to come to the reunion, he said. And yes, he would bring somebody with him. He then pointed out, tactfully, that it was the Department of Sensitive Crimes, not Selective Crimes. It was not a big thing, of course, but one might as well get it right. He sent the message, and put his phone back in his pocket. It was time to go to work. *Selective Crimes* . . . really! What did people think he did? Chose what to investigate and what to ignore? He paused. That was the way things had gone. Perhaps people thought that because the police ignored so many minor matters these days.

Perhaps Selective Crimes was not an entirely inaccurate name after all. Ulf smiled. The Department of Seductive Crimes (crimes that appealed in some way)? The Department of Speluncean Crimes (crimes committed in caves)? There were numerous possibilities, should the department wish to rebrand itself, as had occasionally been suggested by the Commissioner himself, an incorrigible enthusiast for renaming and restructuring things, other than his own department, of course. The Department of Sensitive Crimes had escaped such attentions because of a precautionary memo that Ulf himself had drafted and circulated. This had argued that any interference with the department would be seen as *insensitive* in the current climate, and should therefore be avoided *sine die*. He had been proud of the inclusion of that Latin iteration of *indefinitely*. He knew that nobody in the wider police force would know what it meant, but that obscurity would add authority and his proposal would go unchallenged. That was exactly what had happened, and nothing had been done. His colleague, Blomquist, though, had looked up the expression, and over the weeks that followed Ulf had heard him using it several times with real confidence, on one occasion glancing at Ulf as he uttered it, as if expecting approbation.

'Quite so, Blomquist,' Ulf had said.

Three months later, at a ceremony marking the graduation of the latest cohort of police recruits, the Commissioner himself had said *sine die* in his speech – in an incorrect context, but Ulf had nonetheless warmed to him, because a solecism was a sign of humanity, and there was something reassuring about the stumbling of a great personage.

He parked his silver Saab in the parking place reserved for him at the police offices. He had only recently been granted the privilege of a reserved space, and felt a strange, almost schoolboyish pride in the fact that his name now appeared on a small painted sign:

Varg, Sens. Crim. Dept. His spot was at the far end of the car park, along with the places allocated to the heads of other small departments. He was next to Environmental Crime, the head of which pointedly parked his bicycle in the middle of his place, suggesting that others should similarly resort to more environmentally responsible means of transport. On the other side was Commercial Crime, fittingly occupied by a sleek Mercedes Benz. At the far end were the places allocated to more senior officers, deputy commissioners and the like. Ulf had noticed that these senior spaces were wider than those in his section, and he pointed this out to Tomas Engelman, the Head of Commercial Crime.

'Typical,' Tomas had snorted. 'Have you seen their coffee cups? Bigger. Desks? Bigger. Telephones? More buttons. Computers? Lots more RAM. I could go on.'

'Oh, well,' said Ulf. 'It doesn't make them any happier, I imagine.'

'Doesn't it?' challenged Tomas. 'I'm not so sure, Ulf. Give me a bigger desk and I'd be very happy. And my computer freezes sometimes or sends a message saying I'm almost out of memory. Give me more RAM right now and I'd be really pleased.'

'Oh, well,' repeated Ulf. He almost said something about what the Buddhists taught us about the impossibility of ever satisfying material appetites, but did not, because if one went on about Buddhism to one's colleagues one would acquire a reputation of being eccentric or other-worldly, and that could be problematic. So Ulf simply said, 'I hope you get more RAM soon, Tomas.'

'So do I,' muttered Tomas. 'If we were in the private sector, we'd have plenty of RAM, you know. My brother-in-law works for a finance firm and he gets a new laptop every year. Every year, Ulf! It doesn't matter if the old one is still working fine and has plenty of memory – that doesn't seem to matter in the private sector. You get a new laptop, no questions asked.'

Tomas shook his head, and the conversation had come to an

end, although Ulf remembered it now as he nosed the Saab into its modest parking place. He looked at his watch and saw that he had twenty minutes in hand, the traffic, for some reason, having been unexpectedly light. Twenty minutes was perfect: he would go to the coffee bar opposite the office and phone Juni about the reunion. Then he would read his brother's column in that day's newspaper. Ulf's brother, Björn, the leader of a minority political party, the Moderate Extremists, had been given a weekly column in one of the local papers. Ulf had not been pleased by this development, as he disagreed with Björn on most matters, but he nonetheless felt he had to read what he had to say, even if only to be prepared for the comments the column would provoke amongst his colleagues. He was tired of telling people that he did not share his brother's opinions, and had become used simply to shrugging when people tackled him on the subject. 'He's him and I'm me,' he would say, and leave it at that.

There were few people in the coffee bar when Ulf went in. It was not uncommon for one or two colleagues to be ensconced within, but not now, and Ulf settled unobserved at his favourite table near the window. He looked at his watch: Juni would already be at work, as Dr Håkansson liked to open his veterinary clinic early. She did not mind his calling her at the office, though, unless she was assisting, as she sometimes did, with some veterinary procedure. He had once called her when she was trying to push a reluctant cat back into its carrier, and their conversation had been punctuated with feline growls and gasps of concern from an anxious owner. They had not talked for long.

She answered immediately.

'I'm sitting here having coffee,' he said. 'Thinking about you.'

He had not planned to say that; it came out, naturally, in a spontaneous burst of affection.

She sounded pleased. 'And I was thinking about you only fifteen minutes ago.' She paused. 'Nice thoughts, of course.'

'That's good to know.'

He told her about the reunion and about the clash with the jazz concert. She said that she did not mind at all.

'I'm going to have to change your view about the sax,' he said.

She caught her breath. 'About sex?' she asked.

'No,' said Ulf, and laughed. 'Not sex: sax. About the saxophone.'

The woman behind the bar glanced in his direction. She raised an eyebrow.

'Oh, of course,' said Juni. 'I thought you said sex. That's what it sounded like.'

'Well, it wasn't. Anyway, this reunion . . . it could be a bit dull for you, I suppose.'

She assured him that it would not be. 'I'd like to meet the people you were at school with,' she said.

'They're pretty average. Nothing spectacular.'

She steered the conversation towards an end. Dr Håkansson had buzzed his buzzer and she would need to see what he needed. They agreed to meet for dinner the following day. Ulf asked Juni to come to his apartment, where he would cook crab linguine. He knew she liked that.

'Yes, I do like it,' she said. 'But I don't like it so much that I want to eat it all the time.'

He felt slightly hurt by this. How many times had he made her crab linguine? He had lost count, but that in itself did not mean that he made it too often.

'I could make something else,' he said, trying not to sound offended.

'No. Crab linguine will be fine. I like it – I really do.'

Dr Håkansson buzzed again, and they rang off. Ulf took that morning's newspaper from the rack near the table, his eye caught by a boxed headline on the front page. *How I'd deal with the graffiti problem: Björn Varg, page 4.* Ulf's heart sank. This was his brother playing to the gallery, as his party always did. He doubted

whether his brother believed in half the policies he proposed; the criterion for their adoption, as far as Ulf could make out, being only that they would resonate with dyspeptic and dissatisfied people – people who felt things were fundamentally wrong, and were looking for a simple, viscerally appealing solution.

With an inner sigh, Ulf turned to page 4. There was a photograph of his brother, taken at least ten years ago and projecting an image of confidence and virility. And there, beneath the photograph, was the weekly diatribe.

'Every day,' Björn wrote, 'the senses of ordinary people are assailed by a form of visual pollution that scars our cities. Buildings, walls, even monuments are defaced by highly coloured scrawls, meaningless to most of us and intelligible only to the young vandals who perpetrate them. The police do nothing. The civic authorities say they are powerless, and the politicians don't even bother to comment on the issue. Well, I say that we have had enough! And I'll say it again, just in case the authorities are not listening: *we have had enough!*'

That was a favourite catchphrase of the Moderate Extremists. It was trite, Ulf thought, but it was also highly effective. Most people, he suspected, felt that they had had enough, and would be pleased to hear politicians declare that they shared their feeling. It did not matter too much what they had had enough of – it was the satiety that counted.

'Is there anything we can do?' the column continued. 'The answer is a resounding *yes*. We could stop this epidemic of graffiti immediately – tomorrow, even – if we spray-painted any young vandals caught doing it. They should be spray-painted from head to toe with paint that would take a few days, or perhaps even longer, to peel off. That would stop them in their tracks – right then and there.

'Of course, the usual lawyers will raise a howl of protest,' Björn continued. 'They always do. I say: let them. Be my guest. But lawyers should not be allowed to dictate whom we decide to

spray-paint. That is a political, not a legal decision. I would simply tell these objectors: *we have had enough!*'

Ulf put the paper down with a sigh. The woman behind the counter looked at him. 'Your brother?' she called out.

Ulf made a gesture of helplessness. 'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'People approve of him, you know,' said the woman. 'He's a direct speaker. Even when he's talking nonsense.'

Ulf laughed. 'Which is most of the time.'

'Well, we're a free country,' said the woman. 'And there's a place for people who talk nonsense.'

'I know,' said Ulf. And then, as if to affirm what she had just said, he saw Blomquist on the other side of the road, preparing to cross. It was too early in the morning for Blomquist, Ulf thought: he simply could not face it.

'I have to dash,' he said to the woman behind the counter.

The woman smiled. 'Poor Blomquist,' she said.

Ulf felt guilty. He hesitated. No, if he stayed, he would be buttonholed by Blomquist on something or other. Vitamins. Skin complaints. Solar flares. The latest developments in wind turbine technology. The list was a long one – seemingly endless.

Ulf apologised to the woman. 'I really have to get to the office,' he said. 'We're very busy.'

They were not. There had been very little crime over the last two weeks, largely because criminals were on holiday, mostly in Aegean resorts. They would come back at the end of August and begin to offend again, but until then the country seemed to be peaceful, even somnolent. If only it could be like this all the time, thought Ulf, wistfully. If only Sweden could be how it used to be. He stopped himself: that was the sort of nostalgia that the Moderate Extremists played upon, and he was determined that he would not fall into their trap. There had never been a golden age of contentment and good behaviour. There had always been dark forces beneath the peaceful exterior. Always.

He made his way towards the door, meeting Blomquist just as he stepped outside.

'I'm so sorry, Blomquist,' he said. 'I seem to be leaving just as you're arriving.'

'Synchronicity,' said Blomquist. 'Do you know that many of the events we think are coincidental are, in fact, the result of—'

'I'm so sorry, Blomquist,' Ulf repeated. 'We must talk about synchronicity some other time.'

'Oh, I would like that,' said Blomquist. 'When shall we do that, do you think?'

Ulf smiled, but did not answer, and Blomquist, looking down, went past him into the coffee bar. Ulf crossed the street. Outside the main door of the police building, he hesitated, and almost retraced his steps to join Blomquist, but did not. Moments of hesitation may occasionally be more morally significant than moments of action. This was the case right now, but Ulf could not quite face going back into the coffee bar. So he did not, and left his conscience to sort out the matter later on, which it might or might not do. One could never tell.