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# When the Devil Holds the Candle

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## CHAPTER 1

The courthouse. September 4, 4 p.m.

Jacob Skarre glanced at his watch. His shift was over. He slipped a book out of his inside jacket pocket and read the poem on the first page. It's like playing Virtual Reality, he thought. Poof ! - and you're in a different landscape. The door to the corridor stood open, and suddenly he was aware that someone was watching him. Whoever it was was just beyond what he could see with his excellent peripheral vision. A vibration, light as a feather, barely perceptible, finally reached him. He closed his book.

"Can I help you?"

This woman didn't move, just stood there staring at him with an odd expression. Skarre looked at her tense face and thought that she seemed familiar. She was no longer young, maybe about 60, wearing a coat and dark boots. A scarf around her neck. Enough of the pattern was discernible under her chin. The design seemed a sharp contrast to what she most likely possessed in the way of speed and elegance: racehorses with jockeys in colourful silks against a dark blue background. She had a wide, heavy face that was elongated by a prominent chin. Her eyebrows were dark and had grown almost together. She was clutching a handbag against her stomach. But most noticeable of all was her gaze. In that pale face her eyes were blazing. They fixed him with a tremendous force and he could not escape them. Then he remembered who she was. What an odd coincidence, he thought, and waited in suspense. He sat there as if riveted by the probing silence. Any moment now she was going to say something momentous.

"It has to do with a missing person," was what she said.

Her voice was rough. A rusty tool creaking into motion after a long repose. Behind her white forehead burned a fire. Skarre could see the flickering glow in her irises. He was trying not to make assumptions, but obviously she was in some way possessed. Gradually it came to him what sort of person he was dealing with. In his mind he rehearsed the day's reports, but he could not recall whether any patients had been listed as missing from the psychiatric institutes in the district. She was breathing hard, as if it had cost her immeasurable effort to come here. But she had made up her mind, and at last had been driven by something. Skarre wondered how she had made it past the reception area and Mrs Brenningen's eagle eye, coming straight to his office without anyone stopping her.

"Who is it that's missing?" he asked in a friendly voice.

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She kept staring at him. He met her gaze with the same force to see if she would flinch. Her expression turned to one of confusion.

"I know where he is."

Skarre was startled. "So you know where he is? He's not missing, then?"

"He probably won't live much longer," she said. Her thin lips began to quiver.

"Who are we talking about?" Skarre said. And then, because he guessed who it might be. "Do you mean your husband?"

"Yes. My husband."

She nodded resolutely. Stood there, straightbacked and unmoving, her handbag still pressed to her stomach. Skarre leaned back in his chair.

"Your husband is sick, and you're worried about him. Is he old?"

It was an inappropriate question. Life is life, as long as a person is alive and means something, maybe everything, to another being. He regretted the question and picked up his pen from the desk, twirling it between his fingers.

"He's almost like a child," she said sadly.

He was surprised at her response. What was she really talking about? The man was sick, possibly dying. And senile, it occurred to him. Regressing to his childhood. At the same time Skarre had a strange feeling that she was trying to tell him something else. Her coat was threadbare at the lapels, and the middle button had been sewn on rather badly, creating a fold in the fabric. Why am I noticing these things? he thought.

"Do you live far from here?" He glanced at his watch. Perhaps she could afford a taxi.

She straightened her shoulders. "Prins Oscars gate 17." She enunciated the street name with crisp consonants. "I didn't mean to bother you," she said.

Skarre stood up. "Do you need help getting home?"

She was still staring into his eyes. As if there was in them something that she wanted to take away with her. A glow, a memory of something very much alive, which the young officer was. Skarre had a weird sensation, the sort of thing that happens only rarely, when the body reacts on impulse. He lowered his gaze and saw that the short blond hairs on his arms were standing on end. At the same moment the woman turned slowly around and walked to the door. She took short, awkward steps, as if she were trying to hide something. He went back to his chair. It was 4.03 p.m. For his amusement, he scribbled a few notes on his pad.

"A woman of about 60 arrives at the office at 4 p.m. She seems confused. Says her husband is missing, that he doesn't have long to live. Wearing a brown coat with a blue scarf at her neck. Brown handbag, black boots. Possibly mentally disturbed. Left after a few minutes. Refused offer of help to get home."

He sat there, turning her visit over in his mind. Probably she was just a lost soul; there were so many of them nowadays. After a while he folded the piece of paper and stuck it into his shirt pocket. The incident didn't belong in his daily report.

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HAS ANYONE SEEN ANDREAS? That was the headline in the town's largest newspaper, set in bold type. That's the way newspapers express themselves, using an informal tone to address us directly, as if we were on first-name terms and have known each other a long time. We're supposed to break down the barriers of formality and use a straightforward, youthful tone, in this fresh, onward-storming society. So even though very few people actually knew him or used his first name, let's just cut right to the chase and ask: Has anyone seen Andreas?

And the picture of him. A nice-looking boy of 18, with a thin face and unruly hair. I say "nicelooking", I'm generous enough to admit that. So handsome that things came easily to him. He strutted around with that handsome face of his and took things for granted. It's a familiar pattern, but it does no-one any good to look like that. Handsome in a timeless, classic sense. A charming boy. It costs me a bit to use that word, but all the same . . . charming.

On the afternoon of September 1, he left his house on Cappelens gate. He said nothing about where he was off to. Where are you going? Out. That's the kind of answer you give at that age. A sort of infinite guardedness. You think you're somebody so exceptional. And his mother didn't have the sense to press him. Maybe she used his obstinacy as food for her martyrdom. Her son was in the process of leaving her, and she hated that fact. But it's really a matter of respect. She ought to have raised the boy so that it would be unthinkable for him not to reply in a polite and precise manner. I'm going out, well, with someone. We're thinking of going into town. I'll be home before midnight. Surely that's not too much to ask, is it? But she had failed, as have so many others. That's what happens when you invest all of your energy in yourself, your own life, your own sorrow. I know what I'm talking about. And the sorrow was going to get worse. He never came home.

Yes, I've seen Andreas. I can see him whenever I like. A lot of people are going to be surprised when he's finally found. And of course they'll speculate, they'll guess, and write up reports, and carry on discussions and fill numerous files. Everyone with his own theory. And all wrong, of course. People howl with many voices. In the midst of that din I've lived in silence for almost 60 years. My name is Irma. At last I'm the one who's doing the talking. I won't take much time, and I'm not saying that I have a monopoly on the truth. But what you're reading now is my version.

A childhood memory comes back to me. I can summon it up whenever I like. I'm standing in the porch with one hand on the door knob. It's quiet inside, but I know

that they're there. Yet there's not a sound to be heard. I open the door very quietly and walk into the kitchen. Mother is standing at the counter, lifting the skin from a boiled mackerel. I can still recreate the smell in my nose, a cloying, unpleasant odour. She shifts her heavy body a little, indicating vaguely that she has noticed my presence. Father is busy over by the window. He's pressing putty into the cracks in the frame to keep the draught out. It's an old house. The putty is white and soft like clay, with a dry, chalk-like smell. My two sisters are sitting at the kitchen table, both busy with books and papers. I remember that pale, almost nauseating light when the sun cast its yellow rays into the green kitchen. I'm maybe six years old. Instinctively I'm scared of making any noise. I stand there, all alone, and stare at them. They're all busy with something. I feel very useless, almost in the way, as if I'd been born too late. I often thought I might have been an accident that they were unable to stop. There are two years between my sisters. I came along eight years later. What could have made my mother want another child after such a long time? But the idea that I might have been an unloved obligation makes me miserable. I've had it for so long, it's a well-worn idea.

This memory is so real that I can feel the hem of my dress tickling my knee. I'm standing in the yellowish-green light and noticing how alone I am. No-one says hello. I'm the youngest. Not doing anything important. I don't mean that my father should have stopped what he was doing, maybe lifted me up and tossed me in the air. I was too heavy for him. He had rheumatism, and I was big and chubby, with bones like a horse. That's what mother used to say. Like a horse. It was just Irma who had come in. Nothing to make a fuss about. Their heads turning imperceptibly, in case it was someone important, and then discovering that it was only Irma. We were here first, their looks said.

Their indifference took my breath away. I had the same feeling as when I persuaded Mother to tell me about when I was born. And she shrugged, but admitted that it had happened in the middle of the night, during a terrible storm. Thunder and a fierce wind. It made me happy to think that I had arrived in the world with a crash and a roar. But then she added, with a dry laugh, that the whole thing was over in a matter of minutes. You slid right out like a kitten, she said, and my good feeling drained away.

I waited, my knees locked, my feet planted on the floor. I'd been gone for quite a while, after all. Anything could have happened. We lived near the sea, didn't we? Ships from other countries regularly docked in the harbour. Sailors swarmed through the streets, staring at anyone over the age of ten. Well, I was six, but I was as sturdy as a horse, as I mentioned. Or I could have been lying with a broken leg or arm on the pavement near Gartnerhall, where we often played on the flat roof. Later, three Alsatians stood guard up there, but before that happened we used to play on the roof there, and I might have fallen over the edge. Or I could have been crushed under the wheels of a big lorry. Sometimes they have 20 tyres, and not even my big bones would survive that. But they were never worried. Not about things like that. About other things, yes. If I was holding an apple, had someone given it to me? I hadn't pinched it, had I? No? Well, did I thank them nicely? Had they asked me to say hello to my mother and father?

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My brain was churning over to think up some kind of task. Some way that I could make my way into the companionship that I felt they shared. Not that they turned me away, just that they didn't invite me in. I'll tell you one thing: those four people shared an aura. It was strong and clear, and reddish-brown, and it hardly flickered at all, the way it does for the rest of us. It was wrapped around them as tightly as a barrel hoop, and I was on the outside, enveloped in a colourless fog. The solution was to do something! The person who is doing something cannot be overlooked, but I couldn't think of anything. I didn't have any homework because this was before I had started school. That's why I just stood there, staring. At the boiled mackerel, at all the books lying around. At Father, who was working carefully and quietly. If only he would have given me a piece of that white putty! To roll between my fingers.

For a paralysing second I was struck by something that I think is important; important in order to explain both to myself and to you, who are reading this, how it could happen. The whole thing with Andreas. I suddenly became aware of the tremendous set of rules governing that room. In the silence, in the hands that were working, in the closed faces. A set of rules I had to submit to and follow to the letter. I was still standing in the silence of the kitchen, I felt that set of rules descend on me like a cage from the ceiling. And it struck me with enormous force: within that set of rules I was invulnerable! Within that clear framework of diligence and propriety, no-one could touch me. The concept of "within" meant the possibility of being around people without anyone looking askance, without offending anybody, and at the same time feeling a sense of peace because you were like everyone else. You thought the same way. But in my mind I saw a narrow street with high walls. It was to be my life. And a terrible sadness overwhelmed me. Until that moment I might have believed in Freedom, the way children do; they believe that anything is possible. But I made a decision, even though I was so young and might not have understood it all. I obeyed a primeval instinct for survival. I didn't want to be alone. I'd rather be like them and follow the rules. But something departed at that instant - it rose up and flew off and it vanished for ever. That's why I remember the moment so clearly. There in the kitchen, in the yellow-green light, at the age of six, I lost my freedom.

That silent, well-mannered child. In Christmas and birthday pictures I'm sitting on my mother's knee and looking at the camera with a pious smile. Now I have an iron jaw that shoots pain up into my temples. How could things have ended up this way? No doubt there are many different reasons, and some of it can be put down to pure coincidence, the fact that our paths crossed on one particular evening. But what about the actual crime? The impulse itself, where does that come from? When does murder occur? In such and such a place, at such and such a moment in time? In this case I can share the blame with circumstance. The fact that he stepped into my path, that he was the sort of person he was. Because with him I was no longer Irma. I was Irma with Andreas. And that was not the same as Irma with Ingemar. Or Irma with Runi. Chemistry, you know. Each time a new formula is created. Irma and Andreas destroyed each other. Is that true? Does it emerge over a period of years? Does the crime lie dormant in the body's individual coding? Is the murder a result of a long, inevitable process? Of necessity, I have to view my life in the light of the horrible thing that happened, and I have to view that horrible thing in the light of what has been my life. Which is what everyone around me will do. They'll look in my past life

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for something that could explain whatever part of it can be explained. The rest will be left to float in a grey sea of theories.

But to get back to the past: I was standing there, in the silence of the kitchen. My wordless presence made the silence shrill. It had felt so beautiful, but now they couldn't stand it any more. Mother turned around and crossed the room. She bent down and sniffed at my hair.

"Your hair needs washing," she said. "It smells."

For a moment I considered going to fetch my art supplies. I could smell the oily scent of the pastels I liked to use. But I left the kitchen, went out to the garden, over the fence, past the abandoned smithy and into the woods. Among the spruce trees there was a pleasant, grey-green darkness. I was wearing brown sandals, and on the dry path I came across an ant hill. I poked at it with a twig, gleeful at the chaos I was able to create, a catastrophe in that wellordered society that might take weeks to repair. The desire to destroy! The feeling of joyous power as I scraped inside that ant hill with the twig. It felt good. I looked around for something to feed them. A dead mouse, something like that. Then I could have stood there and watched while they devoured it. They would have dropped everything and forgotten about the catastrophe; having something to devour would come first, I was sure of that. But I didn't find anything, so I kept on walking. I came to a derelict farmhouse, sat down on the front steps, and thought about the story of the people who once lived there. Gustav and Inger and their twelve children. Uno, Sekunda, Trevor, Firmin, Femmer, Sexus, Syver, Otto, Nils, Tidemann, Ellef and Tollef. It was incomprehensible, nevertheless true: none of them is now alive.

Yes. The God that I don't believe in knows that I've seen Andreas. I think back to that terrifying moment when I felt it coming, the desire to destroy him. At the same instant I saw my own face reflected in a windowpane. And I remember the feeling, a sweet pressure, like warm oil running through my body. The certainty that this was evil. My face in the bluish glass. The hideous, evil person you become when the Devil holds the candle.