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The Fire Witness

Written by Lars Kepler

Translated from the Swedish by Laura A. Wideburg

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THE FIRE WITNESS

LARS KEPLER

Translated from the Swedish by Laura A. Wideburg



blue door

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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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A medium is someone who claims to have paranormal talent: the ability to interpret circumstances that lie beyond the limits of science.

Some mediums act as intermediaries to the dead at séances while others offer guidance based on, for example, the reading of tarot cards.

Humans have tried to contact the dead through mediums since the beginning of history. One thousand years before the birth of Christ, King Saul of Israel sought advice from the spirit of the recently deceased prophet Samuel.

All over the world, the police accept the help of psychics and mediums when they are baffled by a case. This happens several times a year, even though there is not a single documented instance where a medium has actually solved a crime.

Elisabet Grim is fifty-three years old. Her hair is streaked with grey, but her eyes are bright and happy, and when she smiles, one of her front teeth juts out impishly.

She is a nurse at Birgittagården, a state-approved home for especially troubled girls north of Sundsvall. It's a small, privately owned residence. Rarely are there more than eight girls there at a time. They range from twelve to seventeen in age. Many are drug addicts when they arrive. Almost all have a history of self-injury—eating disorders, for instance. Some can be violent. For these girls, there is no alternative to Birgittagården, with its alarms and double-locked doors. The next step would be prison or forced confinement in a psychiatric unit. This home, by comparison, is a hopeful place, with the expectation that the girls can make it back someday to open care.

As Elisabet often says, "It's the nice girls who end up here."

Right now, Elisabet is savouring the last bite of a bittersweet bar of chocolate. She can feel her shoulders begin to relax.

The day started well but the evening was hard. There were classes in the morning, and in the afternoon, the girls spent time at the lake. After the evening meal, the housemother went home, leaving Elisabet in charge on her own. The night staff was recently let go when the company changed hands. Elisabet had sat in the nurse's office, catching up with reports, while the girls watched television, which they were allowed to do until ten.

And then she'd heard the yelling. It was loud, very loud. She'd hurried to the television room, where Miranda was beating up tiny Tuula. Miranda was screaming that Tuula was a slut and a whore. She'd yanked the little girl off the sofa and was kicking her in the back.

It was not unusual for Miranda to explode violently. Elisabet was used to her outbursts. She pulled her away from Tuula, and Miranda slapped Elisabet in the face. Elisabet was used to that, too. Without further discussion she led Miranda down the hall to the isolation room. Elisabet wished Miranda a good night, but Miranda didn't answer. She just sat on the bed and studied the floor with a secretive smile as the nurse shut and locked the door behind her.

Elisabet was scheduled to have a private talk with the new girl, Vicky Bennet, but after the conflict, she found she was exhausted and couldn't face it. When Vicky came by and timidly mentioned that it was her turn for a chat, Elisabet put her off. This made Vicky so unhappy, she broke a teacup and slashed her stomach and wrists with the sharpest piece.

When Elisabet checked on her a while later, Vicky was sitting in her room with her hands in front of her face and blood running down her arms.

The wounds were superficial. Elisabet washed the blood off, wrapped gauze around the girl's wrists, and put a Band-Aid on her stomach. And Elisabet comforted her, soothing her with sweet names, telling her not to worry, coaxing her until a tiny smile crossed the troubled girl's face. For the third night in a row, Elisabet gave the girl ten milligrams of Sonata so she could sleep.

All the girls are finally asleep and Birgittagården is quiet. Outside the office window, the September darkness has settled on the forest, but Himmelsjö Lake's smooth surface shines like mother-of-pearl. Elisabet sits in front of her computer entering the evening's events into the log.

It's almost midnight and she realises she hasn't taken her sleeping pill yet. *My own little drug*, she calls it. Difficult days followed by nights on call are interfering with her sleep. She needs a few hours of rest; ten milligrams of Stilnoct by ten and she's asleep by eleven. She pulls her shawl tight and thinks that a glass of red wine would hit the spot right now. She longs for her own bed, where she can curl up with a book, or with her husband, Daniel. But not tonight; she's on call and has to stay here.

In the yard outside, Buster begins to bark. Insistently, stridently.

It's very late. She's usually asleep by now. She takes her pill, shuts down her computer. She grows aware of the sounds she's making: the hiss of her chair's hydraulic lift as she stands; the creak of the tiles beneath her feet as she moves to the window. She tries to look out, but all she can see is the reflection of her face. And of the door gliding open behind her.

Must be the draught, she thinks. *The tile stove in the dining room draws such a great deal of air.*

She shakes off the disquiet she feels and switches off the lamp before she turns around.

Now the door is wide open. She shudders faintly, and steps through it. The lights are on in the hallway between the dining room and the girls' bedrooms. *I should check the tile stove, she thinks; make sure the lids are shut.* But there is whispering coming from one of the bedrooms.

At first all Elisabet hears is a delicate hiss. The whisper is hardly perceptible. Then she hears words.

“It’s your turn to close your eyes,” someone murmurs.

Elisabet keeps still, staring so hard down the hall her eyes are frozen open. *It must be one of the girls talking in her sleep*, she thinks. Then there’s a noise, like an over-ripe peach dropping on the floor. Then another, heavy and wet. A table leg scrapes the floor and there’s the sound of two more peaches falling.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elisabet catches a movement, a shadow gliding past. She turns around and sees the door to the dining room slowly close.

“Wait!” she calls out, even while trying to convince herself it’s nothing; it must be the draught.

She grabs the doorknob to the dining room, but something stops the door from opening and she has to yank it before it finally gives way. Stepping inside, she can see herself in the dull reflection from the scratched dining-room table, and again in the brass fire doors of the tile stove. She checks it: the lids are all shut. The stove suddenly knocks, and Elisabet takes a quick step back, tilting over a chair. It’s nothing. Just the slipping of a log.

She heads to her room, pausing outside the girls’ bedrooms. She detects a sour, slightly metallic aroma. She searches for movement in the

hallway, but all is still. To the right are the bathrooms and the alcove leading to the isolation room. Miranda should be fast asleep in there. The peephole in the door glimmers weakly.

Now, again, there's that light voice, whispering.

"It's time to be quiet," Elisabet calls out.

A series of quick thuds. It's hard to locate the noise, but it sounds as if Miranda is lying in bed and kicking her bare feet against the wall. Elisabet decides to check on her through the peephole. It is then that she sees a shadowy figure in the alcove. With a gasp, she backs away. She knows how dangerous the situation is, but fear makes her slow; her body feels as if it's moving in the heavy water of a dream. But the creaking of the floor startles her awake, and she whirls around and starts to run.

A soft voice behind her urges her to stop, but she knows she mustn't.

Elisabet makes it to the front door. Throwing open the lock, she races out into the cool air of the night. She slips on the front steps, smacking her hip and twisting a leg beneath her. Her ankle hurts so badly she cries out, and she crawls for a moment, losing her slippers. Then she forces herself to her feet.

The dog is barking at her. He runs circles around her as she limps away across the gravel driveway. She knows there is no escape in the forest, and it's several hours' walk to the closest farm, so she drags herself behind the drying shed, towards the former brewery. Hands shaking, she opens the door, slips inside, and pulls the door tight.

"Oh God! Oh God!"

She searches her pockets for her mobile, but her hands jerk so badly she drops the phone. The back bursts off and the battery flies out. She scrambles to pick up the pieces as she listens to the footsteps crunch on the gravel.

She crawls to the low window and peers out. Buster, who has followed her, scratches frantically at the door. Elisabet creeps over to the masonry fireplace and crouches behind the woodpile, where with uncooperative hands she tries to shove the battery back into place.

The door flies open. There's nowhere to go.

She can see the boots, the twisted face, the raised hammer, its heft and shine. She listens to the voice, nods, and then covers her face with her hands.

The shadowy figure pauses a moment before knocking her flat on the ground, holding her down, and smashing her hard. Along the hairline, her forehead burns. Her sight is gone, and she's in agony, but the

warm blood running over her ears and down the sides of her throat feels like a caress.

The next blow lands in the same spot. Her head is knocked askew and now the only thing she knows is how to breathe. She thinks how wonderfully sweet oxygen is.

She cannot feel her body jerk from the next round of blows. She cannot tell when the keys to the office and the isolation room are taken from her pocket. She cannot see her body lying on the floor or the dog sneaking in and tentatively lapping up the blood leaking from her crushed head. She cannot sense her life ebb away.

Someone has left a large red apple on the table. It gleams and looks wonderfully tasty. Perhaps she'll just eat the whole thing and then pretend she knows nothing about it. She'll sit there looking glum, ignore the harangues, and refuse to answer their questions.

She reaches for the apple, but her fingers sink into cold, mushy flesh. It's completely rotten.

Nina Molander wakes up as she jerks her hand away. It's the middle of the night. She's lying in her bed. The only thing she hears is the dog barking in the yard. This new drug makes her wake at night. She has to get up and go to the toilet. She needs to take the drug, even though it makes her feet and calves swell. Without it, dark thoughts consume her to the point where she no longer cares about anything and can't get out of bed. She knows she needs something to look forward to instead of thoughts about death.

Nina throws off her blanket and sets her feet on the warm wooden floor. She's fifteen years old, with straight blond hair, wide hips, and large breasts. Her white flannel nightgown is tight around her belly.

In the hallway, the only light on is the green emergency exit sign. She hears whispers behind one of the doors. Nina thinks the other girls are having a party and didn't invite her. *As if I'd ever want to go.*

She can smell cinders, an old fire that has gone out. The dog starts barking again. Nina doesn't worry about whether she's quiet or not. She

feels like slamming the door over and over. She doesn't give a damn that Almira will get angry and throw things at her.

The floor is colder out in the hall. The old tiles creak. She heads towards the bathroom, but stops when she steps in a wet patch. A dark pool is spreading from beneath the door of the isolation room where Miranda is sleeping. Nina doesn't know what to do at first, but then she sees that the key to the room has been left in the lock.

That's weird.

She opens the door, walks inside, and flips on the light. There's blood everywhere; it runs down the walls. Miranda is lying on the bed.

Nina takes a few steps backwards and sees bloody shoe prints on the floor. She thinks she's going to faint. She doesn't notice that she's peeing herself.

Back in the hall, she opens the door to the next room, and crouches down to shake Caroline's shoulder.

"Miranda's hurt," she whispers. "I think Miranda's hurt."

"What the hell are you doing in my room?" Caroline asks as she sits up. "What time is it anyway?"

Nina stops whispering. "There's blood all over the floor!"

Nina can hardly breathe as she looks into Caroline's eyes. She needs to make her understand, and she's surprised when she realises that she's screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Shut up!" Caroline hisses as she gets out of bed. "Calm down!"

Nina's screams have woken the other girls. Alarmed voices ring out from the other rooms.

"Come and see for yourself," Nina says, and she begins to scratch her arms. "Miranda looks weird. You've got to take a look at her! You've got to!"

"Can you please cool it? I'll look, but I'm sure—"

Another scream erupts in the hallway. Caroline scrambles out of her bedroom. Tuula is staring into the isolation room and her eyes are as wide as saucers.

Indie walks out of her room, too, scratching her armpit.

Caroline pulls Tuula away and catches sight of the blood on the walls and Miranda's pale body. She blocks Indie, thinking that no one should have to see another suicide.

"There's been an accident," she explains quickly. "Can you ask everyone to go to the dining room, Indie?"

"What's wrong with Miranda?" Indie asks.

"We have to wake up Elisabet."

Lu Chu and Almira come out of their double room. Lu Chu is wearing only pyjama bottoms and Almira is wrapped in a blanket.

“Go to the dining room,” Indie orders.

“Don’t I have time to wash my face first?” Lu Chu pouts.

“Take Tuula with you.”

“What the fuck is going on?” asks Almira.

“We don’t know,” Caroline says.

While Indie tries to gather everyone in the dining room, Caroline rushes to the staff room. She knows that Elisabet takes sleeping pills and never hears when the girls get up and wander around at night. Caroline bangs on the door as loud as she can.

“Elisabet, you have to wake up!” she yells.

Nothing happens.

Caroline hurries past the registration room and over to the nurse’s office. The door is open and she runs to the telephone and calls Daniel.

There’s static on the line.

Indie and Nina press in at the office door. Nina is shaking and her lips are white.

“Go and wait in the dining room!” Caroline snaps.

“But the blood! Did you see all that blood?” Nina says and scratches her arm furiously.

“Daniel Grim,” a sleepy voice says on the other end of the line.

“It’s me, Caroline. There’s been an accident and I can’t wake Elisabet. I called you because I don’t know what else to do.”

“There’s blood all over my feet!” screams Nina. “I have blood all over my feet!”

“Calm down!” Indie shouts at her as she tries to pull Nina out of the office.

“What’s going on?” Daniel asks. His voice is sharper now and in control.

“Miranda’s in the cell, but it’s all full of blood,” Caroline says. She swallows. “I don’t know what we should—”

“Is she seriously hurt?” asks Daniel.

“Yes, I think so . . . or I—”

“Caroline,” Daniel says. “I’m going to call for an ambulance. And then—”

“What should I do? What should I—”

“Go and wake Elisabet.”

The emergency centre in Sundsvall is in a three-storey redbrick building on Björneborgsgatan next to Bäckgatan. Jasmin usually has no problem working nights, but at the moment she's having trouble staying awake. It's four in the morning and the witching hour has passed. She sits at her computer with her headset on, blowing on her coffee. Laughter pours out from the cafeteria. The evening newspaper reported that one of the centre's police officers might have earned extra cash as a phone sex worker. The reality is likely more complicated than that, but at this hour, nothing could be funnier than the idea that two very different kinds of calls have been coming into the emergency centre.

Jasmin stares out of the window. There is no light in the sky yet. A truck thunders past.

She puts down her mug to answer an incoming call.

"SOS 112. What's going on?"

"My name is Daniel Grim and I'm a therapist at Birgittagården. One of the girls has just called me . . . You have to send someone to the home right away."

"Can you give me more details?" Jasmin searches for Birgittagården on her computer.

"I don't know anything. One of the girls called, but I didn't really understand what she was saying. She was crying . . . Everybody was screaming in the background . . . The girl said there was blood everywhere."

Jasmin signals to her colleague, Ingrid Sandén, that more operators are needed on this call.

“Are you at the scene now?” Ingrid asks as Jasmin tries to refine her search.

“I was at home asleep when they called—”

“You are talking about Birgittagården north of Sunnås?” asks Jasmin.

“Hurry, please!” The man’s voice is shaking.

“We’re sending police and an ambulance to Birgittagården, north of Sunnås,” Jasmin says clearly to give the man time to correct her if she’s wrong.

She turns away for a moment to issue the alarm, and Ingrid picks up the questioning.

“Isn’t Birgittagården a youth home?”

“Yes, for girls.”

“Shouldn’t there be staff on the premises?”

“Yes, my wife, Elisabet, is on duty tonight. I’m going to call her now . . . I don’t know what’s happening . . . I know nothing . . .”

Ingrid can see blue lights flash across the deserted street as the first car pulls out of the garage. “The police are on their way,” she says in a calming voice.

The turn-off from Highway 86 leads directly into the dark forest and toward Lake Himmelsjö and Birgittagården. The car's headlights play between the tall trunks of the pine trees. "Have you been there before?" asks Rolf Wikner as he shifts into fourth gear.

"Yes, a few years ago when a girl tried to set fire to one of the buildings," Sonja Rask says.

"Why the hell can't anyone reach the person on duty?" Rolf mutters.

"They're probably too busy, no matter what's going on."

"I wish we knew more."

"So do I."

The officers fall silent so they can hear the voices coming over the police radio. An ambulance is on its way and another police car has been dispatched.

The gravel road runs completely straight. It's in need of resurfacing, and their tyres thunder across the potholes. Little missiles of gravel strike their fender, as tree trunks flicker past and flashes of blue light stab far into the forest. As soon as they reach the yard between Birgittagården's dark-red buildings, Sonja reports in.

A girl wearing nothing but a nightgown is standing on the front steps. Her eyes are wide open but her face is pale. Rolf and Sonja get out of the car and hurry towards her. The pulsing blue light swirls all around them. The girl doesn't appear to notice.

A dog is barking excitedly.

"Is someone hurt?" asks Rolf in a loud voice. "Is there someone who needs help?"

The girl waves vaguely towards the edge of the forest, sways, and then, when she tries to walk towards them, her legs give way.

Sonja has reached the girl. "Are you all right?" she asks.

The girl lies absolutely still on the steps, staring up at the sky, breathing shallowly. Sonja notices that she has fresh scratches all over her arms and neck.

"I'll go inside," Rolf says.

Sonja stays by the girl, who has gone into shock, while Rolf enters the main building. Bloody prints, marks from both shoes and bare feet, seem to fly in all directions. One set, going up and down the hall, belongs to someone with long strides. Rolf moves swiftly, while being careful not to mess up the prints.

In a brightly lit room, four girls are huddled on a sofa.

"Is anyone hurt here?" he asks.

"Maybe. Miranda—a little," says a tiny girl with red hair.

"Where is she?"

"Miranda's in bed," says an older girl with straight black hair.

"This way?" He points down the hall.

The older girl nods and Rolf follows the bloody footprints past a dining room with a large wooden table and tile stove, and comes to the dark hall leading to the girls' private rooms. He shines his torch along the Bible quotes on the walls and then aims at the floor again. Blood has seeped out from under a door at the back of the alcove. The door is shut and the key is in the lock. He walks over, shifting the torch from one hand to the other. He presses down on the tip of the door handle. There's a click and the door swings open.

"Hello. Miranda? My name's Rolf and I'm a police officer," he says into the silence. "I'm coming inside now."

The only thing he can hear is his own breathing. He pulls the door all the way open, but the violence of the sight inside stops him short and he slumps against the doorjamb. Instinctively he looks away, but his eyes have already registered what he wishes he'd never seen.

A young woman is lying on the bed. A great part of her head seems to be missing. Blood has splattered the walls; it drips from a lampshade.

The door behind Rolf slams shut and he's so startled that he drops

his torch. Now there's nothing but darkness. He turns around and fumbles for the door handle. He can hear the sound of hands on the outside of the door.

"Now she can see you!" shrieks a young voice. "Now she's looking right at you!"

He presses down on the door handle, but the door is blocked. There is only a glimmer of light through the peephole. He presses down again and throws his shoulder against the door. It flies open and Rolf stumbles into the hallway. The little red-haired girl is standing there staring at him with her wide eyes.