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The Preacher

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated from the Swedish by Steven T. Murray

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CAMILLA LACKBERG

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The day was off to a promising start. He woke up early, before the rest of the family, put on his clothes as quietly as possible, and managed to sneak out unnoticed. He took along his knight's helmet and wooden sword, which he swung happily as he ran the hundred yards from the house down to the mouth of the King's Cleft. He stopped for a moment and peered in awe into the sheer crevice through the rocky outcrop. The sides of the rock were six or seven feet apart, and it towered up over thirty feet into the sky, into which the summer sun had just begun to climb. Three huge boulders were solidly wedged in the middle of the cleft, and it was an imposing sight. The place held a magical attraction for a six-year-old. The fact that the King's Cleft was forbidden ground made it all the more tempting.

The name had originated from King Oscar II's visit to Fjällbacka in the late nineteenth century, but that was something he neither knew nor cared about as he slowly crept into the shadows, with his sword ready to attack. His father had told him that the scenes from Hell's Gap in the film *Ronja Rövardotter* had been filmed inside the King's Cleft. When he had watched the film himself, he felt a little tickle in his stomach as he saw the robber chieftain Mattis ride through.

Sometimes he played highwaymen here, but today he was a knight. A Knight of the Round Table, like in the big, fancy-coloured book that his grandmother had given him for his birthday.

He crept over the boulders that covered the ground and made ready to attack the great fire-breathing dragon with his courage and his sword. The summer sun did not reach down into the cleft, which made it a cold, dark place. Perfect for dragons. Soon he would make the blood spurt from its throat, and after prolonged death throes it would fall dead at his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something that caught his attention. He glimpsed a piece of red cloth behind a boulder, and curiosity got the better of him. The dragon could wait; maybe there was treasure hidden there. He jumped up on the rock and looked down the other side. For a moment he almost fell over backwards, but after wobbling and flailing his arms about he regained his balance. Later, he would not admit that he was scared, but just then, at that instant, he had never been more terrified in all six years of his life. A lady was lying in wait for him. She was on her back, staring straight up at him with her eyes wide. His first instinct was to flee before she caught him playing here when he wasn't supposed to be. Maybe she would force him to tell her where he lived and then drag him home to Mamma and Pappa. They would be so furious, and they were sure to ask: how many times have we told you that you mustn't go to the King's Cleft without a grown-up?

But the odd thing was that the lady didn't move. She didn't have any clothes on either, and for an instant he was embarrassed that he was standing there looking at a naked lady. The red he had seen was not a piece of cloth but something wet right next to her, and he couldn't see her clothes anywhere. Funny, lying there naked. Especially when it was so cold.

Then something impossible occurred to him. What if the lady was dead! He couldn't work out any other explanation for why she was lying so still. The realization made him jump down from the rock, and he slowly backed towards the mouth of the cleft. After putting a few yards between himself and the dead lady, he turned round and ran home as fast as he could. He no longer cared if he was scolded or not.

Sweat made the sheet stick to her body. Erica tossed and turned in bed, but it was impossible to find a comfortable position. The bright summer night didn't make it any easier to sleep, and for the thousandth time she made a mental note to buy some blackout curtains to hang up, or rather persuade Patrik to do it.

It drove her crazy that he could sleep so contentedly next to her. How dare he lie there snoring when she lay awake night after night? She gave him a little poke in the hope that he'd wake up. He didn't budge. She poked a little harder. He grunted, pulled the covers up and turned his back to her.

With a sigh, she lay on her back with her arms crossed over her breasts and stared at the ceiling. Her belly arched into the air like a big globe, and she tried to imagine her baby swimming inside of her in the dark. Maybe with his thumb in his mouth. Although it was all still too unreal for her to be able to picture it. She was in her eighth month but still couldn't grasp the fact that she had another life inside her. Well, pretty soon it was going to be very real. Erica was torn between longing and dread. It was difficult to see beyond the childbirth. To be honest, right now it was hard to see beyond the problem of no longer being able to sleep on her stomach. She looked at the luminous dial of the alarm clock. 4.42 a.m. Maybe she should turn on the light and read for a while instead.

Three and a half hours and one bad detective novel later, she was about to roll out of bed when the telephone rang shrilly. As usual she handed the receiver to Patrik.

'Hello, this is Patrik.' His voice was thick with sleep. 'Okay, all right. Oh shit, yeah, I can be there in fifteen minutes. See you there.'

He turned to Erica. 'We've got an emergency. I've got to run.'

'But you're on holiday. Can't one of the others take it?' She could hear that her voice sounded whiny, but lying awake all night hadn't done much for her mood.

'It's a murder. Mellberg wants me to come along. He's going out there himself.'

'A murder? Where?'

'Here in Fjällbacka. A little boy found a woman's body in the King's Cleft this morning.'

Patrik threw on his clothes, which didn't take long since it was the middle of July and he only needed light summer clothes. Before he rushed out the door he climbed onto the bed and kissed Erica on the belly, somewhere near where she vaguely recalled she once had a navel.

'See you later, baby. Be nice to Mamma, and I'll be home soon.'

He kissed her quickly on the cheek and hurried off. With a sigh Erica hoisted herself out of bed and put on one of those tent-like dresses which for the time being were the only things that fit her. Against her better judgement she had read lots of baby books, and in her opinion everyone who wrote about the joyful experience of pregnancy ought to be taken out in the public square and horsewhipped. Insomnia, sore joints, stretch marks, haemorrhoids, night sweats, and a general hormonal upheaval – that was closer to the truth. And she sure as hell wasn't glowing with any inner radiance. Erica muttered to herself as she slowly made her way downstairs in pursuit of the day's first cup of coffee. Maybe that would lift the fog a bit.

By the time Patrik arrived, a feverish amount of activity was already under way. The mouth of the King's Cleft had been

cordoned off with yellow tape, and he counted three police cars and an ambulance. The techs from Uddevalla were busy with their work and he knew better than to walk right into the crime scene. That was a rookie mistake which didn't prevent his boss, Superintendent Mellberg, from stomping about amongst them. They looked in dismay at his shoes and clothing, which at that very moment were adding thousands of fibres and particles to their sensitive workplace. When Patrik stopped outside the tape and motioned to his boss, Mellberg climbed back over the cordon, to the great relief of the Forensics.

'Hello, Hedström,' said the superintendent.

His voice was hearty, bordering on joyful, and Patrik was taken aback. For a moment he thought that Mellberg was about to give him a hug but thankfully, this turned out to be wrong. Nevertheless, the man appeared completely changed. It was only a week since Patrik had gone on holiday, but the man before him was really not the same one he'd left sitting sullenly at his desk, muttering that the very concept of holidays ought to be abolished.

Mellberg eagerly pumped Patrik's hand and slapped him on the back.

'So, how's it going with the brooding hen at home? Any sign that you're going to be a father soon?'

'Not for a month and a half, they say.'

Patrik still had no idea what had brought on such good humour on Mellberg's part, but he pushed aside his surprise and tried to concentrate on the reason he'd been called to the scene.

'So what have you found?'

Mellberg made an effort to wipe the smile off his face and pointed towards the shadowy interior of the cleft.

'A six-year-old boy sneaked out early this morning while his parents were asleep and came here to play Knights amongst the boulders. Instead he found a dead woman. We got the call at 6.15.'

'How long have Forensics had to examine the crime scene?'

'They arrived an hour ago. The ambulance got here first, and the EMTs were immediately able to confirm that no medical help was needed. Since then they've been able to work freely. They're a bit touchy . . . I just wanted to go in and look round a bit and they were quite rude about it, I must say. Well, I suppose one gets a little anal crawling about looking for fibres with tweezers all day long.'

Now Patrik recognized his boss again. This was more Mellberg's sort of tone. But Patrik knew from experience that it was no use trying to alter his opinions. It was easier just to let his remarks go in one ear and out the other.

'What do we know about her?'

'Nothing yet. We think she's around twenty-five. The only piece of fabric we found, if you could call it that, was a handbag. Otherwise she was stark naked. Pretty nice tits, actually.'

Patrik shut his eyes and repeated to himself, like an inner mantra: *It won't be long until he retires. It won't be long until he retires . . .*

Mellberg went on obliviously, 'The cause of death hasn't been confirmed, but she was beaten severely. Bruises all over her body and a number of what look to be knife wounds. And then there's the fact that she's lying on a grey blanket. The medical examiner is having a look at her, and we hope to have a preliminary statement very soon.'

'Has anyone been reported missing around that age?'

'No, nowhere near it. An old man was reported missing about a week ago, but it turned out that he just got tired of being cooped up with his wife in a caravan and took off with a chick he met at Galären Pub.'

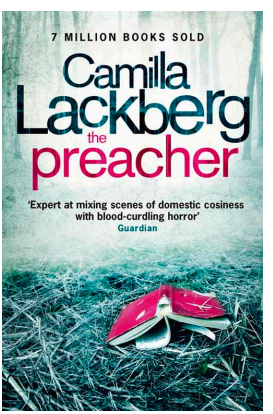
Patrik saw that the team round the body was now preparing to lift her carefully into a body bag. Her hands and feet had been bagged according to regulations to preserve any evidence. The team of forensic officers from Uddevalla worked together

to get the woman into the body bag in the most efficient way possible. Then the blanket she was lying on also had to be put in a plastic bag for later examination.

The shocked expression on their faces and the way they froze instantly told Patrik that something unexpected had happened.

'What is it?' he called.

'You're not going to believe this,' said one of the officers, 'but there are bones here. And two skulls. Based on the number of bones, I'd say there are easily enough for two skeletons.'



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