

PROLOGUE

Katrina Nielsen

Emergency lights glowed cobalt blue in the grainy atmosphere of the corridor. I crept toward a closed door. On the clouded glass, a freshly-painted name appeared below the familiar ones – an unexpected name, an undeserving name. My name.

Hunched over his work, a dark-suited figure stood with his back to me, madly scraping letters from the translucent pane with a flat-headed screwdriver.

Hruskh-rhuskh.

Hruskh-rhuskh.

Curls of auburn pigment lifted off the surface and splinters of glass rained down. Whole letters disappeared; already only “NIELS” remained. *I mustn't let him expunge that name.* But for what seemed like years, I was frozen.

The large man gouged harder, put his weight behind the scraper. Glass squealed under the pressure of cruel metal. Wincing, I buried fingers in my ears, but felt no relief, for the keening was inside me.

Finally I lashed out, striking the man's shoulder. He turned and I gasped, recoiling from the veined and contorted face. There was something familiar about it – but it couldn't be. My father was dead, seven years dead.

The figure tried to speak, but only a gurgle and a rivulet of crimson escaped the lips before the mouth and cheeks and throat began to swell. His skin turned an anoxic purple, as if he was suffocating inside his Grandad collar. Pointing to his chest, he wanted me to undo the button – but when I looked down, I saw that inside his shirt, all was hollow and oozing blood.

I screamed and felt hands on me, patting me awake. Shushing me, Richard snapped on the reading light. As his face materialized, scattered snorts and grumbles emerged from the

delicate sleepers of Club Class, then subsided along with my cries.

He asked me what was wrong. I closed my eyes and tried to cling to the details of the dream. But the sharp images melted and blurred. The pieces eluded me, slipping like snowflakes through my fingers, falling like snow into the void below us, into the vast darkness above the North Atlantic.

**A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.
- Franz Kafka**

**SPRING
1. Katrina**

The shadow of the 747 rippled over lifeless fields, patches of naked forest and the occasional frozen lake, a pastoral landscape still in the grip of the Snow Queen. Though I'd grown up in Denmark and knew how chill the month of March could be, the whiteness took me by surprise. We'd left New York green as Saint Patty's Day, and while there had been a great deal of ice in my childhood, I did not remember snow.

The left side of my body felt dead, numbed by the window's icy breath. I shivered and crawled deeper into the cocoon of blue blankets. In the darkness over the Atlantic, the man of my dream had visited me again. *Who was he?* I could only recall fragments from the vasty deep. I woke up thinking of my father, who'd died of heart failure in late 1988, when I was nineteen. A few weeks after the funeral, I left home and hadn't been back since.

Fa' was an intense man. Mor used to say his obsessions killed him in the end. He couldn't play bridge without becoming club champion, couldn't practice law without rising to partner in a leading firm, and he couldn't drink without reddening his cheeks and ours with the shame of his excesses.

In the rosy light of dawn, Copenhagen burned, a fiery whorl of crooked canals and serpentine passages. Through the

crystals of frost on the glass, all seemed jagged, dog-legged, distorted. The only true shapes I could discern were the ice-skinned rectangles that we call "seas," gleaming like rear-view mirrors along the defenses of the old town.

I was bred in this place. I was a girl here...

The next afternoon, still jet-lagged, I bought a clutch of lady tulips and walked to a taxi stand on the west side. The driver stood and held the door for me. His flowing garments of shimmering white linen and starched skullcap contrasted sharply with the coffee color of his face and hands. I told him the address – Mor was still living up in Hellerup, a well-heeled, well-scrubbed suburb north of the city – and we set off.

The cabman told me his name and bounced into his South Asian version of Danish. Jibril was one droplet in a wave of immigration from Asia and Africa: bearded men stood scowling and gesticulating on the pavement outside halal butcher shops. Stocky women in headscarves of green, white and gold walked flocks of children through open-air markets heavy with smells of frying garlic and onions, falafel and döner kebabs.

The Copenhagen of my memory, a bland, depressed albino of the late eighties, had been spiced up, invigorated by boomtimes. The year was 1996. New buildings were going up everywhere, and the older ones had gotten facelifts. As we drove north and east toward the better sections, we passed under the ramparts of refurbished castles and through the shadows of the newly sand-blasted Royal Theatre. The New Harbor, across from our hotel, was filled with tourists flush with cash.

Yet even in the presence of the city's glittering delights, one was never far from its doleful past. Stone battlements, melancholy as Elsinore, gazed at their reflections in the glass and steel of newly-minted cafés and office blocks. At a construction site, mirthful inns and pubs emerged like newborns from the

clayey soil, even as the dirge of a pile-driver rebounded off the stone monuments of what once had been a warlike state.

Jibril stopped at a traffic light in the shadow of the fortress Kastellet and asked in a loud, bouncy voice, “If you don’t mind, what is bringing you back to this kingdom of ice and snow?”

“I missed my family. My father passed away—”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear of it,” he said as he turned and regarded me with deep-set brown eyes. The crinkles and crow’s feet told me he was older than I knew, as if he’d cried a million tears before I was even thought of. The light changed and he accelerated northward onto the coast road.

“Thank you,” I said. “But it was a long time ago.”

“Yet,” he said, glancing in the driving mirror, “it is not quite settled, I think.”

Was it that obvious? “Yes, that’s just it.”

“So you are coming home to your mother?”

I nodded and said, “I left some things unfinished.”

“You will come home for good?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m not sure whether I’m more comfortable here or in New York.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but it’s not about your comfort. Here you will be a comfort to your mother.”

“Yes, I hope so. What about you? Do you ever think of going back to your homeland?”

“Oh, no, Mahm. You see, wherever I go, there I am home,” he said, flashing a beatific smile.

“What about *your* mother? Don’t you want to be a comfort to her?”

At this his face grew serious. “I’m afraid I have no mother, but I try to be a comfort to those around me wherever I go.”

Jibril delivered me to my childhood home which lay at the end of a sea-scraping side street. Alighting from the cab, I preened a bit. I did not want to show any ruffled feathers upon returning to the nest after so long. But it was difficult to appear anything but tousled on such a raw, windswept day. A wicked March gale blew in off the Sound, whipping my hair and biting the flesh about my eyes until the tears flowed.

Stepping onto the pavement, into the lee of the naked trees that ringed the garden, I wiped my eyes with a gloved finger. A leafless beech tree offered vacant birdhouses to a lifeless sky; the prize-winning rosebushes slept, still wrapped in the thorns of winter. Only a few tender shoots of green, overeager in the rush for life, emerged here and there from patches of frozen brown turf.

Oh, was that a child’s footprint? I could almost see miniature versions of Claus and myself playing soggy games of tag and hide-and-peek on the slippery surface of the side yard. How I loved to sing-song, *Du kan ikke fange mig!* while dodging my brother. Even though he was two years older, he never *could* catch me. I hadn’t seen him in ages – just after the funeral, we bickered over something that seems unimportant now. We haven’t spoken since.

The restless waters of Øresund licked at the thin edge of the coastal ice. The weakening sheet cracked and rumbled; a house-sized chunk broke off and floated out into the deep.

I pictured Mor and my tiny self far out on the Sound, a mere dot on an infinite slate of ultramarine. I must’ve been six or seven years old. We were so far out that day that I could barely see the dark strip behind us that was our island. As the fog closed in around us, I grew frightened and begged to turn back. Mor just smiled and said, “A little farther, Skat.” She always called me Skat. Later I learned that many parents call their children “dear”

or “treasure,” but in my elf-sized ears, it sounded like a shortening of my first name. I’ve always considered it my own.

As we sailed farther out into the Sound, the wind bellowing and the waves crashing over the bow, I shrieked with excitement. I pleaded to come about, but always on the knife-edge of wanting to test the extremes of wind and weather. I dreamed of us sailing in and out of weeks, exploring the crinkled coasts of Sweden and the fjord-ripped fells of Norway, where in my imagination, one-eyed Odin and his followers still held sway.

Mor grasped my little hand in her strong sailor’s grip, locked my eyes in her gaze and said, “There’s nothing to be frightened of out here, Skat. Not out here.”

The whitecaps toppled over us. The sloshing spray splashed my face. All around me was blue and green and sopping wet. I was thrilled, soaked, and as happy as I would ever be. Mor wrapped me tight in an oversized towel of white cotton, and hugged me until I was warm and dry and laughing.

“AHEM. Shall I take the bag for you, Mahm?” said Jibril, rousing me from my nautical reverie.

“Uh, no, that’s all right. I’ll get it,” I said, extracting my purse from the back seat. I paid him the fare, and the next thing I knew I was alone on the familiar stone steps. I stared at the engraved nameplate.

INGRID MARGRETHE LATOUR NIELSEN

ENKE

Oh my God. I knew Fa’s name would be gone by now, but to see *Enke* carved where other upstanding citizens would write “Doctor” or “Attorney” was really just too much – as if she were a *professional* widow.

I must’ve been standing there some minutes in the gale, because my cheeks were hard as candy apples by the time I

pressed the lighted rectangle and heard the chimes. The door opened and before me stood a thin, straight-backed woman.

“*Ach, kom ind, Skat,*” she said. “You’re freezing to death out there.”

“Hallo, Mor, it’s good to see you,” I said and pecked her cheek.

“Yes, well, it’s good to see you too,” she said, ushering me into the vestibule. “And good to have you back in Denmark. It’s been too long.”

I colored at the remark, and before I realized the words had passed my lips, I’d said, “I guess I just wasn’t ready to come about until now.”

“*Come about?*” Mor asked, her brows furrowed. Then her eyes widened; she nodded once and the corners of her mouth dipped as she made a quiet *mm* sound.

Mor went to put the white-and-yellow flowers in water. I took off my shoes by the front door – as one does in Danish homes to avoid tracking in snow or mud — and stepped directly into a puddle of meltwater.

“Eeyuch!”

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“Oh nothing, I just stepped in something wet.”

“Let me see. Oh, just take those stockings off. I’ll put them on the radiator to dry and fetch you a new pair. I still have your—”

“No, Mor,” I said, rubbing. “It’s fine. You don’t have to do that.”

“You’ll catch cold, Skat, let me—”

“No, Mor!” I said, more harshly than I’d intended.

She raised her eyebrows. “As you wish. Come into the kitchen at least, where it’s warm,” she said.

But it wasn’t.

In my memory, the kitchen was always cozy, filled with the soft spices of childhood: cinnamon and cloves, vanilla and cardamom. But no cakes or cookies emerged from the oven on this day; no aroma of fresh-baked *klejner* or *kringler* hung in the air. My hands huddled round my tea cup, yet I remained chilled, wet feet dancing on the clammy tile floor.

We sat and chewed on store-bought *kransekage*. A tower of sugar-drizzled marzipan topped with the national flag, it was the quintessential Danish dessert. Each hardened ring independent, separate unto itself.

Elegant, but cold.

Mor sat stiffly, as if her body had become as brittle as the porcelain we drank from. The royal blue eyes were glossy now and the lamplight reflected in their liquid surface. Her face, lined and sere, reminded me of author Karen Blixen in her later years. She opened her purse and extracted a cigarette case in which a softpack of Prince lay snugly entombed. Removing a single cigarette with a deft flick of her wrist, she tapped the end and reddened its tip with her nickel-plated lighter. I winced as the smoke came between us.

“You really should give that up, Mor. It’s poison, you know.”

“At my age? Hmph! No point in giving it up now. Besides, I *enjoy* smoking. It’s one of my few vices – and few pleasures.”

“What do you do for fun nowadays? Do you sail any more?”

“Goodness, no. Not for years. I’m afraid my little boat is in its harbor for good. But I’m hardly a shut-in. I have my little circle of girlfriends. We meet for whist on Tuesdays and lunch on Thursdays.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re playing cards. Richard and I learned to play bridge in New York. Perhaps we could get a fourth sometime?”

“Perhaps,” Mor said, and narrowed her eyes as she drew smoke into her lungs, then tilted her head back to expel it once more. “Tell me, how is your American adapting to life here in Denmark?”

“Richard’s fine, Mor. He sends his regards. He actually wanted to come today, but had to meet with his new boss. Perhaps we can all get together on the weekend.”

“What is your husband doing here?”

The question was ambiguous, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

“Same thing he did in New York, more or less,” I said, twisting my wedding ring.

“He’s a banker of some sort, isn’t he?”

“A financial consultant, with a firm called Fielding & Company. He worked out a transfer, you see.”

“But what does he do, exactly?”

“He advises companies on, well, financial things – like big mergers and bond offerings and going public.”

“I see. Per worked on matters like that.”

“Yes, I know, Mor. But Fa’ was a lawyer. This is the financial side. Richard’s super with numbers, you know.”

“And how’s his Danish?” she said with a puff.

“He says he’ll learn if he can find the time. But he’ll be working in English anyway, so there really isn’t a need.”

“Oh, it isn’t a question of the *need!* If I were living in London, I should speak English. If one lives in Copenhagen, one *must* speak Danish.”

Mor managed to appear elderly and imperious at the same time. Her hair, blond in her youth and steel grey in my memory,

was now tinged with white; it fluttered as she enunciated directive words like “need” and “must.”

“Yes, well,” I said, “as I say, when he gets the time I’m sure he’ll learn.” My hand trembled slightly as I sipped the cup of Lady Grey.

“Mm-hm,” she said, nodding. Then she raised her eyebrows and added, “Oh, by the way, that Jespersen girl sends her greetings. I attended a luncheon with her mother not long ago.”

“Oh, I haven’t heard from Annika in ages!” I said, smiling as I recalled my best friend from high school.

“Was she one of your ballet-girlfriends?”

“No, we were all in *gymnasium* together. You know she used to have the biggest crush on Claus...”

The room fell silent. We looked away from each other and sipped our tea. I pulled my feet up from the chilly tiles and hugged my knees. Mor finished her cigarette and crushed the stub in the silver ashtray.

Finally, I asked, “How is my brother? Still practicing law, I suppose?”

“Oh yes, he’s specialized in tax.”

“I’ll bet he’s a partner already.”

“No, not yet, but I think it’s coming. He certainly works hard enough. Agnete and the children don’t see much of him.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far—”

“No, it doesn’t,” she said, looking away.

“You know I never did get the watch Fa’ promised me.”

“The *hvad-for-noget?*” she said, narrowing her eyes.

I reminded Mor about the pocket watch that Claus and I both coveted, but neither got, after the funeral. A few minutes later a deep blue velvet box sat on the table between us. She said she had no use for it. I opened the lid and saw the gold orb. It seemed much smaller than I remembered, felt tiny in my hand

when I picked it up. But still it had weight to it, and the chain was heavy, a man’s.

I opened the case and revealed the face that had been hidden for so long. It was like seeing Fa’ again. The watch felt electric in my hand. I wanted to press it to my cheek, but controlled the urge. The time, 16:38, seemed accurate enough, but even though it was afternoon, the little window that showed day and night was filled with darkness and the sliver of a crescent moon. Perhaps it was stuck.

“So you think Claus should have it?” I asked.

“You might check with him yourself. Meanwhile I can’t see any harm in your taking it.”

I covered the face with a satisfying click, settled the body of the watch in the form-fitted satin, and buried the box among the tissues, compact, lip gloss and Tampax in my purse.

“Where are they living nowadays?” I asked.

“Near the center of town, *Overgaden oven Vandet*. They have a lovely apartment overlooking the water – which reminds me, where will you be living?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“If you’re in the market for real estate, you really should meet a spruce gentleman by the name of Niels Vier Dahl.”

“I remember Herr Dahl, Fa’s friend. He used to sneak me black licorice.”

“Hm. I didn’t know about that, but he is extremely well-connected in such matters, informed of properties *before* they go on the market. Shall I have him call your husband?”

Your husband. I bristled, but inhaled and forced a smile. “Richard was just saying he needed to find a realtor, that we couldn’t stay at the D’Angleterre forever.”

“The D’Angleterre. My goodness, such luxury,” she said with a little wave of her hand.

“The Firm is paying for everything.”

“They must think well of your American.”

“They do,” I assured her.

The D’Angleterre was the grand dame of Copenhagen hotels. The royal blue carpets were of deep pile, the crystal chandeliers of French cut, and high tea was served promptly at the stroke of four each day. But something made me uneasy.

“Mor, is it true that the Germans used the D’Angleterre as their headquarters during the Occupation?”

“Yes, I think that’s right. It’s a grand, central venue with a commanding view of the port. Of course, the *Wehrmacht* took possession of whatever they desired.”

A cold draft passed by my left ear and I shivered and reached for the warmth of the teapot. “Mor, what was it like?”

“What was what like? To be occupied?”

I nodded.

“*Tja*, I was just a girl, on the farm in Jutland. Sugar was hard to come by, I recall. Coffee and cigarettes honestly impossible. One couldn’t go anywhere, travel was restricted, and in any event, there was neither gasoline for the tank nor rubber for the tires. But first and foremost, one felt *invaded*, at the mercy of an alien power. It was terrifying,” she said, buttoning her cardigan. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason.” I examined my fingernails. “It’s just that I passed a brass plaque in the lobby today, listing all the famous guests of the hotel.”

“A long list, no doubt. The hotel is positively ancient.”

“H.C. Andersen was there, Niels Bohr. Even Princess Diana visited last year. But when I got to the *G’s*, I noticed...”

I stopped short and swallowed. Mor tilted her head.

“Noticed what?”

I forced the name from my throat.

“Goebbels. The Nazi, you know, Joseph Goebbels.”

“Hmph!” she said, flapping her palms. “I suppose he must have visited during the war.”

“I couldn’t believe it,” I said, leaning forward in my chair. “There he was, a wolf in lambswool sweater, standing in the lobby among heroes and royals. I mean, isn’t he the one—”

“Who killed his family, yes,” she said, her head shaking. “In the bunker at the end of the war. Wife and six beautiful children. He was a monster, they all were.”

“I couldn’t get to sleep last night. I kept thinking of Nazis treading the floorboards. Do you think they kept an eye on the coast from those rooms?”

“I’m sure they did, Skat,” she said with a distasteful expression. “All the more reason for you to get a place of your own as soon as possible.”

Later that evening, as the taxi entered Kongens Nytorv, the lights of the D’Angleterre came into view across the darkened square like a huge ship upon the waters. Above the entrance, the Danish standard fluttered in the breeze as if on a prow. The spotlights cast shadows onto its red-and-white surface, reminding me of the swastika that once flew from the same staff.

Yes, even as one gazed at the city’s glittering delights, one was never far from its doleful past.