



An extract from *Disgrace* by Jussi Adler-Olsen
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Disgrace

by

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Prologue

Another shot echoed over the treetops.

The beaters' calls had grown clearer. A throbbing pulse was thundering against my eardrums, the damp air forcing its way into my lungs so fast and hard that it hurt.

Run, run, don't fall. I'll never get up again if I do. Fuck, fuck. Why can't I get my hands free? Oh, run, run . . . shhh. Can't let them hear me. Did they hear me? Is this it? Is this really how my life is going to end?

Branches slapped against my face, drawing streaks of blood, the blood mixing with sweat.

The men's shouts were all around now. It was at this moment that I was seized by the fear of death.

More shots. A bolt whistled through the chill air so close that sweat poured off me, settling like a compress beneath my clothes.

In a minute or two they'll catch me. Why won't my hands behind my back obey? How can the tape be that strong?

Frightened birds suddenly flew from the treetops, wings beating the air. The dancing shadows beyond the dense line of spruces grew clearer. Maybe they were only about a hundred yards away. Everything was more distinct now. The voices. The hunters' bloodlust.

How would they do it? A single shot, a single arrow, and it would be over? Was that it?

No, no, why would they settle for that? Those bastards

were not that merciful. That wasn't their way. They had their rifles and their blood-splattered knives. They had shown how efficient their crossbows were.

Where can I hide? Is there any place? Can I make it back? Can I?

I searched the forest floor, looking back and forth. But it was difficult since my eyes were nearly covered over with tape, and my legs continued their stumbling flight.

Now I'll see for myself how it feels to be in their snares. They won't make any exceptions for me. This is how they get their kicks. It's the only way to get this over with.

My heart was hammering so hard now that it hurt.

I

When she ventured down the pedestrian street called Strøget, she was poised as if on the edge of a knife. With her face half covered by a dirty green shawl, she slipped past well-lit shop windows, alert eyes scanning the street. It was vital to know how to recognize people without being recognized. To be able to live in peace with her demons and leave the rest to those who hurried past her. Leave the rest to the fucking bastards who wanted to harm her, to those whose blank stares shunned her.

Kimmie glanced up at the street lights that threw an icy brightness across Vesterbrogade. She flared her nostrils. The nights would soon grow cold. She had to prepare her winter lair.

She was standing in a crowd by the crossing, among a group of frozen people emerging from Tivoli Gardens, looking towards the central train station, when she noticed the woman beside her in the tweed jacket. The woman squinted at her, wrinkled her nose, and then eased away. It was only a few inches, but more than enough.

Take it easy now, Kimmie, the warning signal flashed in her head as the rage tried to take hold.

Her eyes glided down the woman's body until they reached her legs. The woman's stockings gleamed, her ankles taut in high-heeled shoes. Kimmie felt a treacherous

smile curling at the corners of her mouth. With a hard kick she could crack those heels. The woman would topple over, and she would learn how even a Christian Lacroix dress gets soiled on a wet pavement. That would teach her to mind her own business.

Kimmie looked directly at the woman's face. Heavy eyeliner, powdered nose, a meticulous haircut, fashioned one strand at a time. Her expression was rigid and dismissive. Yes, Kimmie knew her type better than most people did. She had once been like her. Arrogant upper-class snobs who were thunderously hollow inside. Back then her so-called women friends had been like that; her step-mother, too.

She loathed them.

So do something, the voices in her head whispered. *Don't let her get away with it. Show her who you are. Do it!*

Kimmie stared at a group of dark-skinned boys on the other side of the street. Had it not been for their roving eyes, she would have shoved the woman just as the 47 bus whizzed past. She saw it clearly in her mind's eye: what a wonderful bloodstain the bus would leave behind. What a shockwave the snooty woman's crushed body would send through the crowd. What a delicious sense of justice it would give her.

But Kimmie didn't push the woman. In a swarm of people there was always a watchful eye; plus there was something inside her that held her back. The frightening echo from a time long, long ago.

She raised her sleeve to her face and took a deep breath. It was true what the woman beside her had noticed: her clothes stank terribly.

When the light turned green, she made her way over the crossing, her suitcase knocking along behind her on its crooked wheels. This would be its final trip, because the time had come to toss out the old rags.

It was time to slough her skin.

In the centre of the train station, a placard displayed the day's newspaper headlines in front of the railway kiosk, making life bitter for both the hurried and the blind. She'd seen the poster several times on her way through the city, and it filled her with disgust.

'Pig,' she mumbled when she passed the sign, gazing steadfastly ahead. Still she turned her head and caught a glimpse of the face on *Berlingske Tidende's* placard.

The mere sight of the man made her tremble.

Under the PR photo it read: 'Ditlev Pram buys private hospitals in Poland for 12 billion kroner.' She spat on the tile floor and paused until her body grew calmer. She hated Ditlev Pram. Him and Torsten and Ulrik. But one day they'd get what they deserved. One day she'd take care of them. She would.

She laughed out loud, making a passer-by smile. Yet another naive idiot who thought he knew what went on inside other people's heads.

Then she stopped abruptly.

Rat-Tine stood at her usual spot a little further ahead. Crouched over and rocking slightly, with dirty hands, drooping eyelids and a hand outstretched in mind-blown faith that at least one person in the swarming anthill would slip her a ten-krone coin. Only drug addicts could stand like that hour after hour. Miserable wretches.

Kimmiie tried to sneak past her, heading directly for the stairwell to Reventlowsgade, but Tine had spotted her.

'Hi, Kimmiie. Hey, wait up, damn it,' she managed in a sniffling moment of lucidity, but Kimmiie didn't respond. Rat-Tine wasn't good in open spaces. Only when she sat on her bench did her brain function reasonably.

She was, however, the only person Kimmiie could tolerate.

The wind whipping through the streets that day was inexplicably cold, so people wanted to get home quickly. For that reason, five black Mercedes idled in the taxi queue by the train station's Istedgade entrance. She thought there'd be at least one remaining when she needed it. That was all she wanted to know.

She dragged the suitcase across the street to the basement Thai shop and left it next to the window. Only once before had a suitcase been stolen when she'd put it there. She felt certain it wouldn't happen in this weather, when even thieves stayed indoors. It didn't matter anyway. There was nothing of any value in the suitcase.

She waited only about ten minutes at the main entrance to the station before she got a bite. A fabulously beautiful woman in a mink coat, with a lithe body not much larger than a size 8, was leaving a taxi with a suitcase on hard rubber wheels. In the past Kimmiie had always looked for women who wore a size 10, but that was many years ago. Living on the street didn't make anyone fat.

While the woman concentrated on the ticket machine in the front entrance, Kimmiie stole the suitcase. Then she made off towards the back exit and in no time was down among the taxis on Reventlowsgade.

Practice makes perfect.

There she loaded her stolen suitcase into the boot of the first taxi in the queue and asked the driver to take her for a short ride.

From her coat pocket she pulled out a fat bundle of hundred-krone bills. 'I'll give you a few hundred more if you do as I say,' she told him, ignoring his suspicious glance and quivering nostrils.

In about an hour they would return and pick up her old suitcase. By then she would be wearing new clothes and another woman's scent.

No doubt the taxi driver's nostrils would quiver for an entirely different reason then.

Ditlev Pram was a handsome man, and he knew it. When flying business class, there were any number of women who had no objections to hearing about his Lamborghini and how fast it could drive to his domicile in the fashionable suburb of Rungsted.

This time he'd set his sights on a woman with soft hair gathered at the nape of her neck and glasses with heavy black frames that made her look unapproachable.

It aroused him.

He'd tried speaking to her, with no luck. Offered her his copy of *The Economist*, the cover of which featured a backlit nuclear reactor, only to be met with a dismissive wave. He ordered her a drink that she didn't touch.

By the time the plane from Stettin landed on the dot at Kastrup Airport, the entire ninety valuable minutes had been wasted.

It was the kind of thing that made him aggressive.

He headed down the glass corridors in Terminal 3 and upon reaching the moving walkway he saw his victim. A man with a bad gait, headed determinedly in the same direction.

Ditlev picked up his pace and arrived just as the old man put one leg on the walkway. Ditlev could imagine it clearly: a carefully placed foot would make the bony figure trip hard against the Plexiglas, so that his face – glasses

askew – would slide along the side as the old man desperately tried to regain his feet.

He would have gladly carried out this fantasy in reality. That was the kind of person he was. He and the others in the gang had all been raised that way. It was neither invigorating nor shameful. If he'd actually done it, in a way it would have been that bitch's fault. She could have just gone home with him. Within an hour they could have been in bed.

It was her bloody fault.

His mobile rang as the Strandmølle Inn appeared in the rear-view mirror and the sea rose once again, blindingly, in front of him. 'Yes,' he said, glancing at the display. It was Ulrik.

'I know someone who saw her a few days ago,' he said. 'At the pedestrian crossing outside the central train station on Bernstoffsgade.'

Ditlev turned off his MP3 Player. 'OK. When exactly?'

'Last Monday. The 10th of September. Around 9 p.m.'

'What have you done about it?'

'Torsten and I had a look around. We didn't find her.'

'Torsten was with you?'

'Yes. But you know how he is. He wasn't any help.'

'Who did you give the assignment to?'

'Aalbæk.'

'Good. How did she look?'

'She was dressed all right, from what I'm told. Thinner than she used to be. But she reeked.'

'She reeked?'

'Right. Of sweat and piss.'

Ditlev nodded. That was the worst thing about Kimmie. Not only could she disappear for months or years, but you never really knew who she was. Invisible, and then suddenly alarmingly visible. She was the most dangerous element in their lives. The only one who could truly threaten them.

‘We’ve got to get her this time, do you hear me, Ulrik?’

‘Why the hell do you think I phoned?’



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