

MONSTER JØRGEN JÆGER

Chapter 1

The school bus pulled over at the stop and a girl wearing a satchel on her back, and with long flowing hair, got off.

Crawling onwards, in low gear up the narrow winding highway, the bus disappeared out of sight, and the girl crossed the road, humming to herself while she made her way along the dirt track leading up to the farm where she lived with her family.

Halfway there, she stopped dead and stood, just staring, before she turned and rushed back to the main road as fast as her legs would carry her.

It was mid October. In the old agricultural district of Ramnes, the landscape was brown and forlorn, wherever you looked. A month earlier, the autumn colours came and went in two days and after that the wind set about tearing down the last of these *decorations*, gathering them in rustling compost heaps on the ground. Solitary leaves clung here-and-there to the branches, as if in a final effort to prolong the autumn. But in the hollows and on the slopes where the sun, with its life-giving energy, no longer reached, fresh clumps of snow lay like portents of a new, colder season about to take control.

There were very few people living in Ramnes nowadays, and most of the farms along the highway were abandoned. But, the area was not completely desolate. Hilde Ramnes, ex-girlfriend to the local police chief, for example, ran a breeding and training centre for Labradors on her farm, in that way retaining her inherited rights to the land; some used the farms as their home, and some had let the buildings, for residential or industrial use. Others had allowed their properties to fall into disrepair hoping that a new area development plan would increase the value of their plots of land. But one family had broken with the past, occupying Ramnes out of pure idealism and embarking on a completely new life there.

The Dahl family.

Anne and Ulrik farmed ecologically. All their fertiliser was organic, in the form of farmyard manure and compost, in accordance with the requirements, laid down by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, for organic labelling. Living off idealism alone had been something of a challenge, even though they'd secured additional land from two disused neighbouring farms, but now, after two years work, it was paying off, spurred on by an indomitable need to put the past behind them and at the same time realise Ulrik's dream of one day owning and running his own farm. While Ulrik took care of the business side and ensured that, on the whole, they were self-sufficient in terms of food at least, Anne's job at the town hall in Fjellberghavn made sure they managed financially. But now she was on sick leave, heavily pregnant and had problems with her pelvis.

With the birth approaching, Ulrik took frequent breaks from his work to pop into their little farmhouse and look after his wife. The idealistic farmer was thirty-two, tall and skinny with a thick head of dark hair and a smiling, innocent face. At five to three, Anne heard him come into the porch and kick off his rubber boots, as Aic, the family's four-legged friend and indispensable sheepdog, scurried ahead to see her and began his enthusiastic welcome rituals.

'All ok, sweetheart?' boomed her husband's voice from outside, and suddenly he stood in the doorway in stockinged feet, and his well-worn blue overalls with the 'Farmer's Co-op' logo, grinning from ear to ear.

'If you ignore me feeling like a bloated dumpling, having a sore pelvis and a baby kicking so often that I never get any peace, then *yes*.' Anne leaned back uncomfortably in a winged armchair, looking up at her husband while stroking Aic. 'I'm really looking forward to this being over.'

Three years younger than her husband, she had red, unruly hair, was of short stature and normally in decent shape. But that was before she lost all her freedom of movement, swelled up so much that she would soon only be recognizable by her hair. At least that was how she felt.

As a city girl, she didn't have a good grasp of farming, but she loved the animals and closeness to nature. And up here she finally felt safe.

Ulrik bent down and kissed her. 'One or two weeks now; we'll get there.' He gazed at her, smiling, but saw from her expression that his attempt to

cheer her up hadn't been particularly successful. 'Dumpling or not, you're a beautiful farmer's wife now, I tell you,' he added teasingly, well aware that it got on her nerves when he called her that. 'Love you.'

'Farmer's wife this, farmer's wife that.' She laughed passively. 'Love you too, but ...' She tried to find a more comfortable sitting position. 'Have you seen Thea?'

'Hasn't she arrived?'

2

'No.'

'Hm.' Ulrik checked his watch and frowned. 'But I heard the school bus pass by half an hour ago.'

'Maybe she's met some other kids.'

'There aren't any other kids living around here.' He headed for the door with their Border Collie at his heels. 'I'll go and look for her,' he said. 'What are we having for dinner?'

'Leftovers. Quick and easy, I'll do it now.'

He stood outside on the steps. From there he had an unobstructed view of the area leading down to the main road and the bus stop. There was no one in sight, which gave him a smouldering unease. Where could she be? She always came straight home from the bus. And there wasn't really anywhere she could hide. Maybe she'd got mixed up in something, curious as always?

Ulrik had no idea how that was possible up here in the wilds. He walked briskly down to the main road, calling out Thea's name from time to time – not too loudly, he didn't want to upset Anne unnecessarily, but just enough to make sure that she would hear him if she was in the vicinity. Aic scampered around the terrain, sniffing around, and regularly glowering at some sheep, that stood in a road-side enclosure, and were definitely not calm, as a flock of sheep should be.

Ulrik got no answer. Down at the bus stop he turned and walked back to the house with a rising sense of alarm.

‘Thea!’ His voice increasing in volume. ‘Where *are* you?’

He picked up speed. That old urge to protect her, and Anne, crept up on him, like a chilling reminder of a time he thought they’d put behind them. ‘Thea!’ He span around in all directions. ‘*Theea!*’

Still no answer, so he began to jog back, but halfway home he stopped abruptly. He watched as Thea appear from behind the farmhouse, her long tousled curls flying in the breeze – and then as she disappeared in through the front door. It was sheer luck that he’d spotted her at all: she’d appeared and disappeared almost at once. His pulse throbbed in his ears. The uneasiness continued before it slowly drifted away, replaced by relief and a little embarrassment at having over-reacted.

When he arrived back, Anne was busy setting the kitchen table. With a plate in each hand, she moved laboriously between the stove and table. ‘Hi,’ she said, sounding a little stressed. ‘I’m not finished yet.’

3

Ulrik rushed over to lend a hand. ‘I’d totally forgotten that you’re a bloated dumpling’ he joked, taking the cutlery from the drawer.

She looked straight at him and at once he noticed the pain in her eyes. ‘That’s not why,’ she said quietly. ‘Eh ... why?’ he smiled quizzically. ‘Why what?’

‘That’s *not* why I don’t have dinner ready.’ Anne’s eyes were watery. ‘It’s ...’ She nodded towards their daughter’s room.

‘Thea?’ ‘Yes.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Ulrik felt his anxiety return. ‘Is something wrong sweetheart?’

‘She’s so ...’ Anne gave him a worried look, ‘...strange.’

‘Strange?’

‘Yes, different. Ran straight into her room without answering me when I spoke to her. She was ... somehow like she was before, Ulrik.’

‘Like before?’ Ulrik knitted his brows again. ‘How can that be? Shall I try talking to her?’

Anne nodded. ‘Yes, please do.’

When Ulrik emerged from Thea’s room, Anne was slumped in a kitchen chair. Yesterday’s leftovers were warm, and on the table.

‘Well?’ She looked at him searchingly.

He took a seat opposite her. ‘She won’t say anything. And she called me Ulrik instead of Dad. She’s ... different. What could have happened to her, Anne?’

‘I’ve absolutely no idea,’ she said, a little confounded. ‘Maybe she’s being bullied?’

‘At school?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thea?’ He shook his head. ‘She’s not the sort to let herself be bullied.’

‘A broken heart?’ she suggested. ‘Kids do start early nowadays.’

4

‘If she’d had her eye on someone, she’d have told us long ago – she wouldn’t have been able to contain her excitement – she’s like an open book.’ He brushed a heavy lock of hair from his forehead. ‘No, it must be something else. Something’s scared her – she’s sitting there trembling.’

‘Is she?’ Anne buried her face in her hands. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said in a muffled voice, then looked up, her eyes were filled with dread. ‘It’s him,’ she said suddenly. ‘I know it, it’s him. He’s been here!’

Ulrik gripped her hands. He’d thought the same, but had chosen to dismiss the idea. ‘It’s not possible,’ he replied with as steady a voice as he could

muster. ‘He can’t have found us. Not here, way out here in the country, it’s totally impossible.’ He threw up his arms in a gesture of despair. ‘There’s not a single person who knows who we really are, apart from a few bureaucrats with a duty of confidentiality. It has to be something else.’

They began to eat, both of them silent, filled with an anxiety that they'd long been spared, but which had now returned to sink its claws into their nervous systems. Ulrik couldn't sit still. After a while he stood up and went in to see Thea again, returning almost immediately, shaking his head and slumping into his chair.

‘No change?’

‘No.’

Anne, pale and drawn, looked at him bewildered. ‘I can’t go through that hell again, just the thought of it is intolerable,’ she blurted. ‘We can’t just move to a new house again and again, I’d rather die than have to constantly live on the run.’ The corners of her mouth quivered, and her body shook with convulsive sobs as she crumpled into a heap across the table.

‘We’ll never move again, I promise you that.’ He took her hand and tried to convey some reassurance. It was trembling, just like Thea’s had done.

Noticing her lack of response, Ulrik gingerly let go of her hand and stood up. ‘I’ll make some phone calls,’ he said as he disappeared into the living room.

He returned five minutes later and sat down ‘I’ve talked to the school,’ he said quietly, raking his hands through his hair. “To her teacher.’

Anne looked up, a glimmer of hope appearing in her eyes. ‘And?’

‘Thea’s been happy and cheerful all day; her usual self, chatting and laughing.’

Anne’s face shut down again.

‘And I’ve spoken to Sigmund,’ Ulrik added.

‘The school bus driver?’

‘Yes.’ Ulrik shrugged, in a gesture of helplessness. ‘She was in a great mood all the way up and kept the other kids amused.’ He took a deep breath. ‘And now she’s sitting in there shuddering,’ he added, almost in a whisper. ‘She’s had some kind of shock, and it’s happened to her after she left the bus’.

Anne nodded. ‘It’s him,’ she said, tearfully. ‘He’s here, he’s out there somewhere, hiding in the bushes, ready to catch us when we go outside.’

‘No, I told you that’s just impossible. I asked Sigmund if he’d seen anyone when he dropped her off, and he hadn’t. You’re wrong; nobody can find us here, especially not him. It must be something else that’s spooked her.’

She raised her head. ‘I hope you’re right,’ she answered with a faint smile. ‘Anyway, we can’t leave her in there like that, she’s really shaken.’

‘We can’t force ourselves on an eleven-year-old who doesn’t want to talk to us.’ he said.

‘What then?’

Ulrik just looked at her, unable to utter a word. He was so keen to appear steady and reliable, but now he was at a total loss.

She grasped his arm, pleadingly, as she waited for a response that would calm her nerves.

He took a deep breath, and replied helplessly: ‘I ...I ... *really* don’t know.’

Chapter 2

Anne was first to pull herself together. She picked up a napkin and wiped her face. ‘Well we can’t just sit here like this. Shall we go in to her together? Will you come with me?’

‘I don’t know ... it could be a bit much,’ Ulrik said uncertainly. ‘We can’t just barge in, I mean.’ He mulled it over. ‘You try talking to her and I’ll go back down to the highway again and see if I can find anything. One thing’s

for sure: something happened at some point between the bus stop and the here.'

Anne went in to Thea. Her daughter sat at her desk, staring downward apathetically. Anne sat down heavily, in a chair beside her.

For a while neither of them spoke.

6

'What happened on your way up from the bus stop, Thea?' Anne finally ventured. 'This affects us all, not just you, you must tell us about it!' She paused, afraid she'd been too harsh, but chose to continue: 'Thea, look at me!'

Her daughter turned around slowly, almost mechanically.

'I'm serious,' Anne went on. 'Did you meet your dad?' She could feel her voice shaking. 'Is he here?'

Thea didn't answer.

'*Is he?*' She gripped her daughter's hand. 'This is very important, do you understand?'

Her daughter nodded slightly.

'Was it *him*?'

'It was no one!' The reply came in a surprisingly clear voice. 'I just want to be left in peace for a while, Mum!'

Anne inhaled sharply. Not letting go. 'Something happened after you got off the bus.' She gripped Thea's hand and squeezed it. 'Thea, you're a big girl. You know what we've all been through. I need to know what it was!'

'It was nothing.' The corners of Thea's mouth trembled. 'I don't want to be Thea any more,' she said, sobbing. 'It's not my name, my name's Marie. I don't want to live here, I've no one to hang out with, and at school I can't tell anyone what I did before or where I lived or anything' She gave her mother a pained look. 'I want to go home, I miss my friends, and they don't even know where I am.'

‘You know we can’t go home and you know why,’ Anne said gently. ‘and so do your friends. You’re Thea now, and I’m Anne, and that’s how it has to be whether we like it or not. You’ve not forgotten everything that happened, have you?’

Thea sighed deeply, as though a shudder coursed through her body. ‘No.’

‘Then you know how important it is we tell each other everything.’

‘Yeah yeah’ Thea looked at her. ‘I’m just a bit fed up, Mum,’ she said, sniffing. ‘Nothing happened.’

‘You swear?’ Anne shot her daughter a penetrating look. ‘This is extremely important, it’s not something to lie about, you realise that?’

‘I’m not lying!’ Thea burst into tears. ‘Why don’t you believe me?’ she sobbed.

7

‘I do, sweetheart.’ Anne leaned over and gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek. ‘I love you, but I just need to be sure.’ She stood up, clutching Thea’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s go and get you something to eat.’

Ulrik pulled on his boots and immediately went outside. Aic saw the opportunity for a walk and happily went along.

He strode down to the bus stop. There was no bus shelter, only a crooked sign in the verge and a layby with just enough space for the bus to let the traffic pass. He stood where Thea had probably been when she had got off, and turned just the way she must have done as she began to walk up the track towards the farm.

He stopped. Was there anything that differed from the norm? Something that could scare an eleven-year-old so much that she was almost in a state of shock?

No.

He surveyed the area. About a hundred metres stood between him and the farm track. Was it along these few metres that something so traumatic happened?

Yes. Their farm track was way too secluded, nobody went up there. But ... if someone had been lying in wait ... no, suddenly he wasn't so sure after all.

He retraced his steps. What about the abandoned farm on the opposite side of the highway? Could she have seen something there that made her curious? Or had she felt threatened by something and tried to hide in there? It was years since the neighbouring farm had been deserted and the buildings were now in ruins. It was out of view from their own farm, shielded on the other side of the highway, behind a ridge and a thicket of trees, so the unsightly buildings didn't bother them. Besides, they were renting the adjacent fields, something that added a welcome supplement to their income.

Ulrik walked up the old side road leading to the abandoned farm. The grass had long-since begun to sprout up from the gravel, but parallel ruts where heavy wheels had once rolled were still visible.

He walked part of the way, with a feeling that something was wrong, although at first he wasn't quite sure why. Then he saw it: the ruts in the side road was too *deep*, as if tyres had recently driven along it. He crouched down. Yes. Long, half-withered blades of grass lay crushed into the ruts, while the grass at the verges and in the middle was untouched.

He continued walking, and then got confirmation: grooves in the dirt left by spinning tyres. A half-metre stretch of the grass layer was gouged out on one side, indicating that someone had driven up here recently.

8

Who'd been there? The farm's owner was a childless widower almost ninety years old now living in a nursing home and was crippled with arthritis, so it was definitely not him. Ulrik looked up at the dilapidated buildings farther up. Could something there have scared Thea? Something connected to the car tracks?

He pressed on, thoroughly scouring the area. Aic scurried around, sniffed and lifted his paw here and there, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

In the farmyard, Ulrik paused for a moment. Before him stood the shell of what had once been the farmhouse. The roof was partly missing, the walls

were leaning and unpainted, as if the building was just waiting for time to finally end it's suffering.

He turned around. The outbuildings had also fallen into disrepair, but a huge door leading into the barn dominated the front wall.

Aic already sniffing and clawing eagerly at it, and Ulrik went over to join him. Could the dog have picked up on something?

This door too was weather-beaten, but it had been sheltered from the harsh southerly wind and appeared to be in working order. Ulrik tried the handle and found, to his surprise, that the door was unlocked. He opened it carefully and poked his head inside.

He took a step forward into the dark, intuition telling him that he would find the answer here. Then the door slammed behind him.

Outside stood the bewildered dog. Jumping up at the door, frantically barking and scratching at it with his front paws. But it stayed shut. He took a few steps back and began howling at the top of his voice, but it didn't help. He then ran at breakneck speed back to the farm.

After fifteen minutes, Anne began to worry, but then she heard Aic barking outside and calmed down.

But Ulrik wasn't with him. He did not enter the porch and kick off his boots as she anticipated, and Aic just continued to bark and howl outside, even more wildly than before, as if trying to warn her about something. She got to her feet and staggered bow-legged, to the steps outside.

Her husband was nowhere to be seen, but Aic was down in the yard staring at her and barking loudly. He ran a short way down the track before stopping abruptly and barking again.

But Anne was in no shape to go anywhere: she was barely able to move at all. Helplessly, she called out her husband's name, without a response. Behind her Thea came silently to stand by her. 'Where's Dad?' she asked softly. 'Where is he?'

‘I don’t know,’ was all her mother could say. Thea sobbed. ‘Where’s Dad?’ she cried, almost in falsetto. ‘Where is he, where is he? Dad! Dad!’

But there was no reply, and Thea continued: ‘*Daad! Daaad!*’ She turned to her mother with eyes ablaze with panic. ‘Where is he? Where is he?’ She collapsed to her knees, sobbing hysterically.

Anne had never seen her daughter like this. She felt her heart pounding. This was all too much. She couldn’t cope. She felt a contraction in her chest, then a sharp pain stabbed through her lower abdomen and she buckled at the knees with a groan. At that same moment, she felt warm fluid running down her thighs.

She knew what it was. Her waters had broken.

Chapter 3

‘Thea, run and find my mobile – *now!*’

Anne felt her panic escalate. Her daughter stood motionless beside her, as if she was transfixed.

‘Thea, please – move!’ Anne tried to keep a cool head. ‘You must help me, my waters have broken!’

She realised this meant very little to her daughter, so she added: ‘We need to phone the hospital, darling, the baby might be coming!’

Thea hesitated, just stared rigidly towards the road. ‘*Dad!*’ she shouted, clearly not registering what her mother was saying.

‘We’ll find Dad sweetheart!’ Anne began to hobble back into the house. ‘Fetch my phone now, it’s in the bedroom, I’ll try to phone him! Please!’ Her voice caught in her throat.

Thea lingered for a moment or two before walking past Anne almost mechanically and returning immediately with her mobile. She looked expectantly at her mother who, shakily, keyed in her husband’s number.

It rang for a while before switching to voicemail. Anne hung up and tried the number again, but once again only got the voicemail.

10

‘No,’ she said in a strained voice. ‘He’s not picking up.’

Thea looked blankly at her mother before disappearing out on to the steps.

Anne heard her calling for her father again, while Aic barked relentlessly doing all he could to inflame the situation. She laid down carefully on the sofa, not because she wanted to, but because she simply had to. She felt torn between phoning for the ambulance or calling the police? What should she do first? Anne could hardly think clearly, but decided that her time was best used phoning 113, and then calling the police while she waited for the ambulance.

Her call was immediately transferred to the maternity ward.

‘How far advanced is your pregnancy?’ a midwife began to question her.

‘Thirty-eight weeks.’

‘Are you experiencing contractions?’

‘No ... at least ... I had one strong contraction.’

‘But not at regular intervals?’

‘No.’

‘Has the baby’s head engaged?’

‘No.’

‘Can you see if the waters are discoloured?’

‘No, it’s impossible because of my clothes. But there was a lot. It ran down my thighs, I don’t know what to do – about anything.’

‘I understand. Can you come here to be examined?’

‘No.’ Anne forced the words out. ‘I’ve got pelvic pain, I can’t drive., and my husband’s not at home, he’s gone missing, and I’m on my own with our daughter who’s eleven and ...’ Her voice broke apart.

‘Then we’ll come and get you, and your daughter can come with you, that’s no problem.’ The midwife changed tack. ‘Lie down flat on a bed or sofa, and try to stay calm until we arrive.’

‘I’ve already done that.’

‘Then you’re a clever girl,’ said the midwife, sounding like she was speaking to a child. It struck Anne that she’d brought it on herself, because that was exactly how she felt.

11

‘What’s your address?’ the midwife added.

Anne gave her details and hung up. She looked around. Was Thea still out on the steps? She could no longer hear any shouts or any barking.

She lifted her head. ‘Thea!’ she yelled.

Her daughter did not answer.

Anne felt her pulse hammering in her ears, almost like thunder. Where was she? Her chest felt tight. She was choked with panic. Could he have found them after all? What if he really was out there? What if he ...?

Anne could hardly breathe. She fumbled with the phone, managed to look up *Local Police Station* in her contacts list and called the number.

Chapter 4

At three o’clock in the afternoon, Fjell Police Station in Fjellberghavn was already closed, all callers were redirected to the call centre at the main headquarters in Borg, a hundred kilometres away. Anne’s call was for that reason transferred, and received by the central switchboard in Borg at 16.30.

It was Tuesday 18th October. ‘Police!’ came the terse response.

‘My name is ... Anne Dahl.’ Anne was slightly taken aback. ‘Is that the local police station?’

‘You’ve reached the central switchboard in Borg,’ the voice stated efficiently. ‘How can I help you?’

Anne took a deep breath and explained to the best of her ability. ‘Can you repeat your name?’

Anne did so.

‘And your address?’

‘Rammesveien 237, on the hillside just above Fjellberghavn.’

‘Thanks. And you want to report your husband missing, is that right?’

12

‘Yes, that’s correct.’ Anne was on the brink of tears. ‘Something must have happened to him, he went to find out what had scared our daughter, and only our dog came back, completely hysterical.’

‘And your husband’s not answering his mobile?’

‘No.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Ulrik ...Ulrik Dahl.’

‘Okay.’ The receiver went quiet for a moment. ‘Is there an ambulance on its way to pick you up?’

‘Yes.’

‘We’ll contact Accident and Emergency and ask them to keep a lookout. We don’t have an available patrol vehicle in your area right now, the closest one is in Eidesund. But we’ll send it to Rammes right away.’

Anne swallowed. ‘Ok, but ... what about the local police down in Fjellberghavn, don’t they have somebody ... what about Ole Vik, he’s back at work now, isn’t he?’

‘I’m afraid he’s still on sick leave, and Fjell police station has closed for the day.’

‘Oh? So when will the patrol car get here?’ she asked, aware of how reedy her voice had become.

‘It should reach you within half an hour.’

‘Half an hour?’ Anne held back a sob. ‘Ok, but ... I’ll have been picked up by the ambulance by then. How will I be able to explain what’s happened and ... and ... what about my husband, he ...?’

‘Our people will deal with this, Anne.’ said the voice at the central switchboard, interrupting her in a friendly but authoritative way. ‘If anything has happened to your husband, we’ll find out. Leave it to us, and focus on your own health and your baby, and everything will be all right.’

‘Eh ... okay then ...’ Anne replied, her thoughts in a whirl.

‘Try to remain accessible on your mobile for safety’s sake,’ the voice went on. ‘Good luck, we’re on our way.’

The call then disconnected.

13

Fjell Police Station, or Police HQ, as the station in Fjellberghavn was popularly known, wasn’t totally empty even though it was the end of work hours. In a third-floor office, with a view of the town square, the harbour, and the port entrance to this picturesque little community, sat the station deputy, Superintendent Cecilie Hopen. Sitting as she often did after closing time when all was quiet, and she could work undisturbed.

Undisturbed, relatively speaking. On this particular Tuesday, Cecilie’s boss, Chief Superintendent Ole Vik, had called in to hear the latest news. He was on extended sick leave after being run over during a car chase, but was due back after a recovery that had gone quicker than both he and his doctors had expected. Two weeks from now, and he would be back at work as the station chief.

Ole Vik lived on the sixth floor of this modern structure, built on the ruins of the sheriff’s manor house which burned to the ground several years earlier. This meant he was never more than *a push of a lift button away* as he often jokingly said, something he’d demonstrated very well by his

regular visits to Cecilie's office during his sick leave. As a result, Ole Vik had remained well briefed on what had occurred in the district during his absence.

However, what he'd not acquainted himself with, and which would pose a challenge for him, was the station's modern *cutting-edge* technology and the strict, centralised organisation of the district, now under new guidelines from the National Police Directorate. He'd left an old, reliable world and was now returning to one that was new and totally changed. When the manor house burned down, the directorate swiftly decided that a new police station should rise from the ruins of the previous building. Externally it would be a faithful copy of the original house, since it was well worthy of preserving, and in keeping with Fjellberghavn's unique old timber façades – but internally they would use concrete and other contemporary materials. So, in accordance with the Police Reform Act of the year 2000, Ole's area of jurisdiction was combined with two neighbouring districts and, after a lengthy process, Ole was appointed Chief Superintendent of this new territory.

But, there was still a fortnight to go. The accident that almost cost him his life had happened while building work was under way, and while the local police station occupied a temporary premise in Fjellberg Guest House, and at the time of the official opening ceremony, Ole Vik had been lying in a hospital bed, in a coma. It was actually a stand-in who had the pleasure of being in charge of the police station during that initial period, a woman from Drammen, called Marte Mellingen. She too now lived on the sixth floor of the building, right next door to Ole.

She was not just anybody. At least not to him.

Cecilie kept the two-way radio crackling away in the background. Now that the conversation between her and Ole had dried up, they both sat listening, frowning, to the conversation between the central switchboard and Anne Dahl.

14

Ole was the first to react. He stared at Cecilie while raising his eyebrows: 'Are they really sending a patrol car all the way from Eidesund when a man has been reported missing?' This huge man seemed to almost expand

in his chair, the angrier he became. ‘What the fuck are they playing at, they can’t possibly be there in half an hour, we’re the ones who know the area!’

Cecilie struggled not to smile, Ole was quite a sight when he got wound up, especially now, when he’d started to look like good old Ole Vik again. During his recovery he’d been a shadow of his former self, no hair or beard, skinny, with excess skin hanging in folds over his normally massive body. Now the thick beard and his distinctive curly hair were back, and it looked as if his body was filling out again so that his skin fitted him once more. Everything was just like before, when every doctor would point a finger and warn him of the dangers of being overweight.

But Ole Vik wasn’t bothered about that. This guy had a paunch, fit for any good old-fashioned local cop. What’s more, he had found that this weight suited him a long time ago.

‘Welcome to the new regime, Ole,’ she said with an almost apologetic smile, as if she were complicit in the changes.

Ole stood up. ‘If this had happened in my day, that phone call would have gone straight to my mobile, even in the middle of the night, and I would have turned out,’ he said in his deep, booming voice, even more prominent when he was annoyed.

‘Those days are over,’ she replied. ‘All incoming phone calls to Borg’s district offices are now automatically connected to Borg outside office hours, and it’s the person in charge there who deploys the manpower. This was decided at the highest level, probably to keep tabs on overtime in rural areas.’

‘Overtime? What kind of talk is that? I’ve never asked for any overtime pay. I’ll put a stop to all this rubbish, and on my very first day back, you mark my words!’

Cecilie laughed again. This time the laughter sounded a little hollow. ‘Then you better be ready for war, Ole, because this is part of the new national police contract. The Directorate have laid down a number of detailed regulations for our work, and not even you can oppose that.’

Ole’s eyes bore into her. ‘Oh *no*?’ He grinned mockingly as he scrutinised her. She seemed exhausted, he saw it now, as if she’d lost some of the

spark that had been so typical of her. ‘Tell me,’ he added. ‘Do I detect a certain sense of resignation here? Have you lost your get-up-and-go, my girl?’

She shook her head and flashed a defensive smile. ‘No, but I’ve chosen to adapt,’ she answered. ‘I’m not going to waste my energy on something I can’t influence.’

15

Ole took a firm grip of her arm. ‘I can see it’s time I came back and gave you a kick up the arse. What were you thinking of doing about Anne and Ulrik Dahl? Leave them to their own devices for forty minutes because some theorist in Oslo, who has never ever been involved in an active police assignment, has decided it?’

Cecilie’s mouth tightened. ‘But ... Anne ... and *Ulrik*?’ She looked at him surprised. ‘Do you know them?’

‘Yes, I do,’ he replied brusquely. ‘That’s one of the advantages of local knowledge. Anne was married to a violent man on Karmøy, who manipulated and abused both her and her daughter systematically for several years, and in the end, he almost killed them. Now they live under new identities, granted by the Police Directorate, they live at a secret address, in accordance with the so-called Code 6, the strictest grade of security we have to offer people whose lives are threatened. I was the one who arranged for them to settle in Ramnes a couple of years ago, in close cooperation with my colleague, Chief Superintendent Andersen on Karmøy.’

‘Blimey.’ Cecilie stared at him in surprise. ‘Has her husband – Ulrik – also been given a new identity?’

‘Yes. It’s not normal practice, but the Directorate recommended that, and he agreed out of consideration for his wife’s safety.’

‘And the violent ex, where’s he?’ Cecilie got to her feet, ready for action.

‘I’ve no idea.’ Ole thought about it. ‘He probably finished serving his sentence a long time ago.’

‘After almost killing her ...’ Cecilie rolled her eyes. ‘The courts give such ridiculously short sentences for this sort of thing,’ she said, indignation in

her voice. 'It's always the victims who are punished and have to live on the run, for the rest of their lives, in constant fear. It's just terrible.'

'Yep, so you can imagine how she must be feeling right now,' Ole added. 'One little unintentional slip somewhere in the system can be enough to disclose her identity, all women in her position have to live with that certainty, Code 6 or not.' He looked at her expectantly.

She grabbed the radio mic decisively and pressed the 'talk' button. 'Fox zero-two calling Bravo.'

The radio crackled and then a voice from central switchboard filled the room: 'Bravo responding, come in Fox.'

'I'm available and heading out to Ramnes immediately,' she said firmly. 'I can be in position at Anne Dahl's house in less than ten minutes.'

16

'Received.' It was silent for a moment. 'We have the situation under control, there's a patrol car is on its way,' they heard, Cecilie could have sworn that the voice sounded a little uncooperative.

'Fox zero-two responding. Then the patrol car can give me backup when it arrives. Over and out.' Cecilie severed the connection and put down the microphone.

Ole grinned from ear to ear. 'That's what I like to hear!' he roared.

Cecilie smiled. 'Being boss has some advantages,' she said. 'Well, Ole, I need to go.'

She headed for the door, but Ole was hard on her heels.

'Where are you going?'

'With you.' He shot her a challenging smile.

'You don't have permission to be at work, you're on sick leave.'

'Yeah, but I know Anne and Ulrik personally,' he argued, looking defiantly into her eyes. 'I can assist as a friend and as backup!'

Cecilie sighed heavily. If she resisted, they'd remain here arguing, because now he was no longer ill and weak and he was on the spot after all, and besides, he did have a point, his knowledge of the couple might be useful.

'Okay,' she conceded. 'Let's go.'

Chapter 5

'Do you think the switchboard operator checked Anne's background before deciding she could wait anxiously for three quarters of an hour?' Ole wondered as they turned in between the crooked timber houses in Hovedgata, Fjellberghavn's oldest street.

'Not necessarily. If the switchboard is busy, they prioritise use of time ruthlessly.'

'A couple of mouse-clicks, and they would have seen what they were faced with.' Ole twisted round in his seat, irritated. 'Centralise this, centralise that. Moving the decision-making away from local areas is irresponsible, and in the worst case scenario costs lives!'

'Tell that to the National Police Commissioner.'

'I will! Wait and see!'

17

'Yes, it wouldn't surprise me,' she said, laughing. 'Do you remember the name of Anne's ex-husband, by the way?'

Ole thought about it. 'Ragnvald ... Hagen.'

'We need to find out where on earth he is.' She inserted an earpiece and located the central switchboard number.

'Hopen here!' she said in a decisive tone. 'We have a situation we can't deal with over the open line for reasons of confidentiality.' She explained in detail. 'The woman's ex-husband is called Ragnvald Hagen. We need to know if he might be involved in Ulrik Dahl's disappearance, his daughter was clearly frightened of something before he vanished, and it's important

we establish whether Ragnvald Hagen might have something to do with this. Can you check his status and report back?’

She got ‘ok’ as an answer and hung up.

Her colleague at the switchboard rang back as they drove on a motorway roundabout. Cecilie sat, just listening in silence, before saying *thank you* and hanging up.

‘Well?’ Ole asked, on tenterhooks. ‘What did he say?’

‘Hagen’s inside.’ Cecilie gave a lopsided smile and turned off the roundabout taking the narrow road toward Ramnes. ‘Convicted of a violent attack on his present girlfriend.’

‘Oh – okay. So he’s at it again. Were they sure he was inside and not released on parole or anything like that?’

‘Yes. As you know, the prison service has to report these things.’

‘To the prosecution authorities, yes, who in turn are obliged to report it to his girlfriend. Nobody has heard anything?’

‘No.’

‘Can we rely on that?’ Ole wanted to be entirely certain.

She shrugged. ‘We have to, and I don’t have any reason to believe otherwise,’ she answered. ‘That’s how we’re instructed to operate nowadays, Ole. These are different times, we work through others more.’ She gave him a fleeting glance and chuckled. ‘You’re going to get a shock when you start back,’ she added.

‘Yeah maybe,’ he said, laughing. ‘Marte’s prepared me for it. I’m going to have the Police Commissioner on my back from day one. Has Ragnvald’s girlfriend also had to move to a secret address?’

‘No.’

18

‘Where do they live?’

‘In Skudeneshavn on Karmøy.’

Ole shook his head sadly. ‘So he’s still there. And he’s found himself a new victim. They have radar, those guys, they just home in on them.’

‘Home in on who? Women with the potential to allow themselves to be abused?’ Cecilie fixed her eyes on him. ‘Violent criminals like that home in on flimsily-clothed women who are positively *begging* to be raped, do you mean?’ All of a sudden, they had touched on a topic on which she held strong views.

‘No, no!’ He raised his hand to ward her off. ‘Not like that! Anyway, that explanation is wrong, as you well know, because women who are raped are seldom raped again. But unfortunately, it’s a fact that women who’ve managed to break free from violent men often end up in the same predicament in their next relationship.’

Cecilie felt a tingling in her scalp but was reluctant to be side-tracked into starting a discussion about this, so she quickly changed the subject: ‘According to central switchboard, there have been complaints that a group of gypsies have set up camp on an abandoned farm further up in Ramnes. The folks at Borg say that if there’s a problem it could be linked to them.’

Ole gave a sigh. ‘The most persecuted people of our times,’ he said. ‘Soon the mayor will go to court to lobby for their removal. That’ll be your job, I think. I’ve taken assignments like that many times, and it’s equally distressing every time.’

Cecilie knew what he was talking about, because she'd been with him. ‘Agreed. Shall we conclude that Borg’s deduction is somewhat hasty?’

He nodded. ‘I think that, at this stage, we shouldn’t go stigmatising either the gypsies or anyone else, so we’ll see. But we can at least reassure Anne Dahl that it’s not her ex-husband on the prowl.’

They arrived in less than ten minutes just as Cecilie had promised on the phone, and parked in the farmyard beside the ambulance. They walked up the steps together, Cecilie leading the way in her uniform and followed by Ole casually dressed and limping slightly from the lingering after-effects of his injuries.

Cecilie knocked on the door and walked straight in. A heavily pregnant woman with red hair was stretched out on the sofa in the living room talking to two paramedics. Nodding briefly at them, Cecilie approached the sofa and introduced herself.

The woman replied in a feeble voice, ‘Anne Dahl, thanks for coming so soon,’ then she caught sight of Ole, and it seemed as if a tight veil of anxiety slid from her face, as if his presence alone brought a sense of security. ‘Ole Vik,’ she said warmly. ‘You came too ... they said you were on sick leave.’ She extended her hand to him. ‘Thank you.’

Ole took her hand and held it between his. ‘I am, but of course I’ll help you and Ulrik.’ Cecilie saw that he was moved. ‘Everything okay with you?’

‘I think so.’

Ole looked enquiringly at the paramedics, who nodded in back. ‘Her waters have broken,’ one of them said. ‘But there’s no sign that the births under way yet.’

‘So we have some time left before you need to cart her off?’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Good.’ Ole turned to face Anne again. ‘Have your husband and daughter turned up?’

She shook her head.

‘Your dog?’

‘No’

Anne lifted her head and turned towards the door. ‘Unless ...’

They listened. From the yard outside they heard faint barking and suddenly a girl came shuffling silently through the door.

‘Thea!’ Anne struggled to get up. ‘It *is* you! Where have you been, sweetheart?’ Her voice was shrill. ‘I was so frightened, where have you been?’

The girl stopped in the centre of the room and looked at them with wide eyes. ‘Looking for Dad,’ she answered in a monotone.

‘Did you find him?’

She shook her head.

‘Did Aic try to show you the way?’

‘Yes.’

‘And where did he take you?’ Anne stretched out her arm towards her daughter. Thea did not move.

Ole studied the girl. She was two years older than last time he had seen her, but her appearance was the same, just a little rounder in the cheeks and with thicker hair – and quite a few centimetres taller. They knew each other well, but nevertheless there was no recognition in her eyes. It was as if she didn’t see him at all.

20

‘Where did he lead you?’ Anne’s voice sounding desperate.

‘Nowhere’, Thea shrugged.

Cecilie crouched in front of Thea trying to make eye contact with her.

‘We’ll do everything possible to find your Dad,’ she said gently. ‘Would you like to help us, the police?’

Thea lowered her head ever so slightly.

‘It’s important that you tell us where you and Aic have just been. Can you do that?’

Thea didn’t reply, just looked back at her intensely.

‘You’ve no need to be afraid, we’re on your side, you know.’ Cecilie put all the warmth possible into her voice. ‘You can’t get better friends than that. Perhaps you’ll come with us and show us the way?’

The girl didn’t respond. The corners of her mouth quivered almost imperceptibly. Cecilie squeezed her hand. ‘Will you, Thea?’
Still no answer.

‘Okay.’ Cecilie smiled disarmingly as she realised that the pressure on the little girl was too great. ‘Don’t give it any more thought. You don’t need to show us anything, it’s ok’

She stood up, and gave a look of resignation to the others. The girl headed quietly in the direction of her room.

‘Thea!’ Anne stretched out her arm towards her again. ‘Don’t go, pet! Stay here with us!’ Her voice broke and as Thea disappeared, she burst into tears. ‘What’s happened to my child?’ She pressed her hands to her eyes. ‘What can it be? I don’t understand.’

Ole sat beside her on the sofa. ‘I understand some of it, at least. She’s showing signs of being in shock’ He looked up at the paramedics, silently questioning them.

‘Yes, maybe she’s been threatened by someone,’ one of them suggested. ‘We ought to let her speak to a child psychiatrist down at the hospital.’

Ole nodded. ‘You’ll make sure that’s taken care of?’

Receiving a nod in reply, he turned to Anne. ‘Could she have been attacked?’ he asked tentatively. ‘I mean ... sexually?’

Anne shook her head. ‘I don’t know,’ she sniffed. ‘But I don’t think so.’

21

‘Okay, we’ll find out, and I don’t think we should expose her to any more stress now,’ he said decisively. ‘It’s not your ex-husband who’s been here, he’s in prison, we’ve checked that out, so that’s one thing we can write off, fortunately. Another thing is that he couldn’t possibly have found you anyway, since you’re living at a secret address. Can Anne stay here a little longer?’ he addressed himself to the paramedics. ‘I’d really like to talk to her a bit more.’

He received yet another nod in response.

Cecilie headed towards to the door. ‘In the meantime, I’ll take a look outside,’ she said. ‘Maybe the dog can help me.’

‘Good idea.’

Ole took hold of Anne's hand as soon as Cecilie had left. 'Can you tell me more about Thea?' he asked. 'How was she before this weird thing happened? When did her behaviour change, and how is she now?'

He produced a notebook, and Anne Dahl began to talk.

Outside on the steps, Cecilie spotted the dog down on the road, barking, ears wagging and its intense Border Collie eyes directed straight at her. As Cecilie stepped down, the dog turned abruptly, ran downhill a few metres, turned abruptly again and barked loudly. Then he ran on a few metres more, stopped and turned around yet again. His body language was almost overstated and his eyes were blazing. Cecilie jogged after him, calling out frequent encouragement and then they ran, at the double, down the main road and up the overgrown farm track towards the abandoned farm on the opposite side. Moments later they stood facing the front door of the dilapidated outbuilding. Aic gave indications by whimpering, barking and scratching the door with his paws. There could be no doubt: it was here they should look.

Cecilie took hold of the handle. The decaying door gave way and swung open with a rusty creak. She stepped inside with the dog behind her.