

Jo Nesbo
**THE
KINGDOM**

Translated from the Norwegian
by Robert Ferguson



Harvill Secker
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THE KINGDOM

PROLOGUE

IT WAS THE DAY DOG died.

I was sixteen, Carl fifteen.

A few days earlier Dad had shown us the hunting knife I killed him with. It had a broad blade that glinted in the sun and was grooved on the sides. Dad had explained that the grooves were there to channel the blood away when you dismembered your prey. Even that was enough to turn Carl pale, and Dad asked if he was thinking of getting car-sick again. I think that was why Carl swore he was going to shoot something, anything at all, and dismember it – cut it up into tiny little fucking pieces, if that was what had to be done.

‘Then I’ll roast it and we’ll eat it,’ he said as we stood outside the barn, me with my head bent over the engine of Dad’s Cadillac DeVille. ‘Him, Mum, you and me. OK?’

‘OK,’ I said as I turned the distributor cap to locate the ignition point.

‘Dog can have some too,’ he said. ‘There’ll be enough for everyone.’

‘Sure there will,’ I said.

Dad always said he’d named Dog Dog because at the time he couldn’t

think of anything else. But I think he loved that name. It was like himself. Never said more than was strictly necessary, and so American he had to be Norwegian. And he loved that animal. I've a feeling he valued that dog's company more than that of any human being.

Our mountain farm maybe doesn't have much, but it's got views and it's got outlying land, enough for Dad to refer to it as his kingdom. And day after day, from my position permanently bent over that Cadillac, I could see Carl head off out with Dad's dog, Dad's rifle and Dad's knife. Could see them turn into dots against the bare mountainside. But I never heard any shooting. And when he returned to the farm Carl always said he hadn't seen any game birds, and I kept my mouth shut, even if I had seen one small covey of grouse after another taking off from the mountainside, showing me roughly whereabouts Carl and Dog were.

And then one day, finally, I heard a shot.

I jumped so hard my head struck the underside of the bonnet. Wiped the oil from my fingers and looked towards the heather-clad mountainside as the sound of that shot rolled outwards, like thunder, over the village down below by Lake Brudal. Ten minutes later Carl came running, slowing down when he was so close he knew he could be seen by Mum or Dad in the farmhouse. Dog wasn't with him. He didn't have his rifle either. I had already half guessed what had happened and went out to meet him. When he saw me he turned and began slowly walking back the way he had come. When I caught up with him I saw that his cheeks were wet with tears.

'I tried,' he sobbed. 'They flew up straight in front of us, there were so many of them and I took aim, but I just couldn't do it. And then I wanted you all to hear that at least I'd tried, so I lowered the rifle and pulled the trigger. Once the birds were gone I looked down and there was Dog, lying there.'

'Dead?' I asked.

'No,' said Carl, and now he began really crying. 'But he . . . he will die. He's bleeding from his mouth and both his eyes are shattered. He's just lying there on the ground whimpering and shaking.'

'Run,' I said.

We ran, and after a few minutes we saw something moving in the heather. It was a tail. Dog's tail. He smelled us coming. We stood over him. His eyes looked like two egg yolks pulled to shreds.

'He's done for,' I said. Not because I'm an expert vet like every cowboy in every Western movie seems to be, but because even if by some miracle Dog should survive, a life as a blind hunting dog didn't seem as if it would be worth living. 'You've got to shoot him.'

'Me?' exclaimed Carl, as though he couldn't believe that I was actually suggesting that he, Carl, take something's life.

I looked at him. At my kid brother. 'Give me the knife,' I said.

He handed me Dad's hunting knife.

I placed one hand on Dog's head and he licked my wrist. I grabbed him by the skin on the back of his neck and with my other hand slit his throat. But I was cautious, nothing happened, Dog just jerked. Not until the third attempt did I manage to cut through properly, and then it was like what happens when you make the hole too low in the juice carton, the blood came pouring out as if it had been just waiting for the chance to get free.

'There,' I said and dropped the knife in the heather. Saw the blood in the grooves and wondered if any of it had splashed onto my face, because I could feel something warm running down my cheek.

'You're crying,' said Carl.

'Don't tell Dad.'

'That you were crying?'

'That you couldn't bring yourself to . . . couldn't put him down. We say that I decided it had to be done, but you did it. OK?'

Carl nodded. 'OK.'

I slung the dog's corpse over my shoulder. It was heavier than I expected and kept sliding about. Carl offered to carry it, but I saw the relief in his eyes when I said no.

I placed Dog on the ramp in front of the barn, went into the house and fetched Dad. On the way back I gave him the explanation we'd agreed

on. He said nothing, just squatted down beside his dog, nodding as though this was something that he had in some way or other been expecting, like it was his own fault. Then he stood up, took the rifle from Carl and Dog's body under his arm.

'Come on,' he said, and walked up the ramp to the hayloft.

He lay Dog on a bed of hay and this time he knelt, bowed his head and said something – it sounded like one of those American psalms he knew. I looked at my father, a man I'd been looking at every day of my short life, but never seen like this before. Sort of falling apart.

When he turned towards us he was still pale, but his lip wasn't trembling any longer and his gaze was once again calm and decisive.

'Now it's our turn,' he said.

And it was. Even though Dad had never hit either one of us, Carl standing next to me seemed to shrink. Dad stroked the barrel of the rifle.

'Which one of you was it who . . .' He looked for the words, stroking and stroking that rifle. 'Who cut up my dog?'

Carl was blinking uncontrollably, like someone terrified out of his wits. Opened his mouth.

'It was Carl,' I said. 'I was the one who said it had to be done, but that he was the one who had to do it.'

'Oh really?' Dad's gaze went from me to Carl and then back again. 'You know what? My heart is weeping. It's weeping, and I have only one consolation. And you know what that is?'

We stood silent. The idea wasn't to answer when Dad asked something like that.

'It's that I have two sons who have, today, shown themselves to be men. Who have shown responsibility and taken decisions. The agonies of choice – do you know what that means? When it's the choosing that chokes you up, not the choice you end up making. When you realise that no matter what you choose, you're going to lie awake nights and torment yourself, asking if the choice you made was the right one. You could have run from this, but you faced the hard choice head-on. Let Dog live and

suffer, or let Dog die and be his killer. It takes courage not to turn away when you find yourself confronted with a choice like that.'

He reached out his big hands. One straight ahead that landed on my shoulder, the other a little higher up on Carl's. And his voice had taken on a vibrato Pastor Armand would have been proud of as he continued.

'It is the ability not to take the path of least resistance but the path of highest morality that separates humans from animals.' He had tears in his eyes again. 'I stand here a broken man. But, boys, I am so very proud of you.'

It was not only the most powerful but also the most sustained speech I had ever heard from my father. Carl began to whimper and damned if I didn't have a pretty big lump in my throat as well.

'Now let's go in and tell your mother.'

We dreaded it. Mum who had to take a long walk every time Dad was going to slaughter a goat, and came back red-eyed. On our way to the house Dad held me back a bit, until we were some distance behind Carl.

'Before she hears this version, best you give your hands a more thorough wash,' he said.

I looked up, ready for whatever else might be coming, but in his face I saw only mildness and a weary resignation. Then he stroked the back of my head. As far as I could remember he had never done that before. And he never did it again.

'You and me, we're alike, Roy. We're tougher than people like Mum and Carl. So we have to look after them. Always. Understand?'

'Yes.'

'We're family. We've got each other and nobody else. Friends, sweethearts, neighbours, the locals, the state. All that's an illusion, it's not worth a candle the day something really matters. Then it's us against them, Roy. Us against absolutely everybody else. OK?'

'OK.'

PART ONE

1

I HEARD HIM BEFORE I saw him.

Carl was back. I don't know why I thought of Dog, it was almost twenty years ago. Maybe I suspected the reason for this sudden and unannounced homecoming was the same as it was back then. The same as it always was. That he needed his big brother's help. I was standing out in the yard and looked at my watch. Two thirty. He'd sent a text message, that was all. Said they'd probably arrive by two. But my little brother's always been an optimist, always promised more than he could deliver. I looked out over the landscape. The little bit of it that showed above the cloud cover below me. The slope on the other side of the valley looked like it was floating in a sea of grey. Already the vegetation up here on the heights had a touch of autumnal red. Above me the sky was heavenly blue and as clear as the gaze of a pure young girl. The air was good and cold, it nipped at my lungs if I breathed in too quickly. I felt as though I was completely alone, had the whole world to myself. Well, a world that was just Mount Ararat with a farm on it. Tourists sometimes drove up the twisting road from the village to enjoy the view, and sooner

or later they would always end up in our yard here. They usually asked if I still ran the smallholding. The reason these idiots referred to it as a smallholding was probably that they thought a proper farm would have to be like one of those you get down on the lowlands, with vast fields, oversized barns and enormous and splendid farmhouses. They had never seen what a storm in the mountains could do to a roof that was a bit too large or tried to start a fire in a room that was a little too big with a gale thirty degrees below blowing through the wall. They didn't know the difference between cultivated land and wilderness, that a mountain farm is grazing for animals and can be a wilderness kingdom many times the size of the flashy, corn-yellow fields of a lowland farmer.

For fifteen years I had been living here alone, but now that was over. A V8 engine growled and snarled somewhere down below the cloud cover. Sounded so close it had to have passed the corner at Japansvingen halfway up the climb. The driver put his foot down, took his foot off, rounded a hairpin bend, foot down again. Closer and closer. You could tell he'd navigated those bends before. And now that I could hear the nuances in the sound of the engine, the deep sighs when he changed gear, that deep bass note that's unique to a Cadillac in low gear, I knew it was a DeVille. Same as the great black beast our dad had driven. Of course.

And there was the aggressive jut of the grille of a DeVille, rounding Geitesvingen. Black, but more recent; I guessed an '85 model. The accompaniment the same though.

The car drove right up to me and the window on the driver's side slid down. I hoped it didn't show, but my heart was pounding like a piston. How many letters, text messages and emails and phone calls had we exchanged in all these years? Not many. And yet: had even a single day passed when I didn't think about Carl? Probably not. But missing him was better than dealing with Carl-trouble. The first thing I noticed was that he looked older.

'Excuse me, my good man, but does this farm belong to the famous Opgard brothers?'

And then he grinned. Gave me that warm, wide irresistible smile,

and it was as though time was wiped from his face, as well as the calendar which told me it had been fifteen years since last time. But there was also something quizzical about his face, as though he were testing the waters. I didn't want to laugh. Not yet. But I couldn't help it.

The car door opened. He spread his arms wide and I leaned into his embrace. Something tells me it should have been the other way round. That it was me – the big brother – who should have been inviting the embrace. But somewhere along the line the division of roles between me and Carl had become unclear. He had grown bigger than me, both physically and as a person, and – at least when we were in the company of others – now he was the one conducting the orchestra. I closed my eyes, trembling, took a quavering breath, breathed in the smell of autumn, of Cadillac and kid brother. He was wearing some kind of 'male fragrance', as they call it.

The passenger door had opened.

Carl let go of me and walked me round the enormous front end of the car to where she stood, facing the valley.

'It's really lovely here,' she said. She was thin and slightly built, but her voice was deep. Her accent was obvious, and although she got the intonation wrong, at least the sentence was Norwegian. I wondered if it was something she had been rehearsing on the drive up, something she had made up her mind to say whether she meant it or not. Something that would make me like her, whether I wanted to or not. Then she turned towards me and smiled. The first thing I noticed was that her face was white. Not pale, but white like snow that reflects light in such a way as to make it difficult to see the contours in it. The second was the eyelid of one of her eyes. It drooped, like a half-drawn blind. As though half of her was very sleepy. But the other half looked wide awake. A lively brown eye peering out at me from beneath a short crop of flaming red hair. She was wearing a simple black coat with no sidecut and there was no indication of shape beneath it either, just a black, high-necked sweater sticking up above the collar. The general first impression was of a scrawny little kid photographed in black and white and the hair coloured in afterwards.

Carl always had a way with girls, so in all honesty I was a bit surprised. It wasn't that she wasn't sweet, because she actually was, but she wasn't a *smasher*, as people round here say. She carried on smiling, and since the teeth could hardly be distinguished from the skin it meant they were white too. Carl had white teeth too, always did have, unlike me. He used to joke and say it was because his were bleached by daylight because he smiled so much more. Maybe that was what they had fallen for in each other, the white teeth. Mirror images. Because even though Carl was tall and broad, fair and blue-eyed, I could see the likeness at once. Something life-enhancing, as people call it. Something optimistic that is prepared to see the best in people. Themselves as well as others. Well, maybe; of course, I didn't know the girl yet.

'This is—' Carl began.

'Shannon Alleyne,' she interrupted, reaching out a hand so small that it felt like taking hold of a chicken's foot.

'Opgard,' Carl added proudly.

Shannon Alleyne Opgard wanted to hold hands longer than me. I saw Carl in that too. Some are in more of a hurry to be liked than others.

'Jet-lagged?' I asked, and regretted it, feeling like an idiot for asking. Not because I didn't know what jet lag was, but because Carl knew that I had never crossed even a single time zone and that whatever the answer was it wouldn't mean a lot to me.

Carl shook his head. 'We landed two days ago. Had to wait for the car – it came by boat.'

I nodded, glanced at the registration plates. MC. Monaco. Exotic, but not exotic enough for me to ask for it if the car was to be re-registered. On the walls of the office at the service station I had obsolete plates from French Equatorial Africa, Burma, Basutoland, British Honduras and Johor. The standard was high.

Shannon looked from Carl to me and then back again. Smiled. I don't know why, maybe she was happy to see Carl and his big brother – his only close relative – laughing together. That the slight tension was gone now. That he – that *they* were welcome home.

‘Why don’t you show Shannon round the house while I get the suitcases?’ said Carl, and opened the *trunk*, as Dad used to call it.

‘Probably take us about the same time,’ I murmured to Shannon as she followed me.

We walked round to the north side of the house, where the main entrance was. Why Dad hadn’t had the door open straight onto the yard and the road I really don’t know. Maybe because he liked to see all his land each day when he stepped outside. Or because it mattered more to have the sun warm the kitchen than the corridor. We crossed the threshold and I opened one of the three doors in the corridor.

‘The kitchen,’ I said, noticing the smell of rancid fat. Had it been there the whole time?

‘How lovely,’ she lied. OK, so I’d tidied up and even washed it, but you couldn’t exactly say it was *lovely*. Wide-eyed – and maybe slightly anxious – her gaze followed the pipe that led from the wood stove through a hole sawn in the ceiling to the upper floor. Precision carpentry, that’s what Dad had called it, the way the circular pipe had safety clearance through the timbers on its way up. If that was true then it was – along with the two equally circular holes in the outside toilet – the only example of it on the farm. I turned the light switch on and off to show her that at least we had our own electricity.

‘Coffee?’ I asked and turned on the tap.

‘Thanks, but maybe later.’

At least she’d mastered her Norwegian courtesies.

‘Carl will,’ I said and opened the kitchen cupboard. Fished and fumbled about until I found the coffee pot. I’d actually even bought some old-fashioned coarse ground coffee for the first time in . . . well, ages. I managed just fine myself with freeze-dried and noticed as I held the pot under the tap that from sheer habit I’d turned on the hot tap. Felt myself getting a little hot around the ears myself. But anyway, who says there’s something *sad* about making powdered coffee with water from the hot tap? Coffee’s coffee. Water’s water.

I put the pot on the hot plate, turned on the oven and took the two paces over to the door to one of the two rooms that sandwiched the kitchen. The one facing west was the dining room, which was closed in winter since it acted as a buffer against the wind from the west, and we ate all our meals in the kitchen. Facing east was the living room with its bookcases, TV and its own wood stove. On the south side Dad had allowed the house's only extravagance, a covered glass terrace, which he called *the porch* and Mum 'the winter garden', even though it was of course closed off in the winter and solidly barricaded behind wooden shutters. In summer Dad would sit there and suck on his Berry's tobacco and drink a Budweiser or two – another couple of extravagances. He had to travel to town to buy his pale American beer, and the silvery-green boxes of Berry's moist snuff were sent over the pond from a relative in America. Dad explained to me early on that unlike the Swedish crap American moist snuff goes through a fermentation process that you can taste. 'Like bourbon,' said Dad, who claimed that Norwegians only used that Swedish crap because they didn't know any better. Well, at least I knew better, and when I began using it was Berry's I used. Carl and I used to count up the empty bottles Dad lined up along the windowsill. We knew that if he drank more than four he could get tearful, and no one wants to see his dad tearful. Thinking back now, that might be why I seldom if ever drank more than one or two beers. I didn't want to get tearful. Carl was a happy drunk, so he had less need to set these kinds of limits.

All this was going through my mind while we traipsed around and I showed Shannon the biggest bedroom, the one Dad referred to, in English, as *the master bedroom*.

'Fantastic,' she said.

I showed her the new bathroom, which wasn't new any more, but at least it was the newest thing in the house. She probably wouldn't have believed me if I'd told her we grew up without one. That we washed downstairs in the kitchen, with water heated up on the stove. That the bathroom came after the car accident. If what Carl had written was true,

that she was from Barbados, from a family that could afford to send her to college in Canada, then it would naturally be difficult for her to imagine sharing the grey water with your brother while the two of you stood there shivering over the bowl in the middle of winter. While Dad, paradoxically enough, had had a Cadillac DeVille parked out there in the yard, because a proper car, that was definitely something we should have.

The door to the boys' room had obviously swollen and I had to wiggle the latch a bit to get it open. A breath of stale air and memories wafted over us, like the smell of old clothes you'd forgotten you owned from a wardrobe. Along one of the walls stood a desk with two chairs next to each other; along the opposite wall a bunk bed. The stovepipe from the hole in the floor down to the kitchen was at one end of it.

'This was Carl's and my room,' I said.

Shannon nodded at the bunk bed 'Who was on top?'

'Me,' I said. 'The oldest.' I drew my finger through a layer of dust on the back of one of the chairs. 'I'll move in here today. So you two can have the big bedroom.'

She looked at me in alarm. 'But, Roy, of course we don't want to . . .'

I focused my gaze on her one open eye. Isn't that a little strange, to have brown eyes when you have red hair and skin as white as snow? 'There are two of you and only one of me so it's no problem, OK?'

She gazed round the room again. 'Thanks,' she said.

I led her into Mum and Dad's room. I'd aired it thoroughly. Regardless of what people smell like, I don't like to breathe in their smells. Excepting Carl's. Carl smelled – if not exactly good – at least *right*. He smelled of me. Of *us*. When Carl was ill in the winter – like he always was – I snuggled up to him. His smell was always right, even though his skin was covered with the dried sweat of fever, or his breath smelled of sick. I inhaled Carl and shivered in close to his glowing body, used the heat he was losing to warm my own carcass. One man's fever is another man's hotplate. Living up here makes you practical.

Shannon crossed to the window and looked out. She'd kept her coat tightly buttoned up. She probably thought the house was cold. In

September. It didn't bode well for the winter. I heard Carl come thudding up the narrow staircase with the cases.

'Carl says you aren't rich,' she said. 'But you and him own everything you can see from here.'

'That's right. But it's just outfield, all of it.'

'Outfield?'

'Wilderness,' said Carl, who stood in the doorway panting and smiling. 'Grazing for sheep and goats. There's not a lot you can cultivate up on a mountain farm. You can see for yourself, there aren't even many trees. But we'll get something done about the skyline here. Ain't that right, Roy?'

I nodded slowly. Slowly, the way I had seen the old farmers nodding slowly when I was just a lad and believed so many complex thoughts went on behind those wrinkled brows that it would just take too long and maybe be impossible to express them all using our simple village dialect. And they seemed to have a telepathic understanding of each other, those grown-up, nodding men, the way the slow nodding of one would be answered by the slow nodding of the other. Now I gave that same slow nod, though I hardly understood any more now than I did then.

Of course, I could have asked Carl about all this, but I probably wouldn't have got the answer. Answers yes, plenty of them, not *the answer*. Maybe I didn't need one either. I was just glad to have Carl back and had no intention of bothering him with the question right now: why the hell had he come back?

'Roy is so kind,' said Shannon. 'He's giving us this room.'

'Figured you didn't come back just so you could sleep in the boys' room,' I said.

Carl nodded. Slowly. 'Then this won't seem like much in return,' he said, holding up a large carton. I recognised it at once and took it from him. Berry's. American moist snuff.

'Dammit, it's good to see you again, brother,' said Carl, his voice choked. He came over to me and put his arms round me again. Gave me a real hug this time. I hugged him back. Could feel his body was

softer. A little more padding there. The skin of his chin against mine a bit looser, I could feel the rasp of his beard even though he was clean-shaven. The woollen suit jacket felt like good quality, tightly knitted, and the shirt – he never wore a shirt before. Even the way he spoke was different, he talked the city talk him and me used sometimes when we were imitating Mum. But that was fine. He still smelled the same. He smelled of *Carl*. He stepped back and looked at me. Eyes that were as beautiful as a girl's glowing. What the hell, mine were glowing too.

'Coffee's boiling,' I said, my voice not too choked up, and headed for the stairs.

In bed that evening I lay listening to the sounds. Did the house maybe sound different now people were living here again? It didn't. It creaked, coughed and whistled same as always. I listened out too for sounds from *the master bedroom*. The walls are thin, so even with the bathroom between the two bedrooms I could still hear voices. Were they talking about me? Was Shannon asking Carl if his big brother was always this quiet? If Carl thought Roy had enjoyed the chilli con carne she had made? If his silent brother really had liked the gift she had brought with her, which she'd had so much trouble getting hold of through relatives, a used licence plate from Barbados? Didn't his big brother like her? And Carl answering that Roy was like that with everybody, she should just give him time. And she said that maybe she thought Roy was jealous of her, that Roy was bound to feel she'd taken his brother from him, the brother that was all he had. And Carl laughing, stroking her cheek and telling her not to worry about things like that after just one day, that everything would work out. And she buried her head in his shoulder and said she was sure he was right, but anyway she was glad Carl wasn't like his brother. That it was strange how, in a land almost without crime, people go around scowling as though in constant fear of being robbed.

Or maybe they were getting it on.

In Mum and Dad's bed.

'Who was on top?' I should ask at breakfast in the morning. 'The

oldest?’ And see those gaping faces. Head out into the clear morning air, get into the car, release the handbrake, feel the steering wheel lock, see Geitesvingen coming up.

A long, lovely sad note coming from outside. The plover. The mountain’s lonesome bird, skinny and serious. A bird that accompanies you when you’re out walking, looking out for you, but always at a safe distance. As though too afraid to make a friend, and yet still needing someone to listen when it sings of its loneliness.