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KNIFE

Translated from the Norwegian
by Neil Smith



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PART ONE

1

A RAGGED DRESS WAS HANGING from one branch of a rotting pine tree. It put the old man in mind of a song from his youth, about a dress on a washing line. But this dress wasn't hanging in a southerly breeze like in the song, but in the ice-cold meltwater in a river. It was completely still down at the bottom of the river, and even though it was five o'clock in the afternoon, and it was March, and the sky above the surface of the water was clear, just as the forecast had said, there wasn't a lot of sunlight left after it had been filtered through a layer of ice and four metres of water. Which meant that the pine tree and dress lay in weird, greenish semi-darkness. It was a summer dress, he had concluded, blue with white polka dots. Maybe the dress had once been coloured, he didn't know. It probably depended on how long the dress had been hanging there, snagged on the branch. And now the dress was hanging in a current that never stopped, washing it, stroking it when the river was running slowly, tugging and pulling at it when the river was in full flow, slowly but surely tearing it to pieces. If you looked at it that way, the old man thought, the dress was a bit like him. That dress had once meant

something to someone, a girl or woman, to the eyes of another man, or a child's arms. But now, just like him, it was lost, discarded, without any purpose, trapped, constrained, voiceless. It was just a matter of time before the current tore away the last remnants of what it had once been.

'What are you watching?' he heard a voice say from behind the chair he was sitting in. Ignoring the pain in his muscles, he turned his head and looked up. And saw that it was a new customer. The old man was more forgetful than before, but he never forgot the face of someone who had visited Simensen Hunting & Fishing. This customer wasn't after guns or ammunition. With a bit of practice you could tell from the look in their eyes which ones were herbivores, the look you saw in that portion of humanity who had lost the killing instinct, the portion who didn't share the secret shared by the other group: that there's nothing that makes a man feel more alive than putting a bullet in a large, warm-blooded mammal. The old man guessed the customer was after one of the hooks or fishing rods that were hanging on the racks above and below the large television screen on the wall in front of them, or possibly one of the wildlife cameras on the other side of the shop.

'He's looking at the Haglebu river.' It was Alf who replied. The old man's son-in-law had come over to them. He stood rocking on his heels with his hands in the deep pockets of the long leather gilet he always wore at work. 'We installed an underwater camera there last year with the camera manufacturers. So now we have a twenty-four-hour live stream from just above the salmon ladder round the falls at Norafossen, so we can get a more accurate idea of when the fish start heading upstream.'

'Which is when?'

'A few in April and May, but the big rush doesn't start until June. The trout start to spawn before the salmon.'

The customer smiled at the old man. 'You're pretty early, then? Or have you seen any fish?'

The old man opened his mouth. He had the words in his mind, he hadn't forgotten them. But nothing came out. He closed his mouth again.

'Aphasia,' Alf said.

‘What?’

‘A stroke, he can’t talk. Are you after fishing tackle?’

‘A wildlife camera,’ the customer said.

‘So you’re a hunter?’

‘A hunter? No, not at all. I found some droppings outside my cabin up in Sørkedalen that don’t look like anything I’ve seen before, so I took some pictures and put them on Facebook, asking what it was. Got a response from people up in the mountains straight away. Bear. A bear! In the forest just twenty minutes’ drive and a three-and-a-half-hour walk from where we are now, right in the centre of the capital of Norway.’

‘That’s fantastic.’

‘Depends what you mean by “fantastic”. Like I said, I’ve got a cabin there. I take my family there. I want someone to shoot it.’

‘I’m a hunter, so I understand exactly what you mean. But you know, even in Norway, where you don’t have to go back very far to a time when we had a *lot* of bears, there have been hardly any fatal bear attacks in the past couple of hundred years.’

Eleven, the old man thought. Eleven people since 1800. The last one in 1906. He may have lost the power of speech and movement, but he still had his memory. His mind was still OK. Mostly, anyway. Sometimes he got a bit muddled, and noticed his son-in-law exchange a glance with his daughter Mette, and realised he’d got something wrong. When they first took over the shop he had set up and run for fifty years he had been very useful. But now, since the last stroke, he just sat there. Not that that was so terrible. No, since Olivia died he didn’t have many expectations of the rest of his life. Being close to his family was enough, getting a warm meal every day, sitting in his chair in the shop watching a television screen, an endless programme with no sound, where things moved at the same pace as him, where the most dramatic thing that could happen was the first spawning fish making their way up the river.

‘On the other hand, that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen again.’ The old man heard Alf’s voice. He had gone over to the shelves of wildlife cameras with the customer. ‘No matter how much it might look like a

teddy bear, all carnivores kill. So yes, you should definitely get a camera so you can figure out if it's settled down somewhere near your cabin or if it was just passing through. And now's the time brown bears emerge from hibernation, and they're *starving*. Set up a camera where you found the droppings, or somewhere close to the cabin.'

'So the camera's inside that little bird box?'

'The bird box, as you call it, protects the camera from the elements and any animals that get too close. This one's a simple, reasonably priced camera. It's got a Fresnel lens that registers the infrared radiation from the heat animals, humans and everything else give off. When the level deviates from the norm, the camera automatically starts to record.'

The old man was half listening to the conversation, but something else had caught his attention. Something that was happening on the television screen. He couldn't see what it was, but the green darkness had taken on a lighter shimmer.

'Recordings are stored on a memory card inside the camera – you can play it back on your PC afterwards.'

'Now *that's* fantastic.'

'Yes, but you do have to physically go and check the camera to see if it's recorded anything. If you go for this slightly more expensive model, you'll get a text message every time it's recorded anything. Or there's this one, the most advanced model, which still has a memory card but will also send any recordings directly to your phone or email. You can sit inside your cabin and only have to go back to the camera to change the battery every so often.'

'What if the bear comes at night?'

'The camera has black-light LEDs as well as white. Invisible light that means the animal doesn't get frightened off.'

Light. The old man could see it now. A beam of light coming from upriver, off to the right. It pushed through the green water, found the dress, and for a chilling moment it made him think of a girl coming back to life at last and dancing with joy.

'That's proper science fiction, that is!'

The old man opened his mouth when he saw a spaceship come into the picture. It was lit up from within and was hovering a metre and a half off the riverbed. The current knocked it against a large rock, and, almost in slow motion, it spun round until the light from the front of it swept across the riverbed and for a moment blinded the old man when it hit the camera lens. Then the hovering spaceship was caught by the thick branches of the pine tree and stopped moving. The old man felt his heart thudding in his chest. It was a car. The interior light was on, and he could see that the inside was full of water, almost up to the roof. There was someone in there. Someone half sitting, half standing on the driver's seat as he desperately pressed his head up to the roof, obviously trying to get air. One of the rotten branches holding the car snapped and drifted off in the current.

'You don't get the same clarity and focus as daylight, and it's black and white. But as long as there's no condensation on the lens or anything in the way, you should certainly be able to see your bear.'

The old man stamped on the floor in an attempt to attract Alf's attention. The man in the car looked like he was taking a deep breath before ducking under again. His short, bristly hair was swaying, and his cheeks were puffed out. He hit both hands against the side window facing the camera, but the water inside the car leached the force from the blows. The old man had put his hands on the armrests and was trying to get up from his chair, but his muscles wouldn't do what he told them to. He noticed that the middle finger on one of the man's hands was a greyish colour. The man stopped banging and butted the glass with his head. It looked like he was giving up. Another branch snapped and the current tugged and strained to pull the car free, but the pine wasn't ready to let go just yet. The old man stared at the anguished face pressed against the inside of the car window. Bulging blue eyes. A scar in a liver-coloured arc from one corner of his mouth up towards his ear. The old man had managed to get out of his chair and took two unsteady steps towards the shelves of cameras.

'Excuse me,' Alf said quietly to the customer. 'What is it, Dad?'

The old man gesticulated at the screen behind him.

'Really?' Alf said dubiously, and hurried past the old man towards the screen. 'Fish?'

The old man shook his head and turned back to the screen. The car. It was gone. And everything looked the same as before. The riverbed, the dead pine tree, the dress, the green light through the ice. As if nothing had happened. The old man stamped the floor again and pointed at the screen.

'Easy now, Dad,' Alf said, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder. 'It is very early for spawning, you know.' He went back to the customer and the wildlife cameras.

The old man looked at the two men standing with their backs to him, and felt despair and rage wash over him. How was he going to explain what he had just seen? His doctor had told him that when a stroke hits both the front and back parts of the left side of the brain, it wasn't only your speech that was lost, but often the ability to communicate in general, even by writing or through gestures. He tottered back to the chair and sat down again. Looked at the river, which just went on flowing. Imperturbable. Undeterred. Unchanging. And after a couple of minutes he felt his heart start to beat more calmly again. Who knows, maybe it hadn't actually happened after all? Maybe it had just been a glimpse of the next step towards the absolute darkness of old age. Or, in this case, its colourful world of hallucinations. He looked at the dress. For a moment, when he had thought it was lit up by car headlights, it had seemed to him as if Olivia was dancing in it. And behind the wind-screen, inside the illuminated car, he had glimpsed a face he had seen before. A face he remembered. And the only faces he still remembered were the ones he saw here, in the shop. And he had seen that man in here on two occasions. Those blue eyes, that liver-coloured scar. On both occasions he had bought a wildlife camera. The police had been in asking about him fairly recently. The old man could have told them he was a tall man. And that he had that look in his eyes. The look that said he knew the secret. The look that said he wasn't a herbivore.

2

SVEIN FINNE LEANED OVER THE woman and felt her forehead with one hand. It was wet with sweat. The eyes staring up at him were wide with pain. Or fear. Mostly fear, he guessed.

‘Are you afraid of me?’ he whispered.

She nodded and swallowed. He had always thought her beautiful. When he saw her walk to and from her home, when she was at the gym, when he was sitting on the metro just a few seats away from her, letting her see him. Just so she would know. But he had never seen her look more beautiful than she did right now, lying there helpless, so completely in his power.

‘I promise it will be quick, darling,’ he whispered.

She gulped. So frightened. He wondered if he should kiss her.

‘A knife in the stomach,’ he whispered. ‘Then it’s over.’

She screwed her eyes shut, and two glistening tears squeezed through her eyelashes.

Svein Finne laughed quietly. ‘You knew I’d come. You knew I couldn’t let you go. It was a promise, after all.’

He ran one finger through the mix of sweat and tears on her cheek. He could see one of her eyes through the big, gaping hole in his hand, in the eagle's wing. The hole was the result of a bullet fired by a policeman, a young officer at the time. They had sentenced Svein Finne to twenty years in prison for eighteen charges of sexual assault, and he hadn't denied the charges in and of themselves, just the description of them as 'assault', and the idea that those acts were something that a man like him should be punished for. But the judge and jury evidently believed that Norway's laws were above nature's. Fine, that was their opinion.

Her eye stared at him through the hole.

'Are you ready, darling?'

'Don't call me that,' she whimpered. More pleading than commanding. 'And stop talking about knives . . .'

Svein Finne sighed. Why were people so frightened of the knife? It was humanity's first tool, they'd had two and a half million years to get used to it, yet some people still didn't appreciate the beauty of what had made it possible for them to descend from the trees. Hunting, shelter, agriculture, food, defence. Just as much as the knife took life, it created it. You couldn't have one without the other. Only those who appreciated that, and accepted the consequences of their humanity, their origins, could love the knife. Fear and love. Again, two sides of the same thing.

Svein Finne looked up. At the knives on the bench beside them, ready for use. Ready to be chosen. The choice of the right knife for the right job was important. These ones were good, purpose-made, top quality. Sure, they lacked what Svein Finne looked for in a knife. Personality. Spirit. Magic. Before that tall young policeman with the short, messy hair had ruined everything, Svein Finne had had a fine collection of twenty-six knives.

The finest of them had been Javanese. Long, thin, asymmetrical, like a curved snake with a handle. Sheer beauty, feminine. Possibly not the most effective to use, but it had the hypnotic qualities of both a snake and a beautiful woman, it made people do exactly what you told them.

The most efficient knife in the collection, on the other hand, was a *Rampuri*, the favourite of the Indian mafia. It emanated a sort of chill, as if it were made of ice; it was so ugly that it was mesmerising. The *karambit*, which was shaped like a tiger's claw, combined beauty and efficiency. But it was perhaps a little too calculated, like a whore wearing too much make-up and a dress that was too tight, too low-cut. Svein Finne had never liked it. He preferred them innocent. Virginal. And, ideally, simple. Like his favourite knife in the collection. A Finnish *puukko* knife. It had a worn, brown wooden handle, without any real relation to the blade, which was short with a groove, and the sharp edge curved up to form a point. He had bought the *puukko* in Turku, and two days later he had used it to clarify the situation to a plump eighteen-year-old girl who had been working all alone in a Neste petrol station on the outskirts of Helsinki. Even back then he had – as always when he felt a rush of sexual anticipation – started to stammer slightly. It wasn't a sign that he wasn't in control, but rather the opposite, it was just the dopamine. And confirmation that at the age of almost eighty his urges were undiminished. It had taken him precisely two and a half minutes from the moment he walked through the door – when he pinned her down on the counter, cut her trousers off, inseminated her, took out her ID card, noted Maalin's name and address – until he was out again. Two and a half minutes. How many seconds had the actual insemination taken? Chimpanzees spent an average of eight seconds having intercourse, eight seconds in which both monkeys were defenceless in a world full of predators. A gorilla – who had fewer natural enemies – could stretch out the pleasure to a minute. But a disciplined man in enemy territory often had to sacrifice pleasure for the greater goal: reproduction. So, just as a bank robbery should never take more than four minutes, an act of insemination in a public place should never take more than two and a half minutes. Evolution would prove him right, it was just a matter of time.

But now, here, they were in a safe environment. Besides, there wasn't going to be any insemination. Not that he didn't want to – he did. But this time she was going to be penetrated by a knife instead; there was

no point trying to impregnate a woman when there was no chance of it resulting in offspring. So the disciplined man saved his seed.

‘I have to be allowed to call you darling, seeing as we’re engaged,’ Svein Finne whispered.

She stared at him with eyes that were black with shock. Black, as if they had already gone out. As if there were no longer any light to shut out.

‘Yes, we *are* engaged.’ He laughed quietly, and pressed his thick lips to hers. He automatically wiped her lips with the sleeve of his flannel shirt so there wouldn’t be any traces of saliva. ‘And this is what I’ve been promising you . . .’ he said, running his hand down between her breasts towards her stomach.

3

HARRY WOKE UP. SOMETHING WAS wrong. He knew it wouldn't take long for him to remember what, that these few blessed moments of uncertainty were all he was going to get before reality punched him in the face. He opened his eyes and regretted it at once. It was as if the daylight forcing its way through the filthy, grimy window and lighting up the empty little room carried straight on to a painful spot just behind his eyes. He sought shelter in the darkness behind his eyelids again and realised that he had been dreaming. About Rakel, obviously. And it had started with the same dream he had had so many times before, about that morning many years ago, not long after they had first met. She had been lying with her head on his chest, and he had asked if she was checking to see if what they said was true, that he didn't have a heart. And Rakel had laughed the laugh he loved; he could do the most idiotic things to coax it out of her. Then she had raised her head, looked at him with the warm brown eyes she had inherited from her Austrian mother, and replied that they were right, but that she would give him hers. And she had. And Rakel's heart was so big, it had pumped blood around his

body, thawing him out, making him a real human being again. And her husband. And a father to Oleg, the introverted, serious boy that Harry had grown to love as his own son. Harry had been happy. And terrified. Happily unaware of *what* was going to happen, but unhappily aware that *something* was bound to, that he wasn't made to be this happy. And terrified of losing Rakel. Because one half of a heart couldn't beat without the other, he was well aware of that, as was Rakel. So if he couldn't live without her, why had he been running away from her in his dream last night?

He didn't know, couldn't remember, but Rakel had come to claim her half-heart back, had listened out for his already weak heartbeat, found out where he was and rung the doorbell.

Then, at last, the blow that had been coming. Reality.

That he had already lost her.

And not because he had fled from her, but because she had thrown him out.

Harry gasped for air. A sound was boring through his ears, and he realised that the pain wasn't only behind his eyes, but that his whole brain was a source of immense hurt. And that it was that noise which had triggered the dream before he woke up. There really was someone ringing the doorbell. Stupid, painful, irrepressible hope poked its head up.

Without opening his eyes, Harry reached one hand down towards the floor next to the sofa bed, feeling for the whisky bottle. He knocked it over, and realised it was empty from the sound it made as it rolled across the worn parquet floor. He forced his eyes open. Stared at the hand that was dangling above the floor like a greedy claw, at the grey, titanium prosthetic middle finger. The hand was bloody. Shit. He sniffed his fingers and tried to remember what had happened late last night, and if it had involved women. He threw back the covers and glanced down at all 1.92 metres of his lean, naked body. Too little time had passed since he had fallen off the wagon for it to have left any physical trace, but if things followed their usual course, his muscles would start to weaken, week by week, and his already greyish-white skin would turn

as white as a sheet, he would turn into a ghost and eventually vanish altogether. Which, of course, was the whole point of drinking – wasn't it?

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. Looked around. He was back where he had been before he became a human being again. Only, one rung further down now. In what could have been an ironic twist of fate, the two-room apartment, all forty square metres of it, that he had borrowed and then gone on to rent from a younger police colleague, lay just one floor below the flat he had lived in before he moved in with Rakel, to her wooden house in Holmenkollen. When he moved into the flat, Harry had bought a sofa bed at IKEA. That, together with the bookcase full of vinyl records behind the sofa, a coffee table, a mirror that was still leaning against the wall, and a wardrobe out in the hall, was the total extent of the furniture. Harry wasn't sure if it was due to a lack of initiative on his part, or if he was trying to convince himself that this was only temporary, that she was going to take him back when she had finished thinking things through.

He wondered if he was going to be sick. Well, that was probably up to him. It was as if his body had got used to the poison after a couple of weeks, had built up a tolerance to the dosage. And demanded that it increase. He stared down at the empty whisky bottle that had come to rest between his feet. Peter Dawson Special. Not that it was particularly good. Jim Beam was good. And it came in square bottles that didn't roll across the floor. But Dawson was cheap, and a thirsty alcoholic with a fixed salary and an empty bank account couldn't afford to be fussy. He looked at the time. Ten to four. He had two hours and ten minutes until the liquor store closed.

He took a deep breath and stood up. His head felt like it was about to burst. He swayed but managed to stay upright. Looked at himself in the mirror. He was a bottom feeder that had been reeled in so quickly that his eyes and innards were trying to get out; so hard that the hook had torn his cheek and left a pink, sickle-shaped scar running from the left side of his mouth up towards his ear. He felt under the covers but couldn't find any underwear, so pulled on the jeans that were lying on the

floor and went out into the hall. A dark shape was silhouetted against the patterned glass in the door. It was her, she had come back. But he had thought that the last time the doorbell rang too. And that time it had been a man who said he was from Hafslund Electricity and needed to change the meter and replace it with a modern one that meant they could monitor usage from hour to hour, down to the nearest watt, so all their customers could see exactly what time of day they turned the stove on, or when they switched their reading light off. Harry had explained that he didn't have a stove, and that if he did have one, he wouldn't want anyone to know when he switched it on or off. And with that he had shut the door.

But the silhouette he could see through the glass this time was a woman's. Her height, her outline. How had she got into the stairwell?

He opened the door.

There were two of them. A woman he had never seen before, and a girl who was so short she didn't reach the glass in the door. And when he saw the collection box the girl was holding up in front of him he realised that they must have rung on the door down in the street and one of the neighbours had let them in.

'We're collecting for charity,' the woman said. They were both wearing orange vests with the emblem of the Red Cross on top of their coats.

'I thought that was in the autumn,' Harry said.

The woman and girl stared at him silently. At first he interpreted this as hostility, as if he had accused them of fraud. Then he realised it was derision, probably because he was half naked and stank of drink at four o'clock in the afternoon. And was evidently entirely unaware of the nationwide, door-to-door charity collection that had been getting loads of TV coverage.

Harry checked to see if he felt any shame. Actually, he did. A little bit. He stuck his hand into the trouser pocket where he usually kept his cash when he was drinking, because he had learned from experience that it wasn't wise to take bank cards with him.

He smiled at the girl, who was staring wide-eyed at his bloody hand

as he pushed a folded note into the slot on the sealed collection box. He caught a glimpse of a moustache just before the money disappeared. Edvard Munch's moustache.

'Damn,' Harry said, and put his hand back in his pocket. Empty. Like his bank account.

'Sorry?' the woman said.

'I thought it was a two hundred, but I gave you a Munch. A thousand kroner.'

'Oh . . .'

'Can I . . . er, have it back?'

The girl and woman looked at him in silence. The girl cautiously lifted the box a little higher, so that he could see the plastic seal across the charity logo more clearly.

'I see,' Harry whispered. 'What about change?'

The woman smiled as though he were trying to be funny, and he smiled back to assure her that she was right, while his brain searched desperately for a solution to the problem. 299 kroner and 90 øre before six o'clock. Or 169.90 for a half-bottle.

'You'll have to console yourself with the fact that the money will go to people who really need it,' the woman said, guiding the girl back towards the stairs.

Harry closed the door, went into the kitchen and rinsed the blood off his hand, feeling a sting of pain as he did so. Back in the living room, he looked around and saw that there was a bloody handprint on the duvet cover. He got down on all fours and found his mobile under the sofa. No texts, just three missed calls from last night, one from Bjørn Holm, the forensics officer from Toten, and two from Alexandra from the Forensic Medical Institute lab. She and Harry had become intimately acquainted fairly recently, after he got thrown out, and going by what he knew – and remembered – about her, Alexandra wasn't the sort to use menstruation as grounds to cancel on him. The first night, when she had helped him home and they had both searched his pockets in vain for his keys, she had picked the lock with disconcerting ease and

laid him – and herself – down on the sofa bed. And when he had woken up again she was gone, leaving just a note thanking him for services rendered. It could have been her blood.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to focus. The events and chronology of the past few weeks were pretty hazy, but when it came to last night his memory was blank. Completely blank, in fact. He opened his eyes and looked down at his stinging right hand. Three bleeding knuckles, with the skin scraped off and congealed blood around the edges of the wounds. He must have punched someone. And three knuckles meant more than one punch. Then he noticed the blood on his trousers. Too much of it to have come from his knuckles alone. And it was hardly menstrual blood.

Harry pulled the cover off the duvet as he returned the missed call from Bjørn Holm. As it started to ring, he knew that somewhere out there a ringtone in the form of a particular song by Hank Williams had gone off, a song Bjørn was convinced was about a forensics officer like him.

‘How’s things?’ Bjørn asked in his cheery Toten dialect.

‘That depends,’ Harry said, going into the bathroom. ‘Can you lend me three hundred kroner?’

‘It’s Sunday, Harry. The liquor store’s closed today.’

‘Sunday?’ Harry pulled his trousers off and stuffed both them and the duvet cover into the overflowing washing basket. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘Did you want anything else?’

‘You were the one who called me, around nine o’clock.’

‘Yes, but you didn’t answer.’

‘No, looks like my phone’s been under the sofa for the past day or so. I was at the Jealousy.’

‘I thought as much, so I called Øystein and he told me you were there.’

‘And?’

‘So I went over there. You really don’t remember any of this?’

‘Shit. What happened?’

Harry heard his colleague sigh, and imagined him rolling his slightly

protruding eyes, his pale moon of a face framed by a flat cap and the bushiest, reddest beard in Police Headquarters.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Only as much as you think I need to know,’ Harry said as he discovered something in the basket of dirty washing. The neck of a bottle, sticking up out from the dirty underpants and T-shirts. He snatched it up. Jim Beam. Empty. Or was it? He unscrewed the top, put it to his lips and tipped his head back.

‘OK, the short version,’ Bjørn said. ‘When I arrived at the Jealousy Bar at 21.15 you were drunk, and by the time I drove you home at 22.30, you had only spoken coherently about one thing. One single person. Guess who?’

Harry didn’t answer, he was squinting cross-eyed at the bottle, following the drop that was trickling down inside it.

‘Rakel,’ Bjørn said. ‘You passed out in the car and I got you up into your flat, and that was that.’

Harry could tell by the speed of the drop that he had plenty of time, and he moved the bottle away from his mouth. ‘Hm. That was that?’

‘That’s the short version.’

‘Did we fight?’

‘You and *me*?’

‘From the way you stress “me”, it sounds like I had a fight with someone. Who?’

‘The Jealousy’s new owner may have taken a bit of a knock.’

‘A knock? I woke up with three bloody knuckles and blood on my trousers.’

‘Your first punch hit him on the nose, so there was a lot of blood. But then he ducked and you punched the wall instead. More than once. The wall’s probably still got your blood on it.’

‘But Ringdal didn’t fight back?’

‘To be honest, you were so fucked that there was no way you were going to hurt anyone, Harry. Øystein and I managed to stop you before you did yourself any more damage.’

‘Shit. So I’m barred?’

‘Oh, Ringdal deserved at least one punch. He’d played the whole of that *White Ladder* album and had just put it on again. Then you started yelling at him for ruining the bar’s reputation, which you claimed you, Øystein and Rakel had built up.’

‘But we had! That bar was a gold mine, Bjørn. He got the whole thing for next to nothing, and I only made one demand. That he should take a stand against all the crap, and only play decent music.’

‘*Your* music?’

‘*Our* music, Bjørn. Yours, mine, Øystein’s, Mehmet’s . . . Just not . . . just no fucking David Gray!’

‘Maybe you should have been more specific . . . Uh-oh, the little lad’s started crying, Harry.’

‘Oh, right, sorry. And thanks. And sorry about last night. Shit, I sound like an idiot. Let’s just hang up. Say hi to Katrine.’

‘She’s at work.’

The line went dead. And at that moment, in a sudden flash, Harry saw something. It happened so quickly he didn’t have time to see what it was, but his heart was suddenly beating so hard that he gasped for breath.

Harry looked at the bottle that he was still holding upside down. The drop had trickled out. He looked down. A brown drop was glinting on a filthy white floor tile.

He sighed. He sank to the floor, naked, feeling the cold tiles under his knees. He stuck his tongue out, took a deep breath and leaned forward, resting his forehead on the floor, as if in prayer.