



VINTAGE

---

# DON'T LOOK BACK

KARIN FOSSUM

## **Contents**

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Karin Fossum

Title Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Copyright

## About the Book

At the foot of the Kollen mountain lies a small village where the children play unafraid in the streets. But the tranquillity is about to be irrecoverably shattered by a most sinister crime when a young woman's naked body is found lying by the lake.

Inspector Sejer – smart, tough and enigmatic – is called in to investigate. Only he can uncover the dark secrets of this quiet community, hidden by deep family ties ...

## About the Author

Karin Fossum began her writing career in 1974. She has won numerous awards, including the Glass Key Award for the best Nordic crime novel, an honour shared with Henning Mankell and Jo Nesbo, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for *Calling Out For You*, which was also shortlisted for the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award.

## ALSO BY KARIN FOSSUM

The Inspector Sejer series

*Don't Look Back*  
*He Who Fears the Wolf*  
*When the Devil Holds the Candle*  
*Calling Out For You*  
*Black Seconds*  
*The Water's Edge*  
*Bad Intentions*  
*The Caller*  
*In the Darkness*

Standalone crime fiction

*Broken*

Even though some of the places names have been changed, the setting for this story will be recognisable to those who live there. That is why I want to emphasise that none of the characters in this book are based on real people.

Karin Fossum, Valstad, February 1996

# Don't Look Back

Karin Fossum

Translated from the Norwegian by  
Felicity David

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

# CHAPTER 1

RAGNHILD OPENED THE door cautiously and peered out. Up on the road everything was quiet, and a breeze that had been playing amongst the buildings during the night had finally died down. She turned and pulled the doll's pram over the threshold.

"We haven't even eaten yet," Marthe complained.

She helped push the pram.

"I have to go home. We're going out shopping," Ragnhild said.

"Shall I come over later?"

"You can if you like. After we've done the shopping."

She was on the gravel now and began to push the pram towards the front gate. It was heavy going, so she turned it around and pulled it instead.

"See you later, Ragnhild."

The door closed behind her – a sharp slam of wood and metal. Ragnhild struggled with the gate, but she mustn't be careless. Marthe's dog might get out. He was watching her intently from beneath the garden table. When she was sure that the gate was properly closed, she started off across the street in the direction of the garages. She could have taken the shortcut between the buildings, but she had discovered that it was too difficult with the pram. Just then a neighbour closed his garage door. He smiled to her and buttoned up his coat, a little awkwardly, with one hand. A big black Volvo stood in the driveway, rumbling pleasantly.

"Well, Ragnhild, you're out early, aren't you? Hasn't Marthe got up yet?"



“I slept over last night,” she said. “On a mattress on the floor.”

“I see.”

He locked the garage door and glanced at his watch; it was 8.06 a.m. A moment later he turned the car into the street and drove off.

Ragnhild pushed the pram with both hands. She had reached the downhill stretch, which was rather steep, and she had to hold on tight so as not to lose her grip. Her doll, who was named Elise – after herself, because her name was Ragnhild Elise – slid down to the front of the pram. That didn’t look good, so she let go with one hand and put the doll back in place, patted down the blanket, and continued on her way. She was wearing sneakers: one was red with green laces, the other was green with red laces, and that’s how it had to be. She had on a red tracksuit with Simba the Lion across the chest and a green anorak over it. Her hair was extraordinarily thin and blonde, and not very long, but she had managed to pull it into a topknot with an elastic band. Bright plastic fruit dangled from the band, with her sprout of hair sticking up in the middle like a tiny, neglected palm tree. She was six and a half, but small for her age. Not until she spoke would one guess that she was already at school.

She met no one on the hill, but as she approached the intersection she heard a car. So she stopped, squeezed over to the side, and waited as a van with its paint peeling off wobbled over a speed bump. It slowed even more when the girl in the red outfit came into view. Ragnhild wanted to cross the street. There was a pavement on the other side, and her mother had told her always to walk on the pavement. She waited for the van to pass, but it stopped instead, and the driver rolled down his window.

“You go first, I’ll wait,” he said.

She hesitated a moment, then crossed the street, turning around again to tug the pram up on to the pavement. The

van slid forward a bit, then stopped again. The window on the opposite side was rolled down. His eyes are funny, she thought, really big and round as a ball. They were set wide apart and were pale blue, like thin ice. His mouth was small with full lips, and it pointed down like the mouth of a fish. He stared at her.

"Are you going up Skiferbakken with that pram?"

She nodded. "I live in Granittveien."

"It'll be awfully heavy. What have you got in it, then?"

"Elise," she replied, lifting up the doll.

"Excellent," he said with a broad smile. His mouth looked nicer now.

He scratched his head. His hair was dishevelled, and grew in thick clumps straight up from his head like the leaves of a pineapple. Now it looked even worse.

"I can drive you up there," he said. "There's room for your pram in the back."

Ragnhild thought for a moment. She stared up Skiferbakken, which was long and steep. The man pulled on the handbrake and glanced in the back of the van.

"Mama's waiting for me," Ragnhild said.

A bell seemed to ring in the back of her mind, but she couldn't remember what it was for.

"You'll get home sooner if I drive you," he said.

That decided it. Ragnhild was a practical little girl. She wheeled the pram behind the van and the man hopped out. He opened the back door and lifted the pram in with one hand.

"You'll have to sit in back and hold on to the pram. Otherwise it'll roll about," he said, and lifted in Ragnhild too.

He shut the back doors, climbed into the driver's seat, and released the brake.

"Do you go up this hill every day?" He looked at her in the mirror.

"Only when I've been at Marthe's house. I stayed over."

She took a flowered overnight bag from under the doll's blanket and opened it, checking that everything was in place: her nightgown with the picture of Nala on it, her toothbrush and hair brush. The van lumbered over another speed bump. The man was still looking at her in the mirror.

"Have you ever seen a toothbrush like this?" Ragnhild said, holding it up for him. It had feet.

"No!" he said. "Where did you get it?"

"Papa bought it for me. You don't have one like it?"

"No, but I'll ask for one for Christmas."

He was finally over the last bump, and he shifted to second gear. It made an awful grinding noise. The little girl sat on the floor of the van steadying the pram. A very sweet little girl, he thought, red and cute in her tracksuit, like a ripe little berry. He whistled a tune and felt on top of the world, enthroned behind the wheel in the big van with the little girl in the back. Really on top of the world.

The village lay in the bottom of a valley, at the end of a fjord, at the foot of a mountain. Like a pool in a river, where the water was much too still. And everyone knows that only running water is fresh. The village was a stepchild of the municipality, and the roads that led there were indescribably bad. Once in a while a bus deigned to stop by the abandoned dairy and pick up people to take them to town. There were no night buses back to the village.

Kollen, the mountain, was a grey, rounded peak, virtually neglected by those who lived there, but eagerly visited by people from far-off places. This was because of the mountain's unusual minerals and its flora, which was exceptionally rare. On calm days a faint tinkling could be heard from the mountaintop; one might almost believe it was haunted. In fact, the sound was from sheep grazing up there. The ridges around the mountain looked blue and airy through the haze, like soft felt with scattered woollen veils of fog.

Konrad Sejer traced the main highway in the road atlas with a fingertip. They were approaching a roundabout. Police Officer Karlsen was at the wheel, keeping an attentive eye on the fields while following the directions.

“Now you have to turn right on to Gneisveien, then up Skiferbakken, then left at Feltspatveien. Granittveien goes off to the right. A cul-de-sac,” Sejer said pensively. “Number 5 should be the third house on the left.”

He was tense. His voice was even more brusque than usual.

Karlsen manoeuvred the car into the housing estate and over the speed bumps. As in so many places, the new arrivals had taken up residence in clusters, some distance from the rest of the local community. Apart from giving directions, the two policemen didn't talk much. They approached the house, trying to steel themselves, thinking that perhaps the child might even be back home by now. Perhaps she was sitting on her mother's lap, surprised and embarrassed at all the fuss. It was 1 p.m., so the girl had been missing for five hours. Two would have been within a reasonable margin, five was definitely too long. Their unease was growing steadily, like a dead spot in the chest where the blood refused to flow. Both of them had children of their own; Karlsen's daughter was eight, Sejer had a grandson of four. The silence was filled with images, which might turn out to be correct – this was what struck Sejer as they drew up in front of the house.

Number 5 was a low, white house with dark blue trim. A typical prefab house with no personality, but embellished like a playroom with decorative shutters and scalloped edges on the gables. The yard was well kept. A large veranda with a prettily turned railing ran around the entire building. The house sat almost at the top of the ridge, with a view over the whole village, a small village, quite lovely, surrounded by farms and fields. A patrol car that had come on ahead of them was parked next to the letterbox.

Sejer went first, wiping his shoes carefully on the mat, and ducking his head as he entered the living room. It only took them a second to see what was happening. She was still missing, and the panic was palpable. On the sofa sat the mother, a stocky woman in a gingham dress. Next to her, with a hand on the mother's arm, sat a woman officer. Sejer could almost smell the terror in the room. The mother was using what little strength she had to hold back her tears, or perhaps even a piercing shriek of horror. The slightest effort made her breathe hard, as was evident when she stood up to shake hands with Sejer.

"Mrs Album," he said. "Someone is out searching, is that correct?"

"Some of the neighbours. They have a dog with them."

She sank back on to the sofa.

"We have to help each other."

He sat down in the armchair facing her and leaned forward, keeping his eyes fixed on hers.

"We'll send out a dog patrol. Now, you have to tell me all about Ragnhild. Who she is, what she looks like, what she's wearing."

No reply, just persistent nodding. Her mouth looked stiff and frozen.

"Have you called every possible place where she could be?"

"There aren't many," she murmured. "I've called them all."

"Do you have relatives anywhere else in the village?"

"No, none. We're not from around here."

"Does Ragnhild go to kindergarten or nursery school?"

"There weren't any openings."

"Does she have brothers or sisters?"

"She's our only child."

He tried to breathe without making a sound.

"First of all," he said, "what was she wearing? Be as precise as you can."

"A red tracksuit," she stammered, "with a lion on the front. Green anorak with a hood. One red and one green shoe."

She spoke in fits and starts, her voice threatening to break.

"And Ragnhild herself? Describe her for me."

"About four foot tall. Two and a half stone. Very fair hair. We just took her for her sixth-year check-up."

She went to the wall by the TV, where a number of photos were hanging. Most of them were of Ragnhild, one was of Mrs Album in national costume, and one of a man in the field uniform of the Home Guard, presumably the father. She chose one in which the girl was smiling and handed it to him. Her hair was almost white. The mother's was jet-black, but the father was blond. Some of his hair was visible under his service cap.

"What sort of girl is she?"

"Trusting," she gasped. "Talks to everybody." This admission made her shiver.

"That's just the kind of child who gets along best in this world," he said firmly. "We'll have to take the picture with us."

"I realise that."

"Tell me," he said, sitting back down, "where do the children in this village go walking?"

"Down to the fjord. To Prestegårds Strand or to Horgen. Or to the top of Kollen. Some go up to the reservoir, or they go walking in the woods."

He looked out the window and saw the black firs.

"Has anyone at all seen Ragnhild since she left?"

"Marthe's neighbour met her by his garage when he was leaving for work. I know because I rang his wife."

"Where does Marthe live?"

"In Krystallen, just a few minutes from here."

"She had her doll's pram with her?"

"Yes. A pink Brio."

"What's the neighbour's name?"

"Walther," she said, surprised. "Walther Isaksen."

"Where can I find him?"

"He works at Dyno Industries, in the personnel department."

Sejer stood up, went over to the telephone and called information, then punched in the number, and waited.

"I need to speak with one of your employees immediately. The name is Walther Isaksen."

Mrs Album gave him a worried look from the sofa. Karlsen was studying the view from the window, the blue ridges, the fields, and a white church steeple in the distance.

"Konrad Sejer of the police," Sejer said curtly. "I'm calling from 5 Granittveien, and you probably know why."

"Is Ragnhild still missing?"

"Yes. But I understood that you saw her when she left Marthe's house this morning."

"I was just shutting my garage door."

"Did you notice the time?"

"It was 8.06 a.m. I was running a little late."

"Are you quite sure of the time?"

"I have a digital watch."

Sejer was silent, trying to recall the way they had driven.

"So you left her at 8.06 a.m. by the garage and drove straight to work?"

"Yes."

"Down Gneisveien and out to the main highway?"

"That's correct."

"I would think," Sejer said, "that at that time of day most people are driving towards town and that there's probably little traffic going the other way."

"Yes, that's right. There are no main roads going through the village, and no jobs, either."

"Did you pass any cars on the way that were driving towards the village?"

The man was silent for a moment. Sejer waited. The room was as quiet as a tomb.

"Yes, actually, I did pass one, down by the flats, just before the roundabout. A van, I think, ugly and with peeling paint. Driving quite slowly."

"Who was driving it?"

"A man," he said hesitantly. "One man."

"My name is Raymond." He smiled.

Ragnhild looked up, saw the smiling face in the mirror, and Kollen Mountain bathed in the morning light.

"Would you like to go for a drive?"

"Mama's waiting for me."

She said it in a stuck-up sort of voice.

"Have you ever been to the top of Kollen?"

"One time, with Papa. We had a picnic."

"It's possible to drive up there," he explained. "From the back side, that is. Shall we drive up to the top?"

"I want to go home," she said, a bit uncertain now.

He shifted down and stopped.

"Just a short ride?" he asked.

His voice was thin. Ragnhild thought he sounded so sad. And she wasn't used to disappointing the wishes of grown-ups. She got up, walked forward to the front seat and leaned over.

"Just a short ride," she repeated. "Up to the top and then back home right away."

He backed into Feldspatveien and drove back downhill.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ragnhild Elise."

He rocked a little from side to side and cleared his throat, as if to admonish her.

"Ragnhild Elise. You can't go out shopping so early in the morning. It's only 8.15 a.m. The shops are closed."

She didn't answer. Instead she lifted Elise out of the pram, put her on her lap and straightened her dress. Then she pulled the dummy out of the doll's mouth. Instantly the doll began to scream, a thin, metallic baby cry.



“What’s that?”

He braked hard and looked in the mirror.

“That’s just Elise. She cries when I take out her dummy.”

“I don’t like that noise! Put it back in!”

He was restless at the wheel now, and the van weaved back and forth.

“Papa is a better driver than you are,” she said.

“I had to teach myself,” he said sulkily. “Nobody wanted to teach me.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t reply, just tossed his head. The van was out on the main highway now; he drove in second gear down to the roundabout and passed through the intersection with a hoarse roar.

“Now we’re coming to Horgen,” she said, delighted.

He didn’t reply. Ten minutes later he turned left, up into the wooded mountainside. On the way they passed a couple of farms with red barns and tractors parked here and there. They saw no one. The road grew narrower and peppered with holes. Ragnhild’s arms were starting to grow tired from holding on to the pram, so she laid the doll on the floor and put her foot between the wheels as a brake.

“This is where I live,” he said suddenly and stopped.

“With your wife?”

“No, with my father. But he’s in bed.”

“Hasn’t he got up?”

“He’s always in bed.”

She peered curiously out of the window and saw a peculiar house. It had been a hut once, and someone had added on to it, first once, then again. The separate parts were all different colours. Next to it stood a garage of corrugated iron. The courtyard was overgrown. A rusty old trowel was being slowly strangled by stinging nettles and dandelions. But Ragnhild wasn’t interested in the house; she had her eye on something else.

“Bunnies!” she said faintly.

“Yes,” he said, pleased. “Do you want to look at them?”

He hopped out, opened the back, and lifted her down. He had a peculiar way of walking; his legs were almost unnaturally short and he was severely bowlegged. His feet were small. His wide nose nearly touched his lower lip, which stuck out a bit. Under his nose hung a big, clear drop. Ragnhild thought he wasn't that old, although when he walked he swayed like an old man. But it was funny too. A boy's face on an old body. He wobbled over to the rabbit hutches and opened them. Ragnhild stood spellbound.

“Can I hold one?”

“Yes. Take your pick.”

“The little brown one,” she said, entranced.

“That's Påsan. He's the nicest.”

He opened the hutch and lifted out the rabbit. A chubby, lop-eared rabbit, the colour of coffee with a lot of cream. It kicked its legs vigorously but calmed down as soon as Ragnhild took it in her arms. For a moment she was utterly still. She could feel its heart pounding against her hand, as she stroked one of its ears cautiously. It was like a piece of velvet between her fingers. Its nose shone black and moist like a liquorice drop. Raymond stood next to her and watched. He had a little girl all to himself, and no one had seen them.

“The picture,” Sejer said, “along with the description, will be sent to the newspapers. Unless they hear otherwise, they'll print it tonight.”

Irene Album fell across the table sobbing. The others stared wordlessly at their hands, and at her shaking back. The woman officer sat ready with a handkerchief. Karlsen scraped his chair a bit and glanced at his watch.

“Is Ragnhild afraid of dogs?” Sejer said.

“Why do you ask?” she said with surprise.

“Sometimes when we're searching for children with the dog patrol, they hide when they hear our German

shepherds."

"No, she's not afraid of dogs."

The words reverberated in his head. *She's not afraid of dogs.*

"Have you had any luck getting hold of your husband?"

"He's in Narvik on manoeuvres," she whispered. "On the plateau somewhere."

"Don't they use mobile phones?"

"They're out of range."

"The people who are looking for her now, who are they?"

"Boys from the neighbourhood who are home in the daytime. One of them has a phone with him."

"How long have they been gone?"

She looked up at the clock on the wall. "More than two hours."

Her voice was no longer quavering. Now she sounded doped, almost lethargic, as if she were half asleep. Sejer leaned forward again and spoke to her as softly and clearly as he could.

"What you fear the most has probably *not* happened. Do you realise that? Usually, children disappear for all sorts of trivial reasons. And it's a fact that children get lost all the time, just because they're children. They have no sense of time or responsibility, and they're so maddeningly curious that they follow any impulse that comes into their head. That's what it's like to be a child, and that's why they get lost. But as a rule they turn up just as suddenly as they disappeared. Often they don't have a good explanation for where they've been or what they were doing. But generally" – he took a breath – "they're quite all right."

"I know!" she said, staring at him. "But she's never gone off like this before!"

"She's growing up and getting bigger," he said persuasively. "She's becoming more adventurous."

God help me, he thought, I've got an answer for everything. He got up and dialled another number,

repressing an urge to look at his watch again – it would be a reminder that time was passing, and they didn't need that. He reached the Duty Officer, gave him a brief summary of the situation and asked him to contact a volunteer rescue group. He gave him the address in Granittveien and gave a quick description of the girl: dressed in red, almost white hair, pink doll's pram. Asked whether any messages had come in, and was told none had been received. He sat down again.

"Has Ragnhild mentioned or named anyone lately whom you didn't know yourself?"

"No."

"Did she have any money? Could she have been looking for a shop?"

"She had no money."

"This is a small village," he went on. "Has she ever been out walking and been given a ride by one of the neighbours?"

"Yes, that happens sometimes. There are about a hundred houses on this ridge, and she knows almost everyone, and she knows their cars. Sometimes she and Marthe have walked down to the church with their prams, and they've been given a ride home with one of the neighbours."

"Is there any special reason why they go to the church?"

"There's a little boy they knew buried there. They pick flowers for his grave, and then they come back up here. I think it seems exciting to them."

"You've searched at the church?"

"I rang for Ragnhild at ten o'clock. When they told me she had left at eight, I jumped in the car. I left the front door unlocked in case she came back while I was out searching. I drove to the church and down to the Fina petrol station, I looked in the auto workshop and behind the dairy, and then I drove over to the school to look in the schoolyard, because they have jungle gyms and things there. And then I checked

the kindergarten. She was so keen on starting school, she . . .

Another bout of sobbing took hold. As she wept, the others sat still and waited. Her eyes were puffy now, and she was crumpling her skirt in her fingers in despair. After a while her sobs died away and the lethargy returned – a shield to keep the terrible possibilities at bay.

The phone rang. A sudden ominous jangle. She gave a start and got up to answer it, but caught sight of Sejer's hand held up to stop her. He lifted the receiver.

"Hello? Is Irene there?"

It sounded like a boy. "Who's calling?"

"Thorbjørn Haugen. We're looking for Ragnhild."

"You're speaking with the police. Do you have any news?"

"We've been to all the houses on the whole ridge. Every single one. A lot of people weren't home, though we did meet a lady in Feltspatveien. A lorry had backed into her farmyard and turned around, she lives in number 1. A kind of van, she thought. And inside the van she saw a girl with a green jacket and white hair pulled into a topknot on her head. Ragnhild often wears her hair in a topknot."

"Go on."

"It turned halfway up the hill and drove back down. Disappeared around the curve."

"Do you know what time it was?"

"It was 8.15 a.m."

"Can you come over to Granittveien?"

"We'll be right there, we're at the roundabout now."

He hung up. Irene Album was still standing.

"What was it?" she whispered. "What did they say?"

"Someone saw her," he said slowly. "She got into a van."

Irene Album's scream finally came. It was as if the sound penetrated through the tight forest and created a faint movement in Ragnhild's mind.

"I'm hungry," she said suddenly. "I have to go home."

Raymond looked up. Påsan was shuffling about on the kitchen table and licking up the seeds they had scattered over it. They had forgotten both time and place. They had fed all the rabbits, Raymond had shown her his pictures, cut out of magazines and carefully pasted into a big album. Ragnhild kept roaring with laughter at his funny face. Now she realised that it was getting late.

"You can have a slice of bread."

"I have to go home. We're going shopping."

"We'll go up to Kollen first, then I'll drive you home afterwards."

"Now!" she said firmly. "I want to go home now."

Raymond thought desperately for a way to stall her.

"All right. But first I have to go out and buy some milk for Papa, down at Horgen's Shop. You can wait here, then it won't take as long."

He stood up and looked at her. At her bright face with the little, heart-shaped mouth that made him think of heart-shaped cinnamon sweets. Her eyes were clear and blue and her eyebrows were dark, surprising beneath her white fringe. He sighed heavily, walked over to the back door and opened it.

Ragnhild really wanted to leave, but she didn't know the way home so she would have to wait. She padded into the little living room with the rabbit in her arms and curled up in a corner of the sofa. They hadn't slept much last night, she and Marthe, and with the warm animal in the hollow of her throat she quickly grew sleepy. Soon her eyes closed.

It was a while before he came back. For a long time he sat and looked at her, amazed at how quietly she slept. Not a movement, not a single little sigh. He thought she had expanded a bit, become larger and warmer, like a loaf in the oven. After a while he grew uneasy and didn't know what to do with his hands, so he put them in his pockets and rocked a little in his chair. Started kneading the fabric of his trousers between his hands as he rocked and rocked, faster

and faster. He looked anxiously out the windows and down the hall to his father's bedroom. His hands worked and worked. The whole time he stared at her hair, which was shiny as silk, almost like rabbit fur. Then he gave a low moan and stopped himself. Stood up and poked her lightly on the shoulder.

"We can go now. Give me Påsan."

For a moment Ragnhild was completely bewildered. She got up slowly and stared at Raymond, then followed him out to the kitchen and pulled on her anorak, and padded out of the house as the little brown ball of fur vanished back into its cage. The pram was still in the back of the van. Raymond looked sad, but he helped her climb in, then got into the driver's seat and turned the key. Nothing happened.

"It won't start," he said, annoyed. "I don't understand it. It was running a minute ago. This piece of junk!"

"I have to go home!" Ragnhild said loudly, as if it would help the situation. He kept trying the ignition and stepping on the accelerator; he could hear the starter motor turning, but it kept up a complaining whine and refused to catch.

"We'll have to walk."

"It's much too far!" she whined.

"No, not from here. We're on the back side of Kollen now, we're almost at the top, and from there you can look straight down on your house. I'll pull your pram for you."

He put on a jacket that lay on the front seat, got out and opened the door for her. Ragnhild carried her doll and he pulled the pram behind him. It bumped a little on the pot-holed road. Ragnhild could see Kollen looming farther ahead, ringed by dark woods. For a moment they had to pull off to the side of the road as a car passed them noisily at high speed. The dust hung like a thick fog behind it. Raymond knew the way, and he wasn't very fit, so it was no problem for Ragnhild to keep up. After a while the road grew steeper, ending in a turning space, and the path, which went round to the right of Kollen, was soft and dusty. The

sheep had widened the path, and their droppings lay as thick as hail. Ragnhild amused herself by treading on them, they were dry and powdery. After a few minutes there was a lovely glistening visible through the trees.

“Serpent Tarn,” Raymond said.

She stopped next to him, stared out across the lake and saw the water-lilies, and a little boat that lay upside down on the shore.

“Don’t go down to the water,” said Raymond. “It’s dangerous. You can’t swim here, you’d just sink into the sand and disappear. Quicksand,” he added, with a serious expression. Ragnhild shuddered. She followed the bank of the tarn with her eyes, a wavy yellow line of rushes, except for one place where what might be called a beach broke the line like a dark indentation. That’s what they were staring at. Raymond let go of the pram, and Ragnhild stuck a finger in her mouth.

Thorbjørn stood fiddling with the mobile phone. He was about 16, and had dark, shoulder-length hair with a hint of dandruff, held in place with a patterned bandanna. The ends stuck out of the knots at his temples like two red feathers, making him look like a pale Indian. He avoided looking at Ragnhild’s mother, staring hard at Sejer instead, licking his lips constantly.

“What you have discovered is important,” Sejer said. “Please write down her address. Do you remember the name?”

“Helga Moen, in number 1. A grey house with a kennel outside.” He almost spoke in a whisper as he printed the words in big letters on the pad that Sejer gave him.

“You boys have been over most of the area?” Sejer asked.

“We were up on Kollen first, then we went down to Serpent Tarn and went over the paths there. We went to the high tarn, Horgen’s Store, and Prestegårds Strand. And the church. Last, we looked at a couple of farms, at Bjerkerud



and at the Equestrian Sports Centre. Ragnhild was, uh, I mean *is*, very interested in animals.”

The slip of the tongue made him blush. Sejer patted him lightly on the shoulder.

“Sit down, Thorbjørn.”

He nodded to the sofa where there was room next to Mrs Album. She had graduated to another phase, and was now contemplating the dizzying possibility that Ragnhild might never come home again, and that she might have to live the rest of her life without her little girl and her big blue eyes. This realisation came in small stabs of pain. Her whole body was rigid, as if she had a steel rod running up her spine. The woman officer, who had hardly said a word the whole time they had been there, stood up slowly. For the first time she ventured to make a suggestion.

“Mrs Album,” she asked quietly, “why don’t we make everyone some coffee?”

The woman nodded weakly, got up and followed the officer out to the kitchen. A tap was turned on and there was the sound of cups clattering. Sejer motioned Karlsen over towards the hallway. They stood there muttering to one another. Thorbjørn could just see Sejer’s head and the tip of Karlsen’s shoe, which was shiny and black. In the dim light, they could check their watches without being observed. They did so and then nodded in agreement. Ragnhild’s disappearance had become a serious matter, and all the department’s resources would have to be utilised. Sejer scratched his elbow through his shirt.

“I can’t face the thought of finding her in a ditch.”

He opened the door to get some fresh air. And there she stood. In her red jogging suit, on the bottom step with a tiny white hand on the railing.

“Ragnhild?” he said in astonishment.

A happy half-hour later, as their car sped down Skiferbakken, Sejer ran his fingers through his hair with

satisfaction. Karlsen thought his hair looked like a steel brush now that it was cut shorter than ever. The kind of brush used to clean off old paint. Sejer's lined face looked peaceful, not closed and serious as it usually did. Halfway down the hill they passed the grey house. They saw the kennel and a face at the window. If Helga Moen was hoping for a visit from the police, she would be disappointed. Ragnhild was sitting safely on her mother's lap with two thick slices of bread in her hand.

The moment when the little girl stepped into the living room was etched into the minds of both officers. The mother, hearing her thin little voice, rushed in from the kitchen and threw herself at Ragnhild, lightning fast, like a beast of prey grasping its victim and never ever wanting to let it go. Ragnhild's thin limbs and the white sprout of hair stuck out through her mother's powerful arms. And there they stood. Not a sound was heard, not a single cry from either of them. Thorbjørn was practically crushing the phone in his hand, the woman officer was making a clatter with the cups, and Karlsen kept twisting his moustache with a blissful grin on his face. The room brightened up as though the sun had suddenly shot a beam through the window. And then, finally, with a sobbing laugh:

"YOU TERRIBLE CHILD!"

"I've been thinking," Sejer cleared his throat, "about taking a week's holiday. I have some time off due to me."

Karlsen crossed a speed bump.

"What will you do with it? Go skydiving in Florida?"

"I thought I'd air out my cabin."

"Near Brevik, isn't that where it is?"

"Sand Island."

They turned on to the main road and picked up speed.

"I have to go to Legoland this year," Karlsen muttered. "Can't avoid it any longer. My daughter is pestering me."

"You make it sound like a punishment," Sejer said. "Legoland is beautiful. When you leave I guarantee you'll be

weighed down with boxes of Lego and you'll be bitten by the bug. Do go, you won't regret it."

"So, you've been there, have you?"

"I went there with Matteus. Do you know that they've built a statue of Sitting Bull out of nothing but pieces of Lego? One point four million pieces with special colouring. It's unbelievable."

He fell silent as he caught sight of the church off to the left, a little white wooden church a bit off the road between green and yellow fields, surrounded by lush trees. A beautiful little church, he thought; he should have buried his wife in a spot like that, even though it would have been a long way to come. Of course, it was too late now. She had been dead more than eight years and her grave was in the cemetery in the middle of town, right by the busy high street surrounded by exhaust fumes and traffic noise.

"Do you think the girl was all right?"

"She seemed to be. I've asked the mother to ring us when things calm down a bit. She'll probably want to talk about it eventually. Six hours," he said thoughtfully, "that's quite a while. Must have been a charming lone wolf."

"He evidently had a driver's licence, at least. So he isn't a total hermit."

"We don't know that, do we? That he has a driver's licence?"

"No, damn it, you're right," Karlsen said. He braked abruptly and turned into the petrol station in what they called "downtown", with a post office, bank, hairdresser and the Fina station. A poster bearing the words "Sale on Medicine" was displayed in the window of the low-price Kiwi grocery, and the hairdresser had a tempting advertisement for a new tanning bed.

"I need something to eat. Are you coming?"

They went in and Sejer bought a newspaper and some chocolate. He peered out the window and down to the fjord.

"Excuse me," said the girl behind the counter, staring nervously at Karlsen's uniform. "Nothing has happened to Ragnhild, has it?"

"Do you know her?" Sejer put some coins on the counter.

"No, I don't know her, but I know who they are. Her mother was here this morning looking for her."

"Ragnhild is all right. She's back at home."

She smiled with relief and gave him his change.

"Are you from around here?" Sejer asked. "Do you know most people?"

"I certainly do. There aren't many of us."

"If I ask you whether you know a man, maybe a little odd, who drives a van, an old, ugly van with its paint peeling off, does that ring a bell?"

"That sounds like Raymond," she said, nodding. "Raymond Låke."

"What do you know about him?"

"He works at the Employment Centre. Lives in a cabin on the far side of Kollen with his father. Raymond has Down's syndrome. About 30, and very nice. His father used to run this station, by the way, before he retired."

"Does Raymond have a driver's licence?"

"No, but he drives anyway. It's his father's van. He's an invalid, so he probably doesn't have much control over what Raymond does. The sheriff knows about it and pulls him over now and then, but it doesn't do much good. He never drives above second gear. Did he pick up Ragnhild?"

"Yes."

"Then she couldn't have been safer," she smiled. "Raymond would stop to let a ladybird cross the road."

They both grinned and went back outside. Karlsen bit into his chocolate and looked around.

"Nice town," he said, chewing.

Sejer, who had bought an old-fashioned marzipan loaf, followed his gaze. "That fjord is deep, more than 300 metres. Never gets above 17 degrees Celsius."

“Do you know anyone here?”

“I don’t, but my daughter Ingrid does. She’s been here on a folklore walk, the kind of thing they organise in the autumn. ‘Know your district.’ She loves stuff like that.”

He rolled the candy wrapper into a thin strip and stuck it into his shirt pocket. “Do you think someone with Down’s syndrome can be a good driver?”

“No idea,” Karlsen said. “But there’s nothing wrong with them except for having one chromosome too many. I think their biggest problem is that they take longer to learn something than other people do. They also have bad hearts. They don’t live to be very old. And there’s something about their hands.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re missing a line on their palm or something.”

Sejer gave him a surprised look. “Anyway, Ragnhild certainly let herself be charmed.”

“I think the rabbits helped.”

Karlsen found a handkerchief in his inside pocket and wiped the chocolate from the corners of his mouth. “I grew up with a Down’s syndrome child. We called him ‘Crazy Gunnar’. Now that I think of it, we actually seemed to believe that he came from another planet. He’s dead now – only lived to be 35.”

They got into the car and drove on. Sejer prepared a simple little speech that he would serve up to the department chief when they were back at headquarters. A few days off to go up to his cabin seemed tremendously important all of a sudden. The timing was right, the long-term prospects were promising, and the girl showing up safe and sound at home had put him in a good mood. He stared over fields and meadows, registered that they had slowed down, and saw the tractor in front of them. A green John Deere with butter-yellow wheel rims was crawling at a snail’s pace. They had no chance to overtake it; each time they came to a straight stretch, it proved to be too short.

The farmer, who was wearing a gardener's cap and earmuffs, sat like a tree stump, as though he was growing straight up out of the seat. Karlsen changed gears and sighed.

"He's carrying Brussels sprouts. Can't you reach out and grab a box? We could cook them in the kitchen at the canteen."

"Now we're going as fast as Raymond does," muttered Sejer. "Life in second gear. That really would be something, don't you think?"

He settled his grey head against the head-rest and closed his eyes.