



THE WATER'S EDGE

KARIN FOSSUM

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About the Book

Walking through the woods one warm September day, Reinhardt and Kristine Ris pass a man who is in a state of agitation. Unusually in a small town, he does not return Kristine's smile and drives off in a hurry. As the couple continue on their walk they make a terrible discovery: lying in a cluster of trees is the lifeless body of a young boy. It is a moment that will change their lives for ever.

Inspector Sejer is called to the scene, but can find no immediate cause of death. As the weeks go by, the appeal for the man seen in the woods to come forward remains unanswered. A once peaceful community is deeply shaken, and the children lose the sense of complete freedom they once enjoyed. Then a second boy goes missing.

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.

Charlotte Barslund translates Scandinavian novels and plays. Her recent work includes *Broken* by Karin Fossum, *Machine* by Peter Adolphsen and *We, The Drowned* by Carsten Jensen.

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

The Water's Edge

Karin Fossum

Translated from the Norwegian by
Charlotte Barslund

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

A long, gentle hill sloped down from the main road to the loch known as Loch Bonna. At the edge of the water was a beach with sharp stones and a steep drop further out. A narrow tarmac road wound its way like a grey ribbon between the fields, the houses lay arranged in colourful rows, their verandas and balconies facing north towards the water. In the distance well-kept farms with grey and white farmhouses and red barns could be seen. There was Fagre Vest which belonged to Waldemar Skagen whose horse, Evidence, was grazing inside an enclosure. East of the lake lay Fagre Øst, owned by Skagen's brother-in-law. A rainbow formed a colourful arch between the two farms, a shower of rain had crossed the sky recently and the sun was breaking through.

At the top of the road overlooking Loch Bonna was a shop, which had lately become a branch of the Kiwi supermarket chain; a bright spark in marketing had decided to dress the employees in green uniforms. On the front door was a notice ordering schoolchildren to leave their rucksacks outside, they shoplifted constantly, nicking cigarettes and sweets.

Signe Lund was sitting by the till, groceries gliding past her on the belt, daydreaming as teenagers do. She could see Loch Bonna through the window and Fagre Vest with its undulating pink and yellow fields. On a field below Svart Ridge was a small mound with pretty rowan trees, it rose like an island in a sea of wheat. The mound with its trees and bushes held a secret, a small earth cellar known to only a few. She was thinking of it now. The bittersweet memory lingered still.

CHAPTER 1

NO ONE SAW him walk through the woods; no one saw what he was carrying. A modest burden for a grown man, yet it caused him difficulty, his steps were faltering and he stumbled. From time to time he would stop, gasp for air and make noises which sounded like whimpering. Then he would stagger on as quickly as he could. He walked underneath the trees like an old man, weighed down by it all, weighed down by horror and tears. It was so overwhelming that his knees threatened to buckle; he kept looking over his shoulder, his head twitching nervously. He increased his speed as he approached a cluster of trees. He did not wish to discard his burden casually on the ground; he wanted this precise cluster of trees, which would serve as a kind of monument. This last scrap of decency comforted him, he was still a human being, he had feelings, many of them good ones. Again he looked over his shoulder: there was not a soul around. He remained standing, sensing every sound as his heart pounded. The forest was like a huge organism, it breathed, it watched him, it condemned him with its deep, ominous rustling. How could you stoop so low? the forest intoned, no human being will ever smile at you with warmth or love, not after this.

He had reached the cluster of trees.

He squatted down.

He placed his burden on a bed of soft moss. He got up and wiped the sweat from his brow; it felt hot. This does not look good, he thought, not in any way. Emotions surged inside him, a mixture of panic and rage, nothing ever worked out for him, it was a mistake, the whole thing. How could it have

happened? Horrified, he buried his face in his hands, they smelled like hot iron. He tasted fear in his mouth and felt it in his blood and in his lungs. Fate had played a mean trick on him and dealt him a rotten hand; now he was being hurled down towards condemnation and denunciation. Hanging's too good for him, people would say, lock him up and throw away the key; a man like him should never be allowed out again. He lurched a little to the side, he felt weak at the knees. I have to go now, he thought, I need to get out of here, I must get back to my car, drive home to my house, lock the door and draw the curtains. Huddle in a corner and listen out in case anyone should come. But I won't answer the door, he decided, I'll lock myself in, I won't be able to cope with this! He raised a clenched fist towards the sky, towards God, who had created him with such strong urges, but who would not allow him to satisfy them the way he wanted to.

His car was parked close to a road barrier a little way off. He walked briskly without looking back and moved as quickly as he could through the forest. It was not long before he saw the barrier and his car. And something else: something was moving, something red and white against the green. He stopped abruptly. A man and a woman were out walking. His first thought was to hide between the spruces, but at the last second he thought better of it and continued, averting his eyes, along the short distance he had left. The storm raged inside him with renewed force. This is fatal, he thought, this will be my undoing, those two people walking towards me, they will remember me and tell the whole world. We saw him and we can describe him clearly, they would say, he was wearing a blue anorak. And the hunt would begin. He did not look up until he reached his car and he met the woman's eyes for a fleeting moment. It surprised him that she smiled at him, a broad and friendly smile. When he failed to return her smile and stared at her in horror, she looked puzzled. The couple continued past the

barrier and into the forest. The woman, however, turned one last time and looked after him.

CHAPTER 2

THEY WERE A couple, but they had been married for many years and they no longer held hands. The woman was wearing a raspberry red coat, the man a white windbreaker. He was constantly one step ahead of her, tall, self-assured and fit. The woman watched him furtively while she contemplated her own thoughts. Her husband was a man who owned his space; now he owned this forest and he helped himself to it. The vegetation was compressed beneath his feet as he walked, dry twigs snapped and the woman struggled to keep up with him. They were out of step. They had thoughts they didn't want to share or admit. But they had gone out for a walk together, it was their habit and they needed habits, habits held them together and made the world predictable.

It was a surprisingly warm September day. The man unbuttoned his jacket and a gust of wind made it flap like a sail. He rummaged around in his pockets, looking for a cigarette.

'Reinhardt,' the woman said. 'It's ever so dry around here.'

Her voice was devoid of authority, it was more like a pitiful plea. He snarled in irritation; he was not one of those men who allowed themselves to be reprimanded. He closed his lips around the filter of the cigarette and lit it with a Zippo lighter. His irises were blue like the ocean with golden flecks, his nose was sharp and looked good in profile.

The woman chose to say nothing; experience had taught her this was her best option. She focused on the forest floor, there were tufts of grass and the odd dip; every now and

again roots would crisscross the path. She glanced quickly at her husband: he was much taller than her, broader, stronger, he always led the way. She had suppressed her own views for years because he was so argumentative and opinionated. Now she worried about the dry ground and the burning cigarette.

The light that once existed between us has been extinguished, she thought sadly, nothing shines any more, we should have had a child. A child would have brought us closer, it would have united us and made us good people. This is what she believed. But the years had passed and no child had come; her husband had said no and she hadn't dared cross him. Whenever she raised the subject, he became sullen and would jut out his chin while she lowered her eyes and grew silent. We're all right as we are, aren't we, he would say, we both work full-time, there's the house and the garden, we're mortgaged to the hilt. How do people find the time, he pushed on, how do they find the money? She offered him no reply, but she noticed that people did find the time. She also noticed that they looked exhausted, torn between the demands of their children, their careers and their personal needs. But the moment their child crawled up on their lap, they became radiant, and she longed with all of her heart for this glow. That unique glow she had seen in her friends' eyes.

Her husband had finished smoking, the tobacco still glowed red. Suddenly he flicked the stub away, it leapt into the air and sparks flew in an arc. The woman followed it with her eyes: it landed in the heather, still smoking.

'Reinhardt,' she begged. 'Stamp it out!'

Reinhardt took a few steps to the side and ground the butt with exaggerated force using the sole of his shoe.

'You worry too much, Kristine.'

She shrugged defensively, she dared not show any greater rebellion than that. The sun, which would soon set, let its last rays spill out between the trees. And Kristine, too,

unbuttoned her jacket. She brushed her long hair away from her cheeks and her forehead. It was thick and brown with auburn streaks. She was petite, her face was small with a high domed forehead and round cheeks. She had tiny hands and feet, and indeed her husband would in more affectionate moments call her his 'doll'. Reinhardt, too, ran his fingers through his hair. A short, sandy-coloured tuft stuck up at the front, it looked like a shark's fin. They were heading towards Lake Linde; this was their usual destination, every Sunday after lunch. Kristine was struck by their routine life, the habits that trapped them, the old grooves which held them in place. No one ever broke the rhythm. They left their house together every morning and said goodbye outside the Central Hospital, where she worked as a receptionist. Reinhardt drove on to the offices of Hafslund where he worked with security systems. They ate dinner together and watched television, side by side in front of the blue glare. Afterwards Reinhardt would sit in front of his computer and play games while Kristine did the housework. It really bothered her that he spent so much time on the computer, she did not think a grown man of thirty-six should be playing at wizards and dragons. Not only did his eyes shine with excitement but he often indulged in childish outbursts, which embarrassed her. He would curse and swear appallingly or he would shout out in triumph when he managed to slay an enemy. In addition he talked incessantly, he had an opinion about everything and he had a solution to every problem. They never talked about themselves or how they felt. Most of it had already been said and, in her darker moments, Kristine felt that they had become strangers. At night she would lie awake for long periods breathing against the wall, while Reinhardt snored violently. At times he would take her with an intensity that came close to scaring her. This is my life, she thought, I won't get any more than this. I could leave him, but where would I go, what would I say? He is reliable and faithful, he

never hits me and every month he receives a pay cheque which is considerably bigger than mine. She was weighed down by these thoughts as they walked through the forest. Are other people happy, she wondered, is there something wrong with us, is there something that we've failed to grasp?

Reinhardt was way ahead of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his moving shadow. She felt permanently guilty. No matter how hard she looked, she could discover no positive feelings towards him and she felt like a traitor. Her betrayal brought her to her knees. She did not dare confront him, cause him to doubt her or make demands, because then he might expose her: you don't love me, did you honestly think I didn't know? Do you really think I don't know that you're faking? She plodded after him on the path, her thoughts making her cheeks burn. They were aiming for Lake Linde where they would stand on the shore for a few minutes as usual; the water always made her feel better. The water would extinguish the fire in her cheeks and cool her down. She would ponder the ruins of the old settlement by the shore, small, modest circles of stone. Once they had contained families with children, living and working, falling ill and dying, brief moments of happiness and despair. It was hard to imagine how people used to manage with so little. Between them, Reinhardt and she had two hundred and fifty square metres they hardly ever used, they sat next to each other on the sofa in front of the television while the bedrooms waited for children who never came, for friends who never stayed over.

Only the tallest trees were touched by the sun now. This, Kristine thought, is the best time of year. Not the hysteria of summer, or the storms of autumn, or the cold of winter, or even the treacherous late frost or the early spring with its sudden sleet and unpredictable gusts of wind, but September with its unique serenity. Dark cool nights, refreshing mornings. Suddenly she felt exhausted, she was

weighed down by so many thoughts and though it was warm, she wrapped her coat around her body more tightly.

'It's Sunday,' Reinhardt said, 'it's Sunday and the weather is fine. And there's not a soul to be seen. Can you believe it?'

She looked up at him with wide green eyes.

'We're here,' she said softly.

He jutted out his chin as he always did when someone corrected him and she loathed that tiny gesture, hated that he could never just nod in agreement. And she despised herself because she was afraid of him. She was constantly on the defensive, she was always on her guard, because he had this hold over her, as if something existed deep inside him that she did not dare face. An image from a childhood fairy tale of a monster slumbering at the bottom of a swamp surfaced in her mind.

'Yes, but all the same,' he countered, 'look how deserted it is. There's not a single tent or a boat here. Lake Linde is a pearl, but people can't be bothered to come up here because they can't drive the whole way.'

'But that's why we like walking here,' she said: 'because it's so peaceful.'

Reinhardt felt in his pockets for another cigarette, the low sun touched his broad cheekbones and his forceful chin. And she recalled the first time she saw him and how he had seemed carved out of granite. There were many edges and protrusions in his broad face, but his eyes were deep-set. On Sundays he skipped shaving and a pale shadow was spreading across his jaw.

'Schoolchildren go camping here,' Kristine remembered. 'If they choose Outdoor Studies. They go canoeing and fishing and they have to get up at three in the morning to hear the wood grouse.'

Reinhardt shrugged. 'I've never really understood the attraction of camping,' he snorted. 'You can rent a cottage up here. With a proper bed and a toilet. When I was a boy,'

he went on, 'my dad took me camping. He had an old-fashioned green tent that slept four people, I couldn't bear the smell inside it, and my sleeping bag was ancient and musty. It stank of smoke and earth and paraffin, it smelled of waterproofing chemicals. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't breathe.'

Kristine went over to one of the mounds of grass and stepped inside a stone circle.

'This is where their kitchen must have been,' she called out.

Reinhardt came over to her.

'I wouldn't call that a kitchen,' he smiled. 'More like a fireplace, I'd say.'

She nodded. 'Just think,' she said, 'they would catch fish in the lake and snare birds and hares. What a quiet life it must have been, here by the water.'

Reinhardt entered the circle. He stood towering over her, he was one metre ninety tall and very broad-shouldered.

'In the evenings they would sit by the fire and talk amongst themselves,' she said, 'and when the fire died down they would curl up on the ground under their furs.'

Reinhardt grinned broadly. 'Whereas I turn on my Bang & Olufsen music centre and stretch out in my recliner,' he said. 'Thank God, I'm alive now.'

Kristine went quiet once again. He refused to join in her thinking, he didn't want to ponder life or humanity. He was an enterprising man, rational and self-assured, whereas she felt dizzy when she imagined herself living in another age, where people had different values, where their fears had been different from the ones she lived with. Perhaps they had feared a roaming wolf stalking the half-naked children playing on the shore of Lake Linde.

CHAPTER 3

'WE'LL GO BACK a different route,' he called out.

He cut through the forest, holding back the branches so they would not swipe her face. Again they walked themselves warm in the low sunshine and after half an hour they stopped for a rest. In front of them lay a clearing surrounded by spruces, an open, golden area with tufts and heather. Then the brutal scene hit them.

'No!' Reinhardt yelled.

And again, a few seconds later. 'No!'

Kristine gave him an uncomprehending look. He was squeezing her arm so tightly that she started to whimper, she had never seen his strong face display such terror. She followed his gaze and spotted a cluster of trees.

Something lay at the foot of the dark tree trunks.

Reinhardt was speechless. She was not used to this, he was always the one who took action, who would have something to say about every situation. She stared at the bundle at the foot of the trees, it was slim and white. She was struck by the awful thought that this might be a small person.

'It's a little kid,' Reinhardt whispered. He still did not move. Nor did he let go of her arm; his grip was vice-like.

'For Christ's sake, it's a little kid,' he repeated.

'No,' she said. Because it could not possibly be true, not here, not in Linde Forest.

Reinhardt took a step forward. He was no longer in any doubt, he could see arms and legs. A T-shirt with some writing on it. Kristine clasped her mouth. They stood like this for what seemed an eternity. The bundle lay immobile on

the green moss. Kristine looked up at Reinhardt, her green eyes desperately pleading with him to do something.

‘We must call the police!’ she whispered.

Reinhardt started walking towards the cluster of trees, his body exuding reluctance. Ten paces, fifteen, they saw a foot and a fragile neck. It was a boy. He was lying on his stomach, he was naked from the waist down, and between his legs they could see blood, which had coagulated into rust-coloured scabs.

Kristine turned away in horror. But she could only look away for a few seconds. She had to look again, those green eyes had to see everything. The boy’s short hair, his T-shirt with ‘Kiss’ written on it. The soles of his feet, pale pink against the dark moss.

‘We have to call the police,’ she whispered. ‘We have to call the police now!’

Then she lost control of her body and started to shake. First her hands, then her shoulders. She had nothing to hold on to so she stumbled.

Reinhardt reached under her armpits and helped her back to her feet.

‘Calm down now, calm down!’ But she was unable to calm down. Inside her head she was issuing commands which never reached her arms and legs.

‘112,’ she whispered. ‘You need to call 112.’

He quickly reached into his pocket for his mobile. ‘You’re sure it’s not 113?’

She protested weakly, her body was rebelling: ‘112,’ she repeated. ‘The police!’

He entered the number at breakneck speed, started walking up and down while throwing quick glances at the dead body.

‘We’re calling from Linde Forest,’ she heard him say. ‘We’re thirty minutes from the lake. We’ve found a small boy.’

Then he was silent for a few seconds, pressing the mobile against his ear.

'Yes, my name's Ris. Reinhardt Ris, we've been out for a walk. We've found a dead boy. You need to send someone.'

Again silence. Kristine gave in to the shaking, she sank down on to her knees and pressed her hands against the earth for support.

'No, there's no pulse,' Reinhardt shouted. 'Of course I'm sure. We can see that he's dead, he's gone all white!'

He came over to her, stopped, the sandy-coloured tuft stuck out.

'Yes, we can walk back to the barrier, our car's parked there, we'll wait for you.'

With considerable effort Kristine managed to stand up, and she started walking towards the edge of the clearing. Someone had stacked logs in a large pile and she slumped on to a log. She sat there watching the husband she knew inside out. Because she did, didn't she? Didn't she know every fibre of his powerful body, all his moods and his strong, commanding nature? He stood for a long time staring helplessly in every direction, a large man between the trees. All the qualities she normally associated with him sparkled by their absence. Authority, assurance and calm. Will and determination. It seemed as though he was prevaricating. She saw him walk back to the boy, saw him kneel down, he lowered his head and raised his hands to his face. What's he doing? she thought, baffled, is he crying, is that possible? Is he sitting there sobbing like a child? Have I misjudged him all these years, is he, in fact, a sensitive and emotional man?

Then the truth dawned on her.

He was taking pictures of the dead boy with his mobile.

CHAPTER 4

'HOW COULD YOU!' she screamed, outraged.

Her usual subservience had evaporated, gone was the fear of antagonising him, her limit had been reached and there was no holding her back. She was crying and wiping away her tears, she half ran all the way to the barrier, but it took her a while because her legs were so short.

'You're insane!' she yelled.

Reinhardt scrambled behind her on the path, muffled swearwords reached her ears. They made it to the car simultaneously; Kristine slumped across the bonnet and sobbed. It was all too much for her: the body of the boy they had found and Reinhardt taking pictures of him. Reinhardt got into the car, found a cigarette and lit it, his lips tightened. Nevertheless Kristine thought she had detected a hint of embarrassment because she had pointed out his desire for sensation, something he would never own up to. He exhaled three times, the smoke coming out as white clouds.

'It was just a gut reaction,' he said, 'or, I don't know. It just happened.'

'But what do you want them for?'

She straightened up and looked at him, her green eyes shining. 'What are you going to do with those photos?'

'Nothing,' he replied in a sullen voice and kept smoking in defiance.

'Think about his parents,' she appealed to him. 'Imagine if they knew you had those photos: you have to delete them, it's not right!'

‘Well, they don’t know that I’ve got them,’ he argued, slowly starting to get riled. ‘And of course I’ll delete them, I’m not an idiot, Kristine, how dare you take that tone with me, I’m in charge of my own life, so don’t you start telling me what to do!’

When his outburst had finished, he carried on smoking. Kristine tried to calm herself down; she was always terrified when he raised his voice. She was still slumped over the bonnet, feeling upset and nauseous. They peered down the road for the cars, which were meant to turn up. Kristine suddenly remembered something, she looked at Reinhardt in the car.

‘That man we passed,’ she said, ‘the one we met at the barrier. In the blue anorak. What do you think he was doing up here?’

Reinhardt got out of the car and squatted down.

‘It might have been him,’ she said. ‘He could barely look me in the eye. Surely we need to report him? They’ll be asking us. If we saw anything. People or cars.’

Reinhardt coughed to clear his throat. He suddenly became very busy. He slammed the car door hard and started pacing up and down like he always did when he was in a state about something.

‘The car?’ he said. ‘You saw the car?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I saw it quite clearly.’

‘It was white,’ he stated.

‘It was an older model,’ she said, ‘but the paintwork was in very good condition.’

‘We need to focus,’ Reinhardt said. ‘They’ll want details.’

Kristine thought back. She had got a good look at the man, she had looked him in the eye, and an image of his face had imprinted itself on her retina. She had flashed him a brief smile out of reflex politeness, a smile he had not returned. He had looked back at her in horror and he had certainly behaved in a suspicious manner, as if they had caught him red-handed. I didn’t like him, she thought, the

one second I looked him in the eye was enough to give me a feeling about him, and it was not a good one.

'How old was he?' Reinhardt said. 'What do you think, Kristine? Come on, we need to be ready.'

She thought carefully. 'Somewhere between forty and fifty,' she declared.

He wrinkled his nose with displeasure. 'We need to be more specific than that,' he stated. 'No, not as old as fifty.'

She made no reply. She, too, started pacing up and down the road, she circled their parked car. The sun shone off the silver Rover. Reinhardt made sure it was always washed and polished.

'I hope they get here soon,' she said.

'There'll be a whole army of them, Kristine, believe you me.'

She turned away from him and kept silent. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and chewed on a nail, a bad habit she had never managed to quit. Time had never passed so slowly, waiting had never felt like this. She could no longer enjoy the serenity of the forest, the susurrations of the enormous treetops, the rustling leaves. She looked at Reinhardt for a long time. He was leaning against the car, his arms folded across his chest.

'What the hell is taking them so long?' he snapped.

'It's the road,' she replied. 'It's in poor condition. You can't drive very fast on it.'

They spoke no more. In their minds they were back by the cluster of trees, with the little boy, and Kristine was suddenly glad about the way he lay. Face down in the moss. She had not seen his eyes. She stared along the road. Finally she heard a car. Reinhardt stubbed out his cigarette and straightened his back. It was as if he was getting ready for the performance of his life.