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# Anne Holt

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‘Her peculiar blend of off-beat police procedural and social commentary makes her stories particularly Norwegian, yet also entertaining and enlightening ... reads a bit like a mash-up of Stieg Larsson, Jeffery Deaver and Agatha Christie’ *Daily Mirror*

# In Dust and Ashes

ANNE HOLT is Norway's bestselling female crime writer. She spent two years working for the Oslo Police Department before founding her own law firm and serving as Norway's Minister for Justice between 1996 and 1997. She is published in thirty languages with over seven million copies of her books sold.

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# In Dust and Ashes

## Anne Holt

*Translated from the Norwegian  
by Anne Bruce*



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‘Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’

*Book of Job, 42.6*

**FRIDAY JANUARY 1, 2016**

Only a fortnight left, and then it would all be over.  
And everything could begin.

Their new life, he and his wife in Provence. She was the one who had insisted on a move. He couldn't speak French, and didn't drink wine, but at least the climate down there was appealing. He had been in the police since 1978 when he had entered what they had then called Police College, and it was high time he found something else. Dog breeding, that was what he and his old woman had decided upon.

A whole lifetime had gone by since the end of the seventies; a couple of generations of Norwegians and thirty-nine sets of trainee officers. Or police students, as they had snootily come to be called over the years. He himself had started in the police force when they used pen and paper and the odd IBM golf ball typewriter, and the youngest officers were more than content to be known as constables. A few months ago, he had been promoted to the rank of superintendent, less than six months before everything came to an end. When he turned fifty-eight in the middle of January, he could pack up the odds and ends in his office and walk out the doors at Stovner Police Station for the very last time.

Kjell Bonsaksen was a contented man in most areas of life. He had no intention of looking back; after all it must be possible to get a decent beer down there in Provence. His son was an only child and their two grandchildren half French, so it actually

hadn't been too difficult to persuade Kjell Bonsaksen to move closer to them. They had sold their terraced house in Korsvoll following a furious round of bids for a sum that had caused him to blush. A good chunk of money was left over, even when the little house outside Aix with the sprawling, overgrown garden was paid in full.

He wouldn't be able to eat so many hotdogs down there, when his wife could keep an eye on him all the time.

Placing a fifty kroner note on the counter, he received some change in return and dropped the coins into his pocket. He zig-zagged a generous portion of ketchup over his hotdog, shaking his head when the assistant pushed the bottle of mustard toward him.

Through the large windows, he glanced at the petrol pumps. The weather was horrendous, as it had mostly been all through Christmas. Plump, wet snowflakes melted before they reached the ground, and everything was colored in shades of gray. A parked trailer truck blocked his view of the E18. It would probably be red once it was washed.

A man came walking toward the automatic doors. Tall, he had most likely been good-looking at one time. Kjell Bonsaksen was not a particularly adept judge of that sort of thing, but there was something about the wide mouth and the extremely straight, symmetrical nose. As the man entered, he looked up and directly at him.

Kjell Bonsaksen froze in the middle of chewing.

There was something about those eyes.

The man stopped for a moment, so briefly that it was actually more a matter of slowing down mid-step, before resuming his original pace. He was holding an empty Statoil cup in one hand, and without a word to the guy behind the counter, he filled it with coffee from a dispensing machine on a console by the window.



Kjell Bonsaksen was a dependable police officer. Never exceptional, and this final promotion had probably been the Police Chief's way of saying thanks for long and faithful service rather than real acknowledgement of his suitability to be in charge of very many subordinates. His forte was working hard and according to the book, being honest and exact and never tempted to take short cuts. He was a workhorse. Policemen of his ilk were a dying breed. It had bothered him for some time, but now he couldn't care less. He had only thirteen days left of his solid, if somewhat nondescript, career.

As a police officer of almost forty years' experience, what he was proudest of was his memory. A policeman had to be able to remember. Names and cases. Relationships and faces. Crime scenes, perpetrators and victims. You had to have some glue up top.

Even though the man at the coffee machine had now lost most of his hair and was also much thinner than the last time they met, Kjell Bonsaksen recognized him as soon as they exchanged glances. His big eyes were unusually deep-set in his skinny, almost gaunt, face.

They radiated nothingness.

Neither curiosity nor evil. No trace of pleasure, not even that the stranger had also recognized him. They contained not a sliver of reproach as the man placed the lid on his cup and, with steady steps, approached the hotdog-munching policeman. He stopped one meter away from him.

"You knew I was innocent," he said softly.

Kjell Bonsaksen did not answer: he had more than enough to do, struggling to swallow an oversized chunk of sausage and bread and ketchup.

"You knew it," the man repeated. "And yet you did nothing."

He let his gaze linger on the other man's face for a second or

two before giving an almost imperceptible shrug as he turned on his heel and headed for the exit.

Kjell Bonsaksen stood lost in thought, a half-eaten hotdog in his hand, until the stranger had climbed into the trailer truck that might have been red, and drove out on to the motorway in the direction of Oslo.

“Maybe so,” he said so quietly it was possible he only thought it. “Maybe it’s true that I knew you were innocent.”

## MONDAY DECEMBER 3, 2001

One extra cup of coffee would cost him everything. If only he had left it there. Then the day would have progressed like every other December day, and they would have celebrated Dina's third birthday the following weekend. As a matter of fact, it might just as easily have been his fumbling with the bunch of keys that proved so fatal. Earlier, he had cut his thumb on a tin of mackerel. Dina had been allowed to be his nurse. She had used a whole roll of gauze bandage, loosely fastened with a Donald Duck adhesive plaster. He should have done it himself. That would have saved the necessary seconds, sufficient time to let the day follow its customary, safe course to evening.

It might also have been something else entirely. Anything at all, really, of all the inconsequential things that took place on that ordinary, rain-sodden, Advent morning: any one of a number of things that happened, or didn't happen. If he hadn't overslept for example. If he hadn't taken that third cup of coffee, or even if he hadn't drunk the second one down to the dregs. A couple more gulps would have been enough for them to reach the road a bit later, and maybe he could also have resisted checking the mailbox because he knew they were running late.

He had done the calculations, later, when his whole head was swarming with reflections about time and he spent an entire day ensconced in the massive spruce tree in his neighbor's garden. It grew right beside the mailbox that he had torn down that same

morning and smashed to smithereens with a sledgehammer. He sat there, just before Christmas, on a sturdy branch, aloft and unseen by passersby, counting the cars that drove past the little exit road from seven o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night. He arrived at a total of sixteen. If he calculated five seconds for each, five seconds when a potentially dangerous situation could arise when a soon-to-be three-year-old child ran out into the road while her father was opening the mailbox and crossly starting to sort out the junk mail, it totaled no more than eighty seconds. Twelve hours, those twelve hours when it was feasible for Dina to be outside, beside the mailbox, while something distracted her father and she, for a fleeting millisecond of time, was not properly supervised, amounted to 43,200 seconds. So, in eighty of those seconds, something could happen.

In less than two thousandths of that time.

0.185185185 percent – something he would always remember.

If only he had taken some time to return the milk carton to the fridge, nothing would have happened.

It was Jonas who screamed. Dina made not a sound.

He yelled the moment before, when his life had not yet fallen apart, and he saw her stumble. It was Jonas who roared so loudly that the driver braked abruptly. It was Jonas who desperately tried to shove the car back, away from Dina, who was still lying wedged under the left front wheel. It was Jonas's scream that made the baffled driver roll down his window without understanding any of it until he finally let his BMW trundle on a meter or so.

In the years that followed, the scene never released its grip on him. Dina's fall in front of the winter tire. The look she gave him as her open mouth drained of color and turned almost white under the dim street light. The seconds when he stood with Dina in his arms, realizing what had happened, without yet possessing any

capacity to comprehend it. All of it, image by image, turned into a horror film that kept him awake when he ought to be sleeping, and exhausted him so much that he fell asleep when he shouldn't.

He would remember that tableau forever. The blue snowsuit and the pink bonnet he had attempted to straighten before the police arrived. Dina's eyes that stared through and past him. The kindergarten bag on the ground and what was inside it. The Donald Duck plaster and the bloody gauze rag that had fallen off when he picked her up. The smell of feces as they leaked from Dina's diaper before the blue lights approached. Jonas would never forget the driver who kept talking on his phone while he sobbed endlessly in a nauseating cloud of aftershave.

"It was my fault," Jonas shouted at him, over and over again. "It's not your fault."

That was the only thing he said on that morning when he lost his only child.

"It was my fault."

**THURSDAY JANUARY 7, 2016**

His hand warmed her shoulder through the flimsy sweater. Hanne Wilhelmsen could not stand being touched by anyone other than the people she lived with – her little girl and her wife, whom she would have called her family if she had ever spoken about them to others. This hand, narrow and tentative, felt strangely welcome all the same. A lifeline, she thought, a flicker of something familiar and stable in a situation she had been forced into and had dreaded for days on end.

She screwed up her eyes against the unrelenting camera flashes. The photographers were so persistent that she had enough of a problem maneuvering her wheelchair, and that was no easier when she was blinded.

“Move yourselves,” she said sharply, and felt the man behind her release her shoulder and take hold of the chair handles instead.

“Let me push you for once,” Henrik Holme said, bending into earshot. “We have to get out of here.”

“Were they convicted?” a journalist called out. “All of them, I mean?”

“What did you think of the prosecutor’s arguments?” another one asked, thrusting an iPhone into her face.

“Get out of the way, won’t you!”

Henrik Holme’s voice rose to falsetto as he resolutely steered the wheelchair through the crowd. Just before they reached the

heavy doors leading from the courthouse, it was as if Moses had intervened. The journalists, probably twenty in number, were suddenly preoccupied with checking their cellphones and turned aside. The photographers, at least some of them, confused by the abrupt change in atmosphere, lowered their cameras. Henrik Holme stopped for a second, taken aback to see a clear route to the door and the waiting police car outside.

"What's going on?" Hanne Wilhelmsen asked, grabbing hold of the wheels.

"No idea. Let's get out of here."

The winter weather met them head-on. It had begun to snow at last, following a gloomy Christmas. It was not yet cold enough to turn the city white, but damp, downy flakes were falling thickly, making Hanne scrunch up her eyes.

"My goodness," Henrik said, coming to an abrupt halt.

The police car, which had been parked a few meters away, rolled slowly up to the steps. A uniformed woman emerged from the driver's seat.

"What is it?" Hanne asked in annoyance as she wrapped her jacket more snugly around herself.

"Iselin Havørn is dead."

Hanne looked at him. He was holding his cellphone so close to his face that a faint, bluish light was reflected off his glistening cheeks.

"If you're now going to tell me that she's been murdered, now that we've just done our best to get twenty-two right-wing extremists put behind lock and key at long last, then ..."

The policewoman approached them, obviously unsure of how to negotiate Hanne into the vehicle.

"It doesn't exactly look like murder."

Henrik scrolled down with his thumb on the screen.

"They don't spell out that it's suicide," he went on. "But it does

in fact look as if she's voluntarily kicked the bucket." Stuffing the phone into his pocket, he walked halfway round the wheelchair.

"Would you allow me the honor?" he said with a smile, holding out his arms. "It's easier that way, you know."

"I'll have to put up with it for once," Hanne muttered, raising her arms sluggishly, like an unwilling child.

He carried her to the car. For such an unusually small-boned man, he seemed strong, Hanne felt, even though her aversion to being carried made her feel physically sick.

"Would you see to the wheelchair?" Henrik said to the woman in uniform, who had already begun to fold it up.

He deposited Hanne on the back seat.

"Iselin Havørn," Hanne said in an undertone. "What a stupid name. But to be quite honest ..."

Henrik carefully straightened her legs.

"... hardly a single person in this country has more reason to feel ashamed now than ..."

She used both hands to push him away before snatching at the seatbelt.

"... Iselin Havørn. What a name. And what a deplorable harridan."

If the police were taciturn and subdued in their attempts to play down Iselin Havørn's death, the media went berserk. Even on a day when the most far-reaching criminal case in Norwegian history brought right-wing extremists to court, the sixty-two-year-old woman's suicide was headline news everywhere.

"Three weeks ago, hardly anyone had any idea who she was," Henrik Holme said as he picked up the remote control to reduce the volume on the TV. "And now there's a real hullabaloo about her."

"Well," Hanne answered. "Lots of people have known her by



her pseudonym. Difficult to avoid it, for one thing. At some time or other that sort of thing was bound to be exposed. It just took an unusually long time in this instance.”

“I thought press ethics stipulated that suicides should not be reported, at least at the outset?”

“That no longer applies, seemingly. And anyway not when they’ve been all over her in recent weeks. From that point of view, there may well be some paradoxical connection between the media’s hounding of her and them now having a suicide to gorge themselves on.”

“Do you think she was hounded?”

Hanne shrugged nonchalantly.

“In point of fact she certainly was. After her identity was revealed, she’s hardly ventured out of her apartment, from what I’ve read. And it’s clearly been more or less under siege.”

“Yes, I suppose so, but hounded? After all it was her own fault that—”

“Were you thinking of moving in here?” Hanne interrupted him, glancing demonstratively at the clock.

Henrik blushed and touched the side of his nose.

“No, of course not. But hounded? Do you really think that?”

Hanne did not reply. She switched off the TV and nodded at the door.

“Iselin Havørn wasn’t stupid. Ergo she was evil. I don’t shed a single tear that she’s dead, but there are probably a few others who do. What she’s had to endure in the past few weeks would have been enough to tip the greatest stoic into depression and suicidal thoughts. But now you have to leave. You don’t need to come back or get in touch until another cold case turns up.”

“Not even when sentence is passed, you mean?”

“You don’t need to. They’ll be convicted, one and all.”

“Do you really think so?”

He had stood up and was heading for the door when Hanne began to trundle to the kitchen. All of a sudden she stopped and looked at him.

“Thanks to us, they most certainly will. Or in actual fact ...”

An almost imperceptible smile crossed her face.

“Thanks to you, Henrik. All thanks to you.”

Henrik had been allocated his own office.

It was far from spacious, but it was his. For several years he had been shunted into impersonal shoeboxes he was allowed to keep for a few days, a few weeks or in one case a month and a half. This one, however, he had kept ever since several days after May 17, 2014, when sixteen people were killed by homemade bombs hidden in a tuba and four big bass drums during the two-hundred-year anniversary of the Norwegian Constitution. The total number of deaths would have been far greater if it had not been for Hanne Wilhelmsen and himself. They were too late to prevent the attack, but just in time to reduce its scale and have firstly two people arrested and later twenty more in a network so terrifying that it had given him sleepless nights for ages afterward. Since Hanne had downright refused to move into Police Headquarters at Grønlandsleiret 44 for the duration of the subsequent intense and lengthy investigation, he was upgraded to a deputy of sorts. And errand boy, as he already had been for a while.

He loved that office.

His mother had called in only a few days after he had moved in. She hated the curtains, which in her opinion looked like municipal issue, and had sent him new ones in the mail. At first he had hesitated to hang them up, after all there could be some sort of proscription against adding any personal touches to government property. When one of the older female civilians in the Violent

Crime Section had come across the bundle of fabric on the spare seat in his office, she had insisted on helping him to hang them. Along with a couple of posters he had bought in IKEA, and a potted plant at the window that he contented himself with watering every Monday and Thursday, the curtains made his office look very nice, to tell the truth.

Henrik Holme arrived at work every day at quarter past seven in the morning and seldom went home before ten o'clock at night. He headed for Hanne's whenever she asked him to come, and returned to Police Headquarters when she ordered him out of the apartment in Kruses gate. For the first six months following the terrorist attacks, he had for the most part worked every weekend without exception. Eventually, when the case was close to being submitted to the Public Prosecutor, they had once again been given a couple of old, unsolved cases to keep them busy. They never managed to figure out one of these, and the other, an ancient homicide case, was solved only a couple of months before the time limit expired. The killer turned out to have been dead for sixteen years, but the aged mother of his victim could at least rest more easily in the knowledge of what had actually taken place.

Now it was half past eight in the evening, and Henrik Holme was staring despondently at the empty in-tray on his office desk.

They had no cases on the go.

Nothing to do. No excuse to visit Hanne.

In fact he ought to report to the Chief Inspector: Police Chief Silje Sørensen had given him a roving commission on the assumption that he would inform his superiors whenever he had time to spare.

"Do you have a minute?"

A burly man with a broad smile stood in the doorway, knocking lightly on the door frame. A small bag was slung over his right shoulder.

"Quite a few," Henrik answered. "Come on in."

"Bonsaksen," the man said, holding out a huge hand. "Superintendent Kjell Bonsaksen, Stovner Police Station."

His stubby fingers touched the police badge suspended on a blue cord around his neck.

"Henrik Holme," Henrik reciprocated, trying to avoid grimacing at the overly firm handshake. "But of course you knew that. Since you ..."

He smiled sheepishly, tapping his forehead with his fist before he sat down.

"Since I'm the one who looked you up," Bonsaksen said, nodding, as he subsided on to the empty chair.

"Yes."

"You're starting to make a name for yourself, Holme."

Henrik did not answer. He had enough to cope with as he battled with increasingly flushed cheeks and struggled to tuck his hands safely under his thighs.

"People talk about you. With respect. The way they once spoke about Hanne Wilhelmsen."

He smiled again.

"Or ... you've got some way to go before you reach that stage, I suppose. I worked here in the bad old days, so I know what I'm talking about. We never worked together, Wilhelmsen and I, but my goodness what a reputation she had. Queen of them all, near the end. Before that ... before she was shot and became a bit ..."

His index finger rotated slowly above his forehead.

The room fell silent. The sound of a siren in the backyard finally penetrated the walls and floor.

"Much to do?"

Bonsaksen ran his eyes over the almost clear surface of the desk. They stopped at the wire basket, empty of contents.

"Not right now."

"Excellent. I'd actually like to ..."

The older policeman lifted the bag from his lap and pulled out a blue ring binder. It was so crammed with paper that it was bulging open. He placed it on the desk with a dull thud.

"I'd really like you to take a look at this case," he said.

"We ... It's the Police Chief who gives us cases. We can't simply—"

"I know, I know."

Kjell Bonsaksen ran his finger thoughtfully along the ridge of his nose.

"You've been here for only ... three years?"

"Five this summer."

"Five."

Bonsaksen nodded.

"I retire on full pension in exactly one week," he continued. "I'll be fifty-eight on the fourteenth of January. I've been in the police for nearly thirty-nine years."

Henrik stared intently at the blue ring binder that looked terribly worn and faded.

"And in so many years, making the occasional mistake can't be avoided," Bonsaksen went on. "Even though I may have made fewer than most. But as I said ..."

He glanced around the room and caught sight of Henrik's Moccamaster coffee machine on a sideboard in the corner.

"Could I have a cup?"

"It's been standing for a while, I'm afraid."

"That makes no odds," Bonsaksen said as he got to his feet. "I just told you I've spent more than a lifetime in the force."

He crossed the room and picked up a clean cup from the tray beside the coffee machine. Lifting the cup to his nose, he sniffed loudly and swallowed a mouthful.

"Absolutely fine," he said tersely, resuming his seat.

"You were saying?" Henrik reminded him. "You started to—"

"As I said," Bonsaksen broke in, lifting the cup to his mouth once more before changing his mind and putting it down again, "... it's inevitable to have made one or two mistakes. Letting people go too easily. Maybe not putting everything into solving a case. It can't be discounted that now and again you haven't been able to remain as objective as you should, according to the book. All the same, Holme, it's true that ..."

He sniffed slightly and ran his finger several times under his nose.

"There's nothing I can't live with. Nothing that's going to niggle me when I put my belongings in a box in a week's time and trudge out of my office to step foot on the first plane to France. There's nothing I've done in all these years, or nothing I haven't done, that's going to cost me a minute's sleep in all the years that lie ahead. Not one single minute."

He emphasized the point by slamming his fist on the desk.

"Except for this one," he added, tapping the blue ring binder. "This has rankled like a stone in my shoe since 2004."

"I see. I know how exasperating it can be when an offender gets away with it."

"This one didn't get away."

"What?"

"He certainly didn't get away. He was charged, tried and convicted."

"Then ... then in that case ..."

Henrik swallowed. He could still feel a slight tenderness around his larynx, where at the beginning of December he had undergone an operation to have his Adam's apple reduced in size. Considerably. Now he went about in high-necked sweaters or with a scarf around his neck, dreading the warmer weather to come. It was true that the operation incision was made so precisely in the spot between his neck and his chin that it was barely

visible any longer, but everyone would notice the great change in his neck itself. Which had of course been the intention, when he came to think of it.

He fiddled with the collar of his army-green sweater.

"Hanne Wilhelmsen and I work on unsolved cases," he said, trying to give the impression of firmness. "Cold cases. I'm afraid we can't ... and anyway, as I said earlier, we're subject to the Police Chief and no one else."

"I dare say," Kjell Bonsaksen said. "There's probably nobody else here at headquarters with any hope of keeping any sort of control over Wilhelmsen, eh? But this case ..."

He laid his hand on the ring binder and pushed it insistently across to Henrik, who stepped back a little, as if the collection of documents scared him.

"This has to do with an error," the older policeman went on. "A miscarriage of justice. Or ..."

Leaning back abruptly in his chair, he fished out a half-smoked cigar from his breast pocket and stuck it into his mouth.

"Only sucking on it," he murmured reassuringly. "I won't light it."

"A miscarriage of justice," Henrik reiterated in a monotone. "If you mean that a wrongful conviction occurred, then the Criminal Cases Review Commission is the place to take that up."

"Yes, I know. If the guy had been interested in doing so, yes. The problem is..."

Kjell Bonsaksen gave a slight groan as he stood up. He was at least twenty kilos overweight, and the cigar had obviously found its customary place at the corner of his mouth, in a tiny crevice between his lips formed by decades of habitual pressure. Henrik, who thought the cigar resembled a dry puppy turd, cast his eyes down.

"I've consoled myself that he never fought back," the soon-to-be-retired policeman said, staring out into the darkness. "For

nearly twelve years now I've tried to placate myself with the fact that he was never willing to fight. Could anyone like that be innocent, I wonder?"

Henrik did not reply.

"I think ..."

Bonsaksen spat out invisible tobacco flakes without removing the cigar from his lips.

"All the evidence pointed to him. He told an obvious lie. Two courts of law found him guilty. Bloody hell, not even the poor guy's own defense lawyer believed him!"

He turned to face Henrik and flung out his arms.

"Do you understand?"

Henrik wanted to say no. Instead he stared intently at the ring binder in front of him.

"In fact I was the only one who doubted it," Kjell Bonsaksen ploughed on. "I was the chief investigator in the case. Of course, that could have been a fucking advantage for the guy, that the chief investigator wasn't entirely convinced that he was guilty of killing his wife, but—"

"Killing his wife?"

Henrik looked up.

"Yes. He was sentenced to twelve years in prison for murdering his wife."

"So he's ..."

Henrik did a rapid mental calculation.

"He's out now, then? He didn't serve his whole sentence, did he?"

The other man nodded and sat down again.

"He was released after serving eight years. I know that now. Did some digging, you see, after I bumped into him recently. On New Year's Day, in fact, at a gas station out on the E18. Completely by chance. He had lost his good looks, to put it mildly. Emaciated. Nearly bald and the few wisps of hair left on his head were totally



gray. In the past, he was quite a guy. A real showoff, with a brilliant job at Statoil. Now he drives a trailer truck between Norway and Sweden and looks like it too. Pale and drawn and so chock-full of coffee that you're knocked wide-awake just by looking at him. Absolutely unrecognizable. But his eyes, Holme ..."

He placed both strong hands on the desk and leaned forward unexpectedly.

"They were exactly the same as that time. Absolutely identical."

"I see," Henrik said meekly. "Eyes probably don't change so much in twelve years."

"Yes they can. But not these ones."

Henrik could detect a sharp, cloying smell from the cold cigar and drew his chair even further back.

"Do you know what my wife says is the worst thing about me after all these years in the police force?" Kjell Bonsaksen asked in deadly earnest.

"No."

"That I've become so damned cynical. She says it's as if I don't believe in anybody, that I come out with objections and re-examine everything that's said. It's probably true. An occupational injury, that's what it is."

Finally he took his cigar from the corner of his mouth and tucked it back inside his breast pocket.

"But do you know what Bjørg-Eva thinks is the *best* thing to emerge from all these years?"

Henrik shook his head energetically.

"That I can tell – just from people's eyes – when they're lying."

Henrik sat quiet as a mouse.

"Of course I can't really," Bonsaksen said. "But almost. And the problem at that time was, I saw no trace of a lie in his eyes when he said he hadn't done it. But there was no spark behind them, sort of thing. No indignation at being unfairly treated. Just ..."

He used both hands to snatch up the ring binder and he stood it edgewise on the desk. Henrik could see that the man's wedding ring was disappearing into his ring finger, and he recognized an equally tight Odd Fellow ring on the other hand.

"Resignation," Bonsaksen completed his sentence. "The guy seemed totally resigned. As if he had no energy left, in a sense. So I've tried to allay my concerns by telling myself that justice was up to the mark at that time. As I said, the case has just been like an irritating stone in my shoe: uncomfortable, but far from dangerous. A nuisance, but something I can live with."

He set the bulky ring binder down again, and yet again shoved it across the desk to Henrik Holme.

"But not now," he added, with a heavy sigh. "That look he gave me out there at the gas station—"

"What's the guy's name?" Henrik asked merely to say something rather than through genuine interest.

"That look told the truth, Holme. And then ..."

Kjell Bonsaksen got to his feet, grabbed his almost empty bag and hooked it over his right shoulder before heading for the door. The ring binder was left on Henrik Holme's office desk, as if he had already accepted responsibility for it.

"... then he really does qualify for the title of the most anguished soul in the country. That man lost everything. Absolutely everything, and in such a short space of time. Take a gander at the case, please. Give the man the chance I should have given him twelve years ago."

"What's his name?" Henrik repeated.

"He's called Jonas," Kjell Bonsaksen said as he opened the door. "Jonas Abrahamsen, and I hope to God the two of you can help him."

**FRIDAY JANUARY 8, 2016**

“**T**his is a gift. Despite everything. A gift.”

Halvor Stenskar, General Manager of the health food firm VitaeBrass AS, gave a loud sigh and placed his hand over hers. She pulled back, just slowly enough to appear dismissive rather than downright rude.

“I mean ...”

He stood up and walked to the window, where the accursed weather cast the fjord in shades of dark gray beneath a sky that seemed only slightly paler. The Nesoddland peninsula lay like an oppressive predator on the other side of the water, only just visible in the low clouds above the city of Oslo.

November weather in January.

“Of course suicide is a tragedy,” he said.

It dawned on him that this was probably the fifth time he had done so since his arrival. He cleared his throat and began over again.

“Nevertheless, suicide is a voluntary act. I’m sure it isn’t undertaken lightly. Not by anyone. Not even by Iselin. But despite all that, it is a choice, after all.”

He turned again to face the living room. Even though the apartment was located in an eye-wateringly expensive area of Tjuvholm, it was not impressively large. Besides, there were too many items of furniture here, which made it all seem cramped. Furniture and bric-a-brac and strong colors, completely different

from the strict minimalism his own wife favored. A gigantic painting above the fireplace of a sea eagle in flight was the only picture in the entire room. Otherwise there were only curios, made of ceramic and wood, of copper and wrought iron. And brass. There were objects made of brass everywhere. Admittedly, the pale-yellow metal was the key to the company's success, but there had to be a limit as to quantity. He had counted candlesticks and arrived at a total of fourteen before he had given up. The room reminded him of a boudoir most of all, with its dark red settees, countless soft cushions and the scent of incense that was making him feel slightly queasy. Boudoir was appropriate to some extent, since two lesbians, getting on in years, had lived together here.

On the other hand he had never set foot inside a boudoir, so what did he know?

He caught himself staring at Maria.

The settee she sat on was so deep and low that her legs, when stretched out, were almost parallel with the floor. She was clutching a cushion to her stomach, holding on to it as if for grim death. It could not possibly be to hide her paunch. Despite her age, she was slim, healthy and relatively fit. She seemed neither tear-stained nor devastated, at least not the way he would imagine his own wife to be if he had been the one to die.

"The most important thing is to pour oil on troubled waters," he said. "It's been an unpleasant time for all of us these past few weeks. It's not particularly advantageous for the company, all this ..."

His hand waved uncertainly in the air, as if he was bothered by an insect.

"... media interest."

Finally Maria glanced up. They had never enjoyed a close relationship; they were far too different for that. He did not

understand her. To him, BrassCure was a business idea. An exceptionally lucrative one, but he had never felt tempted to swallow a single one of the pills they sold at such an extortionate price. Iselin was the one who had belief in the product. She was the one who could mesmerize a whole room full of agents and sellers with explanations about BrassCure's active ingredients and effects on the human body. The theories would not have taken her very far in a medical institute, but they had laid the foundations of a small fortune for her as well as several others.

It was less clear where Maria fitted in to all this.

She had always appeared loyal to Iselin, sometimes bordering on self-effacing. Whereas Iselin could fill a room with her mere presence, Maria was a wide-eyed admirer who seldom spoke a word in her spouse's company. He had warned her before she had brought her lover into the firm. And handing over half of Maria's shares to Iselin as a wedding present, with no conditions stipulated, had been sheer madness. Halvor Stenskar spoke up, both indirectly and eventually more bluntly and boorishly, but it had been to no avail. A matter of months after they met, the two turtledoves were registered partners. And Halvor Stenskar had to admit that it had been upon Iselin's introduction to the company that VitaeBrass had really taken off.

Maria had seemed totally enthralled by Iselin. Endlessly.

"Media interest," he repeated, mainly to break the painful silence.

"You're always claiming that all PR is good PR."

"But by that I mean *relevant* PR."

He placed exaggerated emphasis on "relevant".

"Such as articles stating that we promise more than we deliver?" she asked. "That we have no scientific proof that BrassCure has any effect whatsoever? About the Consumer Council having slaughtered our adverts time after time?"

“Whenever someone writes something along those lines, we can cite umpteen patients who claim the opposite. And the right of reply, Maria, is not to be sneezed at. The right of reply has given us a lot of free publicity over the years, both for VitaeBrass as a company and BrassCure as a product. Iselin being unmasked as ...”

He was not quite sure about his choice of word. After all, this was a brand-new widow seated in front of him.

“Extremist,” she offered helpfully. “That’s what they call it. But I can’t recall you ever expressing disagreement with what Iselin stood for.”

“Socially, no! We’re all agreed that these immigrants are getting out of hand, aren’t we, and that something drastic has to be done to prevent ...”

He used his fingers to comb his thick, gray hair and discreetly brushed away flakes of dandruff from his jacket shoulders before sitting down on the arm of the only chair in the room.

“Healthy skepticism about this flood of dysfunctional illiterates and prospective benefit claimants is one thing. It’s another thing entirely to preach that pure ...”

“Racism,” she helped him again when he hesitated.

He blinked hurriedly, but did not answer.

“Iselin, or more correctly Tyrfin, was not racist in the tabloid sense of the word. She was more of a modern nationalist. She wanted to free her country from its multicultural yoke. Racism builds on certain people being inferior to others. Iselin’s ideas were not based on any ranking of races. She simply meant that our ethnicity, identity and culture are important, so important that we must protect them from the completely unwarranted influence that Islam has had. You said before that you agreed with all this.”

“No. What she wrote in that damned blog of hers is something very different from what she voiced in social settings. As I said, it’s some way from—”

"You've never expressed reservations about anything Iselin said on this subject. Neither have I, for that matter, but that's because I quite simply wasn't too bothered. About politics, I mean."

"Not too bothered?"

He stared at her in disbelief.

"You picked Iselin up out of nothing," he said, far too loudly. "You've financed this entire ..."

He flapped his hands distractedly. Now it seemed as if he had been attacked by a whole swarm of insects.

"... blog business of hers. You've made this crusade possible. You're the one who gave her half your shares, and you're the one who—"

"You seem to have forgotten that the company doubled its turnover in ten months once Iselin joined the management team. Anyway, Iselin could have been Tyrfing without me. A blog costs two kroner and fifty øre to set up. But forget it. I can't stand all this."

Maria Kvam got to her feet. With more difficulty than usual, he thought, as if she was weighed down by something almost intolerable. The angry, almost aggressive expression in her eyes was gone. Maybe it was her way of grieving.

"Despite everything, this is also a gift," Halvor Stenskar said, lifting his backside from the soft chair-arm. "As I said. With all due respect, Maria. Now that the worst has happened, with Iselin given a thrashing and deprived of every last shred of dignity as she was, despite it all this is best for ..."

He hesitated, just long enough for her to give him a smile he had never seen before.

"For the company," she declared. "It's good for the company that the storm around Iselin is calming down. And of course that is the most important thing. The most important thing of all."

"Your company," he said sharply. "Very much yours. Especially now. After this, I mean ..."

His hand swept over the room in an imprecise gesture, as if Iselin's suicide lay hidden somewhere between the velvet cushions and knick-knacks.

"Mine," she said, with a nod. "Now it's almost all mine."

He saw that she was crying. Absolutely silently, and almost unnoticeably, with only the tears running down her cheeks giving him to understand that it was high time he left.

Henrik Holme had been greatly in doubt about whether he should dare to visit Hanne at all. His dismissal yesterday had been just as peremptory and imperious as ever, and strictly speaking this was not a new case he had tucked under his arm.

It was not a case at all.

The papers inside the worn, blue ring binder did not contain a mystery. No unknown perpetrator lurked there, no blind alleys as in the cases they had previously investigated and in some instances solved. Quite the opposite. Henrik had spent the past night and morning skimming through most of the documents, and Jonas Abrahamsen's conviction seemed far from unreasonable. Into the bargain, the poor man had accepted the judgment on the spot when it had been pronounced. Admittedly with one conspicuous and somewhat uncommon reservation: when the convicted prisoner had been permitted to speak, he had repeated his assertion of innocence despite accepting his severe punishment. It happened now and again that people expressed such reservations when it was a matter of a measly writ, but to agree to twelve years imprisonment without admitting guilt seemed remarkable. His lawyer had immediately intervened and advised his client to take some time for reflection.

That had not helped one iota.

"Obviously the correct judgment," Hanne Wilhelmsen said, slamming the ring binder closed after leafing through it in silence



for less than quarter of an hour. "This Superintendent Bonsaksen has obviously just had an attack of pension blues. It's never easy for these old guys when their time in the police force is up."

Henrik felt a certain inclination to remind her that she was only two or three years younger than the Superintendent. He resisted the temptation.

"Bonsaksen seemed pretty convinced," he said.

"No doubt."

"And he is immensely experienced."

"No doubt."

"He said it was the only case in nearly forty years that has plagued him with doubts."

"Then he's an idiot. As for me, I had doubts in every other investigation. Why have you adopted that high-necked style? And do I see the suggestion of a beard, Henrik? Have you become a hipster, or what?"

Touching his neck, and hesitating slightly, he said: "Haven't you noticed?"

"Yes, of course. Your Adam's apple is much smaller. You can see that even through your sweater. Congratulations. Is it still sore?"

"No, just a bit tender."

"That will pass, I'm sure. And it was about time you did something about that monstrous lump. And since the scar ..."

She angled her head to squint at his neck.

"... is placed so neatly and tidily in the fold right beside your chin, I don't understand the point of that sweater."

Henrik did not answer. He took hold of the table edge to deter his intense compulsion to touch the side of his nose.

"It's twelve o'clock," Hanne said. "Time for lunch. If you're not hungry, you can go."

Henrik still sat in total silence. His gaze was fixed on the ring binder between them, and he still clutched the edge of the table.

But his left leg, which until a few seconds ago had been vibrating so violently that his heel had beat a muffled tattoo on the parquet floor, stiffened.

“Henrik?”

There was something he had spotted last night. Something he had not quite caught, perhaps because it was already past two o’clock and the collection of documents was so extensive. So convincing. So full of damning evidence.

“There’s something about this case,” he said suddenly in a loud voice. “Something that doesn’t quite add up.”

“What’s that?”

Hanne’s tone was a touch more forceful than usual, as always happened when she was impatient. Henrik raised his eyes and peered out the picture windows into the bleak day outside, where the streetscape was distorted by raindrops clinging to the windowpane, and the light from a standard lamp adjacent to the settee was reflected in the dark glass.

This was exactly what he required.

He remembered one peculiarity. A detail. Of course, it did not have to mean anything.

But it could, in fact, be significant.

“Nothing,” he said with a defensive smile after pondering for a fraction of a second. He wedged the ring binder under his arm and departed.

When anyone occasionally asked him how he was, he always gave the same answer: “Can’t complain.”

Jonas Abrahamsen could not complain.

He had lost his only child because he had not taken good enough care of her.

Their marriage was already on the rocks when Anna died two years later, and he had served eight years in prison for something

he had not done. His job in Statoil went up in smoke when sentence was passed. Since Anna had sole ownership and her application for a legal separation had been approved, he had lost the house and most other things with it.

He no longer had any friends.

It was true that a surprising number had been supportive during the trial, but the majority melted away when he was found guilty. A cousin, a colleague and a couple of childhood pals had visited him in prison during the first year. All except his cousin had abandoned him after a while. He hardly encouraged them to come back, sitting there in clothes that grew increasingly baggy, and eventually giving up all efforts at personal hygiene.

But he could not complain.

He was the one who should have taken care of Dina. He was the one who had allowed himself to be distracted by the junk mail in the mailbox, and it was his fault that Dina was gone and his whole life had been shattered.

He did not complain.

It was chilly in the spartanly furnished living room. Jonas tossed a couple of logs into the cast iron stove in the corner before it crossed his mind that he had not eaten since breakfast. It was years since his body had stopped telling him it was hungry. It had stopped telling him most things. The only thing he could not do without was coffee: it was rare for more than half an hour to elapse between each cup. All through the day and the evening too. Sometimes he woke about three o'clock at night and had to brew himself a cup or two. If he was lucky, he could have a nap afterward for an hour or so.

As a rule he was not lucky.

But he was never tired either.

That was just as well, given that he was a long distance driver. Normally only to Sweden, but now and again he had also driven

to Germany. It was his cousin who had found him the job, six months after he had been released from prison. Guttorm had even paid for his HGV license. As a loan, Jonas had insisted, and it was now repaid in full.

He earned reasonable wages and his needs were few.

The house he rented in Maridalen was tiny. The total floor area was barely forty square meters, and the basement was so damp that it could not be used for anything. He had insulated the door with polystyrene on the inside and sealed it off. The ceiling of the attic was so low that he had decided to close it off as well, and the narrow staircase was nailed up to save heat. The ground floor included an old dining room he had transformed by simple means into a kind of bathroom, a bedroom measuring almost ten square meters that used up an unnecessary amount of space, and an open-plan kitchen-cum-living room. It was a furnished let, and the majority of the furnishings harked back to the fifties. The most flamboyant exception was a colossal TV screen for which he had needed to shut off one window to make sufficient space. The house in the woods was not connected to broadband, but he had splashed out on a subscription for RiksTV. At any rate, that gave him six channels through a roof antenna.

Jonas Abrahamsen watched a lot of TV.

Drank coffee and watched TV. Used the Internet for one hour each day, but never more than that. He had to connect via 3G, and that was expensive.

Most of all he thought about Dina. She would have just turned seventeen now. In his mind's eye, he pictured what she would have looked like, and wondered whether her hair – that beautiful fair hair shot through with electricity from her winter clothes – would still have been so blond. At nights he dreamed of her, and he found himself increasingly often talking out loud to her during the day. She would have been almost grown up and graduating

from high school next year. Of course it was impossible to say what a youngster who had not even reached the age of three would have chosen to study, but Jonas had decided on agricultural economics. She would have attended agricultural college and maybe even married a farmer.

Dina was so fond of flowers.

Sometimes, but increasingly infrequently, he also thought about when Anna died. On his arrest, the shock had been so great that he had been unable to speak for two days. Quite literally: his vocal cords went on strike. Even when the investigator who called himself Bonsaksen had explained to him in a fairly friendly tone how difficult he was making things for himself by not answering any questions, it was barely possible for him to open his mouth. His jaws were locked, his hands and feet numb, and he had not slept for more than forty-eight hours. In the end he received medication and was able to cope, but by then it was too late.

Apparently those two days of silence had cost him eight years in prison.

It seemed as if they had made up their minds. Bonsaksen had made good use of the time while Jonas was curled up in a fetal position in a bare cell at Police Headquarters, Grønlandsleiret 44. He had realized that only half an hour into his interview, when one compromising snippet of information after another was presented to him.

Nothing he said could change anything.

Anyway, the first words he had uttered were a lie.

He was certain of being convicted, and so he gave up. This had brought him a peculiar sense of peace. He would never admit anything he had not done, but denying his guilt was about the only thing he had the stamina to do. Days and weeks on remand eventually felt quite comfortable: predictable and completely

lacking in responsibility for anything whatsoever. He could dream about Dina every night and talk to her under his breath during the day, at that time still with a slightly affected, childish voice that Dina's grandmother had considered detrimental to the little girl's speech development.

Nowadays he spoke to her as an adult.

He could have had a grown-up daughter, and the sorrow and sense of loss over her death had never been assuaged. A psychiatrist they had fobbed off on him at the approach of his release date was of the opinion that that his grief reaction was pathological. Not that the doctor had said so directly to him. Far from it. On the contrary – the guy had mostly fixed him with a resolute stare, holding a pen in his hand that he never used on the blank sheet of paper in front of him. A couple of years later, however, and most definitely without him having requested it, Jonas had received a copy of the entire file in the post. It stated in black and white that Jonas was not really healthy, that he was tormented by “uncontrolled, intrusive memories about the deceased even almost ten years after the accident”. It said that he displayed “a conspicuous lack of interest in anything other than his sorrow”, and a whole pile of other guff that Jonas had put straight on the fire.

That psychiatrist could not possibly have had any children.

He could never have known the joy of holding a newborn in his arms for the very first time, only seconds old and so beautiful that the world would never be the same again. He could never have felt the wafting fragrance of a newly bathed one-year-old in pajamas. That bloody doctor had never held his dearest, most precious person in his arms as the light in her eyes faded and she breathed her last.

The doctor was wrong. Guilt about Dina's death did not prevent Jonas from living.

Grief at Dina's death was the only thing that made it worthwhile for him to stay alive.

Sorrow, and those fleeting moments when he felt blessedly guilt-free. They were what gave Jonas Abrahamsen the strength to live yet another day, yet another month and perhaps yet another year: eternal sorrow and the occasional, sporadic glimmer of intense hatred.