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Wolves in the Dark

Written by Gunnar Staalesen

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

Published by Orenda Books

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Wolves in the Dark

GUNNAR STAALESEN

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett



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1

They came early – to catch me in bed. At seven I was woken by a loud, continuous ring on the bell downstairs. I staggered to the window, opened it and looked out.

The police car was parked nose to the wall. In front of my door stood Inspector Bjarne Solheim, accompanied by his colleague Arne Melvær.

'Veum?' Solheim said. 'Can we come in?'

'Do I have the option to say no?'

He turned an unsmiling face up at me and shook his head slowly.

I closed the window, threw on a dressing gown, thrust my feet into a pair of slippers and trudged down the narrow staircase. I had barely opened the door before they were inside. Both eyed me warily.

Solheim put his hand into an inside pocket and pulled out a folded document. His look was solemn as he said: 'We have a warrant for your arrest, Veum. And a search warrant. Have you got a computer in the house?'

I stared at him in shock. 'Yes? A laptop. But—'

'It's confiscated. We'll go up with you, so that you can put some clothes on. Afterwards you'll have to accompany us to Police HQ.'

I still wasn't sure if I was awake or if all this was some bad dream. 'Tell me … Are you serious? And what have I been arrested for?'

'We can deal with that at the station. Hamre's already waiting.'

A few minutes later we were heading towards Allehelgens gate. Melvær was sitting with my computer on his lap, his facial expression suggesting he had been entrusted with the Crown Jewels. A few hours ago I had been as happy with my life as I was able to allow myself to be. Now I was sitting in the back of a police car, feeling like a naughty boy being summoned to the headmaster for no obvious reason.

Outside the car, the town was waking up to a dull, grey September day. I could see it was going to be far different from the one I had imagined. I already envied those people getting out of the yellow buses to walk to an office or some other everyday job somewhere in town, anywhere but the police station.

2

Jakob E. Hamre, the section head, was about my age. In other words, he was fast closing in on retirement. Not even that thought made him a cheerier spectacle as he sat behind his desk, observing me with a face gloomier than that of a passport official at the pearly gates. His hair was greyer than when I had last seen him, nearly white in some parts. It was thinner than I remembered as well, unless he had just washed it.

His eyes narrowed visibly as I sat down on the chair opposite him. 'I would never have believed I'd experience this, Veum.'

'We've sat like this on innumerable occasions, Hamre.'

'Not like this.' He looked down and flicked through some papers he had in front of him.

I craned my neck to see what they could be. From a distance they looked like computer print-outs, but internet technology had never been my strongest suit. I was happy so long as my computer worked, I could get online, and send and receive emails.

'I have a print-out here,' he said, rather redundantly. 'It's a summary of the traffic on your office computer over the last six months. If we wish we can go even further back. The laptop we confiscated during your arrest will now be examined by our experts to compare, and perhaps document, similar content.'

I felt my jaw drop. 'Tell me … is that legal?'

He nodded. 'Court order.'

'And what do you mean by "similar content"?'

He sent me a stern gaze. 'I reckon you can work that out for yourself.'

'No, in fact I can't. All I use the computer for is emails, banking, booking the odd ticket and various searches connected with work.'

His eyes flashed. 'And you've been working on cases that involve dubious content recently, have you?'

'Dubious content?' I wasn't so stupid that I didn't suspect where this was leading. Though I didn't understand the how and why. 'Could you perhaps be a little more explicit?'

He heaved a heavy sigh, pushed some of the papers aside, leaned forward slightly and stared at me darkly. 'Child pornography, Veum.' He grimaced. 'Of the most repugnant kind.'

I could feel my body stiffening, the way muscles brace themselves in the face of an assumed danger. I still felt as if I were trapped in a bad dream, as though I had been transferred into a parallel existence where nothing was how it should be; or I was looking into a fairground mirror, struggling to recognise myself.

I gesticulated with my right hand, a denial of everything. 'I know nothing about this. This cannot possibly be right. And if it is …'

'Yes?' He fixed his eyes on me.

'Then someone has got into my computer and left it there intentionally.'

'*Quod erat demonstrandum*, Veum. That's Latin, in case you didn't know, and it means "that which was to be proved"'.

'Well, I'll help you in every way possible. You can rely on me!' When he said nothing, I carried on: 'Surely you can't believe that I … that this is something I … that I would … I'm speechless.'

'And perhaps that shows the thin ice you're walking on.'

'Now, just listen here! I understand nothing about computers, except the essentials, as I told you. But surely you have experts who can examine this and … find out what happened?'

'If someone hacked into your computer, as it's called, it ought to be possible to find that out, yes. The problem, Veum, is that you are not on your own. Our raid today wasn't some chance visit. This afternoon you'll hear about it on the radio news. It'll be on TV this evening and it'll be splashed over all the newspapers for days.'

'*What* will be splashed over the newspapers?'

'Hordaland Police District, in co-operation with several other police districts in Norway, other European countries and, furthermore, the USA, in the early hours of this morning uncovered an international child pornography ring that distributes images over the internet. Arrests are being made in a number of countries. As well as you there are three other men in our district awaiting interrogation – either here, or in one case at a provincial police station. Your IP address appeared on this network with incoming and outgoing traffic.'

'Incoming and outgoing?'

'It means you've both received and sent … images that have been shared around the network.'

'But, but…' My face was taut, and all the muscles in my body, from the back of my head to the soles of my feet, were tensed. 'This is absolutely incomprehensible! My God, Hamre. You've known me … for how many years?'

He shrugged. 'Too many, if you ask me.'

'You can't think … you can't believe that I would be involved in this with my background – from Child Welfare officer to private investigator?'

'I don't want to believe it, Veum, but…' Again he showed me the paperwork on his desk. 'The evidence is weighty. And the case has to be examined. In the meantime you'll be remanded in custody. No visitors and no mail of any kind.'

At once I felt a deep fear shiver through my body and I wanted to open one of his desk drawers to see if he had a tiny bottle of aquavit waiting for me.

'I assume you're not going to make a confession?'

'Confession! For Christ's sake, I have nothing to confess. This is madness. Any discerning person can see that.'

'This discerning person can't,' he drawled, then announced: 'Your case will come up today.'

I heard my own voice quiver with nerves as I said: 'I suppose I'm entitled to a lawyer?'

He nodded. 'You are. Anyone in particular?'

'Give me Vidar Waagenes. He knows me well.'

'We'll ring him. For now you'll be put in a basement cell. You can spend your time having a good think. About whether it wouldn't pay to lay all your cards on the table.'

'There are no cards to show you, Hamre. Not in this hand. Can I make a call to tell my family where I am?'

'Only in my presence. Afterwards you'll have to leave the phone with us.'

'You'll examine that too, I take it.'

'What do you think?'

'It's an old model. No camera.'

'Well … are you going to make the call?'

I dialled Sølvi's number. Her phone rang five times, then the voicemail cut in: *'You have reached Sølvi Hegge. I can't take the phone now, but I can call you back as soon as I'm free, or you can leave a message after the tone.'*

When the tone came I just stared blankly at the phone. I had no idea what to say. So I pressed 'off' and looked at Hamre. 'She didn't answer.'

'Perhaps just as well, Veum.'

3

Bjarne Solheim's scruffy hair, which often stood on end, had always reminded me of Stan Laurel – the thin one from Laurel & Hardy, in my opinion the funniest comic duo ever. But there was nothing comical about him as he stood beside me in the lift, accompanying me to the custody suite in the basement. We didn't exchange a single word, and he stared gloomily at the lift door until we had reached the bottom.

I had my belt and shoelaces taken off me but was allowed to keep my notepad and biro, the latter after much rumination on the officer's part.

'Has anyone committed suicide with a biro?' I asked.

The officer glared at me. 'Spare me the wit. You can use it to stab with, can't you?'

Yes, in my eye, I answered in my head, making sure I didn't say it aloud.

Then the door closed behind me, it was locked and I was alone in a hotel room I hadn't booked, but someone had reserved for me anyway.

Bergen's custody suite is in the basement of Police HQ, which was built in 1965. It didn't appear that any great modernisation had taken place since then. There was no drunk tank, but the sparse furnishings meant the difference was not immense: a bench, a table fixed to the wall, a hole in one corner and a metal sink beside it. No windows, just a hatch in the door to the corridor. Through it I heard the garbled protests of one of the drunk-tank fraternity, but was unable to make any sense of what he was saying.

The shocked numbness I had felt in my body after Hamre had outlined the serious charge against me was now being replaced by something even more unpleasant: panic. It made my heart pound in my chest and sweat form between my shoulder blades and on my forehead.

I gasped for breath as though my respiratory system were on the blink. My body twitched uncontrollably a few times, and I leaned against the wall so as not to fall over; at least that was how it felt.

I slumped down on the bench, leaned back against the wall, rested my head and concentrated on taking deep, controlled breaths, down to my belly: slow inhalation, controlled release; slow inhalation, controlled release.

Gradually the panic attack began to lose its grip, but still I could feel it in my body, like a hollow in the pit of my stomach and a lump in my chest, a kind of collar around my lungs.

I looked around. Bare, greyish-white walls. Not one picture. A few swear words carved into the plaster and some unrefined drawings of disproportionately large, erect sexual organs, head-on, as it were. This wasn't a place people stayed for long. You were taken out relatively fast and released or sent for a longer stay in the luxury accommodation at Åsane – or even further away if it was overbooked.

I had nothing to read. All I had was my pad with a few boring notes on cases I had either cracked or couldn't crack – all two to three months old. I flicked through to a blank page, clicked the biro and sat staring at the white sheet. I had nothing to write. In the end, I jotted down the date, 10th September 2002, and then a big question mark. No matter how hard I concentrated on what Hamre had said, I couldn't understand where all the evidence had come from and why I hadn't discovered it for myself.

On the other hand, there was quite a lot I had only vague memories of in the soon-to-be four years that had passed since Karin had been so suddenly and brutally ripped out of my life. I had a fairly good perspective of the last six months because of the case I had worked on and which had brought Sølvi and me together. The three years or so before that were wreathed in the sombre mists of confusion and intoxication, shame and dishonour, en route from the gutter to the sewer, in the company of men and women I would have preferred not to be seen with, even on the darkest night. I had taken on jobs I wouldn't normally have touched with a barge pole, but I had never been as low

as the place where Hamre had put me during the first meeting in his office. There were limits, tattooed inside my heart, and I never crossed them.

Only last night I had been with Sølvi and her young daughter in Saudalskleivane. After Helene had fallen asleep, we had stood above her bed as if we were her parents, and no evil had befallen her or her mother in the past six months. She looked like an angel as she slept, her blonde hair spread out on the pillow like a bridal veil. Helene was ten and a half years old. She was a beautiful little girl with gentle features, round cheeks and a mouth that loved to smile when she was awake. Her eyelids twitched, and I couldn't help but remember how Beate and I had stood over Thomas's bed and looked down on him in exactly the same way, a very long time ago, of course.

After a while we had tiptoed back into the living room, where Sølvi had another glass of red wine and I had a last bottle of Farris mineral water, the idea being that I would drive home.

Once she had finished her wine, we went into the bedroom. Her mouth, so welcoming and soft and open, tasted of red wine. In the dim light we made love with a passion that told us nothing goes out of date so long as the contents are still fresh.

Afterwards we lay chatting.

She tugged at my ear and said: 'I wonder what it was that made me fall for you.'

'I'm probably not the right person to answer that question,' I mumbled.

She chuckled. 'Actually I'm wondering if it wasn't a kind of maternal feeling.'

'Thank you very much,' I said, pulling her to me and kissing her in a way no son would, as if to persuade her there must have been something else.

'I mean it, Varg. You seemed so lost.'

I hadn't convinced her, in other words. But I could live with that. The alternative was a great deal more boring.

It was approaching two in the morning when I got into my car

and drove home. We still hadn't reached the stage of having breakfast together; not while Helene was at home. It wasn't a year yet since she had lost her father, and I still had a way to go before I could be promoted to step-daddy, in her eyes. But on a good day I could imagine that I was on my way. And yesterday had been just that: a good day without the slightest hint of what was to come.

There was a rattle in the lock, and I turned to face the heavy door, which was pulled open to let in Vidar Waagenes. He didn't look a bundle of laughs, either.

'Veum,' he declared, holding out a hand.

I struggled to my feet and shook hands. 'Nice to see you again,' I mumbled, although I had no memory of when I last saw him.

He nodded towards the bench. 'We can have a few words here before going back to see Hamre.' He motioned to the prison officer waiting in the doorway. 'You can leave us alone now, Johnsen.'

Johnsen nodded and pulled the door to, without locking it this time.

I looked at Vidar Waagenes. He had become a forty-something, but there was still a boyish gaucheness about him that made you feel he would be easy prey in a court of law. It was a misjudgement many had had cause to regret; and experience had taught me he was the opposite. He was a trial lawyer of the highest calibre and would have been a star in Oslo, if he hadn't preferred to remain in a large house in Fjellveien, within walking distance of the Bergen Law Courts, Wesselstuen – a celebrity restaurant – and other places he had to go for professional reasons or to satisfy other proclivities. If anyone could get me out of the fix I was in, it was him.

His dark hair was speckled with grey, but he still had a forelock and he still swept it to the side with the same flick. He was elegantly dressed in a grey suit, white shirt and a bluish-grey tie that was hardly likely to cause annoyance to anyone. The glance he cast at my outfit – blue jeans and black T-shirt thrown on in haste after the early-morning call several hours earlier – suggested the opposite. He would probably have recommended different clothes if we were going to court.

He sat down next to me on the bench and half turned in what

seemed like a very uncomfortable position. 'Let's hear your side of the story then, Veum.'

'My side? I haven't got one.'

He sent me a measured look. 'That's what most people say, at first.'

I gesticulated impatiently. 'But it's true, Vidar. I have no idea what this is about!'

He sighed. 'Well, what I've been given to understand by Hamre is that they have located extremely incriminating material on your computer. Have you any comment?'

'It came like a bolt from the blue. I've never opened that kind of webpage or gone onto a website of that description.'

He shrugged. 'It could have been in connection with a case.'

'Yes, but that's never happened. Thank God, I've never had cases like that.'

His face crinkled in disappointment. 'We could have used that as an argument in court.'

'I'd opened child porn webpages in connection with a case?'

'Yes.'

'Are you recommending that I lie, Vidar?'

He pouted, the way lawyers do when they are generally trying to avoid the truth. 'Not as such, but … let's say it was your side of the story.'

'Even if it isn't true?'

His eyes gleamed, and he smiled at me. 'Thank you, Veum. That was how I hoped you would react. If we stick to the truth, in principle nothing can go wrong.'

'No?'

'No.'

'We've never had travesties of justice in this country?'

'Well, we have, in fact.'

'But you're sure we'll avoid one this time?'

'Let's not assume the worst. Right now we have two important tasks ahead of us. We have to talk to Hamre and find out how willing he would be to drop charges. From what he said on the phone I doubt

we'll achieve that. So either this afternoon or tomorrow morning there will be a review of your case, which could be important. Are you ready for action?'

I spread my arms. 'Ready for everything except staying here, anyway.'

'Then I'll tell Johnsen he needs to get someone down to accompany us.'

'They won't let us go upstairs on our own?'

'Not on a day like today, I'm afraid.'

4

Two officers came to collect us. They looked like brothers: one big and strong; the other slightly smaller. Both had shaven heads, newly pressed uniforms, and they gave the impression that descending into Hades to fetch a depressed Orpheus from the dead-end street where he had ended up was a pleasant duty.

'One each,' I mumbled to Waagenes.

He rolled his eyes and led the way out of the cell. They escorted us to Hamre's office before leaving us in the company of those present.

Hamre wasn't alone any more. With him sat Beatrice Bauge, a surprisingly young woman to have the title 'police solicitor', so young I could have been her father. She had blonde hair pulled back into a bun, a square jaw and the coolest eyes I had seen since I was last in the bank. This lady wasn't going to give much away either, sadly.

We shook hands, but neither of us smiled. There was a sombre atmosphere in the small office, as though none of us actually wanted to be there. At an undertaker's there was a definite tone of friendliness. Here there was nothing. Hamre was grey-faced, Beatrice Bauge had angry red blotches on her cheeks, Vidar Waagenes looked as if he was placing all his bets on the wrong horse, and I wouldn't have been able to perform a somersault if they had paid me a million kroner.

Beatrice Bauge sat there in full uniform, as straight-backed as if she were leading the day's press conference, which in fact she announced. 'You all know what this case is about. The press conference has been called for 1800 hours, and I think I can guarantee it will be headline news throughout the media tonight.'

She deliberately interposed a tiny pause and watched her words sink in. They did, like underwater mines programmed to detonate any second. Again I felt fear grip me, and the room had started to tip.

'Not mentioning any names, I assume,' I managed to stutter.

She stiffened her lips into a caricature of a smile. 'No, we won't go that far, but you never know what the media can find out. They often operate effectively outside our systems.'

'Inside too, I've been told.'

Waagenes gave an admonitory cough. 'Let's hear what they have to say, Veum. They need to have solid proof before they put their heads above the parapet.'

This time she did indeed give a little smile.

'I doubt if there's any proof more solid than this.' She shifted her gaze back to me. 'As soon as we start the hearings you'll be confronted with various links to an international child pornography ring, with primary emphasis on your…' Now it was her turn to cough. '…What shall I call them – colleagues? – in the local area.'

'I don't have any "colleagues"!'

'No? Acquaintances then, perhaps?'

'No, not the kind you're referring to.'

'Early this morning we confiscated the computer you have in your office and the laptop you have at home.'

'In the office! How did you get in?'

'We had some assistance.'

'I hope you remembered to lock up afterwards!'

She sent me a condescending glare. 'This material will now be thoroughly examined by our professional experts. But they've already established that you're an active participant in exchanging images, film clips and comments in this … what shall I call it? … market?'

This was making my head whirl. 'I've never … Film clips? Comments? I've never written a comment in any thread, not even one about Brann FC, however tempting that might be.'

She sighed theatrically and turned back to Waagenes. 'Of course you'll be given all the material we've had to sit through.' She pulled a face. 'For the refreshment and purification of your soul.'

'Amen,' I muttered.

'I doubt you'll be able to object that all the evidence we've gathered

isn't enough to formulate a charge. I'm also convinced the court will agree when we ask, initially, for your client to be held in custody for four weeks, with no visitors or access to mail.'

'No visitors or mail?' Waagenes echoed. 'Isn't that a little on the severe side?'

She slowly shook her head. Hamre stirred uneasily in his seat; he'd been conspicuously quiet throughout the proceedings so far. 'Not at all,' she said. 'Any communication within the alleged network must be stopped. We're not ruling out the possibility of further arrests in the course of the next twenty-four hours, but we feel confident that the four people we have in custody now are the main operators in this locality.'

'The main operators?' I burst out, still unable to believe my own ears.

She nodded, without adding anything else this time.

Waagenes looked in my direction with some concern. 'Naturally we'll oppose custody. My client maintains he is one hundred percent innocent of the charges being made. He has absolutely no idea how these images have got onto his computers, and we will assert that they have been planted from the outside – by someone who has hacked into them.'

'We will dispute this. We can wait with the technical data until we're in court, but we are confident that Veum put the images there himself.'

I just shook my head in disbelief. 'What else can I say? Where's the old legal ruling that a defendant should be given the benefit of the doubt?'

'Doubt? What doubt?' Beatrice Bauge answered drily.

'When is the hearing scheduled for?' Waagenes asked.

'1500 hours.'

'Then I'd like to have a full session with my client beforehand. Is there a spare room we can use up here?'

She arched her eyebrows. 'Spare room? Do you think we're running a hotel? You'll have to make do with the custody suite.'

Again Hamre shifted uneasily. 'We need the time we have left, Beatrice.'

'Right.' She stood up as a sign the meeting was over.

Accompanied by Charon and his little brother, Waagenes and I took the lift back down to Hades. I wondered if I should look for a coin or two to place on my eyes, then I remembered all my small change had been taken from me earlier in the day. You weren't allowed to take so much as a fifty-øre coin down into Hades in this part of the world, one early-autumn day at the very beginning of the twenty-first century.