

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT.

- THIS IS FUCKING PERFECT, YOU KNOW. I'll fucking remember this place if I need to dump a car sometime. It's not a big fucking lake, but there should be room for one more car. A small one.

I was crouching in the back of Oddvar Jelinek's Grand Cherokee struggling to put on a wetsuit that was too small for me. In the blackness outside, the rain was falling like tiny bombs. Jelinek was sitting sideways in the back seat, staring pensively towards the tiny lake of *Blåtjern*. We had already been down there to salvage old Jelinek's eel traps. They were both broken.

- Pike, Oddvar explained. – They break in and steal the eel if they're left too long. That's why Dad's always up so early.

He had also showed me where the big black car had gone into the water. To find it, all I needed to do was to wade in and follow the incline down to the bottom, he suggested.

I tried to remember the PADI acronym for the equipment checking procedure. It didn't matter, I decided. Henry Skailand's equipment was totally different from the simple outfit I'd rented in Mexico ten years earlier. The two fifteen-liter bottles of nitrox were mounted on some sort of a combined backpack and life vest to be filled with air and emptied again as the need arose. One strap on the chest for emptying, another one on the back, plus a device with a button on it on the left side for filling the vest from the bottles. And emptying it. Probably handy once you got the hang of it.

- Better leave it alone, Henry Skailand had told me. – If you need to surface in a hurry, it's better to lose the weights. A lot of people hesitate doing that, especially with borrowed equipment, 'cause it's expensive. But if you need to go up fast, you get rid of the lead, and that's that. It's expendable, like the nitrox you breathe, OK?

Then he showed me how to loosen the belt by pulling at the free end, making the buckle spring open.

- A lot more difficult if you start fiddling with the buckle itself. It's constructed so the belt does *not* fall off very easily. Got it?

Henry Skailand had been focused while demonstrating the equipment, lucid and straightforward as if the alcohol had been temporarily displaced from his blood by his profession. Instead, *I* had been feeling a little dizzy. I should have taken it as a hint that I was already in too deep, developing a premature nitrogen

narcosis. While the former deep-sea diver lectured on the symptoms of decompression sickness and the importance of not surfacing too quickly, I had been trying to find a way out of this absurd situation. All in all I had maybe six dives from a boat, ten years ago, with a guide, in broad daylight, water temperature 25 degrees centigrade. This was pure madness. But I was caught as if by an undertow.

Oddvar Jelinek had not persuaded me to dive. No arguments could have made me go down into the lake. A part of me simply had decided that I needed to go all the way down to the bottom of all this. Literally.

When I finally was ready to edge my way out of the car, Jelinek came around to the back and took the vest with the bottles on his shoulder. I could see that it was heavier than he had expected. Neither of us said anything as we trudged down to the water. It was barely eight to ten degrees, a sheet of clouds hanging so low it was resting on my forehead.

Down at the edge of the water Jelinek hooked the harness with the bottles onto my shoulders, helping me fasten it. My fingers were already thick and stiff as cured sausages, every strap, loop and buckle biting into my skin, gnawing away. But at last I was ready, knife in belt, flippers, diving mask, flashlight and snorkel. I checked everything I could think of, and when I couldn't think of anything more to check, I checked everything once again. Finally I grabbed a coil of rope that I had found in the car, tied one end around my waist and handed the rest of it to Jelinek.

- Two yanks at the rope and you pull me up, OK?

He nodded.

- You look like a pro, he said, encouragingly. – If I'd known it was going to rain like this, I'd have borrowed a suit myself.

I said nothing. Next he'd probably start blabbing about how the water would feel warmer because of the rain.

- One yank and you stop pulling.

- OK.

- Give me fifteen minutes, and then you pull me up, no matter what.

- OK.

The water actually didn't feel too bad. But the bottom really did slope sharply downwards. Three paces and I was in up to the waist. I adjusted the mask, inserted the mouthpiece and

checked that I was able to breathe through it. Then I turned around and let myself slide into the water.

I sank like a rock. Too much lead in the belt. I vaguely remembered Henry Skailand asking my weight, but not what I had answered. I hadn't set foot on a scale in ages. I tried to increase my buoyancy by letting air into the vest, but instead I accidentally let out what little there was. In addition, I was more than busy trying to neutralize the rising pressure inside my head to keep my eardrums from exploding. I pinched my nose, blowing, swallowing and burping, having some success, although my head felt as if it was being cut in two with a jigsaw. Simultaneously, my diving mask started to fill with water.

I pulled on the rope twice. No reaction. I yanked on it once more, harder, and suddenly saw the whole coil of rope coming down towards me. Then I hit something heavy; a hard jolt in the back and one elbow made the torch jump out in front of me, as if it was trying to climb back up. I managed to intercept its slow arc. It felt like saving a penalty kick in the cup final.

Clutching the torch against my chest, I closed my eyes and sank to my knees on the soft, muddy bed. For a few seconds I sat like that, completely motionless, catching my breath, gasping like an untrained marathon runner at the finish. Finally I was able to empty the diving mask of water. It immediately began to fill up again. I checked the depth gauge: 21 meters. Sight: 15 centimeters.

The car seemed to be some sort of pickup, big as a small house, and – beneath a thin layer of rotting humus – black, like Jelinek's father had said. I found a window and pointed the torch inside. Something banged against the glass and disappeared. I gasped and swallowed water through my nose. *Relax, Henriksen, damn it! Fish, ever heard of that? Eel?* I had to cough, and the mouthpiece shot out into the big nothingness. I swallowed a litre of muddy water before I managed to put it back. *Breathe. Empty the mask. Breathe calmly.* I kneeled down again, feeling my way toward the back of the car until I found a bumper. No registration plate. Also, the front had sunk into the mud, and I couldn't find anything to reveal the make of the car, although I was beginning to have my suspicions.

Doors locked, side windows ajar to let the water in and the air out on the way down, the opening not big enough to put an arm inside and open the door. I pointed the flashlight inside again. An eel came shooting out through the opening in the window. I backed away. Cramp nibbling at my thigh and calf.

How long had I been down here? The way I was gulping air, the bottles would be empty before very long.

I forced myself to breathe calmly and swam around to the opposite side of the car. Both doors locked. I pointed the light in through the back window. For a second it looked as if the cone of light touched a human face. It would have to be a fish, of course, another eel. I set the frame of the diving mask firmly against the window and squinted.

There was a person sitting inside. In the back seat on the opposite side, wrapped in plastic and strapped in tight with the safety belt. Around the head the plastic had been eaten away by eel and pike. Most of the face, too; nose, cheeks, lips; teeth bared in an impossibly wide grin.

I felt my forehead going ice cold. I was starting to lose consciousness. I kicked off against the car door to begin the ascent, but ended up on my back in the mud. The torch slipped from my hand and rolled under the car, and suddenly it was completely dark. I fumbled for the belt buckle to release the lead weights, but my numb fingers couldn't have discerned hot soup from a darning needle. Tired to the bone, I bent my knees to try to get up along the steep incline, but my strength was gone. I found the mechanism on the side of the vest, pushed the button and held it in. Roaring like an accelerating fighter plane, the vest filled with compressed air. In the same instant, the lead belt came loose.

They say that with a vest like that, from 20 meters down your velocity may approach 50 kilometers per hour before you break the water surface. Oddvar Jelinek later swore I had a whole meter of air beneath the soles of my feet before I fell back into the water like a sack of potatoes and remained floating, face down.