

IT WAS ASLEEP IN THERE, behind the door.

The inside of the corner cupboard smelt of old wood, powder residue and gun oil. When the sun shone through the window into the room, a strip of light shaped like an hourglass travelled from the keyhole into the cupboard and, if the sun was at precisely the right angle, there would be a matt gleam to the gun lying on the middle of the shelf.

It was a Russian Odessa, a copy of the better-known Stechkin.

The ugly automatic pistol had had a peripatetic existence, travelling with the Cossacks in Lithuania to Siberia, moving between the various Urka headquarters in southern Siberia, becoming the property of an ataman, a Cossack leader, who had been killed, Odessa in hand, by the police, before ending up in the Nizhny Tagil home of an arms-collecting prison director. Finally, the weapon was brought to Norway by Rudolf Asayev, alias Dubai, who, before he disappeared, had monopolised the narcotics market in Oslo with the heroin-like opioid violin. Oslo, the very town where the gun now found itself, in Holmenkollveien, to be precise, in Rakel Fauke's house. The Odessa had a magazine that could hold twenty rounds of Makarov, 9x18mm calibre, and could fire single shots and salvos. There were twelve bullets left in the magazine.

Three of them had been fired at Kosovo Albanians, rival dope pushers. Only one of the bullets had bitten into flesh.

The next two had killed Gusto Hanssen, a young thief and drug dealer who had pocketed Asayev's money and dope.

The gun still smelt of the last three shots, which had hit the head and chest of the ex-police officer Harry Hole during his investigation into the above-mentioned murder of Gusto Hanssen. And the crime scene had been the same: Hausmanns gate 92.

The police still hadn't solved the Hanssen case, and the eighteen-year-old boy who had initially been arrested had been released. Mostly because they hadn't been able to find, or link him to, any murder weapon. The boy's name was Oleg Fauke and he woke every night staring into the darkness and hearing the shots. Not those that had killed Gusto, but the others. The ones he had fired at the policeman who had been a father to him when he was growing up. Who he had once dreamt would marry his mother, Rakel. Harry Hole. Oleg's eyes burned into the night, and he thought of the gun in the distant corner cupboard, hoping that he would never see it again. That no one would see it again. That it would sleep until eternity.

He was asleep in there, behind the door.

The guarded hospital room smelt of medicine and paint. The monitor beside him registered his heartbeats.

Isabelle Skøyen, the Councillor for Social Affairs at Oslo City Hall, and Mikael Bellman, the newly appointed Chief of Police, hoped they would never see him again.

That no one would see him again.

That he would sleep until eternity.

PART ONE



1

IT HAD BEEN A LONG, warm September day. The light transformed Oslo Fjord into molten silver and made the low mountain ridges, which already bore the first tinges of autumn, glow. It was one of those days that make Oslo natives swear they will never, ever move. The sun was sinking behind Ullern Ridge and the last rays swept across the countryside, across the squat, sober blocks of flats, a testimony to Oslo's modest origins, across lavish penthouses with terraces that spoke of the oil adventure that had made the country one of the richest in the world, across the junkies at the top of Stensparken and into the well-organised little town where there were more overdoses than in European cities eight times larger. Across gardens where trampolines were surrounded by netting and no more than three children jumped at a time, as recommended by national guidelines. And across the ridges and the forest circling half of what is known as the Oslo Cauldron. The sun did not want to relinquish the town; it stretched out its fingers, like a prolonged farewell through a train window.

The day had begun with cold, clear air and sharp beams of light, like lamps in an operating theatre. Later the temperature had risen, the sky had gone a deeper blue and the air possessed that pleasant physical feel which made September the most wonderful month in the year. And as

dusk came, tentative and gentle, the air in the residential quarter on the hills towards Lake Maridal smelt of apples and warm spruce trees.

Erlend Vennessla was approaching the top of the final hill. He could feel the lactic acid now but concentrated on getting the correct vertical thrust on the click-in pedals, with his knees pointing slightly inwards. Because it was important to have the right technique. Especially when you were tired and your brain was telling you to change position so that the onus was on less tired, though less effective, muscles. He could feel how the rigid cycle frame absorbed and used every watt he pedalled into it, how he accelerated when he switched down a gear and stood up, trying to keep the same rhythm, about ninety revolutions a minute. He checked his heart rate monitor. One hundred and sixty-eight. He pointed his headlamp at the satnav he had attached to the handlebars. It had a detailed map of Oslo and its surrounds. The bike and the accessories had cost him more than, strictly speaking, a recently retired detective should spend. But it was important to stay in shape now that life offered different challenges.

Fewer challenges, if he was honest.

The lactic acid was burning in his thighs and calves now. Painful but also a wonderful promise of what was to come. An endorphin fest. Tender muscles. Good conscience. A beer with his wife on their balcony if the temperature didn't plummet after sunset.

And suddenly he was up. The road levelled out, and Lake Maridal was in front of him. He slowed down. He was out of the town. It was absurd, in fact, that after fifteen minutes' hard cycling from the centre of a European capital city you were surrounded by farms, fields and dense forest with paths disappearing into the dusk. The sweat was making his scalp itch beneath the charcoal-grey Bell helmet – which alone had cost the same as the bike he had bought as a sixth-birthday present for his granddaughter, Line Marie. But he kept the helmet on. Most deaths among cyclists were caused by head injuries.

He looked at his monitor. A hundred and seventy-five. A hundred and seventy-two. A welcome little gust of wind carried the sound of

distant cheering up from the town. It must have been from Ullevål Stadium – there was an important international match this evening. Slovakia or Slovenia. Erlend Vennessla imagined for a few seconds that they had been applauding for him. It was a while since anyone had done that. The last time would have been the farewell ceremony at Kripos up at Bryn. Layer cake, speech by the boss, Mikael Bellman, who since then had continued his steady rise to take the top police job. And Erlend had received the applause, met their eyes, thanked them and even felt his throat constrict as he was about to deliver his simple, brief speech. Simple, sticking to the facts, as was now the tradition at Kripos. He'd had his ups and downs as a detective, but he had avoided major blunders. At least as far as he knew. Of course you were never a hundred per cent sure you had the right answer. With the rapid advances made in DNA technology and a signal from the upper echelons that they would use it to examine isolated cold cases, there was a risk of precisely that. Answers. New answers. Conclusions. As long as they concentrated on unsolved cases, that was fine, but Erlend didn't understand why they would waste resources on investigations which had long been filed away.

The darkness had deepened and even in the light from the street lamps he almost cycled past the wooden sign pointing into the forest. But there it was. Exactly as he remembered. He turned off and rode on to the soft forest floor. He slowly followed the path without losing his balance. The cone of light from his headlamp shone ahead, and was halted by the thick wall of spruce trees on either side when he turned his head. Shadows flitted in front of him, startled and hurried, changed shape and dived under cover. It was how he had imagined it when he had put himself in her shoes. Running, fleeing with a torch in her hand, after being locked up and raped over three days.

And when Erlend Vennessla saw a light suddenly come on in front of him, for a moment he thought it was her torch, and that she was running again, and he was on the motorbike that had gone after her and caught her up. The light ahead of Erlend flickered before it was

flashed straight at him. He stopped and dismounted. Shone his headlamp on his heart rate monitor. Already below a hundred. Not bad.

He loosened the chin strap, took off his helmet and scratched his scalp. God, that was good. He switched off his headlamp, hung the helmet from the handlebars and pushed the bike towards the light. Felt the helmet banging against the frame.

He stopped by the torchlight. The powerful beam hurt his eyes. And, dazzled, he thought he could hear himself still breathing heavily. It was strange his pulse was so low. He detected a movement, something being lifted behind the large, quivering circle of light, heard a hushed whistle through the air and at that moment a thought struck him. He shouldn't have done that. He shouldn't have removed his helmet. Most deaths among cyclists . . .

It was as if the thought stammered, like a displacement in time, like an image being disconnected for a moment.

Erlend Vennessla stared ahead in astonishment and felt a hot bead of sweat run down his forehead. He spoke, but the words were incoherent, as though there were a fault in the connection between brain and mouth. Again he heard a soft whistle. Then sound went. All sound, he couldn't even hear his own breathing. And he discovered that he was on his knees and his bike was slowly tipping over into a ditch. Before him danced a yellow light, but it disappeared when the bead of sweat reached the ridge of his nose, ran into his eyes and blinded him.

The third blow felt like an icicle being driven into his head, neck and body. Everything froze.

I don't want to die, he thought, trying to raise a defensive arm above his head, but, unable to move a single limb, he knew he had been paralysed.

He didn't register the fourth blow, although from the aroma of wet earth he concluded he was now lying on the ground. He blinked several times and sight returned to one eye. By his face he saw a pair of large, dirty boots in the mud. The heels were raised and then the boots took

off from the ground. They landed. The same was repeated: the heels were raised and the boots took off. As if the assailant were jumping. Jumping to get even more power behind the blows. And the last thought to go through his brain was that he had to remember what her name was, he mustn't forget her name.

2

OFFICER ANTON MITTET TOOK THE half-full plastic cup from the small, red Nespresso D290 machine, bent down and placed it on the floor. There was no furniture to put it on. Then he took out another coffee capsule, automatically checked that the aluminium foil lid wasn't perforated, that it was in fact unused, before inserting it in the coffee machine. Set an empty plastic cup under the spout and pressed one of the illuminated buttons.

He checked his watch while the machine began to sputter and groan. Soon be midnight. Shift change. She was waiting for him at home, but he thought he should teach the new girl the ropes first; after all she was only a police trainee. Silje, was that her name? Anton Mittet stared at the spout. Would he have offered to get coffee if it had been a male colleague? He wasn't sure, and it made no difference anyway, he had given up answering that kind of question. It was suddenly so quiet he could hear the final, almost transparent, drops dripping into the cup. There was no more colour or taste to be had from the capsule, but it was vital to catch every last droplet; it was going to be a long night shift for the young woman. Without any company, without any action, without anything to do, other than to stare at the inside of the Rikshospital's unpainted, bare concrete walls. Then he decided he would have a coffee

with her before leaving. He took both cups with him and returned. His footsteps resounded against the walls. He passed closed, locked doors. Knowing there was nothing or no one behind them, only more bare walls. For once Norway had built for the future with the Rikshospital, realising that Norwegians were becoming more numerous, aged, infirm and needy. They had taken a long-term approach, the way the Germans had with their autobahns and the Swedes with their airports. But had it felt like that for them, the few motorists crossing the German countryside in isolated majesty on the concrete leviathans in the thirties or the Swedish passengers hurrying through the oversized lounges in Arlanda during the sixties? Had they sensed that there were ghosts? That despite it being brand new and unspoilt, and despite no one having died in a car accident or a plane crash yet, there were ghosts. That at any moment car headlamps could pick out a family standing on the kerb, staring blankly into the light, bleeding, ashen, the father impaled, the mother's head the wrong way round, a child with limbs on one side only. That charred bodies could come through the plastic curtain on the baggage carousel in the arrivals hall at Arlanda, still glowing, burning the rubber, silent screams issuing from their open mouths, smoke coiling upwards. None of the doctors had been able to tell him what this wing would be used for eventually; all that was certain was that people would die behind these doors. It was already in the air; invisible bodies with restless souls had already been admitted.

Anton rounded a corner, and another corridor extended before him, sparsely lit, equally bare and so symmetrical that it created a curious *trompe d'oeil*: the uniformed woman sitting on the chair at the far end of the corridor looked like a little picture on a flat wall in front of him.

'I've got a cup of coffee for you,' he said, standing by her. Twenty? Bit more. Maybe twenty-two.

'Thanks, but I brought some with me,' she said, lifting a Thermos from the little rucksack she had placed beside her chair. There was a barely perceptible lilt to her intonation, the residue of a northern dialect perhaps.

‘This is better,’ he said, with his hand still outstretched.

She hesitated. Then took it.

‘And it’s free,’ Anton said, discreetly putting his hand behind his back and rubbing the burnt fingertips on the cold material of his jacket. ‘We’ve got a whole machine all to ourselves in fact. It’s in the corridor down by—’

‘I saw it when I came,’ she said. ‘But the regulations are that we mustn’t at any time move away from the patient’s door, so I brought some coffee from home.’

Anton Mittet took a sip from his cup. ‘Good thinking, but there’s only one corridor leading to this room. We’re on the third floor and all the other doors are locked between here and the coffee machine. It’s impossible to get past us even if we’re helping ourselves to coffee.’

‘That sounds reassuring, but I think I’ll stick to the rules.’ She sent him a fleeting smile. And then, perhaps as a counterbalance to the implicit reproof, she took a sip from the cup.

Anton felt a stab of irritation and was about to say something about the independent thinking that would come with experience, but he hadn’t managed to formulate it before his attention was caught by something further down the corridor. A white figure appeared to be floating towards them. He heard Silje get up. The figure took on firmer features. And became a plump blonde nurse in a loose hospital uniform. He knew she was on the night shift. And that tomorrow night she was free.

‘Evening,’ the nurse said with a mischievous smile, holding up two syringes in one hand, walking towards the door and placing the other on the handle.

‘Just a moment,’ Silje said, stepping up. ‘I’m afraid I have to examine your ID. Also, have you got today’s password?’

The nurse sent Anton a surprised look.

‘Unless my colleague here can vouch for you,’ Silje said.

Anton nodded. ‘Just go in, Mona.’

The nurse opened the door and Anton watched her enter. In the darkened room he could make out the machinery around the bed and

toes sticking out from under the duvet. The patient was so tall they'd had to requisition a longer bed. The door closed.

'Good,' Anton said with a smile to Silje, and could see she didn't like it. Could see she regarded him as a male chauvinist who had just assessed and graded a younger female colleague. But she was a student for Christ's sake, she was supposed to learn from experienced officers during her training year. He stood rocking back on his heels, unsure how to tackle the situation. She spoke up first.

'As I said, I've read the rules and regulations. And I suppose you have a family waiting for you.'

He lifted his coffee to his mouth. What did she know about his civil status? Was she insinuating something, about him and Mona, for example? That he had driven her home a couple of times after her shift and it hadn't stopped there?

'The teddy bear sticker on your bag,' she smiled.

He took a long swig from his cup. And cleared his throat. 'I've got time. As it's your first shift perhaps you ought to use the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. Not everything's in the rules and regulations, you know.' He shifted feet. Hoping she could hear and understand the subtext.

'As you wish,' she said with the irritating self-confidence you have to be under twenty-five to be so presumptuous as to possess. 'The patient in there, who is he?'

'I don't know. That's also in the rules. He's anonymous and has to stay that way.'

'But you know something.'

'Do I?'

'Mona. You can't be on first-name terms with people without having chatted first. What did she tell you?'

Anton Mittet weighed her up. She was attractive, that was true enough, but there was no warmth or charm about her. Bit too slim for his taste. Untidy hair and a top lip that looked as if it was held in place by an over-taut tendon, causing two uneven front teeth to appear. But youth

was on her side. Firm and fit underneath the black uniform, he would bet on it. So if he told her what he knew, would it be because he was subconsciously calculating that his obliging attitude would increase his chances of bedding her by 0.01 per cent? Or because girls like Silje would be inspectors or detectives within five years? They would be his bosses, while he would remain on the beat, an officer on the bottom rung of the ladder, because the Drammen case would always be there, a wall, a stain that could not be removed.

‘Case of attempted murder,’ Anton said. ‘Lost a lot of blood. They reckon he barely had a pulse when he came here. Been in a coma the whole time.’

‘Why the guard?’

Anton shrugged. ‘Potential witness. If he survives.’

‘What does he know?’

‘Drugs stuff. High level. If he wakes up he probably has the goods to bring down some important heroin dealers in Oslo. Plus he can tell us who was trying to kill him.’

‘So they think the murderer will return and finish off the job?’

‘If they find out he’s alive and where he is, yes. That’s why we’re here.’

She nodded. ‘And is he going to survive?’

Anton shook his head. ‘They reckon they can keep him alive for a few more months, but the odds of him pulling out of the coma are slim. Nevertheless . . .’ Anton shifted feet again; her probing stare was becoming uncomfortable. ‘Until then we have to keep an eye on him.’

Anton Mittet left her, feeling crushed, went down the stairs from reception and stepped into the autumn night. It was only when he was sitting in his parked car that he noticed his mobile was ringing.

The call came from the Ops Room.

‘Maridalen, murder,’ 01 said. ‘I know you’ve finished for the day, but they need help to secure the crime scene. And as you’re already in uniform . . .’

‘How long for?’

‘You’ll be relieved after three hours, max.’

Anton was astonished. These days they did whatever they could to prevent people from working overtime. The combination of rigid rules and budgets didn't even allow deviations for reasons of practicality. He had an intuition there was something special about this murder. He hoped it wasn't a child.

'OK,' Anton Mittet said.

'I'll send you the coordinates.' This was new: satnav, a detailed map of Oslo and district and an active transmitter for Ops to track you down. That must have been why they rang him. He was closest.

'OK,' Anton Mittet said. 'Three hours.'

Laura would be in bed, but she liked knowing when he would be home from work, so he texted her before putting the car into gear and heading for Lake Maridal.

Anton didn't need to look at the satnav. At the entrance to Ullevålseterveien there were four patrol cars, and a bit further away orange-and-white tape showed the way.

Anton took the torch from the glove compartment and walked over to the officer outside the cordon. Through the trees he saw lights flashing, but also the forensics team's lamps, which always reminded him of film sets. Not so daft actually; nowadays they didn't just take stills, they used HD video cameras as well, which not only captured the victims but the whole crime scene so that at a later date they could go back, freeze and zoom in on details they hadn't appreciated were relevant at first.

'What's going on?' he asked the officer with crossed arms, who was shivering by the tape.

'Murder.' The officer's voice was thick, his eyes red-rimmed in an unnaturally pale face.

'So I heard. Who's the boss here?'

'Forensics. Lønn.'

Anton heard the buzz of voices from inside the trees. There were lots of them. 'No one from Kripos or Crime Squad yet?'

‘There’ll be even more officers here soon. The body has just been found. Are you taking over from me?’

Even more. And yet they had given him overtime. Anton examined the officer closer. He was wearing a thick coat, but the shivering had got worse. And it wasn’t that cold.

‘Were you the first on the scene?’

The officer nodded without speaking, looked down. Stamped his feet hard on the ground.

Bloody hell, thought Anton. A child. He swallowed.

‘Well, Anton, did o1 send you?’

Anton looked up. He hadn’t heard the two of them coming, although they emerged from dense thickets. He had seen it before, how forensics officers moved at crime scenes, like somewhat ungainly dancers, bending and twisting, positioning their feet, as though they were astronauts on the moon. Or perhaps it was the white overalls drawing that association.

‘Yes, I had to take over from someone,’ Anton said to the woman. He knew who she was, everyone did. Beate Lønn, the head of Krimteknisk, who had a reputation as a kind of Rain Woman because of her ability to recognise faces, which was often employed to identify bank robbers on grainy disjointed CCTV footage. They said she could recognise even well-disguised robbers if they were ex-cons and she had a database of several thousand mugshots stored in her fair-haired little head. So this murder had to be special, otherwise they wouldn’t send out bosses in the middle of the night.

Beside the petite woman’s pale, almost transparent face her colleague’s appeared to be flushed. His freckled cheeks were adorned with two bright red mutton-chop sideburns. His eyes bulged slightly, as though there was too much pressure inside, which lent him a somewhat gawping expression. But what attracted most attention was the hat which appeared when he removed his white hood: a big Rasta hat in Jamaican colours, green, yellow and black.

Beate Lønn patted the shoulder of the trembling officer. ‘Off you go

then, Simon. Don't tell anyone I said this, but I suggest a strong drink and then bed.'

The officer nodded, and three seconds later he was swallowed up by the darkness.

'Is it gruesome?' Anton asked.

'No coffee?' Rasta Hat asked, opening a Thermos. These two words told Anton he wasn't from Oslo. From the provinces, that was clear, but like most Norwegians from Østland Anton had no idea about, and no particular interest in, dialects.

'No,' Anton said.

'It's always a good idea to take your own coffee to a crime scene,' Rasta Hat said. 'You never know how long you'll have to stay.'

'Come on, Bjørn. He's worked on murder investigations before,' said Beate Lønn. 'Drammen, wasn't it?'

'Right,' Anton said, rocking on his heels. *Used to work on murder investigations, more accurately.* And unfortunately he had a suspicion as to why Beate Lønn could remember him. He breathed in. 'Who found the body?'

'He did,' said Beate Lønn, nodding in the direction of the police officer's car. They could hear the engine revving.

'I mean who tipped us off?'

'The wife rang when he didn't come back from a bike ride,' Rasta Hat said. 'Should have been away for an hour, and she was worried about his heart. He was using his satnav, which has a transmitter, so they found him quickly.'

Anton nodded slowly, picturing it all. Two policemen ringing the doorbell, a man and a woman. The officers coughing, looking at the wife with that grave expression which is meant to tell her what they will soon repeat in words, impossible words. The wife's face, resistant, not wanting to hear, but then it seems to turn inside out, shows her inner emotions, shows everything.

The image of Laura, his wife, appeared.

An ambulance drew up, without a siren or a blue light.

It slowly dawned on Anton. The fast reaction to a missing-person message. The rapidly traced satnav signal. The big turnout. Overtime. The colleague who was so shaken he had to be sent home.

‘It’s a policeman,’ he whispered.

‘I’d guess the temperature here is one and a half degrees lower than in town,’ Beate Lønn said, pulling up a number on her mobile phone.

‘Agreed,’ Rasta Hat said, swigging a mouthful from the Thermos cup. ‘No skin discoloration yet. So somewhere between eight and ten?’

‘A policeman,’ Anton repeated. ‘That’s why they’re all here, isn’t it?’

‘Katrine?’ Beate said. ‘Can you check something for me? It’s about the Sandra Tveten case. Right.’

‘Goddamn!’ Rasta Hat exclaimed. ‘I asked them to wait until the body bags had come.’

Anton turned and saw two men struggling through the forest with a stretcher between them. A pair of cycling shoes poked out from under the blanket.

‘He knew him,’ Anton said. ‘That was why he was shaking like that, wasn’t it?’

‘He said they worked together in Økern before Vennesla started in Kripos,’ Rasta Hat said.

‘Have you got the date to hand?’ Lønn said on the phone.

There was a scream.

‘What the . . .?’ Rasta Hat said.

Anton turned. One of the stretcher-bearers had slipped into the ditch beside the path. The beam from his torch swept over the stretcher. Over the blanket that had fallen off. Over . . . over what? Anton stared. Was that a head? The thing on top of what was indubitably the human body, had it really been a head? In the years Anton had worked at Crime Squad, before the Great Mistake, he had seen a great many bodies, but nothing like this. The hourglass-shaped substance reminded Anton of the family’s Sunday breakfast, of Laura’s lightly boiled egg with the remains of the shell still hanging from it, cracked with the yellow yolk

running out and drying on the outside of the stiff but still soft egg white. Could that really be a . . . *head*?

Anton stood blinking in the darkness as he watched the rear lights of the ambulance disappearing. And he realised that these were replays, he had seen all this before. The white figures, the Thermos, the feet protruding from under the blanket, he had just seen this at the Rikshospital. As though they all had been portents. The head . . .

‘Thanks, Katrine,’ Beate said.

‘What was that about?’ Rasta Hat asked.

‘I worked with Erlend on this very spot,’ Beate said.

‘Here?’ Rasta Hat queried.

‘Right here. He was in charge of the investigation. Must have been ten years ago. Sandra Tveten. Raped and killed. Just a child.’

Anton swallowed. Child. Replays.

‘I remember that case,’ Rasta Hat said. ‘Fate’s a funny thing, dying at your own crime scene. Imagine. Wasn’t the Sandra Tveten case also in the autumn?’

Beate nodded slowly.

Anton blinked, and kept blinking. He *had* seen a body like it.

‘Goddamn!’ Rasta Hat cursed under his breath. ‘You don’t mean to say that . . .?’

Beate Lønn took the cup of coffee from him. Took a sip. Passed it back. Nodded.

‘Oh shit,’ Rasta Hat said under his breath.

3

‘DÉJÀ VU,’ STÅLE AUNE SAID, looking at the packed snowdrift across Sporveisgata where the December-morning gloom was receding to allow a short day. Then he turned back to the man in the chair on the opposite side of the desk. ‘Déjà vu is the feeling we’ve seen something before. We don’t know what it is.’

By ‘we’ he meant psychologists in general, not only therapists.

‘Some psychologists believe that when we’re tired, information sent to the conscious part of the brain is delayed, so that when it surfaces it’s already been in the subconscious for a while. And that’s why we experience it as recognition. The tiredness explains why déjà vu usually occurs at the end of a working week. But that’s about all research has to contribute. Friday is déjà vu day.’

Ståle Aune had perhaps been hoping for a smile. Not because smiling meant anything at all in his professional efforts to get people to repair themselves, but because the room required it.

‘I don’t mean déjà vu in that sense,’ the patient said. The client. The customer. The person who in roughly twenty minutes would be paying in reception and helping to cover the overheads of the five psychologists who each had their own practice in the featureless, yet old-fashioned four-storey building in Sporveisgata which ran through Oslo’s medium-elegant

West End district. Ståle Aune sneaked a glimpse of the clock on the wall behind the man's head. Eighteen minutes.

'It's more like a dream I have again and again.'

'Like a dream?' Ståle Aune's eyes scanned the newspaper he had lying open in a desk drawer so that it couldn't be seen by the patient. Most therapists nowadays sat on a chair opposite the patient, and when the massive desk had been manoeuvred into Ståle's office, grinning colleagues had confronted him with the modern therapy theory that it was best to have as few barriers as possible between themselves and the patient. Ståle's retort had been swift: 'Best for the patient maybe.'

'It's a dream. I dream.'

'It's common,' Aune said, passing his hand over his mouth to conceal a yawn. He reflected longingly on the dear old sofa that had been carried out of his office and now stood in the reception area, where with the weight racks alongside and a barbell above, it functioned as a psychotherapist's in-joke. Patients on the sofa had made the uninhibited reading of newspapers even easier.

'But it's a dream I don't want.' Thin, self-conscious smile. Thin, well-groomed hair.

Enter the dream exorcist, Aune thought, trying to respond with an equally thin smile. The patient was wearing a pinstriped suit, a red-and-grey tie, and black, polished shoes. Aune had a tweed jacket on, a cheery bow tie under his double chins and brown shoes that hadn't seen a brush for quite a while. 'Perhaps you might tell me what the dream was about?'

'That's what I've just done.'

'Exactly. But perhaps you could give me some more detail?'

'It starts, as I said, where *Dark Side of the Moon* finishes. "Eclipse" fades out with David Gilmour singing about everything being in tune . . .'

'And this is what you dream?'

'No! Yes. I mean, the record stops like that in reality too. Optimistic. After three-quarters of an hour about death and madness. So you think

everything will end well. Everything is back in harmony. But then as the album fades out, you can just hear a voice in the background mumbling something about it all being dark. Do you understand?’

‘No,’ Aune said. According to the manual he should have asked ‘Is it important for you that I understand?’ or something like that. But he couldn’t be bothered.

‘Evil doesn’t exist because everything is evil. Cosmic space is dark. We are born evil. Evil is the starting point, natural. Then, sometimes, there is a speck of light. But it is only temporary, because we have to go back to the darkness. And that’s what happens in the dream.’

‘Continue,’ Aune said, swinging round on the chair and gazing out of the window with a pensive air. The air was to hide the fact that he only wanted to gaze upon something that was not the man’s facial expression, which was a combination of self-pity and self-satisfaction. He obviously considered himself unique, a case a psychologist could really get his teeth into. The man had undoubtedly been in therapy before. Aune watched a car-park attendant with bow legs swaggering down the street like a sheriff and wondered what other professions he might be cut out for. And drew a speedy conclusion. None. Besides, he loved psychology, loved navigating the area between what we knew and what we didn’t, combining his heavy ballast of factual knowledge with intuition and curiosity. At least, that was what he told himself every morning. So why was he sitting here wishing this individual would shut his mouth and get out of his office, out of his life? Was it the person or his job as a therapist? It was Ingrid’s undisguised, clear ultimatum that he should work less and be more present for her and for their daughter Aurora which had enforced the changes. He had dropped the time-consuming research, the consultancy work for Crime Squad and the lectures at PHS, the police training college. He had become a full-time therapist with fixed working hours. The new priorities had seemed like a great decision. For of the things he gave up what did he actually miss? Did he miss profiling sick souls who killed people with such gruesome acts of brutality that he was deprived of sleep at night? Only

to be woken up by Inspector Harry Hole demanding quick answers to impossible questions if he did finally fall asleep? Did he miss Hole turning him into the inspector's image, a starved, exhausted, mono-maniacal hunter? Snapping at everyone who disturbed his work on the one thing he thought had any significance, slowly but surely alienating colleagues, family and friends?

Did he hell. He missed the *importance* of it.

He missed the feeling that he was saving lives. Not the life of a rationally thinking suicidal soul who could on occasion make him ask the question: if life is such a painful experience and we can't change that, why can't this person just be allowed to die? He missed being active, being the one to intervene, the one to save the innocent party from the guilty, doing what no one else could do because he – Ståle Aune – was the best. It was as simple as that. Yes, he missed Harry Hole. He missed having the tall, grumpy alcoholic with the big heart on the phone asking – or to be more precise commanding – Ståle Aune to do his social duty, demanding him to sacrifice his family life and sleep to catch one of society's poor wretches. But there was no longer an inspector at Crime Squad by the name of Harry Hole, and no one else had rung him either. His eye ran over the pages of the newspaper again. There had been a press conference. It was almost three months since the murder of the police officer in Maridalen, and the police still didn't have a lead or any suspects. This was the kind of problem they would have rung him about in times gone by. The murder had occurred at the same scene and on the same date as an old, unsolved investigation. The victim was a policeman who had worked on the original case.

But that was then. Now the problem was the sleeplessness of an overworked businessman he didn't like. Soon Aune would begin to ask questions that would presumably eliminate post-traumatic stress disorders. The man in front of him wasn't incapacitated by his nightmares; he was only concerned about getting his productivity back to its previous heights. Aune would then give him a copy of the article 'Imagery Rehearsal Therapy' by Krakow and . . . he couldn't remember the other

names. Ask him to write down his nightmares and bring it along for next time. Then, together, they would create an alternative, a happy ending to the nightmare, which they would rehearse mentally so that the dream either became easier to cope with or just disappeared.

Aune heard the regular, soporific drone of the patient's voice and reflected that the Maridalen murder had been in a rut from day one. Even when the striking similarities with the Sandra Tveten case – the date, the place – and the connection between the victims had come out, neither Kripos nor Crime Squad had managed to make any headway. And now they were urging people to rack their brains and come forward, however seemingly irrelevant their information might be. That was what the previous day's press conference had been about. Aune suspected it was the police playing to the gallery, showing they were doing something, that they weren't paralysed. Even though that was exactly what they were: helpless senior management under attack, desperately turning to the public and asking 'let's see if you can do any better'.

He looked at the picture of the press conference. He recognised Beate Lønn. Gunnar Hagen, head of Crime Squad, resembling a monk more and more with the rich abundance of hair like a laurel wreath around his blank, shiny pate. Even Mikael Bellman, the new Chief of Police, had been there; after all, it had been the murder of one of their own. Taut-faced. Thinner than Aune remembered him. The media-friendly curls that had been on the verge of being too long had obviously been shed somewhere along the line between being the head of Kripos and Orgkrim and the sheriff's office. Aune thought about Bellman's almost girlish good looks, emphasised by the long eyelashes and the tanned skin with its characteristic, white patches. None of which were visible in the photo. The unsolved murder of an officer was of course the worst possible start for a Chief of Police who had based his meteoric rise on success. He had cleared up the drug wars in Oslo, but that would be forgotten quickly. It was true the retired Erlend Vennesla hadn't been killed on active service in a formal sense, but most people knew that in some way or other it was tied up with the Sandra Tveten case. So Bellman

had mobilised every available officer and all the external manpower there was. Except him, Ståle Aune. He had been crossed off their lists. Naturally enough – he himself had asked them to.

And now winter had arrived early and with it a sense that snow was settling on the tracks. Cold tracks. No tracks. That was what Beate Lønn had said at the conference, an almost conspicuous lack of forensic evidence. It went without saying that they had checked the evidence in the Sandra Tveten investigation. Suspects, relatives, friends, even colleagues of Vennesla who had worked on the case. All without success.

The room had gone quiet, and Ståle Aune saw from the patient's expression that he had just asked a question and was waiting for the psychologist's answer.

'Hm,' Aune said, resting his chin on his clenched fist and meeting the other man's gaze. 'What do *you* think about it?'

There was bewilderment in the man's eyes and for a moment Aune feared he had asked for a glass of water or something like that.

'What do I think about her smiling? Or the beam of light?'

'Both.'

'Sometimes I think she's smiling because she likes me. Then I think she's smiling because she wants me to do something. But when she stops smiling the beam of light in her eyes dies and it's too late to find out, she won't talk to me any more. So I think perhaps it's the amp. Or something.'

'Erm . . . the amp?'

'Yes.' Pause. 'The one I told you about. The one Dad used to switch off when he came into my room, when he said I'd been playing that record so long it was bordering on insanity. And then I said you could see the little red light beside the off switch fade and disappear. Like an eye. Or a sunset. And then I thought I was losing her. That's why she says nothing at the end of the dream. She's the amp that goes quiet when Dad switches it off. And then I can't talk to her.'

'Did you play records and think about her?'

'Yes. All the time. Until I was sixteen. And not records. The record.'

'Dark Side of the Moon?'

'Yes.'

'But she didn't want you?'

'I don't know. Probably not. Not then.'

'Hm. Our time's up. I'll give you something to read for next time. And then I want us to make a new ending for the story in the dream. She has to speak. She has to say something to you. Something you wished she would say. That she likes you perhaps. Can you give that a bit of thought for next time?'

'Fine.'

The patient stood up, took his coat from the stand and walked towards the door. Aune sat at his desk and looked at the calendar shining at him from the computer screen. It already looked depressingly full. And he realised it had happened again: he had completely forgotten the name of the patient. He found it on the calendar. Paul Stavnes.

'Same time next week OK, Paul?'

'Yes.'

Ståle entered it. When he looked up, Stavnes had already gone.

He got up, grabbed the newspaper and went to the window. Where the hell was the global warming they had been promised? He looked at the newspaper, but suddenly couldn't be bothered, threw it down, weeks and months of grinding his way through the papers were enough. Beaten to death. Terrible force. Fatal blows to the head. Erlend Vennesla leaves behind a wife, children and grandchildren. Friends and colleagues in shock. 'A warm, kind person.' 'Impossible to dislike.' 'Good-natured, honest and tolerant, absolutely no enemies.' Ståle Aune took a deep breath.

He gazed at the phone. They had his number. But the phone was mute. Just like the girl in the dream.

4

THE HEAD OF CRIME SQUAD, Gunnar Hagen, ran his hand across his forehead and then further up, through the entrance to the lagoon. The sweat collecting on his palm was caught by the thick atoll of hair at the back of his head. In front of him sat the investigative team. For a standard murder there would typically be twelve officers. But the murder of a colleague was not typical and K2 was full, down to the last chair, just shy of fifty people. Including those on the sick list, the group consisted of fifty-three members. And soon more of them would be on the sick list, as they felt the full force of the media. The best that could be said about this case was that it had brought the two big murder investigation units in Norway – Crime Squad and Kripos – closer together. All the rivalry had been cast aside, and for once they were collaborating with no other agenda than to find the person who had killed their colleague. In the first weeks with an intensity and passion that convinced Hagen the case would soon be solved, despite the lack of forensic evidence, witnesses, possible motives, possible suspects and possible or impossible leads. Simply because the collective will was so formidable, the net spread was so tight, the resources they had at their disposal boundless. And yet.

The tired, grey faces stared at him with an apathy that had become

more and more visible over the last few weeks. And yesterday's press conference – which had been like an ugly capitulation, his plea for help, wherever it might come from – had not raised fighting spirits. Today there were two further absentees, and they weren't exactly throwing in the towel over a sniffly nose. In addition to the Vennessla case there was the Gusto Hanssen murder which had gone from solved to unsolved after Oleg Fauke had been released and Chris 'Adidas' Reddy had withdrawn his confession. Ah, there was one positive side to the Vennessla case: the murder of the policeman overshadowed that of the young beautiful drug dealer called Gusto Hanssen so completely that the press hadn't written a word about the resumption of this investigation.

Hagen glanced down at the sheet of paper on the lectern. There were two lines. That was all. Two lines for a morning meeting.

Gunnar Hagen cleared his throat. 'Morning, folks. As most of you are aware, we have received some calls after yesterday's conference. Eighty-nine in all, of which several are being followed up now.'

He didn't need to say what everyone knew, that after close on three months they were now scraping the bottom; ninety-five per cent of all calls were a waste of time: the usual nutters who always rang in, drunks, people wanting to cast suspicion on someone who had run off with their other half, a neighbour shirking their cleaning duties, practical jokes or just people who wanted some attention, someone to talk to. By 'several' he meant four. Four tip-offs. And when he said they were being 'followed up' it was a lie, they had finished following them up. And they had led where they were now: nowhere.

'We've got an illustrious visitor today,' Hagen said, and immediately heard that this could be construed as sarcasm. 'The Chief of Police would like to join us and say a few words. Mikael . . .'

Hagen closed his folder, raised it and placed it on the table as though it contained a pile of new, interesting documents instead of the one sheet of paper, hoping he had smoothed over the 'illustrious' by using Bellman's Christian name and nodding to the man standing by the door at the back of the room.

The young Chief of Police was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, waiting for the brief moment when everyone turned round to look at him, then in one sleek, powerful movement he pulled himself away from the wall and strode to the rostrum. He was half smiling as though he was thinking about something amusing, and when he turned to the lectern with a casual swing of his heel, rested his forearms on it, leaned forward and looked straight at them as if to emphasise that he had no typed speech ready, it struck Hagen that Bellman had better deliver now what his entrance promised.

‘Some of you may know that I’m a climber,’ Mikael said. ‘And when I wake up in the morning on days like today, look out of the window and there’s zero visibility and more snow and gusting winds are forecast, I think about a mountain I once had plans to conquer.’

Bellman paused, and Hagen could see the unexpected introduction was working; Bellman had caught their attention. For the moment. But Hagen knew that the overworked unit’s bullshit tolerance was at an all-time low, and they wouldn’t go out of their way to hide it. Bellman was too young, had taken up his post too recently and had arrived there with too much haste for them to allow him to test their patience.

‘Coincidentally, the mountain has the same name as this room. Which is the same name some of you have given the Vennesla case. K2. It’s a good name. The world’s second-highest mountain. The Savage Mountain. The hardest mountain in the world to conquer. One in four climbers dies. We’d planned to tackle the southern ascent, also known as the Magic Line. It’s only been done twice before and is considered by many to be ritual suicide. A slight change in weather and wind, and you and the mountain are enveloped in snow and temperatures none of us is made to survive, not with less oxygen per cubic metre than you have underwater. And, as this is the Himalayas, everyone knows there *will* be a change in the weather and wind.’

Pause.

‘So why should I climb this mountain of all mountains?’

Another pause. Longer, as though waiting for someone to answer.

Still with the half-smile. The pause dragged on. Too long, Hagen thought. The police are not fans of theatrical effects.

‘Because . . .’ Bellman tapped a forefinger on the table beneath the lectern. ‘. . . *because* it’s the hardest in the world. Physically and mentally. There’s not a moment’s pleasure in the ascent, only anxiety, toil, fear, acrophobia, lack of oxygen, degrees of dangerous panic and even more dangerous apathy. And when you’re on top, it’s not about relishing the moment of triumph, just creating evidence that you have actually been there, a photo or two, not deluding yourself into thinking the worst is over, not letting yourself slip into an agreeable doze, but keeping your concentration, doing the chores, systematically like a robot, while continuing to monitor the situation. Monitoring the situation *all* the time. What’s the weather doing? What signals are you getting from your body? Where are we? How long have we been here? How are the others in the team coping?’

He took a step back from the lectern.

‘K2 is an uphill climb in all senses. Even when going downhill. And that was *why* we wanted to have a go.’

The room was silent. Utterly silent. No demonstrative yawning or shuffling of feet under chairs. My God, Hagen thought, he’s got them.

‘Two words,’ Bellman said. ‘Stamina and solidarity. I had considered including ambition, but the word isn’t important enough, not big enough in comparison with the other two. So you may ask what’s the point of stamina and solidarity if there’s no goal, no ambition. Fighting for fighting’s sake? Honour without reward? Yes, I say, fighting for fighting’s sake. Honour without reward. When the Vennesla case is still being talked about years from now it’s because it was an uphill climb. Because it looked impossible. The mountain was too high, the weather too treacherous, the air too thin. Everything went wrong. And it’s the story of the uphill climb which will turn the case into mythology, which will make it one of the tales around the campfire that will survive. Just as most climbers in the world have never got as far as the foothills of K2, you can work all your life without ever being on a case like this one. If this

case had been cracked in the first weeks it would soon have been forgotten. For what is it that all legendary criminal cases in history have in common?’

Bellman waited. Nodded as if they had given him the answer.

‘They took *time*. They were *an uphill climb*.’

A voice beside Hagen whispered: ‘Churchill, eat your heart out.’

He turned and saw Beate Lønn standing beside him with a mischievous smile on her face.

He nodded and watched the assembled officers. Old tricks maybe, but they still worked. Where, a few minutes ago, he had seen only a dead, blackened fire, Bellman had managed to blow life into the embers. But Hagen knew it wouldn’t burn for long if results were not forthcoming.

Three minutes later Bellman had finished the pep talk and left the podium with a broad grin and to great applause. Hagen clapped along dutifully, dreading his return to the lectern. For the certain showstopper, telling them the unit would be cut to thirty-five. Bellman’s orders, but which they had agreed he would not have to pass on. Hagen stepped forward, put down his folder, coughed, pretended to flick through it. Looked up. Coughed again and said with a wry smile: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building.’

Silence, no laughter.

‘Well, we have a few matters to deal with. Some of you are going to be transferred to other duties.’

Stone dead. Fire extinguished.

As Mikael Bellman left the lift in the atrium at Police HQ he caught a glimpse of a figure disappearing into the adjacent lift. Was it Truls? Hardly likely, he was still suspended after the Asayev business. Bellman walked out of the building and struggled through the snow to the waiting car. When he took over the Chief of Police post he had been told that in theory he had the services of a chauffeur, but his three predecessors had all refrained from using them because they thought it would send

the wrong signals, as they were the ones who had to deliver all the cuts in other areas. Bellman had reversed this practice and said in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't let that kind of social-democratic pettiness threaten his productivity, and it was more important to signal to those further down the food chain that hard work and promotion brought certain benefits. The head of PR had subsequently taken him aside and suggested that if the press were to ask him he should limit his answer to productivity and lose the bit about benefits.

'City Hall,' Bellman said as he settled in the back seat.

The car glided away from the kerb, rounded Grønland Church and headed towards the Plaza Hotel and the Post Office building, which despite the excavations around the Opera House still dominated Oslo's small skyline. But today there was no skyline, only snow, and Bellman thought three mutually independent thoughts. Bloody December. Bloody Vennesla case. And bloody Truls Berntsen.

Mikael had neither seen nor spoken to Truls since he had been forced to suspend his childhood friend and subordinate last October. Although he thought he'd glimpsed him outside the Grand Hotel last week in a parked car. It was the large injections of cash into Truls's account that had led to his suspension. As he couldn't – or didn't want to – explain them, Mikael, as his boss, had had no choice. Of course Mikael knew where the money had come from: burner jobs – sabotaging evidence – which Truls had done for Rudolf Asayev's drug cartel. Money the idiot had put straight into his account. The sole consolation was that neither the money nor Truls could point a finger at Mikael. There were only two people in the world who could expose Mikael's cooperation with Asayev. One was the Councillor for Social Affairs and she was an accomplice, and the other lay in a coma in a closed wing of the Rikshospital.

They drove through Kvadraturen. Bellman stared with fascination at the contrast between the prostitutes' black skin and the white snow in their hair and on their shoulders. He also saw that new layers of dope dealers had moved into the vacuum left by Asayev.

Truls Berntsen. He had followed Mikael through his childhood in Manglerud the way sucker fish follow sharks. Mikael with the brain, the leadership qualities, the eloquence, the appearance. Truls 'Beavis' Berntsen with the fearlessness, the fists and the almost childlike loyalty. Mikael, who made friends wherever he turned. Truls, who was so difficult to like that everyone actively avoided him. Yet it was precisely these two who hung out together, Bellman and Berntsen. Their names were called out one after the other in class and later at Police College, Bellman first, Berntsen tagging along afterwards. Mikael had got together with Ulla, but Truls was still there, two steps behind. As the years passed Truls had lagged further behind; he had none of Mikael's natural buoyancy in his private life and career. As a rule Truls was an easy man to lead and to predict – when Mikael said jump, he jumped. But he could also get that blackness in his eyes, and then he seemed to become someone Mikael didn't know. Like the time with the young guy they arrested, whom Truls blinded with his truncheon. Or the guy at Kripos who tried it on with Mikael. Colleagues had seen, so Mikael had to do something to avoid the impression he would let such matters go. He had tricked the guy into meeting in the Kripos boiler room, and there Truls had attacked the man with his baton. First of all, in a controlled way, then more and more savagely as the blackness in his eyes seemed to spread, until he appeared to be possessed, his eyes wide and dark, and Mikael had to stop him so that he didn't kill the guy. Yes, Truls was loyal, but he was also a loose cannon, and that in particular worried Mikael Bellman. When Mikael had told him the Appointments Board had decided he was suspended until they were satisfied they knew where the money in Truls's account came from, Truls had just shrugged as though it was of no significance and left. As if Truls 'Beavis' Berntsen had anything to go to, a life outside work. And Mikael had seen the blackness in his eyes. It had been like lighting a fuse, watching it burn in a mine gallery and then nothing happens. But you don't know if the fuse is just long or if it has gone out, so you wait, on tenterhooks, because something tells you the longer it takes, the worse the explosion is going to be.

The car parked behind City Hall. Mikael got out and walked up the steps to the entrance. Some claimed this was the real main entrance, the way the architects Arneberg and Poulsson had designed it in the 1920s, and that the drawing had been turned round by mistake. And when the error was discovered in the late 1940s the building was so far along that they hushed the matter up and went on as if nothing was wrong, hoping that people sailing up Oslo Fjord to Norway's capital city wouldn't realise the sight that met them was the kitchen entrance.

Mikael Bellman's Italian leather soles gently caressed the stone floor as he marched over to reception, where the woman behind the counter flashed him a dazzling smile.

'Good morning, sir. You are expected. Ninth floor, end of the corridor on the left.' Bellman studied himself in the lift mirror on his way up. And reflected that was exactly what he was: on his way up. Despite this murder case. He straightened the silk tie Ulla had bought him in Barcelona. Double Windsor knot. He had taught Truls how to tie a knot at school. But only the thin, easy one. The door at the end of the corridor was ajar. Mikael pushed it open.

The office was bare. The desk cleared, the shelves empty and the wallpaper had light patches where pictures had hung. She was sitting on a windowsill. Her face had the conventional good looks that women often call 'nice', but it had no sweetness or charm despite the blonde doll's hair arranged in comic ringlets. She was tall and athletic with broad shoulders and broad hips which had been negotiated into a tight leather skirt for the occasion. Her thighs were crossed. The masculinity in her face – emphasised by an aquiline nose and a pair of cold, blue lupine eyes – combined with a self-confident, provocative, playful gaze had caused Bellman to make a couple of quick assumptions the first time he saw her. Isabelle Skøyen was an initiative-taker and a risk-loving cougar.

'Lock,' she said.

He hadn't been mistaken.

Mikael closed the door behind him and turned the key. Walked over to

one of the other windows. City Hall towered above Oslo's modest development of four- and five-storey buildings. Overlooking Rådhusplassen, the City Hall square, was the 700-year-old Akershus Fortress, on high ramparts with ancient, war-damaged cannons pointing at the fjord, which seemed to have goose pimples as it trembled in the freezing gusts of wind. It had stopped snowing, and under the leaden grey sky the town was bathed in a bluish-white light. Like the colour of a dead body, Bellman thought. Isabelle's voice echoed off the bare walls. 'Well, my dear, what do you think of the view?'

'Impressive. If I remember rightly the previous councillor had an office that was both smaller and lower down.'

'Not that view,' she said. 'This one.'

He turned to her. Oslo's latest Councillor for Social Affairs had spread her legs. Her panties were on the windowsill beside her. Isabelle had repeatedly said she didn't understand the attractions of a shaven pussy, but Mikael reckoned there had to be a halfway house as he stared into the thick bush and mumbled a repeat of his comment about the view. Truly impressive.

Her heels hit the parquet floor hard and she walked over to him. Brushed an invisible speck of dust off his lapel. Even without stilettos she would have been a centimetre taller than him, but now she towered over him. He didn't find this intimidating. On the contrary, her physical size and domineering personality were an interesting challenge. It required more of him as a man than Ulla's slender figure and gentle compliance. 'I think it's only right and proper that you're the person to inaugurate my office. Without your . . . willing cooperation I wouldn't have got this job.'

'Ditto,' Mikael Bellman said. He breathed in the fragrance of her perfume. It was familiar. It was . . . Ulla's. The Tom Ford perfume – what was it called? Black Orchid. Which he'd bought for her when he was in Paris or London because it was impossible to get hold of in Norway. The coincidence seemed highly improbable.

He saw the laughter in her eyes as she saw the astonishment in his.

She interlaced her fingers behind his neck and leaned back laughing. ‘Sorry, I couldn’t stop myself.’

What the hell. After the house-warming Ulla had complained that the bottle of perfume had disappeared and that one of the celeb guests he’d invited must have stolen it. He’d been pretty sure it had been one of the local Mangleruders, namely Truls Berntsen. He wasn’t exactly unaware that Truls had been head over heels in love with Ulla ever since their boyhood days. Which of course he had never mentioned to her or Truls. Nor the business with the bottle of perfume. After all, it was better that Truls pinched Ulla’s perfume than her panties.

‘Have you ever wondered if that might be your problem?’ Mikael said. ‘Stopping yourself?’

She laughed softly. Closed her eyes. Her long, broad fingers opened behind his neck, moved down his back and stole inside his belt. She looked at him with mild disappointment in her gaze.

‘What’s up, my stallion?’

‘The doctors say he’s not going to die,’ Mikael said. ‘And recently he’s been showing signs of coming out of the coma.’

‘In what way? Is he moving?’

‘No, but they can see changes in his EEG, so they’ve started doing neurophysiological examinations.’

‘So what?’ Her lips were close to his. ‘Are you frightened of him?’

‘I’m not frightened of *him* but of what he could say. About us.’

‘Why would he do anything so stupid? He’s alone and he has nothing to gain by it.’

‘Let me put it this way, my love,’ Mikael said, shoving her hand away. ‘The thought that there’s someone out there who can testify that you and I have been working with a dope dealer to further our careers—’

‘Listen,’ Isabelle said. ‘All we did was make a careful intervention to prevent market forces ruling. It’s good, tried and tested Socialist Party politics, my dear. We let Asayev have a monopoly on dope, and we arrested all the other drug barons because Asayev’s goods caused fewer ODs. Anything else would have been an unsatisfactory drugs policy.’

That made Mikael smile. 'I can hear you've been honing your rhetoric on the debating course.'

'Shall we change the topic, darling?' She slipped her hand around his tie.

'You know how it will be interpreted in a court of law, don't you? I got the Chief of Police number and you the Councillor job because it looked as if we'd personally cleaned up Oslo's streets and brought down the death rate. While in reality we let Asayev destroy the evidence, remove his rivals and sell a type of drug that was four times as potent and addictive as heroin.'

'Mmm, you make me so hot when you talk like that . . .' She pulled him close. Her tongue was in his mouth, and he could hear the crackle of her stockings as she rubbed her thigh against his. She towed him after her as she backed unsteadily to the desk.

'If he wakes up in the hospital and starts blabbing—'

'Stop it. I didn't get you here for a chit-chat.' Her fingers were working on his belt.

'We've got a problem we have to solve, Isabelle.'

'I know, but now you're Chief of Police you're in the prioritisation business, my love. And right now your City Hall prioritises *this*.'

Mikael parried her hand.

She sighed. 'Fine. Let me hear. What have you got planned?'

'He has to feel threatened. In a credible way.'

'Why *threaten* him? Why not just kill him now?'

Mikael laughed. Right up to the moment he realised she was serious.

'Because . . .' Mikael held her eyes, his voice firm. Trying to be the same masterful Mikael Bellman who, half an hour ago, had stood in front of the assembled detectives. Trying to come up with an answer. But she was quicker on her feet.

'Because you don't dare. Shall we see if we can find someone under "Active Euthanasia" in the Yellow Pages? You remove the police guard, misuse of resources blah blah blah, and afterwards the patient receives an unexpected visit from the Yellow Pages. Unexpected as far as he's

concerned, that is. Or, no, as a matter of fact, you could send your shadow. Beavis. Truls Berntsen. He'll do anything for money, won't he?'

Mikael shook his head in disbelief. 'First of all, it was the head of Crime Squad, Gunnar Hagen, who ordered the twenty-four-hour police supervision. If the patient was killed after I'd overruled Hagen, that would make me look bad, if I can put it like that. Secondly, we're not going to murder anyone.'

'Listen, darling, no politician is better than her adviser. That's why the basic premise for getting to the top is you always surround yourself with people who are smarter than you are. And I'm beginning to doubt that you're smarter than me, Mikael. First off, you can't even catch this police killer. And now you don't know how to solve a simple problem of a man in a coma. So when you don't want to fuck me either, I have to ask myself: "What am I going to do with him?" Answer me that, please.'

'Isabelle . . .'

'I'll take that as a no. So, listen to me. This is how we're going to play it . . .'

He had to admire her. Her controlled, cool professionalism, yet her risk-embracing unpredictability, which made her colleagues sit a little further back on their chairs. Some saw her as a ticking bomb, but they hadn't realised that creating uncertainty was a feature of Isabelle Skøyen's game. She was the type to soar further and higher than anyone else, and in a shorter time. And – if she fell – to plummet to a nasty end. It wasn't that Mikael Bellman didn't recognise himself in Isabelle Skøyen, he did, but she was an extreme version of himself. And the strange thing was that instead of dragging him along, she made him more cautious.

'The patient hasn't come out of the coma yet, so for the time being we do nothing,' Isabelle said. 'I know an anaesthetist from Enebakk. Very shady type. He supplies me with pills that as a politician I can't get on the street. He – like Beavis – does most things for money. And anything at all for sex. Apropos of which . . .'

She had perched herself on the edge of the table, raised and spread

her legs and unbuttoned his flies in one go. Mikael grabbed her wrists. 'Let's wait until Wednesday at the Grand.'

'Let's *not* wait until Wednesday at the Grand.'

'Well, actually, I vote that we do.'

'Oh yes?' she said, freeing her hands and opening his trousers. She looked down. Her voice was throaty. 'The noes have it by one, darling.'