



Beyond the Truth: Hanne Wilhelmsen Book Seven (A Hanne Wilhelmsen Novel)

By Anne Holt

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Editorial Review

Review

"When you think of Scandinavian noir, names like Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, and Camilla Lackberg probably come to mind, not Anne Holt. That may be about to change....Holt consistently delivers in her series. And *Beyond the Truth*, the seventh novel to star brilliantly but emotionally damaged Oslo detective Hanne Wilhelmsen, is her best yet.... This is a character who's going to get in your head—and stay there."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Realistically flawed characters, nuanced relationships, and thematically resonant subplots complement the central mystery, while Hanne's housekeeper – an irreverent former prostitute – adds unexpected humor and heart."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"This is a series that demands to be read—and the more quickly, the better."

—*Bookreporter*

"Perfect for fans of Scandinavian detectives and for those who appreciate Ann Cleeves' Vera Stanhope and other strong but flawed female protagonists."

—*Booklist*

"If you aren't familiar with her Hanne Wilhelmsen novels, it's okay to dive in with this one—no. 7—but then do yourself a favor and binge-read the first six."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

About the Author

Anne Holt is Norway's bestselling female crime writer. She was a journalist and news anchor and spent two years working for the Oslo Police Department before founding her own law firm and serving as Norway's Minister for Justice in 1996 and 1997. Her first novel was published in 1993 and her books have been translated into over thirty languages and have sold more than 7 million copies. Her novel *1222* was nominated for an Edgar Award for Best Novel. She lives in Oslo with her family.

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Beyond the Truth

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19

It was an old dog with stiff joints, damaged by calcification. Illness had caused the animal to resemble a hyena, for his powerful chest and strong neck shrank abruptly into a skinny backside, with the tail curling around his testicles.

The mangy animal came and went. No one could remember when he had first appeared. In a way, he belonged to the district: an unpleasantness impossible to avoid, like the noise of the streetcars, double-parked vehicles, and sidewalks in need of repair. People had to take precautions, keep basement doors closed and locked, haul cats in for the night, and secure lids tightly on garbage cans in backyards. Now and again

someone complained to the public health authorities when food scraps and other trash were left scattered beside bicycle racks three mornings in a row. They rarely received any response, and nothing was ever done to catch the beast.

If anyone had stopped to consider how the dog actually lived, it would have been obvious that he moved around the neighborhood according to a pattern, out of step with the calendar, and therefore difficult to spot. If anyone had taken the trouble, they would have realized that the dog was never very far off and that he seldom roamed beyond an area measuring just fifteen or sixteen blocks.

He had lived like that for almost eight years.

He knew his territory and avoided other animals as much as possible, giving a wide berth to lapdogs on gaudy nylon leashes, and had understood long ago that pedigree cats with bells around their necks were a temptation best resisted. He was a stray mongrel in Oslo's upper-class west end and knew how to lie low.

The period of mild weather in early December was over, and now a biting pre-Christmas frost had glazed the asphalt. There was a hint of snow in the air. As the dog's claws scratched the black ice, he dragged his back leg behind him. The glare from the street lamp highlighted a gash on his left haunch, liver-colored on his close-cropped fur and speckled with yellow pus. It had snagged on a spike the previous evening while he was searching for somewhere to sleep.

The apartment building was secluded, set back from the street. A paved walkway divided the front garden in two, and knee-high chain-link fencing, painted black, enclosed the wet, dead grass and a flower bed covered with tarpaulin. A twinkling, decorated Christmas tree flanked either side of the entrance.

This was the dog's second attempt to gain entry in the course of the evening. There was usually a way. Unlocked doors were easiest, of course. A quick leap, a swipe of the paw at the door handle. It was usually immaterial whether the door opened in or out: unlocked doors were a piece of cake. But rare. Normally he had to search for basement windows opened a chink, loose boards around walls due to be repaired, or gaps under rotting cellar stairs. Access points that everyone else, apart from him, had forgotten. They were not to be found everywhere, and sometimes these gaps were repaired, basement shutters shut, and walls replastered. Blocked and impenetrable. He walked on. Sometimes it took several hours to find a place for the night.

There was an opening in this block. He was familiar with it, and though it was easy, it mustn't be abused. He never slept in the same spot for more than one night. On his first attempt that evening, someone had turned up. These things happen. So he made himself scarce, quick as a flash. Trotted on for two or three blocks. Lay down under a bush, behind a bike rack, hidden from anyone who did not look too closely. Then he tried again. A good den was worth a couple of forays.

The frost had worsened during the past hour, and the snow was real now: dry, light flakes that painted the sidewalks white. He shivered: he had not had anything to eat for more than twenty-four hours.

The building was quiet now.

The lights both lured and scared him.

Light brought a chance of being seen. It was threatening. However, light also brought warmth. Blood pulsed painfully through his infected wound. Warily, he stepped over the low chain fence, whimpering as he lifted his back leg. A hole—access into the store where an old sleeping bag lay discarded in a corner—was at the

rear of the building, between the basement stairs and two bicycles that were never used.

But the front door was open.

Front doors were dangerous. He could get locked in. A cozy glow enticed him all the same. Stairways were better than basements. At the very top, where people seldom ventured and nobody lived, it was warm.

Keeping his head down, he approached the stone steps and stood perfectly still, front paw raised, before stepping slowly into the beam of light. Nothing stirred anywhere; there were no alarming sounds to be heard, only the distant, reassuring murmur of the city.

He was inside.

There was another open door.

He could smell food, and everything was totally silent.

The scent of meat was strong, and he no longer hesitated. Quickly he limped into the apartment, but came to a sudden stop in the hallway. Emitting a low growl, he bared his teeth at the man on the floor. Nothing happened. The dog drew closer, inquisitive now, and more curious than apprehensive. Gingerly, he thrust his nose nearer the motionless body and tried licking some of the blood around the man's head. His tongue grew more eager, washing the floor, cleaning the congealed clots from the man's cheek, probing into the hole just beside his temple; the starving dog slurped down what he could extract from the skull, before it dawned on him that he did not have to exert himself to obtain food.

There were three more bodies in the apartment.

His tail wagged in delight.

☒

“There's nothing to discuss. Nefis will damn well have to learn how we do things.”

Mary slammed the door behind her.

“One, two, three, four,” Hanne Wilhelmsen counted, and when she reached the “f” of five, Mary had reappeared in the room again.

“For Christ's sake, if I went to those Muslims at Christmastime, I'd eat whatever they put down in front of me. Pure, sheer good manners, if you ask me. She's not even religious. She's told me that, time after time. On Christmas Eve here in Norway, we eat pork ribs. Enough said, and that's the end of it.”

“But, Mary,” Hanne made a desperate effort, “can't we have rack of lamb? Then the whole problem is solved. After all, we had your pork ribs last year.”

“The problem?”

Mary Samuelsen had once lived under the name “Hairy Mary,” the oldest street hooker in Oslo. Hanne had bumped into her three years ago in connection with a homicide case. Mary was near death at that time, high

on drugs and freezing in the bitter cold of the big city. Now she kept house for Hanne and Nefis in a seven-room apartment in Kruses gate.

Mary ran her arthritic hands stiffly over her apron.

“The problem, my dear Hanne Wilhelmsen, is that the only rack of lamb I ever put in my toothless mouth before I met you and Nefis was cold, watered down, and arrived on a paper plate, courtesy of the Salvation Army.”

“I know that, Mary. We could have both, don’t you think? For heaven’s sake, we can certainly afford it.”

Hanne added the latter as she glanced despairingly around the room. The only furniture that remained from the apartment in Lille Tøyen where she had lived for more than fifteen years was an antique bureau, almost lost in a recess beside the door leading out to a gigantic terrace.

“Christmas is no time for compromise,” Mary declared solemnly. “If you’d sat like I had, sucking on a scrap of fatty meat too tough to swallow, year after year, one Christmas Eve after another, out of sight and forgotten in a corner, then you’d realize this has something to do with holding on to your dreams. Christmas Eve with crystal and silver and a decorated tree and a huge fat rib of pork in the center of the table, with crackling so crisp that you could hear it crow. Throughout all those years, that was what I dreamed of. And that’s the way it has to be. You could show that much respect for a poor old woman who might not have very much longer to live.”

“Come on, Mary. You’re remarkably fit. And not so old either.”

Without a word, Mary turned on her heel once more and marched out, dragging one leg behind her. Her rhythmic limping disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. Hanne had measured it when they moved in, pacing it out when she thought no one was looking: 52 feet from the sofa to the kitchen door. From the dining room to the largest bathroom was 36 feet. From the bedroom to the front door, 21 feet. The whole apartment was filled with distances.

She poured out more coffee from a stainless-steel pot before switching on the TV.

For the very first time, she had taken the entire festive period off from work. Two whole weeks. Nefis and Mary had invited every Tom, Dick, and Harry to a sumptuous breakfast on Christmas morning, lunches during the following week, and a huge party on New Year’s Eve. On Christmas Eve, it would be just the three of them. At least, that was what she thought. You never knew.

Hanne Wilhelmsen was both dreading and looking forward to Christmas.

The television was broadcasting a dramatization of the Christmas gospel story. Oddly enough, the baby Jesus was blue-eyed. The Virgin Mary wore heavy makeup and had blood-red lips. Closing her eyes, Hanne turned down the volume.

She tried not to think about her father. These days, that demanded all her strength.

The letter had reached her too late, three weeks ago now. Hanne suspected her mother of ulterior motives for using the postal service. Everyone knew that snail mail was no longer reliable. The message reporting his death had taken six days to reach her. By then the funeral had already taken place. Actually that was just as

well. Hanne would not have attended anyway. She could visualize the scene: the family in the front pew, her brother with his mother's hand in his—a repulsive claw, covered in eczema, sprinkling flakes of skin all over her son's dark suit trousers. Her sister would most likely be wearing some expensive creation and would burst into tears at regular intervals, but not be so distressed that she neglected to look her brilliant best for the assembled congregation; her father's colleagues from home and abroad, a few celebrated academics, elderly women no longer in full control of their morning ablutions and who dispersed an odor of old-fashioned perfume along the rows of pews.

Her phone played an Arabian dance. Mary had tinkered with the list of ringtones and felt that oriental tunes would please Nefis. Hanne grabbed the receiver swiftly, to prevent Mary from reaching it first.

“Billy T. here.” The words were spoken before she managed to say anything. “It would be best if you came over here.”

“Now? It’s past eleven o’clock.”

“Now. It’s a major case.”

“Tomorrow’s my last workday before the holidays, Billy T. There’s no point in my starting something I won’t be able to finish.”

“You can damn well forget about that time off, Hanne.”

“Cut it out. Bye. Ring someone else. Call the police.”

“Very funny. Come on. Four bodies, Hanne. Mother, father, and son. And somebody else whose identity we haven’t figured out yet.”

“Four . . . four bodies? Four people murdered?”

“Yep. In your own neighborhood, by the way. If you want, I’ll meet you there.”

“Quadruple homicide—”

“What?”

“Do you mean we’re faced with homicide times four?”

A demonstrative sigh crackled through the receiver.

“How many times do I have to repeat it?” Billy T. asked her irascibly. “Four dead people! In an apartment in Eckersbergs gate. All of them shot. It looks fucking horrendous. Not only are the bodies punctured, but there . . . There’s been . . . someone’s been there afterward. An animal. Or something like that—”

“Good God . . .”

On the TV screen, Joseph had begun to knock on doors at nightfall. In a brief close-up of his knuckles rapping on a rustic door in Bethlehem, Hanne noticed that the actor had forgotten to remove his wristwatch.

“Absurd,” she mumbled. “An animal?”

“A dog, we think. It has . . . eaten its fill, you might say.”

“Eckersbergs gate, was that what you said?”

“Number 5.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“I might take longer than that.”

“Fine.”

They both hung up simultaneously. Hanne gulped down the last of her coffee and stood up.

“Are you thinking of going out?”

Mary stood with her legs astride, her hip leaning on the doorway, and her gaze forced Hanne to sit down again, raising her hands in a defensive gesture.

“This is an extremely serious case,” she began.

“I’ll give you serious,” Mary barked. “Nefis is coming home in half an hour. She’s on her way from the airport. She’s been gone for a whole week now, and I’ve been busy in the kitchen since seven. You’re not going anywhere.”

“I must.”

Mary sucked through her teeth. For a moment, she seemed to be thinking of something else.

“Then you’ll have to take some food with you. Are you going to meet that slob?”

“Mmm.”

Ten minutes later, Hanne was ready. She had two plastic boxes of venison stew in her shoulder bag, half a sliced loaf spread generously with butter, a couple of apples, one and a half liters of cola, a large bar of chocolate, a packet of napkins, two plastic cups, and some silver cutlery in the bargain. She tried to protest.

“It’s the middle of the night, Mary. I don’t need all this!”

“Yes, you do. We never know when we’ll see you again,” Mary muttered. “Remember to bring that silver cutlery home with you!”

With that, she shut the door firmly behind Hanne, using all three locks.



Hanne had never grown accustomed to these streets. The wide spaces between the grand apartment blocks

and forbidding villas cloaked in darkness created an atmosphere of angst, as if something dreadful were about to happen. Infrequent pedestrians crossed the road diagonally, with their eyes on the ground to avoid being drawn into any kind of intimacy with others. It was natural for Mary to choose to shut herself inside. After almost half a century under the influence of drugs and alcohol, isolation was probably a good idea. It was impossible to understand why all the other residents of this area seemed to make the same choice. Maybe they were perpetually absent. Maybe no one really lived here. The whole of Frogner is a stage set, Hanne thought.

She tugged her winter jacket more snugly around her frame.

It was pretty crowded outside the stone villa at Eckersbergs gate 5. Red-and-white police tape constrained a small group of curious spectators, but the interior of the cordoned area was swarming with uniformed colleagues. She recognized several of the journalists making friendly overtures to the youngest and most inexperienced police officers: shocked, immature, on edge, and easy to engage in conversation. The number of journalists swelled unbelievably fast, as if they all lived in the vicinity. At the sight of Hanne Wilhelmsen, they did no more than hoist their shoulders brashly to ward off the cold, conveying a greeting by lifting their heads ever so slightly.

“Hanne! Brilliant!”

Sergeant Silje Sørensen broke free from a group of eagerly gesticulating police personnel.

“My goodness,” Hanne said, sizing her up. “Uniform? This must be something to write home about.”

“Had an extra shift. But yes, this is something to write home about. Come on in!”

“I’ll wait for a bit. Billy T. will be here soon.”

She was dazzled by the temporary lighting that the police had already managed to rig up, making it difficult to gain a general impression of the apartment block. Hanne stepped back a few paces, using her hand to shield her eyes. It did not help much until she walked all the way to the opposite side of the street.

“What are you looking for?” Silje Sørensen asked, following in her footsteps.

Silje always asked questions. Pestered. What are you looking for? What are you doing? What are you thinking? Like a child. A smart but slightly annoying child.

“Nothing. Just looking around.”

The apartment block was antique rose in color, with broad cornices. Above each window was a statue of a man battling a hideous fabled creature. The front garden was tiny, but a broad paved path snaking around the western corner of the building might indicate a more impressive backyard concealed at the rear. The building seemed to contain only four apartments. The one on the top left-hand side was in darkness. Frugal lamplight shone from the ground and first floors on the right of the building, leaving little doubt about where the crime had taken place. Through three of the windows down on the left, she could see figures in white overalls and hairnets moving to and fro, precise and apparently purposeful. Someone drew a curtain.

Suddenly Hanne was embraced from behind and lifted off her feet.

“Christ!” Billy T. yelled. “You’ve put on weight!”

She kicked him in the shin with the heel of her boot.

“Ouch! You could just have said something.”

“I have,” Hanne told him. “Don’t lift me every time you see me. I’ve said that a thousand times.”

“You just say that because you’re getting fatter and fatter.” He grinned, brushing her shoulders. “You never mentioned it before. Never. You used to like it.”

Snow was falling more thickly now, light, bone-dry flakes.

“I don’t think you’re any fatter,” Silje was quick to say, though Hanne was already halfway across the street.

“Let’s go inside,” she murmured, noticing how dread had made her feel queasy.



The oldest of the four murder victims bore a resemblance to the famous portrait of Albert Einstein. The corpse lay in the hallway with one hand tucked under his head as if he had made himself comfortable on the floor, his hair forming a voluminous garland around his crown, with a bushy mop of hair in the middle. His tongue dangled from his mouth, extended to a bizarre length, and his eyes were wide open.

“That guy looks as if he’s had a shock. An electric shock!”

Billy T. leaned inquisitively over the old man.

“If it hadn’t been for this here, right?”

He used a pen to point to an entry wound just below his left eye. Not particularly large, it appeared black rather than blood-red.

“And this. And this.”

The doctor, obviously responsible for the cadaver’s shirt front being carefully folded to one side, waved Billy T. aside. Between the sparse gray chest hairs, Hanne could see two more wounds.

“How many shots are we actually dealing with?” she asked.

“Too early to say,” the physician answered tersely. “Quite a number. You ought to have had a pathologist here, if you ask me. It’s about time you had a workable rota system sorted out with the Forensics Institute. All I can say is that these people are dead. Pretty grotesque, in my opinion. That man over there’s the worst, I believe.”

Hanne Wilhelmsen did not want to look at “that man over there.” She had to steel herself to step around the old man and take a closer look at the body in the overcoat. An ill-tempered grunt sounded from one of the technicians, who could not bear having police investigators tramping around the crime scene.

Hanne ignored him. When she leaned over the corpse nearest to the front door and noticed how the exit wound in the skull had been licked clean of blood, her nausea increased. Swiftly straightening her back, she swallowed and pointed at the body of the third man, whose age she estimated at about forty.

“Preben,” Billy T. introduced him. “The elder son of the father, Hermann, over there. That much we know at least.”

His arms were by his sides, as if the son of the family had stiffened into a military pose as he hit the floor. His pale-blue shirt showed two small bullet holes on the breast pocket, and his shoulder was ripped open with dark, fleshy lacerations.

The doctor nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I haven’t managed to look at him more closely. The dog has gorged itself on . . . if we are talking about a dog, that is.”

“Come here!”

Billy T. waved her toward the kitchen at the end of the spacious, dark hallway. Dressed all in white, he looked odd, with green socks outside his shoes and a paper hairnet stretched tight on his head.

A woman’s body stood by the kitchen sink. She had no hair, but a wig lay on the floor beside her. The woman’s pale scalp was disfigured by scars. She wore an elegant pink dress and her eyes were wide open, with a piercing, almost reproachful look. A perplexed young police officer was making a feeble attempt to set her hair to rights before Billy T. stopped him.

“Are you crazy or what? Don’t touch! Hell and damnation, what are you doing here anyway? This place is overcrowded as it is.”

Irritated, he began to sort out those who were necessary from those who were not. Hanne stood calmly by, struggling to make sense of what she could see.

The woman was actually upright.

Her face was singularly sexless. That must be because of the lack of hair. When Hanne approached more closely, she saw that the woman’s eyebrows were also fake, painted on, a bit too high, too distinctive. Above her left eye the painted brow formed an arch toward the bridge of her nose that served to reinforce her skeptical expression. Her eyes were open. Pale blue, small, and without lashes. Her mouth was well formed, with full lips, and appeared younger than the rest of her face, as if it had recently been repaired.

“Turid Stahlberg,” Billy T. said, having now halved the number of people present in the apartment, and the atmosphere was conspicuously quieter now. “Her name’s Turid. Tutta, to the family.”

“Stahlberg,” Hanne said, slightly confused, as she surveyed the enormous kitchen. “Not the Stahlberg family?”

“Yep. Hermann, the father, is the oldest of the three you saw in the hallway. I’ve also introduced you to Preben. He is forty-two. What is actually keeping this woman on her feet?”

Billy T. leaned forward and tried to peer behind the upright woman. Her ample backside was resting on the kitchen worktop and her feet were planted on the floor, well spaced, as if she had found her sea legs when faced with the killer.

“She’s only just supported here,” Billy T. mumbled. “By her ass. But her torso . . . why doesn’t she topple over?”

A faint tearing sound should have warned him, as he stood halfway crouched over the corpse in an effort to seek an explanation. The woman, who must weigh at least 150 pounds, collapsed on to his back and knocked him off-balance. First he fell to his knees. The floor was slick with tea from a smashed teapot and something that looked like honey or syrup. Fast as lightning, Billy T.’s knee skidded out to one side.

“Hanne! Goddamn it! Help!”

Billy T. was spread-eagled and floundering under a pink-clad female cadaver with a shiny scalp.

“What in all . . .”

The curses of two crime scene technicians reverberated around the room.

“Lie still! Completely still!”

Five minutes later, Billy T. was able to stand up, looking more abject than Hanne had seen him in a very long time.

“Sorry, boys,” he muttered, disconsolately struggling to assist them with moving the woman’s body onto a stretcher.

“Get away,” one of his colleagues snarled. “You’ve done enough in here!”

Only now did Hanne notice a cake dish, licked clean, on the counter-top where the woman’s body had rested. The marks left by an animal’s tongue could be distinguished in the greasy traces of whipped cream: wiry gray hairs plastered to the porcelain.

“Well, at least Tutta escaped the attentions of the dog,” she said crisply. “Saved by cream cake.”

“I think they were planning a celebration,” Billy T. said. “There’s an opened, but full, bottle of champagne in the living room. Four glasses. Yes, okay! I’m leaving. I’m going, I said.”

The most senior of the crime scene examiners was literally trying to push Billy T.’s huge bulk out of the kitchen, through the door into the living room.

“I’m going,” Billy T. barked. “I’m leaving right now, don’t you hear!”

“Four glasses,” Hanne repeated, following him into the vast living room crammed with heavy furniture. “And sandwiches. Open sandwiches, that is.”

The plate of sandwiches was still on the dining table. Empty, apart from a salad leaf and three slices of cucumber, meticulously licked clean of mayonnaise.

“Did they have a dog?” Hanne asked distractedly.

“No,” Silje Sørensen replied, and Hanne noticed for the first time that she had sneaked in. “Pet dogs were forbidden here. Or . . . the owners had agreed that no one should keep pets.”

“How do you already know that?”

“The neighbor,” Silje said, waving vaguely in the direction of the street. “I spoke to a woman who lives across the street.”

“What else did you find out?”

“Not much.”

Licking her fingertip, Silje Sørensen leafed through a spiral notebook. A massive diamond ring glittered on her right hand.

“The neighbors directly above . . .”

She pointed at the ceiling.

“. . . are away. They have a second home in Spain and traveled south as early as November.”

“No one looking after their apartment?”

“The woman outside, Aslaug Kvalheim, says their daughter looks in now and again. She hasn’t been there for a few days, though, according to Mrs. Kvalheim. And to be honest . . .”

Silje flashed a smile.

“. . . I think Mrs. Kvalheim knows most of what goes on in this street. A real old busybody.”

“Just as well for us,” Hanne said. “What did she see tonight?”

“Nothing, unfortunately. She was at bingo from seven o’clock, and came back an hour ago. We were already here by then.”

Hanne pulled a grimace.

“The other apartments, then?”

“Across the landing . . .”

Silje used her thumb to point, before turning the page.

“. . . lives someone called Henrik Backe. A grumpy old man. I spoke to him myself, and he was three sheets to the wind. Bad-tempered about all the commotion. He didn’t let me in.”

“You didn’t go in? Did you just talk to him and leave him be?”

“Of course not, Hanne. Take it easy. Two men are in with him now. For the time being, all I know is that he claims he’s been at home all evening and hasn’t heard anything.”

“That’s impossible,” Billy T. blurted. “Look around! There must have been all sorts of bangs and explosions in here.”

“Whether it’s possible or not is something we don’t know very much about yet,” Silje said, sounding slightly peeved. “The guy could have used a silencer. In any case, the boys will bring Henrik Backe in for an interview tonight, no matter how much he protests. Then we’ll see.”

“And who reported it?”

“A chance caller. We’re checking him out, of course, but it seems he’s a young man who was just—”

“Fine. I see.”

Hanne caught herself speculating about the size of the apartment. The living room must be more than 760 square feet—at least if you counted the conservatory overlooking the backyard. The furniture was crowded, but each item was beautiful when regarded individually. Pride of place, against the exterior wall, was given to a dark oak sideboard with carved door panels and glass doors on the top cupboards. The dining table was surrounded by twelve chairs with armrests. In addition to the manila-hemp seating in the conservatory, there was sufficient room for at least three more sets of furniture. Only one seemed to be in regular use: the upholstery was obviously worn on the sofa and chairs in front of the TV. The paintings on the walls were probably genuine, all with national romantic or maritime motifs. In particular, Hanne noticed an imminent shipwreck on the wall facing the kitchen. She stepped closer.

“Peder Balke,” she said in hushed tones. “My goodness!”

The ice cubes in the champagne cooler had melted long ago. Hanne studied the label without touching the bottle.

“That’s the sort of stuff you drink,” Billy T. said. “Damned expensive.”

“Do we know anything at all of interest?” Hanne asked, without taking her eyes off the bottle. “For instance, what they were celebrating?”

“Maybe they were just enjoying themselves,” Silje Sørensen ventured. “After all, it will soon be—”

“Christmas,” Hanne broke in. “There are five days left until Christmas. This is a fairly normal Thursday. That bottle there costs 850 kroner at the liquor store. There are limits to enjoying yourself, Silje. They were going to celebrate something. Something pretty major.”

“We don’t know—”

“Look here, Silje.”

Hanne pointed at the TV set, a massive piece of furniture in mahogany or teak.

“The TV set is at least thirty years old. The sofa is so worn that you can see the warp in the weave. The

pictures—at least that one there . . .”

She pointed at the Peder Balke.

“It’s fairly valuable. The crystal in the cupboard over there is worth a fortune. There are only three kinds of sandwich toppings in the fridge: yellow cheese, liver pâté, and jam. The apartment here must be worth 7 or 8 million, at least. His sweater . . .”

Wheeling around, she nodded to the hallway where Hermann Stahlberg’s body was being transferred to a stretcher.

“. . . is from some time in the seventies. Nice and clean, but nevertheless so worn that the elbows are darned. What does all this tell you?”

“Tight-fisted folk,” Billy T. answered, before Silje had a chance to consider the question. “Miserly. But rich. Come on, let’s go.”

Hanne made no sign of following him.

“Is there really nobody who knows who that stranger in the hallway is?”

“He’s been removed now,” Silje murmured.

“Thank God for that,” Billy T. exclaimed. “But do we know anything about him?”

“Not a thing.”

Silje Sørensen leafed aimlessly through her notes.

“No wallet. No ID. But elegant clothes. Suit. Good overcoat.”

“Nothing very elegant about that guy,” Billy T. said, shuddering. “The dog has—”

“Overcoat,” Hanne Wilhelmsen interrupted. “He was wearing a coat. Had he just arrived, or was he about to leave?”

“Arrived,” Silje suggested. “The champagne was untouched. Besides, with all those men out in the hallway—”

“Lobby,” Billy T. corrected her. “It’s big enough for three dead bodies, for heaven’s sake.”

“Lobby, then. It looks like a real welcoming committee out there, don’t you think? I’ll bet the stranger had just arrived.”

Hanne scanned the living room one final time, making up her mind to inspect the rest of the apartment later. There were enough people here at present. Photographers balancing on short stepladders. Crime scene technicians moving around quietly with their steel cases, wearing plastic gloves and looking purposeful. The doctor, gray, drawn, and obviously in a foul mood, was on his way out. The silence with which the technicians enveloped themselves was broken only by rapid commands of one syllable, demonstrating both

their efficiency and their coordination, but also an ill-concealed displeasure at the continued presence of the police investigators. Later, Hanne thought. I'll look at the rest later. The thought was accompanied by a grudging sense of relief that the Christmas holiday would come to naught yet again this year.

The idea brought a smile to her face.

“What is it?” Billy T. asked.

“Nothing. Let's go.”

In the lobby, Hanne was confronted by her own reflection in the mirror and stopped short for a moment. Billy T. was right. She had put on weight. Her chin was rounded, her face seemed slightly broader, and there was an unfamiliar aspect to the bridge of her nose that made her look away. It must be the mirror, black-speckled with age.

The cadaver of the horribly lacerated and hitherto unidentified male in his sixties had been removed. Marker tape glistened on the parquet.

“Not a single damn trace of blood left,” Billy T. said, crouching down. “That dog's had a feast.”

“Stop it,” Hanne said. “I feel sick.”

“I'm hungry,” Billy T. said, shadowing her on the way out.

They both noticed the nameplate as they closed the front door behind them: magnificent, almost awe-inspiring, in worn brass with black lettering: “Hermann Stahlberg.”

No Tutta. Or Turid. None of the children, even though the nameplate obviously originated from a time long before any of the children had left home.

“Here lived Hermann Stahlberg,” Billy T. said. “Cock of the walk.”



They settled on the steps outside Hanne's apartment in Kruses gate. She had brought newspapers from the recycling container to sit on.

“Picnic in the depths of winter,” Billy T. said, munching, his mouth full of food. “Can't we go up? Christ, I'm freezing to death!”

Hanne tried to follow the snowflakes, one by one, with her eyes. The temperature had plummeted. As the crystals whirled through the air, she caught them in the palm of her hand. One glimpse of hexagonal symmetry, and then they were gone.

“Don't want to wake the others.”

“What do you think?” he asked, tucking into another slice of bread.

“That they'll waken if we go up.”

“Idiot! About the case, I mean. Nothing was stolen.”

“We don’t know that.”

“That’s how it looks,” he said impatiently. “The silverware was still there. The paintings . . . you said yourself that they were valuable. To me, it looked as if nothing had been taken. It wasn’t a robbery-related homicide.”

“We don’t know that, Billy T. Don’t jump—”

“. . . to conclusions,” he completed for her, sounding discouraged, as he got to his feet. “Thanks for the food,” he said, brushing snow off his jacket. “Is Mary okay?”

“As you can see,” Hanne said, nodding at the leftovers. “Methadone, isolation, and housework are doing wonders. She and Nefis are like this.”

She crossed her fingers in the air, and Billy T. hooted with laughter.

“Not so easy sometimes,” Hanne said, “for me. There’s a lot of two against one in our everyday lives, if I can put it that way.”

“Huh. You love it. Haven’t seen you looking so happy in years. Not since . . . the old days, you know. It’s almost as if everything’s the same as before.”

They cleaned up in silence. It was past two o’clock, and the weather had turned blustery, with sudden biting gusts. Their footsteps on the courtyard were swept away. There was no longer light from any of the apartments. Only the street lamps beyond the stone wall cast a glimmer of visibility over the snow that now blanketed everything. Hanne squinted into the wind.

“Nothing’s like it was before,” she said softly. “Never say that. This is now. Everything’s different. Cecilie is dead. Nefis has come. You and I are . . . we’re older—nothing is like it was before. Never.”

He had already started to walk, lurching unsteadily in the drifts, with his hands thrust deep inside his pockets. Her gaze followed his retreating back.

“Don’t go!” she shouted. “I only meant . . .”

Billy T. did not want to hear her. As he negotiated his way around the gate and quickly threw a backward glance, his expression scared her. At first she did not understand. Then she did not want to understand. She did not want to catch what he muttered under his breath; she must have been mistaken. The distance was too great. The weather made contours indistinct and sounds unclear.

Grabbing her bag, she fumbled for the keys and let herself in.

“Fuck!” she said through gritted teeth.

She ignored the elevator and slowly took the stairs.

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