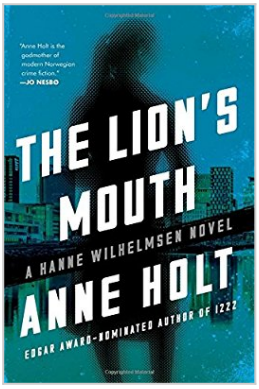

The Lion's Mouth: Hanne Wilhelmsen Book Four (A Hanne Wilhelmsen Novel)

By Anne Holt

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From the internationally bestselling author of *1222*, called the “godmother of modern Norwegian crime” by Jo Nesbø, the next book in the Edgar Award–nominated mystery series: Hanne Wilhelmsen is on the case when someone murders the prime minister of Norway.

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Hanne Wilhelmsen, Chief Inspector of the Norwegian Police, is on leave in California but when the death shakes the country to its core, she knows she can’t remain on the sidelines of such a crucial investigation. The hunt for the Prime Minister’s killer is complicated, intense, and grueling. When secrets begin to unravel from the Prime Minister’s past, Hanne and her partner, Billy T., must piece together the crime before a private tragedy becomes a public outcry, in what will become the most sensitive case of their career.

Filled with lies, deception, and the truth about government, *The Lion’s Mouth* questions who truly holds the power in Norway, and how far they will go to keep it.

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Editorial Review

Review
“The wonder and pleasure of *The Lion's Mouth* is in how Ms. Holt – Norway’s former minister of justice – weaves the strands of a political thriller, a police-procedural, a locked-room mystery and a domestic novel into a satisfying plot.” (*The Wall Street Journal*)

"Holt uses her surprising plot to highlight the nature of power and the extent to which it can corrupt." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"A fine addition to a noteworthy series, spotlighting a politically sensitive case in the broader context of Norwegian society. A natural for Jo Nesbø readers." (*Booklist (starred review)*)

"Within this English translation of Holt's 1997 novel lies a twisty tale of political intrigue...a clever mystery." (*Library Journal*)

"Norway's former minister of justice knows her way around the halls of power, and her characters, including lesbian detective Hanne Wilhelmsen, are credible creatures." (*Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette*)

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.

The Lion’s Mouth

FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 1997

6:47 P.M., PRIME MINISTER’S OFFICE (PMO)

She wore a blue suit, the woman who sat doing nothing outside the prime minister’s office; she just sat there, with a mounting sense of disquiet, staring alternately at the double doors and her own telephone. Her neat little jacket was of classic cut, with a matching skirt, and was topped off by an overly gaudy scarf. Although it was close to the end of a long workday, not a single hair was out of place in her elegant, if somewhat dated, coiffure. The hairstyle made her appear older than she actually was, and that might have been the intention, as if the fact that it had gone out of fashion in the early 1980s—feather-cut at the sides, with a full crown—somehow endowed her with a gravitas that her forty-plus years did not.

She had more than enough to do, but uncharacteristically, she couldn’t settle down to anything. For some considerable time, she just sat there. Only her fingers betrayed her steadily rising sense that something was terribly wrong. They were long and beautifully manicured, with crimson nails and two gold rings on each hand, and they touched her temple at regular intervals, as though to tidy some invisible disorderly strands,

before tapping the blotting pad with a hollow sound, like a series of shots fired using a silencer. Suddenly the woman stood up and crossed to the west-facing window.

It was twilight outside. April promised to be just as capricious as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, author of the Norwegian national anthem, had once described it many years earlier. Fifteen floors below, she saw people shivering as they hurried along Akersgata—the street where both the country's government and Oslo's newspapers had their headquarters—some of them walking irritably in circles as they waited for a bus that might never come. There was still a light on in the culture minister's office across the road in the R5 building. Despite the distance, the woman in the blue suit could see the secretary walking from the anteroom to her boss with a sheaf of papers. Tossing her blond hair, the young cabinet minister laughed in response to the older woman. She was too young to be culture minister. Not tall enough, either. An evening gown did not sit becomingly on a woman of barely five foot three. To crown it all, the young woman lit a cigarette, and placed an ashtray on top of the pile of papers.

She shouldn't smoke in that office, thought the woman in blue. The finest cultural treasures are hanging in there. It can't be doing the paintings any good. And it can't be very safe either.

She embraced the feeling of irritation with gratitude. It momentarily distracted her from the sense of disquiet that was about to tip over into unfamiliar and distressing anxiety.

Two hours had passed since Prime Minister Birgitte Volter had said, very specifically, almost coldly, that she was not to be disturbed, no matter what. That was what she had said: "No matter what."

Gro Harlem Brundtland, the previous prime minister, had never said, "No matter what." She would have said, "Regardless of the reason," or perhaps simply left it at that: she was not to be disturbed. Even if all seventeen stories of the government building went up in flames, Gro Harlem Brundtland would have been left in peace if she had given that instruction. But Gro had stepped down on October 25 of the previous year, and these were new times, with new methods and new jargon, and Wenche Andersen kept her emotions to herself. She carried out her work as she always did: effectively and discreetly.

It was well over an hour since Supreme Court Judge Benjamin Grinde had left the office. Clad in a charcoal-gray Italian suit, he had nodded as he emerged through the double doors and closed them behind him. Smiling faintly, he had indulged in a flattering remark about her new outfit before he had disappeared downstairs to the elevator on the fourteenth floor, carrying his burgundy leather briefcase under his arm. Wenche Andersen had automatically risen to her feet to take a cup of coffee in to Birgitte Volter, when at the last minute she had fortunately remembered her boss's resolute instruction about peace and quiet.

However, it really was starting to get extremely late now.

The undersecretaries and political advisers had left, as had the rest of the office staff. Wenche Andersen was sitting alone on a Friday evening on the fifteenth floor of the tower block in the government complex and did not know what to do. There was total silence from the prime minister's office. Maybe that was not so strange after all, because of the double doors.

7:02 P.M., ODINS GATE 3

There was definitely something wrong with the contents of the plain, tulip-shaped crystal glass. He held it up to see how the light refracted in the red liquid. He tried to take his time listening to the wine, attempted to relax and enjoy it, as full-bodied Bordeaux normally deserved. The 1983 vintage was supposed to be friendly

and inviting. This one was far too tight in its initial phase, and he pursed his lips in astonished disgust as it dawned on him that the flavor of its finish in no way matched the price he had paid for the bottle. Abruptly setting down his glass, he grabbed the TV remote control. The evening news had already started, but the broadcast was completely banal, and the images flickered past without him noticing anything other than that the reporter's togs were thoroughly tasteless. A yellow jacket was quite simply not suitable male attire.

He had been compelled to do it. There had been no other option. Now that it was all over, he felt nothing. He had expected some kind of relief, the opportunity to breathe easily after all these years.

He really wanted to feel relieved, but instead he was gripped by an unfamiliar sense of loneliness. The furniture surrounding him suddenly seemed alien. As a child, he had often climbed on the heavy old oak sideboard decorated with carved bunches of grapes; it now dominated his own living room in all its grandeur, and he kept his exclusive collection of Japanese netsuke miniatures behind its polished glass doors, but today it seemed only gloomy and threatening.

One object lay on the table between him and the remote control. He did not understand what it was doing there. Why he had brought it with him was a mystery.

Giving himself a shake, he switched off the Dagsrevy reporter with a tap of his finger. Tomorrow was his birthday, when he would turn fifty. He felt much older than that as he strained stiffly to rise from the chesterfield sofa and walk through to the kitchen. The pâté could, and ought, to be made tonight. It would be at its best after twenty-four hours in a refrigerator.

For a second or two he considered opening another bottle of the wretched Bordeaux. Then he pushed the thought aside and contented himself with a cognac poured generously into a fresh glass. Cooking cognac.

There was no relief to be found in the cognac either.

7:35 P.M., PMO

Her hair was no longer so perfect. A brittle, bleached lock fell across her eyes, and she felt beads of perspiration on her top lip. Nervously clutching her handbag, she opened it to find a freshly ironed handkerchief, which she held to her mouth before using it to mop her forehead.

Now she would go in. Something could be wrong. Birgitte Volter had disconnected the phone, so she would have to knock on the door. The prime minister might be ill; she had seemed stressed recently. Although Wenche Andersen had considerable reservations about Birgitte Volter's rather reckless, unfamiliar style, she had to acknowledge that the prime minister was usually very friendly. During the past week, however, Birgitte Volter had been verging on dismissive; she had been irritable and sometimes even exasperated. Was she unwell?

Now she would enter. Now.

Instead of disturbing the prime minister, she paid another visit to the restroom. But although she lingered in front of the mirror, she couldn't find anything that needed attending to. She spent a long time washing her hands, then fished out a little tube of hand cream from the closet underneath the sink. It was unnecessary and made her hands feel sticky, but putting it on used up some time. Massaging her fingers thoroughly, she felt the cream penetrate the surface of her skin. Involuntarily she looked at her watch once more, and breathed heavily. Only four and a half minutes had passed. The tiny golden hands almost seemed to be standing still.

Anxious and resigned, she returned to her seat; even the sound of the restroom door slamming behind her seemed alarming.

Now she simply must go in. Wenche Andersen attempted to stand up but stopped halfway, hesitating, and sat down again. The instruction had been crystal clear. Birgitte Volter was not to be disturbed. “No matter what.” But nor had the prime minister said that Wenche Andersen could go home, and it would be unheard of to leave the office before she had been given permission to do so. Now she would go in. She must go in.

With her hand on the door handle, she placed her ear against the door panel. Not a sound. Tentatively, she tapped her index finger on the wood. Still not a sound. She opened the outer door and repeated the action. It did not help: no one said, “Come in!” or “Don’t disturb me!” No one said anything at all, and now it wasn’t just Wenche Andersen’s upper lip that was perspiring. Cautiously and hesitantly, ready to close the door again as quick as a flash if the prime minister was sitting there deep in concentration on something or other of great importance, she opened the door a tiny crack. However, from where she stood, looking through a gap that was no more than a few inches wide, she could see only the far end of the sitting area and the circular table.

All of a sudden, Wenche Andersen was seized with a decisiveness that had eluded her for several hours, and she threw the door open wide.

“Excuse me,” she said loudly. “Sorry for disturbing you, but . . .”

There was no point in saying anything further.

Prime Minister Birgitte Volter was sitting in her office chair, her upper body slumped across the desk. She looked like a student in a luxurious reading room, late one evening right before exams, just taking a little nap, forty winks. Wenche Andersen stood in the doorway a good six yards away, but she could see it all the same. The blood was clearly visible; it had formed a large, stagnant pool on a draft of the proposal concerning the Schengen agreement—so visible that Wenche Andersen did not even cross over to her dead boss to see if she could possibly help her, fetch a glass of water perhaps or provide her with a handkerchief to wipe away the mess.

Instead, she carefully—but this time very determinedly—closed the doors of the prime minister’s office, skirted around her own desk, and grabbed the phone with the direct line to the central switchboard of Oslo Police Headquarters. It rang only once before a man’s voice answered.

“You have to come right away,” Wenche Andersen said, her voice trembling only ever so slightly. “The Prime Minister is dead. She’s been shot. Birgitte Volter has been killed. You must come.”

Then she put down the receiver, moved her hand to another telephone, and this time got the security switchboard on the line.

“This is the Prime Minister’s office,” she said, more calmly now. “Shut the building. No one in, no one out. Only the police. Remember the garage.”

Without waiting for a response, she disconnected the call in order to dial another four-digit number.

“Fourteenth floor,” answered the man on the floor below from within a cage of bulletproof glass, the chamber that allowed access up into the holy of holies, the offices of the head of government of the Kingdom

of Norway.

“This is the Prime Minister’s office,” she said yet again. “The Prime Minister is dead. Activate the emergency plan.”

And so Wenche Andersen continued her duties as she always did: systematically and faultlessly. The only clues that this was a quite extraordinary Friday evening were the two expanding lilac patches on her cheeks.

They soon spread across her whole face.

7:50 P.M., KVELDSAVISEN EDITORIAL OFFICE

When “Little” Lettvik’s parents christened their blond-haired baby girl Lise Annette, they failed to anticipate that her sister, older by one year, would naturally nickname her “Little” or that fifty-four years later Little would weigh two hundred pounds and smoke twenty cigarillos a day. Nor could they have predicted that she would push her exhausted liver to the limits by drinking a daily dram of whiskey. Her entire body invited ridicule: she still adhered to the 1970s rule about going braless, and her stringy gray hair framed a face that bore signs of almost thirty years in Akersgata. But no one cracked a joke about Little Lettvik. At least not in her company.

“What the fuck’s a Supreme Court judge doing at the Prime Minister’s office late on a Friday afternoon?” she muttered to herself as she hoisted up her breasts, which were spilling out in the direction of her armpits, finally finding support on her well-upholstered pelvic bone.

“What did you say?”

The young man facing her was her lapdog. He was six foot four, emaciated, and still suffered from acne. Little Lettvik despised people like Knut Fagerborg: boys with six-month temporary contracts at Kveldsavisen. They were the most dangerous journalists in the world; Little Lettvik knew that. She had once been in that position herself, and although it was a long time ago and circumstances in the Norwegian press had completely altered since then, she recognized him. But Knut was useful. Like all the others, he admired her without reservation. He thought she would make sure his contract was extended. In that, he was totally mistaken. However, for the moment, he had his uses.

“Strange,” she murmured again, really more to herself than in reply to Knut Fagerborg. “I phoned Grinde at the Supreme Court this afternoon. It’s so bloody difficult to find out anything about what that commission of his is up to. A young chick in his office chirped that he was with the Prime Minister. Why in hell was he there?”

Raising her arms above her head, she stretched, and Knut recognized the scent of Poison. Not so long ago, he had been forced to pay a visit to the emergency doctor for antihistamines after a one-night stand with a woman who had the same taste.

“What do you want?” she said suddenly, as though she had just noticed him.

“There’s something going on. The police radio went berserk at first, and now it’s totally silent. I’ve never known anything like it.”

Truth to tell, twenty-year-old Knut Fagerborg had not experienced very much in his short life. However,

Little was in agreement: it did seem odd.

“Heard anything on the street?” she asked.

“No, but . . .”

“Guys!”

A man in his forties, wearing a gray tweed jacket, came shuffling into the editorial office.

“Something’s going on in the government tower block. A great commotion and lots of vehicles, and they’re cordoning off the entire place. Is the Prime Minister expecting some hotshot from abroad?”

“At night? On a Friday night?”

Little Lettvik’s left knee was aching.

She had experienced pain in her left knee two hours before the Kielland oil rig disaster in the North Sea. Her knee had also been excruciating the day before the murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. Not to mention how she had limped to the emergency room the evening after the Gulf crisis erupted, surprised that it had come on her so late, until that night she had received news that King Olav had died.

“Pop out and investigate.”

Knut popped out.

“By the way, does anybody know anybody who had a child in 1965?”

As Little Lettvik rubbed her tender knee, she panted and puffed, bringing her stomach into a clinch with the edge of the desk.

“I was born in ’65,” yelled a snazzy woman in a mauve dress who entered carrying two archive folders.

“That’s no help at all,” Little Lettvik said. “You’re alive.”

8:15 P.M., PMO

Billy T. felt something he could only interpret as longing. It hit him somewhere in his solar plexus, and he was forced to take several deep breaths in order to clear his head.

The Norwegian Prime Minister’s office would have been quite tasteful if it had not been for her lying there stone-dead with her head on the papers in front of her, a literally bloody affront to the interior designer who had carefully chosen the massive desk with its bow-shaped outer edge. The same undulating contours were echoed in a number of places throughout the room, including on a bookcase that admittedly was quite decorative, but its lack of straight lines made it seem totally unfit for purpose. And sure enough, there were not many books in it. The room itself was rectangular. At one end the furniture was arranged for meetings, and at the other end was the desk plus two visitors’ chairs. It contained nothing that could truly be called luxurious. The picture on the wall behind the desk was large, but not particularly attractive, and Billy T. could not immediately identify the artist. The first thought that struck him as he looked around was that he

had seen far more exclusive offices in other places in the country. This space was social democracy through and through—a sober prime ministerial office that would make Norwegian visitors nod in appreciation but which foreign heads of state would probably find conspicuously lacking in flamboyance. There was a door at either end; Billy T. had just entered through one of them, and the other led into a restroom containing a shower and toilet.

The pale physician had bloodstains on his gray jacket. He was struggling to remove his latex gloves, and Billy T. detected a hint of solemnity in his strained voice.

“I believe the Prime Minister died between two and three hours ago. However, that’s only a provisional estimate. Extremely provisional. I am assuming that the temperature in this room has remained constant, at least until our arrival.”

Finally, as the gloves capitulated, saying farewell to his fingers with a sucking sound, they were stuffed into the pocket of his tweed jacket. The doctor straightened up.

“She was shot in the head.”

“Can see that,” Billy T. mumbled.

The Superintendent sent him a warning look.

Billy T. registered it. He turned to face the three men from the crime scene division who had already set to work doing what they had to do, what they had done many times before: they photographed, measured, and brushed their fingerprint powder, moving around the huge office with a grace that would have amazed anyone who had not seen it before. They behaved as though they were used to this sort of thing, as though this was simply routine practice. But there was something approaching the sacred in the room, an absence of the usual gallows humor, an uneasy atmosphere that was exacerbated by the rising temperature. A dead Prime Minister did not invite frivolity.

As always when he found himself in close proximity to a corpse, it struck Billy T. that nothing was as naked as death. Seeing this woman who had ruled the country until three hours ago, this woman whom he had never seen in the flesh but had encountered every single day on TV, in the newspapers, and on the radio; seeing Birgitte Volter, the human being behind the public persona, lying dead on her own desk, this was worse, more embarrassing, and made him feel more self-conscious than seeing her without any clothes. Billy T. turned away and walked across to the window.

The Ministry of Finance was situated to the left, far below. The building seemed to cower in leaden resentment at the newly and very expensively refurbished Supreme Court by its side. Farther to the southwest, Billy T. could just discern the roof of the Parliament Building, which appeared rather reticent from where he stood on the second-to-top floor of the government tower block, a wispy, impotent pennant flying from the flagpole atop its cupola. The executive, the judiciary, and the legislature, observed from a somewhat skewed angle.

And the national newspaper offices of Akersgata winding through it all, Billy T. thought, turning to face the room again.

“Weapon?” he inquired of a young police officer who had stepped toward the door for a moment.

The officer drank some water from a plastic mug, then conscientiously returned the beaker to a uniformed female officer in the outer office. He shook his head. “No.”

“No?”

“Not yet. No weapon.” He wiped his mouth with his jacket sleeve. “We’ll find it soon enough,” he continued. “We have to search further. Bathrooms, hallways, corridors. Damn it, this building’s a mammoth. But it’s probably not in here. The weapon, that is.”

“And this mammoth is actually filled with loads of people, even on a Friday evening?” the Superintendent said with some surprise. “They’re starting to gather in the canteen downstairs. At least sixty or seventy people so far.”

Billy T. swore under his breath. “There must be at least four hundred fucking offices in this building. Do I dare to ask for reinforcements?” He said this with a tense smile, rubbing his hand over his smooth-shaven skull.

“Of course,” said the Superintendent. “We need to find that weapon.”

“So much for the obvious,” Billy T. said, just quietly enough that no one could hear.

He wanted to leave. There was no need for him to be there. He knew that the days, the weeks, yes, perhaps even the months that followed would be hellish. There would be a lengthy state of emergency. No days off and definitely no vacations. No time for the boys. Four children who should be entitled to see him at least on weekends. However, there was no need for him to be here, not now, not in this rectangular office with its fantastic view over the lights of Oslo and a dead woman lying across her desk.

The sense of loneliness seized him again. That was what it was: loneliness and longing. For her, his partner and only confidante. She ought to have been there. Together, they were invincible; alone, he felt that neither his height—six foot seven in his stocking feet—nor the inverted cross he wore in his ear were of any use whatsoever. For the last time, he averted his eyes from the pool of blood underneath the woman’s shattered head.

He turned around and touched his chest.

Hanne Wilhelmsen was in the United States and would not be back until Christmas.

“Shit, Billy T.,” whispered the police officer who had drunk the water. “I’m feeling really sick. That’s never happened to me before. At a crime scene, I mean. Not since I was a rookie.”

Without replying, Billy T. simply glanced at the man and flashed a grimace that, with a certain degree of indulgence, might be taken for a smile.

He felt really awful himself.

8:30 P.M., KVELDSAVISEN EDITORIAL OFFICE

“This must be something colossal,” Knut Fagerborg gasped, flinging off his fleece-lined denim jacket. “Crawling with people, crawling with cars, cordoned off everywhere, and everything so silent! Fuck,

everybody’s so damn serious!”

He collapsed into an office chair that was far too low, his legs flailing about all over the place, making him look like a spider.

Little Lettvik’s left knee was smarting intensely. She stood up and warily set her foot down on the floor, increasing the pressure with extreme caution.

“I want to see for myself,” she said, fishing out a box of small cigars.

Slowly and solicitously, with Knut Fagerborg jogging on the spot, impatient to sprint ahead of her the few yards across to the government tower block, she lit her cigar.

“I think you’re right,” she said, smiling. “This is definitely something colossal.”

She limped her way out of the editorial office.

8:34 P.M., SKAUGUM ESTATE IN ASKER

The black government car drew gently to a halt at the entrance to the royal residence in Asker, half an hour’s drive from central Oslo. A tall slim man in a dark suit opened the right-hand rear door before the vehicle was properly at a standstill and alighted. Shrugging his coat more snugly around himself, he strode toward the entrance. Halfway, he staggered slightly, but only momentarily, and moved a foot to one side to recover his balance.

A uniformed man opened the door and led the Foreign Minister straight into a room resembling a library. In a subdued voice, the man asked the minister to wait. He had raised his eyebrows in surprise when the minister had dismissively waved away his outstretched hand, ready to take his outer garment. Now the tall, dark, ungainly Foreign Minister was sitting in an uncomfortable baroque chair, feeling that there was not enough room for him on it. He pulled his coat even more tightly around his frame, even though he didn’t feel cold.

The King was standing in the doorway, wearing everyday clothes: gray trousers and an open-necked shirt. He looked even more concerned than usual, and his eyes glinted restlessly behind the heavy eyelids that revealed only the lower part of the iris. He was unsmiling, and the Foreign Minister rose to his feet abruptly, holding out his hand.

“Unfortunately, I have extremely grave news, Your Majesty,” he said softly, coughing with his left hand clenched in front of his mouth.

The Queen had followed her husband and stood a couple of yards inside the room, holding a glass containing something with ice cubes. There was a homely clinking sound as she entered, like an invitation to a pleasant evening. She was wearing denim jeans designed specially for older women and a colorful sweater adorned with black and red cows. The professional expression on her face did not succeed in concealing a certain curiosity about the visit.

The Foreign Minister felt unwell. The royal couple seemed to be enjoying a rare evening of peace and quiet at home. Of course, other people too were having their evening spoiled.

He nodded to the Queen before looking into the King's eyes again as he continued. "Prime Minister Volter is dead, Your Majesty. She was shot earlier tonight."

The royal couple exchanged glances, and the King rubbed his nose slowly. Both remained quiet for some time.

"I think the Foreign Minister should take a seat," the King said eventually, pointing toward the chair the minister had just vacated. "Sit down and let us hear more. Perhaps I can take your coat?"

The Foreign Minister looked down at himself with an air that suggested he was not even aware he was wearing a coat. Clumsily, he extricated himself from it, but felt it was too much to hand it over to the King, so instead he hung it over the back of his chair before sitting down again.

The Queen's hand touched his shoulder as she passed to sit in a chair several yards away, a comforting gesture from a woman who had discerned a hint of tears behind the Foreign Minister's extremely thick glasses.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked softly, but the minister shook his head, almost imperceptibly, and cleared his throat once more, this time at length and with obvious difficulty.

"No, I don't think so. This is going to be an exceptionally long night."

8:50 P.M., OLE BRUMMS VEI 212

"My sincere condolences," the Bishop of Oslo said as he attempted to make eye contact with the man facing him.

It was impossible. Roy Hansen had been Birgitte Volter's sweetheart for thirty-four years and married to her for thirty-three of them. They had both been a mere eighteen when the wedding took place, and despite turbulent patches, they had weathered all storms and stayed together even while everyone around them was trying to prove that lifelong marriage couldn't survive such an urbane, hectic environment. Birgitte was not only an important part of his life; in many ways she was his life, something he had regarded as a natural consequence of their joint decision to prioritize her career. Now he sat on the sofa, staring at some nonexistent place.

The Labor Party Secretary stood at the veranda door, appearing very uncomfortable in the Bishop's presence. She had protested at his being there. "I'm the one who knows them," she had said. "For God's sake, Birgitte wasn't even a member of the church!"

But protocol required it, and protocol had to be followed. Especially now. When everything was crazy and upside down and the way nobody ever thought it could be, the dust was brushed off the Crisis Management Handbook. Suddenly it became something new and different rather than simply a book lying in a drawer for when the thing that was never going to happen actually happened.

"I'd like you to leave," whispered the man on the sofa.

The Bishop looked disbelieving for a brief moment, but only for a second; he caught himself and recovered his ecclesiastical dignity.

“This is a very difficult time,” he continued in his east Norwegian accent. “I have the greatest respect for your wish to be alone. Maybe there is someone else? Family, perhaps?”

Roy Hansen continued to stare at something the others could not see. He did not sob, his breathing was even and easy, but a silent stream of tears ran down from his pale blue eyes, a tiny rivulet he had long since given up wiping away.

“She can stay,” he said, without looking at the Party Secretary.

“Then I’ll withdraw,” the Bishop said, though he remained seated. “I shall pray for you and your family. And by all means phone if there’s anything anyone else or I can do for you.”

He still did not get to his feet. The Party Secretary stood at the door, keen to open it and hasten the man’s departure, but something about the situation made her stand absolutely still. The minutes passed, and all that could be heard was the ticking of the oak-cased mantel clock. Suddenly it struck nine: ponderous, strained, hesitant strokes, as though it did not wish the evening to progress.

“Ah, then,” said the Bishop, with a heavy sigh. “I’ll be off.”

When at long last he had gone, the Party Secretary had locked the door behind him and returned to the living room. Roy Hansen looked at her for the first time, a bewildered look that turned into a grimace as he finally burst into tears in earnest. The Party Secretary sat down beside him, and he rested his head on her lap as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Someone will have to speak to Per,” he wept. “I don’t have the strength to tell Per.”

9:03 P.M., ODINS GATE 3

The liver was top quality. He held it up underneath his nose, letting his tongue just touch the pale slice of meat. The slaughterhouse at Torshov was the only one he could truly rely on as far as calf’s liver was concerned, and although it was situated out of his way, the detour was worth the trouble.

He had bought the truffles in France three days earlier. Normally he contented himself with canned ones, but when the opportunity presented itself—something that happened relatively often—there was nothing to compare with the fresh variety.

Ding-dong.

He had to do something about that doorbell. The sound was discordant and atonal, and it startled him every time it rang.

He glanced at his wristwatch, and it crossed his mind that he was not expecting anyone. This was Friday, and the party was not until tomorrow.

En route to the front door, he suddenly stopped, remaining still for a split second, before walking resolutely across to the heavy oak coffee table and taking hold of the object lying there. Without further thought, he opened one of the sideboard doors decorated with carved grapes and placed the item behind the table linen, underneath a tablecloth his great-great-grandmother had woven in the 1840s. He closed the door again and brushed his hands on his flannel trousers before striding out to see who was ringing the doorbell.

“Benjamin Grinde?”

It was a woman who asked. She was in her forties, had three stripes on her shoulders, and looked as though she enjoyed being in uniform; it fit well and suited the matronly bust he could discern underneath her buttoned jacket. However, it appeared that she was far from happy about the business in hand. Avoiding his gaze, she instead stared at a point four inches above his head. At her side stood a somewhat younger man with glasses and a bushy, well-kept beard.

“Yes,” answered Benjamin Grinde, stepping aside as he held the door open in invitation to the two police officers.

They exchanged fleeting glances before deciding to follow the Supreme Court Judge as he headed toward the living room.

“I expect you’ll tell me what this is about,” he said, using his palms to indicate the sofa.

He himself sat down in a deep winged armchair. The police officers remained on their feet: the man stood behind the sofa and fiddled in embarrassment with a seam in the leather, without raising his eyes.

“We would like you to accompany us to the police station,” the woman said, clearing her throat, obviously feeling increasingly ill at ease. “We, that is to say, the attorneys at headquarters, would really appreciate it if you could come down for a . . . a chat, you might say.”

“A chat?”

“An interview.”

The voice emanated from the beard; the man straightened up now as he continued. “We would like to interview you.”

“Interview me? About what?”

“You’ll find that out when we get there. To the police station, I mean.”

Supreme Court Judge Benjamin Grinde gazed first at the woman and then at the man before bursting into laughter. Muted, pleasant laughter. The situation seemed to amuse him enormously.

“I expect you know that I’m familiar with the rules here,” he chortled. “Strictly speaking, I don’t need to come with you at all. Of course, I’m happy to be of service, but I do need to know what this is about.”

Then he stood up and, as if to emphasize his nonchalance, left them and disappeared into the kitchen. He returned immediately, carrying his cognac glass, and raised his glass to them with an elegant movement, as though he had already embarked on his birthday celebrations.

“I expect you probably don’t drink while on duty.” He smiled and sat down slowly in his chair again after picking up a newspaper from the floor.

The female officer sneezed.

“Prosit,” mumbled Benjamin Grinde, fumbling with the financial newspaper, Dagens Næringsliv, in his hand. Oddly, its pink paper matched the room’s furnishings.

“I think you ought to come with us,” the woman said, clearing her throat again, this time with more assurance. “We have a warrant for your arrest, just in case.”

“An arrest warrant? For what, if I may be so bold?”

The newspaper was now back on the floor, and Grinde leaned forward in his seat.

“Honestly,” the female officer said, moving around to the front of the sofa in order to sit down, “wouldn’t it be better if you just came with us? You said so yourself: you know how things work, and it will be such a shambles if we arrest you. The press, for example. Much better to come with us.”

“Let me see that warrant.”

His voice was cold, hard, and incontestable.

The younger man fiddled with his jacket zipper and eventually withdrew a blue sheet from his inside pocket. Hesitant, he remained where he was as he glanced at his older colleague to find out what he should do. She nodded faintly, and Benjamin Grinde was handed the form. He unfolded it, laid it on his knee, and stroked the paper several times.

To top it all, they had used his full title: “Doctor of Law, Bachelor of Medicine, Supreme Court Judge Benjamin Grinde. Charged with violation of penal code section 233, c.f. penal code section 232, for the . . .”

When he read the basis and essential elements of the offense, he grew pale; his complexion turned completely gray behind the slight suntan, and as if by magic, a sheen of moisture covered his face.

“Is she dead?” he whispered to no one in particular. “Is Birgitte dead?”

The two police officers exchanged swift glances, knowing that they were both thinking exactly the same thing: either this man had no idea about what had taken place, or he ought to add “Actor by Royal Appointment” to his already incredibly impressive title.

“Yes. She is dead.”

It was the woman who replied, and for a moment she was afraid that Benjamin Grinde would faint. The color of his complexion was frightening, and if it had not been for his seemingly excellent health, she would have feared for his heart.

“How?”

Benjamin Grinde was on his feet now, but his body seemed slumped. His shoulders were stooped, as if he were drunk, and he had banged the cognac glass down on the table, the golden liquid sloshing around, twinkling in the light from the chandelier prisms above the dining table.

“We can’t tell you that, as you well know,” the woman responded, though her voice had softened, to the irritation of her colleague, who interrupted brusquely.

“Are you coming with us now, then?”

Without uttering a word in reply, Benjamin Grinde folded the blue sheet carefully and precisely before unhesitatingly placing it in his own pocket.

“Of course I’ll come with you,” he muttered. “There’s no need for any kind of arrest.”

Five patrol vehicles were parked outside the venerable old apartment block in Frogner. As he slipped into the rear seat of one of them, he spotted two police officers heading up to his flat.

They were probably going to guard his apartment, he thought. Perhaps they were awaiting a search warrant. Then he fastened his seat belt.

That was when he noticed that his hands were shaking quite violently.

9:30 P.M., KIRKEVEIEN 129

The phone had been ringing continually, and in the end she had pulled out the plug. It was Friday night, and she wanted some time off. Real time off. Honestly. She shuttled to and fro between her office and the Parliament Building every day and wasn’t about to have a hard-earned Friday evening spoiled as well. Both her children were out, and though they were almost grown up, she hardly spoke to them at all. Right at this moment, that didn’t matter. She was exhausted and felt a bit under the weather, and had deliberately left her pager tucked away inside a clothes closet, even though, strictly speaking, she was meant to be reachable at all times. Half an hour ago, she had heard something come in on the fax machine in her bedroom, but she didn’t have the stamina to go and see what it was. Instead, she mixed herself a Campari with a little tonic and lots of ice cubes, propped her feet up on the coffee table, and was on the point of searching for some kind of detective program among the plethora of channels with which she had never managed to become entirely familiar.

NRK, the state broadcaster, was the safest bet.

The news review program’s graphics appeared on the screen. At half past nine? It must be the evening news. As early as this? She stood up to fetch a newspaper.

Then she noticed the vertical text on the picture, down the right-hand side. “News Flash.” It was a special broadcast. She stood quite still with the Campari glass in her hand. The man with the fine, blond hair and tired eyes looked almost choked with tears as he cleared his throat before starting to speak.

“Prime Minister Birgitte Volter is dead, at the age of only fifty-one. She was shot in her office in the tower block inside the government complex some time this afternoon or early evening.”

The Campari glass fell to the floor. From the hollow sound, she could hear that it did not smash, but the pale shag-pile carpet would almost certainly never be the same again. She did not even look at it, but let herself sink down slowly onto the sofa once more.

“Dead,” she whispered. “Birgitte? Dead? Shot?”

“We’re moving across to the government complex.”

A breathless young man, who seemed tiny in a far too big all-weather jacket, gazed into the restless camera with wide eyes. “Yes, I am standing here outside the tower block, and we have just had confirmation that Birgitte Volter has in fact . . .”

He was obviously struggling to find the right words for the occasion and, as he stuttered and spluttered, she noted that he had not even managed to change into a dark suit, as the man in the studio had.

“. . . passed away. From what we now know, she was shot in the head, and we have been informed that she must have died instantly.”

And then he could not think of anything further to say. He swallowed repeatedly, and the camera operator was clearly unsure about whether to keep him in focus. The image veered between the reporter—strongly illuminated by a floodlight—and the scene of subdued activity in the background, where the police had their hands full keeping rubberneckers and journalists outside the red-and-white crime scene tape.

Birgitte was dead. The voices on the news program became distant, and she realized she felt faint. Lowering her head between her knees, she reached out for an ice cube from the carpet. Though it was covered in carpet fluff, she placed it on her forehead all the same. It helped to clear her head.

The anchorman in the studio was making a heroic effort to save his younger, far less experienced colleague standing outside the government offices.

“Do you know if any arrests have been made?”

“No, there’s nothing to suggest that.”

“What about the weapon. Do you know any more about what kind of gun we’re talking about?”

“No, all we’ve been told is that Birgitte Volter is dead and that she has been shot.”

“What’s happening around the tower block at the moment?”

And so they continued, for an eternity, thought the Minister of Health, Ruth-Dorthe Nordgarden, who did not succeed in absorbing much of it at all. Then the TV picture moved from the tower block to the Parliament Building, where a procession of solemn-faced parliamentary leaders was hurrying into the studio.

Telephone!

She restored the plug, and only a few seconds later, the phone rang.

As she replaced the receiver after the call, there was only one thought in her head: Am I going to lose my job now?

She headed for the clothes closet in her bedroom to fish out her pager and look for something suitable to wear. Black. It must be black. But her winter complexion was pale, and black was not the most becoming color. She was aware she was beautiful, she was well aware of that—enough not to choose a black dress in April. They would have to be satisfied with brown. Something dark.

The shock had subsided, and instead she felt a growing sense of irritation.

This was a particularly bad time for Birgitte to have departed this world, to have died. It was extremely inconsiderate of her.

The brown velour dress would have to do.

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