

I

‘WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST reaction when you found her, Thygesen?’ Stribolt asks.

Vilhelm Thygesen doesn’t answer. He has his eyes fixed on a point behind Stribolt, who observes the distracted look on Thygesen’s face and repeats the question in a sharper tone: ‘How did you react when you found the frozen body of the dead woman?’

‘There’s a woman trying to get in,’ Thygesen says, pointing with the stem of his pipe to the point he has been staring at. Stribolt wriggles on the leather sofa and catches sight of Vaage. She is standing on the glass veranda and fumbling with the handle of the door to Thygesen’s living room cum office. The low sun in the middle of the day, which is the second in February, a Friday, causes the frost patterns on the veranda window to glitter. Through the windows of the large log-house in Bestum the light angles in, giving the burlap wallpaper a warm glow, and is reflected by the golden letters on the spine of *Norway’s Laws* and other books on the shelves, causing the wisps of pipe smoke to become visible.

‘It’s not locked, but it’s awkward,’ Thygesen says, getting up and walking to the door.

Stribolt struggles to deal with the unreality of the situation. He is sitting here on official business in the home of a man whose sun he had thought had long since set. A murky legend who, it transpires, is a living legend.

Thygesen has a slight limp. His ponytail, which makes him look like an old hippie, swings back and forth. It doesn’t

go with the Italian-tailored charcoal suit which Thygesen is wearing and definitely not the white shirt and grey-striped silk tie which matches the man's hair almost too perfectly.

To Stribolt it is unimaginable that Thygesen should comb his mane into a ponytail and wear a fashionable suit on a daily basis. He had expected a scruffier turnout. Leaving to meet Thygesen, he had assumed he would be confronted by a wreck, a shipwrecked mariner washed ashore on the sea of life.

Stribolt makes a note on his pad lying on the coffee table: *T has tarted himself up for us.*

Thygesen kicks the door as he twists the handle.

A cold blast of air enters from the veranda. It is freezer temperature outside: minus 18 degrees. Ruddy-faced Vaage has frost on her dark fringe. She looks even more apple-cheeked and attractive than usual, Stribolt muses. Every time he works with Vaage he thinks he will have to have his hair cut as short as hers, take up squash again and get himself into shape. When he was last out on the town a slip of a girl told him he looked like a Buddha with a Beatles wig sliding off the back of his head. Not hard to say something like that when you are in the Buddha Bar, but he took it to heart and the sight of the clientele made him bristle with anger, all those tossers on financial steroids. Now it annoys him that Vaage is wearing an almost identical shiny blue pilot's jacket to his. They aren't in uniform. Although they look as if they are, just not a police uniform.

'More like taxi drivers,' Stribolt mumbles.

Vaage removes her gloves, shakes Thygesen's hand and introduces herself.

'I'm also a Kripos detective,' she says. 'A chief inspector like my colleague Stribolt here.'

'Coffee?' Thygesen asks. 'I've put a pot on.'

'No, thanks,' Vaage says.

Stribolt accepts.

While Thygesen goes out, Vaage examines the room, clearly with some disapproval. Perhaps she thinks it is repugnant that a couple of logs are crackling away on the fire while a very cold woman is lying under a tarpaulin in a corner of Thygesen's large, overgrown garden.

'I thought this bugger Thygesen didn't have two øre to rub together,' Vaage says under her breath. 'He'd gone to the dogs. Done for murder in the seventies, petty fraud in the nineties. Alkie and all-round dick. And then here he is, poncing around in this million-dollar pad in the West End of Oslo.'

'It's just a rambling old house,' Stribolt says.

'Imagine what he can *get* for this place, the plot alone. Why's he trying to trick old dears out of the odd krone when he has all this?'

'It's dangerous to give credence to rumours,' Stribolt answers, turning down the volume of the stereo, which is playing a jazz CD, possibly Miles Davis. 'Our friends at Grønland Police HQ are not always well informed. The two fraud charges against Thygesen were dropped for lack of evidence.'

'What we have in the garden is murder,' Vaage says. '*Premeditated* murder, I would think. The poor girl has been hacked about in every conceivable way.'

Vaage roams around restlessly and scrutinises a new, green transparent iMac on a computer desk, a thick book beside it, next to a south-facing window overlooking the garden.

'Is Thygesen a member of some morose sect?' she asks, lifting up the book.

Lichtturm is written on the cover in big letters.

'I think it's a stamp catalogue,' Stribolt says, trying not to let his voice sound too cutting. He has never got used to the sudden changes in Vaage's temperament and deals with her forthrightness badly every time. She can be as

capricious as the weather on his childhood coast.

‘Right, I thought it might be one of those sect books,’ Vaage says. ‘Lighthouse or whatever it’s called. You’ve heard about *Watchtower*, haven’t you, Smartie Pants?’

Stribolt has no time to respond. Thygesen makes his entry carrying a jug of espresso coffee and three small, brushed-steel cups on a tray.

‘We want permission to carry out a detailed inspection of the site,’ Vaage says.

‘Aren’t you doing that already?’ Thygesen answers, nodding towards the windows. Stribolt looks in the same direction. Down in the south-east corner of the snow-covered garden, where the bushes and scrub appear like frost-ridden trolls, the SOC team, wearing white overalls over thermal suits, are inspecting the area around the spruce tree where the woman was found. Three Kripos officers are busy in Skogveien. They are crouched down by the wire fence that borders Thygesen’s property from the road. Presumably they are looking for tyre marks in the snow. Two police cars are parked further up the road behind a cordon. One of them has a rotating blue light. Behind it there is a red Saab which Stribolt thinks he recognises – a press car from Akersgata, the Norwegian Fleet Street. A little crowd of curious onlookers has gathered by the cars, mostly schoolchildren by the look of it.

‘I’m referring to an inspection of the *house*,’ Vaage says.

Thygesen places the tray on the coffee table. He fills all three cups and sits down in the Stressless, which clearly belongs to the man of the house, rests his right foot on a stool and lifts his cup.

Stribolt notices Thygesen’s hands trembling. He has small hands, surprisingly brown for the middle of the winter, with a number of conspicuous liver spots.

‘The house,’ Thygesen repeats. ‘Is that really necessary?’

‘The officers in charge of this investigation have stated

we *definitely* have to search your house,' Vaage answers.

'I see. I have a couple of legal objections. But I don't want to be difficult. Odd that you're both Nordlanders, by the way,' Thygesen says. He lights his pipe with a match. Picks an imaginary crumb from his beard, which is the same colour as the espresso cups and as well brushed.

Stribolt and Vaage exchange glances. Stribolt's Finnmark dialect has faded so much, in his own opinion, that you would have to be a Linguistics Professor to hear that he is from Hammerfest. Even a professor would be deceived by his Oslo-acquired 'a' endings. It is easier for a layman to hear that Vaage is from Helgeland, the most southerly district of northern Norway.

'You take the room at the end,' Stribolt says to Vaage. 'I'd like to finish this interview without any interruptions.'

'Cool worktop,' Vaage says, running her hand along the polished surface, which is made of a large piece of shiny black marble, three fingers thick. 'Must have cost a *fortune*?'

'It's home-made,' Thygesen answers. 'I used to work with stone once upon a time.'

Vaage must have forgotten she didn't want any coffee. She takes a cup, drains it in two or three quick sips, goes out on to the veranda and starts talking on her phone.

'Where were we?' Stribolt asks.

'You were asking me what my reaction was when I found her.'

'Let me rewind a bit. I need more accurate personal details.'

Stribolt checks his notes.

'It's correct that you're 63 and on disability benefit, is it?'

'Soon 64, and I prefer to call it a disability *pension*,' Thygesen says. He pulls a face which Stribolt finds hard to interpret: is he offended or is he acting offended?

'You have standards which do not seem to correspond to the image I have of people living on disability benefit.'

Thygesen leans forward, knocks the ash out of his pipe and splays his palms.

‘The house and furniture are inherited. I have no debts. I have some rental income and I earn a fair bit buying and selling stamps over the internet.’

‘Like those on the screen?’ Stribolt asks, pointing to the iMac.

‘Yes, they’re African stamps from colonial times. Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Tanganyika.’

Thygesen reaches over a stamp album and opens it at a page marked with a silk ribbon in Norwegian colours.

‘This is the closest I came to a Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav,’ Thygesen says, holding out the ribbon. ‘This is the same page you saw on the screen. I photograph album pages with a digital camera and put them on the net. If I can sell this collection I’ll earn 200 dollars.’

Stribolt peers at the stamps, which have either the British Queen or an elephant as the motif. Kilimanjaro takes centre stage on one stamp.

‘Let’s drop the philately,’ he says. ‘Do you deal in badges and coins as well?’

‘On the odd occasion.’

‘I have a vague idea you run an unlicensed legal business.’

‘Your sources are not mistaken,’ Thygesen says. ‘Why wouldn’t I offer assistance to widows and the fatherless if they ask nicely? Society at large had no further use of me and dropped me like a dead fish. But in the micro-society around me there are deserving poor who may even need such a decrepit pedant as yours truly.’

‘Do you take a fee off them?’

Thygesen shrugs.

‘And declare your earnings to the tax authorities?’ Stribolt enquires.

‘I thought you were Kripos, not the Fraud Squad.’

Stribolt notices that Vaage's irritation with Thygesen has rubbed off on him. It is a risk working as a pair, with one officer acting as the aggressive partner and the other playing the more laidback, reserved part. If the play-acting fails it is easy to slip into the other's role. At the back of his head Stribolt hears the voices of the veterans there are left at Kripos when reports of the dead woman in Thygesen's garden came in: Off you go. Catch the bastard now, once and for all. He was one of us in a way. He was a cop in his day, then he became a murderer.

Now he is king of all he surveys here, Thygesen of all people, in a palace in the West End behaving like a mafioso. Teasing us with his under-the-table cash.

'So it's black money,' Stribolt states.

'Blacker than the night,' Thygesen says, bursting into laughter. He has brown stains on his teeth. 'But how I make a living should hardly concern a murder investigation. At least not as long as I have the status of a witness and not a suspect. I was skint for many years, scraping the bottom because of the demon drink. Then I managed to pick myself up by my bootstraps from the hell. Do you and your colleagues imagine I have lapsed into crime?'

Stribolt grips the marble worktop. He would have loved to deflate Thygesen. Stick a sharp point in his skinny carcass – much thinner than on the photos in Kripos's files – as he sits there shaking with extremely inappropriate laughter. Who gave Thygesen the idea that he was only a witness? He could become a suspect in a flash.

'You said you went down the garden to cut off spruce twigs,' Stribolt says. 'So you had a knife on you?'

'Indeed,' Thygesen says. His laughter had subsided. His eyes had narrowed. 'For Christ's sake, you don't think I stabbed her, whoever she is, do you? That I killed the little lady and left her under a tree in my own garden? Surely you can't have *such* a fatuous working hypothesis.'

‘We’re keeping all avenues open,’ Stribolt says, annoyed that he lets such a cliché pass his lips. ‘What about the twigs?’

‘I’ve already told you.’

‘Try again.’

Thygesen pours himself another cup of coffee and produces a little silver box from his jacket pocket. It contains snus, in pouch-form, to be placed under the top lip.

Thygesen repeats that he realised no birds had been in the two corn sheaves he hung from the veranda posts for Christmas, despite how cold the weather had been.

‘Then it struck me I’d forgotten to add spruce twigs to the sheaves. As a landing place for tits. I went down to lop some twigs off the spruces. When I pushed apart the lower branches I saw a body lying there.’

Stribolt takes notes.

‘*That* is extremely suspicious,’ Thygesen says. ‘A man tending his Christmas corn sheaf in February.’

‘Spare me the sarcasm,’ Stribolt says.

‘Apologies. Do you think I’m made of iron or what? All this has been very upsetting.’

‘You went out at a quarter past six. That’s early, isn’t it?’

‘I usually get up early. I’d slept badly.’

‘Any special reason?’

‘It’s got nothing to do with the case. I may come back to it. Someone close to me is in trouble. Maybe because of uranium. It’s a long story.’

Stribolt sips at the espresso. It tastes of mafia, ergo Italian, ergo absolutely excellent. He asks whether Thygesen minds if he lights a cigarette, and is told, as he had expected from a smoker, that of course it is fine. He can feel the pressure, which always builds during an interview, lightening.

‘We have a time gap here,’ Stribolt says. ‘You found her

at around six. But you didn't alert the police until six forty-two.'

'I needed time to think straight. Get over the shock. I knew I would come under suspicion, because of my criminal record.'

'You said just now that suspecting you was a fatuous working hypothesis.'

'OK. Forget it. I thought time wasn't important. After all, she must have been there a good while. She was like deep-frozen. And then there were the tracks... they slightly unsettled me.'

'What tracks?' Stribolt asks, even though he knows the tracks he means: the tiny animals' tracks around the body, which made him stop and swallow several times before he could continue examining the body.

'You saw them yourself when you were down there doing a recce. Mouse tracks, I would say, in the thin layer of snow beneath the tree. Unless they were from a wild mink. I'm glad she was lying on her stomach. When I plucked up the courage to turn her over I was expecting the animals not only to have attacked her fingers but her face as well. And eyes. Thank God, though, everything was intact. I could see the blood on the light-coloured blouse was her own. I saw the rips in her clothing. After I'd seen enough I had to take a trip to the bathroom, if you know what I mean.'

Stribolt can understand the shock and the nausea. Even for a man like Thygesen, who has been around, it must have been distressful to find a dead woman in his garden. If he had found her, that is, if everything he is saying now is not a carefully prepared pose.

'Your first reaction before you touched the body?' Stribolt persists.

Thygesen takes out a snus pouch, which always reminds Stribolt of a used miniature tea bag, and puts it on the lid

of the box. Stribolt crushes the ultra-light Marlboro in the ashtray.

‘I thought she was a druggie who’d fallen over the fence,’ Thygesen says tentatively. ‘And was sleeping off a high. She was wearing a down jacket after all. I thought she was sheltered by the spruce. It didn’t occur to me how bloody cold it was.’

Stribolt scribbles away on his pad.

‘And then?’ he asks.

‘I’m sure you know from your own experience that your brain whirs for a few seconds before you realise you’re standing in front of a corpse. My next thought was that she’d come a long way. She was... what do bloody politicians call them?... culturally diverse.’

‘What made you think that?’

‘I had a *déjà vu* experience. There used to be a reception centre for asylum-seekers down the road here. Very unpopular with the posh neighbours. One evening I found a man bleeding in my garden. He wasn’t lying on the ground but on a garden bench. A Kurd. From Iraq, as far as I remember. He’d been in a fight at the centre and had been stabbed in the neck with a screwdriver. He didn’t want to report the incident and didn’t want to see a doctor. It cost me half a bottle of whiskey to thaw him out and put on a bandage. There was something about the dead woman that reminded me of him. The raven-black hair, the very pronounced eyebrows.’

Stribolt lights another cigarette and allows a silence to develop.

‘There’s something else you’d like to tell me about your reflections by the body, isn’t there?’ he says.

‘A total absurdity,’ Thygesen answers. ‘It occurred to me that an estate agent might have dumped her there.’

‘An estate agent?’

They are interrupted by the ring of Stribolt’s mobile

phone, the ridiculous march jingle he hasn't been able to re-programme, and he unhooks the machine from his belt, presses the answer key and listens.

'This is private,' he says to Thygesen.

'Shall I go away?'

'No, I can go into the hall.'

In the hall it is as untidy, down-at-heel and cold as Stribolt had expected Vilhelm Thygesen's home to be. He trips on a threadbare rag rug, kicks over a bamboo ski stick that should have been in a museum – and sits down on the lowest step of the stairs leading to the first floor. A Kripos SOC officer in polyethylene coveralls, with blue gloves on his hands, steals past.

Stribolt has received a call from Akersgata. It is a female reporter, whom he knows, has occasionally advised and even taken for a drink to Tostrupkjeller bar.

'It is correct that we're performing a crime-scene investigation at the house of ex-solicitor Vilhelm Thygesen in connection with a suspected murder,' Stribolt says. 'It is correct that we've found a dead body in the garden. You must have seen that from your press car. But it is not correct that Thygesen is a suspect. We're interviewing him as a witness.'

Stribolt discovers that he is holding a cigarette butt that is still glowing. He stubs it out in a metal bowl with remains of what might have been cat food. Does Thygesen, the devil incarnate, keep cats?

'What do you mean by once a murderer always a murderer?' Stribolt says. 'Please spare me such nonsense. If I may offer you some advice, play this case down and do not splash Thygesen over the whole of the front page. You might have a vague memory of the wonderful Norwegian press's code of ethics poster? Stick to it. If Thygesen really turns out to be the murderer I'll serve you his head on a silver platter.'

Stribolt notices a movement against his trouser leg and feels the hairs on his neck standing up. It is a cat. A little tiger, as lean as her owner, though not quite so grey-haired. Stribolt has always thought he should be allergic to cats. Even though he isn't, he still reacts mentally. It is his firm conviction that all kinds of cats, whether big lions or tiny kitties, should be kept in a zoo. He kicks the mog away. Had anyone seen him he would have maintained that it wasn't a kick but a tap, no more violent than the kick-off at the start of a football match.

'How did you know the deceased was a woman?' he asks the reporter. 'All right, let's say it's a woman then.'

The mog is eating the cigarette end now. That should give it diarrhoea.

'No, we haven't identified her. She doesn't match anyone on our missing-persons list. But we did have a quick look at the list before we set off for the crime scene. You'll have to ask Vaage about an ID. Hello, are you there? There's a bad connection. I'm busy interviewing. Yes, I heard you say you don't get on so well with Vaage. But none of us in Kripos is in this business to be loved by our venerable journalists.'

The inquisitive puss doesn't eat the cigarette end after all. It is a smart cat.

'Hello, yes. No, we don't know who she is,' Stribolt says, pressing the 'off' button. He sighs with relief as he attempts to forget that he said x and thought y to fob off the journalist. And forces himself to return to deadly, literally deadly, serious matters.

The dead woman hadn't had her throat cut. On her neck he had observed only a few scratches. It was her breasts and her stomach that had taken the brunt of the attack. By some lunatic. So many cuts.

The SOC officer, Larsson, to be precise, comes down from the first floor.

'Do you know if Thygesen has a tenant?' Larsson asks.

‘There seems to be a separate flat up here. The door’s locked.’

‘Ask Thygesen for a key. He mentioned something about rental income. He’s probably got a tenant living there.’

When they arrived, Stribolt noticed there were two bells by the front door. He goes outside and the cold hits him in the face. Under one bell, an old-fashioned bronze affair, there is a brass plate saying *Fam Thygesen*.

Not much left of the family, Stribolt muses. Behind the façade Thygesen has erected it isn’t hard to see a lonely soul. He lives alone, as the majority of city inhabitants do. If there are no ghosts haunting the loft of the hundred-year-old house, there are certainly countless demons haunting the owner’s brain.

Beneath a modern, white bell there is a strip of Dymo tape with *VC Alam* written on it. So, judging by the name, the tenant is an immigrant. A Pakistani?

On the drive leading to the front door is one of the police’s civilian vehicles, which most officers regard as an old banger, but Stribolt loves driving it. Alongside, by a garage overgrown with moss, built with logs like the house, stands a rust-riddled, snow-covered Fiesta, with no registration plates. It is dwarfed by Kripos’s old 4WD Nissan with all their vital equipment on the flat bed.

The garage has a lean-to shed on the side, presumably for wood. Many cords of birch are piled up neatly along the wall. There is a chopping block with an axe sunk in it. Newly cloven logs lie scattered around. Beside the garage is a brand-new, illuminated greenhouse. Through the misted-up glass Stribolt can make out plants that are redolent of marijuana. They are most probably tomatoes.

A gust of wind causes the snow on the tall pine trees to fall by the wrought-iron gate facing Skogveien. Stribolt shivers and makes his way back indoors. In the corners of the

hall piles of work and outdoor clothes hang from hooks. On a stool there is a chainsaw, which is dripping oil into a little pool on the floor. He concludes that Thygesen spends a lot of time working in the garden and cutting wood when he is not bodging legal jobs or trying his hand as an internet pedlar.

Or committing acts so unpleasant that not even a seasoned murder investigator likes to contemplate them.

From the belt of wadmál overalls hangs a knife in a leather sheath with silver ornamentation.

The shaft of the knife appears to be made of reindeer horn. There are some reddish-brown stains on the handle.

Larsson comes in and shows him a key.

‘Thygesen said the tenant was a woman,’ Larsson says. ‘Apparently she’s working abroad.’

‘Check out the knife with the reindeer horn handle,’ Stribolt says. ‘Are they blood stains?’

‘Looks like dried blood, yes. But I think the handle’s made of ivory.’

‘Coming from Finnmark, I know perfectly well what reindeer horn looks like. Besides, trade in ivory is forbidden.’

‘Not antique ivory,’ Larsson says, carefully slipping the sheath off the belt and putting the knife into a plastic bag.

‘See if you can find a picture of the tenant upstairs. A passport photo. Anything.’

‘You think it’s *her*? You think he murdered his own tenant?’

‘I don’t think anything.’

In the living room Thygesen is bent over the soapstone stove, warming his hands. Stribolt coughs. Thygesen straightens up.

‘Let’s sit back down, shall we,’ Stribolt says. ‘Tell me about your tenant.’

Thygesen takes a seat and stares vacantly into the room, where the light has begun to fade.

‘Why?’ he says. ‘Vera’s been in the Balkans since just after Christmas. She knows even less about what has happened than I do.’

‘Vera Alam?’ Stribolt asks, and makes a note.

‘Vera Christophersen Alam. Norwegian mother. Father was from Bangladesh. She’s a kind of stepdaughter to me,’ Thygesen says, and falls silent.

‘Oh, yes?’

Thygesen rummages through his jacket pockets. Finds the pipe he put down on the marble table top, but doesn’t fill it, just sits polishing the bowl with his fingertips.

‘As you get older you have so many stories to tell,’ Thygesen says at length. ‘I’ll give you the edited highlights. Vera’s mother and I were a couple. She was murdered. Little Vera went out into the world. Started working for idealistic organisations. More coffee?’

Without waiting for an answer, Thygesen fetches a copper kettle he has put on the stove.

He was suspected at that time in the eighties as well, Stribolt reflects. For the murder of a female journalist. Was that murder ever cleared up satisfactorily? The alleged murderer shot himself by the River Lysaker.

‘It’s old-style coffee,’ Thygesen says. ‘I realised you liked espresso, but I haven’t any more Lavazza.’

He has brought out bigger cups and a little jug of milk.

Stribolt reflects that it will take more than coffee with milk to sidetrack him.

‘Vera came home five or six years ago,’ Thygesen says. ‘She was going to study at Blindern University. Serbo-Croat. She wanted to rent a room here. I liked the idea of that and I have more than enough space. She’s been at home very little of the time, but has kept the two rooms as a fixed point in her life. We’ve agreed a price that is way below the market rate.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘In Bosnia, working for Norwegian People’s Aid. She was home for a while at Christmas and went back on the 27th. She had a partner here, but now there is nothing that binds her to Norway, and an old fogey like me can’t hold her.’

‘How old is Vera Alam?’ Stribolt asks.

‘A bit younger than you. Thirty-three.’

Thygesen has started fiddling with the snus box. Stribolt tries the coffee, which tastes like coffee did in his youth in Prærien, the northernmost town in the world.

‘You didn’t have a relationship beyond the rental contract?’

Thygesen gives a crooked grin.

‘I’m starting to be too tired for that kind of thing. And if I’d tried I wouldn’t have had a chance.’

‘Why not?’

‘Quite simply because she’s a modern girl and her partners are other women.’

They both give a start at the wail of a police siren. The sound dies away as quickly as it began. Stribolt has taken up a position so that he has a view of the glass veranda. He can confirm that now there are birds in Thygesen’s sheaves, even though there were no spruce twigs in them.

Vaage and Larsson enter. Larsson has something hidden behind his back and Stribolt guesses it is the knife.

Vaage, who is either unusually fierce or pretending to be, lays a colour photo on the table.

‘Is this your tenant?’ she asks.

‘Bloody hell, not much sacrosanct to you, eh,’ Thygesen sighs. ‘Is it absolutely necessary to rifle through *her* things?’

Stribolt looks at the picture. It shows a dark-haired woman leaning against a jeep and squinting into the bright sun, with her sunglasses perched on top of her head.

He and Vaage exchange glances. She pinches her mouth. They are both thinking the same: there is a striking similarity between Vera Alam and the murdered woman.

Thygesen, almost as a reflex action, takes a cigarette from Stribolt's packet and lights it with hands that are trembling a lot now.

Confess, Stribolt thinks. Confess this very minute. We have the body, we have the knife, we have the motive: jealousy.

'I can read your thoughts,' Thygesen says, his lips quivering. 'If you can call them *thoughts* or anything so exalted. Shit for brains! I know Kripos has the highest clear-up rate for murder in the world. What clever cops you are, eh! But if you really think I killed Vera you're the two least talented detectives ever to have worn shoes. Sherlock Holmes will be turning in his grave.'

'Relax,' Vaage says.

'Relax?' hisses Thygesen. His lean face is as red as the embers in the stove. 'I've never had any children. The girl I've regarded as my daughter isn't lying under a spruce tree in Norway. Vera's lying in hospital in Sarajevo. And if anyone has snuffed her out it isn't Mr Thygesen but fucking NATO.'

'NATO? How come?' Stribolt asks.

'She's had a tumour lasered off her oesophagus. She emailed to tell me the lump was benign. Her colleagues have phoned to say they're not so sure. They reckon she might have been poisoned by depleted uranium. During the mine-clearance programme she went to every bombed village in Bosnia. She drank water and ate vegetables there. Since then she's worked in Kosovo and recently in Serbian districts of Sarajevo where people think they've been poisoned on a regular basis.'

'We don't need a party-political broadcast,' Vaage says grumpily. 'How can we get confirmation that Alam is in Sarajevo?'

'Easy as wink,' Thygesen answers. 'Ring Norwegian People's Aid.'

Vaage fans her face.

'I'm going crazy with all the smoke in here,' she says, walking towards the veranda door; she gives it a hefty kick, frightens away the sparrows and tits, stands outside and barks down her phone.

'We'd better get Vera Alam checked out,' Stribolt says. 'You mentioned something about estate agents, Thygesen?'

'Yes, just blather. It struck me as a remote possibility that an estate agent might have put a body in my garden. They've been hovering over me like vultures, these agents, to get me to sell so that they can build terraced houses on this site and shovel in the millions. The perverse idiots might even succeed if they can get me locked up for another murder.'

Stribolt had to stifle a smile.

'You haven't got any better theories that might be able to help us Kripos cripples?'

'One,' Thygesen says. 'Her ending up in my garden is completely random. I think she was killed somewhere else, transported to a quiet part of town and thrown over the fence where the spruces would hide her. The person or persons who did it needed time to make their getaway. But they weren't frightened the body could lead the police back to them when she was found.'

Stribolt writes this down. He notices he has lost some of his steam.

Not so with Vaage, who reluctantly has to confirm that Norwegian People's Aid's information tallies with what Thygesen has said. She hasn't closed the veranda door after her when she came in; she is a fresh-air fiend. She beckons to Larsson, who slips in from the wings and places the knife on the table.

Thygesen doesn't react noticeably at the sight of the knife.

'Here we have a blood-stained knife,' Vaage proclaims.

'Beef,' Thygesen says. 'I was sent a load of beef by a

friend, Bernhard Levin, former solicitor colleague. Now seized by an insane fear of mad cow disease. I cut up the meat with a hunting knife, which is the sharpest I have, and put it in the freezer.'

'And the other knives?' Vaage asks.

'They're around. You'll find them,' Thygesen says, looking at his watch, an Omega with a manual wind facility. 'If you would excuse me... I have to go to a funeral. I suppose you must have guessed from my attire. A mourning suit doesn't gather moths when you get to my age. The show gets under way at half past three. In the awful Ullern church at the top of the hill. One of my best friends from school. We bought a car together to celebrate the end of our schooldays, a Packard. It would be best if you posted someone in the house until I'm back, so we don't have to bother with keys.'

Stribolt accompanies Thygesen out. From behind all the work clothes in the hall Thygesen hauls out a beige camel-hair coat, which is one of the most elegant Stribolt has ever seen.

'Who owns the little Ford with no plates?' Stribolt asks.

'It's Vera's wreck. I haven't had a driving licence for many years.'

'I'll stay here until you get back, and then we can continue the interview.'

'Fair enough,' Thygesen answers, heading for the gate. He has forgotten to change into outdoor shoes.

He'll freeze his toes off, Stribolt thinks.

'I've put a tail on Thygesen,' Vaage states.

Stribolt doesn't reply. He suspects now that winter and spring could pass before they find a solution – or they are facing the unsolvable. He doesn't tell Vaage though. She won't want to hear that.