

A black and white photograph of a snowy winter scene. In the foreground, a small, dark wooden cabin with a snow-covered roof and a single lit window sits on a snow-covered hill. Bare, snow-laden trees surround the cabin. In the background, a lone figure stands on a distant ridge under a cloudy sky. A green circular graphic is overlaid on the lower left of the image.

**A
HARRY HOLE
THRILLER**

**The
Leopard**

JO NESBO

OVER 23 MILLION BOOKS SOLD WORLDWIDE

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Copyright

About the Book

Two young women are found dead, both drowned in their own blood. Then a female politician is found brutally murdered in a city park. The crime scenes offer no clues, the media is reaching fever pitch, and the police are running out of options.

There is only one man who can help them solve the case, but Inspector Harry Hole doesn't want to be found ...

About the Author

Jo Nesbo is a musician, songwriter, economist and author. His first crime novel featuring Harry Hole was published in Norway in 1997 and was an instant hit, winning the Glass Key Award for best Nordic crime novel (an accolade shared with Peter Høeg, Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson). *The Leopard* is the sixth of Nesbo's novels to be translated into English and went straight to the top of the bestseller charts in its first week of publication.

Don Bartlett lives in Norfolk and works as a freelance translator of Scandinavian literature. He has translated, or co-translated, Norwegian novels by Lars Saabye Christensen, Roy Jacobsen, Ingvar Ambjørnsen, Kjell Ola Dahl, Gunnar Staalesen and Pernille Rygg.

ALSO BY JO NESBO

The Redbreast

A report of a rare and unusual gun being fired sparks Harry's interest. Then a former soldier is found with his throat cut. Next Harry's former partner is murdered. Why had she been trying to reach Harry on the night she was killed?

Nemesis

A man is caught on CCTV, shooting dead a cashier at a bank. Harry begins his investigation but after a dinner with an old flame, wakes up with no memory of the last 12 hours. Then the girl is found dead and he begins to receive threatening emails; is someone is trying to frame him for her death?

The Devil's Star

When a young woman is murdered in her Oslo flat and a tiny red diamond in the shape of a five-pointed star is found behind her eyelid, Harry is assigned the case alongside his long-time adversary Tom Waaler. On notice to quit the force, Harry is forced to drag himself out of his alcoholic stupor when it becomes apparent that Oslo has a serial killer on its hands.

The Redeemer

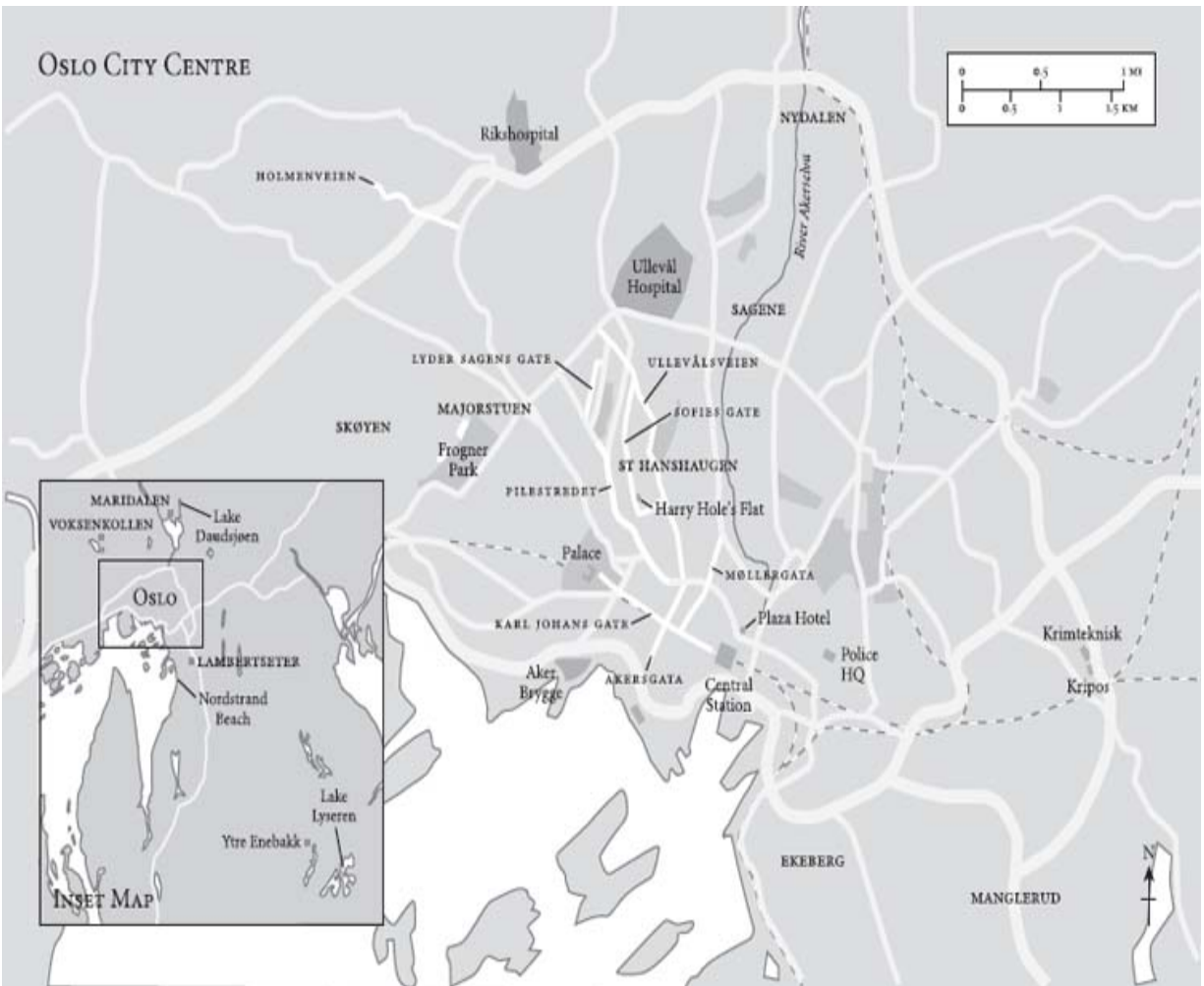
On a freezing December night, one of the singers at a Christmas concert is shot dead. Harry and his team are called in to investigate but have little to work with – there is no immediate suspect, no weapon and no motive. But

when the assassin discovers he's shot the wrong man,
Harry find his troubles have only just begun.

The Snowman

On the night the first snow falls, a young mother vanishes from her home. Is there a link between her disappearance and a menacing letter Harry received months before?

When a second woman disappears it seems that Harry's worst fears are confirmed: for the first time in his career, Harry is confronted with a serial killer who will drive him to the brink of madness.



JO NESBO

The Leopard

TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN BY
Don Barlett

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

1

The Drowning

SHE AWOKE. BLINKED in the pitch darkness. Yawned, and breathed through her nose. She blinked again. Felt a tear run down her face, felt it dissolve the salt of other tears. But saliva was no longer entering her throat; her mouth was dry and hard. Her cheeks were forced out by the pressure from inside. The foreign body in her mouth felt as though it would explode her head. But what was it? What was it? The first thing she thought when she awoke was that she wanted to go back. Back into the dark, warm depths that had enveloped her. The injection he had given her had not worn off yet, but she knew pain was on the way, felt it coming in the slow, dull beat of her pulse and the jerky flow of blood through her brain. Where was he? Was he standing right behind her? She held her breath, listened. She couldn't hear anything, but she could sense a presence. Like a leopard. Someone had told her leopards made so little noise they could sneak right up to their prey in the dark. They could regulate their breathing so that it was in tune with yours. Could hold their breath when you held yours. She was certain she could feel his body heat. What was he waiting for? She exhaled again. And at that same moment was sure she had felt breath on her neck. She whirled round, hit out, but was met by air. She hunched up, tried to make herself small, to hide. Pointless.

How long had she been unconscious?

The drug wore off. The sensation lasted only for a fraction of a second. But it was enough to give her the foretaste, the promise. The promise of what was to come.

The foreign body placed on the table in front of her had been the size of a billiard ball, made of shiny metal with punched-out small holes and figures and symbols. From one of the holes protruded a red wire with a looped end, which instantly made her think of the Christmas tree that would need decorating at her parents' house on 23 December, in seven days. With shiny balls, Christmas pixies, hearts, candles and Norwegian flags. In eight days they would be singing a traditional Christmas carol, and she would see the twinkling eyes of her nephews and nieces as they opened their presents. All the things she should have done differently. All the days she should have lived to the full, avoiding escapism, should have filled with happiness, breath and love. The places she had merely travelled through, the places she was planning to visit. The men she had met, the man she had still not met. The foetus she had got rid of when she was seventeen, the children she had not yet had. The days she had wasted for the days she thought she would have.

Then she had stopped thinking about anything except the knife that had been brandished before her. And the gentle voice that had told her to put the ball in her mouth. She had done so, of course she had. With her heart thumping she had opened her mouth as wide as she could and pushed the ball in with the wire left hanging outside. The metal tasted bitter and salty, like tears. Then her head had been forced back, and the steel burned against her skin as the knife was laid flat against her throat. The ceiling and the room were illuminated by a standard lamp leaning against the wall in one of the corners. Bare, grey concrete. Apart from the lamp, the room contained a white plastic camping table, two chairs, two empty beer bottles and two people. Him and her. She smelt a leather glove as a finger had tugged lightly at the red loop hanging from her mouth. And the next moment her head had seemed to explode.

The ball had expanded and forced itself against the inside of her mouth. But however wide she opened her jaws, the pressure was constant. He had examined her with a concentrated, engaged expression, like a dentist checking to see whether the orthodontic brace was sitting as it should. A little smile intimated satisfaction.

With her tongue she could feel circular ridges around the holes in the ball and that was what was pressing against her palate, against the soft flesh of her tongue, against her teeth, against the uvula. She had tried to say something. He had listened patiently to the inarticulate sounds emerging from her mouth. Had nodded when she gave up, and had taken out a syringe. The drop on the tip had glinted in the torchlight. He had whispered something in her ear: 'Don't touch the wire.'

Then he had injected her in the neck. She was out in seconds.

She listened to her own terrified breathing as she blinked in the darkness.

She had to do something.

She placed her palms on the chair seat, which was clammy from her perspiration, and pushed herself up. No one stopped her.

She advanced with tiny steps until she hit a wall. Groped her way along to a smooth, cold surface. The metal door. She pulled at the bolt. It didn't budge. Locked. Of course it was locked. What had she been thinking? Was that laughter she could hear, or was the sound coming from inside her head? Where was he? Why was he playing with her like this?

Do something. Think. But to think, she would first have to get rid of this metal ball before the pain drove her insane. She put her thumb and first finger in the corners of her mouth. Felt the ridges. Tried in vain to get her fingers

under one of them. Had a coughing fit and a panic attack when she couldn't breathe. She realised that the ridges had made the flesh around her windpipe swell, that soon she would be in danger of suffocating. She kicked the metal door, tried to scream, but the ball stifled the sound. She gave up again. Leaned against the wall. Listened. Was that his wary tread she could hear? Was he moving around the room? Was he playing blind man's buff with her? Or was it her blood throbbing past her ears? She steeled herself against the pain and forced her mouth shut. The ridges were hardly down before they sprang back and forced her mouth open again. The ball seemed to be pulsating now, as though it had become an iron heart, a part of her.

Do something. Think.

Springs. The ridges were spring-loaded.

They had jumped up when he pulled the wire.

'Don't touch the wire,' he had said.

Why not? What would happen?

She slid down the wall until she was sitting. Cold damp rose from the concrete floor. She wanted to scream again, but she couldn't. Quiet. Silence.

All the things she should have said to those she loved, instead of the words that had served to fill the silence with those to whom she was indifferent.

There was no way out. There was just her and this unbelievable pain, her head exploding.

'Don't touch the wire.'

If she pulled it, the ridges might retract into the ball, and she would be spared the pain.

Her thoughts ran in the same circles. How long had she been here? Two hours? Eight hours? Twenty minutes?

If all you had to do was pull the wire, why hadn't she already done it? Because the warning had been given by an obvious sicko? Or was this part of the game? Being tricked into resisting the temptation to stop this quite unnecessary pain? Or was the game about defying the warning and

pulling the wire, causing ... causing something dreadful to happen? What would happen? What was this ball?

Yes, it was a game, a brutal game. And she had to play. The pain was intolerable, her throat was swelling, soon she would suffocate.

She tried to scream again, but it subsided into a sob, and she blinked and blinked, without producing any further tears.

Her fingers found the string hanging from her lips. She pulled tentatively until it was taut.

There was so much she regretted not having done, naturally. But if a life of self-denial would had placed her anywhere else than here, right now, she would have chosen that. She just wanted to live. Any sort of life. As simple as that.

She pulled the wire.

* * *

The needles shot out of the circular ridges. They were seven centimetres long. Four burst through her cheeks on each side, three into the sinuses, two up the nasal passages and two out through the chin. Two needles pierced the windpipe and one the right eye, one the left. Several needles penetrated the rear part of the palate and reached the brain. But that was not the direct cause of her death. Because the metal ball impeded movement, she was unable to spit out the blood pouring from the wounds into her mouth. Instead it ran down her windpipe and into her lungs, not allowing oxygen to be absorbed into her bloodstream, which in turn led to a cardiac arrest and what the pathologist would call in his report cerebral hypoxia, that is, lack of oxygen to her brain. In other words, Borgny Stem-Myhre drowned.

2

The Illuminating Darkness

18 December

The days are short. It's still light outside, but here in my cutting room there is eternal darkness. In the light from my work lamp the people in the pictures on the wall look so irritatingly happy and unsuspecting. So full of expectations, as though they take it for granted that all life lies before them, a perfectly calm ocean of time, smooth and unruffled. I have taken cuttings from the newspaper, snipped off all the lachrymose stories about the shocked family, edited out the gory details about the finding of the body. Contented myself with the inevitable photo a relative or a friend has given a persistent journalist, the picture of when she was in her prime, smiling as though immortal.

The police don't know a lot. Not yet. But soon they will have more to work with.

What is it, where is it, whatever it is that makes a murderer? Is it innate, is it in a gene, inherited potential that some have and others do not? Or is it shaped by need, developed in a confrontation with the world, a survival strategy, a life-saving sickness, rational insanity? For just as sickness is a fevered bombardment of the body, insanity is a vital retreat to a place where one can entrench oneself anew.

For my part, I believe that the ability to kill is fundamental to any healthy person. Our existence is a fight for gain, and whoever cannot kill his neighbour has no right to an existence. Killing is, after all, only hastening the

inevitable. Death allows no exceptions, which is good because life is pain and suffering. In that sense, every murder is an act of charity. It just doesn't seem like that when the sun warms your skin or water wets your lips and you recognise your idiotic lust for life in every heartbeat and are ready to buy mere crumbs of time with everything you have accrued through life: dignity, status, principles. That is when you have to dig deep, to give a wide berth to the confusing, blinding light. Into the cold illuminating darkness. And perceive the hard kernel. The truth. For that is what I had to find. That is what I found. Whatever it is that makes a person into a murderer.

What about my life? Do I also believe it is a calm, unruffled ocean of time?

Not at all. Before long I too will be lying on death's refuse heap, together with all the other role players in this little drama. But whatever stage of decay my body may attain, even if all that remains is the skeleton, it will have a smile on its lips. This is what I live for now, my right to exist, my chance to be cleansed, to be cleared of all dishonour.

But this is only the beginning. Now I am going to switch off the lamp and go out into the light of day. The little that is left.

3

Hong Kong

THE RAIN DID not stop first thing. Nor second thing. In fact, it didn't stop at all. It was mild and wet week upon week. The ground was saturated, European motorways caved in, migratory birds did not migrate and there were reports of insects hitherto unseen in northern climes. The calendar showed that it was winter, but Oslo's parkland was not just snowless, it was not even brown. It was as green and inviting as the artificial pitch in Sogn where despairing keep-fit fans had resorted to jogging in their Bjørn Dæhlie tights as they waited in vain for conditions around Lake Sogns vann to allow skiing. On New Year's Eve the fog was so thick that the sound of rockets carried from the centre of Oslo right out to suburban Asker, but you couldn't see a thing, even if you set them off on your back lawn. Nevertheless, that night Norwegians burned fireworks amounting to six hundred kroner per household, according to a consumer survey, which also revealed that the number of Norwegians who realised their dream of a white Christmas on Thailand's white beaches had doubled in just three years. However, also in South-East Asia, it seemed as if the weather had run amok: ominous symbols usually seen only on weather charts in the typhoon season were now lined up across the China Sea. In Hong Kong, where February tends to be one of the driest months of the year, rain was bucketing down and poor visibility meant that Cathay Pacific flight number 731 from London had to circle again before coming in to land at Chek Lap Kok Airport.

'You should be happy we don't have to land at the old airport,' said the Chinese-looking passenger next to Kaja Solness, who was squeezing the armrests so hard her knuckles were white. 'It was in the centre of town. We would have flown straight into one of the skyscrapers.'

Those were the first words the man had uttered since they had taken off twelve hours earlier. Kaja eagerly grabbed the chance to focus on something other than the fact that they were temporarily caught in turbulence.

'Thank you, sir, that was reassuring. Are you English?'

He recoiled as if someone had slapped him, and she realised she had offended him mortally by suggesting that he belonged to the previous colonialists: 'Erm ... Chinese perhaps?'

He shook his head firmly. 'Hong Kong Chinese. And you, miss?'

Kaja Solness wondered for a moment if she should reply Hokksund Norwegian, but confined herself to 'Norwegian', which the Hong Kong Chinese man mused on for a while then delivered a triumphant 'Aha!' before amending it to 'Scandinavian' and asked her what her business was in Hong Kong.

'To find a man,' she said, staring down at the bluish-grey clouds in the hope that terra firma would soon reveal itself.

'Aha!' repeated the Hong Kong Chinese. 'You are very beautiful, miss. And don't believe all you hear about the Chinese only marrying other Chinese.'

She managed a weary smile. 'Hong Kong Chinese, do you mean?'

'Particularly Hong Kong Chinese,' he nodded with enthusiasm, holding up a ringless hand. 'I deal in microchips. The family has factories in China and South Korea. What are you doing tonight?'

'Sleeping, I hope,' Kaja yawned.

'What about tomorrow evening?'

‘I hope by then I’ll have found him and I’ll be on my way back home.’

The man frowned. ‘Are you in such a hurry, miss?’

Kaja refused the man’s offer of a lift and caught a bus, a double-decker, to the city centre. One hour later she was standing alone in a corridor at the Empire Kowloon Hotel, taking deep breaths. She had put the key card into the door of the room she had been allocated and now all that remained was to open it. She forced her hand to press down the handle. Then she jerked the door open and stared into the room.

No one there.

Of course there wasn’t.

She entered, wheeled her bag to the side of the bed, stood by the window and looked out. First, down at the swarm of people in the street seventeen floors below, then at the skyscrapers that in no way resembled their graceful or, at any rate pompous, sisters in Manhattan, Kuala Lumpur or Tokyo. These looked like termite anthills, terrifying and impressive at the same time, like a grotesque testimony to how humankind is capable of adapting when seven million inhabitants have to find room in not much more than a hundred square kilometres. Kaja felt exhaustion creeping up on her, kicked off her shoes and fell back on the bed. Even though it was a double room and the hotel sported four stars, the 120-centimetre-wide bed occupied all the floor space. And it hit home that from among all these anthills she now had to find one particular person, a man who, all the evidence suggested, had no particular wish to be found.

For a moment or two she weighed up the options: closing her eyes or springing into action. Then she pulled herself together and got to her feet. Took off her clothes and went into the shower. Afterwards she stood in front of

the mirror and confirmed without a hint of self-satisfaction that the Hong Kong Chinese man was right: she was beautiful. This was not her opinion, it was as close to being a fact as beauty can be. The face with the high cheekbones, the pronounced raven-black but finely formed eyebrows above the almost childlike wide eyes with green irises that shone with the intensity of a mature young woman. The honey-brown hair, the full lips that seemed to be kissing each other in her somewhat broad mouth. The long, slim neck, the equally slim body with the small breasts that were no more than mounds, swells on a sea of perfect, though winter-pale, skin. The gentle curve of her hips. The long legs that persuaded two Oslo modelling agencies to make the trip to her school in Hokksund, only to have to accept her refusal with a rueful shake of the head. And what had pleased her most was when one of them said as he left: 'OK, but remember, my dear: you are not a *perfect* beauty. Your teeth are small and pointed. You shouldn't smile so much.'

After that she had smiled with a lighter heart.

Kaja put on a pair of khaki trousers, a thin waterproof jacket and floated weightlessly and soundlessly down to reception.

'Chungking Mansion?' the receptionist asked, unable to refrain from cocking an eyebrow, and pointed. 'Kimberley Road, up to Nathan Road, then left.'

All hostels and hotels in Interpol member countries are legally obliged to register foreign guests, but when Kaja had rung the Norwegian ambassador's secretary to check where the man she was looking for had last registered, the secretary had explained that Chungking Mansion was neither a hotel nor a mansion, in the sense of a wealthy residence. It was a collection of shops, takeaways, restaurants and probably more than a hundred classified and non-classified hostels with everything from two to twenty rooms spread over four large tower blocks. The

rooms for rent could be characterised as everything from simple, clean and cosy to ratholes and one-star prison cells. And most important of all: at Chungking Mansion a man with modest demands of life could sleep, eat, live, work and propagate without ever leaving the anthill.

Kaja found the entrance to Chungking in Nathan Road, a busy shopping street with branded goods, polished shopfronts and tall display windows. She went in. To the cooking fumes from fast-food outlets, hammering from cobblers, radio broadcasts of Muslim prayer meetings and tired looks in used clothes shops. She flashed a quick smile at a bewildered backpacker with a *Lonely Planet* guidebook in his hand and frozen white legs sticking out of over-optimistic camouflage shorts.

A uniformed guard looked at the note Kaja showed him, said 'Lift C' and pointed down a corridor.

The queue in front of the lift was so long that she didn't get in until the third attempt, when they were squeezed up tight in a creaky, juddering iron chest that made Kaja think of the gypsies who buried their dead vertically.

The hostel was owned by a turban-clad Muslim who immediately, and with great enthusiasm, showed her a tiny box of a room where by some miracle they had found space for a wall-mounted TV at the foot of the bed and a gurgling A/C unit above the bedhead. The owner's enthusiasm waned when she interrupted his sales spiel to produce a photo of a man with his name spelt as it would have been in his passport, and asked where he was now.

On seeing the reaction, she hastened to inform him that she was his wife. The embassy secretary had explained to her that waving an official ID card around in Chungking would be, quote, counterproductive. And when Kaja added, for safety's sake, that she and the man in the photo had five children together, the hostel owner's attitude underwent a dramatic change. A young Western heathen who had already brought so many children into the world earned his

respect. He expelled a heavy sigh, shook his head and said in mournful, staccato English, 'Sad, sad, lady. They come and take his passport.'

'Who did?'

'Who? The Triad, lady. It's always the Triad.'

Naturally enough, she was aware of the organisation, but she had some vague notion that the Chinese mafia primarily belonged to the world of cartoons and kung fu films.

'Sit yourself down, lady.' He quickly found a chair, onto which she slumped. 'They were after him, he was out, so they took his passport.'

'Passport? Why?'

He hesitated.

'Please, I have to know.'

'Your husband bet on horses, I am sorry to say.'

'Horses?'

'Happy Valley. Racecourse. It is an abomination.'

'Does he owe money? To the Triad?'

He nodded and shook his head several times to confirm and regret, alternately, this fact of life.

'And they took his passport?'

'He will have to pay back the debt if he wants to leave Hong Kong.'

'He can only get a new passport from the Norwegian embassy.'

The turban waggled from side to side. 'Ah, you can get a false passport here in Chungking for eighty American dollars. But this is not the problem. The problem is Hong Kong is an island, lady. How did you get here?'

'Plane.'

'And how will you leave?'

'Plane.'

'One airport. Tickets. All names on computer. Many control points. Many at airport who get money from the Triad to recognise faces. Understand?'

She nodded slowly. 'It's difficult to escape.'

The hostel owner shook his head with a guffaw. 'No, lady. It's *impossible* to escape. But you can hide in Hong Kong. Seven million people. Easy to go underground.'

Lack of sleep was catching up on Kaja, and she closed her eyes. The owner must have misunderstood because he laid a consoling hand on her shoulder and mumbled, 'There, there.'

He wavered, then leaned forward and whispered, 'I think he still here, lady.'

'Yes, I know he is.'

'No, I mean here in Chungking. I see him.'

She raised her head.

'Twice,' he said. 'At Li Yuan's. He eat there. Cheap rice. Don't tell anyone I said. Your husband is good man. But trouble.' He rolled his eyes so that they almost disappeared into his turban. 'Lots of trouble.'

Li Yuan's comprised a counter, four plastic tables and a Chinese man who sent her an encouraging smile when after six hours, two portions of fried rice, three coffees and two litres of water she awoke with a jolt, lifted her head from the greasy table and looked at him.

'Tired?' he laughed, revealing an incomplete set of front teeth.

Kaja yawned, ordered her fourth cup of coffee and continued to wait. Two Chinese men came and sat at the counter without speaking or ordering. They didn't even spare her a glance, for which she was glad. Her body was so stiff from sitting on the plane that pain shot through her whatever sedentary position she adopted. She rolled her head from side to side to try to stimulate circulation. Then backwards. Her neck cracked. She stared at the bluish-white neon tubes in the ceiling before lowering her head. And stared straight into a pale, hunted face. He had

stopped in front of the closed steel shutters in the corridor and scanned Li Yuan's tiny establishment. His gaze rested on the two Chinese men by the counter. Then he hurried on.

Kaja got to her feet, but one leg had gone to sleep and gave way under her weight. She grabbed her bag and limped after the man as fast as she could.

'Come back soon,' she heard Li Yuan shout after her.

He had looked so thin. In the photographs he had been a broad, tall figure, and on the TV talk show he had made the chair he was sitting on look like it had been manufactured for pygmies. But she had not the slightest doubt it was him: the dented, shaven skull, the prominent nose, the eyes with the spider's web of blood vessels and the alcoholic's washed-out, pale blue irises. The determined chin with the surprisingly gentle, almost beautiful mouth.

She stumbled into Nathan Road. In the gleam of the neon light she caught sight of a leather jacket towering above the crowd. He didn't appear to be walking fast, yet she had to quicken her pace to keep up. From the busy shopping parade he turned off and she let the distance between them increase as they came into narrower, less populated streets. She registered a sign saying 'Melden Row'. It was tempting to go and introduce herself, get it all over with. But she had decided to stick to the plan: to find out where he lived. It had stopped raining, and all of a sudden a scrap of cloud was drawn aside and the sky behind was high and velvet black, with glittering, pinhole stars.

After walking for twenty minutes he came to a sudden halt at a corner, and Kaja was afraid she had been rumbled. However, he didn't turn round, just took something from his jacket pocket. She stared in amazement. A baby's bottle?

He disappeared round the corner.

Kaja followed and came into a large, open square packed with people, most of them young. At the far end of the square, above wide glass doors, shone a sign written in English and Chinese. Kaja recognised the titles of some of the new films she would never see. Her eyes found his leather jacket, and she saw him put the bottle down on the low plinth of a bronze sculpture representing a gallows with an empty noose. He continued past two fully occupied benches and took a seat on the third where he picked up a newspaper. After about twenty seconds he got up again, walked back to the sculpture, grabbed the bottle as he passed, put it into his pocket and returned the same way he had come.

It had started to rain when she saw him enter Chungking Mansion. She slowly began to prepare her speech. There was no longer a queue by the lifts; nevertheless he ascended a staircase, turned right and went through a swing door. She hurried after him and suddenly found herself in a deserted, run-down stairwell with an all-permeating smell of cat piss and wet concrete. She held her breath, but all she could hear were dripping sounds. As she took the decision to go on up, she heard a door bang beneath her. She sprinted down the stairs and found the only thing that could have made a bang: a dented metal door. She held the handle, felt the trembling come, closed her eyes and cursed to herself. Then she ripped open the door and stepped into the darkness. That is to say: out.

Something ran across her feet, but she neither screamed nor moved.

At first she thought she had entered a lift shaft. But when she looked up, she glimpsed blackened brick walls covered with a tangled mass of water pipes, cables, distorted chunks of metal and collapsed, rusty iron scaffolding. It was a courtyard, a few square metres of

space between tower blocks. The only light came from a small square of stars high above.

Although there wasn't a cloud in the sky, water was splashing down onto the tarmac and her face, and she realised it was condensed water from the small, rusty A/C units protruding from the front of the buildings. She retreated and leaned back against the iron door.

Waited.

And, eventually, from the dark, she heard: 'What do you want?'

She had never heard his voice before. Well, she had heard it on the talk show when they were discussing serial killers, but hearing it in reality was quite different. There was a worn hoarse quality that made him sound older than the forty years she knew he had just turned. But at the same time there was a secure, self-assured calm which belied the hunted face she had seen outside Li Yuan's. Deep, warm.

'I'm Norwegian,' she said.

There was no response. She swallowed. She knew that her first words would be the most important.

'My name is Kaja Solness. I have been tasked with finding you. By Gunnar Hagen.'

No reaction to the name of his Crime Squad boss. Had he gone?

'I work as a detective on murder investigations for Hagen,' she said into the blackness.

'Congratulations.'

'No congratulations necessary. Not if you've been reading Norwegian papers for the last months.' She could have bitten her tongue. Was she trying to be funny? Had to be the lack of sleep. Or nerves.

'I mean congratulations on a well-accomplished mission,' said the voice. 'I have been found. Now you can go back.'

‘Wait!’ she shouted. ‘Don’t you want to hear what I have to say?’

‘I’d prefer not to.’

But the words she had jotted down and practised rolled out. ‘Two women have been killed. Forensic evidence suggests it’s the same perp. Beyond that we don’t have any leads. Even though the press has been given minimal info, they’ve been screaming for ages that another serial killer is on the loose. Some commentators have written that he may have been inspired by the Snowman. We’ve called in experts from Interpol, but they haven’t made any headway. The pressure from the media and authorities—’

‘By which I mean no,’ the voice said.

A door slammed.

‘Hello? Hello? Are you there?’

She fumbled her way forward and found a door. Opened it before terror managed to gain a foothold and she was in another darkened stairwell. She glimpsed light further up and climbed three steps at a time. The light was coming through the glass of a swing door, and she pushed it open. Entered a plain, bare corridor in which attempts to patch the peeling plaster had been given up, and damp steamed off the walls like bad breath. Leaning against the wall were two men with cigarettes hanging from the corners of their mouths, and a sweet stench drifted towards her. They appraised her through sluggish eyes. Too sluggish to move, she hoped. The smaller of the two was black, of African origin, she assumed. The big one was white and had a pyramid-shaped scar on his forehead, like a warning triangle. She had read in *The Police* magazine that Hong Kong had almost thirty thousand officers on the street and was reckoned to be the world’s safest metropolis. But then that was on the street.

‘Looking for hashish, lady?’

She shook her head, tried to flash a confident smile, tried to act as she had advised young girls to do when she