

CHAPTER 1

How are we to start this story? I wish I could say that we'll start at the beginning. But I don't know where it starts. Just like everyone else, I'm not truly aware of the *real* sequence of cause and effect in my life.

Does the story start when I realised that I was only the fourth-best football player in the class? When Basse, my grandfather, showed me the drawings – his own drawings – of La Sagrada Família? When I took my first drag on a cigarette and heard my first track by the Grateful Dead? When I read Kant at university and thought I understood it? When I sold my first lump of hash? Or did it start when I kissed Bobby – who's actually a girl – or the first time I saw the tiny, wrinkled creature who would end up being called Anna screaming up at me? Perhaps it was when I was sitting in the Fisherman's stinking back room and he was telling me what he wanted me to do. I don't know. We store up all sorts of stories with fabricated logic, so that life can look as though it has some meaning.

So I may as well start here, in the midst of the confusion, at a time and a place where fate seemed to be taking a short break, holding its breath. When, just for a moment, I thought I was not only on my way, but had also already arrived.

I got off the bus in the middle of the night. Screwed my eyes up against the sun. It was scouring across an island out to sea, off to the north. Red and dull. Like me. Beyond it lay yet more sea. And, beyond that, the North Pole. Perhaps this was somewhere they wouldn't find me.

I looked round. In the three other points of the compass low mountain ridges sloped down towards me. Red and green heather, rocks, a few clumps of stunted birch trees. To the east the land slid into the sea, stony and flat as a pancake, and to the south-west it was as if it had been cut with a knife at the point where the sea started. A hundred metres or so above the motionless sea a plateau of open landscape took over, stretching inland. The Finnmark plateau. The end of the line, as Grandfather used to say.

The hard-packed gravel road I stood on led to a cluster of low buildings. The only thing that stuck out was the church tower. I'd woken up in my seat on the bus just as we were passing a sign with the name 'Kåsund' on it, down by the shore, near a wooden jetty. And I thought, why not? and pulled the cord above the window to illuminate the stop sign above the bus driver.

I put on the jacket of my suit, grabbed my leather

case and started walking. The pistol in the jacket pocket bounced against my hip. Right on the bone – I'd always been too thin. I stopped and tugged my money belt down under my shirt so that the notes would cushion the knocks.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the air was so clear that I felt I could see a very long way. As far as the eye can see, as the expression goes. They say that the Finnmark plateau is beautiful. Fucked if I know. Isn't that just the sort of thing people say about inhospitable places? Either to make themselves seem a bit tough, to lay claim to some sort of insight or superiority, the way people boast about liking incomprehensible music or unreadable literature? I'd done it myself. I used to think it might make up for at least a few of the things about me that weren't good enough. Or else it was simply meant as a consolation to the few people who had to live there: 'It's *so* beautiful here'. Because what was so beautiful about this flat, monotonous, bleak landscape? It's like Mars. A red desert. Uninhabitable and cruel. The perfect hiding place. Hopefully.

The branches of a clump of trees by the side of the road in front of me moved. A moment later a figure leaped across the ditch and onto the road. My hand went automatically for the pistol but I stopped it: it wasn't one of them. This character looked like a joker who'd jumped straight out of a pack of cards.

'Good evening!' he called to me.

He walked towards me with a strange, rolling gait, so bandy-legged that I could see the road stretch out

towards the village between his legs. As he came closer I saw he wasn't wearing a court jester's hat on his head but a Sámi cap. Blue, red and yellow – only the bells were missing. He was wearing pale leather boots, and his blue anorak, patched with black tape, had several tears revealing yellow-coloured padding that looked more like loft insulation than feathers.

'Forgive me asking,' he said. 'But who are you?'

He was at least two heads shorter than me. His face was broad, his grin wide, and his eyes at something of a slant. If you piled up all the clichés people in Oslo have about what a Sámi or native Laplander looked like, you'd end up with this bloke.

'I came on the bus,' I said.

'So I saw. I'm Mattis.'

'Mattis,' I repeated, to gain a few seconds to think about the answer to his next inevitable question.

'Who are you, then?'

'Ulf,' I said. It seemed as good a name as any.

'And what are you doing in Kåsund?'

'I'm just visiting,' I said, nodding towards the cluster of houses.

'Who are you visiting?'

I shrugged. 'No one special.'

'Are you from the Countryside Commission, or are you a preacher?'

I didn't know what people from the Countryside Commission looked like, so I shook my head and ran a hand through my long, hippy hair. Maybe I should cut it. Less eye-catching.

‘Forgive me asking,’ he said again, ‘but what are you, then?’

‘A hunter,’ I said. It might have been the mention of the Countryside Commission. And it was as much the truth as it was a lie.

‘Oh? Are you going to hunt here, Ulf?’

‘Looks like good hunting territory.’

‘Yes, but you’re a week early. Hunting season doesn’t start until the fifteenth of August.’

‘Is there a hotel here?’

The Sámi smiled broadly. He coughed and spat out a brown lump that I hoped was chewing tobacco or something similar. It hit the ground with an audible splat.

‘Lodging house?’ I asked.

He shook his head.

‘Camping cabin? Room to rent?’ On the telephone pole behind him someone had stuck up a poster about a dance band who were going to be playing in Alta. So the city couldn’t be too far away. Maybe I should have stayed on the bus until it got there.

‘How about you, Mattis?’ I said, slapping away a gnat that was biting my forehead. ‘You wouldn’t happen to have a bed I could borrow tonight?’

‘I burned my bed in the stove back in May. We had a cold May.’

‘Sofa? Mattress?’

‘Mattress?’ He spread his hands out towards the heather-covered plateau.

‘Thanks, but I like roofs and walls. I’ll have to try and

find an empty dog kennel. Goodnight.' I set off towards the houses.

'The only kennel you'll find in Kåsund is that one,' he called out plaintively, his voice falling.

I turned round. He was pointing at the building in front of the cluster of houses.

'The church?'

He nodded.

'Is it open in the middle of the night?'

Mattis tilted his head. 'Do you know why no one steals anything in Kåsund? Because there's nothing worth stealing apart from reindeer.'

With a surprisingly graceful leap, the chubby little man jumped across the ditch and began to tramp through the heather in a westerly direction. My guides were the sun in the north, and the fact that churches – according to my grandfather – have their towers to the west no matter where in the world you go. I shaded my eyes and looked at the terrain ahead of him. Where the hell was he going?

Maybe it was because the sun was shining even though it was the middle of the night and everything was completely still, but there was something strangely desolate about the village. The houses looked as though they had been built in a hurry, without care or love. Not that they didn't look solid, just that they gave the impression of being a roof over someone's head rather than a home. Practical. Maintenance-free slabs to stand up to wind and weather. A few wrecked cars in gardens that weren't

gardens, more fenced-off areas of heather and birch trees. Prams, but no toys. Only a few of the houses had curtains or blinds in the windows. The other naked windowpanes reflected the sun, stopping anyone looking in. Like sunglasses on someone who doesn't want to reveal too much soul.

Sure enough, the church was open, although the door was swollen, so it didn't open as readily as those of other churches I had been inside. The nave was fairly small, soberly furnished, but attractive in its simplicity. The midnight sun lit up the stained-glass windows, and above the altar Jesus hung from the customary cross in front of a triptych with the Virgin Mary in the middle and David and Goliath and the baby Jesus on either side.

I found the door to the sacristy off to one side behind the altar. I searched through the cupboards and found vestments, cleaning equipment and buckets, but no altar wine, just a couple of boxes of wafers from Olsen's bakery. I chewed my way through four or five of them, but it was like eating blotting paper; they dried out my mouth so much that in the end I had to spit them out onto the newspaper on the table. Which told me – if it was that day's edition of the *Finnmark Dagblad* – that it was 8 August 1978 and that the protests against the exploitation of the Alta river were growing, and showed me what local council leader Arnulf Olsen looked like, and said that Finnmark, as the only Norwegian district that shared a border with the Soviet Union, felt a little safer now that the spy Gunvor Galtung Haavik was dead,

and that at long last the weather here was better than in Oslo.

The stone floor of the sacristy was too hard to sleep on, and the pews were too narrow, so I took the vestments inside the altar rail with me, hung my jacket over the rail and lay down on the floor with my leather case under my head. I felt something wet hit my face. I wiped it away with my hand and looked at my fingertips. They were rust red.

I looked up at the crucified man hanging directly above me. Then I realised that it must have come from the pitched roof. Leaky, damp, coloured by clay or iron. I turned over so I wasn't lying on my bad shoulder and pulled the cassock over my head to shut out the sun. I closed my eyes.

There. Don't think. Shut everything out.

Shut in.

I tugged the cassock aside, gasping for breath.

Fuck.

I lay there staring at the ceiling. When I couldn't sleep after the funeral, I started taking Valium. I don't know if I got addicted to it, but it had become difficult to sleep without it. Now the only thing that worked was being sufficiently exhausted.

I pulled the cassock over me again and closed my eyes. Seventy hours on the run. One thousand, eight hundred kilometres. A couple of hours' sleep on trains and buses. I ought to be exhausted enough.

Now – happy thoughts.

I tried thinking about the way everything was before.

M I D N I G H T S U N

Before before. It didn't work. Everything else popped up instead. The man dressed in white. The smell of fish. The black barrel of a pistol. Glass shattering, the fall. I thrust it aside and held out my hand, whispering her name.

And then she came at last.

I woke up. Lay perfectly still.

Something had nudged me. Someone. Gently, not so as to wake me, just to confirm that there was someone lying under the cassock.

I concentrated on breathing evenly. Maybe there was still a chance, maybe they hadn't worked out that I had woken up.

I slid my hand down to my side before remembering that I'd hung the jacket with my pistol in it on the altar rail.

Very amateurish for a professional.

CHAPTER 2

■ carried on taking slow, even breaths, and felt my pulse calm down. My body had realised what my head still hadn't worked out: that if it had been them, they wouldn't have poked me, they'd just have pulled off the vestments, checked it was the right person, then peppered me worse than over-spiced mutton stew.

I carefully pulled the cassock away from my face.

The one looking down at me had freckles, a snub nose, a plaster on its forehead and pale eyelashes surrounding a pair of unusually blue eyes. Topping this was a thick fringe of red hair. How old could he be? Nine? Thirteen? I had no idea, I'm hopeless at anything to do with kids.

'You can't sleep here.'

I looked round. He seemed to be alone.

'Why not?' I said in a hoarse voice.

'Because Mum's got to clean there.'

I got to my feet, rolled up the cassock, took my jacket from the altar rail and checked that the pistol was still

in the pocket. Pain stabbed through my left shoulder as I forced it into the jacket.

‘Are you from the south?’ the boy asked.

‘That depends what you mean by “south”.’

‘That you’re from south of here, of course.’

‘Everyone’s from south of here.’

The boy tilted his head. ‘My name’s Knut, I’m ten. What’s your name?’

I was on the verge of saying something else before I remembered what I’d said the day before. ‘Ulf.’

‘How old are you, Ulf?’

‘Old,’ I said, stretching my neck.

‘More than thirty?’

The sacristy door opened. I spun round. A woman emerged, then stopped and stared at me. The first thing that struck me was that she was very young to be a cleaner. And that she looked strong. You could see the veins in her lower arm, and on the hand holding the bucket, which was overflowing with water. She had broad shoulders but a narrow waist. Her legs were hidden under an old-fashioned, black pleated skirt. The other thing that struck me was her hair. It was long, and so dark that the light from the high windows made it glisten. It was held back by a simple hairclip.

She started moving again and came towards me, her shoes clattering on the floor. When she got close enough I could see that she had a fine mouth, but with a scar, perhaps from an operation to correct a harelip, on her top lip. It seemed almost unnatural, considering her dark complexion and hair, that she should have such blue eyes.

‘Good morning,’ she said.

‘Good morning. I arrived on the bus last night. And there was nowhere to . . .’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘The door here is high, and the gate is wide.’ She said this without warmth in her voice, put down the bucket and broom and held out her hand.

‘Ulf,’ I said, holding out my hand to shake hers.

‘The cassock,’ she said, waving my hand away. I looked down at the bundle in my other hand.

‘I couldn’t find a blanket,’ I said, handing her the vestments.

‘And nothing to eat apart from our communion wafers,’ she said, unrolling and inspecting the heavy white garment.

‘Sorry, of course I’ll pay for—’

‘You’re welcome to it, with or without a blessing. But please don’t spit on our council leader next time, if you don’t mind.’

I wasn’t sure if that was a smile I could see, but the scar on her top lip seemed to twitch. Without saying anything else she turned and disappeared back into the sacristy.

I picked up my case and stepped over the altar rail.

‘Where are you going?’ the boy asked.

‘Outside.’

‘What for?’

‘What for? Because I don’t live here.’

‘Mum’s not as cross as she seems.’

‘Say goodbye from me.’

‘From whom?’ her voice called. She was walking back towards the altar rail.

‘Ulf?’ I was starting to get used to the name.

‘And what are you doing here in Kåsund, Ulf?’ She wrung out a cloth above the bucket.

‘Hunting.’ I thought it was best to stick to one and the same story in such a small community.

She fixed the cloth to the end of the broom. ‘What for?’

‘Grouse,’ I chanced. Did they have grouse this far north? ‘Or anything with a pulse, really,’ I added.

‘It’s been a bad year for mice and lemmings this year,’ she said.

I hummed. ‘Well, I was thinking something a *bit* bigger than that.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘I just meant that there aren’t many grouse.’

There was a pause.

In the end Knut broke it. ‘When predators can’t get enough mice and lemmings, they take grouse eggs.’

‘Of course,’ I said with a nod, and realised my back was sweating. I could do with a wash. My shirt and money belt could do with a wash. My suit jacket could do with a wash. ‘I daresay I’ll find something to shoot. It’s more of a problem that I’m a week early. After all, hunting season doesn’t start until next week. I’ll just have to practise until then.’ I hoped the Sámi had given me accurate information.

‘I don’t know about a season,’ the woman said, pushing the broom across the floor where I had slept so hard that the broom head squeaked. ‘You southerners are the ones who came up with that idea. Here we go hunting

when we have to. And don't bother when there's no need.'

'Speaking of needs,' I said. 'You don't know of anywhere in the village where I could stay?'

She stopped cleaning and leaned on the broom. 'You just have to knock on a door and they'll give you a bed.'

'Anywhere?'

'Yes, I'd say so. But of course there aren't that many people at home right now.'

'Of course.' I nodded towards Knut. 'Summer holidays?'

She smiled and tilted her head. 'Summer work. Anyone who's got reindeer is sleeping in tents and caravans at the pastures down by the coast. A few have gone fishing for pollock. And a lot of people have gone off to the fair in Kautokeino.'

'I see. Any chance I could rent a bed from you?' When she hesitated I quickly added: 'I'll pay well. Very well.'

'No one here would let you pay much. But my husband isn't at home, so it's really not befitting.'

Befitting? I looked at her skirt. Her long hair.

'I see. Is there anywhere that isn't so . . . er, central? Where you can get some peace and quiet. With a view.' By which I meant, where you can see if anyone's coming.

'Well,' she said. 'Seeing as you're going to be hunting, I suppose you could always stay in the hunting cabin. Everyone uses it. It's fairly remote, and a bit cramped and ramshackle, but you'd certainly get your peace and quiet. And a fine view in all directions, that much is certain.'

‘Sounds perfect.’

‘Knut can show you the way.’

‘There’s no need for him to do that. I’m sure I can—’

‘No!’ Knut said. ‘Please!’

I looked down at him again. Summer holidays. Everyone away. Bored having to follow his mum to do her cleaning. Finally, something happening.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Shall we go, then?’

‘Yes!’

‘What’s bothering me,’ the dark-haired woman said, dipping the broom in the bucket, ‘is what you’re going to shoot with. You’ve hardly got a shotgun in that case.’

I stared down at my case. As if I were measuring it to see if I agreed with her.

‘I left it on the train,’ I said. ‘I called them, they’ve promised to send it on the bus in a couple of days.’

‘But you’ll be wanting something to practise with,’ she said, then smiled. ‘Before the *season* starts.’

‘I . . .’

‘You can borrow my husband’s shotgun. The two of you can wait outside until I’m done, this won’t take long.’

A shotgun? Hell, why not? And because none of her questions was phrased as a question, I simply nodded and walked towards the door. I heard quick breathing behind me and slowed down slightly. The young lad tripped over my heels.

‘Ulf?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know any jokes?’