

MIDNIGHT SUN

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. 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.

*

M I D N I G H T S U N

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.