

Rover kept his eyes on the white-painted concrete floor in the eleven-square-metre prison cell. He bit down on the slightly too long gold front tooth in his lower jaw. He had reached the hardest part of his confession. The only sound in the cell was his nails scratching the madonna tattoo on his forearm. The boy sitting cross-legged on the bed opposite him had remained silent ever since Rover had entered. He had merely nodded and smiled his blissful Buddha smile, his gaze fixed at a point on Rover's forehead. People called the boy Sonny and said that he had killed two people as a teenager, that his father had been a corrupt police officer and that Sonny had healing hands. It was hard to see if the boy was listening—his green eyes and most of his face were hidden behind his long, matted hair—but that didn't matter. Rover just wanted his sins forgiven and to receive Sonny's distinctive blessing so that tomorrow he could walk out of Staten Maximum Security Prison with the feeling of being a truly cleansed man. Not that Rover was religious, but it could do no harm when he intended to change, to give going straight a real try. Rover took a deep breath.

"I think she was from Belarus. Minsk is in Belarus, isn't it?" Rover looked up quickly, but the boy made no reply. "Nestor had nicknamed her Minsk," Rover said. "He told me to shoot her."

The obvious advantage of confessing to someone whose brain was fried was that no name and incident would stick; it was like talking to yourself. This might explain why inmates at Staten preferred this guy to the chaplain or the psychologist.

"Nestor kept her and eight other girls in a cage down in Enerhaugen. East Europeans and Asians. Young. Teenagers. At least I hope they were as old as that. But Minsk was older. Stronger. She escaped. Got as far as Tøyen Park before Nestor's dog caught her. One of those Argentine mastiffs—know what I'm talking about?"

The boy's eyes never moved, but he raised his hand. Found his beard. He started to comb it slowly with his fingers. The sleeve of his filthy, oversized shirt slipped down and revealed scabs and needle marks. Rover went on.

"Bloody big albino dogs. Kills anything its owner points at. And quite a lot he doesn't. Banned in Norway, 'course. A guy out in Rælengen got some from the Czech Republic, breeds them and registers them as white boxers. Me and Nestor went there to buy one when it was a pup. It cost more than fifty grand in cash. The puppy was so cute you wouldn't ever think it . . ." Rover stopped. He knew he was only talking about the dog to put off the inevitable. "Anyway . . ."

Anyway. Rover looked at the tattoo on his other forearm. A cathedral with two spires. One for each sentence he had served, neither of which had anything to do with today's confession. He used to supply guns to a biker gang and modify some of them in his workshop. He was good at it. Too good. So good that he couldn't remain below the radar forever and he was caught. And so good that, while serving his first sentence, Nestor had taken him under his wing. Nestor had made sure he owned him so that from then on only Nestor would get his hands on the best guns, rather than the biker gang or any other rivals. He had paid him more for a few months' work than Rover could ever hope to earn in a lifetime in his workshop fixing motorbikes.

But Nestor had demanded a lot in return. Too much.

“She was lying in the bushes, blood everywhere. She just lay there, dead still, staring up at us. The dog had taken a chunk out of her face—you could see straight to the teeth.” Rover grimaced. Get to the point. “Nestor said it was time to teach them a lesson, show the other girls what would happen to them. And that Minsk was worthless to him now anyway, given the state of her face . . .” Rover swallowed. “So he told me to do it. Finish her off. That’s how I’d prove my loyalty, you see. I had an old Ruger MK II pistol that I’d done some work on. And I was going to do it. I really was. That wasn’t the problem . . .”

Rover felt his throat tighten. He had thought about it so often, gone over those seconds during that night in Tøyen Park, seeing the girl over and over again. Nestor and himself taking the leading roles with the others as silent witnesses. Even the dog had been silent. He had thought about it perhaps a hundred times. A thousand? And yet it wasn’t until now, when he said the words out loud for the first time, that he realised that it hadn’t been a dream, that it really had happened. Or rather it was as if his body hadn’t accepted it until now. That was why his stomach was churning. Rover breathed deeply through his nose to quell the nausea.

“But I couldn’t do it. Even though I knew she was gonna die. They had the dog at the ready and I was thinking that me, I’d have preferred a bullet. But it was as if the trigger was locked in position. I just couldn’t pull it.”

The young man seemed to be nodding faintly. Either in response to what Rover was telling him or to music only he could hear.

“Nestor said we didn’t have all day, we were in a public park after all. So he took out a small, curved knife from a leg holster, stepped forward, grabbed her by the hair, pulled her up and just seemed to swing the knife in front of her throat. As if gutting a fish. Blood spurted out three, four times, then she was empty. But d’you know what I remember most of all? The dog. How it started howling at the sight of all that blood.”

Rover leaned forward in the chair with his elbows on his knees. He covered his ears with his hands and rocked back and forth.

“And I did nothing. I just stood there, looking on. I did fuck all. While they wrapped her in a blanket and carried her to the car, I just watched. We drove her to the woods, to Østmarksetra. Lifted her out and rolled her down the slope towards Ulsrudsvannet. Lots of people take their dogs for walks there so she was found the next day. The point was, Nestor wanted her to be found, d’you get me? He wanted pictures in the papers of what had happened to her. So he could show them to the other girls.”

Rover removed his hands from his ears.

“I stopped sleeping; every time I closed my eyes I had nightmares. The girl with the missing cheek smiled at me and bared all her teeth. So I went to see Nestor and told him I wanted out. Said I’d had enough of filing down Uzis and Glocks, that I wanted to go back to fixing motorbikes. Live a quiet life, not worry about the cops the whole time. Nestor said that was OK, he’d probably sussed that I didn’t have it in me to be a tough guy. But he made it very clear what would happen to me if I talked. I thought

we were sorted. I turned down every job I was offered even though I still had some decent Uzis lying around. But I kept thinking that something was brewing. That I would be bumped off. So I was almost relieved when the cops came and I got put away. I thought I'd be safer in prison. They got me on an old case—I was only an accessory, but they had arrested two guys who both said that I had supplied them with weapons. I confessed to it on the spot.”

Rover laughed hard. He started to cough. He leaned back in his chair.

“In eighteen hours I'm getting out of this place. Haven't got a clue what's waiting for me on the outside. But I know that Nestor knows I'm coming out even though I'm being released four weeks early. He knows everything that goes on in here and with the police, I'm sure of it. He has eyes and ears everywhere. So what I'm thinking is, if he wanted me dead, he might as well have me killed in here rather than wait for me to get out. What do you think?”

Rover waited. Silence. The boy didn't look as if he thought anything at all.

“Whatever happens,” Rover said, “a little blessing can't hurt, can it?”

It was as if a light came on in Sonny's eyes at the word “blessing” and he raised his right hand to signal that Rover should come closer and kneel. Rover knelt on the prayer rug in front of the bed. Franck didn't let any of the other inmates have rugs on the floor in their cells—it was a part of the Swiss model they used at Staten: no superfluous items in the cells. The number of personal possessions was limited to twenty. If you wanted a pair of shoes, you would have to give up two pairs of underpants or two books. Rover looked up at Sonny's face. The boy moistened his dry, scaly lips with the tip of his tongue. His voice was surprisingly light even though the words came slowly, but his diction was perfectly clear.

“All earthly and heavenly gods have mercy on you and forgive your sins. You will die, but the soul of the penitent sinner shall be led to Paradise. Amen.”

Rover bowed his head. He felt the boy's hand on his shaved head. Sonny was left-handed, but in this case it didn't take a genius to work out that he had a shorter life expectancy than most right-handed people. The overdose could happen tomorrow or in ten years—who knew? But Rover didn't think for one minute that the boy's hand was healing like people said. Nor did he really believe this business with the blessing. So why was he here? Well, religion was like fire insurance; you never really thought you'd need it, so when people said that the boy was prepared to take your sins upon himself and didn't want anything in return, why not say yes to some peace of mind? What Rover did wonder was how someone like Sonny could have killed in cold blood. It made no sense to him. Perhaps it was like the old saying: The devil has many disguises.

“Salaam alaikum,” the voice said, and the hand was lifted.

Rover stayed where he was with his head lowered. Probed the smooth backside of the gold tooth with his tongue. Was he ready now? Ready to meet his Maker if that was his fate? He raised his head.

“I know you never ask for anything in return, but . . .”

He looked at the boy’s bare foot which he had tucked under. He saw the needle marks in the big vein on the instep. “I did my last stretch in Botsen and getting hold of drugs in there was easy, no problem. Botsen isn’t a maximum security prison, though. They say Franck has made it impossible to smuggle anything into Staten, but”—Rover stuck his hand in his pocket—“that’s not quite true.”

He pulled something out. It was the size of a mobile phone, a gold-plated object shaped like a pistol. Rover pressed the trigger. A small flame shot out of the muzzle. “Seen one of these before? Yeah, I bet you have. The officers who searched me when I came here certainly had. They told me they were selling smuggled cigarettes on the cheap if I was interested. So they let me keep the lighter. I don’t suppose they’d read my rap sheet. No one bothers doing their job properly these days—makes you wonder how anything in this country ever gets done.”

Rover weighed the lighter in his hand.

“Eight years ago I made two of these. I ain’t boasting if I tell you that nobody in Norway could have done a better job. I’d been contacted by a middleman who told me his client wanted a gun he would never have to hide, a gun that didn’t look like a gun. So I came up with this. It’s funny how people’s minds work. At first they think it’s a gun, obviously. But once you’ve shown them that you can use it as a lighter, they forget all about it being a gun. They still think it could also be a toothbrush or a screwdriver. But not a gun, no way. So . . .”

Rover turned a screw on the underside of the handle.

“It takes two 9mm bullets. I call it the Happy Couple Killer.” He aimed the barrel at the young man. “One for you, sweetheart . . .” Then he pointed it at his own temple. “And one for me . . .” Rover’s laughter sounded strangely lonely in the small cell.

“Anyway. I was only supposed to make one; the client didn’t want anyone else to know the secret behind my little invention. But I made another one. And I took it with me for protection, in case Nestor decided to try to kill me while I was inside. But as I’m getting out tomorrow and I won’t need it any more, it’s yours now. And here . . .”

Rover pulled out a packet of cigarettes from his other pocket. “Because it’ll look weird if you have a lighter, but no cigarettes, right?” He then took out a yellowed business card saying “Rover’s Motorcycle Workshop” and slipped it into the cigarette packet.

“Here’s my address in case you ever have a motorbike that needs fixing. Or want to get yourself one hell of an Uzi. Like I said, I still have some lying—”

The door opened outwards and a voice thundered: “Get out, Rover!”

Rover turned round. The trousers of the prison officer in the doorway were sagging due to the large bunch of keys that dangled from his belt, although this was partly obscured by his belly, which spilled over the lining like rising dough. “His Holiness has a visitor. A close relative, you could say.” He guffawed with laughter and turned to the man behind him. “No offence, eh, Per?”

Rover slipped the gun and the cigarette packet under the duvet on the boy's bed and took one last look at him.

Then he left quickly.

The prison chaplain attempted a smile while he automatically straightened his ill-fitting dog collar. A close relative. No offence. He felt like spitting into the prison officer's fat, grinning face, but instead he nodded to the inmate emerging from the cell and pretended to recognise him. Glanced at the tattoos on his forearms. The madonna and a cathedral. But no, over the years the faces and the tattoos had become too numerous for him to distinguish between them.

The chaplain entered. He could smell incense. Or something that reminded him of incense. Like drugs being cooked.

"Hello, Sonny."

The young man on the bed didn't look up, but he nodded slowly. Per Vollan took it to mean that his presence had been registered, acknowledged. Approved.

He sat down on the chair and experienced a slight discomfort when he felt the warmth from the previous occupant. He placed the Bible he had brought with him on the bed next to the boy.