

Chapter 1

The snow was dancing like cotton wool in the light of the street lamps. Aimlessly, unable to decide whether it wanted to fall up or down, just letting itself be driven by the hellish, ice-cold wind that was sweeping in from the great darkness covering the Oslo fjord. Together they swirled, wind and snow, round and round in the darkness between the warehouses on the quayside that were all shut for the night. Until the wind got fed up and dumped its dance partner beside the wall. And there the dry, windswept snow was settling around the shoes of the man I had just shot in the chest and neck.

Blood was dripping down onto the snow from the bottom of his shirt. I don't actually know a lot about snow—or much else, for that matter—but I've read that snow crystals formed when it's really cold are completely different from wet snow, heavy flakes, or the crunchy stuff. That it's the shape of the crystals and the dryness of the snow that make the haemoglobin in the blood retain that deep red colour. Either way, the snow under him made me think of a king's robe, all purple and lined with ermine, like the drawings in the book of Norwegian folk tales my mother used to read to me. She liked fairy tales and kings. That's probably why she named me after a king.

The *Evening Post* had said that if the cold carried on like this until New Year, 1977 would be the coldest year since the war, and that we'd remember it as the start of the new ice age scientists had been predicting for a while. But what did I know? All I knew was that the man standing in front of me would soon be dead. There was no mistaking the way his body was shaking. He was one of the Fisherman's men. It was nothing personal. I told him as much before he collapsed, leaving a smear of blood down the wall. If I ever get shot, I'd rather it was personal. I didn't say it to stop his ghost coming after me—I don't believe in ghosts. I just couldn't think of anything else to say. Obviously I could have just kept my mouth shut. That's what I usually do, after all. So there must have been something that made me so talkative all of a sudden. Maybe it was because there were only a few days to go before Christmas. I've heard that people are supposed to feel closer to each other around Christmas. But what do I know?

I thought the blood would freeze on top of the snow and end up just lying there. But instead the snow sucked the blood up as it fell, drawing it in under the surface, hiding it, as if it had some sort of use for it. As I walked home I imagined a snowman rising up from the snowdrift, one with clearly visible veins of blood under its deathly pale skin of ice.

On the way back to my flat I called Daniel Hoffmann from a phone box to tell him the job was done.

Hoffmann said that was good. As usual, he didn't ask any questions. Either he'd learned to trust me in the course of the four years I'd been working as a fixer for him, or else he didn't actually want to know. The job was done, so why would a man like him trouble himself with that sort of thing when what he was paying for was to have fewer problems? Hoffmann asked me to go down to the office the next day—he said he had a new job for me.

"A new job?" I asked, feeling my heart skip a beat.

"Yes," Hoffmann said. "As in a new commission."

"Oh, okay."

I hung up, relieved. I don't really do much more than commissions. I can't actually be used for much more than that.

Here are four things I can't be used for. Driving a getaway car. I can drive fast, that's fine. But I can't drive inconspicuously, and anyone driving a getaway car has to be able to do both. They

have to be able to drive so they look just like any other car on the road. I landed myself and two other men in prison because I can't drive inconspicuously enough. I drove like a demon, switching between forest tracks and main roads, and I'd long since lost our pursuers, and was just a few kilometres from the Swedish border. I slowed down and drove in a steady, law-abiding way like a grandad on a Sunday outing. And we still got stopped by a police patrol. They said afterwards that they had no idea it was the car used in the robbery, and that I hadn't been driving too fast or breaking any of the rules of the road. They said it was the *way* I was driving. I've no idea what they meant, but they said it was suspicious.

I can't be used in robberies. I've read that more than half of all bank employees who experience a robbery end up with psychological problems afterwards, some of them for the rest of their lives. I don't know why, but the old man who was behind the counter of the post office when we went in was in a big hurry to develop psychological problems. He fell to pieces just because the barrel of my shotgun was pointed in his general direction, apparently. I saw in the paper the next day that he was suffering from psychological problems. Not much of a diagnosis, but either way, if there's one thing you don't want, it's psychological problems. So I went to visit him in hospital. Obviously he didn't recognise me—I'd been wearing a Santa Claus mask in the post office. (It was the perfect disguise. No one gave a second glance to three lads in Santa Claus outfits carrying sacks as they ran out of a post office in the middle of the Christmas shopping crowds.) I stopped in the doorway to the ward and looked at the old man. He was reading *Class Struggle*, the Communist newspaper. Not that I've got anything against Communists as individuals. Okay, maybe I have. But I don't *want* to have anything against them as individuals, I just think they're wrong. So I felt a bit guilty when I realised that I felt a lot better because the bloke was reading *Class Struggle*. But obviously there's a big difference between feeling a bit guilty and a lot guilty. And like I said, I felt a *lot* better. But I stopped doing robberies. After all, there was no guarantee the next one would be a Communist.

And I can't work with drugs, that's number three. I just can't do it. It's not that I can't get money out of people who are in debt to my employers. Junkies only have themselves to blame, and in my opinion people should pay for their mistakes, plain and simple. The problem's more that I have a weak, sensitive nature, as my mum once put it. I suppose she saw herself in me. Either way, I have to stay well away from drugs. Like her, I'm the sort of person who's just looking for someone to submit to. Religion, a big-brother figure, a boss. Drink and drugs. Besides, I can't do math either, I can hardly count to ten without losing my concentration. Which is kind of stupid if you're going to sell drugs or collect debts—that ought to be pretty obvious.

Okay. Last one. Prostitution. Same sort of thing there. I don't have a problem with women earning money whatever way they like, and the idea that a bloke—me, for instance—should get a third of the money for sorting things out so the women can concentrate on the actual work. A good pimp is worth every krone they pay him, I've always thought that. The problem is that I fall in love so quickly, and then I stop seeing it in terms of business. And I can't handle shaking, hitting or threatening the women, whether or not I'm in love with them. Something to do with my mother, maybe, what do I know? That's probably why I can't stand seeing other people beating up women either. Something just snaps. Take Maria, for instance. Deaf and dumb, with a limp. I don't know what those two things have got to do with each other—nothing probably—but it's a bit like once you start getting bad cards, they just keep coming. Which is probably why Maria ended up with an idiot junkie boyfriend as well. He had a fancy French name, Myriel, but owed Hoffmann thirteen thousand for drugs. The first time I saw her was when Pine, Hoffmann's head pimp, pointed out a girl in a home-made coat and with her hair up in a bun, looking like she'd just left church. She was sitting on the steps in front of Ridderhallen, crying, and Pine told me she was going to have to pay back her boyfriend's drug debt in kind. I thought it best to give her a gentle start, just hand-jobs. But she jumped out of the first car she got into after barely ten seconds. She stood there in floods of tears while Pine yelled at her. Maybe he thought she'd hear him if he shouted loud enough. Maybe that was what did it. The yelling. And my mum. Either way, something snapped, and even if I could see what Pine was trying to get into her head by the use of very loud sound waves, I ended up decking him, my own boss. Then I took Maria to a flat I knew was empty, then went to tell Hoffmann that I was no use as a pimp either.

But Hoffmann said—and I had to agree with him—that he couldn't let people get away without paying their debts, because that sort of thing soon spreads to other, more important customers. So, well aware that Pine and Hoffmann were after the girl because she'd been stupid enough to take on her boyfriend's debts, I went out looking until I found the Frenchman in a squat up in Fagerborg. He was both wrecked by drugs and broke, so I realised I wasn't going to get a single krone out of him, no matter how much I shook him. I said that if he so much as approached Maria again I'd smash his nose into his brain. To be honest, I'm not sure there was much left of either of them. So I went back to Hoffmann, said the boyfriend had managed to get hold of some money, handed him thirteen thousand and said I presumed that meant hunting season on the girl was over.

I don't know if Maria had been a user while they were together, if she was the sort who looked for ways to be submissive, but she seemed pretty straight now, at least. She worked in a small supermarket, and I looked in every now and then to make sure things were okay, and that her junkie boyfriend hadn't popped up to ruin things for her again. Obviously I made sure she couldn't see me, just stood outside in the darkness looking into the well-lit shop, watching her sitting at the till, putting things in bags, and pointing at one of the others if anyone spoke to her. Every so often I suppose we all need to feel that we're living up to our parents. I don't know what Dad had that I could live up to—this is probably more about Mum. She was better at looking after other people than herself, and I suppose I saw that as a kind of ideal back then. God knows. Either way, I didn't really have much use for the money I was earning from Hoffmann. So what if I dealt a decent card to a girl who'd been given such a lousy hand?

Anyway. To sum up, let's put it like this: I'm no good at driving slowly, I'm way too soft, I fall in love far too easily, I lose my head when I get angry, and I'm bad at math. I've read a bit, but I don't really know much, and certainly nothing anyone would find useful. And stalactites grow faster than I can write.

So what on earth can a man like Daniel Hoffmann use someone like me for?

The answer is—as you might have worked out already—as a fixer.

I don't have to drive, and I mostly kill the sort of men who deserve it, and the numbers -aren't exactly hard to keep track of. Not right now, anyway.

There are two calculations.

To start with, there's the one that's ticking away the whole time: When exactly do you reach the point where you know so much about your boss that he starts to get worried? And when do you know he's beginning to wonder if he ought to fix the fixer? Like one of those black widows. Not that I know much about arachnology or whatever it's called, but I think the widows let the males, who are much smaller, fuck them. Then, when he's finished and the female has no more use for him, she eats him. In *Animal Kingdom 4: Insects and Spiders* in the Deichman Library there's a picture of a black widow with the male's chewed-off pedipalp, which is like the spider's cock, still hanging from her genitals. And you can see the blood-red, hourglass-shaped mark on the female's abdomen. Because the hourglass is running, you pathetic, randy little male spider, and you need to keep to your allotted visiting time. Or, to be more accurate, you need to know when visiting time is over. And then you get the fuck out of there, come what may, with a couple of bullets in the side or whatever—you just have to get away, to the only thing that can save you.

That's how I saw it. Do what you have to, but don't get too close.

And that's why I was seriously fucking worried about the new job Hoffmann had given me.

He wanted me to fix his wife.

