

CHAPTER 1



My interview with Oscar Strande lasted for three minutes and four questions. While he interrogated me, he drank a mug of espresso, sweat waterfalls, and injected himself from the insulin syringe he kept in a shoulder holster.

Can you make real coffee?

How about tea?

Ever used a typewriter?

Can you make coffee, or did I ask you that already?

He thought he was a journalist of the old school: a white pin-striped shirt, bright red braces, and a cigar he rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. He carried his girth and his failing pancreas like a boxer carries a prize belt; they were his rite of passage, the sacrifices he'd made in return for his position at the *Trondheim Echo*.

He gave me the job without listening to a single reply or sparing me a look. He scribbled down notes, which I'm sure had nothing to do with the interview, and told me I could start that afternoon if I wanted.

'I am warning you though, Miss ... ?'

'Ersland.'

He looked up, staring at me over the top of his spectacles. He

knew the name was a lie, so it was down to how much he cared. For the first time since I'd stepped into his office he took a good look at me and found things that didn't seem to fit: I wasn't wearing makeup; my shoes were scuffed and worn, and the dress – my only dress – had faded with age.

'Ersland,' he said.

I nodded.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Would you like to try again?'

I shook my head.

His brow furrowed and he tapped his teeth. His eyes dipped so he could look at my legs.

Monica was right; this was a terrible idea. I was about to get up and leave when Strande leaned forward with his hands clasped in front of him.

'I will do you the courtesy of being honest. Only three people applied for the job: a woman in her forties, a man – if you can believe it – and you. If there were someone more suitable, I'd take them in a heartbeat. But let me warn you, young lady, you will find this the dullest, most unrewarding job you will ever have. I should know; I was doing it at your age.'

And look at you now.

'I only need to know one thing: would it be a mistake to hire you. Think carefully. I am not a forgiving man.'

I told him I was hardworking, didn't have a criminal record and wasn't wanted by the police. I think that's all he wanted to know.

He stared into my eyes; I stared back without blinking. Finally, he sniffed loudly and sat back in his seat. 'Fine,' he said. 'Mine's black, four sugars.'



Strande hadn't lied. The work was dull, repetitive and mostly unappreciated. Only Rodrek, a junior reporter, ever thanked me for the coffee. But I did like being there. There are few places I can go where I just fade into the wallpaper.

'You take far too many risks,' Monica said over a late breakfast. We

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were sitting in a small café, a short walk from *The Echo*, at the table closest to the door. Monica kept one eye on the entrance and berated me again for my spectacularly poor judgement. ‘A newspaper? I think you’ve lost your mind.’

‘I’m hiding in plain sight; that’s what you called it, isn’t it?’ I smiled and spooned ice cream into my mouth. ‘No one recognised me. The biggest paper in Trondheim and not one journalist, photographer or editor has looked at me twice.’

She lit a cigarette and craned her neck to blow smoke at my eyes. ‘You think we’re forgotten, don’t you?’ She put the cigarettes back into her bag without offering one to me. ‘And you’re looking at me like that again.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like this is all my fault.’

‘I never said that. I *have never* said that.’

‘You never say half the things you’re thinking.’

‘Would it make any difference if I did?’

‘A newspaper for God’s sake. I mean, you can barely read.’

‘Now that is your fault,’ I said, lighting a cigarette of my own.

Monica widened her eyes. ‘Excuse me?’

‘You’re my mother. If not you, then who?’

‘Well – how about your fucking father!’

The other customers stopped eating to look at us.

‘We have to fly low, Brigit,’ she whispered, her eyes searching for an assault from any quarter. ‘One day we won’t have to. One day, Norway will—’

‘Yeah, I know. “Norway will forget.”’

The mantra changed a while ago. She used to say ‘Norway will forgive.’ But it’s been thirty years since the war ended, so forgiveness was clearly off the table.

‘We could leave,’ I said. ‘We could just leave and settle somewhere where they’ve never heard us. Switzerland maybe. Or America.’

‘America? You’re joking. They’re up to their necks in Viet Nam, and don’t get me started on all that “free love” crap ...’ She stubbed out the cigarette with the same gravity someone else would use to load a gun. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Norway is our home.’

‘Norway doesn’t seem to think so.’

‘Then Norway will have to learn.’

‘Mrs Quisling must’ve said the same thing.’

She looked at me as though I’d accused her of drowning kittens.

‘You’re comparing me ... to her.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Fine.’ She stood up, threw her napkin on the table and walked out. The other customers were staring at me; some smiled sympathetically, some shrugged – others frowned while they backtracked through our conversation, perhaps trying to piece together our lives from a single snatched word:

Quisling.

An old man, sitting alone in one corner, gripped the arm of a passing waiter. He whispered in his ear and pointed in my direction. I guessed he was a Survivor. We ran into them frequently, or their relatives, or their descendants, or people with no lives of their own and nothing better to do than hound us. Strange when you consider there were only a few hundred people in that village to begin with.

I’d been recognised so it was time to leave. I left money next to the ice cream dish and hurried back to *The Echo*.

A shame – I really liked that café.



Back at *The Echo*, Oscar Strande was throwing chairs.

‘Impact!’ he screamed.

Another chair bounced off the wall.

‘Where is my *fucking* impact?’

The editors and journalists crammed into his smoke-filled office looked at each other and then back at Strande. He was purple, a very deep purple. I moved amongst the rigid bodies, quietly taking orders for the afternoon coffee run.

‘We are three days out from the new year,’ Strande said, pressing his fists into his desk. ‘Three days from the most significant event in—’

‘A year,’ said Marte Henning, and I was so glad I wasn’t her. She smiled weakly and a ripple of laughter flowed around the office. Oscar

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Strande stared at her and rolled his cigar from the left side of his mouth to the right – the angry side.

The ripple stopped.

‘We’ll speak later, Marte,’ he said. ‘But for now, just get out.’

‘Oh come on, Oscar. She was just trying to lighten—’

‘And you can go too, Thomas. In fact, both of you, leave the building and don’t think of coming to the New Year party. Now does anyone else have a little year-end humour they’d like to share? No? Good, I thought not.’

Marte left in tears, and Thomas slammed the door on his way out.

‘Quite honestly people, the Special, as it currently stands, is shit. It is worse than shit.’ Strande looked to the ceiling for a suitably barbarous metaphor. ‘If shit stepped in our Year-End Special then shit would hop to the nearest patch of grass and scrape its shoe.’

‘There is nothing emotional here, people. Norway during the war – check. Norway and its nascent welfare system – check. Norway’s future oil wealth – check. Yes, we know all that! All you idiots have done is add “as the end of the year approaches” in front of every sentence! And that, dear friends, is shit.’

‘Oscar, if I may speak—’

‘No Jens, you may not. Norway is just a slab of land which God saw fit to place next to an oil slick. What makes our country is the people who built it. Did no one think to speak to the family of Edvard Grieg? What about Quisling’s relatives? Yes, he is the most reviled man in Norwegian history, but his actions lit a fire of righteousness that still burns in every one of us. You! Yes, you – coffee girl.’

I hiccupped, dropped my pad and stood to attention.

‘You’re young,’ he said accusingly. ‘What will 1969 mean to you, and don’t you dare mention free love or the fucking Beatles!’

Rodrek pushed the notepad back into my shaking hand and whispered in my ear: ‘Say something. Anything.’

‘Don’t help her, Rodrek. She’s not a retard. You’re not a retard, are you?’

‘It’s the year I stop waiting for things to change,’ I said with nothing to follow it with.

‘And can you tell me what the fuck you mean by that?’

I swallowed so loudly I swear everyone heard it.

‘Well,’ I began, ‘it’s just another year, isn’t it?’

Strande’s cigar returned to the angry side of his mouth.

‘Korea’s ongoing,’ I said. ‘Viet Nam is heading towards another fuck-up that’ll cost millions of dollars and millions of men. We might put a man on the moon, we might not. Even if we do, the aliens won’t drop by and Jesus won’t come back.’

‘So what you’re saying is ... ?’

‘What I’m saying is that I don’t care about any of that. I just want to know how to get out of this crappy job and get one like yours. I want to know where I’ll find a man when they’re still in short supply, and when I’ll have babies. I want to know how I can have a career while I’m caring for my family. I think I want it all, Mr Strande, and I think the New Year Special should tell me how can I get it.’

The silence wasn’t quite what I’d hoped for. The journalists looked at each other. I think the women wanted to applaud. Most of the men probably wondered if Strande would fire me with violence, or just fire me.

‘The youngsters will love it, Oscar,’ Rodrek ventured.

Strande rolled the cigar to the left side of his mouth. ‘Have something that ends with “this year I’ll change things myself” on my desk by tomorrow morning.’

‘Me?’

‘You do want to be a journalist, don’t you? I mean that’s why you took this crappy job, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know if I can—’

‘Good, an article by tomorrow morning, and if you value your life, I’d better not see the phrase “as the new year approaches”.’

I nodded while everyone stared at me.

‘You’d better get started then, Coffee Girl, and before you do, mine’s a double espresso, four sugars. The rest of you should take a cue from her. Now fuck off back to your desks, and give me people, not bullshit.’



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Around nine o'clock, after the rest of the newsroom had gone home, I realised Monica had been right all along.

Write a piece on the coming year from the perspective of a twenty-three-year-old Norwegian woman. It would have been easy except for one small problem: I can't write. When you spend your life running from one town to the next, things suffer. You make no friends, develop no social skills. You don't spend long in school so you say goodbye to college, university – you say goodbye to pretty much everything.

I looked at the blank paper; it looked back. I glanced at the clock: nine-forty-six. I turned around and snatched a glance at Oscar Strande sitting in his office. He was reading from a brown folder, his eyes scanning quickly across the pages, stopping every so often to look at me. He smiled, and not in an endearing way.

I desperately rattled out a few words on the keys, hearing the door to his office open then close. When I turned around again, he was perched on the edge of a desk six or seven feet away. The folder was resting against his thigh, the rictus smile stretched across his jowls. I could hear him wheezing.

Seven words altogether. The journalist's equivalent of 'It was a dark and stormy night.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, and I meant it. 'I can't do this. I just can't.'

'Hmm.'

'If I had some more time, and a little help – from Rodrek maybe ...'

He dropped the folder on my desk.

'What is it?'

'Take a look.'

He licked the perspiration from his upper lip. He looked nervous, and that made me nervous. I opened the folder. Inside it were a few sheets of paper, copies of old documents from the Nuremberg trials, and a large photograph. The black-and-white picture was of Erik Brenna, taken just before the end of the war. He was dressed in black woollen trousers and a chequered shirt. He was smiling. I'd never seen the picture before. My mouth went dry and my hands started to shake. It occurred to me that I had his nose.

'I didn't know who you were at first,' Strande said. 'Which begs the

question, what sort of reporter am I? I mean, the daughter of the second-most reviled man in the history of Norway walks into my humble establishment, and I don't even recognise her.'

'Mr Strande, I—'

'Just be quiet.'

He closed in behind me, pressing down on my shoulder with one hand. 'I gave you a chance, Brigit. I asked you if I could trust you.'

'You can. What my father did has nothing to do with me.'

'Can you see how embarrassing this is for *The Echo*, for me personally?'

I said I was sorry, and he started massaging my shoulder, pushing his thumb into my collarbone.

'I'm sure you are. I mean, you're not a bad person, are you, Brigit?'

I heard him undo his zip.

'No, I'm not. I should have told you.'

'Yes, and now we have to think of a way to make this right, don't we?' His hand left my shoulder and I could breathe again. Then it snaked inside the collar of my dress. I froze. He leaned closer. He smelled like raw onions. 'When people find out that I've taken on the daughter of a missing war criminal, I'll be a laughing stock.' He started kneading my breast. 'But I'm sure we can come to an arrangement that'll benefit us both.' He used his free hand to draw my dress to the top of my thighs. I tried to pull at the hem to cover myself. He gently moved my arm out of the way. 'We can say that you came here to tell your story, to see justice done, to see your father answer for his crimes.' He pressed his hand between my thighs and spread his fingers, forcing my knees apart.

'Mr Strande, please ...'

'Do you know where your father is, Brigit?'

He fumbled between my legs and I snapped to my senses. I grabbed hold of a paperweight and swung it over my right shoulder. It connected, though I wasn't sure with what. I heard him cry out and stumble backward; he tripped, landing heavily on the floor.

I was on my feet, holding the paperweight out in front of me with both hands, like a gun.

Strande was on his knees, doubled over, his chest rattling and

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blood running from his nose and mouth. 'You cut me, you ... little ... bitch.'

'I swear to God I'll kill you if you come near me again!' I gave the paperweight a threatening shake. Strande got up, staggered back to his office and closed the door.

It took a few minutes to get myself together. My right breast hurt; it was probably bruised. My tights were ripped and I'd managed to fold a fingernail back on itself; there was blood running from the cuticle. I drank what was left in the water cooler and wiped my eyes with napkins I found in Rodrek's desk. I thought Strande might have ripped my dress because I could feel a coldness around my shoulder blade. When I reached round to check for the hole I found the dress wasn't ripped – it was damp. I used the rest of the napkins trying to wipe my back.

I thought about calling the police, but Monica doesn't trust them, and so instinctually, neither do I.

Strande sat upright when I threw open his door. His shirt was covered in blood and he hadn't made any attempt to staunch the flow from his nostrils. I'd managed to break one of his front teeth.

He glared at me then looked down at his desk, rubbing the palm of his hand with his thumb.

He said, 'I appear to have misread the situation.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'yes, you did.'

'But the offer stands. Tell me where your father is hiding and I will make sure—'

'I want money. Everything in the safe, all of it.'

He blinked rapidly before narrowing his eyes. 'You're blackmailing me?' he said, loosening his collar. The top button of his shirt popped free and landed on the desk. He looked at it as though he had no idea where it could have come from.

'Empty your pockets.'

He slid down in his chair and started wheezing, pearls of white sweat already congealing at his hairline. 'No one will believe you.'

'Perhaps.' I dipped my eyes towards his wedding ring. 'But a man like you ... I don't think you can take the chance.'

There wasn't much: his wallet, a pair of museum tickets, a small

notebook and a silver cigarette case. I took all his cash, even the change, about three thousand kroner all together. And I kept the cigarette case, which seemed to upset him more than the money. 'That was a present from my wife.'

I lit a cigarette and gratefully filled my lungs.

He opened the safe which landed me another thirty thousand kroner, and I took his wedding ring because it was worth more to me than it meant to him.

'Do you know why Norway hates you?' he asked.

Fastening my coat and feeling bulletproof, I told him I didn't care.

'You see, I think you do. Don't you wonder what makes you different from the descendants of other war criminals?'

'He's alive,' I said. 'He's alive and he hasn't paid for what he's done, so they take it out on us. I expected better.'

'That's only part of it. Yes, Quisling paid for his crimes, but his atrocities were slow, they were measured, meted out over time. Your father ...' He shook his head. 'A whole village wiped out in one terrible day. Two hundred men, women and children – gone. He will never be forgiven, and in his absence neither will you.'

I made for the stairs before he could see me cry.

'Enjoy your life, Brigit,' he shouted after me, 'such as it is.'