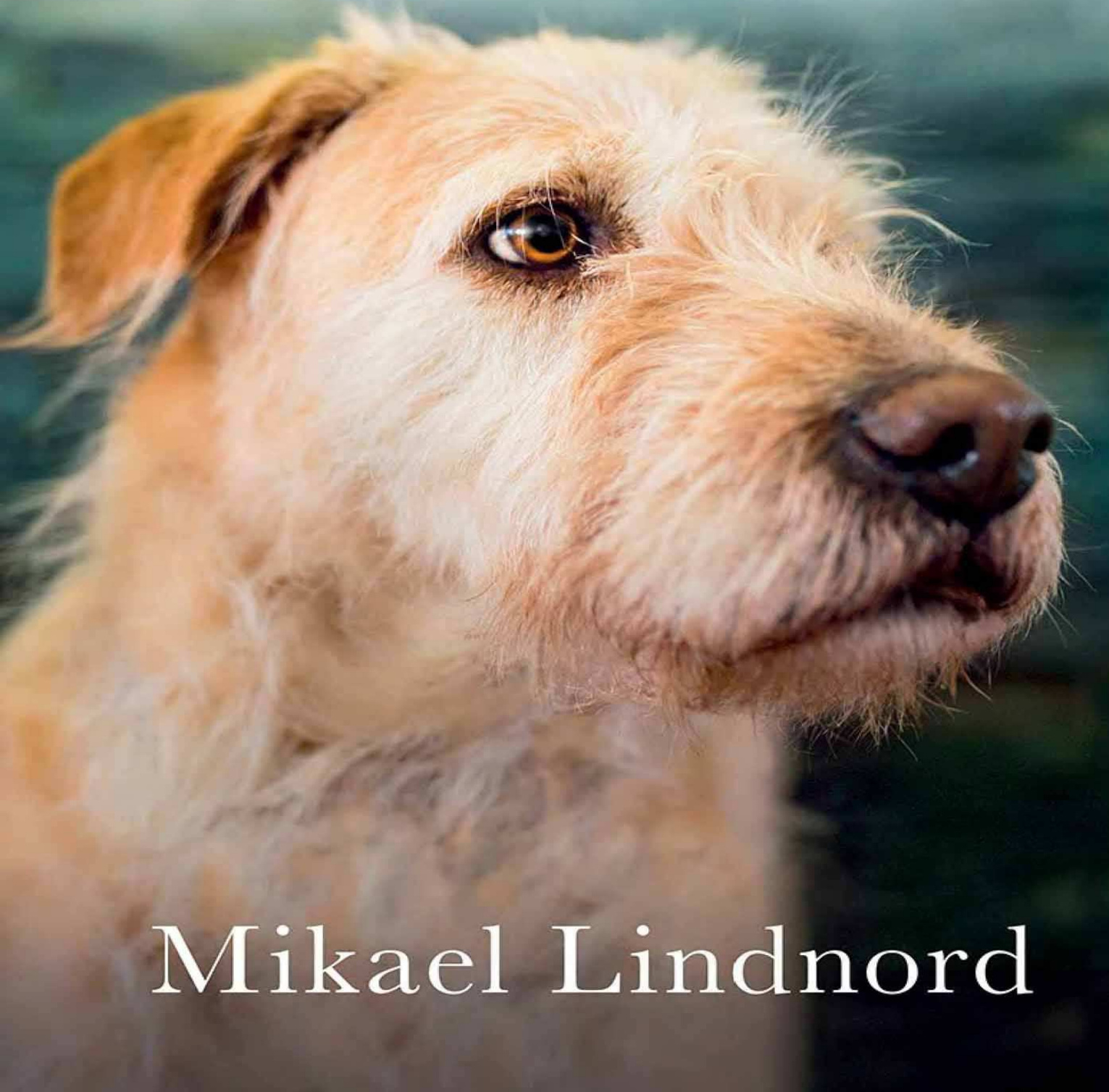


Arthur

The Dog Who Crossed the
Jungle to Find a Home



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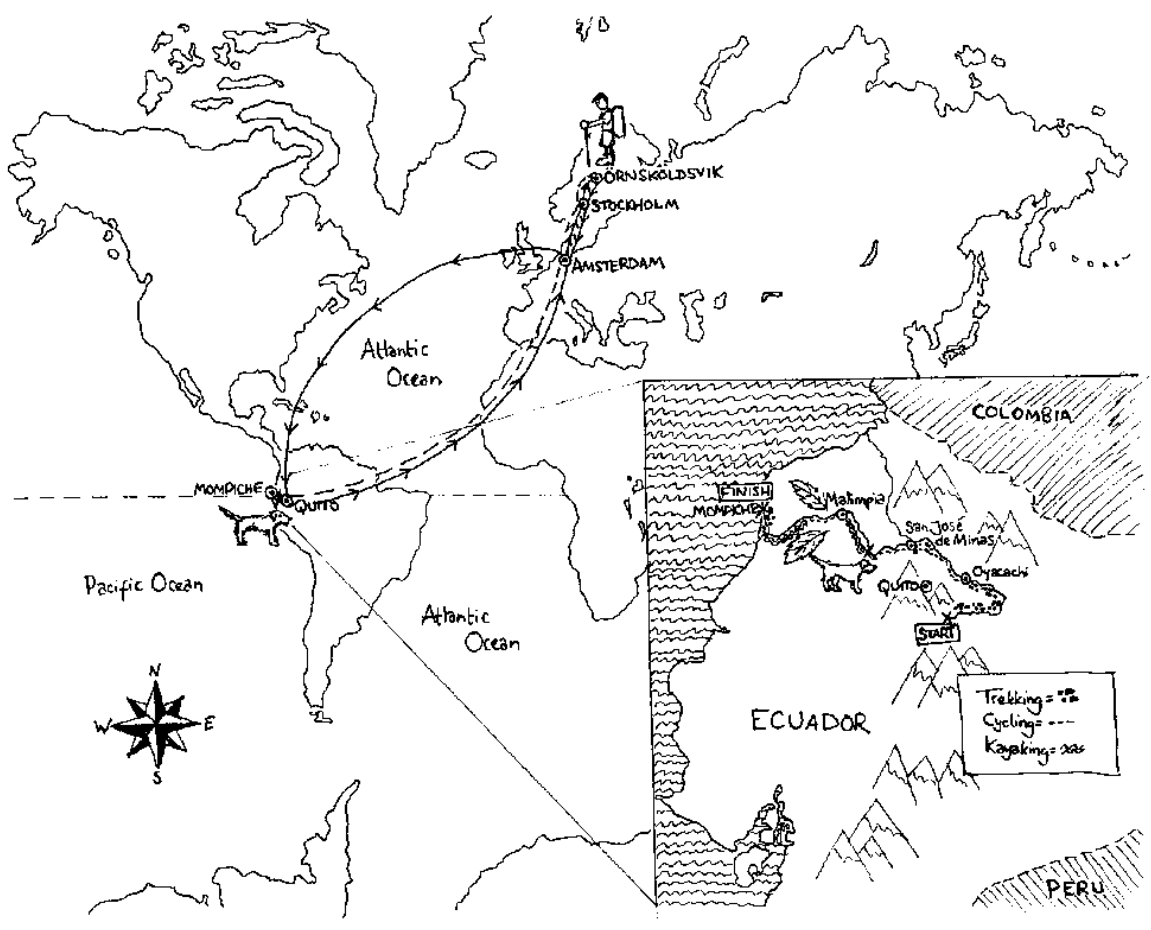
Mikael Lindnord



GREYSTONE BOOKS

Vancouver/Berkeley

*'I never set out to have a dog.
But I feel there is something of Arthur in me.
Meeting Arthur and bringing him home is the single best thing I have
ever done.'*



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Chapter 1

A Sporting Chance

'People who do adventure racing are not normal'



Örnsköldsvik, November 2015

It's eleven thirty at night, and I'm just beginning to hit my stride with the emails that have been piling up in my in-box. We are only days away from setting off for the Adventure Racing World Championship in Brazil – the highlight of the year's racing schedule. There are a hundred things to organise, and my desk is overflowing with lists of things to take, and lists of things to do, before my team and I set off.

Outside there's a wind howling, and it's started to rain, but our upstairs office is warm. Warm and comfortable – and smelling just a little bit of wet dog. My feet aren't remotely cold, but if they were I'd

only have to move them a couple of inches and they'd be cosy and safe beneath a familiar furry body.

Arthur.

Half asleep as he lies under the desk, adjusting his front left paw so it's in the perfect, comfortable Arthur-ish position. If I shut my eyes, now or at any time, I can see him in this favourite position. His long body panting gently, his big lion-like head pointing towards me expectantly, and one of his front paws tucked under him as if he were saving it for later. I don't have to look below the desk to know what he's doing. I can hear from the snuffle and the sigh of contentment that he's making himself comfortable for as long as it takes me to do my work.

Helena and the children are asleep downstairs. It's a rare moment of quiet in a house that's usually full of activity and noise. Two-year-old Philippa is perfect and adorable and I'd do anything in the world for her, but her thirst for new adventures and new things to play with sometimes means waking up her little brother.

Thor is only three months old, so he can't really be expected to know when it's playtime and when it's sleep time. Mostly he is beautifully behaved – he eats, sleeps, eats, sleeps and that's pretty much it – but he can be a bit noisy too. I guess with two people in the house under three, you have to expect noise and a little bit of mess.

But there's a serene presence in the middle of all this, and as I look down below the desk to check on him, Arthur looks up at me with the trusting expression that I never tire of seeing. I scratch his head, just behind his ear. Most of him is a rich golden colour, but his ears – through the unique mixture of dog genes that makes up Arthur – are a delicate shade of orange. I love these ears, and the way they fly up in the air when he's running fast over the mountains.

But at the moment there's no running; there's just a sleepy contentment. Happy to know that I'm safely in his sight, he puts his big head back down on to his paw and closes his eyes.

As I start to make the final preparations for this year's championships, I can't help gazing at Arthur in a little bit of wonder. This time last year, I had no idea he even existed. Let alone that he would become a part of me, a part of our family. I started thinking of

how extraordinary it is that we are here together, despite all the odds having been so stacked against us . . .



Örnsköldsvik, 1993

'No, not you, Mikael. You're out. Not good enough.'

I stopped in the middle of tying up my hockey skates and looked up at my coach aghast.

'You can stay if you like,' he went on. 'But I won't be letting you play. I suggest you pack your things and say goodbye.'

He turned away from me, walked out of the locker room and moved out to the ice to talk to the rest of the team. He led three of them on to the rink and started directing them in a new training exercise. As he sped off, he looked like he was completely unaware of the hammer blow he'd just dealt me.

It felt like my insides had turned to water. Not. In. The. Team. I was seventeen years old, and being in the ice hockey team was pretty much all I'd ever wanted, all I'd been aiming for and training for these past five years. I hadn't missed a single training session, I'd done everything that had been asked of me. I did my very best, trained off-season and extra on rest days. I put all my energy, everything I had into it.

The words 'not good enough' seemed to echo around the skating arena. I bent down to put my gear back in my bag, not wanting anyone

to see the expression on my face. When I'd packed everything away, I looked at my teammates. I didn't know it then but it would be more than twenty years before I entered that locker room again.

As they went off to start the training session, it seemed to be business as usual for them. Nobody realised that something in Mikael Lindnord had just died a little.

For anyone born and brought up in Örnsköldsvik, northern Sweden, ice hockey was pretty much the holy grail of what you could do. In fact, it was the holy grail wherever you were born in Sweden. Our country is unusual in this respect: you can be mediocre at anything, that's fine, mediocre is fine. But if there's one thing you should really, really excel at it is hockey. That's the sport that more than any other – even soccer, even orienteering and skiing – commands respect.

Ever since I was a small boy I put my heart and soul into sport. I'm not a natural talent, but I have always loved sports and been super-competitive. Years before, when I was only about ten, I was at a volleyball practice at school. It was only a practice, the score didn't really matter as such, yet when the coach called the ball out because he said it had hit the roof, I hit the roof too. I was sure the ball was still in play and I wouldn't accept his call. I must have been infuriating to teach at that age, but I was simply determined to win. Even in a practice session.

I guess the coaches could see the determination, and the effort, but in the end they didn't see enough skill.

I remember going home at the end of that day, wondering how I'd tell my parents that I wasn't in the team. They knew how much it meant to me, and indeed my mother had spent most of the previous twelve years driving me to endless hockey practices and other sports events. I suppose she might have got bored during all those years of waiting in the car for me to finish whatever training session I was at, but if she did she'd never say so. Once, she was the last mother waiting by quite some time. I'd got lost during an orienteering race and was well behind everyone else. And yet that didn't stop me painstakingly making sure that I went to all the checkpoints to get my card stamped. They'd told me to finish the whole course, so finish it I

did. Looking back, I realise now that I was never going to be a quitter.



My father was in the military and worked for the United Nations, a job I didn't really understand in those days, and anyway he never really talked about his work. But I knew it was important and time-consuming.

It also meant that he had the option of working abroad for a year. He didn't have to, but he had wanted to. So we – my parents, me aged twelve, my sister aged seven – were uprooted from our lives in Sweden to go and live on the other side of the world. For the first six months we were to live in Damascus. And then for the next six months we were to live in Cairo.

Nowadays I'm glad I had that year abroad, and in such frighteningly unfamiliar places. Like a lot of not-always-pleasant experiences that one has in life, I can look back on it and realise that actually I learned things, things that made me understand the world a little bit better.

At the time it didn't feel like it, though. And when it came to learning things at school, I actually learned precious little. I had to go to the Pakistani school in Damascus, where the teachers were brutal. All our lessons were in English, which I didn't speak well then. Maths was my weakest subject (in fact, I was pretty average at most sciences and things that involved numbers), so imagine how hard an average Swedish boy found it to be taught maths in English. Sometimes we were told to learn our times tables overnight, and when I couldn't say them the next day, which I hardly ever could, I'd be beaten. My mother would help me with my homework, but even so, in class I'd get question after question wrong, and nearly every time I got my ears pulled for being stupid. Pulled hard – with a firm grip and a forward motion. I'm amazed I don't have enormous ears, or they don't point forward in an unusual way.

It was a very hard time. Not only was I being beaten, but I was desperately homesick for Sweden. I really, really missed the place and

all my friends. But eventually my father went to the school and told the principals – two rather terrifying women – that it wasn't acceptable to beat a Swedish citizen like this, even a small one. After that, the beating stopped, but I was so tired at the end of the day and I still had to stay up doing homework until it was time for bed. It was constant punishment, and it isn't how school should be. The memory still haunts me, even thirty years later.

But those six months, and the six months in Cairo, did teach me something about how other people live with each other, or how they *should* live with each other. Just watching people from different cultures having to get used to being with each other was a lesson in itself. And because I'd had such a hard time learning in another language, I think I'll always have sympathy for people who come to a strange country and are suddenly expected to be able to do everything in a strange language.



Shortly after we got back to Sweden, we moved to Örnsköldsvik, the same town where we still live today. It's a great part of the world, where you can ski, trek, bike, swim, play sport – all within a few minutes of home.

The city is in the heart of a beautiful archipelago and the area known as the High Coast – the Höga Kusten. The combination of steep hills, small islands and forests makes for fantastic country – it looks beautiful at any time of the year, and the trails are some of the most spectacular anywhere in the world.

When I was growing up, if I wasn't playing ice hockey I'd be biking or skiing – we had great skiing holidays as children – or skating. I liked skating, even though I had a bit of a problem with it for many years. I had a pair of skates that didn't fit properly. Every time I put them on I had so much pain. I'd look around me at everyone else, and they didn't seem to be troubled by their skates. I thought everyone must be in pain like me, and I couldn't understand why they weren't showing it. It was only years later, when I had skates that fitted, that I realised

what a difference it made – and in fact now, at thirty-nine, I am a better skater than I was when I was younger and training five or six hours a week. I'd also play soccer during the summer – just for fun; with this sport I did know I didn't have the skill to really succeed.

And then that summer, the summer I didn't make it to the hockey team, I discovered something that took the edge off my disappointment. A girl called Helena.

It was the summer of 1993, the exams were over and we were free to be outside and to have late nights, and even the odd secret drink when our parents weren't looking. I had been going out with a girl at high school since I was fifteen, so she and I had been together for nearly three years. Like most of my friends, I thought of myself as quite the grown-up, but looking back on the seventeen-going-on-eighteen-year-old me, I guess I wasn't really that sophisticated after all. Having a girlfriend and playing lots of sport didn't necessarily make you mature.

A group of us decided to celebrate the beginning of the holidays by going to a dance in the centre of town. We knew people from at least two other schools would be there, so we all thought – especially those friends who were single – there'd be new boys and girls there. And that could only be a good thing.

It was noisy and dark, as these places so often are, but I immediately noticed a glint of golden hair at the other side of the room. As I edged closer I could see this awesomely lovely girl. She looked bright and fun, and gorgeous. We talked a bit – or as much as you could talk with all the noise – but then we said goodnight. I'd been able to establish that she was younger than me, sixteen, and she loved sport, especially horse riding. Also that she wasn't with anyone. But I was, so I had to go.

Somehow, though, I knew in my heart that this was the real thing, and I knew I had to break up with my girlfriend before I could do anything about it. Once that hard part was over, the next difficult bit was to pursue Helena. The first time I asked to go round and see her, she said I couldn't as she was just off to a week's riding camp.

But I didn't let that put me off. I could see how important her riding was to her, and that this wasn't just some excuse. Also I could see

that she was a little bit nervous, which made me even more sure that she did want to see me. Gradually we got to know each other, and saw more and more of each other. In between her riding and my hockey, of course.

She said later that she could tell straight away that I was 'a very special guy'. I don't know about that, but I do know it's wonderful that all these years later she still thinks I'm a special guy.



If having met the love of your life is a very grown-up experience, then so too is military service. When I was eighteen, military service was compulsory, though since 2010 you only get to do military exercises if you're going into the army professionally. But I do think there's an argument for making military service compulsory still. It gives you a discipline and a structure, and it makes you find things out about yourself. For me, it was the beginning of the rest of my life.

I elected to do fifteen months of military training, the maximum, although after what had happened with the ice hockey team I felt desperately insecure – terrified even – as to whether or not I'd make it. But I was determined to do whatever it would take to succeed.

Throughout my childhood I was told that I was weak. I knew my father's expectations of me weren't high; I remember as if it were yesterday him telling me that he didn't think I could make it. Maybe this was because, being in the military himself, he had seen so many boys like me broken by the tough, hard work that you had to do. And maybe his idea that I was 'weak' was something to do with my hatred of confrontation – which I do hate; I feel really bad after any confrontation for a long time afterwards. But actually weak? Rather, I felt I had something to prove, not just to myself but to him and everyone else.

After the first tests of physical fitness and endurance, I began to think that maybe I was right and my father was wrong. This was where I belonged.

For one of the early tests, fifty-five of us set off on a hugely

gruelling march over the mountains of Kiruna, the biggest, northernmost town in Sweden, not far from the Finnish border, with fifty-kilo backpacks, and only our own resources to make it to the end. As the march got tougher and tougher people dropped out. Not many were expected to see it through to the end of the march, and of the fifty-five – all judged to be physically very fit – only twenty-two went on to become Green Beret Rangers.

I was so happy to have proved that I had the kind of toughness that it took to win through. I felt it was one in the eye to the officers who had yelled and shouted insults at me in the past.

When it came to my turn to lead the boys, I thought I should give them a taste of the medicine that I had suffered. On a day I shall never forget, I stood in front of them to give them my great speech. I think I believed then that the louder I shouted, the more I bullied, the tougher I would seem and the more the men would admire me. I think I must have thought that the more noise I made the less likely my basic insecurities would be found out.

It did not go well. I went red in the face, I forgot some of the words I wanted to say and my voice cracked in the middle of my shouts. But despite this failure of public speaking, I still felt that I had what it takes to succeed in the military.

From there, we went on to do months of even more demanding exercises – I guess we were being trained to be warriors, to survive, to kill rather than be killed. We'd do most of our exercises as if on a defence mission around the Russian border. Every day was different – we might be chased by dogs, or by other bands of soldiers. Often we ran out of food, and had to sneak up on imaginary enemy lines under fire. And rather like in the movies of that time, always the 'enemy' was from the east.

As the weeks progressed I discovered that I was right – I was strong. Not just physically strong, but strong in my head. Willpower strong. We would be carrying two guys, racing and still winning. I could keep going when everyone around me had given up; I found I had huge reserves of stamina, plus an ability to go without sleep that seemed to be above and beyond anyone else's.

And along with all this I discovered something else, something that

would change my life. I discovered that I had what translates from Swedish as 'troopscharm': the ability to take guys with me. Not just by telling them what to do, but also by showing them what to do. I learned to lead by example. I didn't shout or insult, I was just positive. I was a natural leader.

On one exercise we were all out in the bush and it got incredibly cold. Numbingly, buttock-clenchingly, toe-freezingly cold. We could see our breath, we could see our eyelashes freeze even as we blinked.

Some people were finding it almost too tough, but I found that not only did I not have a problem with the cold and the exhaustion, but that I could also show them that it was OK, we could get through. If we helped each other and kept going, we'd make it together. One or two guys had to be carried, another had to be joked into carrying on up the last mountain when he'd almost given up. Somehow or other I got us all to the end of the exercise, in good spirits and all, thankfully, alive.

Then, after one particularly tough test out in the mountains – where a troop of thirty of us crossed difficult terrain in freezing temperatures for ten days at a stretch – we got back to base to be told that there would be a test the following morning against the rest of the regiment. We were all sore, sick and exhausted. It was beyond belief that we were expected to perform to peak standards at dawn the following morning. Of the thirty of us, twenty-six found a reason or a doctor's note not to do the test.

Although a part of me thought they were just seeing if we'd even turn up, I got up at dawn and presented myself for duty. It was for real. It was a serious race, and there was no going back. So we did the competition, sprinted like maniacs and came in only just behind the winners – and top overall.

We crossed the finish line and were bending over, utterly exhausted, breathless but slightly exhilarated at what we had achieved. Our commanding officer came over to us. 'OK guys. Good job. You are now the new Number One Platoon Ranger Officers.'

As I saluted him, sweat pouring down my face, I felt a thrill of pride and satisfaction that I can still feel to this day. This was the first time I had been told I was the best. And it was a moment to savour.

All sorts of things followed from that – where I used to blush and hate talking to large groups of people, now I was confident at public speaking; where before I would take a back seat, now I would take command and show the way. But mostly I realised that I could succeed, that I was someone who could lead, see the big picture, have confidence – and have the maturity to know all that.

I was growing up.

Chapter 2

Finding the Way

'You can't get to where you want to go if you don't know where you are'



Örnsköldsvik, 2015

The sun's starting to break through in the first moments of dawn, and I've just run up to the top of my favourite mountain. It's still autumn, so there's no sign of snow yet, and you can see the naked wooden ski jump looming rather terrifyingly out of the gloom.

I can feel the familiar gasping pain as I lean over to recover my breath. I've parked the car at the top, so that I can run down and up again and finish at the highest point. I look back down the trail, expecting to see a familiar golden shape. Hmm. No sign of Arthur.

I decide not to panic. Even though the forests and mountains of Sweden are so different to the jungles of Ecuador where Arthur spent his first mysterious years, he has a way of orienteering himself.

It mostly involves going back to the point where he's last seen me, or where I've parked the car. But it is getting late, and I start to feel a hard knot of worry in my stomach. I set off at great speed down the mountain, bouncing in between the rocks and roots. I am well used to this kind of running, so it is not long before I am halfway down the trail.

Still no sign of Arthur. I think back to how lost we were together the day after we first met, me and my team misreading the map, Arthur unwittingly leading us even further astray. Perhaps Arthur's internal compass has let him down this morning . . .

The knot in my stomach seems to grow tighter, and I turn round to go back to the top. We are way too far away from home for Arthur to make his way there by himself, so he must be somewhere near. But it's getting later and later, and running uphill is slower work than coming down.

As I reach the top of the hill and see the outline of the ski jump against the still-grey sky, I head round the back towards the car. Nothing there but a few loose rocks.

Then suddenly there's a woof. From behind the car comes a golden bundle of fur and paws and barking. Arthur bounds towards me as if he hasn't seen me for months. He jumps up at me, higher and higher, barking in an 'isn't this fun?' kind of way. I am so happy to see him that I don't mind that he's being a bit rough and practically knocking me off my feet. I kneel down and put my face next to his and my arms round his furry body.

Not lost after all.



To Åre and Beyond, 1995 Onwards

Of all the things I hate, getting lost is right up near the top of the list. Maybe it's the memory of all those hours spent trying to find the checkpoints in the forest when I was a boy. Maybe it's the feeling of rising panic I still get when I look at a muddied map in the middle of the jungle and have NO IDEA which path we're on. Or maybe it's just that getting lost is always the first step to losing. But whatever causes it, I hate that feeling of helplessness.

Happily, my spell in the military did a lot to make me more confident about navigation. There's nothing like having thirty guys dependent on you getting the map coordinates right in a temperature of minus-35 to focus the mind.

I was beginning to realise there were things I was good at, and my favourite thing I was good at was skiing. We did plenty of cross-country skiing in the military; I knew I was getting better and better at it and I found I couldn't get enough of it. I often spent my leave going mountain-skiing with other cadets. The army had a cabin in the small ski resort of Riksgränsen, and we could trade our going-home-on-leave money for bus and ski passes.