

The Last Safe Deposit Box (Norwegian title: *Den siste bankboksen*) by Ulrik Høisæther

Sample translation from the Norwegian by David M. Smith

Chapter 1

Eva Berg hurried through the Palace Park, which seemed empty and desolate in the evening rain. In her own intense anxiety, she hadn't noticed the figure that had been following her all the way from her office. The bitter taste of the gun lube still lingered from the pistol that had been pushed all the way into her mouth. The notch on the end of the barrel had made a bloody cut in the back of her throat, and the friction of the cold metal on her teeth had made her shiver horribly. The threat had been convincing enough, the voice calm, calculated, direct. But wasn't until Eva's daughter was mentioned that she knew she had no choice; she had to do what she was told.

In the twilight in front of the gate on Fredensborgveien, she fumbled around for the right key. The foregoing events were replaying relentlessly in her mind, but she finally found the key and felt it slip into place with a metallic click. Coming into the stairwell, she forgot her usual ritual of opening the metal mailbox with its yellow, faded label: "E. Berg." She walked up the stairs, two floors up, much faster than normal. She heard the whirr of the front door's electric lock downstairs. She didn't notice the fact that the door didn't slam shut the way it usually did.

Instead, she reached for a key to the apartment, her awareness clouded by the thoughts raging within her. It was the first time in her fifty-four years that she had committed a crime. Now she was clinging to the hope that a solution could be found. There just *had* to be a way out.

She flung her outerwear away instead of carefully hanging it up like she always did. The wet heap contrasted with the otherwise neat and cosy kitchen. Eva Berg had lived alone for almost a decade, and she no longer missed the feeling of living with someone. Her daughter, who was studying abroad, had teased her about getting a pet, but Eva claimed that allergies stood in the way.

Inside the small kitchen, she put on the hot water boiler before taking out a bag of chamomile tea and a big, pink mug. Then she went to the medicine cabinet, fumbling past the throat lozenges and aspirin for a packet of individually-wrapped pills that were several years old.

After swallowing a couple of sedatives, she turned on the radio, a small red gift from her daughter one Christmas. She'd never changed the station on it. A smooth hit from the eighties might help her relax her shoulders. She knew a few words to the chorus of this song, a tune by Elton John that she liked.

Maybe a hot bath before bed might help her nerves even more. With the mug of tea between her hands, she went back out to the hall to pull off the wet ankle boots, before walking into the living room. Her fingers were still shaking as she dialed her daughter's number, only to have it go straight to voicemail. In vain she tried to calm herself down. *Safe conduct*, they'd promised. It was all over now.

An unfamiliar sound made her stop and stand completely still as the piano from the radio hummed softly in the background. There it was again. Was it coming from the apartment above? It was a strange scraping sound she'd never heard before. Again her heart pounded just as fast as it had earlier in the evening. She took a cautious step toward the front door, just as it flew open with a small bang.

Everything happened fast, before she could even think. Her hands clutched the mug and her mouth opened without a sound. It wasn't over. They'd broken their promise. Her body froze and was no longer under her control, but every sense was heightened, every detail in sharp focus.

A dark-clad figure passed through the door. Precisely and quickly, the loosened bits from the doorframe were pressed back into place. Eva didn't even have time to blink. The figure was on her before she could gasp one last time. Her head was jerked to the side, an icy, gloved hand covered her mouth, and a hard kick to the back knocked her down onto her knees.

A shiny awl glimmering in the corner of her eye was the last thing she saw. One final sensation filled her whole body in the final seconds of consciousness: the sound of cloves that she used to push into oranges as a girl. With one stab, the awl went into the upper part of her neck. The sharp metal was driven into her brain, and an indescribable pain ripped asunder all the seams of Eva Berg's existence. The piano notes from the radio vanished. Everything vanished.

It was over just as quick as it began. The mug of tea splashed in a half-circle over the carpet before coming to rest by the threshold to the bedroom. There was no more movement in the little apartment.

Chapter 2

Admiral Miguel Augustin Villanueva stood at the stern of the *San Joaquin*, wiping his own blood off his face, making an effort to control the muscle spasms wracking his body. From the day he was born in the Spanish coastal town of Los Caños de Meca in the year of our Lord 1673, he'd loved going to sea. But now, thirty-five years later, on a scorching hot June evening on a pitch-black ocean, he was trembling with an uncontrollable anxiety, and would gladly have given all of his considerable possessions to set foot on solid ground once more.

The blood on his face ruined the symmetry of the precisely trimmed beard, and he observed how dishevelled his admiral's uniform had become when he supported his lean body on the port railing. The cannons from the four British warships that were about to surround *San José* thundered in short, merciless bursts. The flames from the cannons flashed against the dark sky, and the smoke hung heavy between the sails of the ships that had encountered one another on this fateful evening.

Villanueva said a brief prayer in Latin, followed by one in Spanish that he remembered from his childhood.

Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén. Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of death.

The outcome was no longer in question. The Spanish fleet of fourteen merchant ships, a lightly armed receiving ship, and three escorting warships had been outmanoeuvred by the four British warships. The Spaniards' flagship, *San José*, with its sixty-four canons, was already burning. That had allowed the British warship *Expedition* to pass by on the broadside, inflicting several catastrophic hits with its seventy cannons.

There was no longer any hope of pushing through and continuing to Spain. The only thing to do now was save whatever could be saved. They had to turn round, try to get back to Colombia. Villanueva saw an opening for *San Joaquin* between the two British warships *Kingston* and *Vulture*; his men could try to sail northeast in the direction of Cartagena de Indias.

It was a gamble, any way you looked at it. But anything was preferable to a certain death out here, with *San José* cut off and *Santa Cruz* unable to provide support. The Englishmen had managed to separate the Spanish ships from each other and could attack them one by one. Villanueva, as a nobleman and the king's trusted admiral, also saw the situation from another angle. Would he disgrace himself if he, under these extreme circumstances, made a retreat?

Suddenly there was a gigantic boom and a white blast coming from *San José*. The sky lit up red and orange, unlike anything the men on the Spanish fleet had ever seen, before everything went black again, darker than ever before. Several minutes passed before the smoke cleared and they could see what had happened. It was unthinkable: *San José* had exploded and sunk beneath the waves. 687 men had been onboard; it was hard to see how any could have survived.

Villanueva crossed himself and again prayed to Santa Maria. They had lost their *capitana*, the ship leading the fleet of fourteen Spanish ships. Even at this distance, he could hear the men on board the *Vulture* cheering. British swine! Eleven million Spanish pesos in gold were lost forever. The jewels from Muzo, too. The very thought made him swallow hard, the metallic taste of blood spreading across his tongue and into his nose. Then he took a deep breath.

“Out with the foresail, lower topsail and tops! Up with the mizzen and on the double! Hard aport and pray, you sinners, that the little wind we have will take!”

He grabbed the arm of his loyal mate Pedro and shouted, dribbling saliva and blood: “Build up speed in her, for the mother of God—our very lives depend on it!”

The roughly 460 survivors on board heard Villanueva's unmistakable voice ringing below the huge white sails, and their shock at seeing *San José* vanish was replaced by feverish activity around the deck and the masts.

San Joaquin had also been damaged by *Kingston*'s hideously accurate cannon volleys. The cross-jack had a huge tear that gaped toward the dark heavens, rendering it useless. In the main mast, the yards bearing tops and large royals were broken, snapped like branches from a tree.

"We have enough for fifty shots, Admiral," moaned Cacafuego, the artilleryman in charge of the sixty-four cannons on board. He'd gotten his nickname as "fire-shitter" after fifteen hard years on different ships of the Spanish Armada. He too was drenched in blood.

"What in the hell are you standing here for, man?" shrieked Villanueva, spurting blood and spittle while waving his arms. "Fire at will! And pray to Santa Barbara that half of it hits its target, and that one blessed cannonball may delay them enough to get us out of here alive!"

Cacafuego wasted no time. While the ship slowly changed course in the unbearably weak wind, there came a thundering from starboard side. First five shots, then ten, then a short staccato symphony of shots. It was impossible to see anything clearly in the darkness, but from the *Vulture*, which lay within sight around a thousand metres away, there came small explosions like the click-clack of corn on a hot iron skillet.

The next few minutes were absolutely quiet. Villanueva took his binoculars and scoped out *Vulture* and *Kingston*. He let out a hiss when he turned the long brass binoculars a few centimetres toward port and caught eye of *Expedition*, which was also turning. Villanueva cursed the cowardly swine Conde de Vega Floride, the vice admiral on the *Santa Cruz* who was trying to flee southeast with the *Portland* on its tail.

"You're bleeding, Admiral."

The voice belonged to the third mate, Manuel, as he extended his clean white handkerchief. Villanueva reluctantly took it, wiped off his throat, felt the sting where splinters had bored into the skin, and tossed the used cloth overboard.

"The weight of Spain is upon our shoulders," he said after a few moments, tonelessly. "King Filipe himself had given his blessing to our General de Santillán. Now he is dead. God bless his name and his reputation for posterity."

With these words, it dawned upon him how imperative it was to escape the approaching British ships. Now that the cargo of *San José* was lost, the future of the kingdom depended on protecting the cargo of *San Joaquin*.

A meek voice whimpered behind him. It was Pedro.

“They’re closing in.”

Chapter 3

Frans Nansen had to try and stifle his hunger pangs in a situation like this. Even with a bloody corpse in front of him, he was visited by small sugary thoughts of pastries, chocolate, ice cream, even a whole carrot cake, with extra glazing. It was more than embarrassing; it made him irritated and threw off his concentration. With a suppressed groan, he lifted his hundred and thirty kilograms from a kneeling position and breathed laboriously through his nose.

“Goddamn, worst thing I’ve ever seen,” said Henke Li, once again breaking the silence inside the little apartment.

For a rookie officer in his twenties, he wasn’t completely worthless, but his energy levels had been annoying Frans ever since his first day on the force. Perhaps because Henke was constantly on his mobile telephone and came from a digital world that didn’t concern Frans in the least, as he swore by his leather notepad. Perhaps also because Henke was in impeccable shape, a young man in a hurry, of the sort that Frans had outclassed at the police college about fifteen years ago. The sort of recruit he would’ve squeezed water out of with his left hand.

“This is bad,” said Frans finally.

“How bad? Bad enough to call in Kripas?”

“We’ll see. For now we can probably handle it ourselves in violent crimes. But it’s clearly a homicide.”

They both looked down at the dead woman. Her head had been violently wrenched to one side, the face was light blue, and the eyes stared into space, right through them, into nothingness.

“Looks like she was a nice lady,” said Henke. “Reminds me of my aunt Ruth. She used to always slip me a hundred-kroner bill and make waffles whenever I came over.”

Frans abruptly went into teacher mode in order to reign in not only Henke’s inexhaustible stream of comments and opinions, but also his own thoughts.

“We should close her eyes.”

He leaned down to the body and carefully pushed the lids down the eyeballs. For one moment he stood, bent over Eva Berg’s body, as if quietly contemplating, before straightening up and pointing at the blood spattered on the wall. “What about this?”

With a look that asked permission, Henke slowly stooped down and with the utmost care eased a finger into the hair of the dead woman. Frans did nothing to stop him. They were both wearing rubber gloves, and the technicians had already finished their work and gathered their clues over an hour ago.

“Could this be a gunshot wound?” asked Henke, pointing at the hole at the back of her head, which was covered by a clump of congealed blood and hair.

“No. Calibre would have been a bit too small, judging from the circumference of the hole. The skin and the hair would also look different with a projectile travelling into the cranium at three to four hundred metres a second.”

“What could it be, then?”

“A sharp weapon of some kind. Efficient and noiseless. Now what about the entrance?”

Henke turned toward the door which bore small, but clear signs of destruction.

“Forced entry. Maybe a thief who was surprised to find someone at home?”

Frans shook his head and wrote something down.

“What thief would leave two thousand kroner cash in her bag, not to mention those two silver candlesticks?”

He pointed toward the counter a little further ways toward the living room. “There are no signs anything is missing. We’ll get confirmation of that from relatives, friends, once we’ve contacted them.”

Frans sighed, before allowing the young go-getter a chance to score an empty netter: “Apropos of relatives and friends, most murders are carried out by...”

“...an acquaintance of the victim. Ah,” said Henke, finally catching on. “The fact that the perpetrator broke in indicates that it was someone unknown to the victim.”

Frans nodded silently.

“Back to the blood spatters. Go on. I’m listening.”

Henke turned toward the wall behind the corpse. The beige wallpaper had dark spots running all the way down to the moulding.

“I think the crime was committed right here. The body wasn’t moved.”

“Right. And the cup of tea?”

“She was taken by surprise?”

Henke carefully lifted the cup to see if it could provide any further information. It was covered in the technicians’ powdered graphite, and Eva Berg’s fingerprints were visible on both sides. Frans wiped the sweat from his forehead even though it wasn’t especially hot inside the apartment.

“Methodical. It couldn’t have been long from the time the perpetrator broke in until he reached her. The spilled tea, the way she was killed. Goddamn, I don’t like it one bit. This isn’t the sort of thing that happens in Norway,” said Frans, as he felt his stomach rumble.

“But isn’t it a little exciting?” said Henke in a near-whisper. “A murder case with an unknown perpetrator. Not your everyday traffic stop.” Henke became pensive, saying more to himself than to Frans, almost proudly: “My first real murder case...”

Frans looked at his younger colleague. Henke had lost his hair at the top of his head at a relatively young age, shaving the rest to a millimetre’s length. His uniform covered a muscular body that was in tip-top condition. Frans was dressed in civilian clothes from a big-and-tall store. The shirt had so many X’s for “Large” that they were replaced by a number. But at least he still had most of his hair.

“My babysitter’s off soon, I’d better get home to Elena,” said Frans, gesturing toward the door.

“But shouldn’t we write the report first? The others’ll be waiting at Grønland—the chief said she wanted to be briefed before the press conference,” said Henke, tentatively. Frans quickly snapped back like an experienced dog shoving a puppy aside with its paw.

“We still don’t know any more than the technicians. Plus, didn’t they teach you how to give a verbal report at school? I’m sure you have plenty of notes on that smart telephone of yours.”

They stood a few seconds regarding the dead woman before covering the corpse. Frans stuck his hands in his pockets and manoeuvred his huge body out of the little apartment. Henke tried to pacify his superior with one last naive thought.

“We’ll find that murderer, won’t we?”

Frans had already lumbered halfway down the first flight of stairs. “Say hi to the chief and tell her I’ll have a preliminary written report on her desk before 8 tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 6

Virik Bragelid knew everything there was to know about the Armed Forces’ Special Command. He could answer every possible question about it. The number of soldiers, their weapons, deployment, armed assignments, equipment in different climates, and finally, the enlistment requirements—the battery of physical and mental tests. If it was an official part of the Command, Virik Bragelid knew about it. And if it were non-official, he knew about that too.

There was nothing especially impressive about learning these facts by heart. What was impressive was the fact that he did it at the age of eighteen, without ever having set foot inside a military base or training camp. Virik was the only boy in his class who’d never changed his mind about what he would do when he grew up. The dream, the goal, and the plan had all been determined after he met the father of his classmate, Truls Børresen, when he was thirteen.

Truls's father never came to end-of-year class parties or parent-teacher conferences. There were whispers among the classmates that Truls's father was a soldier. Some said he'd killed people, even though Virik was never able to confirm that part. Truls suffered from a rare illness, an incurable heart condition, to which he would succumb scarcely two years after he and Virik had become mates at lower secondary.

Virik's own father had died long ago, and so Tarald Børresen, Truls's father, became the hero and father figure in Virik Bragelid's life. After losing his own son, the major took the young Virik under his wing as though he were family. With every day that passed, Virik Bragelid's fascination with the Special Command grew and grew. Every morsel of information that came via the special forces major was memorised, admired.

Virik Bragelid was going to join the ranks of the ASFC. The best of the best. A proud defender of the Norwegian homeland with the blue, red and white flag on his arm. He would one day carry on the traditions he'd read about in Company Linge's days, during and after the Second World War. The spearhead of the Armed Forces, doing operational work for the good of society. He was going to make a difference.

Both his physical fitness and his grades in upper secondary had been at the top of his class. For several years he exercised regularly according to Tarald Børresen's regimen. He ran. He lifted weights. He swam the frigid river that ran through the village, and he stretched his physical and mental limits to the utmost. Nothing was left to chance. Nothing would stand in the way of the dream, the goal, and the plan.

And nothing did. With his muscular physique and athleticism, the gym teacher talked him up as a contender in the national track and field championships. Everything was as good as signed, sealed and delivered for enlistment in ASFC the year Virik Bragelid had finally turned nineteen.

However, a horse on his grandfather's farm had kicked him in the head when he was a boy. His eyesight and hearing on one side had been permanently damaged. Not a whole lot, but unfortunately enough to ruin everything.

The military doctor hadn't even shown a whiff of sympathy. Not even a shrug of the shoulders. In a monotone voice, the man in the white coat had laconically declared Virik Bragelid's hearing and vision to be less than absolutely perfect. On an otherwise nondescript Wednesday in January, with the entire capital under snow and ice, at the medical examination at Akershus Fortress, the dream was shattered.

Virik Bragelid was inconsolable. Not even major Tarald Børresen's encouragement could help. A military career with the Norwegian flag on his shoulder was forever closed off in a matter of seconds. He'd been declared unfit for duty in the ASFC.

Winter turned to spring, and he finished upper secondary school, all while a shadow hung over him. Not even the summer sunshine could get him out of his inertia. It was only when autumn had come once more, bringing its complete transformation in Norway's natural scenery, that Virik came across a long article in a men's magazine about the French Foreign Legion. And thus, a new dream was born.

Chapter 35

Janosch Dudek was freezing like never before in his life. The frost had come to the town of Augustów, and an icy fog lay along the Rospuda Lake, which gave promise of icing over. Why it was so much colder here than in Norway right now was something he couldn't fathom, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

The past two nights he'd slept in his car, and even though it was the third car he'd procured since crossing the border into Sweden, he wasn't at all confident that someone couldn't track him. He was almost out of cash, and the plan to make it to Russia was full of holes, to say the least. But it was the smartest plan he'd been able to come up with on the fly.

Finally, he saw a light turn on in the little houseboat that lay under the Mostowa Bridge at Port Gondoli. He glanced at the note in his hand one more time, crumpled it up and drew the zipper all the way to his throat. He shivered as he approached, and tried to get his chattering teeth under control. For a moment he wasn't quite sure whether it was due to fear or the cold.

“Who there?”

The voice grumbled from inside the houseboat when he rapped on the doorframe. Janosch stood with one foot on the boat and the other on the edge of the pier as he leaned forward.

“It’s Banicki,” said Janosch Dudek as deeply and manfully as he could.

He’d taken the name from the father of someone he was in love with in elementary school, the manliest and strictest person he’d ever met in his entire life. It gave him a little more confidence.

The door opened and a naked, white-haired older man with tattoos all over his chest came out. The heat from the inside of the boat became a thin steam that rose up in the air above them.

“Banicki, Banicki,” he mumbled as a strong odour of whisky spread over the pier. “Fuck if I know any Banicki.”

He held one hand on the inside of the door, but thanks to his hangover he was unable to keep his balance, and as he swayed to one side, Janosch could see he was trying to conceal a pistol.

“You’re Grajek?” asked Janosch.

“Who the fuck is asking?” said the old man with a juicy belch.

“Banicki. I got your name from Kolinski.”

The older man straightened up at once.

“You know Kolinski?”

“I’ve talked to him, yes.”

“Shit, why didn’t you say that in the first place? Get your ass in here before the both of us freeze to death.”

Inside it smelled even worse than Janosch had feared. Could this really be the right man to talk to? He decided not to ask any questions about Kolinski’s contacts. He stood there awaiting further instructions from the hungover Grajek.

“Sit down,” said Grajek as he began picking up clothes that, as far as Janosch could tell, could hardly have been washed in months, if not years.

Grajek set his pistol aside as he tried to put on a stained jumper, and immediately Janosch breathed a bit easier.

“So,” said Grajek when he’d put on an old pair of sweatpants. “What can I help the gentleman with? If it’s Kolinski that’s ordering, you bet your ass I’ll deliver.”

Grajek’s breath stunk of herring, whisky and rot. Judging from his remaining top row of yellow-brown teeth, it had been even longer since he’d been to a dentist than his clothes had been to the laundry.

“I heard you’re the right man to talk to when it comes to a special item,” said Janosch.

Grajek looked around in a daze, presumably for something to sit on. Finally he found an old beer crate that he pulled up close to Janosch, so close that Janosch had to make an effort not to react visibly to the stench the man exhaled.

“I can be...the right man for so much, young fellow,” said Grajek with a fresh belch.

Just as well to get this over with, Janosch decided. He stuck a hand into his jacket pocket.

“Then I suppose you might give me a price for this?”

In his hand shone an uncut diamond.

Chapter 50

Frans considered his alternatives with lightning speed. In a fraction of a second, he’d decided to attack, but Linda Siem commanded him abruptly:

“Don’t even think about it. Do you have family, Nansen?”

He nodded slowly.

“Good. Think of your family over the next few minutes. The only reason you’re still drawing breath is because I need information from you, and for you to make sure I can leave the country.”

She walked calmly backwards, all the while keeping the pistol aimed at Frans. Her hands weren’t shaking, she betrayed not even the least sign of nervousness. She’s good, thought Frans. Remarkably adept with weapons. Intelligent.

“You’ve killed an officer,” he said with as little emotion as he could. “Was that part of the plan?”

She rooted around in a drawer with her free hand. She took out a pair of handcuffs, tossing them to Frans. He didn’t catch them, instead they struck his chest and fell to the floor.

“There,” she pointed with her pistol. “At the bottom of the fireplace.”

Frans bent down slowly to pick up the handcuffs. Henke lay lifeless in a pool of blood. One of his legs twitched. Presumably he was in his death throes.

“You said information. What is it you want?”

She came closer to make sure he’d secured the handcuffs properly. At the bottom of the fireplace, there was a valve that was cast into the reinforced concrete. Thick steel rods with a circumference of 10 centimetres formed a rail that extended down into the dark wooden floor. The handcuffs were just the right size for the railing, and barely fit around Frans’s fat wrist.

Linda pulled Frans’s jacket away and patted it for concealed weapons.

“No service gun? I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said triumphantly.

Now that Frans was under control, she relaxed somewhat and wriggled out of her bathrobe. Frans couldn’t help staring. Her body was just as muscular as if it’d belonged to a young elite soldier. He wondered for a moment if he’d been ever that fit when he’d gone through training in the paratrooper division.

Two large tattoos of a cat wound around her belly and behind her back. The breasts were clearly implants.

“See anything you like?”

Frans looked at the floor. He leaned his body against the fireplace, trying to indicate surrender.

“So you thought you’d get Eva Berg to rob the safe deposit boxes. That was your solution to everything, in order to get Siem and Hundtvedt on their feet again? Just one small murder, and an attempt to lure the police into incriminating Janosch Dudek?”

Linda didn’t answer, but went into the bedroom for a few minutes. Frans twisted his body back in order to look at Henke. Was he breathing? There was no way to tell. His body lay just as lifeless as

before. The shot had entered his right cheek and gone out behind the ear. A large flap of skin was turned down toward the face, as though someone had partially peeled off a carnival mask.

“If you think I’m about to tell you all you want to know, and admit to everything, you are sorely mistaken,” she said as she came back out into the living room.

She’d gotten dressed. Jeans, a white blouse and black blazer. Neutral glasses and a new hair colour as well. Had she managed to change her passport too? That was as far as he got before she aimed the pistol at him again.

“Information: How official is it that I’m a suspect? Who else in the police knows?”

“No one,” said Frans. “You aren’t officially a suspect. We wanted to take this conversation into consideration before going further. I was actually quite sceptical myself. You’ve done a damn good job putting us off the trail.”

“Spare the flattery. I don’t believe you.”

She approached him from behind and slammed the butt of the pistol into his chin. Then she struck him again from the other side. Damn, she was smart. She stood just far enough away from Frans that he couldn’t reach her with his one arm handcuffed.

“I’m telling the truth,” he said, spitting a clot of blood onto the white Persian rug that lay under the living room furnishings.

“So if I go to Gardermoen Airport right now, I won’t be stopped?”

“You got it,” said Frans.

This time it was the truth. Only the detective team headed by Iselin, Bruberg and Andersen knew he and Henke were with Linda Siem, so there hadn’t been an all-points warning sent out for her.

“You can go anywhere you want. We haven’t put out any APWs. You’re free as a bird.”

He twisted his head around toward her and attempted a smile. She struck him again. Right on the skull this time. The pain shot down his spine like boiling-hot oil. She stood for a moment, thinking. Frans studied the apartment. The exit was too far away, the balcony lay on the other side of the living room, and further inside the apartment there was probably just a bathroom, plus the bedroom.

All possible escape routes were closed off. And he assumed he'd be killed as soon as he'd given Linda what she was after. This was the icy truth that settled over him. But he wasn't about to panic. Instead he calmed himself down in order to analyse the possibilities at hand. Linda walked in a wide circle around him while she rummaged through the pockets of his jacket.

“Here.”

She handed him his mobile. “Call the station and tell them it was a dead end and that Linda Siem can be ruled out.”

She raised a finger in warning. “Try anything funny, and your family'll never see you again.”

Elena. The thought fluttered in the back of his brain like a tattered rag in violent gusts of wind. He did as she commanded. Brought up Iselin's number and showed it to Linda.

“She's the second-in-command in violent crimes, after me. An inspector. After dating a policeman, you ought to know what that means.”

She nodded and pointed the pistol at his head with both hands, as if to underscore her determination.

“You really don't have to aim the weapon at me the whole time. I get it, you're serious,” said Frans. “What you just did to my colleague is evidence enough. I have a young daughter.”

He looked for a reaction, but didn't get any. Why would she show any empathy now, he thought, as he spat another mouthful of blood.

“Hello? This is Iselin.”

He'd put her on speaker.

“Hey. Frans here. Bad news, I'm afraid.”

“Oh?”

“I was wrong. Linda Siem's alibi is airtight. Couldn't have been her.”

For a moment there was silence.

“But everything was pointing toward...”

“I know. It happens. We can talk about it some more tomorrow. I just wanted to let you know. You can go ahead and tell the others that we’re ruling her out. Tell them that Andersen just might win that bet after all. I was wrong.”

He glanced up at Linda. She wasn’t budging an inch, and her expression remained steady.

“Okay. You coming by the station?”

“No, I better get home to Elena. See you tomorrow.”

He held the phone up to her with a questioning look. She nodded, and he hung up.

“Not a bad performance,” said Linda as she walked toward the bedroom.

Frans knew that every second counted. There was no way she’d just leave him shackled to the fireplace like that. Nobody did that except in films. How rational was she, really? They’d taken her by surprise, showing up in the evening. Would she risk leaving behind a witness, and the one person alive who knew she’d killed Eva Berg?

Frans was getting desperate. He surveyed the surroundings once again: the balcony, the exit door, a door right behind him to an unknown room, perhaps an office or a second bedroom. He touched the handcuffs, looked at the steel poles. He rapped one of the poles with his finger: solid steel, not a hollow tube.

“It’ll soon be over,” yelled Linda from the bedroom, reminding him of the inevitable.

Frans heard a low mumbling. Perhaps she was talking to herself. Then he heard the wheels of a suitcase. His heart skipped a beat. Elena. He couldn’t leave her orphaned. The clacking of high heels. Linda was ready for travel. He braced both legs on the concrete and leaned backward.

Nothing. Neither the steel nor the concrete gave the least sign of weakness. The only thing that was about to break was his wrist. The steel of the handcuffs bored into the flesh and blood began to trickle out.

Frans knew exactly what force was needed to break the two metal links on a pair of Peerless handcuffs. A minimum of 225 kilos over three seconds. This was presumably impossible with his arms behind his back, or in front of his chest for that matter. But Frans had one thing going for him. Only one

of his arms was shackled, and he could use his body weight and both legs to build up force. The only drawback would be the damage to his wrist, but since the alternative was a bullet in the head, this was a small price to pay in order to get to see Elena celebrate her birthday in just a few weeks.

He heard Linda approaching. Her suitcase was obviously full, since it took her a couple seconds more to come from the bedroom into the living room. Seconds that Frans sorely needed. There would be no farewell speech, no words to soften the blow. He'd given her exactly what she needed, and she was going to liquidate him to be on the safe side.

He braced himself one last time and leaned his whole weight backward. Held the wrist with his free arm and forced himself backward with all his might. One second. Two seconds. The clacking heels came around the corner.

“What the hell?”

Linda's outburst came the very moment the handcuffs gave way with a loud crack. Frans flew halfway across the room and landed with his back on a chaise longue, which snapped in two. Both his wrist and back screamed with pain, but he could little afford to pay that any mind. He got up and swiftly considered where to seek cover. The tall bar counter separating them wouldn't protect him for long.

He had only one choice. It was too far to the balcony or the front door. If Linda Siem was anywhere near a decent shot, he'd be riddled with bullets before he took three steps. The door to the second bedroom was his only chance, and he ran for it.

Both in the military and at police college, he had learned how to position the body against gunfire. Always with the side of the body toward the shooter and the head bent as far to the side as possible, down and away from the path of the bullet. It minimised the risk of hitting inner organs and the head. The first shot rang out from the kitchen and pain seared through his arm, radiating toward the neck.

As he threw open the door with his left arm, he could already tell his right arm wasn't fully cooperating anymore. The next shot struck him high on the shoulder. The third whizzed right over his head, into the door, which he'd opened just wide enough to hurl himself into the unknown room.

He closed the door behind him and turned the lock. Even though his body was begging to take it easy, he knew he couldn't waste any seconds. At any moment Linda could come round the bar counter and start shooting holes through the locked door.

The little room had a bed alcove and an office desk. His right hand smarted terribly, but he needed both hands now. Fuelled by adrenaline, he wrenched the whole bed from the wall and pushed it against the door with lightning speed. Then he reinforced it by putting the desk on top of the bed, with the tabletop against the door. Even though the walls in the room were wooden, the material seemed thick enough to hold off a .380 calibre shot from Linda's Colt Mustang. If not, he'd work something out.

Sure enough, just after he'd sunk down on the floor, the first shots came through the door. He tried to count the shots, but they were coming on too rapidly. Just as quickly as they'd begun, it became quiet. The magazine must have been empty. He heard Linda kicking the door, but there was no way it was going to budge.

"The neighbours have heard the shots!" yelled Frans. "Get out while you have the chance!"

There was no answer from the other side. Ten seconds became twenty, thirty, a minute. Frans's body was still pulsing with adrenaline, the pain storming back. He knew his heart was beating three times faster than normal because of the bleeding in his arm and shoulder. He brought his left hand up to his right shoulder to get a sense of how things stood there. When he brought it back in front of his face, it was dark with blood.

Carefully, he tried to move his right arm, but couldn't. The slightest attempt brought on unbearable pain. He hoped the bullet had come out the other side, but there was no way he could tell right now. From the living room there suddenly came sounds he couldn't quite place. If Linda Siem wanted to come in, she'd need a bulldozer. So just what the hell was she doing?

He sat there listening. Was that a voice he heard out there? All at once it clicked for him, what he'd seen in her bedroom: a movement. He heard a voice speaking in English.

"You fucked it all up, you bitch."

“Please,” shouted Linda in despair, as if fearing for her life. “I have done everything you asked me to do! No! Please, no, I’m begging you …!”

Frans gave a start as a single gunshot rang out. It was a different, bigger calibre than Linda’s small pistol. Then it became quiet again. He heard a thud that resounded through the whole apartment. Was that a door being slammed? He couldn’t say for sure, but he began to feel nauseous and faint. The loss of blood was making him delirious. Just then, he thought he could smell smoke.

With a moan he got up and tried to gain control of his breathing. He focused on his surroundings and spoke in a low voice to himself.

“Red pillow, white bedsheets, dark wood, parquet floor.”

He took a deep breath and held it, his heart still pounding. He supported himself against the wall and turned his body to the right, looking at the four bullet holes just over the door handle. It looked to him as if they were moving—before he realised just what was happening. *Smoke*. White and black smoke seeped in through the holes like hypnotic snakes.

Anxiety seized him. All at once, his senses were back in that fateful night of fire and smoke. The wail of baby Elena; the desperate feeling of knowing that Katerina was in the sea of flames. He trembled uncontrollably. He heard a low whistling sound through the door. Then he realised it. The petrol canisters in the bedroom.

He remembered reading the report about the fire in Janosch and Svetlana Dudek’s house. So it was Linda who’d placed the petrol canisters around the house and in the cellar, as well as throwing a bottle of flammable liquid through the window. He could already guess what she had placed out in the living room. The smoke from the bullet holes became darker and denser, the snakes dancing their way up toward the ceiling.

He forced himself to get up and looked desperately around the room. No windows, no escape routes. Only a vent at the top of one wall that was ten by ten centimetres. In here, he was trapped. He had to get out.

He threw the desk aside and got a foothold against the wall to pull the bed back from the door. It felt a lot heavier this time, but sheer desperation gave him the strength he needed now.

As soon as the door was open, a wave of flames rushed into the room. It was as if the air was sucked out of his lungs. His body was back in that fateful night; he recalled how a part of him wanted to run into the flames to rescue Katerina, and how another part held him back, told him he needed to stay where he was in order to take care of Elena.

This time he had no choice. With the door already aflame, soon the whole room would be engulfed. He took a few steps back, yanked the linen from the destroyed bed, and wrapped himself up in it. With a long bound, he made it through the first wall of flames. On the other side there was a pocket of air, and on the floor by Henke, lay Linda Siem. She was moving, barely.

“He...he shot me,” she gurgled, incredulous.

She’d been shot in the lower part of her throat, and dark blood was bubbling out as she breathed and tried to speak.

“Who,” said Frans, repeating it louder to make himself heard above the flames.

“I didn’t kill her,” said Linda. “It was he who did it. He promised me...”

She reached up to her neck and made a gurgling noise before closing her eyes. “Corn...”

She pointed toward the kitchen.

“What?”

“Cornflakes,” she repeated, before releasing the grip around her own throat and losing consciousness.

Frans ran into the kitchen and flung open the cabinets. There: a red and green box of organic cornflakes. Opening it, he saw that it was stuffed full of documents. A picture of a man and travel documents were the first thing he saw. Antwerp.

He flipped furiously through the first few documents, before hurriedly shoving them all into the pockets of his pants and jacket. The entire kitchen would soon be consumed, and along the ceiling lay a thick, bluish smoke that waved in time with the flames. The heat pulsing into the room forced him on his

knees. The pain from the gunshot wounds protested furiously with each movement. He sunk further to the floor as he realised why his body was done obeying. He could not breathe.

In front of him lay Linda and Henke, still lifeless. Out, he thought. Got to get out. He lay his head on the carpet and tried to take one last gulp of air. He coughed. No more than a few seconds had passed, but all visibility was gone. Everything had been reduced to an orange hell of smoke and fire.

He fumbled his way toward the bodies, finally grabbing hold of Henke's uniform and Linda's blouse. With a tremendous exertion, he threw Henke over one shoulder, and took Linda under the other arm. Even though Henke's body was nothing more than muscle, he had to have weighed up around 100 kilos. Linda weighed well over half that.

Frans tried to take one step, then another, before collapsing with Henke and Linda on top of him. There was just no way. He was no more than a few metres away from the front door, but it may as well have been kilometres. The smoke singed his eyes and lungs, and in a powerful convulsion he vomited all over himself and Henke.

This gave him an immediate sensation of relief that he knew he couldn't waste. Using one of Henke's pants legs as a filter, he placed it over his mouth and swallowed some more air and smoke. His lungs and his body protested, but there was no helping that. He forced himself to his knees, crawling his way to the door, but had to give up. The flames were too hot; he'd be burned to a crisp if he got any closer.

Death, he thought. A remarkable peace settled over him as he lay against Henke's motionless body. Linda Siem lay beside him. If only he could lie there a few seconds more and gather a little more strength. He was almost comfortable. He closed his eyes. Heard an explosion from the kitchen, presumably some flammables that had gone up.

Elena! The thought tore him out of his glorious languor, and again he grabbed hold of Henke and Linda. The balcony. He estimated it was four or five metres across the living room. Elena, he thought. I cannot give up. I must not. I won't. He crawled forward, dragging Linda and Henke behind him. It was excruciatingly slow. He threw up again. Then an inhuman coughing set in, and his sight flickered.

The room began to shift. Shelves toppled over, huge clouds of smoke and sparks were swallowed by the roaring flames. In the distance he could hear a fire alarm. A little further, he thought. Just a little further. First he grabbed Henke, threw him over the wounded shoulder, took Linda under his arm, and got up, before hurling himself toward the black window in front of him.

In an explosion of glass and flames, he tumbled out into the dark, cold autumn. He had the sensation of flying through the air, his body revolving head first. Somewhere above him he sensed the explosion. The fire had gotten fresh oxygen through the opening in the window.

Again the word came to him, *death*, for he knew his skull would be shattered if he hit the ground at this speed head first. Instead, it was his unhurt shoulder that first made contact, and a strange feeling of coldness spread through the last bit of consciousness he had left.

They had fallen into the dock basin. The ice-cold water plunged him back into awareness for one second, before everything began spinning. He floundered around with his one good arm, trying to keep his head above water. But it was no use. Somewhere above him lights were still flickering, but he was weighed down by Henke's body. Up, he thought. Elena. Glimmers of thoughts slid away from him while his mouth and throat filled with salt water. Death. Then everything went dark.