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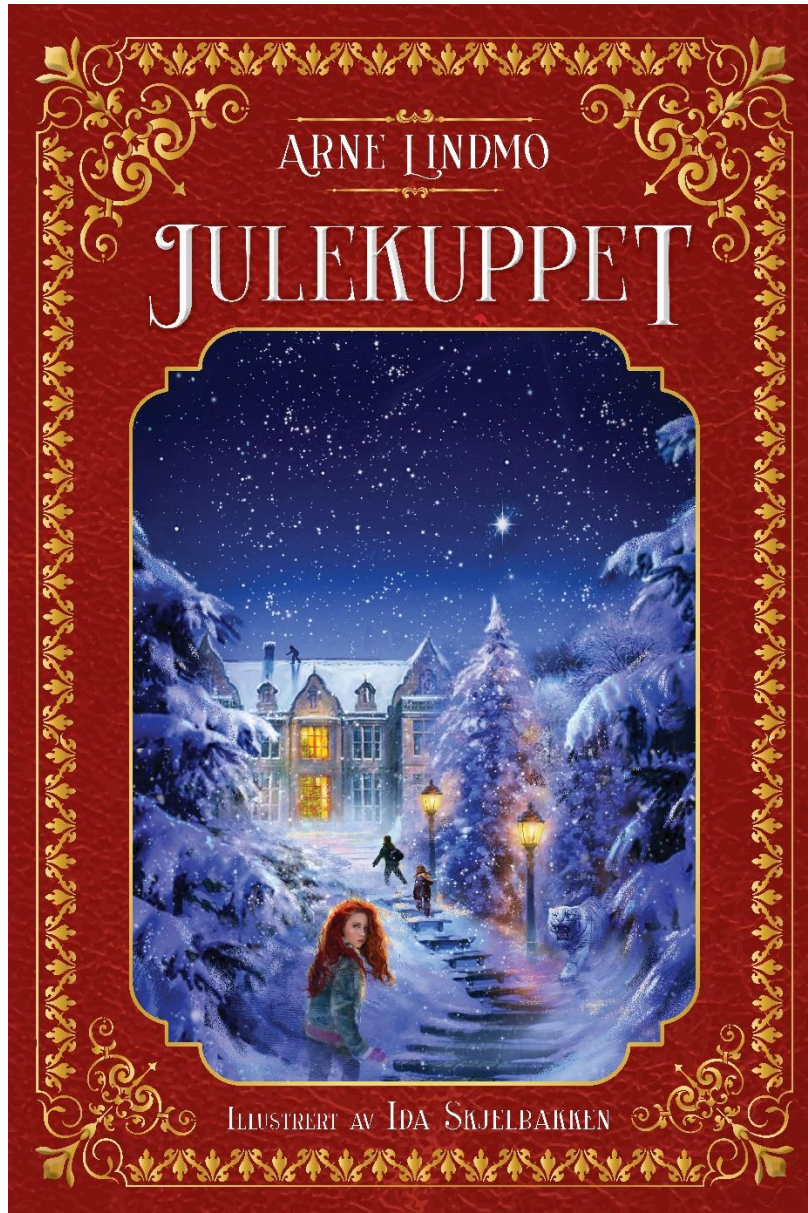


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THE CHRISTMAS CAPER

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Prologue

Have you heard of Gregor Twist? No? Well, then you should perk up your ears. Because here comes advice from an old sea dog that could save your skin: Stay away!

All the boat owners around here are afraid of that old codger. He owns an island out there in the fjord somewhere. He lives there, all alone, probably sitting and polishing his gun, waiting for someone to set foot on the island so he can shoot them down!

If you're boating in the area, steer far clear.

Some say he's crazy. Perhaps. Others say he's the embodiment of evil itself. They also claim that the island is crawling with monsters, so if Gregor's bullets don't get you, his beasts will sink their teeth into your throat!

No, stay away! Don't mess with Gregor Twist.

Advice from an experienced boatman

Chapter 1

Two Hungry Street Children

A cold gust of wind struck Lukas, and he shivered. It was freezing!

They were making their way down a gray and slushy street in the middle of December, him and his little sister Emma, hand in hand.

There was a rumor that someone had set up a tent with a soup kitchen down in the square, and Lukas looked forward to getting something warm to eat. So far today, they had only eaten a handful of breadcrumbs.

They had fought hard for those crumbs against a flock of flapping pigeons after an old lady had stopped to feed the birds in the park. Sometimes, they got the rest of the bread too, but this lady had just gotten angry, scolded them, and left.

"The food is for the birds," she had yelled. "Not for dirty brats!"

The path to the square was covered in dirty snow and slush, and it was soon getting wet and cold in their tattered shoes.



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Lukas wondered if it would be warm in the tent. He hoped so.

Emma never complained about the cold, but she had a warm winter suit and waterproof boots. Lukas, on the other hand, only had a green puffy jacket full of holes, faded jeans, and worn-out sneakers with holes in them. It often felt like the wind was just blowing right through him!

At least he had a warm hat and a pair of mittens, though they were different. One was black and thin, while the other was striped and in all the colours of the rainbow.

Lukas tugged at his sister's hand to get her to walk faster. She was slow, as usual.

Emma had a habit of stopping to stare into every store window at this time of year. After all, it was Christmas everywhere. And if there was one thing Emma loved more than anything else, it was Christmas.

Most of the windows were filled with elves, presents, and plastic Christmas trees, and even Lukas had to stop at the baker's window, filled with buns, almond cakes, and marzipan pigs.

"Yum yum," said Emma, placing a hand on the glass.

Lukas' mouth watered, and his empty stomach rumbled. Imagine sinking his teeth into something like that! He forced his gaze away and looked out at the street, illuminated by endless rows of string lights and big, glowing bells. People smiled and laughed as they hurried by, and a cacophony of festive Christmas music blared from the open doors.

"Come on," he said, pulling his sister along. "We'll eat soon."

Lukas used to like Christmas once, when Mom and Dad were alive... but not anymore. The magic that used to bubble up inside him from the first door on the advent calendar to the last gift on Christmas Eve... had been replaced by something dark and sad. Now, Christmas felt like a nasty lump in his stomach, and it grew bigger every time he saw someone else with a happy smile and joyful eyes.

Emma suddenly stopped and yanked Lukas back.

"Look!" she said, eagerly dragging him over to a large and fancy store window.

"Emma," Lukas said irritably, shaking his head. "They're giving out food at the square now. We need to hurry before it runs out."



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But Emma pressed her nose against the glass and widened her eyes.

"Wow! It's a new toy store!"

"We can't afford that. We can't even afford food."

"But it's almost Christmas." His sister looked up at him with big, round eyes.

"And then Santa Claus comes!"

Lukas sighed heavily. "You're 6 years old now. Isn't it time to stop believing in all that nonsense? There were no gifts last year, right? The gifts stopped after Mom and Dad died. Can't you put two and two together?"

"He... just couldn't find us," Emma sighed. "It can't be easy to find kids living on the street. But maybe this year?"

"Forget it! Come on, we need to eat."

"But look!" Emma resisted as Lukas tried to pull her away. "They have dolls! Aren't they cute?"

She could be incredibly stubborn...

Emma wiped away the condensation where her breath had fogged up the glass. "And they have scooters, teddy bears, dollhouses, electric pianos, and..."

Lukas pulled a little harder and finally got her away from the window.

"They don't have food, and I'm hungry."

Emma gave up, sighed, and continued walking beside her brother.

Lukas shook his head irritably.

"The worst part about Christmas is probably that Emma still gets excited... and that she's going to be disappointed, just like last year. She deserves so much better..."

A big snowflake landed on his nose. Lukas glanced up at a dark sky filled with white, dancing flakes.

"Emma, can you walk a bit faster? It's starting to snow again... for heaven's sake!"



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Large, thick snowflakes slowly descended around them, wiping away the dirty slush on the sidewalk. Everything that was grey and dull would soon be covered by a sparkling new, white blanket, and the wet squelching sound in their shoes would soon be replaced by the crisp crackling of fresh snow.

At least she was going to have a white Christmas...

Chapter 2

A Criminal Thought, a Dangerous Idea

Lukas pushed the empty soup plate away and looked around at everyone. People were sitting and standing everywhere, poor, and hungry, but more were still coming into the tent; would there be enough soup for everyone?

An old lady with a warm smile passed by, handing out bread slices with butter.

Lukas smiled back and thanked her before sinking his teeth into the delicious bread. He couldn't have asked for a better dessert!

He felt much better now. Warm and full! He had even stopped being annoyed by all the Christmas decorations in the tent.

"Well, you two aren't very old," said the old lady, looking with big eyes from Emma to Lukas. "Why are you here then? Don't you get enough to eat at home, maybe?"

Oh dear! Lukas sat up straight in his chair and cleared his throat as he prepared himself. These moments were always dangerous. Adults who were homeless could get away with it, but street kids, no, that wasn't acceptable! It would mean the police, child protective services, and in the worst case—the same awful foster home they had run away from!

"Oh, we get enough to eat," Lukas replied. "But when we walked past, we thought it smelled so good that we just had to come in to taste it. Thank you so much. The soup was delicious. Yum, yum!"

"Oh really?" The old lady raised an eyebrow. Had she become suspicious?



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"Why aren't you at school?"

"No school today," Lukas said. "They have one of those planning days."

"And why are your clothes so dirty then?"

"Oh, that... My sister and I were playing earlier today, and we rolled around in the dirty snow. Oh, Mom will probably scold us like there's no tomorrow. You know how mothers are, right? Well, well. We'll change when we get home."

The lady leaned forward toward Lukas and stared at him with stern eyes.

"So you're just sitting here eating up the food that those who really need it could have had! Don't you have any shame, young man!"

"Oh, dear. You know, kind lady, we simply didn't think about it. Yes, we should be ashamed. I'm sorry." He turned to Emma. "Come on, we're going to get kicked out."

"... No, just stay," the lady said, and the stern look disappeared. "We have enough food, and it's snowing heavily outside the tent now. Stay here and warm up. We'll soon be reading from the Christmas gospel in that corner over there, and it would be nice if you stayed and listened. Too many children these days are growing up without Jesus."

She smiled warmly at Lukas, then turned and continued with the breadbasket.

As she struck up a conversation with some others, he was finally able to relax. Why did adults always have to be so curious? Couldn't they mind their own business and let him, and Emma be in peace?

He glanced down at his little sister. She had made a smiley face with one of the potatoes and was pretending it was taking a bath in the soup. Typical Emma.

"Eat before it gets cold," he said, but she just continued to play with the potato.



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Lukas sighed. He was almost 13 years old, so maybe he could find some kind of job? He had grown quite a bit in the past year and might look old enough soon. Then he could earn some money... but the other people in the soup tent were all adults, and it didn't seem like they had any more work for him.

And what about Emma and her dreams? She would be disappointed this Christmas too. No Christmas decorations, no Christmas tree or Christmas food, and worst of all: no presents on Christmas Eve, soft or hard, not since Mom and Dad had crashed... and the terrible foster family they had been sent to... no, it was better to survive on the streets!

They had no money for gifts, but maybe... yes, maybe he could... snatch one? There were so many customers in the new toy store... so many that maybe no one would notice him... and a little doll inside his jacket?

Chapter 3

To Steal or Not to Steal?

Lukas sneaked into the new toy store. Meanwhile, Emma remained safe, warm, and comfortable inside the tent. They had started reading from the Christmas story, and she, of course, wanted to listen. She even had a cup of hot cocoa. Emma was probably enjoying herself and didn't mind that he was gone for a little while.

So it was now or never; he had just enough time to fix the Christmas gift! Emma truly deserved a nice present. Just think, she was only 5 years old when Mom and Dad disappeared, but she was the one who had comforted him. She had never complained, not even once, despite everything that had happened since, even though they had been living on the streets for over a year, despite the fact that he, her big brother, hadn't been able to make anything better...

Yes, she deserved the best Christmas gift in the world! Lukas made sure to keep other customers between himself and the cashiers. Although they seemed busy processing payments. There were lines at all three cash registers, and a fourth employee was sweating at the gift-wrapping counter,



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where there was another queue. Lukas couldn't see anyone else in a red store shirt with a name tag on their chest. The customers were tightly packed, just like it used to be in stores right before Christmas. Plenty of people to blend in with, but also many pairs of eyes that could see him...

Lukas sneaked over to the section with dolls and began searching for one that he thought Emma would like and that was small enough to fit under his jacket without bulging too much. Maybe a Barbie doll? Weren't those the ones she used to stare at the most when she had dragged him into other toy stores? Hadn't she mentioned that she liked the princesses more than the babies? Maybe, maybe not... Lukas sighed. He should have listened better.

As he stood there pondering, two men in red store shirts approached the same shelves with dolls and stuffed animals. The younger one, a teenager, read from a sheet of paper in his hand and sighed heavily.

"This is going to take forever."

The other, an older man, pushed a shopping cart over to the shelf and started putting stuffed animals into it.

"We just have to get on with it," he said. "So maybe we'll finish before closing time."

"There are hundreds of items on this list. And we have to wrap everything as Christmas gifts?"

"Yes, one by one, individually. Come on!"

"Who's placing such a large order? It's insane."

"Gregor Twist."

"He must be filthy rich to be able to buy all this."

"Hold on a second... Haven't you heard of Gregor Twist?"

"No, should I have? Sounds like a candy wrapper."



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"You're pretty green behind the ears! He's one of the world's richest people and lives by himself on an island in the fjord."

"So, what does he need all these gifts for? To give them to the poor, perhaps?"

"No, he makes a bonfire!"

"Huh?"

"He burns everything! Every Christmas, he places large orders with all the toy stores in town. And not just toys, but Christmas food from all the bakeries: wreath cakes, marzipan, buns, gingerbread cookies, all sorts of stuff. Some people haul it all out to his island by boat and decorate the largest room in his house for Christmas. They take care of everything: decorations, a star in the window, setting out food, and building huge piles of Christmas gifts around a gigantic Christmas tree. Gregor himself doesn't lift a finger, and everything stays there until Christmas Eve, but on Christmas Eve..."

"He makes a bonfire?"

"Yes, he throws everything out into the courtyard in front of the house, douses it with lighter fluid, and sets it on fire! He even drags the Christmas tree outside to feed the flames."

"That sounds like pure madness!"

"When you have as much money as Gregor Twist, they call that kind of behavior eccentric, and nobody cares. It's just the way it is. Every Christmas, a plume of smoke rises to the sky out there in the archipelago, and everyone knows why, well... everyone except you."

"Every single Christmas, you say, but it must have started sometime?"

"Yes... about 30 years ago, I would think."

"30 years!"



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"And he's been living on the same island in isolation for just as long, probably lonely."

"What about his family?"

"They're all dead, but enough gossip! Roll up your sleeves, boy, we have work to do!"

The older man snatched the paper from the younger man's hands.

"Let's see... ten stuffed animals, yes, and then there were ten boxes of the best Barbie items. What do I know about what's best?"

"Take those," said the younger man, pointing. "My sister loves those dollhouses and horse things."

"Alright," said the older man, sweeping the boxes into the shopping cart until it was full. "Wheel this over to the gift-wrapping counter and wrap everything as nicely as you can, no slacking. I'll go get the boxes of Lego."

"Does it matter how I wrap them? It's all going to burn anyway."

"Bonfire or not, for good customers, we do our best!"

The young man sighed heavily and wheeled the cart away while the other went elsewhere. Lukas shook his head sadly. Just imagine having that much money. So much money that you could buy a load of gifts and food just to burn it all. What a waste! Lukas felt almost nauseous at the thought.

He finally found a cute, small doll and quickly tucked it under his jacket. Okay, calm and composed now... No sudden movements. Act like nothing happened...

Lukas had never stolen before, despite how hungry and poor they had been in the past year. What if he got caught?... and ended up in jail! Who would take care of Emma then? Maybe she'd have to go back to those awful foster parents. The ones who had only hit and yelled...



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Lukas took out the doll and stared sadly at it. Was this little thing made of fabric, hair, and plastic really worth such a big risk?

"Hey!" someone with a deep, booming voice shouted. "Are you going to pay for that, boy?"

A big, burly man in a store shirt pushed his way over to him.

"Where are your parents?"

Lukas quickly put the doll back in its place and shook his head.

"They must have left," he mumbled and hurried out of the store.

There, he stood in the snow with his heart pounding in his chest. It was wrong to steal, and he couldn't risk getting caught anyway. Not for a little doll!

But an idea had popped into his head and was now spinning around and around...

Imagine... all the food and all the gifts that were going out to that island in the fjord. Hundreds of gifts, maybe thousands! Bought and paid for, just to be burned! Why? It was utterly senseless.

But then... what if? There were many strange people out there... No one would get any joy from the food and gifts if everything was just destroyed. But Emma would be thrilled with even one small gift. Maybe she could even get more? What if he could save some of the gifts, as many as he could carry? Then he could distribute gifts to the other poor children in the city, like a real Santa Claus!

Lukas smiled to himself. Yes! This wouldn't be another sad Christmas. Emma's eyes would light up instead of being filled with disappointment. She would get a doll, just like she had always wanted, and they could celebrate Christmas like in the old days: happy, good, and full.

He just had to come up with a plan first...



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Chapter 4

Caroline

"What are you talking about?" Emma asked.

"We're going to help an old man get rid of some Christmas gifts that he doesn't actually want!"

Emma looked at her brother strangely. "No one wants to get rid of Christmas gifts. Christmas gifts are something you receive because it's fun to get them."

"Trust me, Emma. This is an old, strange man who hates Christmas. He hates Christmas so much that he actually burns all his gifts. We're just doing him a favour!"

"A favour? That means we're helping him, right?"

"Yes."

Emma smiled. "But if you're sure he doesn't want the gifts, we could just ask nicely if..."

"No, no, no," Lukas said, shaking his head. "Asking won't help. He hates both Christmas and people and would rather burn everything than give it away. No, we'll have to help ourselves."

Emma looked at her brother even more strangely. "Lukas, if you're tricking me..."

"But Emma..." Lukas smiled as reassuringly as he could. "Trust me!"

Emma smiled again. "Okay! I believe you! How do we get the gifts?"

"We need help. They're on an island out in the fjord."

"An island! But Lukas... I can't swim!"

"It's okay; I know someone who has a boat. Her name is Caroline. It's a big boat, not a dinghy. No, it's a boat that can probably hold hundreds of gifts!"

"Caroline. That's a nice name. Is she nice?"



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"Oh yes, she's kind, but also a bit... crazy. She's not afraid of anything. A few years ago, we were in the same class, and on a field trip to the zoo, one of the boys fell into the bear enclosure!"

"Oh no!" gasped Emma.

"He was trying to balance on the railing, that idiot! He panicked, of course, screamed and cried, and the rest of us called for help. What else could we do? But Caroline..."

"Yes?"

"She jumped down after him! Just before the first bear came out, she stood up, raised her hands in the air, and roared! The bear stopped and stood up on its hind legs. It roared back but didn't come any closer. She bought just enough time for the zookeepers to sort out the rest."

"Wow," gasped Emma. "So brave!"

"Well, brave or just reckless. What if the bear hadn't stopped? Like I said, she's a bit crazy... She's been living at sea for years and makes a living from hunting and fishing. With Caroline and her boat on our side, those gifts will be ours in a snap!"

After a sneak ride on the tram and some walking along the harbour, they spotted a girl with an axe, chopping wood so vigorously that splinters flew.

"Is that her?" Emma asked.

"Yes."

"She looks really tough! Like a Viking going into battle with an axe!"

"Take it easy," said Lukas. "She's just chopping wood." He raised one arm in the air and waved. "Hey, Caroline!"

The girl stopped chopping and looked up. She had two sparkling green eyes in a face full of freckles and a mane of curly red hair. She wore a tattered black overall and a worn-out light blue, lined denim jacket. She held the axe with a pair of dirty, pink mittens.

"Hi, Lukas! It's been a while since I've seen you. Nice that you're visiting – and could that be little Emma?"



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"Just Emma, please," said Emma.

"Yes, this is my sister."

"Hi there," said Caroline. "I'm actually done here." She swung the axe over her head and split the last log in two with a powerful blow. "Help me carry the firewood to the boat, okay?"

Lukas and Emma gathered as much firewood as they could and followed the girl along the pier.

Chapter 5

The Houseboat

"There!" Caroline said with pride in her voice, pointing. "That's my houseboat. The door is open, so just go inside. I need to stash the firewood under a tarp and secure it."

Caroline's houseboat was like a small, floating house made of wood and steel. The walls were made of brown-painted planks, with large windows that extended from the deck up to the flat, snow-covered roof. A thin stream of smoke emerged from a small chimney.

The house was situated on a flat, square wooden deck, so you could walk all the way around the outside. There was a lot of clutter on the deck: snow-covered crates, ropes, and tarps.

A steel railing framed the deck like a low fence against the sea, except for an opening where a plank led to the edge of the pier. Lukas and Emma walked down the plank, opened the door to the house, and entered.

It was very cozy inside, decorated for Christmas with strings of lights and small elves. It was also warm and snug thanks to a small wood-burning stove. It was the kind that was flat on top, so you could boil water or cook food on it.

Along one wall, there was a sofa with red cushions and blankets, and a table was fixed in the middle of the room. It had only one leg and was bolted down.

On the table stood a large cactus, decorated like a Christmas tree. It had three colorful garlands in red, silver, and gold winding around its prickly body, with a star taped to the top with duct tape.



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"What a nice Christmas tree!" Emma said and laughed.

"The first Christmas cactus I've seen," Lukas remarked. "Crazy, but there's not enough room for a whole tree in here. So, it's a good idea, actually."

Caroline came in through the door with some firewood in her hands. She opened the hatch on the wood-burning stove and tossed the pieces inside.

"There," she said. "Nice and warm!"

"I like that the floor sways!" Emma said. "Back and forth, back and forth..."

"Those are the waves you're feeling," Caroline explained. "It always sways a bit on a boat. That's why there's a low rim around the table, so things don't slide off when the boat hits really big waves."

"Lukas, can't we live like this someday?" Emma asked.

"Yes, that would be nice. But it's expensive for a houseboat. You also have to pay for gasoline and rent for the boat slip."

"Expensive for a houseboat, yes," Caroline added. "But I'm lucky – I actually got this one from my father."

"Got!" Emma exclaimed, staring at her with wide eyes. "You must have the world's best dad!"

"Nonsense! More like the world's worst, but he has a lot of money, so he pays for both the houseboat and the boat slip. Every now and then, he drops by with food and gasoline, too."

"But..." Emma said. "If he's rich, why don't you live with him at home?"

Caroline sighed.

"We made a deal. He loves money and loves his wife, especially since she earns most of the money, but he doesn't love me. He didn't want his wife to find out who I was. It would have caused a fuss! After my mom left me on his doorstep and went abroad a few years ago, we agreed to live separately. He gave me this boat, and I left him alone."

"Oh..." Emma said. "So, you're kind of parentless like us!"



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"Yes, in a way," Caroline said. "Or, not quite like you. At least you had two kind, good parents to start with. I didn't. Just a couple of adults arguing about whose responsibility I was... But enough about them! Do you two want something? I think I have some clementines and a pack of biscuits... and I can make tea. I have plenty of tea."

"Thanks, biscuits and tea sound great," Lukas said, smiling at Emma, who waved her hands excitedly.

"Biscuits!" she exclaimed. "But... they're super delicious."

"We should visit more often," Lukas said. "You're always welcome, but you got lucky today. My father stopped by earlier with a box of food, and there were clementines and a pack of biscuits on top. Probably because Christmas is coming soon. The rest of the box was filled with the usual: noodles, crackers, and such."

Caroline went over to the wood-burning stove and put a kettle on it. Then she poured water from a jug on a narrow shelf along the wall, where there were cups, plates, and cutlery.

"While I prepare hot water for tea and get the biscuits and clementines," Caroline said, "can you tell me why you're here? Just to say hello, or...?"

"No, not just that," Lukas said. "We're planning to pull off the biggest Christmas heist in history! Listen..."

Chapter 6

The spying Christmas Gang

After a while, Lukas had explained everything, and Caroline stood there pensively with the biscuit box in one hand and a couple of teacups in the other.

"That sounds absolutely insane!" she finally said.

"All we need to do," Lukas said, "is take your boat there, sneak onto the island, put the gifts and food in some sacks, and sneak away. Simple as that!"

"Simple as that, huh!" Caroline wrinkled her nose. "It sounds great with gifts and good food, but I've heard about that Gregor Twist and his island. There are stories in the boating community here. He's not just an eccentric old millionaire but a completely insane murderer."



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"Murderer!" Emma gasped. "Lukas, maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all."

"Uh... who did he murder?" Lukas asked, shocked.

"His family! Wife, children, dog, all of them! He got tired of them one day, and then..." Caroline dragged her finger across her throat and made a kind of cutting sound, followed by a sort of death gurgle.

"They say he hates people, especially children. One of the boats here tried to land on his island once. They were curious and thought they'd explore a bit, maybe take a dip on the beach, but no. BANG!"

Caroline slammed the biscuit box on the table, making the cactus jump.

"Old Gregor started shooting at them from his house. They barely got away with their hearts in their throats and some bullet holes in the hull. Since then, no one has dared to go ashore there. They say the island is haunted by all his dead victims..."

"Haunted!" Emma exclaimed.

"Sailors' tales," Lukas said. "Isn't that a good word for it?"

Caroline shrugged.

"Maybe."

"If he murdered his family, why isn't he in prison?"

"Ha! Young, naive Lukas. Money can buy anything in this world. It bought my father out of an inconvenient child born out of wedlock, and it bought Gregor Twist out of the consequences of his madness."

"Can't we just take a quick look?" Lukas asked. "We can drive there when it's dark, and he's asleep. Then we'll land at the dock, sneak up to the house in the cover of darkness... and gently break a window."

"Lukas, you can't break a window by being gentle! On the contrary, you have to be rather reckless, smash it with a stone or something – and that makes noise... and probably triggers the alarm."

"Do you think he has an alarm?"



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Caroline sighed and shook her head. "All rich people have alarms on their houses. My father does, at least."

"Darn it! I didn't think of that. What can we do about it?"

"Well, we can check with Malik – if he wants to join your Christmas heist."

"Who is Malik?"

"He's a hacker and the same age as us. A super specialist in computers and the internet – and therefore perfect for disabling electronic alarms."

"Where do you know him from?"

"We live together."

"Huh?"

"Oh, he won't be home until tonight. He's rummaging around in the containers behind Currys PC World, looking for old computer equipment they've thrown away but that still works. Then he's going to the library, charging his laptop, and surfing the internet."

"So, you live with a... computer nerd?"

"He was homeless and needed a place to stay."

"Was that enough?"

"Do you think I should have let him live on the streets? Freezing under a bridge or sleeping on a park bench until someone came to chase him away?"

"Hmm... Caroline..."

"Yes?"

"Emma and I... we don't have a place to live either..."

Caroline smiled slyly and looked at him.

"Lukas, if you and Emma need a place to sleep, especially during the winter, you're more than welcome to stay on my boat."



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"Yippee!" Emma shouted next to them. She threw herself around Caroline and gave her such a strong hug that they both nearly fell overboard.

"Hey, be careful," Caroline said, laughing. "Thanks! You're the kindest person in the whole world! Did you hear that, Lukas? We're going to live on a real houseboat!"

Chapter 7

The Guardian of the Island

"What will Malik say about us just moving in?" Lukas asked.

"It's okay; he was in the same situation as you," Caroline replied.

"Is he also kind, like you?" Emma asked.

Well, he mostly keeps to himself. Doesn't talk to people much. Talks a bit strangely too. Uses quite a few difficult words and such. I think he reads and hacks more than he talks to people, but he's nice. You'll probably like him."

"Do you think he'll join the heist?" Lukas asked. "And will you join too?"

"Hmm..."

"Please, think about it. Lots of Christmas presents and lots of good Christmas food! We can celebrate Christmas here on the boat afterward. The heist will be on Christmas Eve, so it's perfect! We can unwrap the presents, play with them, eat to our heart's content, have a great party, all four of us! And at least we'll save some of the gifts from being burned!"

"Yes, of course, I'm in!" Caroline said with a broad grin. "It sounds exciting! I'm sure Malik will join us too if we just bug him enough."

"Great!"

"Back to the plan," Caroline said. "How do we get inside the house without breaking a window?"

Lukas sighed and shook his head. "Yeah, that's the thing..."

Caroline took another look through her binoculars. "I still don't see any guards. Just a lot of trees and that big house."



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"Hey, Caroline! Can I have a look?" Emma tugged at her denim jacket. "I want to see through the binoculars too!"

Caroline smiled and handed her the binoculars. "Go ahead; I've seen enough."

Emma put the binoculars to her eyes.

"It's all blurry!"

"Here, you need to turn the wheel to make the image sharp."

"Wow, thanks! Cool! Everything looks so big!"

"Maybe he doesn't lock the door," Lukas suggested. "Or maybe he has a spare key under the doormat or something? We might get lucky."

"No chance!" Caroline said.

"Caroline," Emma asked while looking through the binoculars. "Can I decorate the houseboat a bit more for Christmas?"

"Of course," Caroline said. "I have a box with a lot of materials under the sofa. I like decorating for Christmas too. Did you see my lovely Christmas cactus? You'll find yarn, cardboard, scissors, glue, colours, felt, and many other things in that box."

"Awesome!" Emma said. "I want to start with making one of those toilet paper roll Santas."

"Santa..." Lukas mumbled. "Santa... Santa Claus... I got an idea! What if we act like Santa Claus!"

"Have you completely lost it?" Caroline asked. "Didn't you just want to do the opposite of Santa Claus? Take gifts instead of giving them?"

"But there's a chimney on the house, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, these rich folks with huge houses probably don't have just a small wood-burning stove; they likely have a huge, built-in fireplace!"

"Oh no..."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Oh yes! We can sneak in through the chimney! Climb in like Santa Claus. Then we'll unlock the front door from the inside and make off with the food and presents."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry at that suggestion," Caroline said. "But... I can't deny that it might work. If one of us, that is you, secures yourself well with a rope and lowers yourself down. But how do you get up on the roof?"

"Didn't you say some of the trees are right up against the house?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I'm the world's best tree climber! It's one of the few things I'm actually really good at!"

"Hmm, but don't you think..."

"No!" Emma said. "Look at that cute kitty!"

"A kitty?" Lukas asked. "Not good... better a cat than a dog, but all pets can create problems for us. It might wake up the owner. Can I see?"

Emma handed him the binoculars.

"Where was the cat?" he asked, putting the binoculars to his eyes.

"In the woods... a bit past the pier."

"Hmm... I can't see anything... or wait a minute... what in the... black!?"

"Isn't it cute?" Emma asked.

"Cute!" Lukas exclaimed. "That's not a kitty, Emma. That's a darn tiger."

Caroline snatched the binoculars.

"A tiger. Cool! Where... ah, there it is! Sooo cute!"

"Yes, right?" Emma said.

"Big and white, with black stripes. It must be one of those Siberian tigers. Makes sense. They can handle the cold well."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Makes sense," Lukas shouted. "It makes absolutely no sense! Who puts a tiger on their island!"

"Better than a guard dog, I guess," Caroline said. "No one dares to go ashore then. Maybe it's time to scrap the whole plan, right?"

"No!" Lukas said. "Tiger or not, we're getting those Christmas presents!"

Chapter 8

The Christmas Gang Forms a Plan

Malik had finally come home and was now sitting on a small stool with his back against the wall, his arms crossed.

"Are you completely crazy?" he said. "We're not going to steal Christmas presents!"

"Are you sure?" Caroline said. "Considering you stole a box of gingerbread cookies today."

"There was a note: Help yourself!"

"Inside stores, that means one gingerbread cookie per customer."

"There was nothing about that!"

"At least they taste good," Caroline said, biting the head off a gingerbread man.

Lukas sat on the sofa, munching on gingerbread cookies too, while Emma lay there pretending that a gingerbread man was climbing up the back of the sofa.

Caroline fetched the saucepan with boiling water from the wood-burning stove and poured the hot water into the teacups on the table.

"We'll let the tea steep for a bit," she said. "And then we can toast to the expansion of the family!"

Malik glared at the two new residents through the steam.

"So, these two are going to live here," Malik said. "With us! We don't have room for that!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Malik," Caroline said sternly. "Either everyone who wants to can live here, or no one can. And you know what that means?"

He sighed. "Fine, then..."

"So, this is Malik," Caroline said, running her hand through his dark, short curls. "My boyfriend."

"We're not dating!" He waved her hand away.

"But Malik, we live together, eat together, sleep together."

"I sleep on the floor!"

"But under the same roof." Caroline grinned. "Anyway, we'll probably be a couple someday, don't you think?"

"You're crazy."

"He's a super-smart computer geek and really wants to join our Christmas heist!"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, because we're going to have a Christmas party on the houseboat afterward! Yippee! There will be lots of presents, good food, and Emma has already started making Christmas decorations."

"See," Emma said, pointing at the table. "I made this toilet paper roll Santa. You can name it Malik. Will that make you happy?"

"Great," Malik said. "I've always wanted to be associated with something people use to wipe their butts."

"Associated?" Emma looked like a question mark.

"He often uses strange words," Caroline said. "Because he's a weirdo, with his nose buried in a book 98 percent of the time."

Lukas reached his hand across the table.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Nice to meet you, Malik," he said. "I'm Lukas, 12 years old, and the one playing with gingerbread cookies on the sofa is my sister, Emma. She just turned 6. Hope we can be friends?"

"Yeah, okay," Malik said. "Friends." He shook Lukas's hand and then leaned back on the stool.

"So... do you want to hear our plan?" Lukas asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Malik glanced over at Caroline.

"You can choose to move out."

"Go on," he said, sighing.

"It's actually quite simple," Lukas said. "The plan is to rescue some of the Christmas presents and Christmas food from an old, crazy millionaire before everything gets burned. He lives alone on an island in the fjord. We'll sail the boat to the island under the cover of darkness, on Christmas Eve. That's when we know the goodies will be there, waiting for us. There's a tiger there..."

"A what now?" Malik exclaimed.

Lukas cleared his throat. "A tiger, but don't worry. We plan to shoot it with a tranquilizer dart. No problem!"

"A tiger is definitely a problem! The degree of the problem is higher than zero even if you use a bazooka. And where are you going to get tranquilizer darts? Or pay for them?"

"I'll ask my dad," Caroline said. "He's a veterinarian."

"And you think he'll just say, 'Sure, take them'?"

"Well, worst case, we may have to borrow the equipment without permission, and if that doesn't work, we'll give up."

"Good to hear," Malik said. "What's the rest of the plan?"

"While the tiger is asleep," Lukas said, "we'll jump ashore and follow the path up to the house. I'll climb a tree and lower myself onto the roof. There, I'll tie a rope to the chimney and lower myself down the chimney."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Is that possible?" Malik asked.

"If a fat Santa Claus can squeeze down a chimney," Caroline said, "then Lukas can do it too."

"But Santa Claus doesn't exist," Malik said.

"Liar!" A gingerbread man flew through the air and hit Malik right on the forehead.

"Ow!"

"Emma," Lukas sighed. "Don't throw food at our hacker."

"But he..."

"Hush!" Lukas interrupted. "Whether real or not, we've all seen people dressed as Santa Claus go down chimneys in movies, right?"

"In movies, yes," Malik said, rubbing his forehead. He looked surprised at Emma, who sat with her arms crossed and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Okay..." Malik said, moving his gaze back to Lukas. "Let's say the chimney is big enough, and you manage to get in. What then?"

"I'll find the front door and unlock it. Simple as that. You guys come in with your own sacks and load them up with gifts. Then we'll all go down to the boat and make our getaway."

"So, it's a party!" Caroline said.

"An interesting plan," Malik said. "But why do I have to be involved? Can't you guys do this on your own?"

"Well," Lukas said. "There might be some kind of alarm system tied to the house. So... maybe you can figure that out and sort of hack it away? Do you think you can do something like that?"

Malik ran a hand through his dark curls and looked thoughtful.

"Hacking an alarm system..." he said.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

The houseboat fell silent, then he finally smiled and said, "Okay, I accept the challenge."

"Great!" Lukas said.

"But I'm not going inside that house! I can hack from the outside."

"No problem," Lukas said. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Yes, and then you'll see that Santa can actually get inside!" Emma said.

"Exactly, yes..." Malik smiled gently at Emma. "If your brother manages to climb down that chimney, then I'll change my mind, okay?" "Okay!" Emma said and smiled back.

"Okay, I'll bring my laptop," Malik said. "And I'll set up by a window or something. I should be able to pick up Wi-Fi from there. If I can crack the code, I'll get into the system, and then I should be able to disable any pesky alarms."

"But can you crack such a code?" Lukas asked.

"Man, of course I can! Almost everyone uses lousy codes these days: 1111 and 1234 are common ones. Especially old people tend to enter the most ridiculous number combinations. This old coot is probably no exception, but if he's tried to be more original, that won't stop me and my CodeCracker 3000!"

"CodeCracker 3000?" Lukas asked.

"Yes! The world's best program for cracking codes. It can try millions of combinations in just a few minutes. I can load it up with background info about Gregor Twist by conducting a meta-search on the internet. All newspaper articles, social media comments, and similar data will be fed into the program, and then all this information will be used to test possible codes, such as a birthdate, another favorite among the elderly."

"Great! Then you work on that while Caroline and I get tranquilizer darts and a rope. We need to be ready for action on Christmas Eve!"

"And I can make more Christmas decorations!" Emma said.

Chapter 9



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[Skriv her]

The Christmas Gang Springs into Action

Caroline entered the houseboat with a smile on her face and a bag over her shoulder.

"Did you manage to get the tranquilizer darts?" Malik asked. He was crouched down, tossing some firewood into the stove.

"Nothing is impossible for Caroline!" she said, dropping the bag on the floor. "A complete set with an air rifle and six tranquilizer darts, straight from my dad's veterinary clinic."

"What did you tell him, by the way? I was sure he would refuse!"

"You just have to press the right buttons. I threatened to show up at his place on Christmas Eve. That got him moving!"

"Isn't that a breach of your agreement about the houseboat?"

"That's what he said too, but I argued that Christmas Eve shouldn't count. It's a special family day. What would Jesus have said, after all?"

"And he gave in?"

"Total surrender! I got to borrow the rifle and darts until after New Year's, as long as I stayed away."

"What did you say you were going to use them for?"

"Practice tranquilizing animals in the forest and studying them because I also want to become a veterinarian and be as rich as my awful dad when I grow up."

"Did you really call him awful?"

"Why not? I doubt he cares, but what about you? Is the laptop ready?"

"Yes, the code cracker is loaded and ready for action, and I've also charged four mobile phones with headsets for you all so we can stay in contact on the island. It wasn't easy to hack those mobile subscriptions, and they probably won't be active for more than a few days, but they should work tonight at least."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Four mobile phones and headsets!" Lukas exclaimed, looking up from the sofa where he sat with Emma, helping her assemble a long paper chain of Christmas decorations.

"It's amazing what you can find in the electronic waste containers," said Malik. "People sometimes discard perfectly good phones, or phones that just need a little repair, all because they want the latest model. Such waste! But good for us!"

"Wow," said Emma. "Is one of them for me?"

"Yes, even for you," said Malik.

Emma let out a small cheer and bounced back to the sofa with the phone.

Caroline crouched down and unzipped the bag. Then she pulled out a long air rifle and examined it.

"Which one of you is going to shoot the tiger?" she asked.

There was complete silence.

Caroline grinned broadly. "Relax, as the only one on the boat with hunting experience, I'll take responsibility! Tigerline will take it down in a snap!"

She made a pistol shape with her hand, swung around, and shot the door with her index finger.

"Bang!" she said. "Tiger 0, Caroline 1."

"Great," said Lukas, breathing a sigh of relief. "So, we all have our important roles in this heist. Caroline shoots the tiger, Malik disables the alarm, and I climb onto the roof, lower myself down the chimney, and unlock it from the inside. Finally, we all work together to fill the sacks with gifts and delicious Christmas food."

"I said I didn't want to go inside," Malik said.

"Okay, Caroline and I will fill the sacks with gifts and food, but you can help carry some of them back to the boat."

"Yeah, okay, I can do that."

"But what about me?" Emma asked. "I want to help too!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"You?" Lukas said. "Well, you have the most important job of all—you have to watch the boat!"

"Is that the most important job?"

"Yes, because without the boat, we'll be stranded on the island! It's super important that it's ready for our escape. Super important!"

"Oh yeah, trust me! I'll watch the boat!"

"Awesome," said Caroline. "We're all set, and it's midnight now, so I'll go start the engine. We should be there in about an hour."

Chapter 10

In the Dark of the Night

Lukas stood on the deck of the houseboat as it sailed along the dark fjord. He couldn't see any other boats, and the only light came from the boat itself.

The splashing of the dark water as the boat forged its way forward was both a bit cozy and a bit eerie. Lukas shivered at the thought of everything that lived down there, beneath the water... fish, jellyfish, squids, and crabs... maybe sharks and giant crabs too? A dark, icy, and almost bottomless abyss.

It made him think of his mom and dad... just over a year ago, it seemed unthinkable that they could just disappear. He missed them so much it hurt. He wished he could have said something, a goodbye... and given them a hug, told them he loved them.

The last thing he had said to dad was, "Can you change the song on the radio?" And then it had crashed. Maybe that's even why they crashed? Perhaps dad was fiddling with the radio instead of watching the road? Because of what he said. Maybe it was all his fault?

No! No! That was something he shouldn't think about. Never think about it again!

Lukas tried to think about something else.

His thoughts drifted to the day when grandma was going to be buried. He remembered that Emma had asked if it was possible to talk to her again. Mom had replied, "If you're like me... well, it's almost Christmas, you see, we have a gift..." That



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was all he heard before he put on his headphones and let the music drown out the rest of the world.

At that moment, he had thought that mom was just trying to comfort Emma, but it was a strange thing to say, "If you're like me," and then suddenly change the subject to Christmas and Christmas gifts! Right now, Lukas wished for the same thing that Emma had wished back then... Yes, that would have been something! If Santa Claus really existed, it would be at the top of his wish list! A call to heaven... A chance to say goodbye. Just a few last words...

The boat rocked heavily as it hit some large waves, and Lukas had to grab onto the railing to avoid falling. The boat wasn't going very fast, but the waves had grown larger, and the wind was blowing briskly.

His mobile phone, provided by Malik, rang. Lukas fished it out of his pocket with one hand and glanced at the display.

"Tiger Girl" it said. They had saved each other's phone numbers with code names that Caroline had come up with. Malik was "The Data Wizard," and Emma was "The Boat Elf." Lukas himself was "Santa Claus." He put on his headset and pressed the answer button.

Caroline's voice was easy to hear despite the wind.

"1-2-3, testing, testing. This is Tiger Girl. Over."

"I hear you loud and clear," Lukas said.

...

...

...

"Are you there, over?" Caroline asked.

"Huh?"

"You have to say 'over' when you're done speaking. Over."

"Oh... um... over."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Good job, Santa. We're approaching the island now. You can see lights up ahead. The dock and the path to the house are full of lampposts, so it's easy to spot from the boat. Over."

"You?"

...

...

...

"You, over!" Lukas said irritably.

"Yes? Over."

"Can we skip saying 'over'? I don't think it will cause more confusion if we talk without waiting for 'over.'"

"Ten Four."

"Huh?"

"Ten Four. It's police code for okay."

"We don't need police codes."

"You're boring, you know that! But okay. Do you know what 'okay' means?"

"...Yes."

"Great. We're there now! Over and out." Caroline hung up, and the boat began to swing toward the island's dock. There was only one boat there from before, probably Gregor's boat, so there was plenty of space.

It started to snow a little. Snowflakes danced around Lukas before melting on the deck or in the water.

Not so pleasant with wind and snow, he thought, but on the other hand, it would make it harder to see the boat from the house.

Lukas put his mobile back in his pocket.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

They were almost there! The dock was getting closer slowly... Soon it would be too late to turn back. It would either be a celebration on the boat with gifts and good food, or alone in tears behind a locked door in jail.

Lukas had an unpleasant feeling... a feeling that something was going to go wrong.

Chapter 11

Soldier, Soldier... Santa?

The door to the houseboat opened behind Lukas, and Malik stepped out onto the deck. He was dressed in dark military-style clothing for camouflage and had smeared green makeup on his face to match. He wore a headset, and a laptop bag hung over his shoulder.

"This is going to be exciting!" he said.

"Yeah... why do you look like a soldier?" Lukas asked.

"Cool, isn't it?"

"Isn't green and black camouflage for jungles, forests, and such?"

"It's the middle of the night, and there's little light. The point is to blend in with the surroundings, like a shadow in the dark... like a phantom!"

"A phantom?"

"Yes, you know... a ghost?"

"I know what a ghost is, but you don't look like one. You look like a soldier."

"Anyway, Caroline said we need to moor the boat to the posts on the dock. There are ropes on the deck that can be used for that."

"Okay."

Along the edge of the dock, large rubber tires were attached so that the boat gently bumped into them. Lukas and Malik each took a rope and jumped onto the dock, where they secured the boat.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"I used a cleat hitch," Malik said. "I read up on knot techniques on the internet earlier today. What did you use?"

"A bowline," Lukas replied.

"Ah... a classic. But not so easy to untie if the boat pulls on it so much that it gets properly stuck. Maybe I should..."

"It'll be fine," Lukas said, giving Malik a friendly pat on the shoulder. "We have all night!"

The door to the houseboat opened again, and Caroline came out with the air rifle slung over her shoulder, a large bag in her hand, and a big grin on her face. She was also dressed in dark clothes and had applied makeup to her face.

"You guys look really professional," Lukas said. "As if this were some kind of military operation. Do you have clothes like that for me too?"

"This is for you," Caroline said, tossing the bag to him.

Lukas peered inside.

"...It's a Santa costume."

"Yes!" Caroline exclaimed. "Perfect!"

"Wait a minute, you're wearing dark camouflage clothes, and you want me to run around as a bright red Santa?"

"Exactly!" Caroline said. "We can't risk the tiger attacking me. I'm the one who's going to shoot it. Not Malik either, because his laptop could get damaged. That's why you have to be the bait."

"Bait?"

"How do you think I'm going to shoot that tiger if we don't lure it out first?"

"Shoot it from the boat, maybe!"

"Do you think it'll just come over here on its own? Can you see it, Malik?"

"No," Malik said. "No tiger in sight, but I thought..."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"You too? Are you planning to sit in the boat all night and wait, perhaps? Until morning when Gregor wakes up? Lukas, with that costume, you'll become one of those who fight bulls in Spain. What are they called, Malik?"

"Uh... are you talking about bullfighting?... They're called matadors, I think."

"Exactly, a matador. They wave a red cloth, and the bull forgets everything else and charges. The Santa costume will work just like one of those red cloths!"

"But... in black!" Lukas said. "Can you shoot in time, then?"

"Yes, of course. I've done a lot of hunting. Granted, not with an air rifle like that, and not with those darts... and not on a tiger, but it'll be fine."

"What have you hunted before?" Lukas asked.

"Oh... crows, seagulls, and such."

"I think we need a better plan," Lukas sighed.

Chapter 12

The Decoy Takes Its First Steps

"Too late," Caroline said. "We don't have time to dawdle. When the sun comes up and Gregor wakes up, it's game over for both the Christmas presents and all the delicious Christmas food. He'll throw everything on the fire, including us if we're still here. Do you want to give up now?"

"Well, we could..." Malik began.

"Do you want us to starve?" Caroline continued. "I'm hungry, Malik! I haven't eaten anything today except gingerbread cookies and a packet of noodles."

"But a tiger..." Lukas started.

"Listen here!" Caroline said sternly. "This plan is going to work, I promise, especially if you flap your hands around a bit and make some noise."

"A clucking Santa?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Well, pat your belly and sing a Christmas song then! Just attract attention. The tiger will come, and then I'll shoot it, quickly and efficiently."

"But..."

"Relax," Caroline said in a softer tone. "Maybe the tiger won't attack at all? It could be on the other side of the island, or maybe it's tame or full? It's probably tame. I wonder if a tiger purrs when you scratch it behind the ear?"

"But you might miss!"

"Honestly, if I can hit a small flying animal, how could I miss a gigantic animal standing on the ground? Malik and I will sneak from shadow to shadow, from bush to bush, just a few meters behind you. We're in this together."

"Okay," Lukas said, sighing. "I'll be the bait."

He emptied the bag. Out fell Santa pants, a Santa hat, a Santa suit, and a coil of rope.

"The rope is for climbing down the chimney," Caroline said.

"Thanks," Lukas mumbled.

He put on the Santa pants and Santa suit. They were so big that they fit comfortably over his other clothes. At least he wouldn't freeze.

Finally, he bent down and picked up the coil of rope, a light but sturdy one that should work just fine. He slung it over his head so it lay across him, from one shoulder down to his chest.

Lukas took his first hesitant steps along the dock, toward the land and Gregor Twist's big house.

The house stood alone at the top of a long hill, surrounded by many snow-covered spruce trees and some bare deciduous trees. The path up there wasn't very long and was well lit by small lampposts the whole way, but there were enough bushes and shadows for Caroline and Malik to sneak from one dark spot to another.

Meanwhile, he was supposed to walk carelessly in the brightest area, waving his hands a bit and making noise? Was this plan brilliant or utterly foolish?



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

It would take him about 7-8 minutes to walk up the entire hill to the house. Maybe 30 minutes to climb onto the roof and down the chimney... If everything went according to plan, they could be done with the heist in just an hour!

A branch snapped behind him!

Lukas jumped and spun around, but it was just Malik and Caroline who had started to sneak up, a bit further behind.

He stared nervously into the darkness between the trees on the side of the path and continued walking. No sounds came from there.

Most of the vegetation had been cleared along the path, so he had a clear view for quite a few meters to the edge of the forest on both sides. But was it far enough for Caroline to shoot if the tiger suddenly burst out of the bushes? A tiger, imagine that. But maybe it wasn't a tiger after all? Maybe it had looked much larger through the binoculars than it actually was? Maybe it was just an ordinary, slightly chubby house cat?

Lukas chuckled to himself and relaxed. Of course, that's how it was. No one in their right mind would put a real tiger outside their house!

"It's not coming," Caroline whispered from some distance behind. "Can you sing?"

"♪ Twinkle, twinkle, little star ... ♪ How I wonder what you are! ♪"

"No, no, a Christmas song," Caroline interrupted. "And louder."

Lukas turned around and looked at her. "Why does it have to be a Christmas song?"

"Because you look like Santa Claus! Go on! Sing! Don't look at me. I don't exist; I'm one with the darkness."

Lukas turned back around and shook his head in exasperation. He continued walking while trying to remember some Christmas songs.

♪ "Dancing through the snow ♪ In a one-door open sleigh ♪ On our toes we go ♪ farting all the way ..."

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...

Wait, what was that? A sound from the forest...



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...

Something growled among the trees to the left. And it was getting closer! A deep, menacing sound...

In the darkness between the bushes and trees, Lukas could see two piercing blue eyes and an open, snarling mouth full of sharp teeth. The ears were flattened back.

It was staring right at him, murder in its eyes!

And it wasn't a chubby house cat...

Chapter 13

Tiger! Tiger!

The tiger continued to growl as it slowly emerged from the edge of the forest, staring spellbound at Lukas.

He heard a small noise behind him, followed by Caroline saying, "Oops." Then he heard Malik say, "You must have missed by several meters!"

Lukas didn't need to hear more before he turned and started running as fast as he could in the opposite direction of the tiger. That meant straight into the forest on the opposite side of the path.

Lukas ran and ran, stumbled, scraped himself, and kept running. Maybe there was a tree nearby that he could climb? Can tigers climb? Surely they can't!

After a while, he had run so far that it was becoming strange that teeth and claws hadn't torn into his back yet... Lukas stopped.

He tried to listen to the nature around him but couldn't hear anything other than his own pounding heartbeats and rapid, panicked breaths.

A loud ringing made him jump. It was his mobile phone... "Tiger girl." He answered quickly.

"Hello?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Hey! You can come out now. I hit it with the second shot. The tiger is down for the count!"

"Oh, thank goodness!"

"Unfortunately, it ate Malik first, so we can't disable the alarm on the house."

"WHAT!"

There was complete silence on the phone for a few seconds before Caroline burst into loud laughter.

"No, no! It chased after you, so I got in a really nice shot right in the butt! It stopped and looked very confused. It ran around in circles a few times, but then it ran back into the woods after you. It's probably knocked out by now."

"Okay... so you don't see it? It's not lying on the ground?"

"Well, no, but I hit it. I'm sure of it! Malik is googling right now, so we'll be sure how long it takes for the anesthetic to work... hmm? How long did you say? Oh... goodness... I didn't know that. Lukas won't like it..."

"Hello?" Lukas said impatiently. "How long?"

"I was sure it would only take a few seconds, but it looks like it might take somewhere between 10 and 15 minut..."

Lukas hung up the phone. His breathing and heartbeats had calmed down a bit. Now he listened again to the sounds in the forest around him. Wasn't there something creeping through the plants and bushes just a few meters away?

Chapter 14

The Decoy Flaps Its Wings



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Lukas sprinted as fast as he could. Snow sprayed everywhere, from branches he crashed through, from his pounding feet on the ground, and from the sky and the powerful wind. It was so windy and snowy that he could barely see... and then he stepped into thin air!

Lukas waved his arms wildly, barely grabbing a large, sturdy branch next to him. Then he lost his grip with the other foot as well, and he dangled from his arms. A quick glance down revealed a drop of perhaps ten meters straight into the black, cold sea!

He must have walked right off a cliff. Black! The branch he was holding onto extended over the abyss.

Lukas began swinging his feet back toward the cliff wall. Maybe he could regain footing? But apart from kicking away some snow and pebbles, he achieved very little.

Lukas knew that his arm strength would soon give out, so he had to come up with something quickly!

He tried to lift his entire body onto the branch to get on top of it. It was big enough, but was he strong enough?

... ..

No, he wasn't! He stopped trying.

So he couldn't hoist himself up, and soon his arms would become so tired that he wouldn't be able to hang from them anymore. But he had to do something!

Maybe the rope? He took the chance to hang for a while with just one arm while he threw one end of the rope over the branch. It fell to the other side, where he grabbed it again. Then he tied the rope securely around himself. At least he had some sort of safety line...

With a roar, the white tiger leaped out of the woods and landed on the branch, making it tremble violently up and down!

Lukas lost his grip... and floated for a moment in thin air before the rope tightened and stopped the fall.

There he hung, with a pounding heart, swinging back and forth. He could hear the waves crashing against the hard cliff wall below him.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

The tiger was on the branch, swiping its claws at him, but he hung just far enough down that it couldn't reach him. Then it started to bite and scratch at the rope...

Black! Lukas fished his mobile phone out of his pocket and called "Data Geek."

"Hello?" the geek said.

"I'm hanging off a cliff with the tiger right above me! Can you help me?"

"Well, what can we do?"

"Anything!"

"It's best if you just wait until the anesthesia starts to work."

"I don't think the rope will last that long. It's scratching and biting it!"

"The rope? What..."

A loud cracking noise drowned out the rest of Malik's words. Lukas looked up. A massive crack had opened in the branch where the tiger was lying.

"Malik?"

"Yes?"

"How much does a tiger weigh?"

"Oh, well... about 300 kg, I would think."

"300 kg."

"Yep!"

"Can you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Tell Emma that I loved her very much."

Chapter 15

Another One?



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"He hung up," Malik said, nervously peering through the trees, but he couldn't see Lukas or the tiger, and he didn't want to leave the path to check.

"Is he okay?" Caroline asked.

"I don't think so. He seems to be hanging off a cliff or something, and the tiger won't let him up."

"Can't he just wait until it falls asleep?"

"That's what I said, but he wasn't happy with that."

"Should we go and check?"

"Preferably not."

"I can give it another dose of the tranquilizer dart!"

Malik sighed and glanced at his watch.

"Can't we wait? It's just five minutes until the tranquilizer takes effect."

"Come on!" Caroline said, heading toward the trees. "We have to help Lukas before it's too late. I can still hear the tiger growling somewhere in the woods, behind those big trees. We'll sneak in the direction of the sound and give it another shot, just to be sure."

"You know, Caroline..."

"Yes?"

"How do you know it's only one tiger?"

"Because."

"Because?"

"Because we're not that unlucky."

"Aren't we?"

"No." Malik pointed toward the house. Caroline looked up the path, and there was another tiger standing there, staring right at them!



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Do we have time to run back to the boat?" Caroline asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But if we run, it will chase us. Predators are like that. If we run, it will think we're prey."

"We are prey!"

"Good point. Run!"

They ran toward the boat. Malik glanced back as he ran. The tiger was coming down the path at a furious pace!

"It's coming!" Malik shouted.

Caroline jumped onto the houseboat and yanked open the door.

Malik slid past her and belly-flopped into the boat.

He turned around and looked back at the open door.

Caroline just stood there fumbling around in her pocket.

"What are you doing?" Malik yelled. "Get inside! And close the door!"

"Just wait a moment! I still have time!"

Caroline pulled out another tranquilizer dart and loaded the rifle.

"There it is!" Malik shouted.

The tiger reached the edge of the dock and leaped!

Caroline lifted the rifle, aimed, and fired. Bullseye! Right in the chest!

The tiger landed heavily on the deck, causing the entire boat to tilt to one side. Caroline fell, and water poured onto the deck as the boat dipped.

Malik saw the rifle sliding across the deck and slipping into the water.

"Come on!" Malik shouted. "Get inside now, before it's too late!"

Caroline quickly got to her feet but only managed to take one step toward the door before the tiger grabbed her away from the opening!



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Malik heard her scream, followed by a loud bang and a big splash!

Chapter 16

Malik Swings the Axe!

"What's going on?" Emma asked. "Where's Lukas?"

Malik quickly glanced at her from the floor. She was lying under a blanket on the sofa with a pair of scissors and a folded piece of paper in her hands.

"Drop that and hide in the bathroom!" he shouted.

Malik crawled toward the open door and looked out. The boat was still tilting slightly from side to side, and there was water on the deck, but it seemed like the boat was gradually stabilizing.

He couldn't see either the tiger or Caroline. The loud noise must have come from the railing. They must have hit it pretty hard. And then there was a big splash. Did they both fall overboard?

The water was dark, but in the light from the lamps on the houseboat, he could see foamy bubbles and red strands swirling just below the surface.

Something brushed against Malik's side!

He jumped to his feet and screamed.

"It's just me," Emma said. "Why do I have to hide in the bathroom?"

"Can't you just listen!" Malik said.

He looked around nervously before taking a few cautious steps onto the deck. No tiger? He couldn't see it, but the red in the water... Could it be Caroline's hair?

He quickly lay down on the deck and reached a hand into the icy water. He grabbed hold and pulled. It was Caroline! She coughed and gasped as she got her head above water.

"M-Malik! I-I'm sh-shivering! I can't sw-swim. Cr-cramps!"

"I've got you!" Malik grabbed her under the arms and pulled her onto the deck. She was cold, heavy, and soaking wet.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"There's the kitty," Emma said.

"Where?" Malik shouted and lost his grip on Caroline. He was so scared that his hands were shaking.

"There, in the water," she said, pointing. "It can swim. Look how good it is!"

Malik looked where she was pointing. There it was, heading back to shore at full speed! Would it come back? Of course it would!

"Emma, Caroline, go inside!" he yelled. "I'll get us away from the shore!"

He jumped onto the dock to untie the two ropes that held the boat in place. Despite his trembling hands, he easily undid his own knot, but Lukas's bowline was stuck. He pulled and tugged at it, but it wouldn't come loose!

The tiger crawled up onto the island, water pouring off its wet fur. It turned its head toward the boat and stared at him. Then it started heading back toward the dock!

"I can't untie the rope!" Malik yelled in desperation.

"M-Malik-k-k..." Caroline said through chattering teeth.

She was still shivering on the deck in soaking wet clothes.

"Und-der the p-pres-enn-ting... my ax-xe," she stammered.

"I can't fight a tiger with just an axe!"

"N-No... the ro-ope..."

"Oh, yes, the rope!" Malik jumped down to the deck and ripped open the tarpaulin. There lay the axe! He took it, swung it over his head, and chopped down as hard as he could.

The rope snapped instantly! The boat was free.

Malik glanced back at the tiger. How far away was it now? Oh no! It was already at the beginning of the dock!

He pushed the boat away as hard as he could with his foot against the large rubber tires along the edge of the dock.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

The tiger bounded toward them along the dock as the boat slowly drifted farther out.

It prepared to leap but changed its mind at the last moment. Instead, it began pacing back and forth, glaring angrily at Malik over the water.

Then it sat down and started licking itself.

"S-s-so c-c-cold," Caroline shivered.

Malik finally tore his gaze away from the tiger and dropped the axe onto the deck.

"We'll get you warm soon!" he said, taking her under the arms to help her to her feet.

She was soaking wet and freezing, shivering and chattering her teeth. What if she got seriously ill?

"Emma, go and put more wood in the stove. And put a kettle of water on for tea. We need to get her warm as soon as possible!"

Chapter 17

Time to Give Up?

Malik helped Caroline to the door and onto the houseboat.

"You can relax soon," he said, guiding her to the sofa.

Emma placed the pot of water on the stove.

"The water is ready!" she said.

"Great!" Malik released his grip on Caroline, and she sank onto the sofa.

"This night has truly been a catastrophe-paw," he said as cheerfully as he could and went to get a blanket.

Caroline tried to laugh, but it came out as a small hiccup.

"Here's the blanket."

"Th-thank you," Caroline said weakly and took it with a feeble movement.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Malik, c-c-can you t-turn around?" she asked.

"What?"

"M-my c-clothes."

"Oh, yes, of course! Uh... Emma, can you help her? I'll go get more blankets."

When Malik returned with the rest of the blankets, Emma was in the process of removing Caroline's last sock, but Caroline had pulled the blanket over the rest of her body.

"T-they were so nice," Caroline said to Emma, pointing at the windows with cut-out snowflakes. "D-did you make them?"

"Yes," Emma said. "I made them while you were away. I learned it from Mom."

"Y-you are v-very t-talented! My boat has never been so decorated for Christmas."

Malik draped the blankets over Caroline, sat down beside her, and took her hand to warm it.

"You're still cold, but you'll warm up soon... wow, what a night!"

"Yeah," Caroline said. "This will be something to tell our kids."

"Haha," Malik said. "You must have a fever the way you're rambling."

"I always get a fever when you hold my hand."

Malik rolled his eyes and let go of her hand.

"You're warm enough now."

The water in the pot was boiling.

"I'll fix the tea!" Emma said and bounced over to the stove.

"And I'll go help Lukas when the tigers are asleep," said Malik. "But then we give up the whole thing, right?"

Caroline grasped Malik's arm and pulled him closer.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"No! You must continue. It was my job to shoot the tigers. I did it! You don't need me anymore, but you have to turn off the alarm."

"Seriously, Caroline! After all that!... Seriously?"

"Yes!" Caroline insisted. "I want to have a good Christmas for once. We... deserve it."

She released his arm and groaned.

"She has some wounds," said Emma. "The kitty was angry."

"Wounds? Let me see!"

"No!" Caroline hissed. "You can't."

"She has some scratches on her chest and her butt..."

"Enough!" Caroline interrupted. "It's fine! Emma can bandage them while you go turn off the alarm."

Malik sighed in frustration and checked the time. "The first tiger must be asleep by now, hopefully without Lukas inside its belly. But I should wait at least 5 more minutes until the other one falls asleep too. Then I'll go and check."

Malik's phone rang. He took it out and looked at the display: "Santa Claus."

"He's alive!" he exclaimed and answered, "Hey, Santa! How's it going?"

"Hello, Data-snoop. A bit better now... The tiger finally got tired and gave up. It climbed down from the tree and fell asleep a little distance away. But there's a huge crack in the tree now, so can you come and pull me up as soon as possible?"

"Okay, but you have to wait at least 10 minutes."

"Malik... I could die."

"Lukas, if I go right away, your help will be eaten up! Just hold on for 10 short minutes more."

"It's not me who has to hold on, it's the tree, but okay... I trust you have a very good reason. I tried to call Caroline first, but I think something's wrong with her phone."

"Yeah, it probably drowned."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"What?"

"Long story. Anyway, she's trying to persuade me to continue with the heist. Can you believe it?"

"Of course, we're going to continue with the heist!"

Malik sighed and shook his head.

"But Lukas, think..."

"Do you think I'm giving up now... now that the damn tiger has finally fallen asleep! No way! Think of all the good food and nice gifts!"

"It's something completely different I'm thinking of."

"What then?"

"That you three are all equally insane!"

Chapter 17

The Twist Family

"There you are," Malik said as he peered over the edge of the cliff and saw Lukas hanging from the branch by a rope.

"It's about time!" Lukas exclaimed.

"Don't complain; I came as quickly as I could." Malik dropped his laptop bag, a couple of empty sacks, and a new coil of rope.

"You need to help me up as fast as you can. Maybe you could..."

The branch creaked, and Lukas sank down a few inches.

"Black," Lukas muttered. "We only have seconds left! Throw that rope over here! And tie your end to a tree or something!"

Malik threw the rope to him and hurried to tie the other end to the nearest tree.

"Can you get up? It doesn't look easy, even with a rope."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"I'm actually good at climbing."

Malik tied a double half-hitch around the tree, one of the knots he had just learned, and tugged on the rope to make sure it was secure.

"Okay!" he shouted. "The rope is fastened!"

Lukas grabbed the new rope tightly and pulled himself closer to the cliff wall. There, he finally found footholds in small cracks and protrusions.

After a quick climb, he was up.

"Thanks," he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Lukas... I regret this plan every second. Can't we just give up?"

"Hey, all you have to do is sit back and enjoy your laptop. It's the middle of the night, and both Gregor and the tiger are asleep. What else could go wrong? Come on!"

"You're tempting fate," Malik said.

"Pessimist!"

"Optimist!"

"Nerd."

"Santa."

Malik and Lukas waded through the snow and past many trees until they reached the house.

It stood by itself on the highest point of the island, with a view of the fjord in one direction—down the hill and toward the pier. The other sides were blocked by large, dense spruce trees, laden with snow.

It was still snowing, but the wind was mild.

"Do you think there could be traps here?" Lukas asked.

"I don't think people set traps around their houses for real; it's more of a movie thing. What if a grandchild visits and falls into a pit full of sharp stakes?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"What if a grandchild visits and gets eaten by a tiger?"

"Good point," Malik said. "We have to watch out for traps anyway."

"Gregor Twist doesn't have any grandchildren... or any other family for that matter. Don't you remember what Caroline said? He murdered them all!"

They reached the house wall without triggering any traps.

The house was made of bricks with many large windows. The roof had a sloping design with snow-covered tiles. A large chimney protruded at the top.

"Can you really get all the way up to the roof?" Malik asked. "It's high."

"Piece of cake."

Lukas tested some of the branches on a large oak tree that grew quite close to the house. The best part was that some of the top branches hung over the roof.

"I'll climb up here."

Malik discreetly looked through one of the windows.

"It's completely dark inside. He's probably sleeping." Malik sat down on a stump beside the window, opened his laptop bag, and took out the laptop. He flipped open the lid, pressed a button, and waited for a moment before saying to Lukas, "I've got a wifi connection here, so I'm starting the CodeCracker 3000... oh, look at this!"

"What?" Lukas let go of the branch he was hanging from and landed heavily on the ground. He quickly looked around. "Did you hear something? Is someone coming?"

"No..." Malik said. He brushed the snow off what appeared to be a... gravestone.

"Someone is buried here. It says... Trude Twist. All these square, snow-covered stones here must be gravestones."

Lukas brushed off more snow. "Thor Twist!"

Another one: "Vibeke Twist!"

And another: "Fido."

"That must have been the dog," Malik gasped. "He spared no one!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Yikes," Lukas sighed. "So, the old story must be true! But why are they here and not in a cemetery?"

"Maybe he buried them here so that no one would find them?" Malik suggested. "Maybe that's why he shot at the boat trying to land here. The one Caroline told us about. To keep the secret... a secret."

"Look at the dates," Lukas brushed off more snow. "They all died on the same day, December 24, today... and the same year, exactly 30 years ago."

"There's no longer any doubt," Malik said, shuddering. "We are about to rob a real murderer!"

Chapter 18

Santa Claus Sneaks, Quiet as a Mouse

"He's asleep," Lukas said. "So, it doesn't change anything."

"Just promise me you'll be quiet in there!"

"Relax! I'll be as quiet as a mouse. But I suggest we call each other and keep the line open. That way, we can talk without interruptions and quickly alert each other if something happens. You take the sacks, and I'll take as little as possible down the chimney."

"Okay," Malik said, starting to type on his laptop again. "I'll let you know when the alarm is disarmed. Once you're inside, I'll head to the main entrance and wait for you."

"Wait!" Lukas said, his voice filled with panic.

"What?"

"I thought I saw someone in the window!"

"Gregor?"

"No, not him. It actually looked like... a little boy. About Emma's age, but with a pale, sad face."

"That can't be," Malik said. "Gregor lives alone, and it's the middle of the night."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"No... and now I don't see anyone anymore. It's so strange. I must have been seeing things. It must have been my own reflection in the glass. I'm so nervous that the slightest thing startles me."

"Are you sure? We can still abort and go back to the boat."

"No," Lukas said firmly. "It must have been my reflection. We'll continue."

He jumped up and grabbed the branch again. He placed his foot against the bark and pulled himself up until he could grip the next branch with his other hand.

He quickly worked his way up the tree, branch by branch, until he was hanging over the roof. Then he let himself down, and the tiles made a loud crunching sound as some of them broke and slid off the edge.

"Lukas!" his headset crackled.

"Yeah?"

"That didn't sound like a mouse! Some of the tiles even fell into my lap!"

"Oops. But the worst is over. Quiet from now on, I promise!"

"You already promised!"

"What else should I say? Cross my heart? Stick ten knives in my heart?"

"Just be quiet."

"Okay."

Lukas sneaked along the sloping roof toward the chimney. It was a really large, old-fashioned chimney made of red, slightly crumbling bricks. There was even moss growing on it. Was that a sign that the chimney was rarely used? Moss doesn't tolerate smoke, right?

But what if Gregor had lit a fire in the fireplace? Then it would be deadly to lower himself down... a flaming Santa Claus, of all things!

He leaned over the chimney and took a deep breath... ah... just fresh air. Not a hint of smoke. So it was probably safe, after all...



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Lukas looped one end of the rope around the chimney like a lasso and tied it tightly with a double bowline knot. He definitely didn't want to fall down and break his leg! But what was the best tactic for rappelling down with a rope? He was good at climbing trees, but climbing a rope was a whole different story. What if he fell down the chimney and got crushed?

"Hey, Malik?"

"Yes?"

"How's the code coming along?"

"I just cracked it! The code cracker needed a little over thirty thousand attempts. Piece of cake! I'm on wifi now and scanning the computer. Lots of strange stuff here, but I haven't found any alarm system yet."

"Can you check something for me on the internet? How do you actually use a rope to rappel down?"

"Give me a moment... I'm running a Google search... .. okay, listen carefully. There's something called the Dülfersitz method."

"Sounds professional... and difficult, perhaps?"

"I wouldn't have been able to do it, to be honest."

"Alright, let's hear it."

"Step 1: You need to anchor the rope."

"That's done. I've tied it to the chimney."

"Okay, Step 2: Take the rope between your legs, up behind your back, over your shoulder, and back down under your armpit. The friction from the rope against your clothing will help slow your descent. You brought climbing gloves, right?"

"Well... mittens."

"Better than nothing. In the worst case, the friction might burn your hands on the way down."

"I'll manage. It's not that far down. I'll give it a try!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

Lukas sat on the edge of the chimney, passed the rope between his legs, up behind his back, over his shoulder, and down under his armpit, letting the rest dangle into the chimney. Then he took a deep breath and lowered himself into the dark hole while the rope slowly slipped through his mittens.

It was terribly tight. A fully grown man would probably have gotten stuck. Not only did the rope help, but by pressing his legs and back against the sides of the chimney, he also descended more slowly due to the additional friction.

Finally, he reached the bottom and planted his feet on something hard.

Lukas turned his head and looked down past his body. He stood on a kind of metal plate... and the opening below was far too narrow, though the bottom of the fireplace was very close now, maybe a meter or two at most!

"Oh no," he said aloud.

"What's wrong?" Malik asked on the headset.

"It's a metal plate blocking my way! I'm standing on it now. I can't get past!"

"Oh dear... Maybe it's there to prevent too much cold air from coming in... or perhaps it's meant to stop burglars! Can you climb back up?"

Lukas tried to pull himself up the rope while kicking his feet against the bricks in an attempt to find footholds. It didn't work...

"No," he sighed.

"No?"

"It's not possible. To climb, I'd have to bend my arms and legs... and it's incredibly hard to bend anything down here."

"So..."

"So, I'm completely stuck!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Chapter 19

The Mysterious Voice

"Ahhh!" Emma tossed her phone onto the couch. "Can you believe it? It's busy!"

"What...," mumbled Caroline. She lay under five blankets and seemed to be falling asleep.

"I'm trying to call my big brother, but it's busy."

"Maybe... he's just talking to... Malik."

"Doesn't he have more important things to do?"

"So tired...," Caroline said, yawning. "The dip in the cold water must have drained my energy." She closed her eyes. "And I slept poorly... last night... zzz."

"Caroline?" Emma walked over to her. She was breathing heavily, as if she had already fallen asleep.

"Poor thing," whispered Emma. "You probably need to recover after that icy bath." She wrapped the top blanket around her. "There you go."

Emma started to pace back and forth restlessly.

How was Lukas doing, anyway? Why couldn't he just call and let her know? Maybe something had happened to him?

Caroline's bag lay empty and abandoned on the table. The plan was for her to help retrieve the gifts. That was no longer an option, and it would be a shame to lose a whole bag of nice Christmas presents or some extra delicious Christmas food!

Emma grabbed Caroline's bag and slung it over her shoulder. She didn't need to watch the boat anymore now that Caroline was here. She might as well go and help Lukas!

She walked with determined steps out of the houseboat, climbed up onto the pier, and tiptoed over to the sleeping tiger.

"Hey there, kitty," she whispered. "Are you sleeping soundly?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

She smiled. "You have such a big, beautiful fur coat. Do you want some cuddles?"

Emma leaned against the tiger and rubbed her face against its soft fur.

"Oh, sooo soft!"

She stood up and sighed.

"Goodbye, kitty. Sleep tight. Maybe you'll get a present when I come back!"

Emma began to run up the path as fast as her little legs could carry her.

"Trude?" a voice whispered.

Emma stopped abruptly. She stood in the middle of the path at the bottom of the hill leading up to the house.

The wind whipped snow into her face.

She looked around and shielded her eyes with her hand to block the snow and see better.

"Who said that?"

"Trude?"

"No," said Emma. "My name is Emma."

"Is it... Christmas again?"

"Yes, it's Christmas Eve. Or technically, the night before, but it's become December 24th!"

"Emma... you must go."

The voice sounded like it was starting to hiccup and cry.

"Who are you?" Emma asked. "Why do I have to go?"

"Danger... danger... danger, danger, danger, danger! Danger! DANGER!! DANGER!!!!!"

Emma covered her ears. The voice grew louder and louder until it screamed in her ears!



[Skriv her]

"Stop!" she shouted.

[Skriv her]

It went completely silent. Even the wind subsided, and the snowflakes hung almost still in the air. It was as if the entire nature was holding its breath.

Emma felt a tingling sensation in her neck and spun around. Emma saw something... someone who just disappeared into thin air! A child had been standing there, but after she blinked, it was gone!

A pale, sad boy...

Chapter 20

Panic!

Lukas felt it getting hard to breathe. He gasped for air, feeling dizzy and nauseous. He scratched at the wall until his fingers went numb. Drops of sweat trickled down his face.

"Lukas?" crackled the voice in his headset. "It sounds like you're about to panic."

"Is it any wonder?" Lukas screamed. "I'm stuck here until Gregor lights the fireplace!"

"Try to breathe calmly and take deep breaths."

"I don't know what deep breaths are, but I'm trying to breathe calmly. I'm trying."

"Good... let's think systematically about what you can try. There might be a way out."

"Four tight walls of brick! That's all there is to think about! There's nothing I can do!"

"You said you were standing on some kind of metal plate?"

"Yeah..."

"The house looks very old. What's the condition of the bricks in the chimney?"

"Bricks are bricks... but they crumble into crumbs when I scratch with my fingers. But if you think I can dig my way out, forget it. Even with old, crumbly bricks, it would take weeks to scratch through."

"That's not what I meant. I was thinking about the metal plate... maybe it's not completely secure? If you stomp or jump on it, maybe it'll come loose?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Okay... not a bad idea. I'll give it a try."

Lukas took a deep breath and began to stomp and jump as best as he could. It was tight and difficult to move. It seemed hopeless... or was it? Suddenly, he sank a little on one side! He heard the sound of small pieces of brick crumbling down to the bottom of the fireplace.

"Malik! You're onto something!"

Lukas stomped and jumped even more vigorously... and with a loud crash, the entire plate beneath him came loose.

He fell like a sack of potatoes and landed hard at the bottom of the fireplace. A cloud of old ashes swirled around him.

Pain shot up in his legs, and the ashes stung his eyes. He coughed, turned, and banged his head against the brick wall.

Lukas clenched his teeth hard to keep from screaming!

Lying in the pile of ashes, he writhed in pain from side to side, trying to blink away what had gotten into his eyes.

His head throbbed, but his foot was the worst. Was it broken?

"Lukas...," crackled the voice in his headset. "Shh."

"You can shush! I've got a broken foot!"

"Oh, shit..."

Lukas finally managed to rub and blink away most of what was in his eyes. He took a glance out of the fireplace.

It opened into a gigantic living room. It was so high that it must have included the floor above as well.

In the middle of the floor stood an enormous Christmas tree. It reached up with green, fresh needles all the way to the ceiling, where a beautiful angel shimmered in the light from hundreds of lit candles.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Between the candles hung glittering garlands, woven baskets, and ornaments in red, silver, and gold. It looked like the tree was planted in a garden of small and large presents. There had to be hundreds of them! In all shapes and colours.

Lukas stared in shock at the tree with his mouth wide open. It was beautiful, but...

"Lit candles," he mumbled to himself. "If they're lit... doesn't that mean Gregor Twist is awake?"

"It's almost 2 in the morning now," Malik replied. "I don't think so. He probably just forgot to blow them out... wait a minute, did you say lit candles?"

"Yes."

"Who uses candles on a Christmas tree these days? It's completely absurd! Electric lights are much safer, and how long can they even burn before they need to be replaced? Sounds like a lot of extra work."

"He's old. Maybe it's a tradition?"

"He's not that old. But yeah, maybe it's some kind of family tradition... He might have forgotten to blow them out before going to bed. Dangerous, but old people can be a bit absent-minded."

"Absent-minded?"

"You know, absent-minded... forgetful."

"Right... Let's hope so. What about the alarm? Did you find out if there are any alarms in the house?"

"Ah, yes. Sorry, I forgot to mention it, but I found two alarm systems. One was connected to the windows, and the other was actually linked to motion sensors in the rooms, but I managed to disable everything. You can move freely... or can you? How's your foot?"

Lukas crawled out of the fireplace and tried to stand up. The pain shot up through his leg, but he managed to get up and walk with a limp.

"It looks like my foot isn't broken, just extremely painful."

"That's good to hear. Do you see any presents or food?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Oh yes. All the presents are here, all of them. The Christmas tree was in the same room as the fireplace, and as for food..."

"Yes?"

"It couldn't be better! There's a large table here, and it's filled with Christmas pastries and candy. There are buns, almond ring cakes, and cookies, all covered in plastic wrap. And many bowls of chocolate and marzipan. There's a crate of Christmas soda here too!"

"Hooray! We did it, Lukas! The Christmas heist is a success!"

"We haven't accomplished anything," Lukas said. "Not until we've gotten out of here."

"The goal is just around the corner! I was unsure at first, but now we're so close that even I think it's going to work out! Head to the exit and unlock it! I'll meet you there with the bags. Over and out!"

Lukas limped across the carpeted floor. As if the lit candles and the fireplace weren't enough fire hazards, they had a carpeted floor! Just one spark could...

Lukas froze.

In front of him stood a pale girl! She wore a dark red dress. It looked like her black hair was fluttering in the wind, even though they were indoors...

She couldn't be much older than him, maybe younger. She tilted her head and stared Lukas straight in the eyes!

Chapter 21

The Mysterious Girl

They stared at each other for several long seconds.

"You can see me?" she whispered.

Lukas jumped when he heard her voice. There was something strange and slightly eerie about it, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. It sounded as if it came from a speaker or something.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Uh... yes," Lukas replied.

"Yes? Yes, what?" crackled the voice in the headset.

"Malik, hold on a second..." Lukas took his mobile phone out of his pocket and turned it off.

The girl approached him. There was something peculiar about the way she moved too. He couldn't see her feet under the dress, but it seemed more like she was floating or gliding towards him rather than walking.

She stopped right in front of him.

"Hi," Lukas said.

"Hi... Why do you look like Santa Claus?"

"Maybe I am Santa. Did I not come down the chimney?"

"You're just a kid."

"Kids can be Santa too!... And I'm actually 12, probably older than you!"

"A 12-year-old Santa Claus?"

"Maybe I'm his helper? And what about you? It's kind of weird to be wearing such a pretty dress in the middle of the night."

"It's my Christmas dress," she said. "It wasn't my choice to wear it for all eternity. It's too tight, but those are the rules."

"Huh, whose rules?"

"Stop joking," she said. "You know very well!"

"Do I?"

"But what's that?" The girl pointed at the mobile phone.

"This?" Lukas was puzzled. "It's a... mobile. Can't you see?"

"Mobile? What's that?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Now you're kidding."

The girl shook her head. "It's a... mobile," Lukas said. "You know, for making calls..."

"Call? Like a telephone?"

"Yes... like a telephone."

"Hmm... Have you seen my brother?" the girl asked.

"Brother? No, there's no brother here."

"He's run away again... He runs away almost every Christmas. He's only 5 years old, you see... and probably both scared and confused. You know how the little ones are when they try to go back?"

"Exactly, yeah," Lukas coughed. "I'd love to help you look for him, but my foot really hurts. I should probably just go back home... So, goodbye!"

Lukas limped as fast as he could out of the living room. That girl must be completely crazy in the head! Time to get away...

He entered a long corridor with four doors on one side and large windows on the other. If he followed the wall with the windows, he would eventually reach the exit door. There, he could warn Malik, and then...

Suddenly, the girl was standing right in front of him! A chill ran down his spine. It couldn't be! It was as if she had simply teleported—swoosh—from one place to another!

"H-how did you get there so quickly?" Lukas asked.

"You're limping," she said. "And you said your foot hurt."

"Yeah, so?"

She floated over to him and placed a cold hand on his cheek.

"You're warm," she gasped.

"So?"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"At first, I thought you were like me... because you could see me, but you're real, flesh and blood! How..."

"Wait a minute, you're saying so many strange things that it's making my head spin..."

"But what are you doing here in the middle of the night?" she asked suspiciously.

"Uh..."

"You're a thief!"

"Well..."

"Remember this: you're in danger. There's a man living in this house, and he'll be very angry if he sees you here! The last time someone tried to rob him, he shot them!"

"You mean Gregor?"

The girl looked at Lukas strangely.

"Do you know him?"

"Not exactly, but he's asleep, and I'm about to leave."

"If my dad wakes up..."

"Is Gregor your dad? I didn't think he had any family."

"Of course, he had a family. It was me, my brother, and Mom... but now you need to get out before it goes wrong!"

Chapter 22

Meanwhile, outside...

"Hey, Malik!" Emma said as she approached the main entrance.

Malik jumped so violently that he dropped his laptop in the snow.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You don't listen to anything we say, do you? Your brother said, 'Stay in the boat!'"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"But Caroline is in the boat. So, I'm bringing the last bag! Look!" Emma proudly displayed Caroline's bag. "I can help with collecting food and presents."

Malik picked up his laptop and brushed the snow off the screen and keyboard.

"It's still working. Thank goodness!"

"So, how's it going?" Emma asked.

"Actually, it's going well, but... I don't understand what your brother is doing. The last time I talked to him, he was supposed to come here, to the front door, and unlock it. But his dot hasn't moved for several minutes now."

"His dot?" Emma inquired.

Malik sighed. "I have access to a program that shows movements in the various rooms. There are sensors connected to the alarm system. I turned off the alarm, but I can still see if there's movement in the house. Do you get it?"

"No," Emma admitted.

Malik rolled his eyes. "Why am I explaining this to a five-year-old?"

"I'm six!"

"Okay, listen. If we see a blinking dot on this map of the house," Malik pointed at the screen, "it means someone is walking in that room, probably your brother. But as you can see, the map is dead, and no dot is wandering around. Okay?"

"Okay."

"In other words, Lukas is standing still," Malik said. "I don't understand what he's up to."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I've tried, but he's not answering. It seems like his phone is either turned off or broken."

"Oh no... What if something happened to him?" Emma said.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Well... maybe he tripped, broke his phone, and knocked himself unconscious all at once? He said his foot hurt, so it might be easy to stumble, and that could explain why he's not coming."

"But then he needs help!" Emma declared. "We have to go in and find him! Now!"

"But the door is locked!"

"We can break a window?"

"Emma, that will make noise! Gregor might wake up!"

"No alarm, you said."

"No, no alarm, but..."

Emma walked over to a large brown flowerpot with a withered plant by the wall and lifted it up.

"Emma?"

Emma ran with the pot towards the nearest window.

"No! Don't..." Malik exclaimed.

Emma hurled the pot at the window. Both the pot and the window shattered into a thousand pieces. Ceramic shards, dirt, and glass flew into the house.

"Are you deaf?" Malik shouted, pulling his hair. "I said... argh!"

"It's too late now," Emma said. "There's only one thing to do: find big brother!"

She grabbed the windowsill and quickly pulled her hand back.

"Ouch!"

"Don't you see there are sharp shards of glass all along the edge? Are you deaf AND blind? You're probably driving Lukas insane!"

"Insane?"

"Crazy! Bonkers!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"He's not."

"I didn't mean...," Malik tried to calm down, took a deep breath, one... two... three...

"Forget it!" he said, looking at the broken window. "Thanks to you, we have to improvise!"

"What does im-pro..."

"Hush, listen, I can help you get in if you promise to listen to me from now on, okay?"

"... Okay, I promise. Sorry, Malik."

"Emma... It would be easier for me to trust you if you didn't give me those Bambi eyes and grin as wide and fake as a Cheshire Cat."

"What's a Chesh...?"

"Forget it... There!" Malik tossed his jacket over the glass shards. He pushed the jacket along so that the bumps disappeared, and it lay flat.

"Now we can go over."

Malik placed his laptop in his bag and gently let it in before grabbing the edge where the jacket lay and climbing over. Emma tried to get in too but got stuck and wriggled on the outside.

Malik grabbed her and pulled her the rest of the way over the edge.

"Your big brother should pay me to babysit," he sighed.

Emma stuck out her tongue.

Malik sat on the floor, opened his bag, and took out the laptop. Emma sat down beside him and watched as he pressed the keys.

"There! The program is up and running... Still no moving dots. But we can also use it as a map of the house; it can help us find our way to the living room. Let's see..."

"Isn't that a moving dot?" Emma asked, pointing.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Hmm, yes, there is indeed a moving dot, but it's on the second-floor map and coming toward us from the other side of the house. Why would Lukas have gone up there? Mysterious... The dot will be at the stairs soon."

"That staircase?" Emma asked, pointing to a long, carpeted staircase winding its way up to the second floor. It had a beautiful railing with narrow metal rods, curved and shaped like spirals, branches, and leaves.

"Yes, from the top of that staircase... the dot is there now."

"It's so dark... I can't see anything," Emma whispered.

There was a creaking sound from above.

"Lukas?" Malik asked. "Is that you?"

There was a loud bang, and a vase exploded right next to them!

It banged again, and wooden splinters from the wall flew out into the air and rained down.

"Hey!" Malik yelled, jumping to his feet. "Don't shoot!"

From the top of the stairs, emerging from the shadows, came an old man in a robe and slippers, holding a shotgun in his hands. He squinted at them with small, gray eyes in a stern, wrinkled face. He had almost no hair on his head but a large white beard. Malik recognized him from the articles he had read online.

"Wow! Emma, that's Gregor Twist! Run!"

Malik grabbed Emma's hand and pulled her down the hallway.

It banged again, and another bullet struck the wall right behind them.

They dashed around a corner and ran down a long hallway.

"Malik," Emma said. "Stop... there's something scary that way. I can feel it."

"Nonsense!" Malik shouted. "There's something much scarier right behind us! Keep running!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

As they passed an open door, Malik quickly turned and closed it. Then he grabbed a large bookshelf next to it and toppled it in front of the door. Books and knick-knacks fell out and crashed to the floor.

"The door swings this way," he said. "Maybe he can't push it open with all this mess in front of it?"

The handle on the door went down. It opened a little and bumped into the mess. Malik leaned his back against the door and pushed it closed.

"Thieves!" Gregor shouted with a hoarse, dark voice from the other side. "Just wait until I get my hands on you! I'll shoot you full of holes and feed you to my tigers!"

Then it fell silent.

"Did he give up?" Emma asked.

"It sounds like it! No, he won't give up easily, and I don't think he went to call the police either... Maybe he knows another way around the door? Let's keep going, find Lukas, and get out of here!"

They continued running and entered a large room with a gigantic Christmas tree, surrounded by a sea of presents, and a large fireplace along one wall.

"There's the fireplace!" Malik said. "Lukas must be here."

"That's not Lukas!" Emma exclaimed, coming to a sudden halt. She yanked her hand out of Malik's grip. "It's a scary girl. I told you there was something scary here!"

"Huh?" Malik looked around. "There's no one here, Emma!"

"Yes, there is! She's standing right next to you!"

Chapter 23

The Apparition

The eerie girl stared at Emma with big eyes.

"You can see me too!" she whispered.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Her voice had the same strange resonance as the boy Emma had met on the path. Why did she feel so spooky? Was it the pale, glowing skin? The dark, blood-red dress? The way she moved, in a kind of gliding motion. No... it was how her dark hair seemed to float back and forth, as if she were underwater...

"Y-yes, I can see you," Emma said. "... You're scary."

"Am I scary?" Malik asked.

"Could you be quiet?" Emma said. "I'm talking to the girl."

"... You have quite an imagination," Malik sighed. "Just stay here and talk. I'll go look for Lukas."

Malik rushed to the fireplace and peered up the chimney, then continued searching among the large packages, behind doors, inside closets...

The eerie girl smiled mischievously at Emma.

"He can neither see nor hear me," she said. "Most of them can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a spirit."

"Hmm... I've heard of bad breath."

"Not the same thing."

"Are you dangerous?" Emma asked.

"I will eat your soul!" The eerie girl reached her hands out towards Emma.

Emma gasped and took a step back.

"No, relax," she said, lowering her hands. "I'm not dangerous. Spirits are actually less dangerous than living people. My magical spirit powers mostly consist of being able to travel here on Christmas Eve and move super-fast from one place to another. Not much to brag about."

"Oh, that's good!" Emma said, breathing a sigh of relief. "My name is Emma."

"Hello! I'm Trude. Nice to meet you."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Trude... that sounds familiar. Oh yes! There was a boy outside looking for you."

"That must be my brother, Thor. I came to take him back. He often comes here on Christmas Eve, even though he just gets confused and scared. He misses Dad, and Christmas Eve is the only time of year when spirits like us can visit the place of the deceased."

"Oh, I see!" Emma exclaimed. "Now I understand what a spirit is! You're a ghost, that's what you are!"

"Yes... you can call me that. Or apparition if you prefer. How about specter, or revenant? Phantom? Shade? A beloved child has many names, as Mom used to say. She even calls me her little sugar lump..."

"So coool!" Emma said, clapping her hands with enthusiasm. "I've never met a real ghost before!"

"Hey, Malik!" she shouted. "She's a ghost!"

"That's nice!" Malik yelled from the next room. "Say hi from me."

"Malik says hi," Emma relayed.

"Yes, I heard that," Trude said. "Oh dear! I got carried away. You need to get out of here! You've made Dad very angry! When we heard the gunshots, the other boy climbed out of that window over there."

"Wow, that must have been Lukas, my brother. He probably ran back to the boat."

"So, you're siblings," Trude said. "That explains why you both have the same ability."

"The same ability?"

"The ability to see sp... ghosts. Most people can neither see nor hear us. Dad can't either, unfortunately..."

"Is it true that he killed you? That he killed his whole family on Christmas Eve?"

A sad expression spread across Trude's pale face.

"He..."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Emma, Lukas isn't here!" Malik said, throwing up his arms. "I don't understand."

"He went back to the boat," Emma said.

"And how do you know that?"

"He went out that window." Emma pointed. Malik turned and looked at the large window in the corner. It was slightly ajar.

"Ah, of course!" Malik slapped his forehead.

An old, wrinkled face with a white beard appeared at the open window.

"Oh no..." Malik said as Gregor thrust the rifle through and aimed it at him.

"You damn thieves!" Gregor yelled and fired!

Chapter 24

Gregor Twist

One of the Christmas ornaments on the Christmas tree exploded right next to Malik's ear.

"That was almost my head," he stammered.

"Stop shooting!" Emma shouted, raising her hands. "We're just kids!"

"Kids?" Gregor squinted at her. "Is that true? I can't see darn near anything without my glasses. But you do sound like a little girl. I thought you were a thief, I did. Are you a thief?"

"Yes! Sorry for breaking in!"

"Hm," grumbled Gregor. "At least you're honest... Thief or not, I won't shoot children."

Gregor climbed in through the window and shuffled over to them in his slippers. He stared at Malik.

"So, it's you behind all this, you blasted bandit!"

"It's Malik!" Emma exclaimed. "He's a good boy!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"A thief," Gregor muttered.

"It wasn't his idea," Emma said. "He didn't want to come along, actually."

"Oh really? Whose idea was it, then? Yours, perhaps? You can't be more than five years old."

"Six!" She hesitated... "It was my brother's idea. He was here earlier tonight. But don't shoot him either. He's kind, really."

"Oh, is that so?" Gregor scratched his beard. "And what were you planning to steal? Money?"

"No, Christmas presents."

"Christmas presents!" Gregor's eyes widened. "Of all things... well, there are plenty to go around here."

"But you're just going to burn them all anyway!"

"Right, so you've heard about that too, have you? Yes, it's true."

"But why?"

Gregor slouched over to an armchair and sat down, letting the rifle rest on his lap.

"That's none of your business!" he grumbled.

"Emma, can you tell him something from me?" Trude asked. "He can't see or hear me, but you can help me talk to him. I can whisper in your ear, and then you can just tell him, okay?"

"Okay," Emma said. "We can try."

"What are you trying to do?" Gregor scowled at her.

"I'm going to tell you something from Trude."

"WHAT!" Gregor's face hardened, and he gripped the rifle tightly again. The next ice-cold words came through clenched teeth: "You'd better not mention her name!"

"Emma, I don't think..." Malik began.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Hush, Malik! I'm talking now! And Gregor will hear from Trude whether he wants to or not!"

"Alright," said Gregor, putting the rifle back in his lap. "I'll give you one minute."

"That was little, but we'll try. Trude says that you burn the gifts because of the fire that happened 30 years ago."

"Oh, so you've heard about that too? You know quite a bit, young lady."

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

"Oh... yes, it was my fault... That fire... if only I'd listened to Vibeke, but no... They died in that fire! They all died because of me! Vibeke, Trude, even little Thor... my fault!"

Gregor's stern expression softened, and tears welled up in his eyes. One tear rolled down his cheek and disappeared into his beard. He sniffled, sighed, and shook his head.

"... Every night before Christmas Eve, I light the candles on the Christmas tree and go to bed, hoping never to wake up again. Hoping the same fate will befall me. So when I wake up on Christmas Day and see that the candles have burned down and gone out on their own... that fate hasn't taken me, like it took my entire family. I get furious! So, yes – I burn the gifts to commemorate what happened! One Christmas Eve took everything I had. So now I burn Christmas itself! Damn Christmas!"

"Trude says that her mother wanted to replace the candles on the Christmas tree with modern electric lights."

"Yes, and I refused! I said everything should be the same as when I was a child. Lit candles on the tree have always been a tradition in the Twist family. What a fool I was..."

"I knew it!" Malik exclaimed.

Gregor gave him a sour look.

"That part about the tradition, I mean," stammered Malik. "Not the fool part..."

"Don't interrupt," said Emma. "Gregor, Trude says that you were at work that day. She, her mother, and Thor were home alone when the fire started."



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"All this you've read on the internet! You won't fool me, girl!"

"She says that their mother sometimes had seizures or fainted."

"Yes," said Gregor. "She had medication, but... Vibeke hated taking medicine."

"On that Christmas Eve, it happened again," said Emma. "She fainted while decorating the tree and knocked it over when she fell. Then the carpet and curtains caught fire. Trude and Thor tried to save her, but she was so heavy, and they breathed in a lot of smoke. Soon, the sofa was on fire too, but they wouldn't give up. They wouldn't leave their mom, but it was so hard to move her... and then they disappeared. They died."

Old Gregor sat silently without saying a word as tears streamed down his cheeks. It seemed like he was no longer trying to hold them back.

"Yes, maybe that's how it happened," he said, sighing. "But what does it matter? It was my fault because I wanted those dangerous candles! There wouldn't have been a fire if I had switched."

"But..." Emma said. "Would it help if they forgave you? They still love you and just want you to be okay. They don't want you to be angry or sad for the rest of your life."

Gregor shook his head.

"They're dead. They can't forgive me any more than I can forgive myself."

"Trude says they're doing well now, in another place, but they miss you... and Thor often comes on Christmas Eve to comfort you, but he can't do it."

"Stop it," Gregor sniffled. "Enough... I don't want to hear any more of your nonsense."

"There's one thing that wasn't in the newspapers and that I couldn't have made up."

"No, now I think it's time to call the police!"

"Trude says they peeked at their gifts while you were at work that day, and if I tell you what they were going to get as a gift that Christmas 30 years ago... would you believe me? That she's standing here now, in this room, telling me all of this?"

"Yes ... " Gregor said seriously. "Because you couldn't possibly guess that."

Emma listened for a few seconds and nodded before continuing.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Thor was going to get a Super Nintendo, just as he had wished – with two games, Super Mario Massacre and Efsera. Right?"

Gregor sat up in his chair. "Goodness! That might actually be correct ... It was some kind of machine with TV games, but I don't remember the names... What about Trude? I remember that gift perfectly!"

"You gave her a necklace with a gold heart. Inside the heart, there was a tiny picture of you and her mother. You wrote in the card that it was so she would always remember how much you loved her."

"Impossible!" Gregor Twist stammered with wide eyes. "T-That's truly impossible."

"She also says you placed that necklace in her casket on the day you buried them here, in the garden of your house."

Gregor sniffled and wiped away some tears with his hands. His hands were trembling a bit.

"Th-That... th-that must be true..."

"What!" Malik exclaimed. "She guessed right?"

"No, she can't possibly have guessed all that... Is she here now? Trude, my daughter."

"She is here, yes."

"Can you help me... talk to her? There's so much I should have said! So much... infinite things!"

"Yes, of course!" Emma said with a smile. "But she says she wants to find Thor first. Then I can help all three of you talk to each other."

"Yes! Yes, say yes. Think of it, little Thor too..."

Gregor glanced over at the huge, lit Christmas tree.

"Yes, you green, glittering tree... count yourself lucky! This Christmas, you shall stand in peace."

"Can we go get my brother while we wait for them?" Emma asked. "And Caroline too!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"There are even more of you!" Gregor exclaimed.

"We're just four. Promise!"

"Hmpf. Fine. But if you're going to get someone from outside, I have to come with you. My tigers are lurking out there. They're usually tame, but they might attack strangers. It's incredible that you managed to sneak past them, actually."

"Oh, the kitties! They're just sleeping."

"They ... What!"

Chapter 25

Silent Night, Holy Night

Gregor Twist threw another log onto the fire in the fireplace, lost in thought.

He had found two more children, in a houseboat by the dock. A boy named Lukas and a girl named Caroline, who was in poor shape after falling into the water. She mostly slept. The other boy, Malik, had also fallen asleep.

It was terribly late, but Lukas and his sister, Emma, had stayed awake as long as they could to help him communicate with Trude and little Thor! He was no longer in doubt; it had to be them.

They had talked for a long time there in the small houseboat, reminiscing about the old days. It had actually been quite enjoyable. The strange children had decorated the houseboat with things they had made themselves. They appreciated everything, even if it was just a toilet paper roll Santa Claus, while he had wasted millions of kroner on decorations, gifts, and food, year after year, only to destroy it all.

Gregor shook his head. What had gotten into him? It was madness...

Trude and Thor were doing well now, except that they felt sorry for him, of all things. Every Christmas Eve, they had come to visit and seen how sad and miserable he was – unable to help. Trude wanted him to spend the rest of his life as a better man, not as a whining, selfish miser. Yes, she had a point there...

In the end, the two children had fallen asleep; after all, it was almost morning.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

He had returned to the house and sat in the fireplace room with a cup of cocoa. He couldn't sleep, there was too much to think about.

The silence had once again settled in, except for the unusual but pleasant crackling of the fire.

He had removed the broken metal plate in the fireplace, swept up the ashes, and picked up the pieces of the broken Christmas ornament on the floor. The colourful ornaments on the tree now sparkled in the light of newly lit candles, and a battery-operated radio sat on the table playing Christmas songs.

He was feeling something he hadn't felt in 30 long years... a good, old-fashioned Christmas spirit.

Gregor smiled. It was a nice and cozy fireplace room. He had hired people to decorate it for him, so he could burn Christmas as usual, but not this year. This year, everything could stay, the decorations, the gifts, the food, and the tree. Although the children could probably open the gifts, or he could give them to the poor, perhaps?

Usually, he would have a cup of coffee in the kitchen, work, or watch TV with a plate of microwave-ready meals in his lap. He never used to light up the fireplace or just sit here, as the room always brought back sad memories of the fire. But maybe that would change now?

The new logs had caught fire nicely, and the warmth from the fireplace enveloped him like a cozy blanket.

Gregor sighed. The house had been cold for as long as he could remember. Only the electric heaters in the living room, bedroom, and kitchen were usually turned on. The other rooms in the house, fifty? sixty? He couldn't remember... but they had been empty for many decades. No guests, no visits, nothing. A cold and lonely house for a cold and lonely man...

He settled into the armchair and took a sip from the warm cup of cocoa on the table. He blew on it and took another sip. Mmm... the taste of Christmas.

Gregor glanced over at the Christmas tree. The candles cast a warm glow around the room. They would burn for many more hours. They had burned down on their own for 30 years. He had woken up to scorched pine needles and candle wax on the carpets and gifts, but there had been no fire... not since that time.



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

Strictly speaking, he should report the children to the police, but they had awakened something in him. A tiny glimmer of light in an otherwise grey and dismal existence. Perhaps forgiveness was in order? Forgiveness for the children's break-in and forgiveness for himself for the fire?

A white tiger quietly entered the fireplace room. It yawned and stretched before approaching the chair and sitting down.

Gregor scratched it behind the ear, and it began to purr.

"So, there you are, Rajah. Where is your brother? Is he still asleep?"

The tiger nudged his hand with its head and purred louder.

"Yes, if only the children had found your cat door, they wouldn't have needed to damage the fireplace and the hallway window. Oh well. At least they didn't burn down the house. Maybe I should try to look at life with a bit more optimism, don't you think?"

Rajah purred even louder.

Chapter 26

Christmas Eve

Lukas opened his eyes, yawned, and stretched. He had fallen asleep sitting on the couch with Emma's head in his lap.

He looked around in astonishment. What in the world...

On the table were large bowls of pastries, marzipan rings, clementines, chocolates, and marzipan! Along the countertop were cake boxes filled with all sorts of treats, and a crate of Christmas soda! And by the door, there was a towering stack of Christmas presents!

"Emma," said Lukas, shaking her.

She snapped her eyes open and sprang up from the couch.

"Yoo-hoo!" she exclaimed. "Christmas Eve! Finally! The best day of the year!"



[Skriv her]

[Skriv her]

"Look around you," Lukas said. She let go of him and turned around.

She cheered and shouted, "That's what I said! But you didn't believe me! Just wait until Malik hears that Santa Claus has been here!"

The door opened, and in walked Gregor Twist with another pile of Christmas presents in his arms.

"Hello," said Lukas. "Looks like we fell asleep eventually."

"Couldn't be helped," Gregor said, setting down the gifts. "It was a long night. Caroline said that everyone should sleep in, and no one should eat until everyone is awake. And when that girl makes up her mind, it seems to be final – even though that guy Malik tried to protest."

"Where are they now?" Lukas asked.

"Here," said Caroline, coming out of the bathroom. She was wearing a green bathrobe and was rubbing her hair with a towel. "I just took a shower, feel much better now."

"And Malik is helping me carry," Gregor said. He stepped aside, and Malik entered the houseboat with his arms full of Christmas presents.

"Malik!" Emma exclaimed. "Look at all the stuff Santa brought us!"

"Yeah, have you seen?" he said, setting down the gifts. "What a surprise. Can we eat now?"

"Yes, we can eat now!" Caroline said, placing some bottles of Christmas soda on the table.

"Thank goodness!" Malik slumped onto the couch next to Lukas, took off his jacket, and stuffed the nearest bowl into his mouth.

Emma sat on the floor, rearranging the Christmas presents. "There are no name tags on them... Do you think Santa made a mistake?"

"Emma, these aren't from..." Lukas began.

"No, there's no mistake," Gregor said. "When Santa Claus delivered the presents, he told me that he forgot to put on name tags. He asked me to remember who each one



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is for, but I completely forgot. Take ten each and eat until you're full. Then we can drive the rest into town. There's a tent there with a soup kitchen so the poor can have something to eat just before Christmas. We can start there."

"Gifts for everyone!" Emma cheered and tore open the wrapping paper on the largest gift in the room. "This one must be mine. Oh, a scooter... This one must be mine too... Oh, a sled!"

"Weren't you wishing for a doll?" Lukas asked.

"Yes, that's what I want most of all!"

"If you're not looking for a Godzilla doll, you might want to try opening some smaller packages?"

"Oh, right..."

Lukas popped a piece of marzipan into his mouth and felt his mouth almost swoon with delight.

"I haven't eaten since yesterday's soup," he said to Gregor. "And I can't remember the last time I had something as good as all this. Thank you so much!"

Lukas looked around as he nibbled on the head of a marzipan pig. Gregor had added some extra decorations to the houseboat, including some beautiful string lights, but most of it had been made by Emma and Caroline: colorful paper chains, Santas, snowflakes, little angels, and woven Christmas baskets.

The garlands on the Christmas cactus sparkled, and the crackling and popping from the wood stove filled the room.

He took a deep sip of Christmas soda and felt happy... but then he became uneasy.

"Afterwards..." he said, looking at Gregor. "Will we go to jail or something? We did try to take your things."

"No, no, I benefited from having someone shake up my life. If it weren't for you, I would have spent Christmas Eve alone, filled with hateful and sad thoughts. But then... help and comfort! I have to call your parents! They must be terrified for you!"

"No, you don't need to," Lukas mumbled.



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"Yes, I must, boy. It would be terribly wrong not to inform them immediately. It will take some time to get you back home."

Lukas closed his eyes and felt a pang in his heart. He knew it was too good to be true; now they would have to return to their terrible foster parents...

Chapter 27

Big Changes and a New, Big Question!

Lukas sighed. "We don't have parents."

"What!" Gregor scratched his beard. "You mean you've run away from home?"

"No... I mean they no longer exist. We're orphans."

"Oh dear," mumbled Gregor. "I'm sorry; it wasn't my intention to... But someone must be responsible for looking after you?"

"Yes, but they were mean to us... so you're partly right. We ran away from them."

"Mean? What do you mean? Did they scold you a lot?"

"All the time, but that's not what made us run away... They also hit us. And nobody gets to hurt Emma!"

"Oh, how awful," Gregor murmured. "You've had really bad luck. Most foster parents are kind and safe. If you had just informed the police or child protective services, I'm sure..."

"No, we can't do that! We don't get to decide, and we can't risk being sent back."

"Oh... How long has it been since you became orphans?"

"A little over a year," Lukas replied. "We crashed into a big tree, going really fast. Emma and I were in the back and survived, but..."

"Just a year, huh?" Gregor said. "Poor you. I was about to say that time heals all wounds, but I'm probably the worst example of that. In a way, we're mirror opposites. You lost your parents, and I lost my children."



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"Time hasn't healed anything," Lukas said. "I still have nightmares. The loud crash, the shattering glass, Emma crying, Mom struggling to breathe, Dad not breathing, and that awful tree that took everything from us. Big, scary... I can't forget it."

"It's not meant for you to forget, only to learn to live with."

"Is that so," Lukas said. "Have you learned to live with it?"

Gregor sadly shook his head.

"Doll!" Emma shouted.

She tossed aside the wrapping paper and held a box with a Barbie doll in her hands.

"Look, Lukas! A princess doll. Just what I wished for!"

"Emma..." Lukas glanced over at his sister. "How many presents have you actually opened?"

Around Emma lay scattered torn wrapping paper, books, goody bags, a new cell phone, a game console, Lego, a water gun, a bead set, and more...

Emma looked around for a moment. "Maybe five or six?"

"I don't believe that. You were only supposed to open ten!"

"But I can't count..."

Lukas turned to Gregor. "No, it's my fault. I'm so sorry! I should have taught her about counting and patience and all that..."

But Gregor just smiled. "No, no, it's perfectly fine. I was planning to distribute the rest to poor children anyway. And from what you've told me, you're poor enough. Help yourselves; I can buy more later."

"Can't you just let us go?" Lukas asked. "That's my Christmas wish this year."

"And I'm not actually homeless," Malik said. "I live on the boat. So, I get to go, right?"

"Yes, let us go," Caroline said. "My dad will explode if you drop me off at his door. I'll probably lose the houseboat, and it'll break my heart..."



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"Look how nice the doll is!" Emma said, waving it in front of Gregor. "Her name can be Trude!"

"Hmm..." Gregor grumbled, scratching his beard.

"So, you're the only one here with family?" he said, looking at Caroline.

"I have a father, not a family. My mother ran away; she didn't want me. My father wishes I didn't exist because his wife might find out he's been unfaithful. No, he doesn't want me either. Only Malik wants me..."

"Hey!" said Malik. "We're friends, nothing more..."

"... That's enough for me," Caroline said. "That's all I have. And the houseboat, of course..."

"Alright, I've thought enough," Gregor said, clapping his hands together. "Your houseboat can have a new spot here by my dock on the island."

"What!" Caroline shrieked. "It's my houseboat! You can't just take it!"

"No, I mean... Um, how do I put this... I thought maybe the four of you could live with me from now on? None of us have a real family, and that can't be healthy. I need some people around me, someone to talk to, and you need a good place to live, with good food and clean clothes... and a chance to go back to school."

"Everything sounded great," Caroline said, "until you mentioned school."

"You can choose the school," Gregor said. "Or I can hire a private tutor who can come out to the island if you prefer?"

Caroline gave a thumbs-up. "If Malik agrees, then I agree."

"That sounds good," Malik said. "You have the internet here, right?"

"Yes, of course," Gregor said. "And all the computer equipment you could want."

Malik grinned widely.

Lukas turned to Emma. "What do you think?"



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"Living in the nice house with two big kitties and kind Caroline?" Emma grinned. "Yes, please!"

"It looks like all of us want to give it a try," Lukas said.

"Fantastic!" Gregor exclaimed. "This will be great. I promise you a wonderful post-Christmas period with movies, board games, ice skating, skiing, and anything else you want to do!"

"This feels like a dream," Lukas said. "But it can keep going a little longer..."

"There's one thing I wonder about," Gregor said. "It concerns the spirits of my children."

"The ghosts," Emma corrected.

"Ah, yes... Are they still here?"

"No, they just left. Trude talked to me a bit while I was opening the gifts."

"Left to where?"

"She didn't say. But she said the time for this year is almost up; they can only visit the living on Christmas Eve, and they're looking forward to coming back next year. Then they'll bring their mom with them."

"And since we'll be living together now," Lukas said, "Emma and I can help you communicate with them then."

"Oh, thank you," Gregor said. "That's really kind of you. I'm looking forward to hearing from Vibeke as well. But... why can't I see or hear them?"

"Mama said there was something special about our family," Emma said. "We're more sensitive or something like that. Kind of like psychics. She said it was a gift of sorts."

"So, on Christmas Eve... do you see those ghosts everywhere?"

"No," Lukas said. "At least, I've never noticed them before."

"Mom said that almost everyone goes to some kind of new world and stays there," Emma said. "Because here, they can only visit the place they died, and they don't like that."



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"But Emma..." Lukas said.

An idea had suddenly popped into his head, filling him with a strange, tingling sensation.

"What about... Mom and Dad? Our family! Can't they..."

"Wow," Emma said, her eyes widening. "Maybe they're there right now? The place we crashed! Trude said there's still a little time left!"

"Gregor!" Lukas exclaimed with almost panicked urgency. "Can you please drive us? We have to see! Maybe they're there! Maybe they're there right now!"

Chapter 28

Merry Christmas!

Lukas felt his heart pounding in his chest as they approached the place, the place with the tree that still haunted him in dreadful nightmares, the tree that had taken everything from him!

Gregor had swiftly driven them across the water in his speedboat, while Caroline and Malik stayed back on the houseboat. And then they had hailed a taxi at the dock.

"There!" Lukas exclaimed. "Stop there!"

The taxi pulled into the bus stop and came to a halt, and he and Emma jumped out.

Snow and wind whipped past at a furious pace. It was gearing up for a full-blown snowstorm! Much worse than earlier in the day.

He and Emma ran along the bus stop, past some teenagers, toward the sign for the pedestrian and bike path.

Emma shouted something, but her words were drowned out by the noise of traffic and the strong wind.

He slowed down a bit and turned toward her.

"What did you say?"

"Where are we going?" she yelled again. "I don't remember."



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"Just follow me! I'll never forget this place!"

They ran and ran along the path. His foot still hurt from the fall the previous night, but Lukas clenched his teeth and forced his legs forward, faster and faster.

He heard Emma panting farther and farther behind, but he couldn't stop, couldn't wait... until he slipped and fell.

He struggled to his feet, out of breath and with an even more painful foot.

He looked around. Was he already there? The trees seemed familiar...

Many trees grew between the path and the highway, but only one of them had changed his life forever and haunted him with hundreds of dreadful nightmares: a big, sturdy elm!

His gaze followed the trunks along. Spruce... birch... spruce... spruce... there! His eyes locked onto the target. The old elm towered over the other trees and reached towards the sky like a spear among toothpicks. Its branches whipped and swayed high up there, back and forth in the gusts of wind, as if they were beckoning him closer, enticing him to come nearer until they could grab him and lift him up! Strangle him with their cold, lifeless fingers...

Lukas clenched his fists and steeled himself. It couldn't stop him! Not today!

"Emma, this is it!" he shouted and leaped off the path and into the snow. He pushed his way through the branches of low, bare trees and waded through the deep snow in cold, worn-out sneakers.

He had arrived... This was it!

"Mom!" he called out. "Dad!"

Emma shouted too, a bit further behind.

He looked around. No one... Just that cursed tree!

"You monster!" Lukas shouted, slamming his fist into the icy bark. "Where are they? Give them back!"

Pain shot through his hand, but the memories were even more painful...



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Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he sank into the snow. It was hopeless...

Emma waded over and sat down in the snow beside him.

When she caught her breath, she asked, "Are you sure this is the place?"

"Oh yes. We crashed here, right into that tree," Lukas said, nodding towards the old elm. "You were crying in your child seat, and Dad was dead, but Mom... I was sitting right here, holding her hand. She was trapped inside the car, and I couldn't help her... I was too weak... I didn't know... what..."

"Lukas, don't cry," Emma said.

"Yeah, Mom said the same thing..."

"Let's not talk about sad and upsetting things anymore," Lukas said, looking up. "We've already been here quite a while, and our time for this year is almost up. So tell us before it's too late: How are you two really doing?"

"Oh, good," Lukas said.

"We're moving in with a kind, old man," Emma said. "And he has two big, cute cats!"

"Well, that sounds lovely," Mom said. "We were so afraid that you wouldn't like your new parents. We were absolutely terrified."

"Don't be afraid," Lukas said. "I think it's going to be... okay... now."

"Thank goodness," Dad said, letting out a relieved breath. "Take good care of each other, you two... and can you come here next year as well? Then we'll have more time – and we can hear more about how things have been going."

"Yes, we'll come every Christmas," Lukas said. "Every single one."

"We look forward to that," Mom said. "Our time is up for now. I can feel it, but we'll be back... Merry Christmas, my children!"

"Yes, Merry Christmas!"

The two of them began to glitter before dissolving into sparkling little snowflakes and blowing away in the wind.



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Lukas and Emma looked at each other and smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Emma."

"Merry Christmas, Lukas."