**Myriam H. Bjerkli**

**Little Wagtail**

*A Crime Novel*

2017

She put on her large sunglasses outside the salon and walked towards the art gallery on the other side of the street. High heeled shoes clapping on the asphalt, a car slowing down behind her. She did not turn around, it was not anyone she knew anyway. She stopped in front of the big display windows. Three abstract paintings hung there; one black with red spots, a smaller painting with yellow doodles on a green background. The largest painting had a brown, heart-like spot painted on it on an all-black canvas. She leaned forwards, wanted to see the name of the painting. *Heartbreak*. The painting looked like something a small child could’ve drawn, but the red price tag told her it cost 24000 crowns. On sale, no less. Bewildered, she shook her head. Would someone really pay that much for something like that?

Something moved in front of her, startling her, as if she was caught red-handed doing something bad. Inside, behind the slightly dirty glass door she could see a long-haired woman sitting at a table. She sat turned away, hair covering her face, making it impossible to see if it was *her*.

She put her hand on the door knob then quickly pulled it back, as if the cold steel had burned her palm. Her stomach churned with bile, she swallowed it down, a burning sensation running down her throat. Should she turn around? Was this something she really wanted?

Part 1

MARI

18th October 2005

She wore red today. Mummy said it looked nice. Mari looked at herself, red corduroy pants, red scarf and red duvet jacket. She didn’t think it looked nice at all. The sea was grey, the sky was grey. She should wear grey, too. The red cap itched, so she could have taken it off, even if it means everyone saw her dishevelled hair. It didn’t matter. No one else were here. Only her and the ocean.

Mum was up in the cabin.

Mum was stupid. She had dressed her and sent her outside to play, and Mari knew why. It was because she’d get a visit from Stupid-Petter soon. Petter was weird. He was always busy with mum and never played with Mari. Besides, he always wore suits that must not be curled, was a bit older and much different than the boyfriends of the other mums she knew.

Mari sighed. She wished daddy would call again soon, it had been almost two years since the last time she had spoken with him. He had promised then to visit her during the summer, but he didn’t come last year or this year, and it was autumn now.

- We’ll be fine, just you and I, my little wagtail? Mum used to say while she hugged her tight.

- You and me, and me and you.

And they did, but Mari still wished that daddy visited soon. Even if she didn’t remember him that well, he was still better than dumb, stupid Petter.

Mum had the day off from work today, but had gotten up very early just the same, mopped the floors and vacuumed everywhere. Mari had dusted her room and hoped they’d do something fun together afterwards. Gone to town square and window shop, maybe go to the café and have hot chocolate. Instead, she’d been dressed in red and sent outside to play.

Mari tugged her hand through her disheveled hair and sniffled as she gazed out at the water. It lay silent and peaceful in front of her. Grey water was nice. This summer there were lots of other kids at the beach. She used to play with the girls that lived in the cabin next door, Camilla and Lene. But it was autumn now and all the other kids had moved back to their real houses a long time ago. Only she was left, because the beach house was the only house mum and her had.

In the small cabin kitchen, Sissel cleaned the last few items after breakfast. She put the two dishes and kitchen glasses in the sink before opening the refrigerator and put the jar of Hartleys strawberry jam back inside. Only a half a block of yellow cheese and a squished tube of caviar lay in the fridge with one shelf containing a half-full juice jug. The rest of the shelves cried at her and should’ve been washed. Sissel closed the refrigerator door, one of the door magnets fell off and clattered on the floor. She bent over and picked it up, a hamburger magnet, a memory of Mari’s birthday party at McDonald’s. Sissel put it back on the door, between all the other magnets. The train magnet they’d bought when they went to Tønsberg on the train, the read-headed girl was like a memory from the musical “Annie”, the toothbrush magnet that came home after they had watched Karius and Baktus at the cinema. The door was full of good memories, and Mari could sit in front of it for hours and talk about the fun things she and her mum had done together.

Sissel sighed, it had been a while since they got a new magnet; lately she had almost done nothing but work and didn’t have the time nor the money to splurge.

She sniffed the milk that had been left on the kitchen counter. Her nose wrinkled, and she turned around to pour the milk into the sink. The bluish white lumps fell out of the carton. The sink almost clogged. She helped the last few pieces down the drain with the brush. The smell of the sour milk was intense, she pulled back a little bit to not gag.

She saw her daughter ahead of her through the kitchen window. The seven-year-old with her back to her, staring at the ocean. She had taken her cap off and her brown hair flew everywhere. It looked cold. It was cool inside as well, the draft crept through the cracks in the window pane, the flowered curtains fluttered. Sissel rubbed her hands against each other to warm up, the thermometer showed only three degrees in this chilly October month.

- I hope Mari doesn’t catch a cold again, Sissel thought. – Poor dear, she’s been sick a lot this past year, I wish we had the money to move out of this draughty cabin.

The sound of a car engine made her check her watch. My God, it was half past twelve already!

Sissel ran to the bathroom and studied her face in the mirror. Regular features, high cheek bones, narrow nose. Before she had Mari, she’d had a few small jobs as a photo model and the photographers had loved her slender body and her classic features. It had been a while since she had been to the salon, but her blonde hair still fell gently around her face and made her look younger than the 26 years she had been alive, and she didn’t weigh a gram more than she did before her daughter was born.

She quickly put on pink lipstick, dabbed a little perfume behind her ears. The bottle of Sunflower perfume was almost empty, yet another evidence that summer was long gone. Her bangs fell in front of her eyes. Sissel sighed and brushed her hair away so her blue-green eyes were visible. She really should stop by the salon; there were so many things she must and should get done. If only she could afford it…

The bathroom door creaked unwillingly on its hinges as she opened it. She stopped in the doorway towards the hallway and listened. It was dead silent outside. Was he not coming in?

Sissel walked towards the window and saw him. Petter.

First time she met him was the 28th of April at La Scala, the Italian restaurant where she worked as a waitress. She remembered the date because it was her daughter’s seventh birthday and even though they had celebrated her birthday at McDonald’s, she would’ve much more preferred to have stayed home with Mari that night.

She served Petter and his two suited colleagues their three-course dinner with plenty of drinks. He said nothing to her during the meal, but she felt his eyes on her all night. When he paid, she got 400 crowns in tips and a laminated business card. Two evenings later, after psyching herself up with a half-bottle of red wine, she dialed the mobile phone number on the business card. She didn’t remember what she said, but it must have worked, because a half hour later he was on the stairs with a big smile and a bottle of Chablis.

Sissel repeated the name internally. Petter Eliassen, solicitor Petter Eliassen. The name tasted like oysters, white wine and real caviar. And something else, something warm, both safe and exciting at the same time, something new, unknown and a little scary. Mari’s father, Abdul, had not managed to stir such emotions from her, despite being convinced at the time that she was in love. She was young and naïve, and too starved for love. Abdul was the first and only real friend she had had, and initially he always brought flowers, complimented her, stroked her hair when she had a migraine. When she eventually realized that she was just one of many women he was kind to, she was already pregnant.

With Petter it felt different. A sort of tingling that started somewhere in her stomach and spread all the way to her fingertips, that made her want everything and all of him. He didn’t even need to touch her; a look, a smile was enough. It was definitely lust, something she hadn’t responded with to a man before. Maybe this is what love felt like? The one and only we all dream of, but that Sissel had never really dared to believe in? Could she really have been this lucky?

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Mari heard the car roll into the yard behind her, but didn’t turn around. The car stopped, and a car door opened and closed. Pebbles clattered on the path behind her. She still would not turn around.

- Hi!

The voice was chipper.

- I’ve bought something for you.

She turned her head. Petter held a teddy bear in his hand.

- Hi, she responded.

- Look here, it’s for you.

He stretched his hand towards her. Mari looked at the bear. It was brown and hairy and had big, black marble eyes.

- I’m not allowed to get anything from strangers, she said.

His hand stops mid-air, his smile gone. He bent down and locked eyes.

- But my dear little wagtail, I’m not a stranger anymore.

- Don’t call me that! Only mum can call me that!

She turned away, it was quiet. Even the water was quiet today.

- Okay then, I’ll put the teddy bear here. We’ll talk more later.

\*

Sissel sighed when she saw him put the teddy bear in the sand right next to her daughter. Nothing was more important to her than Mari, she desperately hoped the two would be friends. They had to if her relationship with Peter was to develop further, into something serious. Earlier that autumn he had shown them the mansion where he lived with Karin, his older sister by two years. His sister wasn’t home, and Petter had walked with them room by room. Sissel lost count at five bedrooms, and was overjoyed when he hinted they could possibly move in with him after a while, her and Mari? His house was more than big enough for all of them?

Mari was not quite as happy.

She ran into the yard and refused to come back inside. Even when Petter tried tempting her with the best thing she knew, chocolate ice cream, she demonstratively turned away and instead spoke with the gardener, busy weeding the many flowerbeds in the large yard.

Sissel sighed again and studied the two down there on the beach. She’d been alone with her daughter for over three years now. Abdul was nothing more than a face on the black-white picture her daughter kept on her nightstand, but Sissel had never said anything bad about him, not even when family life bored him and he left. Maybe that was a dumb decision, as Mari constantly talked about him coming to visit soon, just like he promised to do the last time he had called. That was about two years ago, and Sissel knew Abdul would never come to visit; it was just typical of him to make promises he couldn’t keep. She didn’t Abdul to visit either, but she was missing a man and Mari needed a father. When Petter showed up, he seemed like the answer to all her dreams. Kind, romantic and wealthy. Still, if Petter and Mari didn’t form a friendship and soon, the relationship was doomed to fail.

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Mari sat quiet as a mouse while Petter strolled up the path again. His steps were heavier now. She only turned when she heard the cabin’s front door opened and closed. The bear sat on a small tuft of grass, a red slink ribbon around its neck.

- I’m too old to play with teddy bears, Mari thought. – But it does look lonely. Maybe it’s cold?

\*

Sissel opened the door for Petter before he had reached the stairs. He leaped up the final three steps, pulled her close and buried his face in her hair.

- Hello, darling, you smell great. I’ve missed you.

He let her go, put the bag with the wine bottle on the counter, took his blue Armani jacket off and hung it carefully over the kitchen chair. He pulled her close again, they kissed, she felt him missing her against her belly.

- Maybe we should have some wine, she whispered. – That would be great…

His face had a reddish hue and his movements sudden when he let her go and fished out the corkscrew from the drawer, opened the bottle and got two wine glasses from the cabinet directly above the sink. He was already very familiar, she liked that. Petter handed her the glass of golden white wine. They toasted, he emptied his glass one gulp. She tarried with hers, light reflecting in the golden wine, sniffed the scent and nipped carefully.

He laughed, grabbed her hand and pulled her with him through the open bedroom door. The blanket shone at them from within the bedroom, red hearts against a light-yellow background. It struck her that it looked like she had already decorated for Christmas. They stood in front of the bedroom window and looked at Mari at the beach, both smiled as she picked up the teddy bear and pulled her hat down the furry teddy’s ears. She raised her arm. What followed was a fuzzy teddy bear arcing towards the sky before diving into the water. Petter closed his eyes for a mument before shaking his head.

* You guys will work it ou.

He put his glass of wine on the nightstand.

* Come here.

Sissel hesitated, casting a glance out the window at the flimsy back, the red jacket, the dishevelled set of hair against the grey sky. She looked at Petter apologetically.

* I’ll just call her in. It’s cold outside today.

She opened the window, leaned over the windowsill, cupped her hands in front of her mouth like a megaphone.

* Mari! Come play inside instead before you start freezing!

Mari looked up at her mum.

* I’ll be right there. I’m just going to find some seashells first.
* Come inside now, Sissel yelled. – I don’t want you to be outside by yourself.

Mari rolled her eyes, hunkered down to study something or another in the sand.

* Let her finish playing. She’ll be fine on her own.

A hint of impatience to Petter’s voice. Sissel threw one last glance out the window before walking towards Petter. Petter closed the curtains behind her, pulled the t-shirt over her head and pulled her down on the bed. She laughed at him, felt her nipples harden in anticipation. It wasn’t just him that had longed for this.

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Mari picked up the heartshaped seashell that was partially buried in the sand in front of her. The shell was many different shades of blue, just like when the ocean meets the sky during the summer. It almost looked like a small painting. Maybe she should pick it up and show it to mum?

She turned around, staring up at the cabin. The curtains in mum’s bedroom were closed. Mari opened her hand, dropped the seashell back into the sand and stepped on it. Putting all her weight on it, hearing it crack under her wellingtons. When she moved her foot and looked down, all of the blue was gone. What remained was just a small, grey pile of shell.

Stupid Petter, Mari thought. Mum didn’t have time for me, and it’s all his fault!

The red wooly scarf itched underneath her chin; she untangled it and ran across the beach while holding it in her hand. The scarf fluttered in the wind like a red, fire-breathing dragon, she thought, a dragon that is going to burn me to death if I don’t run away from it. Still, she didn’t manage to run far, her wellingtons were too heavy. She stopped suddenly. Dropped the scarf. A strong gust of wind caught and carried it all the way to the rocks. Mari watched it snake its way through the wind until it past the rocks and as it disappeared, she turned and walked back up the path to the cabin. Inside the cabin, she kicked her wellingtons off before continuing into the living room. It was empty and in the corner the TV stood blaring. A lady sang opera, and her voice cut like knives in Mari’s ears. She grabbed the remote control and muted it. The lady mimed at Mari with a wide-open mouth surrounded by red lipstick.

* Can I have some juice? Mari shouted at the closed bedroom door.
* Of course, her mum yelled back, laughing.

The laughter was foreign, deeper than usual like it was only when Petter was nearby. The door was also only closed when Petter was there. Stupid-Petter. Mari shut her thoughts off, turned her back to the bedroom door and went to the kitchen. Petter’s suit jacket was hung across the back of one of the kitchen chairs, both pushed halfway underneath the grey respatex table.

That’s my chair, Mari thought and pushed the blue jacket onto the floor. She poured some red juice from the mug inside the refrigerator, pulled the chair towards the kitchen window and climbed on top. It was drizzling outside now. A seagull squawked and dove at something that moved on the water. Mari stared.

A rowboat had just come about the horn, approaching the beach. Mari glued her nose towards the cracked window pane, focused on the boat that grew closer. Who on earth would be out rowing in this kind of weather?

There was a person in the boat. She could see it was a man, even though he had his back to her. The shoulders were wide, the strokes cut deep into the water. Then the oars stopped, the boat slowed. The man out there had stopped rowing. He bent down to study something in the water, then he hoisted up something brown and red with one oar. It was the teddy bear she had just thrown in the water, and Mari felt a pang of a guilty conscience. Poor teddy, it wasn’t its fault that Stupid-Petter had bought it for her.

The man began to row again. His curly hair crawled up and out of the collar of his blue jacket and drew a ragged halo towards the sky. Mari laughed, the man had more dishevelled hair than she did!

Her laugh stopped abruptly. Mari stared through the glass, her stomach boiling. The chair tipped and fell over as she jumped off and ran out in the rain.

* Daddy!

When she got to the beach, the rower had already managed to pull the boat halfway onto the beach. He

stood and looked at her and said nothing, just stretched his hand out and gave her the red hat he had just fished out of the water. She took it without looking at it. She gazed at the man. She knew it was rude and impolite, but she stared. He was tall and slender, his skin tanned and his hair dishevelled and brown, just like hers. His eyes were grey, as grey as the sky. It had been a long time since she had seen him, but did daddy have grey eyes.

* Daddy. Is that you?

Her voice quivered, the last word barely audible, nothing more than a small, hopeful whisper.

He nodded, bent down and opened his arms.

* Yes, little wagtail, of course it’s me. Come to daddy.

Her eyes welled up, she dropped her hat and ran the last half meter that separated them, clung to his

long legs, embraced the wet and slippery trousers and breathed the scent of moist rubber.

Daddy smiled, pushed her slightly away and nodded towards the rowboat.

* What do you think, want to take a ride with me?
* Oh, yes!

Mari wiped away tears with her hand, jumping up and down in the sand, but stopped and turned towards the cabin.

* But, mummy’s asleep…
* I guess it’s best if we don’t wake her up.

Mari hesitated, cast yet another glance at the cabin on the beach.

Daddy grabbed her hand. – Come on, little wagtail. We’ll row straight away, and we will be back before mum wakes up.

Sissel blinked. Stretched. Body still heavy from sleep. The duvet was too warm. She brushed it aside, got halfway up and let her hands slide down her body. It was thin, almost boney and a little too edgy. A boy’s body, she thought, the only thing softening this look is my breasts. What does Petter see in me, really? He who could have anyone he wanted?

Sissel got up, all the way this time and put on her knickers and the t-shirt that laid on the floor. She looked down on the man in her bed. He slept still, on his back with his arms under his head, mouth half open. He was five years older than her and looked a little bit older, but still – he was the most beautiful man she had ever laid eyes on. The hairline dotted with grey, the blonde bangs cut short that couldn’t hide the wrinkles on his forehead, three almost symmetrical creases that ran from one temple to the other. His wrinkles seemed softer when he slept – just the one crease, the one above the bridge of his nose refused to be affected by sleep, where it drew a strict arch above his straight nose.

Her gaze stopped at his mouth. That was the only thing that didn’t quite fit. The lips were too full compared to the rest of the face; they were soft, almost feminine. She hadn’t thought about it much; it was more visible when he slept than when he was awake.

Petter turned his head, mumbling something in his sleep but the words were too jumbled to make any sense. She moved her eyes. The clock on the nightstand blinked red, showing twenty to four.

Sissel gasped. Mari!

Only wearing her knickers and a t-shirt, she tore the living room door open. Empty. Mari wasn’t there. Only silence from the TV in the corner; a blond woman mimed something at her. The kitchen was just as empty; a half-full glass of red juice sitting on the kitchen table, Petter’s jacket on the floor. Sissel stepped over the suit jacket and looked out the window. The long beach was devoid of people as well. It had started to rain, a solitary seagull tipping along the coarse-grained beach.

Sissel grabbed herself, looking for air. The kids room! Of course, the kids room! Mari was sure to be in her room playing!

Her daughter’s door was closed. She flung it open.

* Mari, dear Mari, I…

She stopped and stared, grasping for something to hold on to, clung to the door handle as her legs

almost gave way. Her eyes caught the unmade bed, the low table from IKEA with two bright green footstools underneath it, the green dresser with the alarm clock and the Mickey Mouse light. The nightstand with the black and white picture of Abdul. But Mari was not there.

Petter walked out of the bedroom behind her. He stood in the doorway with a puzzled look.

* Sissel, what’s the matter?

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Her hand waved at the bed, the living room, the window.

* What’s the matter? Petter repeated.

Sissel opened her mouth again.

* Mari. Mari is gone!

Sissel ran out the door, to the beach, almost fell over in a pot hole, before regaining her balance and

managed to stop. Petter, just a step behind her, came up beside her. Both stared, looked down at what lay on the beach in front of them, about ten meters from the water’s edge. A dripping wet and bright, red hat.

Sissel ran down to the greyish blue water. Waves softly hit the beach, her naked feet wet. She didn’t even feel it, picked up the wate hat, squeezed it to her chest as she stared out at the ocean, towards the rocks. Not a soul in sight, only a seagull or two dabbing the horizon with movement.

* MARI!

Petter shouted with Sissel, their voices caught by the wind and deadened. Only the squawking seagulls

answered.

* Could she be at a friend’s house, in some of the neighboring cabins? Petter asked.

Hope rose for a second, then died and let fear and horror well back in, almost drowned her, made her whole body tremble.

* None of them are here no, she cried. – Mari complained about it yesterday, that she was so alone…

Petter grabbed her shoulders and pulled the trembling body close.

* You have to get dressed. And then you have to call the police, he said, staring at the ocean.

Inspector Håkon Haakonsen sat at the very edge of the grey fabric couch, right between two pink decorative pillows. Petter had is back towards them and looking out the window while Sissel paced restlessly across the living room floor; hair wet, a line of mascara running down her cheek.

Sissel Sørensen. Håkon had recognized his teenage love the second he entered the room while Sissel had shown none. She had barely met his gaze, nor did she try to sit down, she merely paced back and forth from the window to the couch and back to the window. She’s still beautiful, Håkon thought. Strikingly beautiful, the kind you would expect to find in a fashion magazine or lying casually on the couch in a luxurious villa, rather than a drafty and askew cabin in Sandefjord.

When he cleared his throat, she stopped her pacing in front of him. Only her arms moved. Her hands fumbling with the buttons of her white blouse, pulling the sleeves, brushed hair away from her forehead and began fumbling with the buttons again before her hands linked up, squeezed together tightly her fingertips turned white.

Håkon noticed she didn’t wear a wedding ring, only a small silver ring on her left pinky finger.

* When did you see her last, you said? he asked.
* I think it was about half past eleven.
* Half past eleven?

Håkon checked his watch. It was half past four.

* And you didn’t let us know sooner?

Sissel shook her head.

* I didn’t notice it until right before I called you, over an hour ago. We… we just laid on the bed and I

guess I must have dozed off, and when I woke up, she wasn’t here.

The copper followed her gaze. It stopped at the door to the kid’s room. Closed. A child’s drawing hung in

the middle of the door, a lined drawing of a wagtail. Underneath it, thirteen scrawling red capital letters read MARI LIVES HERE.

* So your daughter’s been alone, without supervision for… about three hours?

Voice terse, full of blame that either he either could not, or would not, hide.

* Yes, but… she was just in here watching TV, she wasn’t supposed to…

Sissel closed her mouth and looked agonizingly at the inspector, still leaning forwards with his elbows on

the table, his shaved head shining at her, almost bluish white as if it had never seen the sun at all. He reminded her of someone… she didn’t remember at first, but eventually did.

* Håkon? Is that you?
* Yes.

Short and concise.

* Sorry we had to meet this way.

She studied him. It had been over ten years since she last saw him, she barely recognized him now. He

had gotten fatter, his long hair long since gone, but she remembered him being pale back then, too. Even on beautiful summer days he had preferred to stay indoors, rather than being outside in the sun.

Both fell silent. Petter turned around and looked at them quizzically. Sissel took a deep breath and stood beside Petter. He put a hand on her shoulder, staring out over the beach together, the ocean, the rocks. There were plenty of places where a kid could hide, but she knew Mari wasn’t there. After she had called the police, she had continued to look, ran up and down those very rocks, along the beach and the water’s edge, into the water – all the time shouting her daughter’s name without response.

Two officers were chatting by the edge of the water. They were too far away for Sissel to clearly see their faces but one was bald, the other had full, luscious hair. His blonde mane of hair seemed almost unnatural when contrasted against the blue-grey sky. Curly bent down to pick something up from the ground. Sissel recognized it by colour alone: a toy spade they had bought at the gas station last year, along with a bucket with other beach toys. Mari had picked the colour.

* It’s almost as yellow as the sun, mummy!

Mari had hissed on the s, smiled up at her with a front tooth missing and beamed about her new cheap

toys. The police officer studied the spade a short moment before tossing it away. Sissel’s stomach churned. Would her daughter ever use it again? The officer out there shrugged his shoulders, said something to his colleague, and started walking towards the neighbouring cabin a few hundred meters away.

* Where are they going? she asked Håkon, pointing at the officers. – Are they leaving?
* I think they’re just checking with your neighbours. Some might have seen or heard something. Mari

might even be with one of them having hot chocolate right now.

He smiled at her. Sissel shook her head.

* No, all the neighbours have left, they’re here during summer only and no one of the people I’m

aware that Mari knows have seen her. I called them after I couldn’t find her on the beach, right after I called you.

Sissel embraced herself, rocking herself back and forth. Mari knew that she was only allowed to play on the beach by herself if mum could see her through the kitchen window. Mari had come back inside, Sissel had heard her mute the TV, rummage around the kitchen, had juice, and… why did she go back outside?

The phone Håkon had strapped to his belt buzzed. He picked it up. Answered.

* Yes?

He said yes twice more, clenched his jaws, followed Sissel’s frantic pacing across the living room floor –

from the couch to the window, the kitchen. Back and forth. Then he nodded one last time, hung up and hooked the phone back on his belt. Sissel stopped in the kitchen doorway, waiting.

He stood up, unfolding his tall body. As he stood up, his head hit the plastic lamp hung above the living room table. It dangled back and forth, Håkon stopped it with his hands and carefully held it while he answered Sissel the question she hadn’t asked.

* You were right, none of your neighbours are home.

Sissel looked at him. – What happens now?

He met her direct gaze. – We will do everything in our power to find her. The police boats are on their

way and we’ve alerted HQ. They’re sending a SeaKing helicopter with thermal imaging. We’ve called for a dog patrol to aid in the search. Red Cross have also been notified, they’re usually pretty quick in helping.

He patted her shoulder, lightly.

* We need a photo of your daughter. Do you have one?

Sissel nodded, walked to the brown bookshelf that covered one of the short walls and fished out a pink

photo album with a baby’s picture on the front. The entirety of the photo album was Mari. Mari who smiled at her. Mari who slept. Maris first birthday, the big chocolate cake with one candle, her first steps, Mari who laid naked on the changing table. How chubby she was as a baby.

Her eyes welled up, blurring her vision. She did nothing to hide them, just let them flow while she looked through the photo album. She stopped at a photograph taken earlier that summer. Mari stood on the beach with a yellow bucket in her hand. Eyes fixed directly at the photographer, mouth halfway open in a small smile. Her brown hair waving in the wind.

Sissel remembered when that photograph was taken. It was one of the few days off she’d had this summer. It had been almost thirty degrees and perfectly sunny, they’d been at the beach the whole day. They’d swam, sunbathed and had homemade pastries. You couldn’t see it in the picture, but the yellow bucket was full of crabs.

Her legs trembled. She tried holding it together, breathe. Breathe. Breathe. But her legs had none of it, they gave out beneath her. She sunk down onto the couch, buried her face in the pillow and screamed into the grey fabric, body shaking. Petter sat down beside her and limply patted her on the back before getting back up to the window, staring out with his back to the rest of the room.

Håkon picked up the photo album and studied the girl in the photo. It was taken on the beach down from the cabin, Mari stood with the ocean and the horizon in the background. Dressed in denim shorts and a pink shirt, she stared at the photographer. Her eyes squinting against the sun, her upper jaw missing a tooth.

* It’s a nice picture. She’s a cute girl, your daughter. May I borrow it? he asked.

Sissel nodded into the pillow. Håkon coughed. She lifted her head with the tangled blonde hair, mascara running down brownish black one side of her cheek.

* What was she wearing? Do you remember?

Sissel nodded. Of course she remembered; Mari had protested about everything she wore; the pants

were too warm, the jacket was too red, the hat was too itchy…

* No. not the hat, she interrupted herself. – We found her hat?

Sissel got up and picked up the hat she had brought from the beach.

* I don’t understand why it was there? She threw it into the ocean? You know, both the hat and the bear?

Sissel turned to face Petter. The police officer looked quizzically at them both. Petter fumbled his words.

* Mari, eh, she got one of those brown, fuzzy teddy bears from me… you know… but, in any case, she

threw it into the water, I saw it through the window. But when we woke up, her hat was on the beach outside, so far up the beach that it couldn’t have been washed ashore.

Sissel gave the red hat to Håkon. It was damp still.

* Maybe she waded out there and picked it up? he asked himself. Neither Sissel or Petter answered.
* What about the bear? Did you find that on the beach, too?
* No, Sissel said. – The bear is missing. I think it sunk.

Håkon Haakonsen studied the ocean.

* Can Mari swim?
* Yes, Sissel said hesitantly. – But she’s only seven so she can’t swim very far.

Håkon Haakonsen opened his mouth as if to say something. Then he closed it, put the red hat on the table and picked out a pen and notepad from his jacket pocket.

* Okay, let’s continue where we left off.

Sissel described the rest of Mari’s clothing while Håkon took notes.

* Yeah, and then… she wore a ring, a little green, heart shaped plastic ring. She won it at a carnival on

May 17th. She always wears it. Green’s her favourite color. We used to joke that it was a lucky ring…

Her voice died away into a whisper. Håkon put a hand on her shoulder.

* Dear, don’t assume the worst. We can’t be sure that anything terrible has happened. It might be that

she’s gone for a walk. It happens loads of times that kids Mari’s age decides to wander off on their own.

He pulled his hand back and fixed his gaze on Petter.

* You should probably have someone close by? You’re not Mari’s father, are you?

Petter shook his head.

* No, I’m not, but I’ll be here as long as Sissel needs me.

Håkon sized up Petter. They had never met, but he knew who Petter was. Petter Eliassen, one of Norway’s most well-known defence solicitors. Violent offenders, paedophiles, cop-killers – no criminal was ever too violent for Petter Eliassen to accept their case and defend them. And he was good. So good that in many instances – too many, Håkon thought – he avoided conviction for his clients.

The two men stood looking at each for a long moment, in the middle of the floor, eyes locked on each other. It was Håkon that first turned his eyes away, focusing on Sissel.

* Okay, what about her dad? You should call him too, no?

Sissel shook her head, grabbed a pink sofa cushion and pressed it against her tummy. Held the pillow so

tightly her knuckles turned white.

* Abdul moved back to Morocco several years ago. We have been on the phone with him a few times

since, but the last time I tried calling, I got a message saying the number was no longer in service, and I don’t have his new number.

Sissel let go of the pillow, used the back of her hand to wipe her nose, snot and tears made her skin sticky. She noticed that Petter’s eyes almost retracted, a sort of unreal grimace, but she saw it anyway. She turned away from Petter and focused on the uniform of the man high above her. Face foggy, the light from the window drew a faded halo against his bald head. She gathered her thoughts, and said:

* I will be fine, I think I am okay. Just… just find Mari for me.

Mari yawned. Outside her passenger window, a vast forest covered everything in sight. Daddy was silent, smoking. He had barely said a word this whole trip, from the boat across the water, the car trip through town and now driving in the forest. They hadn’t stopped once, but he had given her a bun that he had kept in the car. Her throat felt dry, she coughed, maybe she was getting a cold? She’d lost her jacket in the water when she stepped ashore, but daddy had just laughed as he watched it float away. It looked like a giant jellyfish, and Mari had laughed too. She’d never liked the jacket anyway, Petter had bought it for her. When they got to the car, daddy had given her a pink woolly sweater, and it fit her just right and it was warm and cozy. Mari wasn’t cold anymore, but she was thirsty – very thirsty. It’d be nice with something to drink, but there were no gas stations or shops out here; only deep, dark forests. Daddy had told her that they’d only go on a short trip, so… weren’t they going to turn around soon? What if mum woke up before they were back?

Mari looked at dad. Even if she was much younger and smaller since she last saw him, mum had told her so much about him, she felt she knew daddy anyway. She used to say good night to the photo she had of him, almost every night, a small black-and-white picture mum told her had been taken in a photo booth. Mari often dreamed of him at night and awoke with the memory of his perfume on her pillow covers. The car also smelled of men’s perfume, but it was much sweeter than she remembered; an almost sickening mix of perfume, old sweat and cigarette smoke. Mari didn’t like the smell of cigarette smoke at all.

* Did you smoke when I was little? she asked, trying to imagine him with a cigarette in his hand, but

couldn’t. She sighed. It had been so long ago.

* No, he answered. – I didn’t smoke before.
* Mum says it’s bad to smoke, Mari said.

A small smile on his face.

* Your mum is quite right.

Mum is probably awake right now, Mari thought. She saw a mobile phone dock on the dashboard. A black mobile was placed in the dock. She pointed at it.

* Maybe I should call mum, let her know where I am so she doesn’t worry?
* We can let mummy wait a little longer. We can call when we get there, he said without taking his

eyes off the road. – Besides, that mobile doesn’t work.

He took the mobile phone out of the dock and threw it in the back seat.

* Where are we going? Mari asked.
* Just wait and see, he said briskly.

A claw grabbed a hold of Mari’s stomach, her bottom lip quivered. The mobile was gone and daddy seemed upset, almost a little scary? But he couldn’t be dangerous, he was her daddy, after all?

Daddies aren’t dangerous, she thought and leaned back into the seat. Eyes halfway closed. Her eyelids were heavy, and the hum of the engine was even, constant, cradling. Mari closed her eyes, maybe fell asleep, at the very least she dreamt, and in the dream daddy’s eyes were brown. Then she heard the blinker ticking and sat back up. Daddy turned the car and drove into a courtyard and turned the car off. There was still dense forest around the car, but they had stopped in front of a small, red house.

* Are we there yet? Do you live here?

He shook his head.

* No, this is not where I live, but I’m taking care of a few kittens for a friend of mine and they need

some food. Would you like to come inside and help?

* Yes! I love cats! Are they old? How many are there?
* There’s about five balls of yarn, daddy answered. He opened the car door and got out.

The second she was alone in the car, it was as if the air thickened and the forest grew closer. Suddenly it was harder to breathe, and her heart beat loudly in her chest. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe calmly while listening to daddy’s steps outside of the car. The steps came from around the car, quieter as they walked away then almost gone completely, then coming closer again. She could hear his feet hit the gravel and some rock or another being kicked.

Daddy was finally at her side of the car. The door opened and a big hand grabbed her around the arm. Mari followed him out of the car, and outside, she breathed heavily in the fresh air, with a hint of damp soil and forest. Daddy’s hand was arm around hers and she wasn’t afraid anymore.

* Come on, little wagtail. The kitty cats are waiting.

They walked closely together through the courtyard, as close as she could muster, the gravel crunching under his boots every step he took, the sound of her feet drowned in his. Even though the woolly sweater was thick, it was cold. Mari shivered. She had to walk briskly, almost jog, to keep up with daddy, his arms long between them as he pulled her with him towards the small house.

Daddy unlocked the front door, opened it and pulled her into the hallway, it was too small for them to walk side by side. He gently pushed her in front of him and into the house, into a small kitchen. Two chairs and a table sat in front of the window, a kitchen counter on one wall, a dirty stove and a mustard yellow refrigerator. That was it.

Mary looked around disappointedly.

* Where are the kitty cats?

Daddy opened a hatch in the kitchen floor, and pointed down into the cellar.

* Look, they’re right down there!

Mari looked past him. There was a stair underneath the hatch about seven, no, eight steep steps. She caught a glimpse of them at the bottom of the stairs. A fuzzy bunch of black and white kittens, bunched together in a wicker basket.

* Oh, how cute they are! Are they asleep? Can I cuddle them?
* Of course.

Daddy stepped aside so she could get past him, the wooden stairs barely creaked under her weight. Mari stopped at the bottom step and looked further into the cellar. Daddy stood at the top of the stairs, his big manly body blocked light from the kitchen; only a small streak of light snuck past him and lit up a small portion of the cellar, but apart from the wicker basket full of kittens, the cellar seemed… empty. Mari bent down and leaned towards the basket. The kittens were still sleeping against each other, tightly – a fuzzy lump of black and white hair. She picked up one of the kittens. It weighed almost nothing. Mari stared at it and gasped loudly, her hand stopped midair, her fingers let go. The kitten fell and hit its siblings with a dead thump. The head of the little kitten landed in a way so that its blank, dead eyes stared up at her.

Seven steps above her, the hatch hit the kitchen floor with a sharp bang. Darkness fell like weights down the steps and swallowed her. Mari took a step to the side, her left foot hitting the wicker basket, overturning it. She screamed.

*On their way through town he could see the helicopter circling over the fjord outside the port. It followed the seashore some ways out before turning around and letting the floodlights sweep back and forth across the ocean surface. It’s getting dark, they’ll have to turn in for the night, he thought. How many days will they continue to look? Two? Three?*

*He tried to think back on earlier cases he’d read in the newspapers, where boats had shipwrecked and people disappeared. How long could a human being really survive in seawater in autumn, or on a windy skerry for that matter, at this time of year?*

*He imagined her small girly body, so small and frail, a body like that couldn’t handle that much. They wouldn’t look for much longer, he thought.*

*«Hit me baby, one more time…»*

*Britney sang in his pocket. He pulled the car into an empty bus stop, picked up his black Nokia mobile phone and pushed the green button. The person on the other end of the line didn’t introduce themselves.*

* *Hi. Are you alone?*

*He knew he was alone in the car, yet he looked around to check, almost automatically.*

* *Yes, go on.*
* *Did everything go alright?*
* *Of course. She thought I was her dad and literally leapt in my arms. So just relax. Everything went as planned.*

*Silence on the other end of the line. All he heard was the sound of a ticking clock. He wasn’t sure if the sound came through the phone or from the clock on his dashboard.*

* *Where are you now?*

*He looked through the window. The city light bathed in the water. The Color Line-ferry was about to dock, probably full of half-drunk people with bags and suitcases full of beer and cheap Swedish bacon.*

* *You don’t need to know.*

*He was about to end the call, but let his index finger hover over the red button. He could hear the other person swallow. The clock kept on ticking. He waited.*

* *Was it… quick?*
* *Yes, she had no idea what was going on. I thought you didn’t want details?*

*Silence again.*

* *No. I don’t.*

*The man met his own eyes in the rear-view mirror, pulled a hand through his curly hair.*

* *Then don’t ask.*

*One last click. The conversation was over.*

*He looked at his watch, ten past seven. It would be dark as hell out there. Poor Mari, down there in the cellar. She’s got to be really scared by now, maybe she cried and yelled for daddy. He smiled, remembered how she put her small, warm hand into his, how she squeezed herself close to his pantlegs down on the beach.*

*Everything had gone according to plan, even easier than expected. He was confident no one had seen him arriving or leaving, even when he rowed past the rocks on the way back to his car. He smiled. Mari had even helped him moor the boat where he had stolen it. If someone still had seen them, they probably looked like father and daughter taking a small boat trip on a grey afternoon.*

*He smiled again.*

*Even when he saw her that first time, as he watched her sit and cry on that old swing in her yard, he had known it. That this was the girl he had been longing for, and that he would never let her go.*

*Beautiful, little Mari. She was more beautiful than he had dreamed, frail and innocent, untouched. The thoughts made his pulse race, he focused on the road ahead, and pressed the accelerator down a little further as he entered the motorway heading towards Oslo. He had to be patient to not scare her. He would take care of her and be good to her. It wouldn’t be like last time.*

Day 2

19th October 2005

Mari ran towards the man when he came downstairs, clenched fists hammering his legs, stomach and chest.

* I want to go home! I want to go home! I want to go home!
* Take it easy, little wagtail. Come to daddy.

The man laughed, hands outstretched towards her, trying to catch her in his arms. Mari backed up as far

as she could and pushed her back towards the rugged and cold brick wall.

* I don’t want to, I want to go home! You’re not my daddy, you’re just mean!

She stared at the floor, bottom lip aquiver. He came closer, all the way close now, pulled her up to him. The smell of sweat and cigarette smoke made her empty stomach turn, she swallowed the stomach acid back down.

* No no, I am kind, he said in a friendly manner. – I’m very kind. Look, I’ve brought a new sweater for

you.

* I don’t want a new sweater, I want to go home.
* Put it on now, it’s cold down here. I don’t want you to get sick. Here, let me help you…

He forced her arms up and pulled a green sweater on her. The sweater had a flower in the middle of the chest – a sunflower. The sleeves were too big and long, her hands disappeared completely. It smelled like the cellar, it wasn’t new, he was lying about that too, she could tell the sweater was worn.

* The kittens, they were dead. You lied!

The man scratched his messy hair, shaking his head.

* I’m sorry, they must’ve starved to death or something. But I can get you a new kitten for you, if you

want?

* I don’t want a new kitten. I just want to go home. I just want to go home to mum. Please?

Her voice cracked. He hunched down in front of her, gripped her chin and forced her head up to make

her look at him. His breath was sour. Mari closed her eyes.

* Your mum doesn’t want you, he said.

Spittle flew from his mouth, and the shower hit her face, she tried to pull away, but the hand holding her

in place was too strong. It was disgusting, he was disgusting. She didn’t want to listen to him anymore.

* Did you know she’s the one who asked me to take you? he said. – Her and Petter both.

Mari opened her eyes, shaking her head.

* You’re lying. I want to go home. I WANT TO GO HOME!
* Be quiet. There’s no point in screaming. No one can hear you. Come here, I’ll take care of you…
* DON’T TOUCH ME! I WANT TO GO HOME! I WANT TO! I WANT TO! I WANT TO!

She pounded his chest with clenched fists, the blows softened by the length of the sleeves, he pushed

her away from her. Mari hit the wall and fell on the floor in front of his feet. He wore brown, dirty sneakers.

* Fuck you, brat! Stop screaming! This is your home now, you hear? No one’s looking for you, they’re

just glad you’re gone. Your mum wanted me to kill you, but I’m your daddy now, so I told her I wouldn’t. I *saved* you!

* YOU’RE LYING, YOU ARE! YOU’RE NOT MY DADDY! YOU’RE NOT NICE AT ALL, YOU’RE JUST MEAN!
* Be quiet. I’m going to leave, and if you’re not nice, I don’t know if I’ll come back. Do you know what

happens, little wagtail, if I don’t come back?

* No?

Mari lifted her eyes to look at the man staring coldly at her from the top of the stairs. He had a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows, his lips a thin line, his head nodding towards the floor. She followed his eyes; the basket with the kittens were still there, swept together in a pile in the middle of the cellar floor.

* You’ll die.

At the police station in Sandefjord, Håkon Haakonsen sat and stared at a large stack of papers on his desk; an insurmountable number of sheets scattered across his brown desk. He took a sip of coffee from the mug in his hand; a yellow mug with the words “world’s best dad”, most likely left by a former colleague. No one working in his department deserved that title or characteristic. Most of his colleagues had at least one divorce behind them, and those who had kids only saw them sporadically. Personally, he hadn’t even gotten as far as a steady girlfriend, despite it being three years since his 30th birthday and receiving the obligatory salt and pepper shakers. Kids were not on his wish list either. Life as a cop was much easier without kids and family, Håkon thought and took a new sip out of the mug. So many bad things can happen to kids that small...

He put the cup down on the desk, gently touching the stack of paper. The top piece slid off and fell to the floor.

* Where do we start?

His younger colleague of six years, Anders Gullbrandsen, looked at him and shrugged.

* At the top?

Håkon picked up the sheet from the floor and read aloud.

* Small girl resembling Mari seen at a Rimi-store in Tønsberg with a man probably from Poland or

Lithuania; an eastern bloc country for sure. The girl seemed unhappy.

He picked up a new piece of paper: - Two 17-year-old girls are sure they saw Mari on the ferry from Horten to Moss. She had ice cream and was with a woman who appeared to be foreign, most likely Romanian or gypsy-ish or something like that. Håkon sighed, punched the tall stack of papers.

* They’re checking the CCTVs in both locations, but… I mean, how many tips do we have stacked up

here, do you reckon? Hundreds of people who are dead sure they’ve seen Mari, everywhere and the same bloody time. None of them are right, most likely. There’s plenty of young girls who looks exactly like Mari.

The rest of the messages were from people claiming to be clairvoyant. One wrote that Mari had ended up with a Christian sect in Germany, while “Clairvoyant Frida” claimed Mari had drowned and lay partially wrapped in a fishnet near some white rocks.

* Nope, can’t bet on these co-called clairvoyant folks could find her for us, Håkon said. – But the dive

team is well on their way to trawl the fjord, Red Cross are canvassing as well, a whole bunch of volunteers are helping, and we’ve spoken with all her neighbours and classmates. Still, we haven’t gotten a single positive result. The girl has… it’s as if she sunk into the earth and vanished.

* Or the ocean, Anders mumbled. – And if that’s the case, we’ll be ruddy lucky to find her. She could

be far into the ocean by now with the way those currents are this time of year.

He shook his head, the unruly curls waved long after the shaking stopped. With all that golden hair, he resembled the footballer from North-Møre, that guy named Ole-Gunnar Solskjær, Håkon thought as he stroked his hand across his clean-shaven head. He nodded.

* Yeah, might be a long time before we find her. Maybe never. Still, I think it’s more likely she fell in

the water than kidnapped, don’t you? I mean, from a shopping mall, or city centre, maybe someone could’ve taken her there, but… kidnapped on a deserted beach this time of year? And, mind you, if she’s supposedly kidnapped, with the media coverage this case is getting, I highly doubt anyone would’ve moved about in public with her. Håkon shook her head. – I bet she fell in the water and drowned.

Anders nodded.

* I think she waded out to get her red hat first, and then maybe decided to get the bear later. Things

could’ve gone wrong very fast, the water’s cold right now and she couldn’t even swim properly.

Both were silent. Håkon took another swig of his coffee, a lukewarm tar pit at this point, grimaced and put the mug down.

* How was she, by the way? The mother? Anders asked.

Håkon got up and walked towards the window, staring outside.

* Didn’t you greet her?
* No, I didn’t go inside the cabin. How was she?

Håkon hesitated before answering.

* Sissel Sørensen was okay, I reckon. Blonde, very pretty to be honest. The cabin needed a lot of

work, so it’s obvious she doesn’t have a lot of financial clout, but then again, plenty of single parents suffer that same fate. She was distressed, of course, utterly devastated.

Håkon went silent again. – We were an item back in the day, in our youth, you know, over ten years ago. Nothing serious.

* But, isn’t Sissel about my age? She must’ve been very young?

Anders gave Håkon a surprised look, but Håkon has fastened his eyes on something outside the window.

Håkon looked at the empty street below. It was only half past nine, and it was still dark. Only a few cars drove past slowly. It didn’t rain anymore, but the ground was damp. The street lights gave the asphalt a golden hue, the oil from the passing cars drew abstract pictures in the water puddles. The cinema poster on the other side of the road advertised an American thriller. A movie about a serial killer who first killed and dismembered his victims and then scattered the body parts in the mailboxes of the victims’ families. According to the local newspaper, it was worth a look.

Despite the cinema being situated right across the street, Håkon had never ventured inside. He didn’t understand why people spent money watching other people being killed, as if murder was some form of entertainment – the bloodier it was, the better. He much preferred an exciting football match.

He shook his head, turned around and glanced at the bunch of tips on his desk.

* You’re right. Sissel was young back then, barely 16 years old. Told you it was nothing serious. But I

Still don’t want to be the guy to tell her we’ve given up the search already, at least not until every tip has been checked and absolutely every avenue explored. We’ll just have to continue, mate…

The sea spray pounded the rock where Sissel stood, it was slippery and wet under her feet. She’d long been soaked by salt water and drizzly rain, but she had paid the slightest attention to it. She continued to walk along the seashore, eyes flickering from side to side, looking out at sea one minute then towards the seashore and land the next. The knees of her jeans were soaked after stumbling, getting up and stumbling again. She only wore a t-shirt and a thin jacket. The fingertips scratching and digging for purchase on each new craggy surface were ice cold, but she didn’t notice freezing, she just climbed on, all the while shouting the same name over and over, but her voice was merely a whisper now, not even the seagulls took notice. It was as if they’d become accustomed to her being there – the first few times they’d flown at her and tried to shoo her away, but now… now they kept their distance, as if knowing she was not after them. Maybe they understood why she kept coming back, why she walked where she walked, Sissel thought, seagulls do have a strong motherly instinct for their young. If only they could talk instead of these shrill squawks, then maybe they could tell her what had happened to Mari?

She coughed, deep and raspy down her throat. I’m getting sick, Sissel thought, without reflecting more on it or even draping her thin jacket tighter around herself. She just walked, slightly hunched over because of the strong wind while her eyes scanned the surroundings for a red jacket or pants, a she, a ring. A child.

All she saw were rocks and mountains, driftwood that had accompanied the sea onto the rocks, seaweed washed up on the craggy points, and angry white-foamed waves that dove deep inlands and over the top of her red wellingtons. Her long hair hung dead and soaked down her back, her cheeks were cold and wet by weather, her eyes dry and sore, her lips blue and purple.

She climbed up on yet another rock, stood and stared out at the ocean, looked down at the shallow ground beneath her, right where ocean meets mountain. Her eyes combed the rocks. She was about to move on when she stiffened and turned around, slowly as if in slow-motion, as if her body didn’t believe what her eyes saw.

Something red, partially hidden, was stuck under one of the smaller rocks in front of her, a little too far off that she could see what it was, but it was red. A gust of wind made it move slightly. It was fabric, some kind of fabric. Sissel swallowed, wet her lips and walked towards the fluttering red. Slower now as she forced her feet to move forwards one step at a time, fists clenched tightly together, her chest pounding. She breathed irregular breaths through small sobs, tripped in a crack in the rock surface, her wellington slid down the crack and got stuck and her left foot was in pain immediately. She fell backwards, her arms too slow to offer protection, and the back of her head hit the rocks with a large thump. The air was knocked out of her, the sky rocking above her. She lay still until the world stopped spinning, and when everything seemed normal again, she crawled back up on her feet. Her wellington was still stuck in the crack, her foot ached and she noticed she had forgotten to put socks on. She had to crawl the last few meters towards the rock and the red fabric, her left foot unable to carry her towards the red, whatever that red was. She tried to pull it free, but it was stuck, she tried again and now it seemed very important to get it unstuck. The sodden woolly fabric gave in and ripped. She screamed as it did, fell over and laid with the rest of the red woollen scarf clutched to her chest.

She didn’t know how long she had laid like this, when a familiar sound made her move, react. Her mobile phone played The Hall of the Mountain King from somewhere in her jacket pocket. She reached for it, but her numb fingers disobeyed. She managed to get the white mobile phone out of her pocket, but the fingers let go, it fell out of her hand and onto the rocks next to her. She tried to pick it up, but it slid out of her icy cold fingers once more, bounced down the craggy rocks and played one last stanza before it hit the water and went silent.

Sissel stared down into the dark water. The sea was sludgy, the water surface grey, uneasy waves licked the mountain, it was impossible to see what hid itself on the sea floor. For an instant, she still saw them clearly. Mari and her mobile phone, laying side by side, her mobile just out of reach for those small and white children’s fingers. Mari had wanted a mobile, Sissel though, but I thought she was too young. Now it’s too late…

The sight of the child at the bottom of the sea disappeared. Grey waters remained. Sissel shivered, knew she was cold. Maybe she should get up and head back to the cabin? The thought was there one moment, but gone the next. It was too far away, her head hurt immensely and her foot had swelled up to double the size. Sissel leaned backwards and closed her eyes, the large rock was soft against her back. When did she last sleep? She couldn’t remember. It’d be nice to sleep.

Day 7

24th October 2005

Mari chewed through the rest of the sandwich the man had brought her. Dry sandwich with sweaty yellow cheese, she washed the last bit down with a sip of water.

* Why have you taken me? How long am I going to be here? Mari asked when she had swallowed it all.

Mari heard her voice trembling, she had to try hard not to cry. The man had been a lot, maybe once a day at least. He didn’t say much, just stood and watched her while she ate the sandwiches with cheese, liver paste or boiled ham he had brought. Sometimes he might stay longer, but if she cried, he turned the light off and left.

* I’ve told you, he said. – It’s because your mum doesn’t want you anymore.
* That’s not true, she said and bit her lip so hard she could taste blood on her tongue.
* Aye, said the man and sat down on the mattress next to her and stroked her bent back.

– I’m afraid it is.

Mari tried to stem the tears and the cries.

* When will I be able to go back?

The man pulled her close, Mari twisted and turned, tried to get away but he was too strong.

* Never, he whispered softly into her hair. – I’m taking care of you now.

Mari couldn’t stop it now, the lump that started somewhere in the stomach grew up towards her chest and blew its way past it. Her eyes welled up.

* I want to go home, she sobbed. – I want to go home to mum. I WANT TO GO HOME!

Mari got up and away from the mattress as the man stormed up the stairs and slammed the hatch shut

above her. She stopped crying, stood still and held her breath until she heard the front door shut upstairs. She sighed as she let her breath out. And again, silence. He had forgotten to turn the light off this time, the ceiling light swung slowly back and forth, she followed it with her eyes until it hung, steady and calm. It wasn’t even a real lamp, it was just a light bulb hanging from an electrical cord. The yellow plastic bucket – the toilet bucket – was empty and didn’t smell, luckily. The man had taken it upstairs and emptied it while she was eating. In the other corner was her matrass with the bed linen bunched up at the edge of the mattress, a thin duvet and a small pillow with a faded Mickey Mouse pillow cover on it.

Mari didn’t understand how the man had managed to get the mattress down that tiny hatch. She peered at the wall. At the top of one wall there was something that looked like a window nailed shut, but it was farther up than she could reach, far above her head. Maybe he had gotten the mattress in that way?

She grabbed the yellow bucket and walked to the window, placed the bucket underneath with the bottom up so she could step on it. She stood on her toes and stretched out as far as she could with her arms, her fingertips scraping the rough brick wall, but no matter how far she stretched, she couldn’t reach the bottom wooden planks.

Mari groaned and sunk down on the floor next to the bucket. There’s no way out of here, she thought. I’m too small and too short.

She stared up again at the window. The boards had been nailed shut so that not a single ray of light shone through. Even if she would’ve reached up, she’d never be able to loosen those boards. Maybe there wasn’t even a window behind it, maybe it just looked like there was?

Mari felt her cheeks were damp, she wiped her tears away with her hand, she hadn’t been aware she’d been crying. Crying won’t help, she thought, and threw the bucket at the wall so hard it bounced back and hit her in the leg.

* Ow!

That’s when she spotted it, right where the bucket had hit the wall. What *was* that? She walked closer to the wall and stared. There were some almost washed out drawings – a sun, a car, a lady in a dress. The drawings looked like something she could’ve drawn herself, but it wasn’t her of course, she had nothing to draw with. Who had drawn them?

Mari let her fingers trace the faded color around the drawing of the sun. The wall was cold beneath her fingertips, the color didn’t smudge her fingers at all. Had there been another kid down here, locked in this disgusting cellar just like her?

Mari’s spine shivered, and felt incredibly sad and sorry for the kid that might’ve been there before her.

* Where are you now? she whispered, alone in the dark cellar. – What happened to you?

Håkon looked up as he heard the front door of the police headquarters open. It was early Monday morning and Anders was on his way in and was going – like he did every single day – make his first stop at the coffee machine in the hallway.

* Have you seen this? Håkon shouted.
* Seen what?

Anders threw a longing glance at the coffee machine before sighing and walked into the office where his

colleague sat and stared at the computer screen in front of him.

* I did a little more searching on Petter Eliassen.
* Solicitor Eliassen? Why? We checked him out, didn’t we? Petter and Sissel were together the whole

time when Mari disappeared?

* Sure, but did you know he’s been involved in a previous kidnapping?
* No… when?
* About ten years ago, summer of ’95. And the girl, because it was a girl then too, is still missing.

Anders stood behind his colleague so he could read the police report on the screen.

* She was his niece, Caroline Eliassen, five years old. She disappeared by the Thor Dahl-pier in

Sandefjord, said Håkon eagerly.

* I think I remember that case, Anders said. – Didn’t she drown?

Håkon summarized from the police report.

* Karin Eliassen stopped by a hair salon to make an appointment. She thought her daughter went with

her uncle to the grocery store to shop, but the uncle – Petter Eliassen, that is – thought Caroline had gone with his sister. They didn’t notice that Caroline was gone until Petter was done shopping and met his sister in the hair salon. Karin sat in the salon chatting with a friend, but Caroline was not there. No one had seen her for at least a half hour. The car was parked at the pier, maybe a meter from the shore, so they concluded that she probably fell in the water and subsequently drowned, but despite the fact the depth was only three meters, she was never found. They made another conclusion, that the current had taken her farther out in the fjord.

Håkon looked at Anders.

* What are the odds for that, eh?
* What, that she was taken by the current?
* No, that the same bloke is involved in two similar cases?
* Well… Anders looked at the screen. – He has an alibi in both cases, yeah? In the Caroline-case he was

shopping, right? It says right here that he met several acquaintances while in the store, and that those people could confirm he was there, the shrink Jørgen Wurth among others, and he’s a damn reliable witness – we use him as an expert witness from time to time, right? So, the chances of Petter somehow scurrying that five-year-old off somewhere, only to be shopping a half hour later with loaded grocery bags when he met up with his sister aren’t great, are they? And in this case, with Mari, he was with the mother the whole time.

* Yeah, but was he, though? Maybe he got up and took care of the girl while she slept? Maybe he

drugged Sissel so that she just happened to sleep a little better? They did drink some wine beforehand, so maybe he put something in her glass?

* He got up and did what? Killed the girl and hid her in the boot of his car, or pushed her into the sea?
* Both are theoretically possible. Remind me, did we ever check the wine bottle? Do they even have it

still, know what I mean? And did we check his car at all?

* No, I don’t think we did. You know as well as I do he wasn’t a suspect. We can check it out of course,

but to kill a girl only to sleep peacefully afterwards? I agree that Eliassen seems like a pretty callous and cold individual, but I don’t think he’s that devious. I think it’s far more probable that the girl went for a swim and drowned.

* You’re probably right, Håkon said grimly, - but I think we ought to chat with him anyway. You know,

off the record?

* Of course, Anders said. – Just got to make a phone call first.

30 minutes later, the two police officers strolled along the quay in Sandefjord, on their way to Eliassens office. The big concrete building and glass was only a five-minute walk away from the police station, but the cool breeze that began at the mouth of the fjord and crept its way up through the city streets made it feel colder than two degrees below. Håkon shuddered and pulled his scarf tightly around his neck as he stopped and pointed at the sign above the double-doors.

* Solicitors Brenden and Eliassen, Håkon read out loud. – The leading solicitor’s office in Vestfold. Do

you know how many employees they have?

Anders nodded. – I was there because of my mother’s inheritance when she passed away last year. They’ve got a fair number of workers there, I believe it’s over 30. Eliassen is the most profiled solicitor of the two; Brenden does divorces, inheritances and such, I think.

* That’s got to be a shitty job, Håkon mumbled. – Arguments and shite.

Anders laughed. – Just the same thing people think about our jobs, mate…

They took the elevator up to the third floor and entered a room that looked like a waiting room in a doctor’s office, to couches on each side of a table stacked with magazines. The room continued into a long corridor, and to the right of the corridor sat a blonde woman behind a mahogany desk.

* Good day. Can I help you? she asked.
* We’d like to speak with Petter Eliassen, Håkon replied.
* Do you have an appointment?

The woman sized them up. She did not seem at all impressed by the uniforms; on the contrary, the voice

had a tinge of hostility to it.

* No, Håkon said, knowing he was eyeballing her more than he should. There was something oddly

Familiar with this woman and her almond-shaped eyes and her straight nose. Where had he seen her before? He got a hold of himself and smiled at her.

* We are working on the disappearance of his friend’s daughter, and have some quick questions in

that regard. Would you please ask if he has time to answer them here, or if he’d prefer to answer them at the station?

The woman stroked a well-groomed hand with long, red nails through her hair.

* Friend?

Her voice was noticeably sour. She got up, walked towards the innermost door that stood in a long row down the corridor, and stopped in front of a double door of solid oak. She knocked twice, briskly, and did not wait before entering.

* Petter? There are two policemen here, they’d like to speak with you.

They couldn’t hear what the man said, but moments later, Petter Eliassen stood in the doorway.

* Come on in, he said, inviting them in with a friendly gesture. – Would you like a cup of tea, maybe

some coffee? Karin, would you put the ket—

* We’ll pass on tea and coffee, we’ve just some questions regarding the day of Mari’s disappearance

we’d like to have filled out a bit more. It won’t take long, so we reckoned it’d be okay if we stopped by?

Petter walked ahead of them into his office.

* Please, have a seat, he said and pointed at two chairs facing a large desk. Petter sat down on the

other side of the desk, mahogany as well, but far bigger than the one in the reception. The surface of the desk was littered in papers and office equipment, but everything was neat and orderly. Seven or eight ball point pens formed a long line where not a single pen was out of place; paper clips, thumbtacks and other small things each had its own space in a plastic organizer, the sheets of paper were gathered in different but neat piles, every sheet of paper looked so smooth and straight that you might not believe they’d been read. The only thing that didn’t quite fit in was a half-empty cup of coffee with the company logo at the very edge of the desk.

Petter crossed his arms on his chest and looked at them.

* So, what can I help you with?

Håkon leaned forwards and picked up a few papers from the blue canvas bag he had brought.

* We’d like you to tell us again what happened that day Mari disappeared. Maybe you’ll remember

new details, maybe we’ll pick up something we missed the last time around…

* Okay? Well, I made it to Sissel’s place around eleven in the morning and I saw Mari playing on the

beach below the cabin…

Petter recapped the series of events about verbatim from the report Håkon held in his hands.

* Then I woke up. Sissel screamed that Mari was missing and after we checked the beach and called

the neighbors, we called you, Petter finished and looked at them quizzically. – Did I miss anything?

* And you slept the whole time? You weren’t up at least once to get yourself a cup of water or anything?
* No, I slept like a rock, which was no surprise.
* Oh?
* Well, I hadn’t slept much the night before as I had prepared a court appearance, and afterwards…

The solicitor turned his eyes away, cleared his throat uneasily for a moment.

* Well, I’m sure you understand why we laid down, but it didn’t take long before we fell asleep.
* You had sex first? Håkon asked sharply.

Petter only nodded.

* In the bedroom?

Petter nodded again.

* And none of you got up afterwards? Not even to go to the bathroom?

Petter shook his head.

* And none of you bothered to look for Mari?

Håkon’s voice was acerbic, but Petter was just as calm.

* No, unfortunately not. I heard her come in, the front door creaks badly, so I’m certain she

came back in. But I fell back asleep once she did.

Anders interrupted: - But you didn’t hear the door creak when she left?

Petter shook his head.

Håkon continued. – You stated earlier that you both had a glass of wine before, well, what kind of wine was it?

Petter shrugged.

* I’m not sure, to be honest. White and sweet is what Sissel likes best. Karin bought it for me.
* Karin? Your secretary?
* Well, Petter said with a smile. – Karin is also my sister, but her official position is as a receptionist.

Regardless, she helps me out a lot with different types of tasks, not just work-related things.

* How practical, Håkon mumbled sarcastically.

Petter looked at them questioningly. – Is the wine important? She probably paid for it using the company card, so we could probably find the receipt here somewhere.

* No, it’s not probably not necessary, Håkon replied. – But back to what happened. You heard nothing

out of the ordinary? You didn’t hear a boat engine, or maybe a car? Voices or steps? A barking dog, anything?

Petter shook his head.

* No, no car or voices. There are boats out there from time to time, so it’s possible one of those might

been around at that time, but I don’t think I would have noticed that at all.

* Okay. Well, we’ve probably disturbed you enough. Oh, by the way, you don’t mind if we take a look

at your car, do you?

The solicitor looked visibly annoyed, but nodded. – Don’t mind one bit, guv, but you’re wasting your time. What else are you blokes doing besides bothering me?

Petter stared at them, challenging them. Håkon grudgingly turned his eyes away.

* We’re doing the best we can, he mumbled. – We don’t have a lot to go on, and the most likely

conclusion is that she fell into the water.

* Divers haven’t found anything?
* No, they’ve searched the sea floor near the cabin but the currents are strong out

there, so if Mari fell in, they would probably have carried her far out to sea.

* What about a mini-sub, an… an ROV or something?

Håkon shook his head. - No, I don’t think that’s…

Petter interrupted him, his voice cold as ice.

* Do you think I’d have to rent one of those things myself? Are you people that short on staff or

Information, you’re just going to give up that bloody quickly?

Håkon didn’t answer, just got up, ready to walk out. Anders followed his example. Håkon stopped as they were just about to walk out the door, and turned to face Petter.

* You had a niece who disappeared as well, is that right?

Petter was visibly taken aback. For the first time, Anders and Håkon could see emotion in his face. His

eyes closed for a moment, and when he opened them again, they were shinier, teary.

* That’s right. My niece, Caroline, drowned. That’s over ten years ago now.

His voice was low, it barely reached across the room.

His words hung in the air for a moment, then Petter slammed one of his fists into the desk.

* Bloody fucking hell, is that why you’re here? His voice cracked with anger. – Because of that old case

with Caroline? Do you think I’ve…

He gathered his thoughts, and calmed down. – Caroline disappeared because of a tragic misunderstanding between my sister and I, and I will never forgive myself for it. But that you bloody people could even… even believe that…

Anders held his hands up defensively. – We don’t believe anything, but it’s our job to ask questions, isn’t it? We’d like to take a look at your car. You… you said that was okay?

Petter stood up and pointed at the door.

* The car is in the parking garage, unlocked. Check all you want, and you’ve gotten all the ruddy

answers I’ve to give you. Feel free to call me in for questioning at the station if you’ve got more accusations to hurl my way, but right now, I’d like for you to leave.

Håkon and Anders backed out of the door. The room outside was empty. Karin was nowhere to be seen.

Outside the office, Anders stopped and turned to face his colleague.

* Was that necessary? To be that bloody brutal?

Håkon shrugged and looked away.

* It’s possible I should’ve expressed myself differently, he said. – But there’s something about that

man that just provokes me.

On the way down the elevator, Håkon finally remembered why Karin had looked so familiar. She looked a lot like Sissel. A few years apart, sure, along with a few extra wrinkles, but still. Those two women could almost have been sisters.

Day 20

6th November 2005

A thump. Another thump. Mari tossed and turned, tried to block the thumping out and stay in dreamland. Mum had baked a big tray full of wheat buns and the smell tickled Mari’s nose as she helped mum set the table. She sat down at the kitchen chair, it creaked. It was a brilliant summer day and they’d go down to the beach soon to catch crabs, the yellow bucket and the crab line sat in the hallway, ready to go. Mum put the jam on the table, and told Mari to dig in and enjoy. Mari smiled, mum leaned forwards and kissed her forehead, her lips were soft. Mari lifted her hands and hugged her.

* Hey there, my little wagtail. Did I wake you?

The man’s voice shook her back to reality and the cellar. Mari sat up and pulled her hands towards

herself. The moist spot on her forehead had followed her out of the dream, she made a grimace when she realized the soft lips belonged to the man and not her mum.

* My, my, what kind of display is that? Are you not happy to see me?

Mari didn’t answer.

* Who drew on the wall? she asked instead, and pointed at the almost invisible line drawings on the

brick wall.

* No one.
* Yeah, someone drew on the wall. You can see it, can’t you?
* Don’t think about it, it’s old.
* Did another kid live here?
* Don’t think about it, I said.
* Who was it?
* Would you shut up!

The slap came unexpectedly. Mari gasped, her eyes filled with moisture. Her cheek was on fire, but the

surprise was still stronger than the pain.

Sissel tossed and turned, attempting to block out the noise. The sounds were wrapped in cotton, they came and went, someone spoke to someone else, the words were muffled and meant nothing. Were they talking about her? A gust of wind struck her face, someone had opened a window, the sounds of the traffic below deafened the voices, a car honked. Then someone shut a door, the voices disappeared completely, but the traffic noise remained. The sound of ambulance sirens, first far away, distant, then closer and closer, the ambulance stopped right outside her window. The sharp notes cut through her consciousness and forced her awake.

Sissel tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were heavy and fell back down. She pushed, her eyelids shook, the light came and went. Third time’s the charm as she managed to keep her eyes open.

A bed. She was in a bed. The room was white; blindingly white and it cut her eyes despite the curtains being partially closed in front of the open window. An apparatus on the side of her bed beeped, a transparent tube hung from it, it started somewhere higher up, behind her, outside of her field of vision. Her eyes followed the tube, it went down to her hand. Into her hand. She lifted her hand and stared at the needle, confused at how it stuck in her hand, through her skin and how a white band-aid was the only thing that held it in place.

* Sissel, darling! Finally!

She turned her head, looking for the voice. Petter stood at the side of her bed and looked at her, smiling.

* What is it?

Her throat was sore. She stretched her hand out automatically to reach for the glass of water that was on her night stand, but the plastic tube yanked it back and her hand fell heavy on the duvet. Petter knew what she wanted and propped her head up with an extra pillow and put the glass of water gently to her lips. Sissel swallowed greedily. The water was lukewarm, dead and wonderfully good.

* Dear, I’m so glad you’re finally awake, he said.
* Awake? Where am I?
* You’ve been sick, Petter answered. – Don’t you remember walking along the seashore?

Sissel tried to remember. The climb along the slipper rocks, the rain and the sea spray, the wellington that got stuck in the crack, it was cold.

* Yes, I think so, she answered and look at herself. Her left foot was bandaged.
* I tried calling your mobile, but when you answered, there was just a lot of noise. I think that’s when

you lost it, Petter said. – And the next time I called, I was told that your phone was turned off, so I started to worry and went out to your cabin. Your front door was unlocked, you weren’t inside, so I knew something was wrong and went looking for you. Luckily, I found you before… my God, woman, you could’ve died on me!

His voice cracked, his tone annoyed, almost angry.

Poor dear, she thought, he’s been so frightened.

* I’m sorry, she whispered. – And thank you for looking for me.
* You were frozen when I found you.

His voice was warm again. – Your body temperature was 32 degrees, and one of your legs were frozen.

You’ve got pneumonia, the back of your head is banged up and twisted your ankle. But you’re lucky, they think you’re going to be just fine.

* They?
* The doctors. You’re at Tønsberg Hospital, the air ambulance picked you up. You’ve been here for

over a week.

* Over a week?!

Sissel sat up. – What about Mari? Have the police found her?

Petter straightened out her duvet, folded it out over the bed and put it neatly around her.

* Unfortunately, no. They don’t have any news about Mari. The divers didn’t find anything, and none

of the tips have led to any new discoveries. They haven’t said it directly, but I think they’re about to give up searching.

He paused a little.

* I’m sorry, but I think the coppers figure it’s a foregone conclusion that Mari drowned.

He leaned over her, looked into her eyes intensely.

* But I promise you, if the police give up, we’ll go on. I’ve already rented a mini-submarine that’ll comb

the seabed. If your daughter is there, we’ll find her. I’ve got enough money, they can keep going until every millimeter’s been checked.

Sissel pallidly smiled at him.

* You will? Really?
* Yes, he said. – But you must promise me to take care of yourself. No more trips looking for her on

those rocks when it’s raining. Can you promise me that?

Sissel nodded, but remembered the red scarf and imagined her daughter still, lying on the seabed with her mobile phone next to her. The vision was just as real now as it was then, on the rocks, but now she saw Mari open her mouth, as if calling for her, crying for a mother that never came. Sissel sank back into her pillow and closed her eyes, but it didn’t stop her daughter from screaming still.

Day 34

20th November 2005

The cellar was completely dark. Mari used to think the darkness was nice and okay. That was when she laid in bed at home and watched the stars outside her window, thinking of what she’d do the next day. There were no stars here in the basement, no moon. Here, the darkness was just dark. Completely dark. When the light was gone, she couldn’t even see her hand, despite holding her hand all the way to her face, touching her nose. Besides, it was awfully quiet in the cellar, you couldn’t hear anything from the outside and when it was dark, the silence was deafening. And even though she knew she was alone, it was as if something was down there with her in the dark, something big, ugly and scary.

Mari couldn’t remember how many times the bad man had been here, but she thought it was almost every day, or at least every other day. He used to bring ready-made slices of bread, dry bread with sweaty cheese. Sometimes he brought cold leftovers – sausage, meat balls, chicken.

He’d sit on the mattress and watch her eat, stroke her hair, telling her she was beautiful. One time he had brought a coloring book and some crayons, and another time, a bunch of chalk and a small blackboard. Sometimes he’d read her stories – Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Ashlad and the Princess. Sometimes he’d sing her children’s song, the kind of childish songs she had outgrown long ago.

When the man was here, she used to eat slowly, as slow as she possibly could. While she ate, he usually took the yellow bucket up the stairs to empty it. When he came back downstairs and she was done eating, he’d brush the crumbs off the mattress and ask her to lay down with him. She had to stroke his chest and call him daddy, while she tried to think of something else, something completely different, and she couldn’t start crying because he’d be angry. He’d always leave her a bag of Marie biscuits, sometimes a picture book, or a drawing pad and some crayons. He told her time and again that he loved her. That he was her daddy, and that it was mom's fault she had to hide down here in the nasty cellar.

He lied, he lied all the time. And when she screamed and was not nice, he’d turn the light off. He had a switch somewhere up there, on the other side of the hatch. Once it had been completely dark a long time, and she told herself she would not be afraid, she would be a big girl, but it didn’t help. She was frightened, so frightened that she peed herself, and when the man finally came back, he said that she was a little squeamish brat, and he should have got rid of her long ago. She hadn’t answered, just looked at him and thought that he absolutely, most certainly was not her daddy. No real daddies were so mean to their children, she was quite sure.

Mari drilled her face into the pillow to try to stave off tears. He's lying, she thought. The man is stupid. Mum is kind, she's looking for me, and one day she will find me. I don’t deserve to be here, and my mum loves me, I was not too naughty, I was not so ... mum is still looking for me, I'm quite sure, and if only mum will come find me, I’m going to be really nice to mum and Petter and to everyone. I’ll put the itchy hat on without whining and do everything mum wants me to do - carry out the trash, pick up the mail and clean my room all by myself. If only mum comes.

Mari tried to stop crying, it made her dizzy, and the man became angry, he didn’t like her crying. Still, she wished he could hear her.

It was had been a while since the man had been here now, many days, she thought. She had only half a biscuit pack left. She was hungry but did not know if she dared to eat the last biscuit. What if he was dead? What if a car had run over and killed him?

If the man dies, no one will find me. At least not until long after I have starved to death and died too, Mari thought and looked down at her flat belly. She had become much thinner than she was before, she didn’t need a mirror to see that. Mum used to say that she was nice and plump, now her previously soft belly become hard and painful. Anyway, she wasn’t hungry anymore. It had been worse the first few days, but now it was as if she had adjusted to not eating much.

How many days had she been here now? Mari took a biscuit and tried to count. Twenty, thirty? Forty? It was no use. The only light in the room came from the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. It was stained brown from dirt, but it burned her eyes if she stared at it. How long could a lightbulb last for? A month, perhaps? Or a year? She hoped it was long, because if not...

She picked up a bit of chalk, drew one line on the wall first at the bottom in one corner. Then another line. One line for every day. I have been here at least a month, she thought and tried to count back. A month is 30 lines. How long would it take before they found her? At least not over 100 lines, she thought. When there are one hundred lines, I am certainly at home again. She took a step back and looked at the lines she had made. They were almost invisible in the dimly lit basement. That was a good thing, maybe the man wouldn’t see them when he came back. If he came back.

Maybe I'm not starving to death, she thought. Maybe the light bulb goes off and all that is scary and creepy down here with me in the dark, will pop come out of hiding and play? Maybe there is a giant rat inside the wall that comes out and begins to gnaw at me, eating me up, piece by piece? Or maybe one of the dead kittens will come back to take me?

Mari climbed on top of the stairs. She pressed her palms against the wooden hatch, pushing her entire body upward, upward, moved her head forward and pressed her neck against the wood. Her head, neck and shoulders ached, but the hatch would not budge.

- Help me! I want out! she screamed, and let her fingers feel the crack where the door met the ceiling. It was only a thin, thin crack that didn’t even let light through, she could barely feel it with her fingertips. Mari screamed again, beating at the hatch, fists pounding against the rough wood. The hatch did not budge, she hit as hard as she could, and after a while her fists began to bleed and it hurt. She screamed again. Her voice was hoarse, it scorched her throat and chest. Mari slumped on the top step.

- I'm all alone, she cried. - No one’s looking for me. Maybe the stupid man's right. Maybe they don’t want me anymore.

She climbed down eventually and lay back down on the mattress. The eyes stared up at the ceiling, her mouth sucking on the bloody knuckles. She didn’t cry anymore. No point in crying. Nobody were there.

Sissel awoke slowly. She tried to fight it, the dream was delightful. Her and Mari had built a snowman on the beach, the snowman was not quite finished, it still lacked eyes and...

Daylight crept in through her eyelids and won. She opened her eyes, turned over in bed and looked out the window. Small, white snowflakes were playing in the wind coming down from the sky, the song of Anne Grete Preus floated out there, millions, billions of snowflakes and no two were alike. Sissel hummed: - *a miracle like this one can ponder for a while…*

Sissel liked that song. She didn’t remember the title, but she knew the melody and a bit of the lyrics - *I'm leaning my head way back / getting an ice kiss on my lips, , getting an ice kiss...*

Sissel closed her mouth, the song died away, and the title remained gone. She got up, put her feet down on the cold wooden floor. The clothes she had used the day before lay in a heap on the floor, she stepped over them and walked naked to the window. The beach was barely starting to be covered by white powder, and still the small snowflakes wafted down from the gray sky.

It's almost Christmas Eve, thought Sissel. I have to wake Mari up. Maybe we get a white Christmas this year, my little wagtail, she is going to love it...

Then she remembered.

Mari was gone. Everyone had been looking the first few days. The helicopter had flown over the cabin roofs, the Red Cross had search parties both on land and at sea, divers who helped the police, and volunteers from the local diving club had pitched in as well. Acquaintances and strangers had signed up to keep a watch along the beaches, even the boss and her colleagues at La Scala had helped. The police and their dogs had trawled every centimetre of the rocks. The only thing they had found, was one of her toy buckets, the yellow one she used to fish for crabs in, floating in a cove a few hundred meters from the cabin.

The first few days the tone had been optimistic, but all too soon it seemed as if everyone was convinced that she had drowned and been carried away by the current. The helicopter disappeared first, then the dogs. Divers and Red Cross crews continued for nearly two weeks, then they were gone too.

Missing, presumed drowned, the papers said. Three short words that contained a whole world of grief. They probably would never play in the snow again, never celebrate Christmas together, never argue about what clothes she should wear, the red or pink pants, the new or the old hat. Never...

Hands opened and closed, eyes staring out over all the white, she knew she mustn’t cry. She mustn’t break down again. If she cried now, she wasn’t sure if she could ever stop. She mustn’t cry!

Outside, the snow and the cold put a virginal white cover over the rocks outside, hiding forgotten beach toys and driftwood the sea had thrown up on the beach earlier that autumn. The wind took hold of the snowflakes, gathering them in drifts up against the rocks and created a new, almost unreal landscape. Inside the window, on the bare bedroom floor, next to a pile of wrinkled clothes, Sissel lay. Crying.

The doorbell woke her up. The sound came and went, forced its way through sleep and tears, and though she tried to fight it and stay here in this emotionless no-man’s-land, the intense ringing threatened to bring her swiftly back to reality. Sissel opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. The bell rang again, someone on the outside wanting to get in.

She stood up, her legs wobbly and she supported herself against the wall. The doorbell scraped again, the sound was rusty and resembled the horn of a high-schoolers car, celebrating the end of twelve years of education, ready to move on to university or work. Outside the window, it was already beginning to darken. Sissel was stumped, had she really laid like this all day, naked and curled up on the hard floor?

She threw her clothes on, the ones lying beside her on the floor, a look in the bedroom mirror showed a wrinkled T-shirt, hair that looked like a crow's nest, and a mascara that had drawn black streams down her cheeks.

- Sissel!

It was Peter who yelled from the outside, the door handle moving downwards. Was the door locked? She couldn’t remember, but the door didn’t open, so it must be. She stretched out a hand and turned the key that was in the lock.

Petter was there in one stride.

She fell against his chest, smelling the scent his shaving lotion and soap. She clung to his cashmere coat, buried her face in soft wool. He put the package in his hand down on the dresser, folded his arms around her and pressed her close to him. Then he took a step back and sized her up. Her lean face was deathly pale, her blue-green eyes seemed unusually large.

- Dearie me, you look terrible, you’re ice cold. Come!

He led her into the bathroom as if she were a child. She sat on the toilet seat and watched as he found bath soap and filled the tub with water. He checked the temperature with his hand before he undressed her. Cautiously, garment by garment; the blue T-shirt with a picture of a butterfly on the chest, jeans, black bra and knickers. Finally, she stood naked in front of him with her hands draped down her sides. Her arms felt so heavy, it was as if she’d never be able to use them again.

He lifted her up, and moments later she lay in the tub, embraced by suds. The warmth of the water slowly soaked into the pores, and it was only now she noticed that she froze, she was shaking and chattering teeth. He found the shampoo and conditioner in the closet, and put it up on the edge of the bathtub.

- My girl, poor little girl. You’re going to take a long bath, wash your hair and freshen up a little bit, alright? Afterwards I can clean this place up a little bit while you are resting. You can’t stay here alone anymore, not like this. He smiled.

- After Christmas, you’ll move in with me. Karin and I'll look after you.

Day 66

22nd December 2005

When Mari heard the familiar sounds of his steps above the cellar hatch, she turned over on the mattress. She lay staring at the brick wall. She’d decided not to look at him, not to talk to him, not answer him. She wouldn’t say a single word to him ever again, never again! Maybe he’d get tired of her then and maybe switch her out with another girl, one that would smile more? Maybe that’s what had happened with the kid that had been here before Mari?

But she couldn’t. As he came down the stairs, the smell wafted ahead of him was too strong and too good, she just had to turn around.

He stood by her mattress, paper bag in his hand with a logo she had seen many times before. The bag was from Esso. Mari got up, took the bag in her hands without asking for permission, she smell of fresh wheat buns filled the small cellar and made her mouth water. She swallowed. Three buns for ten crowns. Sometimes mum would bring home a bag of buns on her way home from work, and when she got home, they’d always share. One for Mari and two for mum, because mum said she was an adult and her stomach was twice as big.

* Are all three for me?
* They sure are, my wagtail, they’re all for you. Enjoy.

He sat down next to her on the mattress, watched her eat. He almost always smelled bad, a disgusting mix of old sweat, cigarettes and sweet men’s perfume, but today she barely noticed it.

The buns were soft and squished, but they were the best buns she had ever had. The first two buns disappeared almost by themselves, she hesitated when picking up the third.

* Are you sure you don’t want any? she asked.

He smiled and stroked her hair.

* Absolutely sure. They’re for you, I told you.

He got up while she ate the last bun. He let his hand drift across the brick walls, walked over to the cellar

window high up on the wall on the other side of the room, knocked and pull the board that was nailed from the inside. It didn’t budge. He seemed pleased. He turned around and looked at Mari. She had positioned herself all the way back of the mattress and pulled the duvet up to her chin.

His eyes swept the rest of the room. Mari followed his gaze. There wasn’t much to look at. A jug of water and some plastic cups were right next to the mattress. A small tray held a half-eaten bag of cookies and half a pack of crispbread and a small jar of strawberry jam. On the stairs, second to last step, there was a small, yellow wash pot with a dash of water and a grey washcloth. Right next to it, a pack of wet napkins, tube of toothpaste and a red toothbrush. And in the corner, was the yellow toilet bucket.

He walked towards it. Mari blushed, she had put it in the opposite corner, as far away from her and the mattress as she could. It smelled like poo and was almost full.

* I wonder…, he said, then fell silent, just stared into the bucket. Mari said nothing for a long time,

then she couldn’t help herself.

* What are you wondering about?
* I think I’m going to get you a real toilet, like the ones they have in caravans, he answered. – And

maybe a desk. It’ll be nicer here with those things, don’t you think? Would you like that?

* Yes, she said and felt she spoke the truth. She wanted a real toilet, one with a lid that she could

close, that wasn’t nasty and didn’t smell.

When she answered, her stomach turned, she bent forwards and pushed her hands against her stomach.

* What is it? the man asked.

He took two steps before he stood before her, his hand cold against her forehead.

* You’re not getting sick on me, are ya?

Her stomach knotted itself again, a giant claw grabbed her insides and made it difficult to breathe.

* No, she whispered. – It’s… it’s just the buns.

But she knew that wasn’t true. It wasn’t the buns. It was the thought behind the words. The man had

Wondered about keeping her down here. For a long time.

The credits for *Three Wishes for Cinderella* rolled across the screen. Sissel downed the glass of wine at the table, and dried her wet cheeks with her hand. Mari loved that movie, they’d watched it together every Christmas Eve, and every time Mari had been just as happy that it little orphan Cinderella that won the prince in the end.

Sissel got up and found the pink photo album from the bookshelf and sat back down to leaf through the old pictures. Her daughter smiled out to her from those pages; Sissel could remember when every single picture was taken. When she closed her eyes, she could *almost* hear her daughter’s laughter and smell her soft skin. Petter peeped through the doorway, looked at the clock and gave Sissel an impatient look.

* Dear, put that photo album down. Karin’s expecting us in a few hours, she’s looking forward to

meeting you, so shouldn’t you start getting ready?

Sissel nodded.

* Thank you for taking care of me, it’s very kind of you.

She got up from the couch and walked into the bathroom with unsteady steps. Wine and sedatives were probably not the best combination, she thought. But Karin was Petter’s sister. Sissel had never met her before, and she was anxious. Petter wanted her to move in with him over New Year’s. The idea both tempted and scared her. It was what she had dreamed about before, but… what if Mari came back here, and she was gone?

* Petter, she yelled. – Are you sure moving is a good idea?

He stood in the bathroom doorway and looked at her, his body filled the whole doorway.

* Of course I am. My house is big enough for all of us. Karin has her own flat, so we won’t even notice

she’s there. And no matter what, you’re not staying here alone, and I’ll brook no further argument on that. Besides, – Petter smiled – I’m looking forward to you two getting to know each other. Karin’s going to love you!

She hoped he was right. Petter got a warmer tone in his voice when he talked about his sister, so it was obvious they were close and that wasn’t weird at all. Ever since their parents died in a car accident when they were young, the two siblings had lived together in their childhood home.

A half-hour later she wore a simple, black dress and was all gussied up and ready to go. She studied herself in the mirror; a little bit paler and sadder eyes, but the rest remained the same. It still amazed her, that the gaping hole inside of her didn’t show on the outside, that her eyes were still bluish green. The cliché about the eyes being windows to the soul were apparently not true; they would’ve been black, as bottomless, dead pits. She raised the corners of her mouth, registered that her lips were perfectly done and that her mouth could still resemble a near perfect smile. She grabbed her purse from the living room, and Petter helped her put on her grey woolen blazer in the hallway. It was the only thing she had left. He smiled when he saw her.

* You’re so beautiful. You’re so incredibly beautiful. I can’t wait until Karin sees you, she’s going to fall

in love with you!

* I hope so, Sissel said. – Is it just the three of us, or does she have a boyfriend?

Petter opened the door for her, took hold of her arm and walked with her to the car. The icy ground crackled underneath their feet, their breaths white against the night sky. The headlights made the frost on the ground sparkle; everything was white, virginally untouched, beach and ocean became one. The Mercedes was already running, she got in the comfortable car, the radio played Christmas music. *Wonderful Is The Earth*, in the tune of *Beautiful Savior*.

* No, she doesn’t have a boyfriend. I guess she’s never really had one. I mean, of course she’s had a

few short-lived relationships, but nothing serious.

He smiled and put a warm hand on her thigh. – Maybe she’s waiting for the right one, like I did.

* Do you mean to say she’s never been with anyone? Doesn’t she want her own family? Kids?

Petter lowered the volume on the radio, and turned to her. His face was suddenly very serious.

* Dear, that’s something I don’t think you ought to bring up. See, she had a daughter when

she was very young. She got pregnant after being raped and didn’t say anything about at home until abortion was no longer an option. It was a difficult childbirth that lasted several days, and when all things were said and done, the doctors told her she couldn’t have any more kids. Despite a bad start, you know, she adored the baby girl she had gotten. But something went wrong and when Caroline died… well, her psyche has been very up and down and kids is a very sore subject for her.

* Oh, how sad! How did she die? Caroline, I mean?
* She drowned. Petter gave Sissel a worried look. – I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that before. I just… didn’t

want to upset you or make you sad.

Sissel couldn’t answer. The tears pushed mercilessly from behind her eyelids; she blinked and focused on the winter wonderland flying past the windows. Children just aren’t allowed to die, she thought decidedly. They just aren’t allowed to die.

The last leg of the drive was spent in silence. Petter had turned the radio volume up again and *Silent Night, Holy Night* blared from the speakers. When they had arrived, he swung the car up the wide driveway to the house. A warm and glowing light beamed from the big bay window facing the road, and several outdoor lights that made it seem as if all of the two-story mansion bathed in a yellow and friendly light. Down in the garden she saw aa small house she hadn’t seen the last time she was here; a lonely advent star hung and shone in the solitary window.

* Who lives there? Sissel asked.
* Where?

Petter followed her gaze.

* Oh, that’s just the gardener.
* Was it he who took care of Mari when she didn’t want to be with us when we were here last?

Her voice died away and Petter nodded.

He gripped her lightly under the elbow as they stepped out of the car. – Careful, it might be slippery.

Hand in hand they walk beside each other on the cobblestone path leading up towards the stairs and the wide front door. Before they got all the way there, the door opened, revealing a pale woman with an up-do, standing at the top of the stairs and smiling at them.

* How nice it is to finally meet you, the woman said, extending her hand. – I’m Petter’s sister Karin, but

you already know that. Petter has talked about you so much and said only good things, so I’ve long been looking forward to getting to know you.

Sissel stared at the woman who stood in the doorway. She knew she was staring, but couldn’t take her eyes off that woman. It’s like seeing an older version of myself, Sissel thought. The straight nose, the blonde hair with a few grey stripes, tall chin bones… we even have the lightly V-shaped eyebrows in common, it’s just the eye colour that makes us different. Karin was also as slender as she was, borderline skinny, and even though she was one step higher up, Sissel could tell they were about the same height. Why had Petter never mentioned how much alike they looked?

Karins hand hung in the air still, waiting; she’d got a quizzical expression in her face, but it didn’t seem like she was at all affected by their striking similarity. Sissel managed to get a hold of herself. She parted her lips in a smile, and extended her own hand. Karins handshake was firm, friendly and her voice profusely warm and hearty. We look alike, Sissel thought, but it probably wasn’t strange at all if Petter had found someone resembling a loved one. She had read about things like that; it was very common in fact, Petter may not even be aware of it himself.

Inside the wide front doors there was a surprisingly narrow and long corridor, resembling an intestine. The mirror doors that hid what Sissel assumed was a closet made it seem bigger, but it was still not wider than Petter stepping aside to let Sissel walk ahead of him.

Karin nodded at a coat stand at the end of the hallway.

* Hang your jacket there, and let’s sit down where it’s warm.
* Just remind me to buy you a new blazer for you, Petter said as he helped take Sissel’s outer coat off

at the same time he brushed off a strand of hair from her shoulder. – This one has seen better days.

* It’s more than nice, Karin said and smiled at Sissel. – Petter’s always so neat.

She walked ahead of them into the living room, her high heels clicking and clacking on the parquet. Sissel

regretted not bringing her nice shoes, opting to just wear stockings instead.

* Come in, I’ve lit the fireplace so it’s nice and cozy here.

They entered a big room where a huge fireplace occupied one corner of the room, a group of sofas in cream-coloured leather occupying the other. Sissel felt her shoulders lower while Bing Crosby dreamed of a white Christmas from a hidden speaker.

* The ham is in the oven. It’ll be done soon, but maybe you’d like something to drink first?

Without waiting for a reply, she turned to her brother. – Petter, would you be so kind to fetch us

something to drink?

Petter nodded and left. Sissel sat down on one of the sofas, sinking deep into the soft cushions. Karin sat down next to her, crossed her legs.

* What lovely shoes you have, Sissel said and studied Karin’s deep purple silk shoes. – I don’t think I’ve

ever seen shoes like that before? Did you buy them abroad?

* Thank you, Karin laughed, - but they’re actually old, and I don’t know where they were bought. I

Inherited them from my mother, and I use them only for this time of year; advent and Christmas. It’s become a tradition.

She leaned closer towards Sissel and put a hand on her knee.

* I just think it’s so nice that Petter has finally found someone he wants to bet his future on, Karin

said and smiled. – I had almost stopped hoping it would happen, and now you’re moving in here as well, that’s lovely. We’ll take good care of you, you’ll see.

Karin folded her hands calmly.

* Yes, I’m… I’m glad that he found me, Sissel responded and instantly heard how ridiculous it sounded,

as if she was a bottle Petter had picked up from the side of the road.

Karin’s face became serious, she threw a glance at the door where Petter had made his exit and lowered her voice a little.

* And this thing with your daughter, how terrible!

Sissel nodded and knew she didn’t want to talk about it, that just for one night she’d rather just forget it and think about something else entirely.

* Yes, it’s been rough. The police believe it’s most likely that she’s drowned, and I guess they’re right.

But since they can’t find her, I can’t stop hoping… Petter said you also had a little girl?

Karin stood up, turned her back. She walked towards the window and stared outside; a few ragged snowflakes flew about, barely visible under the street lights.

* Yes, she said in a whisper. – Caroline was my whole life, and even though it’s been years, I still can’t

convince myself that I’ll never see her again. I still expect her to walk in that door, that everything will be the way it used to be.

She turned back around and walked to Sissel, sat down and gave her a warm hug.

* So, I know what you’re going through. But believe me….

She pulled away a little bit and looked Sissel straight in the eyes.

* You may not feel like it now, but things will get better soon. Human beings are stronger than we think.
* What is it we’re thinking? a voice from the door asked.

Petter was back; in his hands, a tray with three glasses, the ice cubes clanging on the glass every step he

took. Karin smiled and stood up. – I think you’ve finally found a very lovely girl, she said, and took one of the glasses.

Day 69

25th December 2005

A door slammed somewhere over her head. Mari tilted her head and listened – is there someone up there, is it him? He hadn’t been back since bringing the buns and that felt like a long time ago, but she didn’t know; it might not have been more than a day or two. It was difficult to keep track of time down here in the cellar. Sometimes she slept which was good, because she’d dream nice dreams about life and the way things were before and time flew much too fast before she’d wake up again. Other times, time stood still, Mari thought. She couldn’t sleep, she missed mum terribly – so much her chest ached and longed to go back to the cabin on the beach. But she couldn’t think of that a lot, at least not all the time because she’d start crying again and that didn’t help much of anything. She was weary and tired of thinking about what the man had said, that it was true, that mummy didn’t miss her at all and was happy she was gone.

The only thing she could do down here in this stupid basement was to wait, and the only thing she could wait for was him, and now he was here. Maybe she had brought wheat buns today as well?

The ceiling creaked. Heavy steps, she could hear him walk across the floor. Mari got up and walked over to the bottom step, waiting. The hatch opened, she heard him whistling before she saw his legs and his brown sneakers, jeans and then the whole man. She didn’t want to, but still couldn’t stop herself from smiling.

* Hey, you’re smiling. Did you miss me?

Mari didn’t answer, tried to quench her joy that the man had come back, that nothing had happened to

him, that she wasn’t going to rot in this smelly cellar after all, hidden and forgotten by all.

* What it is this?

He gripped her hands, studied them closely from the light in the ceiling. – What have you done? Poor girl,

you’ve hurt yourself.

He kissed her scabbed knuckles, his lips were moist, she pulled her hands back.

* It’s nothing. It doesn’t hurt anymore. I’m just very hungry.

He leaned over and opened the bag he brought with him.

* Look at this, little wagtail of mine, I brought you food.

He brought a plate out from the bag, she stared at it. It wasn’t buns this time, it was food. Real, hot food!

The whole cellar immediately filled with the scent of warm food, of sausages, gravy and… ribs? She sniffed the air, her mouth watered.

* Ribs? Is it Christmas?
* Yes, dearie. It’s Christmas, so we’re celebrating today.

She threw herself at the food. He hadn’t brought utensils, but that didn’t matter. She ate with her fingers – the sausage, the slice of ribs and the two potatoes. He ogled her, she was used to it by now; his eyes locked on her mouth, on the food disappearing between her white teeth, on the lightly red tip of her tongue that licked her fingers clean of gravy, fat and peas. The plastic plate was empty soon enough, and she licked it clean of gravy.

* You *were* hungry, weren’t you? he said hoarsely. It almost sounded like he had a cold. She looked up

at him. His face was redder than usual. Maybe he had a fever?

* Yes, very hungry, she said. – What’s your name?

He took the plastic plate and put it back into the bag.

* Daddy, I’ve told you to call me daddy.
* Yes, I know, she said hesitatingly. – I’ll try to remember that, but daddies have names too?
* Yes, he said and smiled. – My name is Ari. Ari and Mari, goes together well, doesn’t it?

She didn’t answer, just nodded her head. Her stomach had already begun to protest the unusual

and meaty diet; she gulped and swallowed down the nasty taste of vomit. My real dad’s name is Abdul, she thought. You don’t even know that, you know almost nothing about me, you’re just a dumb, mean man! She didn’t say it out loud, even if she wanted to. He wasn’t stupid and mean all the time, when she wasn’t behaving. When she did behave nicely she’d tell her stories, sing for her and would give her buns and food. Delicious food.

Instead, she asked:

* Where do you go when you’re not here?
* Oslo, he replied.
* Oslo? So far away? What do you there?
* Work, of course, so I can afford to buy you food.

She gulped again, her stomach rumbled.

* Where do you work?

He gave her an annoying look.

* Someone’s ruddy nagging today. I work at a hotel a friend of mine owns. He’s loaded, he owns the

car I drive as well.

Mari tried to picture it; Ari and his buddy. She’d never thought that he could have friends. Who knows, maybe he even had a wife?

* Are you married?

Ari started laughing. – No, of course I’m not married.

* Do you live there, too? When you’re not here? At the hotel, I mean?

He nodded and stood up.

* What do you do for work?
* Hush, he said annoyed. – You’ve asked enough questions. Come here instead.

Ari stretched out his hand, she took it and he pulled her up the stairs, squeezing her hand tightly all the

way up. It felt like her fingers would shatter at any moment, but she didn’t complain. They stopped at the top of the stairs. It was the first time she’d been up here since he had first brought her here, but the kitchen had not changed a bit. The mustard yellow refrigerator was still there along with a slightly crooked kitchen cabinet where several cabinet door handles were missing. There was a half a loaf of bread on the kitchen counter, the man had obviously sliced bread there without using a bread board, and it looked like the loaf had been there for a while. Stale. If mum had seen this, she would have yelled at him. Curtains with yellow flowers were hung in front the kitchen window, a white and sharp light shone through. Mari squinted her eyes, but she couldn’t stop looking. She pointed at the window.

* Can we go outside? Please?
* Maybe later. If you’re good, he replied and pulled her into an old bathroom. The bathroom was dirty,

it reeked of urine, brown stripes surrounding the once-white toilet bowl. This is where he dumps my toilet, she thought.

* Get in the tub.

She did as she was told; stepped into the cold tub, the enamel on the bottom was cracked, it looked like the crack had bled rusty blood and she curled her toes as to not step on it.

He pulled her t-shirt off and she willingly stepped out of her dirty panties. He turned the shower on, the spout gulped a few times; brown water at first, then clear. The warm and trickling water ran down her shoulders, down her body, she couldn’t remember such a feeling of bliss before. She leaned her head back and opened her mouth, let her mouth fill with water until it was too full, spilling water out. The bar of soap he washed her with smelled exactly like what the soap at home smelled like; Lano for big and small, she thought and smiled. He soaped her hair, face, neck and throat, rubbed the bar of soap gently over her shoulders and back. Bit by bit he cleaned her whole body.

* Turn around, shorty. Put your arms up. There you go, luv.

She put her arms up obediently so that he could reach, every centimeter of her body was rubbed

squeaky clean. Mum used to wash her like this, she remembered, when she was younger, too young to wash herself. Mari leaned backwards and closed her eyes. It ended way too soon.

He turned the water off, it had begun to cool now, and threw a small towel and a green t-shirt with the image of a frog towards her, it looked a little worn.

* Here, dry off and get dressed. I’ll be waiting in the kitchen.

He let the door stay open as he left, she could hear him pulling one of the kitchen chairs out and sitting down. Mari dried off while she studied the bathroom. There was a small, oblong window high up on the wall. Light barely shone through, that’s how dirty it was. There was the rusty tub along with a sink and a round mirror. The face staring back at her was thinner and paler than she remembered, almost grey – how long had she been here? She put the green t-shirt on, it was much too big, almost a short dress on her body, a little worn, but it smelled clean. Who had worn it before her? Mari looked around the bathroom for her panties; under the tub, behind the toilet, but she couldn’t find it. Her pink Minnie Mouse panties was gone.

She stepped into the doorway. Ari stood in the middle of the kitchen, curtains pulled, the snow outside hidden by the flowery curtains.

* Wasn’t it good? Isn’t daddy kind?

She nodded, pulling the t-shirt down to her knees.

* Yes. But I can’t find my panties.

Ari extended his hand towards her, eyes blank.

* Come her, short stuff, it’s Christmas. You don’t need panties. Not today.

Outside the beach cabin the snow lay white and untouched, and the thermometer in the car show five degrees below. Sissel pulled the scarf tighter up her neck when she shut the car door behind her and made her way to the cabin. The key slid effortlessly into the lock, and she heard the familiar creak of the door as it opened. Petter was right behind her, two empty suitcases in his hands. When they had decided to pick up some of the things from the cabin Sissel had asked him if maybe they ought to rent a van. Petter had stared at her a little at first, then just laughed.

* A van? Dearie me, we’re not bringing more than what’s strictly necessary. Seriously, think about it

for a moment: there’s not much there worth keeping and we have everything we need here, don’t we?

She had nodded, reluctantly. He was right after all, the hillside mansion they had most of what they’d need.

* I’d like to bring along some memories, she said, quietly.
* You’ve already brought the photo albums. Are you sure it’s good for you to—
* Yes, she had said, but her voice cracked on the words that followed and the tears flowed freely down

her cheeks.

* Okay then, Petter mumbled. – I’ll find a couple of suitcases in the attic.

And now the two empty suitcases stood on the floor, waiting to be filled. Two suitcases, Sissel thought. Two sodden suitcases. How much could they even fit?

Petter had moved to the porch, talking on his mobile. Sissel moved from room to room trying to figure out what to bring. Petter was right, she saw it much better now that she was here; there wasn’t much here that would fit into Hillside House. She went to the kitchen, studied the refrigerator door with all the magnets. She found an empty box in a cabinet and started boxing the magnets. The hamburger-magnet from McDonald’s, the angry crab, a blue anemone was a memory of a trip to the forest Mari and Sissel had taken, a small train, a red heart. Each magnet was a memory, a good memory. She kept the tears at bay and was glad Petter was still outside on his mobile phone; he’d never understand why she’d save the magnets. She put the box of magnets, now almost full, carefully into one of the suitcases, then went into the bedroom and fished out a few dresses, three pairs of shoes and some underwear. She let the rest of the clothes be; colourful robes and shabby sweatpants didn’t fit into Hillside House. She found a blue vase in the living room that she had gotten from Mari on her last birthday. She remembered her daughter’s shining eyes when she had unwrapped it.

* Do you like it, mummy? Do you like it? I saved a few of my allowance for lots of weeks and bought it

all on my own? Do you like it?

Sissel had studied the cobalt-blue ceramic vase; the price tag from Nille on the bottom was only partially removed.

* Of course I like it, she had said and meant every word. – It’s the most beautiful vase I’ve ever seen.

Sissel wrapped the vase carefully into one of her dresses and put it in one of the suitcases. She picked out most of the books from the bookshelf, despite realising that her romance- and crime novels would hardly impress anyone, especially not compared to Petter’s many classics. But my books have at least been read, she thought. The Hillside classics was mostly ornamental; she had never seen Petter open anything but biographies and textbooks. She took a few paintings from the living room wall that her mother had painted; unskilled daubs, her mother called them – and even though Sissel didn’t like being reminded of her mother, she did like her paintings. The kids room door was closed. Sissel walked slowly towards it, put her hand on the handle, felt nausea roll and coil in her stomach as she pushed the door open. Peering into the room, she barely managed to breathe. The bed sheets were bunched up, the duvet almost looked like it hid someone and for a split second she thought Mari was there. She exhaled. Mari wasn’t there, obviously. It was Pongo, the spotty toy dog Mari had loved. Sissel grabbed the dog and clutched it to her chest, synthetic Dalmatian fur allaying her sobs. When the sobbing subsided, she looked around. The room was just as she had left it; only a thin layer of dust on the wooden dresser and headboard revealed that it had been several weeks since she’d been there. She could hear Petter enter the living room behind her.

* Are you done?

His voice was impatient. She looked at the Mickey Mouse-clock on the wall above the bed, they’d been there just under an hour. She cast one last glance arorund the room, gripped Pongo firmly and closed the door.

* Yes, she said, - I am done.

*He stood in the dark, behind the window, looking at the Mercedes pulling in front of the main doors of the mansion. Petter walked around and opened the car door for Sissel, and together, they pulled out two suitcases from the boot. They seemed, heavy, but it only took them a few minutes to wrangle them up to the top of the stairs. Petter bent over and kissed Sissel square on the lip, a long kiss, before he tore himself free and put the key into the lock. A few seconds later, the big door shut behind them.*

*The man sank down on the narrow wooden chair, staring blankly ahead. It was true then – Sissel was going to move into Hillside House. He shook his head. How could she? Had she really forgotten Mari already? How could they just go on with their lives as if nothing had happened? And what right did Petter have to a happy life after ruining so many others?*

*He got up, filled a glass of water, took big gulps. The water was cold and it cleared his thoughts and calmed some of his rage the loving couple had awoken in him. He had thought Sissel would have grieved longer, maybe dumped the man who had caused her to not look after her daughter. But no, quite the opposite happened. Now that Mari was gone, nothing stood in the way of their relationship.*

*The man drank the rest of water, and put the empty glass back on the kitchen counter. He didn’t like the thought that Petter was happy, but he was happy that he hadn’t killed Mari. She should really be grateful. He had saved her life, and no one else loved her. Only he.*

Håkon stepped into the office; his face grey and serious.

* A fisherman who was out fishing for trout found Mari’s jacket. It’s bleached after spending that much

time in the water, but the name tag in the neck is still visible. It’s just a matter of time before they find the rest of…

He went silent, sat down on his office chair.

Anders looked at his colleague. – We figured that, didn’t we? Did you tell the mother?

* No, I’ve tried her mobile but I can’t reach her. Says her number’s not in service, and no one’s

answering at home, either. I’ll have to call her lawyer friend, he might know where she’s at. I know that bloody fisherman already spoke to the media. Might as well get it over it before it hits the news.

* Eliassen.

The lawyer’s voice was expectant, almost dismissive.

* Hello. Am I speaking to Petter Eliassen.
* Yes. Who’s asking?
* I’m sorry, Håkon coughed. – You’re speaking with Håkon Haakonsen from Sandefjord police

department, we met some time ago regarding Mari Sørensens disappearance?

The line went silent. Håkon imagined the solicitor the last time he saw him; how Petter, furious and upset, had just about chased them out of the office. Of course he remembers me, Håkon thought and coughed into the mouthpiece to remind the other person that he was still there.

* Aye, I do remember, the other person replied. – You wanted to *take a quick look at my car*, wasn’t it?
* That’s correct, Håkon mumbled, knowing full well they had done more than just taken a *quick look*.

They’d come a few bolts short of dismantling it completely and discovering nothing new other than that Mari had been in the car previously, and they knew that she had because both Sissel and Petter had stated she’d been with them when they visited his mansion a few weeks before she disappeared.

* Ah, I *do* remember you, emphasising the third word.
* What’s it this time?
* I’m trying to get a hold of your girlfriend, Sissel. Do you know where I can reach her?
* No. At home?
* I’ve tried calling there, she’s not answering. Maybe you have a mobile number we could try?
* No, I’m sorry. She lost her old one in the sea, and there was something wrong with the new one I

gave her. Could I give her a message?

Håkon hesitated. Could he? Should he? Could he or should give the sad news to the lawyer, say a few compassionate words and then hang up? The thought was tempting. He hated being the guy who cut the last strings of hope. They always hoped, no matter how time had passed, they all hoped. On the other hand, it’d be better for Sissel to find out from the solicitor than by the media.

* Hello? Hello, are you there?

The solicitor sounded impatient.

* Yes, of course. I was just thinking. We… we do prefer to relay such news in person, but since there’s

a chance she might catch it on the news before we get a hold of her…

* … Yes?
* I’m sorry, but we’ve found a children’s jacket in the fjord and we have reason to believe it belonged

to Sissel’s daughter, Mari.

* Reason to believe? What exactly does that mean?
* Well, we’ve found a jacket matching the description of what Mari wore, and it has her name tagged

embroidered in the neck. Sissel must confirm it, obviously, but we are very confident, and this discovery probably spells the end of the investigation on our side, and I’m sorry to say that at this point, only the sea can give us the final answer to Mari’s disappearance.

The conversation was over, and Håkon was left standing with the phone in his hand. He already regretted not getting in the car to give Sissel the news in person. Besides a small sigh, nothing indicated that Petter Eliassen was remotely affected by the news. Maybe you got that way by having the job he had? Håkon searched for the right word. Emotionless? Petter Eliassen did spend most of his life defending some of the worst criminals in Norway.

Petter stepped through the wide mahogany door, stopped right inside to take his shoes off. He put them in the closet, and straightened the doormat while he listened. A moped drove by the house, the engine tattling that it had been buffed. The oak tree outside creaked, a neighbour shut his car door. Someone played loud music further up the street, probably teens, he only heard the thumping bass. It was quiet inside the house.

He went to the living room. Sissel stood next to the sofa, staring at the text rolling across the television. She was wearing a silk skirt, a blue jacket and high heels, and her body faced Petter. Only her head faced the television, where they in short words talked about the jacket they presumed belonged to Mari Sørensen, the missing Mari Sørensen.

Sissel didn’t move, almost seemed as if she had turned into ice mid-movement, her left hand clutching the remote control.

* Hey, he said, taking a step towards her. – You’ve seen the news, then?

Her head moved as if not knowing he was in the room with her until now. Her eyes still glued to the text

flickering across the screen, fingers white gripping the remote.

* They can’t be sure it’s her jacket…

Her voice no more than a whisper.

* I’m sorry, love, they are. The police called me a little while ago since they couldn’t get a hold of you.

That’s why I’m home early. The red jacket they found belongs to Mari. You’ve got to go down to the station to confirm it, so that they can conclude the investigation.

Her face collapsed in front of him; he could see how it shattered after each of his words hit home. Suddenly she had aged ten years. Her eyes overflowed, the red lipstick screamed at him.

* It’s not true! It’s not true! We never found her, the ROV never found her, she could be…

She punched at him, hammering his chest with her fists, she caught her flailing fists and pulled her skinny body towards him and caressed her hair. – There, there.

He comforted her as if she was a toddler, mumbling words down into her scalp.

* Love, you’ve known for a while. We know she’s dead now and since they’ve found her jacket, I’m

sure they’ll find her body soon, too. You’ll have a grave to go to when they do, and I’m sure that’ll be a relief for you, love. Besides, you’re still young. If you want, you can have more kids, our own little heir. Life must go on, love. Life must go on.

*They’d finally found it.*

*The man watched the news, smiling. It’s about ruddy time. He had wondered if that jacket was lost for good, maybe torn apart by waves and currents. But now, the bald copper had his photograph plastered across the front page of Sandefjord Magazine, in his hands the bleached and ragged jacket, its colours much more faded than when they had dropped it into the sea four months ago. Right next to the copper was a photo of Mari, smiling at the photographer accompanied by a short summary of the disappearance and the search. The journalists never made any conclusions, but anyone who read it would never doubt the harsh and brutal reality and the bald coppers grim stare: All hope was lost. Mari had drowned, and they may never recover her body.*

*The man smiled, anxious to tell Mari. Now they could feel safe. They’d stop looking now.*

Karin smiled at her and brushed her shoulder on her way past.

* I’m heading home! Take care.

Sissel shouted her goodbye and watched Karin leave the house, on the way to her own flat, three rooms beneath the main floor of the house. Sissel knew Petter meant well when he asked Karin to take extra good care of Sissel, and in the period shortly after the hospital stay, it was probably even necessary. Karin only worked two days a week, and when Sissel laid in bed wanting most of all to die, Karin was there on her days off to make sure she ate, got up and got dressed, and that she took her medications. But I’m good now, Sissel thought. It’s been over six months since Mari drowned. It’s about time I can manage on my own. I must try to live with the fact they may never find her.

The police had received several tips a day in the first month since the disappearance. Mari had been seen everywhere; in Norway and abroad, at Svinesund, Morocco, Germany. None of the leads proved fruitful, apparently plenty of children with dark hair resembled Mari. Other kids, kids who lived at home with their unsuspecting parents, parents that called the police in horror when they realised that their child had been confused with Mari.

Many psychics tried to contact her the first few weeks as well. None came to her door, thankfully, but they called. She had listened to them the first few times, taken notes and gathered information they gave her in the hope that some of them really had the answers the police hadn’t found yet. After a while, she understood that what they told her was nonsense; their stories too different, too incredible, and those who called often spoke frantically and incoherently, some seemed almost crazy. One woman said Mari was in Denmark in a cabin near the sea, another said she was in Spain in a castle-like home, another said she was trapped in a basement, yet another claimed she lay dead at the bottom of the sea, tangled in a fishing net. None of the psychics could tell her where Mari was exactly, only vague descriptions of landscape that could be anywhere, but each one convinced they were right. An old man called to yell at her, saying she was a terrible mother for letting Mari play by herself, another man apologized on behalf of the police, saying they were useless to do anything but persecute innocent people and bother decent, law-abiding citizens with radar controls.

Several elderly ladies called to tell her they prayed for her, that God was on her side, another caller, this time a young woman, cried over the phone and begged Sissel for help to find her own child that her ex-husband had kidnapped. As if Sissel had any semblance of help to offer her. It soon became apparent there were simply too many of them – crazy people, desperate people and, according to the police, perhaps even dangerous people. When her last mobile phone made its escape into the sea, it stopped. The new phone Petter had bought her was registered to his firm so the nutters couldn’t find her number.

Sissel thought back to the day when she was the police station to confirmed the jacket they had found belonged to Mari. Anders Gullbrandsen had been visibly upset, and she hadn’t been able to cry, much less speak when she saw the jacket that had once been almost luminescent red. Now it was faded and weathered, but there was no doubt – it was the jacket Petter had bought for Mari. The name tag, with her daughter’s name elaborately embroidered on it, had remained untouched by sun and sea.

Sissel stared out of the window without seeing anything. There was no gentle way to tell a mother that her child had drowned. She had not screamed nor cried, just clutched the coffee mug he handed her, as if holding on to the mug lessened the pain. He spoke all through that meeting. She mustn’t blame herself, it could’ve happened to anyone, drowning is not the worst way to die. All those words rang empty and hollow. She sat silent and the officer’s words sink in. Mari. Drowned. Mari. Dead.

She was sad and upset, of course, all hope was lost. Her daughter gone forever, never to be reunited. Never to see each other again. Still, the strongest emotion right there and then at the station, peering into Anders Gullbrandsen’s worried eyes, she could never, ever tell anyone about. No one would understand, they’d think her emotionless, because she strongest emotion was relief.

Relief that she finally knew. She had imagined so many things, so many painful dreams, thoughts about what might’ve happened to her daughter never gave her peace. Finding Mari’s jacket gave her closure, and a beginning of something else. Despite not finding her body still, she knew. Her daughtered had drowned. Or… my brain knows, Sissel thought, but my heart won’t know peace until they find her body. And maybe not even then.

Sissel walked to the window and stared outside. The sky was blue without a single cloud, early spring. The garden outside Petter’s house had begun to flower, but the view was too clean and neat and made her want olden times at the cabin on the beach, to “the dilapidated hut”, a nickname Petter had given it. She knew he didn’t like it, so she didn’t tell him that she’d go back there several times a week walking along the beaches, climbing the rocks and peering at the blue-grey sea. Looking for traces of her daughter in all that grey and blue and dark and deep.

The only one she told was Dr. Wurth, the psychiatrist Petter had insisted she’d see. Every Wednesday she sat in the sterile office and stared into those cold eyes of his, glasses and all, while he asked her questions she couldn’t fathom were interesting in the slightest; usually about her past, about her parents, her kind father who died when she was 10. Her mother’s increasing use of alcohol and her frustration over not being able to make it as a painter, a frustration that often affected Sissel. Abdul, former boyfriends, the friends she had lost contact with after giving birth to Mari – all were topics she had no desire to talk about. He’d often ask about her time with Mari, how it had been and if it had been stressful being a single mother; constantly trying to make her realize that Mari was dead, to think of herself, look forward and start fresh. Maybe have another child, she was young, after all. His attention was first and foremost on the fact she had to stop looking, not visit the beach all the time, stop hurting herself.

Every week she nodded and agreed, he was probably right, she was going to stop doing it, soon. Every week he nodded, dissatisfied and looked at his watch. His next patient awaited, Sissel repeated that she would do exactly what he said, but they both knew she lied. She couldn’t stop, not yet, nowhere else did she feel as close to Mari as she did on the beach. Perhaps she was down there, alone and cold?

Her phone rang. She jumped despite knowing who it was. Only Petter had her new number. The phone rang again, once, twice, three times. She answered.

* Hey, it’s me.
* Hi.
* How are you?
* Good, I’m good.
* Are you taking your medication? Has Karin been with you today?

Sissel glanced at the counter, at the pills – sleeping medication, sedatives, anti-depressants.

* Yes, she has. She takes good care of me. She just went down to her flat.
* Good. It’s important, you know, so you don’t get sick on me again.

Sissel interrupted: - Are you coming home early today?

Her voiced sounded more pleading than she’d wanted, the line went silent. Sissel imagined him scribbling and doodling with his right hand while the phone rested between his right shoulder and cheek, how his face became serious when listening. Or maybe he paced around the large mahogany desk in trampled patterns made by earlier conversations. Back and forth, to the end of the room where he stopped next to the window and went all the way back to his desk, where she had once laid as he…

She pushed the image away, and repeated the question with a more stiffer voice.

* When will you be home today? Am I making dinner tonight?

His tone changed, became sharp and business-like.

* I’m sorry, but I’m drowning in work over here, so I don’t think I’ll be home before late. Don’t worry

about food for me, I’ll get something easy at the office. Someone’s got to work, you know.

He didn’t say anything else. Didn’t need to. Sissel was on sick leave still. The calendar hung on the kitchen wall; she hadn’t worked in over six months. Mohammed, the owner of the restaurant, had sent her a bouquet of flowers right after they’d found Mari’s jacket along with a card where all her colleagues wrote that they were in her thoughts and prayers and that they were thinking of her. Thinking of her. None of them had come to visit, no one had asked when she was coming back or if she was coming back at all.

* Okay, I understand. I’ll see you tonight, then. Love you.

She ended the call before he could answer. She knew he’d been patient. It wasn’t his fault that she’d

become a crying mess, a mistress from hell…

The next day, she sat in the soft leather couch in the living room, leafing aimlessly through an interior design magazine Karin had bought for her when she heard his Mercedes in the driveway. She checked the clock on the living room wall with a puzzled look. It was about 5 o’clock and Petter usually came home a few hours later than that. If he’d let her know, I could’ve made food for the both of us, she thought. The last few weeks he’d usually already ate by the time he came home. Sissel herself didn’t wasn’t hungry at all, and eating alone was certainly not tempting.

*What a beautiful morning, what a beautiful day…*

The song snuck through the half-open living room window, filling the quiet room with sound. Sissel got up and saw him walk towards the house; impeccably dressed in a black suit, a bouquet of flowers in his hand, red roses in transparent cellophane. Sissel emptied the rest of the wine in one gulp and went to meet him. She stopped for a moment in front of the mirrored wall, her eyes a bit swollen still. She brushed her bangs down her forehead, pulled up the corners of her mouth and greeted him as the front door opened, he smiled when he saw her.

* Hey there, girl.
* Thank you.

She accepted the roses, walked ahead of him into the kitchen and found the cobalt blue ceramic vase, Mari’s birthday present. She filled the vase with warm water, unwrapped the flowers. Twelve long-stemmed red roses.

* A rose for each month since I first laid eyes on you.

He whispered it into her hair, his breath was warm against her ear, she pulled away slightly.

The bouquet was too big for the vase, she removed some of the leaves and squeezed it into place, a

thorn stung her palm. The water was steaming, burning her fingertips. Roses were supposed to have warm water, Petter had taught her that. He gave her flowers every weekend, always blood-red roses.

* Thank you, they’re beautiful.

She bent over the bouquet, stuck the tip of her nose into the soft, velvety red. They smelled like…

nothing. She remembered the smell of the bouquets Mari used to picked for her, lily of the valley, she swallowed deeply and put the vase in the middle of the kitchen table.

* Don’t you think one of the tall crystal vases would look better? he asked and sized up the bouquet.

Twelve elegant long-stemmed roses in a blue vase, a little too small. The beauty lies in the contrast, she thought, but didn’t say. Petter looked at her, examining her.

* You’re so quiet today. I thought you’d be happy I was home early? Is something wrong?
* No, she mumbled and turned her back to him. – Would you like a glass of wine? I didn’t cook

anything, but maybe we have some cheese and crackers…

* No thank you, I’m neither hungry or thirsty, he said and got a crystal vase from one of the kitchen

cabinets, moving the bouquet into the new vase. He was right, of course, the roses looked and fit much better in the crystal vase. Petter approached her. He pulled her close, kissed her neck along her throat, a hand caressed a breast. He put her down gently, made love to her on the kitchen floor. When he came, he bit her shoulder and sunk onto her, heavy and spent.

* I love you, he said afterwards, standing over her, pulling his black slacks back on. – You know I love

you, right?

She nodded and got up. He grabbed her chin, stared into her eyes. She nodded again.

* I know. Of course, I know.

She saw the calendar behind his shoulder, the red ring around today’s date, April 28th. Mari was eight

years old today. Mari would have been eight years old today.

Day 193

28th April 2006

Mari starred at Ari as he walked down the cellar stairs. He held a package, a big gift, wrapped in shiny, red paper.

* Happy birthday! he said and put the gift out for her to grab.
* Is it my birthday today?
* Yes, you’re eight years old today! Here you go.
* Is it from mummy? she whispered.

Ari stopped smiling, pulled his hand and the gift backwards.

* No. I’ve told you already that your mother wants nothing to do with you. Petter and her asked me to

kill you, how many times must I tell you that? They’re living together now, in his big, fancy house and they’re doing great. They wouldn’t be this happy if you were there. You understand that now, right?

Mari shook her head. She didn’t understand. Mum loved her, all mums loved their kids, didn’t they? Didn’t they?

She swallowed the lump in her throat, knew she mustn’t cry. She could see he was annoyed already, and she didn’t want to make him angry. Not today, not on her birthday.

* Okay. Can I have my present now?

Ari stretched his hand out and threw the gift at her with a groan, his smile gone.

The gift was soft and light. She shook it about a little bit, but it didn’t make a sound. Was it clothes, maybe?

* Open it before I change my mind!

Change your mind? You can’t give something away, only to take it back. That’s not allowed, she thought,

but hurried nonetheless, and tore open the red wrapping paper. She recognized it immediately; it was the same bear that Petter had brought that day on the beach, the same day Ari came. But it wasn’t wet anymore, and the bowtie around its neck was green and new. She caressed its head, the bear’s black buttoned eyes staring blankly up at her, its brown fur soft under her fingers.

* What do you say? Ari asked and put a hand on her naked knee. – Do you love me now?
* Yes, she whispered, pulling the teddy bear close.
* Yes? Only yes?

His hand moved, his nails drawing white stripes up her thigh, he blew air softly in her ear, warm, it tickled.

* Yes, daddy, she replied. – I love you. Thank you very much.

Afterwards, long afterwards, he left. The cellar was quiet, only the ticking from the small clock on the floor next to her mattress broke the silence. Since she was so wimpy and afraid of the dark, Ari had kept the light on at night so she could watch the clock and know when she’d go to bed at night. He had told her never to go to bed later than eight o’clock; if she didn’t go to bed at that exact time, he’d start turning the light off again.

Mari walked to the wall, drawing another white chalk line as she did every night before she went to bed. She’d been so sure she’d be home before drawing 100. Now it was almost 200 lines there. Maybe 200 was the magic number?

Mari checked the clock. Ten past eight, but he couldn’t see her when he wasn’t here, could he? Besides, it was her birthday after all, and she had always stayed up a little past bedtime on her birthday. Mum was probably doing the dishes at home, she did that almost every night. Sometimes mum had let Mari help her dry the dishes, but usually she’d lay in bed, listening to clinking and clanking of glass cups and utensils and knew that mum would be at the foot of her bed the next morning, smile down at her and calling her a sleepy head. If Mari was lucky, she’d have bread with Nugatti whilst mum always had crispbread with liver paste. Mari lifted the bear.

* Poor mum, she whispered into the fuzzy fur. –She has to eat breakfast by herself, now.

Sissel parked the car, and sat inside, looking at the cabin. It was as if it grew more and more dilapidated every time she came back. The crooked board above the door looked more crooked, the cracks in the window pane became more obvious. The contrast from her old home to Hillside House became more apparent with each passing day, she thought, or was it just that I didn’t notice how bad it was before?

She opened the car door and closed it behind her. The humid sea air hit her, she opened her mouth, inhaled. Decay or not, it was like coming home. She heard the waves crashing on the beach below the cabin, a crow squawking above her, a pebble bouncing ahead of her up the gravel pathway. Tufts of grass had popped up in the middle of said gravel path, as nature always reclaimed what wasn’t being maintained. The front door creaked when she opened it. It smelled musty. She hadn’t been there in, what, three weeks now? It somehow felt much longer than that. She let her index finger glide over the hallway dresser, it gave her fingertips goose pimples. Sissel walked into the kitchen. The contrast from this kitchen to Hillside House was enormous, and she now knew why Petter would much rather demolish the cabin than renovate it or sell it. Poor Petter, he was always so neat and meticulous; so studious in ensuring everything was in its proper place – shoes, canned food, spices, books. How on Earth had he even managed to stay here without going nuts? Even the walls here were crooked.

Sissel left the kitchen, walked through the living room and into Mari’s room. Nothing had been moved; it was exactly the way she had left it. The teddy bears stacked on the bed, a bald doll on the window sill. Sissel picked it up, the baby doll opened its eyes and stared at her with piercing blue eyes. It felt so real that Sissel jumped and dropped it on the floor. She let it lay there; Mari was more of a sucker for teddy bears than dolls, Sissel thought. Mari was tough.

Below the cabin, waves crashed on the empty beach, throwing golden white foam on the sand. The swelling waves forced their way onto the beach, a small line of foam formed on top of the waves before retreating, preparing for another attack. The view was great, despite the water that had killed and hid her daughter, still.

Was it truly possible that Mari was down there on the bottom somewhere? Maybe caught in a fishing net, that she’d be there forever until nature and the fish had nibbled on her tiny body and there was nothing left of her but bones? The ROV that had Petter had rented had covered every meter of the sea floor. Sissel knew that the search had cost Petter nearly half a million crowns, and yet they had found nothing. Truth be told, she might never have a definite answer.

Sissel shook her head. She didn’t believe it, didn’t want to, couldn’t. But where else could Mari be? Even if the ROV didn’t find anything, the ocean outside the fjord was capricious and a child’s body could’ve been carried far out to sea. Sissel sighed, she caught herself more and more often thinking of her daughter in past tense. Mari was tough, Mari was…

The drawers in the old, brown living room sideboard was full of photographs and papers. Sissel picked up a picture of Mari. It was taken on her third birthday; the open child’s mouth was full of chocolate cake. Sissel gathered the pictures together and put them in a plastic bag. She should’ve brought them when she moved, she thought. Just another example that she wasn’t quite right; a bad mistress and even worse mother. At the bottom of the drawer she found a picture of Mari as a new-born, her daughter lay on the changing table staring directly into the camera. Sissel gently stroked the picture with her index finger, tears overwhelmed her, suddenly and without warning. She knew she couldn’t fight it and just let them flow. After ten minutes, she was empty.

Sissel walked into the kitchen, blew her nose on napkins on the counter. The old doors underneath the counter loudly creaked in protest when she opened them, a light cloud of dust whirling in the light. She remembered correctly; next to about a dozen empty wine bottles, she found the white wine – Riesling – one of the many bottles Petter had brought. The bottle was heavy and cold against the palm of her hand. She opened the top cabinet, and didn’t find any wine glasses. She found a regular glass, filled it up and took a big sip. The wine was lukewarm and sour, her lips pursed, the acidity burning her tongue. Sissel wrinkled her nose, but still emptied the glass, refilled it, drank it quickly and felt the familiar and welcoming veil encompassing her body. It felt good. She stumbled a little bit when, two glasses later, she put the bottle away in the cabinet and the glass in the sink. The kitchen faucet burped a few times before water flowed. The first stream came in rusty brown pulses, reminiscent of old blood. Then the water turned clear and she cleaned the glass. Darkness fell outside the window. Mari should’ve been home long ago.

Day 268

12th July 2006

Teddy sat next to her mattress and looked at her with its big button eyes. Mari smiled at him. Teddy was her friend, her only friend and he was soft and nice to hold. They were besties, Teddy and her. The sounds from the mattress made her turn her head, she studied the two bodies down there, almost hidden under the worn duvet cover. They looked different from up here. The back was hairy, she didn’t usually see this, but it was very hairy. A bunch of black hair plunged its way through his mesh undershirt, long and curly hair. The hair on his head was short on top, the brown hair curling around a whiter spot on his scalp. His hair started to get damp, drops of sweat trickling down his back. He didn’t seem particularly strong either, from this high vantage point. A sinewy body under a ragged duvet cover. The body beneath him was smaller; so small that one could barely see it. She could only see the arms that stuck out, laying still on the mattress. One hand lay open, she could see the green, heart-shaped ring. Mum had called it a lucky ring. Mari didn’t believe in lucky rings anymore, but it was quite nice either way. The other hand clutched the duvet cover. The room smelled musty, full of sweat and urine. Mari wished she could fly through the brick wall, through the forest and back to the beach below the cabin. She clenched her eyes shut and pictured it; a boat sailed past on the water, it was summer. It was a nice boat, with white great sails. A slight gust of wind, but the water lay silent and blue. Poor Teddy. The boat rocked beneath her feet, someone groaned, and the wooden hull creaked. The salt air hit her nose, a few drops of water hit her forehead, she didn’t dry them off, only shut her eyes closed harder. Teddy sat next to the mattress and looked at them, he couldn’t close his black button eyes. Mari regretted not turning his head to face the wall.

Sissel had basically been skeptical about moving into Hillside House while Karin lived there, but it had gone far better than she’d feared. They saw very rarely at night, but it happened from time to time that she dropped by while Petter was at work. They’d chat, watch TV together, have a cup of tea, coffee or a glass of wine. Sissel had thought it was unusual and strange at first, but she’d come to appreciate the visits and chats they had. They’d become really good friends, and thanks to Karin, Sissel had found out more about the two siblings and their childhood, a tragic affair, really. A subdued mother and a domineering and brutal father.

It was also quite welcomed to talk about the grief of losing Mari with someone who truly understood her. Karin talked about Caroline quite often; things she had said and done, what she liked to eat, how sensible and kind she’d been. It was obviously that the loss of her daughter still pained her, and how she was convinced her daughter was alive and that they’d see each other again, even after all these years. Sissel didn’t know if she could stand it – hoping, waiting, dreaming like that year after year after year – but as long as Mari remained missing, she’d have to live with the uncertainty; the what-ifs, the maybes…

The tears were never far away; the floodgates opened for any sad piece of news regarding the accidental death of a child or a child dying in a catastrophic event half across the globe. She’d cry for the smallest thing; even the sound of children laughing would rip her tear ducts open, tear her heart in two and leave her breathless and longing for her missing child.

Maybe it’d get better soon, she thought, and put a hand over her flat stomach. It must get better soon.

Sissel checked the clock, it was almost four, Petter had promised to come home early for dinner, and she’d planned to make one of his favorite dishes – at least, the ones she could make. Steak with broccoli and béarnaise sauce.

An hour later they sat across each other; he ate with a healthy appetite, she had to force down every scrap of food. After finishing dinner and sitting down in the living room, she cleaned the table before sitting next to him on the couch. She gripped his hand and placed it on her stomach. He stared at her, not knowing the implication; his pupils dilated as he began to understand.

* Are you kidding? Is it really true? You’re on the pill, aren’t you?

Petter jumped up and stood in front of her, his hands whirring in the air as if they were looking for

something to grab on to.

* No, it’s true. I’ve taken the pill every night, but it’s not 100% guaranteed, but… she stuttered, the

lump in her throat grew.

* I hope you’re happy? I mean… you’ve said you want kids, and—and I know it’s a bit early, but…

Petter smiled at her, grabbed her waist and pull her up off the couch, spun her round and round until

they both fell laughing over each other on the couch.

* Early! Are you mad, I’m chuffed to bits! We’ve got to celebrate this!

They went to Solvold, the only gourmet restaurant in Sandefjord and it was only when the waiter brought the menu that Petter remembered they had already eaten. He asked the waiter for a dessert menu instead, and Sissel ordered a chocolate mousse that melted on her tongue, she thought she’d never tasted something as delicious. In all honesty, she wanted a second portion, but let it be; it was too early to be eating for two, after all. Petter had glazed strawberries and a bottle of champagne, followed by three drinks in quick succession. Sissel had water only, and when the taxi dropped them off outside their house later that night, he was drunker and happier than she’d ever seen him.

It was completely dark outside of the big living room windows. She could hear Petter rummage around the bathroom. She sat in the dark, facing the apple trees in the garden when he came back into the living room. He strode across the room, fell on his knees on the carpet, head in her lap.

He looked up and met her gaze, his eyes blank.

* I’m sorry for being a little bit pissed, I’m just… I’m just incredibly happy. I really love the thought of

having a child with you. I think I’ve wanted to ever since I saw you, you know, that night at La Scala. I just hope I can be a good dad, you know? I know I can seem confident, but my childhood was pretty shit…

Petter went silent, Sissel held her breath and waited for him to continue. It was the first time he told her something from his childhood on his own accord.

* Eivind, my dad, was a bastard. He hit both mum, Karin and me. I don’t know what it’s like to be a

dad, and those times I’ve tried to get close to children; Caroline, your Mari, well… you know. It didn’t go very well.

Sissel stroked his hair.

* Poor, poor you. Karin told me about how the two of you grew up, no child should ever experience

that, it’s awful.

He lifted his head and peered up at her. – Karin? What did Karin say?

Sissel smiled. – No need to be afraid, she only speaks kindly of you, and I’m sure you’ll be the world’s best dad. In fact, I’m sure of it.

She held him close, stroked his back. He lifted his head and kissed her. His tongue tasted sweet, his toothpaste. They made love on the couch, sweat beading on his forehead, dripping down on her face. She opened her mouth and let the salty drops hit her tongue.

* I hope it’s a boy, he said afterwards as he got up and put his pants back on.

He came home early the next day. Sissel was in the kitchen, brewing a pot of coffee when he was suddenly there, right behind her. Startled, she dropped the coffee filter full of coffee grounds on the floor and quickly bent over to clean it up.

* I’m sorry, I’m sorry…

Petter grabbed her shoulders.

* Fucking hell, forget about the coffee, look here. I brought something for you.

He put his hand in his jacket pocket, pulled out a small jewelry box and bent one knee in front of her.

* Sissel, my love, I love you. I want us to be together for the rest of our lives. Would you marry me?

Sissel looked down at him, the big chunk of a man in a newly pressed Armani-suit, on one knee on a floor

full of freshly ground coffee. The sight was surreal, she couldn’t help but smile.

* You’re smiling. Can I take that as a yes?

He looked up at her, pleading.

* Yes, she nodded. – Of course I do. She stroked her belly without realizing it. – But maybe we could

wait until… you know, after?

A shadow flashed in front of his eyes, then disappeared. He smiled.

* We can get married now if you want, if you’ll promise me I’ll get my happy-go-lucky girl back?

He got up and grabbed her hand, lifted it to his mouth, his tongue tickled against her skin; he put the ring

on her finger, white gold with a lonely and far too big diamond. She heard a heartbeat, then a loud flutter of beats, she didn’t know if it was his or hers. I love him, she thought. He is far more than I deserve.

The sun shone from a clear sky as Petter drove in front of the house the next day, and backed the Mercedes into the garage. He walked up to the house and looked up at the empty kitchen window as he passed the main entrance, knowing full well Sissel was at her weekly psychiatry appointment. He stopped in front of the more modest side door, the front door to Karins flat. He lifted his hand and knocked, three quick knocks before he opened the door and entered without waiting for a response. Karin stood in the middle of the living room and looked at him.

* Hi, she said without smiling. How nice of you to stop by.

He heard the sarcasm in her voice, ignored it and gave her a hug instead.

* I always have time for you, you know that.

She didn’t answer him. She wriggled out of his embrace.

* Would you like coffee? Wine?
* No thank you, he said, sitting down on the couch in the living room, and clapping the cushion next to

him. - Sit down. We need to talk.

She sat on the edge of the couch, his hand stroked her back gently, the index finger followed her shoulder blade.

* I proposed to Sissel last night. She said yes.

Karin abruptly turned her head and stared at him. She said nothing. Her face showed no emotions, but

he could see her knuckles whiten, a small red blood vessel beating in her temple. She turned her back to him, got up, straightened one of the many books that were already correctly placed in the book shelf. The ticking of the German pendulum clock was the only thing that broke the silence.

* Why? she finally asked. – Sissel is a lovely girl, but why marry? Besides, it hasn’t been that long since

she lost her daughter. Isn’t it a bit unseemly? Does she really want to get married that quickly?

He got up as well, leaned forwards – cheek to cheek – she smelled vaguely of shampoo and perfume. He closed his eyes.

* Why? she repeated. Her voice thinner now, almost cracking. – You already live together. What can a

marriage give you that you don’t already have?

* Sissel is pregnant, he said in a hushed voice. – You know I’ve always wanted a son and I’ve seen my

share of desperate men lose contact with their child because they didn’t have the wits about them to marry their mum.

Petter smiled.

* Sissel will give me a son, and we’ll be a family. A real family.

The doorbell rang, Sissel checked the time, it was almost past two o’clock. Only Karin visited her these days, with the exception being salesmen wanting to sell her the best in house alarms, fire insurance or TV subscriptions – salesmen were not allowed to enter the house, Petter had told her, after she’d been convinced into buying a German vacuum for 20,000 crowns. The salesman had been both handsome and kind, and the vacuum worked like a charm, but Petter had flown into a rage. The next day she’d called the salesman and asked him if he couldn’t pick up the vacuum, but when she told Petter she’d returned it, he flew yet again into a fit of rage. She understood then that it wasn’t the vacuum that had caused his rage, but jealousy about the handsome salesman. It would’ve been comical if he hadn’t been so visibly upset. As if she was interested in anyone else but Petter!

Sissel peered out of the peep hole in the door; no salesman today, thank God. It was Karin, smiling.

* Hey, she said eagerly when Sissel opened the door. – Petter stopped by yesterday to tell me that you

two are expecting! Congratulations! How fun!

Sissel combed her hand through her hair and regretted not putting makeup on, but couldn’t help but return the smile to the excited guest.

* Thank you very much. Do come in, she said, - have a cup of coffee or something while I shower and

get ready. Petter and I were up too late last night, so I’ve just been moseying around this morning. I’m tired these days too, I’m sure it’s the pregnancy.

Karin nodded. – I was the exact same way with Caroline the first few months.

A shadow passed over her face, then Karin smiled again. – Go on, get ready, I’m in no hurry.

Twenty minutes later they sat on opposite sides of the kitchen table.

* Have you decided on a name yet? Karin asked eagerly. – Have you even thought of a name?
* We don’t even know the gender yet, Sissel said laughing. – I haven’t had an ultrasound yet, so it

being a boy is just something Peter has decided on his own. Petter wants to name him Eivind, after your dad. I think it’s a little bit strange, since he was so mean to you, but Petter says it’s a tradition?

* Yes, Karin nodded. – It’s always been that way in our family; the first-born boy is always named after

the grandfather.

She leaned forward and gave Sissel a hug. – I’m sure your boy will be a kind and decent boy, no matter the name. He’ll have you as a mum!

* Oh, thank you, that’s very kind! Sissel said and smiled. She shrugged her shoulders. – Names aren’t

really that important to me and Eivind is a nice name, don’t get me wrong. But I hope Petter won’t be disappointed if it’s a girl…

* It’ll turn out whatever way Petter wants it to turn out, Karin said with a smile. – He usually gets his

way. Here, have some more wine, we’ve got to celebrate!

Karin filled the glasses on the table. Sissel knew she shouldn’t, but still took a hearty sip from her glass. It was just wine, after all…

* I’m so glad it’s you, Karin giggled and sipped her glass. – Petter usually fell for the dumbest girls. You

know, all tits and no brains.

* Oh? I thought…

Sissel went quiet. Petter never spoke of any women before her, but of course there’d been others.

Anything else would be weird.

* Oh, don’t worry, Karin said and put a reassuring hand on her thigh. – It was silly of me to mention it.

Besides, there’s something about you. After Petter met you, he’s become a different person. He’s much happier…

She went quiet for a moment, looked at Sissel. – You guys are doing okay, right?

* Yes! Of course, Sissel said and nodded her head vigorously. – Of course we’re doing alright, she

repeated. – Why do you ask?

Karin gave her a serious look. – I care about you, you know, and even though I love my brother dearly, he can be a bit… moody sometimes. But let’s not talk about that, have another glass of wine! Isn’t this wine delicious?

* It was delicious, but I shouldn’t have anymore, Sissel said. – I’ve got a baby to think about.
* Oh, come off it, a bit of wine won’t hurt you. Did you know that Hispanic countries recommend

women to drink at least one glass of red wine per day? This hysterical caution only exists here in Norway, Karin said and pour her glass full. – Red wine contains plenty of iron and antioxidants. You’re far too pale and thin, so this is only good for you.

Sissel laughed and took another sip. To glasses of wine, that couldn’t hurt, could it? She drank far more when she’d been pregnant with Mari; mostly because she hadn’t known she’d been with child until she was five months pregnant, and Mari had turned out quite alright.

The gardener passed by the window. Both women followed him with their eyes.

* He’s quite handsome, isn’t he? Karin asked and giggled.
* For being that old, I guess he is. He’s got to be over 60, doesn’t he? How long has he worked here?
* As long as I can remember. It was my father who hired him, so he’s been here since I was a little girl.

Sissel’s gaze traced the gardener’s movements. If she hadn’t known he was Greek, she wouldn’t have

guessed it. His skin colour was almost as white as hers, despite spending much of his time outside in the sun. The curly brown hair was a bit too long but it was surprisingly thick, considering his age.

* Do you think he dyes his hair?

Karin shrugged.

* Don’t know. He’s always had thick, brown hair. Maybe he just has good genes.

The muscles in his upper arm contracted has the gardener bent down to pick up a new bag of soil out of

the wheelbarrow beside him. Karin was right, he was a handsome man.

* Has he never been married?
* Oh yes, he was. He married a Norwegian lady. They had a boy, but his wife died during labour. I think

my dad felt sorry for them after that, and that’s why he let him stay here. I dated his son during my youth, he was a few years older than me.

* The gardener has a son? Does he visit?

Karin looked away. Suddenly her cheery mood was blown away.

* Yes, he had a son named Nicolai. He’d pop round from time to time, but he died a few years ago. Last

I saw him was at Oslo S. I walked straight at him, but I barely recognized him. He was a total mess and high on drugs. He looked like a skeleton, quite honestly.

She smiled again. – Let’s talk about something nicer, okay? When are you getting married?

* We haven’t talked about it much yet, Sissel said hesitantly. – But it won’t be until after I’ve given

birth.

When Petter came home about an hour after Karin had left, he threw a single glance Sissel’s blank eyes before exploding.

* You’re pregnant, he raged, - you mustn’t drink! Have you no idea what the alcohol does to the child

you carry? I won’t let you harm my child! You hear?

Sissel looked away, heard despair behind the rage and knew it was right. Still, she protested.

* It wasn’t that much, I only had two glasses of red wine with Karin, and she’s the one who brought…

His faced darkened. She backed up two steps before realising his anger was no longer aimed at her. He

turned his back to her and stormed out of the room. Seconds later she heard the door to Karin’s flat close with a hard thud.

Two hours later he emerged. The anger had subsided, now he just looked tired, almost sad.

* What is it? What did you tell her? Sissel asked nervously.

Petter stopped in front of her, his voice devoid of emotion.

* She is to move the second our child’s been born. We’ll need the flat for the au pair, anyway. Until the

baby’s born, I’ve told her to stay away from you.

* But she’s only been nice to me, Sissel protested in shock. – You can’t just kick her out, she’s your

sister! I don’t want an au pair either, I want to take care of my own child!

* There’s nothing to discuss. I’m not kicking her out obviously, I’ll buy her another flat, he said. His

Voice brook no arguments, he had already made up his mind. As he walked out of the room, he added, almost as a throw-away sentence: - And we’ll speed up the wedding. I’ve thought about it, and I don’t want my son to be born out of wedlock. I’ve already made an appointment with the bailiff on Friday in three weeks.

Petter remained unmoved; they were going to marry at the bailiffs on Friday the 22nd of September. Sissel, really, was just happy regardless. Her stomach didn’t show, and now she didn’t have to worry about much else than a wedding dress. No big party, no family, just her and Petter and his two groomsmen, which were two of his colleagues from his office. The only thing she thought was sad was not inviting Karin. The two siblings had become friends again, Petter even had dinner with his sister several times a week. Even so, Petter had made it clear she was not invited to the wedding and that Sissel was not to visit her as Karin was a bad influence on her. Sissel understood he only wanted what was best for her, and it *was* a mistake to drink wine, but she thought it was sad he was so adamant about it. As close as the two siblings were, and he’d marry without his big sister there? And poor Karin, what of her? Did she think Sissel didn’t want her to come?

The next morning, after Petter had left for work, Sissel saw Karin walk across the gravel towards the postbox. Sissel hurried into the hallway, threw on a pair of sandals and walked after Karin. The months had sped past and though it was September, summer was still in the air and a few birds tweeted happily from the apple tree in the garden. One of the neighbours further up the street had started their day by mowing the lawn, and the sound of the lawnmower came and went with the wind.

Sissel stopped directly behind Karin, about to take the morning paper out of the postbox.

* What a lovely day, Sissel said loudly.

Karin whirled around and looked at her.

* My God, you startled me. I didn’t hear you coming.

Sissel smiled.

* I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you. I saw that you were outside, and I wanted to talk to you a

little bit.

Karin looked away, her gaze searching for the garage, where Petters car usually stood when he was at

home.

* Petter left, Sissel said reassuringly. – But we’re adults; surely we should be able to talk to each other

if we want to?

Karin put the newspaper under her arm and stepped aside; it looked as if she wanted to leave without answering.

* I miss you! Sissel added, barely audible, but still loud enough for Karin to stop.
* I miss you too, she said with a flicker of a smile, - but when Petter has made his mind up about

Something, I just can’t be bothered to argue with him. Karin shook her head apologetically. – I’m sure things will be fine once you’re married and your baby’s born.

* But what about the wedding? Do you not want to be there? He’s on your only brother, after all?

Karin shook her head, opened her mouth; she was about to answer, then her mouth closed. She turned

around and walked away.

* Karin! Sissel ran after her. – Don’t leave! At least let me give you a hug!

Karin stopped, turned and faced Sissel.

* Are you crying? Sissel exclaimed. – I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to…
* It’s okay.

Karin smiled, sniffled and dried her tears with her hand.

* And even if I won’t be at the wedding, I hope you both have a truly wonderful day!
* Thank you.

Sissel pulled Karin close, her body stiff at first, then it relaxed. Sun warmed her shoulders, a moped backfired somewhere out there in the street, then silence. Even the neighbour’s lawnmower was resting.

* What a lovely day, Sissel repeated, cheek to cheek with her future sister-in-law.
* Of course everything will be alright!

Day 327

9th September 2006

The nose was a bit crooked, and he had a small, round mole on his left cheek. His skin was golden brown, a pimple grew listlessly on his chin, his mid-length hair curled down his forehead. The corners of his mouth pointed upwards, it looked like he was dreaming about something nice.

He’s not scary when he’s sleeping, Mari thought. He looks like every other man, an ordinary and kind man. Maybe even a daddy…

Mari shook her head. She didn’t want Ari as a daddy, she didn’t want Petter either, she didn’t want a daddy at all. She just wanted mummy.

She slithered away carefully from the man on the bed. Quiet, quiet, centimetre by centimetre. Her feet finally touched the wooden floor. She got up, saw how the depressions from her body in the mattress slowly straightened out and were gone, as if she had never laid there.

Mari stared towards the window, towards the door. Maybe it was summer outside? After the first time, on Christmas Eve, he’d taken her upstairs many times. Bathed her, washed her, eaten with her. First the nice. Then the bad and the painful. But the curtains had always been pulled, and she was never allowed to look outside.

The floor was cold against her bare feet, Mari rocked on the balls of her feet. Her pee-pee ached, but she was used to it now. The first time, on Christmas Eve, it hurt so much she thought she’d die. She bled and cried, but held her and comforted her, told her she’d given him the world’s best Christmas present.

Mari took a step forward, something moist slithered down one of her thighs, one more step, all the time keeping an eye on the man asleep in the bed. He mumbled something or another, stretched his arm out, she held her breath – please tell me he won’t notice the bed’s empty – then he smiled in his sleep and turned away, only his hairy back was visible.

Still on the balls of her feet, she let herself sink down a little bit so the soles of her feet hit the cold wooden floor, took yet another step towards the door, stretching her leg out as far as she could before letting her foot touch the floor.

Once she was past the doorstep, she couldn’t keep herself together anymore; she ran across the kitchen floor, easy steps on hard linoleum, they were almost silent. She gripped the handle on the front door, pulled it downwards and… it didn’t open. The door was locked. Of course it was locked.

The instant sadness, the imminence of crying burned. It burned in her eyes, her throat, her chest. She threatened it away, blinked the salt away, drew her breath and thought. The window!

She pulled the kitchen curtains carefully aside, stared out and couldn’t believe what she saw at first.

It wasn’t summer. It was autumn. The leaves on the trees had already turned yellow, the yard outside was already covered in yellow and orange leaves. I’ve been in the cellar for almost a year, she thought, and had to blink to keep her eyes straight. The sun shone from a clear sky, it stung her eyes as if a thousand small needles pierced her eyeballs. She squinted, both eyes now a straight line, unhooked the clamp from the windowsill. The window stuck slightly to the windowsill, protesting being opened, she pushed carefully, once, twice. It finally surrendered and slid open.

A gust of wind hit Mari dead in the face. She drew her breath deeply, sucked in the warmth from the son and the smell of earth and trees. She threw one last glance at the man in the bed, still asleep, then she climbed up the window opening and jumped. As her bare feet hit the ground about a metre further down, she heard it, even before the window hit the sill, she heard the sharp thud. She turned around and looked up, the window was about to slide open after the unkind meeting with the windowsill. She could hear the bed creaking inside.

She ran. A gravel road opened to a wider and open landscape further down, a path led into the forest. She didn’t stop to think, chose the forest path and the shadows behind the tree trunks. She ran, her knees quivered, it’d been a while since she had last run, her thighs hurt already, but her feet still moved. None of the other girls at school ran faster than Mari. She heard Ari curse somewhere behind her as he opened the front door of the cabin. A bird took flight screaming at the sky.

Mari concentrated on making her legs move forward, one step at a time, forwards, she gasped for air, the path was gone, trees packed close around her.

She stopped for a moment, stood still and listened, heard Ari disappear in another direction. She stood motionless a while longer, the sound of the man swallowed by the forest. All she heard was her own beating heart. She ran further, looking for a path, a creek, anything that could guide her, and punched her way through thickets and bushes. In the yard outside the cabin it had been bright and warm, but here in the forest it was dark and damp with trees forming a prison around her. Mari stopped to look around, unable to hold back her tears. The sun shone spottedly down to the forest floor, it was cold and all she wore was a long t-shirt. Her arms were scratched, her skin crawled in goose pimples and her feet were wet and cold. She didn’t know how far away from the house she had gotten, but her chest burned. Forest everywhere, trees, all these stupid trees that looked exactly alike. She should’ve chosen the gravel road instead.

Then she heard it, on her left. Was it a car? She held her breath and listened. Was it him, or was it someone else, someone who could save her? She stumbled towards the sound, got up and ran, stumbled again, braced herself but fell hard, her right hand ached. Behind her the forest brush cracked, Ari was closer now. She ran and punched through the bushes, gave caution to the wind. She had to get to the car before he did. If she didn’t and he caught her, she’d die, she had to…

Then she saw it. It wasn’t a car, it was a tractor, a tractor with a green coverall. It was on the narrow gravel road; the coveralls grew smaller and smaller. Mari tried to yell, but her voice didn’t carry, it didn’t even break the wind, much less the hum of the tractor. She was about to jump onto the road, onto the gravel, when something caught her foot. She fell and tumbled, screaming in pain shooting from her leg and going up, landing hard on the ground. Her leg was stuck underneath the tree roots, her breath vanished. She was on her back and stared up at the sky. It was blue, beautiful, a heart-shaped cloud hovering far above, a wagtail tweeted above the treetops, maybe it was the same one she used to feed at home?

Then the sky disappeared, the man blocked the light. He was still naked, his body covered in red stripes and she was much taller than she’d ever thought. He was a giant now, and his head grew into the heart-shaped cloud, only now it didn’t look like a heart anymore. It looked like a cross.

*She had tried to escape, run away from him. For days, he’d walked around in a state of delirious bliss, almost didn’t want to believe it was true. He should’ve been more careful, absolutely, should never have fallen asleep. But he thought she had understood it, all he had done for her, that this was where she belonged, and* still *she had tried to run away. When he picked her up and carried her home she hadn’t fought him or struggled, just cried. He had tossed her over his shoulder and carried her back through the woods and into the house. On the way down the cellar stairs her sobs had grown louder, but he had only dumped her on the mattress, her tiny body limp like a ragdoll. She had stared up at him, her face swollen and grimy from tears and dirt, her legs full of cuts and bruises. He had fought it; the urge to beat her, smack her up, punish her so hard she’d never do anything this dumb again, and the urge to wash and clean her, tend her wounds, make love to her and make it alright again. But he hadn’t touched her, just stood there and giving her the chance to apologize before turning around, cursing and leaving. When he shut the catch, her cries had died down, not a peep from below. He had turned the light offs, even though she was afraid of the dark and was usually allowed to have the light on at night. Fuck that, he thought. She can sit there in the dark. She deserved as much. She hadn’t even apologized.*

When they got in the car in Sandefjord, the leaves whirled across the road and the wind howled around the corners of the house, the later summer was warm and dry, but was losing the war against autumn. It began to rain on their way to Oslo, and the windshield wipers struggled to keep up. Petter concentrated on driving and barely said a word during the 90-minute drive. Sissel sat dozing on and off while the miles flew past outside the passenger window. As soon as they passed Oslo city limits, the weather cleared and when Petter parked the car in one of the car ports smack in the middle of Oslo, the sun shone from an almost clear sky. The much-improved weather seemed to put Petter in a better mood too, he grabbed her hand almost pulled her along the capitol streets.

* Where are we going? she asked.

He didn’t answer, only pulled her along further. It wasn’t until they stood in front of the many exclusive

Shops in Bogstadveien that he let her hand go and and opened the door to the shop.

* What do you want?

He stretched his arms out, covering the exclusive shop in Bogstadveien with one simple movement. Sissel

looked around. Rack upon rack filled with blouses, dresses, skirts and coats, all with tags from famous fashion designers.

* What do you mean?
* My wife-to-be must have a decent wardrobe, Peter answered; his eyes narrow and full of laughter.

Petter walked towards a rack and pulled out a fur coat.

* What about this one? Do you like fur?

He’s like a kid trying to surprise his mum on Christmas Eve, Sissel thought. It’s just that I’m no one’s

mother. Not anymore, or… I mean, not yet…

She quit that thought, refused to feel the pain that came rolling from her stomach and threatened to fill

her eyes. Instead, she walked up to Petter and hid her face in the soft fur coat. He just wanted what was best for her. Saga mink fur, the price tag said it was on sale for 80,000 crowns.

80,000 crowns. On sale. She could’ve replaced all the windows in the cabin for 80,000 crowns, Sissel thought. Maybe Mari wouldn’t have been sniffling all the time, or maybe she could’ve taken Mari on the world’s best summer holiday. Mari wanted to visit Legoland and Lion Park in Denmark so badly, but Sissel couldn’t afford it then, and now it was much too late.

Petter took her by the arm, looked worryingly at her. She fought herself to smile at him. Blimey, Petter had driven for 90 minutes to make her happy and here she was, weeping like a little girl. Poor bloke, she thought, get a grip, woman.

Sissel focused on the words he had just uttered; “my wife-to-be”, and yet, she couldn’t free herself from the thought that Mari probably would be alive still if Petter and her hadn’t fallen in love. Her daughter haunted her dreams still, calling for her from somewhere she could never reach. Did Sissel deserve to live on, to experience something that resembled happiness, when her daughter had paid the price for it? She desperately wished things had been different; that Mari was still alive, to be there and been happy with them and for them on their wedding day, and she knew that if it could give her daughter back, she would – even if she loved him – trade Petter for Mari on the spot.

She looked up from the fur coat, met her gaze in one of the many mirrors, two expressionless pits.

* It’s gorgeous, she said, forcing her mouth into a smile again and to her surprise, it looked genuine.

Petter lifted the coat off the hanger and helped her put it on. Size 36. It was a perfect fit. Sissel took in the smell in the store; of leather and fur. It smelled good. Better still, exclusive.

As a young woman Sissel had been a part of an animal right’s group. They had acted against a mink farm and released all the caged animals. She still remembered the intense joy of seeing the small furry animals running towards the forest and freedom.

Sissel spun around in front of the mirror, the coffee-brown mink fur fell softly around her, almost down to her boots. How many minks died to make this coat? Forty? Fifty? She drew her breath, counted to ten while she locked eyes with the mirror. The whole store was trapped in there, in that reflective plate of glass. Row upon row of exclusive and expensive dresses, shirts, the chandelier in the ceiling, the changing rooms with heavy velour curtains. The fur that made her a stranger to her own eyes. Petter’s head above her shoulders, the store owner slightly behind them at a respectful distance, but not too far away that she couldn’t see the eagerness in his eyes to sell that coat, he licked his mouth, the tip of his tongue glistened. Petter looked at him, wrinkled his eyebrows at him for a moment, then turned to Sissel again. Caressed her lightly along the neck up towards her earlobe, a rough fingertip, warm, teasing. The shop owner looked away, Sissel wondered what he’d say if they used the changing room, the thought tickled her, rapid breathing. The shop owner probably wouldn’t say a bloody thing; the fur coat was too expensive for that. He might even enjoy it. She buried her face in the fur again, covering her eyes.

Her psychiatrist, Dr. Wurth, repeatedly asked about her sex life, both former and current. It seemed like he was curious about her drive, she assumed it didn’t fit into his profile of her. He said she used sex as an escape. She thought that was probably not the worst he’d heard.

* Are you happy about your wedding?

The psychiatrist looked at her, she returned the look. Despite the question, he seemed just as cool and

unapproachable as always.

* What do you mean?
* You don’t think it’s too early?
* No… Mari is gone. Besides, I think she would’ve wanted me to be happy. This will… it’ll be a new start.
* You’re looking forward to it?
* Yes.
* Because you’re expecting, or because you love Petter?
* Because…

She wondered where those questions would lead them.

* Both, I assume.
* What does your family say? You never talk about them. Are they happy?

Sissel twiddled her thumbs in her lap.

* I don’t know, I haven’t said anything to my mother. And my dad died when I was ten.

Dr. Wurth studied her for a moment.

* Have you considered inviting your mother to the wedding?
* No, Sissel said determinedly. – We agreed not to invite anyone, and my mother doesn’t care, either

way. After my dad died, all she cared about was the bottle, her art and herself. She drank so much she lost her job as a curator at the museum, and after that she couldn’t hold a single job. Every time she was fired, we ended up moving and I had to switch schools. When she was sober, she was too embarrassed to talk to me, but when she was drunk, I was always on the receiving end of the guilt trip. I was blamed for everything that went wrong. It was my fault she couldn’t pursue her big dream of moving to Paris, live like a bohemian and become a famous painter.

Sissel shook her head.

* I don’t even know where she lives now.

The psychiatrist sad silent for a moment, and studied her from behind his glasses.

* You don’t miss her at all? You don’t have any good memories of your mother?

Sissel leafed through her memories. – Well, I think she was nice to me when I was much younger, but

after she started drinking… Sissel shook her head.

* No, I don’t miss her.
* You’ve just cut her out of your life?
* I can’t do anything about the past. But I control my own future, she answered in a low voice. – And at

that point, I think it’s best to focus on the future and not bury myself in old, bitter memories.

* Was that the same way of thinking you had when you left Abdul, as well?
* What?

The psychiatrist smiled a little.

* It just seems like you’re very good at putting things behind you and leaving them in the past. Many

of my patients here are very preoccupied by their past, but you, you bury it completely. I don’t know if that’s healthy in the long run; more often than not, talking about things is good for you.

* I don’t know if there’s much to talk about…
* When you were pregnant and still with Abdul, why didn’t you marry him?

Sissel felt a wave of irritation spread across her body.

* I guess he never proposed.
* So you would’ve married if he had proposed?
* I don’t know. Maybe. Why do you ask?

Wurth leaned backwards and sized her up.

* I’m only trying to get to know you. One can find many answers if you look into the past. One, often

unconsciously, repeats patterns and one can learn a lot from those painful experiences as well. They could give you answers for why you do what you do. Why you’ve become who you are, for better or worse.

He smiled.

* That’s how you get to know yourself.

The following Friday, they stood outside the magistrate’s office. The sun made the diamond in the gold wedding band shimmer on her ring finger, sparkling and shiny proof that she was now Mrs. Eliassen.

* Don’t I look nice?

Sissel laughed at the man in the tuxedo in front of her. Her husband. She twirled around so he could see

her from every possible angle and admire the silk dress that hugged her still slender body. She had never had such a beautiful and expensive dress before. She danced a few steps, excited, passers-by stopped and pointed, a construction worker looked down at her and whistled from the top of the building on the other side of the street. Petter signalled to Sissel to stop, and waved her towards him.

* You’re beautiful my dear, of course you are. It’s just that…

He straightened one of the small flowers in Sissel’s hair, she looked at him.

* Just what?
* I don’t know. Are you sure that dress was the right one? You don’t think it’s… I don’t know, too low cut?

Sissel looked up and down herself and studied the cut. The pregnancy had made her breasts slightly larger, there really wasn’t much to see on her top shelf.

* No, I don’t think so?

Petter’s face darkened. She looked at him, unsure.

* If it’s important to you, I’ll get a scarf right now. Is that okay?

He nodded. His face softened.

* Please do. I want you all to myself, you know.

Anders stopped behind Håkon’s back, and looked at the picture his computer screen.

* What are you looking at there, Haakonsen?

Peter Eliassen smiled at them from the screen, wearing a black suit, on his way out of the court room.

The big smile plastered on his face obviously meant he was pleased, presumably after avoid conviction for yet another scumbag.

Håkon looked up, his face was ashen.

* They got married, he said flatly
* Who?
* Sissel and Petter Eliassen. Their wedding picture was in today’s paper.
* Well, that’s good, isn’t it? For Sissel, in any case? It’s been almost a year since her daughter drowned,

so… it’s a good thing that she understands that life *does* go on?

Håkon sighed.

* You’re probably right. But have you seen this?

He turned some papers around on his desk, a bunch of old, almost yellow sheets of paper.

* These are old police reports. Petter’s father, Supreme Court judge Eivind Eliassen, wasn’t the nicest

guy in the world. His wife was admitted to hospital several times. The hospital suspected domestic violence, but she refused to report him. That’s not all, though…

Håkon handed a single sheet of paper to Anders.

* The police report after Eivind Eliassen and his wife died. Drunk driving, the judge had a blood alcohol

content over ten times the legal limit. It was never made public of course, and both were dead. Eliassen was a Supreme Court judge after all, imagine the scandal…

Anders skimmed the reports.

* It looks like you’re right, but this isn’t exactly something we can do anything about now, is it?
* No, Håkon replied slowly. – But imagine the kind of home those two kids were raised in. Right?

Violence and alcohol. What do you think things like that does to two small kids? Can they ever grow up to be normal adults?

Day 344

26th September 2006

Mari listened, held her breath. She only exhaled when she recognised the usual sound of his whistling.

The hatch opened. Ari came down the stairs.

* Hey there, he said chumly. She looked at him oddly. Why was he happy? He had been nothing but

sour and nasty and said no to every request she had made about maybe an extra slice of bread or some more colouring stuffs since she had tried to escape, so why the sudden change in mood?

He walked over to her, grabbed her chin, forced her to look up at him.

* Heya sweetheart, did you miss me? Give daddy a kiss.

She twisted her head as he bent down; her kiss landing on his cheek rather than his lips, but he just

smiled.

* Look here, sourpuss. I’ve got a picture for you! Look at it, I’m sure you’ll like it.

Ari picked up something from his chest pocket and folded it out between him and Mari. It was a

newspaper cut-out, there were two rings interlocked above the picture. A married couple smiled at them. Mari gasped.

The couple stood closely together, happy, smiling, her mum had longer hair and a new, white dress. Petter looked down at her mum, his hand wrapped around her waist. They smiled. They both smiled.

* See that? Ari asked and grinned, putting his crooked canines on display. – They got married. I told ya,

they were the ones who asked me to get rid of you so they could get married, and now they’ve gone and done it. See? Do you see how happy your mum is?

Mari grabbed the picture, balled it up and tossed it away. She looked at how the small paper ball bounced and rolled across the floor. Ari laughed again.

* I told ya, and now you’ve got proof. They don’t want you. You should be happy you’ve got me. You

saw the picture and how happy they were. Do you believe me now?

* NO!

Mari shrieked and kicked the tall man, he jumped away and laughed even louder.

* No! No! No! You lie, it’s not true, it’s not true! Mum’s crying, she misses me, she’s looking for me,

she…

Mari threw herself on the mattress; she screamed, eyes clenched, fists raining havoc on her pillow. No matter how hard she tried, however, she couldn’t shut it out; the picture of the happy couple was nailed to her retina. Her mother’s long hair, adorned with white flowers, her new dress. And that smile. That great, big smile.

Sissel got up as Wurth opened his office door.

* Please, do come in, he said in a friendly voice and stepped aside so she could enter.

She sat down, as usual, in the brown leather chair while he sat behind the desk. There was the customary

“psychologist sofa” behind her, also brown, but she had never laid on it. Ever since she had first seen him, they had created a schedule they hadn’t deviated from since. He asked questions, she answered them. He’d spin a pen between his fingers, her own hands jammed underneath her thighs. Sissel always in the brown leather chair, he always behind the desk.

* It’s been over a year since Mari disappeared now, how do you feel about that? he asked and picked

up a pen from his desk.

Sissel focused on the rotating pen while she felt and tasted the words. What did she feel? This phantom pain for she who was missing, the black vortex, the eternal pain that sat somewhere between her chest and her gut, how did you describe that? Was emptiness a feeling? How could the feeling of nothing hurt so much?

* I don’t know. I don’t think I feel much at all.
* Why don’t you feel, do you think? What are your thoughts on that?

His voice was piercing, but the only thing she could clearly think of was that she didn’t want to be there.

In fact, she’d rather be anywhere than here. She’d been in this white psychiatrist’s office every week for almost a year, she didn’t dare think about how much Petter had paid for all these sessions.

* I don’t know. You’re the professional.

Her resistance to his questions was obvious. - Why don’t you tell me why that is?

Dr. Wurth put his pen down, leaned over his desk a little, moved a few sheets of paper ahead of him. His

forehead furrowed, as if deep in thought.

* I think you daren’t feel, and that worries me a little. It’s been a year, and you’re still running away.
* Maybe you’re wrong, she answered slowly. – Maybe I’m finally getting over it?
* Do you truly think so?

Without being aware of it, she stroked a hand over the bump on her belly, felt the child inside kick under

her fingertips. She nodded, put her where it belonged, under her thigh.

* It’s been one fuck of a year. But me hurting won’t bring Mari back. I have to look forwards now. The

child I’m expecting helps me do that.

* What about Petter? Does he help you?
* Absolutely, but he works quite a bit.
* That’s for sure. He’s always done that, Wurth said and nodded.
* Have you known each other long? Sissel asked and gave him a curious look.
* Yes, since we were young.
* Then you must’ve known Caroline as well? she asked. – What was she like?
* She was a gorgeous girl, Wurth answered. He smiled the type of smile that didn’t reflect in his cool

eyes. – Truly a gorgeous, small child.

Then he shook his head as if the thought was uncomfortable. He pointed at her pregnant belly.

* How long now?
* A little over four months, she said, her voice softening.
* Not much to see yet, he said and looked puzzled. – Are you still drinking?

She was startled, her cheeks flushed, felt her neck flare up over her white collar.

* What do you mean? What kind of question is that? Who says I’m drinking? Have you talked to Petter?

She got halfway up the chair and looked at the door. He waves his right hand calmingly.

* Don’t worry, I haven’t spoken to your husband, you can be sure of that. And besides, I’m not here to

judge, I’m here to help you. You grew up with a mother who drinks, and that’s not how you want to raise your child, is it?

Almost subconsciously, she shook her head and sank back down in the chair.

* You’re damn right I won’t, and I’m not like my mother. Not one ruddy bit. I haven’t had a bloody

drop since I was pregnant. Not one drop.

Dr. Wurth pushed his glasses to the tip of his nose, looking at her above his gold rimmed glasses. He said nothing, sat motionless, only his eyes blinked behind the round frame. He reminded her of an adder, a sly adder waiting for its prey to get close enough to jab. Sissel sat uncomfortably in the chair, the room was hot, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. He shifted his gaze eventually, up at the clock on the wall. Half past two.

* Our time is up, he said and got out of the chair. He opened the door for her, turned around and

extended his hand to her. She grasped it. The handshake was firm but clammy; she wasn’t sure if it was because of him or her.

* I will see you next week, he said, eyes already on their way out the door, to the next patient; a man

in a grey-striped suit, leafing through an old tabloid magazine.

It was drizzling outside. She walked fast to the BMW parked right outside, got in, started the engine. A parking ticket was stuck underneath her windshield wiper. You could only park here for thirty minutes, and it wasn’t the first ticket she had gotten here. The parking agency had made a fortune off her sessions.

Sissel turned the wipers on, the ticket danced along with the wipers once, twice, before freeing itself. Sissel watched the ticket flying away in the wind before losing altitude and landing in the gutter. It remained there, as a yellow warning among cigarette butts, pebbles and autumn leaves.

She stepped on the accelerator, and merged without turning her blinkers on. She could hear a car brake furiously, followed by a honk. She saw the braking car and its driver in the rear-view mirror, flipping her off. Thunder cracked and rolled above her.

Day 375

27th October 2006

Thunder whipped above her, Mari looked up at the boarded-up window on the wall, but not as much as a flash of light crept through. She tried to picture it like it had been at home at the cabin. The lightning flashes on the sky above the horizon, the rain that pummelled the ground, creating creeks and rivers in the sand, the hard drops whipping against the sea surface so hard that the ocean almost came to life.

She’d never been afraid of thunder; quite the opposite, she’d sit with her nose planted on the window and watch the fascinating play outside. Her mother, on the other, was a real wimp, afraid of both thunder and lightning. Maybe she sat somewhere and felt afraid, right now? Or did she feel safe, now that she was married to Petter?

Mari got up and pulled the newspaper cut-out she hid underneath her mattress. She stared at her mum’s wedding picture, like she had done many times before after Ari gave it to her. Every time she had a glimmer of hope that she would discover something new on mum’s face, a sorrow in her eyes, a sad curve of the mouth. A hidden message, some sign that mum hadn’t forgotten her. Not quite, anyway. She only saw the big, radiating smile.

Ari’s right, Mari thought. No one misses me. No one’s looking for me. It’s just like he said: mum is glad she’s rid of me.

Mari folded the piece of paper carefully and put it back underneath her mattress. She picked up Teddy and stroked his soft fur while looking around the small cellar. There was a colouring book on her desk, a few crayons, a plastic water bottle and a pack of Marie biscuits. Last time Ari had been here he had brought a white dresser she could put her t-shirts in, the grey brick walls decorated with drawings she’d made. Drawings of houses, boats, cars, flowers and people. On the roof right above her head she had put a drawing of a great, big smiling sun – it was the first thing she saw when she woke up and the last thing she saw before she fell asleep. On one wall, she had all the lines she had made for every day she’d been here. She’d put the boring magazines Ari liked for them to read in one corner, and a small pack of wet napkins. In the other corner was her toilet with a roll of pink toilet paper on top of the lid. She also had a duvet and a pillow and the pink sweater Ari had given her on her first day there. She’d put it on if it was cold. Pluss, the small clock on the floor next to the mattress she slept on. The small cellar started to look like a real room, she thought.

But still, was she supposed to live here forever? She clutched Teddy to her chest. Was she supposed to never feel rain on her skin, warmth of the sun, the sand between toes? Was she never to be outside again?

Mari looked at the boards that covered what she thought was a window on the wall. They were still too far up for her to reach, but maybe if she stood on top of the dresser?

She felt her heart flutter at the thought, the fear spread to her fingertips. The last time she had tried to escape, Ari had been terribly disappointed and angry, and if she truly managed to remove the boards and get out and escape, where would she go? Mum didn’t want her, she’d just give her back, or even kill her. Ari said that was her original plan?

Mari walked over to the white dresser. Hesitated, but put her sweater on the mattress and tried lifting the dresser. It wasn’t very heavy; she either pushed it or lifted it towards the window wall. When she had climbed on top of it, she stood, swaying for a moment. If she fell, it wouldn’t be much of a fall, just half a meter, but it still felt like she was on very high ground. She got herself together, took a deep breath and stretched her arms up as far as they could reach.

Her fingertips stroked the coarse wooden boards, trying to find a gap between them, finding none. Only thick wooden boards, nailed so tightly shut and so close together it seemed like they were glued together as well. She tried to jam a fingertip underneath the outermost board, but that didn’t work either, there wasn’t enough grip. If I had a knife, she thought, or something thin and hard. But she didn’t. Ari never brought anything but plastic utensils to her cellar room. She studied the boards once more. The bottom plank revealed a tiny hole, probably for a branch, she tried to squeeze her finger through but the board was too thick.

* Ow! she said. She caught a splinter, she pulled the finger back, put it in her mouth and sucked on it

until it stopped bleeding. When it had, she got up on her toes, put her eye close to the branch hole, and tried to look out. She didn’t see anything at first, everything was black, but after a long while, her eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light. There really was a window behind these boards. First a deep windowsill, then a dirty, grey window pane. It was shattered and broken here and there, shards of glass pointing inwards, at her, as if someone had pushed them in from the outside. Probably from when Ari had boarded up from both the inside and the outside, Mari realised. Even if there was a small space in the top corner that let a little bit of light through, she could see that the window was boarded up on the outside as well, with the same thick and coarse wooden planks she had her eye pressed up against right now. It’s no use, Mari thought, and pulled back. I need tools to get out of here, and there’s nothing I can use down here.

She heard movement and steps from above. Mari gasped, jumped down from the dresser. Ari was back and he was already pulling the hatch open! She looked around, puzzled, what on Earth was she to do? She’d never have enough time to get the dresser back to where it was, and the dirty foot prints almost shone at her from the top of the dresser, tattling on what she’d been up to.

A short moment later, the hatch opened, Ari stood on top of the stairs, staring down at her as if he already could tell something was amiss. Her heart beat so furiously underneath her t-shirt, she was afraid he could hear it. She tried to breathe as calmly as she could.

His eyes stopped at the dresser.

* Why did you move the dresser, he asked, voice angry.

She cast her eyes down, walked over the dresser and straightened the pink sweater she had just barely

managed to put on top of the dresser before the hatch had opened. It was placed so it just covered her dirty footprints, she moved it gently back and forth, side to side pushing the pink fabric down on the dresser.

* I thought it looked nicer here, she stuttered. – Don’t you?

Ari walked down the stairs and came towards her, his eyes black. She saw him clench his fists and shrank

in front of him, felt her eyes well over as the fist flew through the air.

It changed course right before it hit her face, and landed hard in the boards covering the window, right above her head. She jumped, the thump spread across the cellar. But the boards didn’t move a millimetre.

The thunder had long since relented as Petter parked in front of Hillside House three hours later. He walked through the wide mahogany door, stopped past it and studied today’s mail that lay on the small table just inside the hallway. Only adverts. He took his shoes off, put them in the closet and straightened the door mat a little. He could hear Leonard Cohens dark voice from within the living room. *First we take Manhattan…*

Sissel was on the sofa, an open pink photo album on the coffee table in front of her. Petter turned the stereo off, she didn’t look up. He stood behind her, peering down at the photographs. The same old pictures. Mari at age one, Mari at age two, Mari at age three. He sighed.

* Why do you continue to torment yourself with those old pictures; don’t you have anything better to

do?

Sissel closed the photo album without answering.

* What about dinner? Did you cook dinner?

She shook her head.

* I only had a few sandwiches, I didn’t know when you’d be home.

He walked into the kitchen. The countertops shone, he opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

Cheese, jam, deli meats, eggs, a leftover omelette, a bag of carrots and three bananas along with a yogurt beaker on the bottom shelf, an open bottle of juice and a carton of milk in the door. He turned the jam jar so that the strawberries faced outwards.

Sissel came into the kitchen, stood halfway turned from him while she looked out the window, to the apple garden outside. The light from out there shone through the thin curtains, a blond strand of hair fell down her forehead, he stretched his hand out and put it back. She jumped from the touch, he smiled and came closer, all the way close, Sissel moved backwards until she couldn’t move further, her back pressed against the windowsill. He followed, towering over her.

* Don’t do that, she whispered. – You’re scaring me.
* I do, do I? His voice soft as silk. – Why?

Sissel knew she should keep her mouth shut, plaster on a fake smile and ask if he wanted a glass of wine,

or maybe go out to dinner tonight. Didn’t.

* After we got married, you’ve become so… your mood, you’re so… variable… I don’t know, maybe you

need to talk to someone? Wurth or someone else?

Her voice died out, the words hung like islands between them and the pang of regret was there before the words were out of her mouth. It was too late now. His face turned white, his cheeks tightened, he grabbed her chin and lifted her face up, forcing her to meet his black stare.

* I’m not the nutter in this family. I’m surrounded by two women who can’t deal with reality, wasting

their lives away longing for kids they’ll never get back. Can you fucking blame me for being tired? You two nutters can keep that shrink all to your bloody selves, thank you very much.

Petter leaned in closer. She tried to wriggle away, but he tightened his grip, her skin went white from the pressure of his fingertips. He put his mouth over hers, pushed his tongue through her pursed lips. Kissed until she stopped resisting, then let go. She sat down on a kitchen chair, bottom lip quivered, eyes welling over.

* My God, woman, it was just a kiss! I’m your bloody husband, or am I just the guy dumb enough to

marry you after you made sure you got pregnant?

* I’m sorry, she whispered. – Y-you know it’s not like that, I’m just… of course you can kiss me.

He had walked towards the doorway and stopped to look back at her.

* Sorry. I can’t deal with someone who obviously doesn’t want me. I’ll be eating with Karin tonight,

there’s nothing to eat here, anyway. And would you please clean up the refrigerator before I’m back? It looks like a ruddy pig sty.

The door slammed shut. Sissel jumped, but didn’t get up, she sat staring out of the window. A seagull had left a white stain on the bird feeder outside, she should ask the gardener to clean it up.

A short while later, she had gathered her strength, put her legs underneath her and forced her stiff body in the upright position.

She opened the refrigerator door trying to see what Petter had seen.

Pig sty. He called it a pig sty. She knew she had to clean it up before he came back, but was still puzzled. She had cleaned the shelves there only a few days ago, and it was almost no food in there. How a could an almost empty and sparkling clean refrigerator be a pig sty?

She moved the egg carton on the shelf above and removed the omelette which had been yesterday’s lunch. For a moment she considered eating it, then threw the thought away with the omelette, despite not eating since breakfast. Her stomach growled as the omelette hit the garbage bag. She wasn’t hungry at all, even though she knew must eat. Her doctor was obviously not happy with her weight gain at her last check up and asked too many questions about her eating- and drinking habits. Sissel felt a burn behind her eyes and sank down onto the floor, sitting on the cold kitchen tiles with her back against the refrigerator.

Nausea came rolling, her throat burned. The bathroom was just a few metres away, but she knew it was already too late. She was on her knees on the kitchen floor, retching, her sour contents of her stomach spread on the floor and coloured the tiles yellowish brown; a thin, transparent fluid seeped down into the joints between the tiles. The stench hit her nostrils and she retched again, now only producing stomach acid. Tears flowed freely, dripping onto the floor, mixing with the sick. Sissel laid down on the cold tiles, closed her eyes and waited for her stomach to settle.

She opened her eyes a little bit later, focusing on the room around her. The sick on the floor had a dry, brown crust, a napkin lay under the table, she had to remember to pick it up. Sissel checked the clock on the wall high up there. It was nine o’clock, and dark. How long had she been like this? She had to get up, had to clean. Petter would be home soon, and he couldn’t, mustn’t find her like this.

Day 384

5th November 2006

Ari had been quiet and upset the last few times he’d been in the basement, Mari knew he was still annoyed she had moved the dresser. It had been very stupid of her. The boards were too thick as well, when his big fist hadn’t managed to break them, she didn’t stand a chance at all, not with her small hands.

That’s why she tried to be as happy and nice as she could when he was there, and it seemed like he was in a better mood today. He’d smiled to her when she ate the sandwiches, stroked her and let her be good to him.

Ari was leaving and walking up the stairs again, when Mari grasped his hand. She stared up at him and tried to make her brown eyes as big as she could.

* Daddy?
* Yes. What is it now?
* Can I have something to read?

Ari looked down at her, stroked her brown curls.

* Read?
* Yes, I want to read. I’m bored! I have nothing to read and no one to play with.

He laughed.

* I’ve given you plenty of magazines. Can’t you read those, and then we can play together later?

Mari hesitated. She didn’t like his magazines, they were full of naked people, both grown-ups and kids.

She never looked at them when she was alone, and the kids in those magazines didn’t look at all happy; only the grown-ups smiled.

* They’re not in Norwegian, she said and forced herself to smile. – Besides, they’re mostly pictures. I

*want* to read. If I have to live here without reading, I’ll forget how to do it and I don’t want to because other kids might think I’m dumb when I… if I…

She heard how she stuttered, stopped talking and looked at him, pleading.

* You could buy a few real books for me, couldn’t you?

He studied her with a serious face, before he let his room glide across the room, the desk, the toilet and

the bear. Then he leaned over and kissed her forehead.

* I’ll think about it.

It was middle of December, but still not much to presume it was almost Christmas. It was several degrees plus, and nothing that would indicate snow any time soon. The streets were dark and sad, at least that’s the way Håkon felt, and the report on his screen didn’t improve his mood in the slightest.

* We have to take a trip up to Kodal, he said dourly.
* Why? Anders asked.
* Some lady called and complained about noise. She thinks someone’s being held captive in a house in

the forest there.

Anders got up, leaned over Håkon’s back and skimmed the report.

* Mrs. Samuelsen saw a car drive by her house late one night earlier this autumn, and believes the saw

the man who owns a few of the houses next door with a young girl. She didn’t think anything of it, but when she took a stroll past his house yesterday morning, she heard knocking, thumps and screaming from the inside and was adamant someone was being beaten…

* We’ve better go, Håkon mumbled while putting his police jacket on and looking out the window. It

was already twilight. He wanted it to snow; things seemed a little bit brighter when it did. Almost Christmas, he had to remember to buy his mother a present. A soft blanket, maybe? She may not even remember what he’d gotten her or who had given it to her, she was the only one he could buy a Christmas present for.

He stopped his train of thought and looked at his colleague. Anders had sat down at his desk again.

* Are you coming? We ought to check it out, and it’s always nice to take a trip to the forest. The fresh

air will do you good, you know.

After driving for about half an hour, Håkon pointed.

* Right there. Turn right there!

Anders stomped on the brakes, the white Ford Mondeo skidded onto the narrow forest road.

* Are you sure?

Håkon nodded.

* Yep. My aunt lived around here somewhere, and I was there a lot as a kid. Only a few kilometres left.
* I don’t get it, Anders muttered.
* What?
* That anyone could bloody live here. It’s just forest.
* There’s plenty of houses through these woods. Some people want the peace and quiet, you know.

My aunt wrote books, those sappy romance novels and detested having people creeping about.

Håkon interrupted himself and pointed at a yellow house right next to the dirt road.

* There. That’s the tipper’s house. Mrs. Samuelsen, was it?

Anders hit the brakes and parked in front of the house, all the windows had curtains and the house

was dark and presumably empty. A weak lamp threw a cautious circle of light over the front stairs. Håkon stepped out of the car, pressed his index finger firmly on the door bell, heard it ring inside. Nothing happened. He tried again, harder this time. He shook his head.

* There’s not a single light on the inside, she’s probably not even home. We could probably stop on

the way back, right?

Just as Håkon was about to get into the car, the kitchen light flickered on, and after a bit the old front door cracked open. A pale face surrounded by white hair peeped out through the crack, eyes squinting against the headlights. Håkon extended his hand and introduced himself, her hand almost disappeared in his.

* Finally you show up, she said with a slightly shrill voice. – You took your bloody time, he might’ve

beaten her to death by now.

* Sorry, we didn’t get your complaint until about thirty minutes ago, Håkon said. – What did you see?

Mrs. Samuelsen shook her head, and Håkon could’ve swore dust fell off her head.

* I’ve already told ya, she said, before she reluctantly repeated what they already knew. – It’s the

second house on your right, she said, pointing into the woods and wanting them to get going.

* A red house, about a kilometre further up the road.

They drove on. Anders slowed down as they passed a small, red house, no bigger than a cabin. A man stared at them from the kitchen window, his face pale white in the sharp headlights before he drew the curtains closed.

* I wonder what he’s doing behind those curtains, Håkon mumbled. – Obviously something he didn’t

want us involved in.

Anders laughed.

* We do seem to have that effect on people. Maybe we should do a training class on how to smile?

After driving a few hundred metres more, Anders slowed down again. Ahead them was a small, cropped circle in the middle of the dark forest. It was colder down here than in the city, the forest and the yard covered by a few centimetres of fresh snow. They saw the house where Mrs. Samuelsen thought she’d heard knocks and screams, in the middle of the yard. The grey paint was peeling off the door, the whole house spelled decay and disrepair. Anders rolled down his window, killed the engine. It was quiet.

* There’s definitely people there.

Anders pointed to the chimney, a thin line of smoke trailed up towards the grey sky. Håkon nodded,

opened his door and got out. It was chilly here, three or four degrees below. He shuddered as he walked towards the house. An unknown sound made him stop, someone whimpered. Anders closed the car door carefully behind him, both looked at the house.

* What was that? An animal? A person?

Håkon whispered, suddenly unsure. Should they have asked for assistance? They were deep in the forest

now, and if something happened, it’d be ages before anyone would show up.

He looked back at the car where their weapons lay locked in the trunk. He hesitated, wondering if he should’ve contacted HQ. Something whimpered again from inside the house. Håkon made a snap decision and sneaked towards the wall and stopped right underneath the lonely window with Anders in tow. The window was shut, curtains drawn. They held their breath and listened. Something whimpered again. A woman? They looked at each other.

* It sounds like an emergency, Håkon whispered. – We’re going in.

Anders nodded. A scream from the inside, loudly, they both jumped. Håkon ran to the door. He sped up

and was about to lay into the door with his shoulder when Anders checked the door handle. It was open. It slid open and Håkon nearly fell into the room, hit a kitchen chair that fell over and hit the wall with a sharp bang. The kitchen was empty. Somebody screamed again from a room further in. Håkon charged without even trying to be silent this time; he’d blown his chance of surprise, anyway.

He wished he had the gun in his belt, but it was too late now. As the door to the adjacent room was kicked in, he stared right into two brown eyes. The skinny girl on the bed tried to hide her naked body under the duvet, a shadow came storming from one of the corners. A man wearing only jeans almost landed atop Håkon, and for a moment, everything in the world was arms and legs. Then it was over.

Håkon sat with his knee planted hard in the back of the assailant, the half-naked man kicked his legs but was put in a vice by the cop’s compact 120 kilo weight.

* Don’t move, you fucking prick, or I’ll crack your skull open, Håkon seethed and drove the point

home by pushing down harder with his knee.

His point was firmly understood, because the man stopped moving and let himself be cuffed. Håkon nodded to Anders, immediately covering for Håkon. Håkon walked over to the girl on the bed. Her blue-black hair went everywhere, she cried. Håkon wanted to curse, but swallowed his rage. The girl was young, no more than seventeen or eighteen years old, Asian, probably Thai. Her faced was grimed with tears.

A framed photograph stood on top of the nightstand. Håkon picked it up. The same girl was in this photo, smiling. She wore a pink dress, the man who held her protectively around the waist was dressed in black. There was a date on the bottom of the picture, taken only two weeks ago. Håkon cursed this time. The bastard on the floor and the crying woman in bed were newlyweds.

He tried to stem his anger, smiled to the woman and put a hand on her naked shoulder. She whimpered, he removed his hand and discovered it was bruised, yellow and blue. Håkon pulled the cover down further and saw the bruises the dotted across her upper body. Some fresh, some old varying in color from bright purple to faded yellow and green. He put the cover back over her and look at the man on the floor. There were times he wished he wasn’t a cop, that he just could…

His hands trembled. Håkon forced his rage back, the woman on the bed squeezed her pillow, obviously frightened.

* You’re safe now, he said and hated the lie, but still tried to smile.

She hid her face in her hands and cried louder.

* What’s your name?
* Monita, she whispered.
* Okay Monita, will you report this, will you press charges? Should we take him away?
* No, please, please…

She shook her head and cried even louder.

Håkon turned to Anders, shaking his head in dismay.

* They’re married, he said, nodding towards the photograph on the nightstand. – She’ll never press

Charges, and if *we* do, she’ll just deny it. Fuck!

They both knew it to be true; they never pressed charges against their husbands, these foreign brides thinking they had found happiness in Norway. When they discovered they’d married an asshole, it was too late and no matter how bad they had it, the victims saw it as a lesser evil than going back to their home country.

* We could bring him and charge him for assaulting an officer of the law, Håkon said and scowled at

the man who now sat still on the floor. Anders shook his head.

* Probably not the best idea. This didn’t exactly go by the book.

He whispered so the half-naked man wouldn’t hear.

* She’s never going to press charges, and he’s going to claim it was self-defence, that he was

frightened when you came barging in, and then we’re up shit creek instead of him.

* Fuck, I hate assholes like that! Just go outside, I’ll take care of things in here.

Anders hesitated a moment, then walked towards the door.

Ten minutes later, Håkon stepped outside, closed the front door behind him and inhaled the cool December air. The snow lay as a white, virginal blanket over the forest floor and stood in stark contrast to the sad situation in the bedroom behind him.

He got in the service car and turned on the CD player. Kurt Nilsen still sang country music. *Soon It’s Gonna Change.* One can only hope, Håkon thought and closed his eyes.

*Ari let out a sigh of relief as he saw the service car roll silently past him heading towards the city. What were they doing up here so far into this forest? Were they looking for him?*

*When the car came up the forest path, Ari lost his breath. He’d jumped back from where he stood near the window and felt his heart pounding underneath his t-shirt. Had they seen him? For a moment, he was certain this was their destination, that the white service car would stop in the yard outside and that the two men would storm the house. He’d recognized one of them; it was the bald copper from the newspaper with the serious face and the red jacket, the copper that had led the investigation.*

*What was he to do, if they had stopped? Opened the door, invited them for a look-see and placed his bets on the coppers not finding the hatch, or barricaded himself with a knife and an axe and tried to escape before they found her? Maybe yank Mari out of the cellar and use her as a hostage?*

*It struck him that he didn’t have a plan whatsoever; not a plan B, not even a plan A. His dad was right; he was a bloody mess, living life without purpose or goals or meaning. Did he truly think they had stopped looking? How stupid could you be? Just because the service car didn’t stop at his cabin now didn’t mean they wouldn’t stop there later. The danger was still there. Maybe they were reconnoitring after receiving an anonymous tip? It was possible someone had seen him, storming naked after Mari through the woods? That someone had heard her cries and screams, suspected something illegal and contacted the police? His skin crawled, goose pimples shot up, the thought of ending up in jail terrified him but losing Mari would be worse. Didn’t they understand he had saved her? Did they think he was one of those…*

*He couldn’t stand to articulate the word in his mind, even though he knew the internet was full of them. Paedophiles. Sick men hunting small children, some of them even babies. Ari shook his head. He wasn’t like that. What he had with Mari was different. It was beautiful.*

*Still, he needed to be more careful. He needed a plan.*

Day 434

25th December 2006

Ari walked down the stairs, carrying two very large plastic bags. Mari stared excitedly at them. What had Ari brought?

* Look here, these are for you, he said and overturned the bags; the contents spread on the

mattress in front of her. It was presents. Mari counted seven of them, all wrapped in the same red wrapping paper.

* Wow! I’ve never had that many presents before! What is it?
* It’s Christmas presents, short stuff! From me to you.
* Oh, it’s Christmas again? Already?

He didn’t answer, only waiting for her to open her presents. She could tell he was excited.

Mari squeezed one present, felt it fight against her touch, heavy, square, it was a book. She wondered which book it was, but didn’t want to open it just yet, turned it over in her hands. The red wrapping paper was so shiny she could see her own reflection, the gold ribbon formed a small flower, no from and to tag on it. She wondered if he had wrapped it himself, but didn’t ask him, just picked up another present. Another book. The next one was lighter, completely square, maybe a CD? But she didn’t have a CD player?

She looked over at the big present, the biggest one and lifted it up. It wasn’t very heavy. How heavy was a CD player, really? She turned it over in her hands. The wrapping paper had been worn off in one corner, and she could see the grey cardboard box underneath.

* Come on, little wagtail. Open it.

Mari turned the CD player on only after Ari left the following day. She listened to the voice on the CD and let her index finger trail the lines in the book. She stuck the tip of her tongue out of her mouth to concentrate, and read aloud with the evil step-mother.

* *I’ll tell you what. Let’s take the children far, far into the dense forest, and when they’re tired enough*

*to fall asleep, let’s leave them…*

Ugh, Mari thought while she read. Why do grown-ups have kids if they don’t really want them? Don’t they know that makes the kids sad?

She turned the CD player off, flipped to the next page and spelled her way through the pages.

* *‘Twas a strange house, it was made of bread and covered in cookies and cakes, the roof tiles were*

*made of pancakes and the windows were made of sugar…*

It became easier every time she restarted the CD player, and she could eventually read the whole story without the CD in the background, only some of the longer words were hard to pronounce.

Karin stared at the date, a red circle around it. Another six weeks until the baby was born, but Petter had already found her a new flat. Three kilometres away, closer to city centre. The flat was nice, spacious and bright with a view over the dock. Living room, kitchen, bathroom and three bedrooms, one more than she needed.

* You’ll like it here, Petter had said, standing on the balcony overlooking the fjord where the sun shone

on the surface, reflecting light making their eyes hurt.

He was right. The flat was nice, much nicer than the cellar flat she had at Hillside House. And, she thought, when Caroline comes back, it had room for her as well. That was the most important thing.

Petter wouldn’t tell her much the flat had cost; only smiled and said it was worth it. Only the best is good enough for you, he had said, and kissed her on the cheek.

* Besides, it’s a good investment, he added. – I’ll come visit you often, he promised her as he noticed

tears streaming down her face. – It’ll be just like before.

Later that night a large glided almost silently into the driveway in front of Hillside House. Sissel looked out of the window, puzzled. It was past ten o’clock, it had been dark for a long time already.

* Petter, she yelled into the living room. – Someone’s coming.
* Now?

Her husband got up and stood next to her. A car door opened, the person seemed to stagger for a

moment in the dim light outside. It was a man. The man straightened up and walked towards the door, they still couldn’t make out his face.

* Who is it? Sissel asked. – Do you recognize the car?
* Stay here, Petter said walking into the hallway. She could hear him open the front door seconds

later, the stranger hadn’t even rung the doorbell.

* What are you doing here?
* You’ve got to help me.

Sissel’s ears perked, there was something familiar about that voice. She couldn’t place it, however. Who

needed help? Moments later both men were in the living room, neither of them looked in her direction. Petter almost shoved the man in front of him towards his home office.

* We’ll talk in here.

Sissel sat staring at the closed door. What in the world was Dr. Wurth doing here? She snuck over to the

door to eavesdrop, but could only hear fragmented conversation. The psychiatrist was angry, obviously upset. Petters voice barely reached her, she couldn’t differentiate their words.

* You owe me that much, she heard Wurth say, his voice threatening. – I’ve helped you all these years.

Now I’m the one who needs help, you can’t just turn me down.

She couldn’t hear what Petter said, and after a while the mood took a turn for the better, the words became a low buzz. She went back to the sofa, but couldn’t focus on the movie rolling across the television screen. What did Wurth need help with, and why come to Petter? She knew Petter had used him as an expert witness in court plenty of times, and assumed that once or twice it hadn’t exactly been on the up and up.

Petter had no qualms when it came to win a case. Was that why Wurth was here now? Did Wurth need help and wanted Petter to repay a favour?

When the two men later left the room, it was evident Petter was cranky. Wurth only gave Sissel a cursory glance and a nod before he left.

* What did he want? Sissel asked when she heard the front door close behind Wurth.
* His wife threw him out, Petter mumbled and poured himself a glass of whiskey. – I guess he had an

affair with the nanny, and his wife promised to make his life a living hell. He needs a place to stay until things have settled down.

* With the nanny? That’s horrible! You didn’t let him stay here, did you?
* The nanny was seventeen, so it wasn’t *that* horrible.

Sissel gave Petter a shocked look. – You can’t possibly mean that. A seventeen-year-old girl and *that* old

man, that’s sick.

* Well now, she was of legal age and he did not coerce her. Legally speaking it’s okay, though I think

his wife disagrees with it.

Petter laughed dryly, emptied his scotch glass in two big gulps.

* But no, he’s not staying here. I said he could borrow Karin’s new flat for the time being. She doesn’t

want to move there still.

* Why come to you, though? Doesn’t have family or close relatives?
* There’s nothing more to talk about, Petter said and put the glass on the table hard. – One favour

gains another. He did me a solid, I do him a solid. I gave him the keys already.

Sissel sat with a puzzled expression. It was not like Petter to be blackmailed. What was it the psychiatrist had threatened him with?

Dag 440

31st December 2006

She sat with an open book when she heard Ari’s heavy steps above her. She’d already read the book several times; it was about a small girl named Cornelia. She was only four years old, but had to move to some complete strangers because her mum was very sick in her head and couldn’t take care of her. Her new family, the one she was going to live with, were very nice and even though Cornelia missed her mum, the story was both sad and happy at the same time.

* Hi! she yelled eagerly when the hatch opened and Ari came down the stairs. – Daddy, do you want to

hear? I’ve gotten really good at it, do you want to hear?

He looks much nicer today, she thought. Why is he wearing a suit? And a tie? She had never seen dressed up before, he always wore worn jeans and a regular t-shirt or a sweater. He looked like a different man with a suit on, he almost looked like Petter. Mari wasn’t sure if she liked it.

* Why have you dressed up? she asked.
* It’s New Year’s Eve, he smiled. – I dressed up for you. He extended his hand towards her. – Today

we’re eating upstairs. Come on, wagtail.

He took her upstairs to the kitchen, he had cleaned it, the countertop was usually crammed full of stuff, but it was cleaned and nice. The table was already set, for two. Ari did a pretend-bow, pulled the chair out for her and let her sit down first. She giggled.

The flavourful rib filled her mouth. She closed her eyes and enjoyed every bite, and even though she tried eating slowly, the plate emptied much sooner than she wanted.

* Do you want more ribs?
* Yes please, daddy.

Ari put another piece of rib on her plate. She pushed the plastic knife hard against the rind. It bent and

broke. She looked up, he pulled her plate towards him and cut up the meat for her.

* There you go, short stuff.
* Thank you, daddy.

With the last scrap of meat eaten, Mari stretched her arms over her head and looked around. The table had a red Christmas table cloth on it, and the window was decorated with a Christmas star, placed in front of the curtains.

* You’ve made it quite nice in here.

He nodded.

* Yeah, it’s New Year’s Eve after all.
* Don’t you have any friends you’d rather celebrate with?

Ari shook her head. – Don’t care for anyone as much as I care for you.

* What about family? Don’t have a mum or a dad?

Ari looked away for a moment before answering.

* I have a dad I visit every now and then, but my mum died.
* Oh, poor you!

Mari put a hand on his thigh and smiled as warmly as she could.

* Poor, poor you.

Ari shook his head again.

* It happened long ago, I’m fine. But look, I’ve a present for you.

He handed her a present, she squeezed it. It was soft.

* I don’t have anything for you, she mumbled.
* I thought I could draw you something, but it didn’t turn out well…
* That’s okay, don’t you worry. Just open it up.

She started removing the clear tape, opened it carefully, the silver-coloured paper was so shiny she could

see her face in it. There was tissue paper beneath the silver paper, and further down she could feel something soft. She removed the paper and held up the contents. It was a blue nightie with small, white flowers.

* How nice!
* You think? I thought you might be tired of your old t-shirts.

Ari looked at her in great anticipation.

* Yes!

Mari clutched the dress to her chest.

* Thank you very much, it’s lovely!

She let her fingers glide over the soft fabric, watched the dress form itself around her fingers, how

the fabric moved.

* It reminds me of the sea outside of the cabin at home, she said.

Ari got up in a flash, startling Mari, his chair fell behind him and hit the floor with a loud bang.

* This is your home now! Ari shouted, his cheeks trembling in anger. – How many times do I have

to tell you, you’re home now!

Mari lowered her head, and swallowed the salty tears.

* Yes, daddy. I’m sorry. I’m home now. I’m sorry. I know I’m home now.

He stood towering above her, she dared not look up.

* Come on, put the nightie on.
* No, please, not now, not…

He grabbed her arm so hard it felt like a vice.

* Put it on! Now!

She got up and pulled the nightie over her head. He studied her, his face softened, his voice kind

when he spoke again.

* I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get angry at you, you’re just ruddy stubborn sometimes.

He put a heavy hand on her shoulder.

* Come here.

Mari laid on her mattress quietly until the hatch closed. She tried getting up off the mattress, but her legs couldn’t carry her. She thought it smelled worse in here now, worse than usual. Her toilet was half-full, the stench of sweat lingered – in the room, on her skin, in every pore.

She made a second attempt at getting up, supported herself on the brick wall with one hand while she tore off the new nightie, folded it neatly together and put it on the mattress. She looked at herself, below the waist, saw the stains on her thighs, she retched into the toilet. The rib meat floated, then sunk into the waste. Her body shook, it was cold. Mari coughed short, growling barks and spat into the toilet, the saliva was red. She crawled to her mattress, pulled the duvet over herself, kicked her legs a few times to warm them up, turned the CD player on and closed her eyes. *Sølvguttene* sang *Silent Night, Holy Night*; their clean, adolescent voices filled the room. Teddy kept watch on his side of the mattress to make sure nothing bad would happen to her.

Petter stood in the hallway. The dark blue Armani suit still fit his slender body like a glove, despite eating copious amounts of food during Christmas. His metabolism must be fantastic, Sissel thought as she stood looking at him from the kitchen doorway. And he never works out. He opened the closet door and pulled out a winter coat, studied it for a moment before he hung it back in the closet.

* I’m heading over to Karin, he said. – You don’t need to wait up for me.
* But… it’s New Year’s Eve! Are you going to Karin’s tonight as well? Why don’t we invite her over

here? Shouldn’t we…

* Shouldn’t we what? Eat leftovers while you recite the same old shit for the thousandth time

about how much you miss Mari?

He grabbed her arm and pulled her so close the tip of their noses almost touched.

* I’m at my breaking point. I can’t take it anymore, he said.
* You can’t take what anymore? You’ve never lost a child, you know nothing… Sissel tried to

squirm away from him, scratching wildly to break free.

* Bloody cunt!

His arm lunged out and threw her to the floor. She looked up at him in the mirrored wall, her nails had drawn five blood-red stripes down his cheek.

* I’m sorry, she whispered. – I don’t know what got into me, I didn’t mean to…

He held out his hand, she gripped it, got up and sunk into his chest.

His arms hung motionless down his sides, then he raised them, caught her head between his hands

and yanked it backwards. Their eyes met.

* No, your little shitstain wasn’t mine, he whispered.

Her eyes well over again. He leaned in, tasted the salty tears with his tongue. He raised his voice a

little, not by much; just enough for her to hear.

* Poor Mari, imagine how afraid she was, laying in the freezing water and understood she was

about to die. I’m sure she called for you, you agree? She laid in that freezing water, yelling for a mother that never came, don’t you think?

Sissel again tried to wriggle herself away, but his grip tightened. She was stuck. His mouth still touching her cheek. His tone changed, almost chipper now.

* By the way, if I remember right, we were fucking in your shitty cabin you refused to sell. You

were screaming a little bit too around that time, weren’t you?

Sissel whimpered. Abruptly, he released his grip.

* Quit whining, I barely touched you.

Sissel crouched over in pain, groaning: - My stomach, it hurts so bad…

Her thighs turned wet, she understood now. Her water broke. It was six weeks early, but there was

no mistaking it. She was in labour.

Petter stared at the growing puddle on the parquet flooring.

* Fuck!

He helped her into the car and drove like a madman through town on the way to hospital. No more than 20 minutes had passed from when she had scratched his face red until she was in a white hospital bed in full labour. Sissel screamed and clenched her fists together, it was too early, much too early, she didn’t want to give birth just yet. Her baby had other plans however; her contractions were seven minutes apart. She groaned as another contraction washed over her, Petter dabbed her forehead with a cold wash cloth. The pain subsided. She was so happy he was there with her when it mattered.

* I’m scared, she whispered.
* Hush, he said. – You’ll be fine. You’re doing good.

He squeezed her hand, she stiffened as another contraction split her body open. She screamed up at

the ceiling. The midwife looked at her.

* Dearie, this can take quite some time, are you sure you don’t want anything for the pain?

Laughing gas, or something?

Petter answered.

* No, thank you. We’ve decided that we’ll do without.

The midwife looked questioningly at Sissel. She nodded.

* He’s right. I don’t want anything to hurt the baby. I’ll be fine.

She screamed again at the ceiling. Outside the windows, the first New Year’s Eve fireworks raced

towards the sky.

* Look, it’s a beautiful boy!

The midwife lifted the new-born and slapped his bum, but the cry wasn’t more than a peep. The

midwife grew concerned.

* Come on, dear, cry a bit for me.

After two more cautious pats, he finally screamed, almost a careful scream and still more a sob than

a real scream, but it was the most wonderful sound Sissel could remember hearing. The midwife still had a concerned look on her face, but put the baby on Sissel’s stomach.

* I’ll leave you alone a little bit, and I’ll be right back with a doctor that can make sure everything

is okay with our impatient gentleman.

Sissel nodded, caressing the downy baby head; he stopped sobbing as soon as he felt Sissel’s warmth. The midwife closed the door behind her. Sissel buried her nose in the baby’s straggling wisps of hair, sniffing the baby smell.

* Petter, look, he’s so small. Isn’t he beautiful?

Petter didn’t answer. He stood right next to the bed, eyes blank as he studied his son.

* He’s gorgeous, he smiled. – As beautiful as his mom. He studied the boy closely. – Though I’m

not quite sure how he got that nose. Isn’t it a bit flat and weird?

Sissel grabbed her husband’s hand and put it on his son’s head.

* I think it’s cute. He’s got your chin, he’ll be just as handsome as you.

At that moment her baby opened his hand, five tiny fingers squeezed her index finger.

* Little Eivind, she whispered.

She closed her eyes and sniffed his hair.

* My little Evind.

The midwife returned with a tall doctor in tow.

* I’d like to take a look if I may, the doctor said and picked up Eivind. Both the doctor and the

midwife looked worryingly at the little boy. The doctor flipped him gently over and put his stethoscope against Eivind’s chest.

* I think… I think we should bring him with us, at least for a while, the doctor said finally, his voice

serious.

* Why?
* Well, you can never be too sure, so it’s good idea to double check everything when they arrive a

little bit early, he explained. – I’m not sure his lungs are developed enough to fully breathe on his own, so he might need some help breathing the first few days. He’s also got a yellow tinge to him, which may indicate jaundice.

* Is it dangerous?
* No, no, don’t you worry, I think we’ll be fine. You should rest, you know, try to get some sleep.

You’ll need your strength about you later.

The midwife looked at Sissel comfortingly before they disappeared out the door with her son in their arms. Petter looked down at her, his lips pursed, the red stripes on his right cheek still visible.

* Let’s hope your carelessness hasn’t hurt our boy.

A few minutes later she was alone in the room. She leaned backwards, tried to rest.

The thought that Petter could be right haunted her, gave her no peace or comfort to sleep. She had eaten too little, drank too much wine and maybe cried too much as well? What if it was her fault their son came early? What had she done?

PART 2

A NEW START

Petter picked her up at the hospital three days later. Eivind had to remain at the hospital; his lungs weren’t fully developed and he needed to be placed in an incubator for a few days. There was also an anomalous sound coming from his heart and they’d like to take a closer look at that as well. The doctors said that was very common in preemies, but Sissel was still scared. Petter was silent the whole drive home; he only dropped her off before apologizing for having to go back to work.

Karin stood in her kitchen window as Petter dropped Sissel off. Sissel raised her hand and waved, but her sister-in-law only turned her back and walked away. Sissel sighed. What had she done to deserve this? What had she done to be ignored like this? Maybe Petter was right, maybe she was just hard to like, not to mention hard to love? Still, she’d get herself together, as long as her son was okay.

Dag 447

7th January 2007

Ari sung above her head. Mari put the book down, turned one ear to the ceiling and listened. She had never heard him sing anything but children’s songs before, but now he sang a grown-up song with words she didn’t understand. It reminded her of one of mum’s CDs, she thought, the one with the picture of a man with lots of dark hair and a beard. Dennis, or something?

The hatch opened. He had stopped singing, but he was happier than he had been in a long time. If it hadn’t been for his ears, his smile would’ve gone around his head, Mari thought. That’s what mum said when she saw happy people on TV.

* What is it? Why are you so happy? she asked. – Did anything nice happen?
* Yes. Ari nodded. – I brought a surprise for you.
* Oh? What is it? A new book? Another CD?

Ari shook his head.

* No, I brought something much nicer for you. Come here, I’ll show you.

He sat down on the mattress, patted his thigh and Mari obediently crawled on his lap. Ari took a paper

clip from his chest pocket and gave it to her. It was a newspaper cut-out with the picture of a new-born child.

* A baby?
* Aye, you can read what’s written below the picture yourself.

Mari lifted the cut-out closer to her eyes and concentrated on the small letters.

*On New Years Eve*

*1st January 2007*

*Eivind Eliassen was born.*

*Our little prince weighed 2160 grams and was 47 cm long.*

*Petter and Sissel Eliassen*

Mari let her index finger glide over the baby’s black and white face.

* Is it…? she whispered and couldn’t utter another word, the lump in her chest grew bigger and bigger.

It grew too big for her to hold and ran down her cheeks. The tiny boy’s face stared at her, eyes wide and open, he looked right at her.

* Is that… is that my baby brother?
* Yes. That’s your little brother. Aren’t you happy? Your mum and that solicitor are finally a real family.

Long after Ari had left, Mari stood up. She wiped her face and hands on the duvet, and searched for something under her mattress. Her small fingers quickly found what they searched for; the other newspaper cut-out, the one she got a long time ago; the wedding photo of her mum and Petter. She had meticulously straightened all the crinkles and wrinkles she had made when she balled it up; now there were only a few white lines, almost invisible, that criss-crossed the photo. She put the two cut-outs next to each other and studied three faces; the two grown-up faces and the small baby face. Eivind. She tasted the name. It was ugly. Eivind. Her little brother.

She put the cut-out back where she’d found it, and walked to the brick wall, looked at all the lines she had drawn, they covered almost the whole wall. One line for each day. Maybe that wasn’t entirely true, she had to guess before she had gotten the clock. But almost. She’d counted them over and over, all those white lines. There were over 400 lines now. One line for each day. Every time she made a line, she had thought she was one day closer to coming home.

She got the wash cloth and wash basin. She soaked the cloth and began the painstaking job of washing them all off, scrubbing the wall until her fingertips were red and sore. The white chalk lines vanished, one by one. She understood now. She’d never come home. There was no home to come home to. There was no point in counting days anymore.

The sun shone outside, the thermometer showed a summerly 23 degrees Celsius, but Sissel couldn’t enjoy it. She was too tired. Everything had been fine the first few months after Eivind came from hospital. He got colic after three months, and she had barely slept since. She had walked in circles, night after night with the screaming child on her arm, in a fog of breastfeeding and exhaustion, for over two months. Petter stayed mostly with Karin downstairs, he said he couldn’t stand living in such a madhouse. Sissel didn’t care, she had enough on her plate with her son. Now, finally, during these last two weeks, Eivind seemed to finally understand that nights were for sleep and that the colic was passing. No matter, Sissel was constantly tired still.

Dr. Wurth had hinted that she might’ve become pregnant too fast, that it was a way for her to escape her grief and that her exhaustion might be her body’s natural reaction to all it had been through. She didn’t protest, it might well be true. Her boy was still a blessing, because after Eivind was born, hours or even days would pass where she didn’t miss Mari. It was as if her son erased a lot of the pain of merely existing.

She was worried. Still, she was worried. There was something different about Eivind. He didn’t lock eyes properly and rarely chased her voice with his eyes when she spoke. She tried to ignore it at first, but six months were approaching fast and she thought he should respond more, despite being born prematurely. She walked to Eivind in his rocker on the floor, and stroked his hair.

* I’m sorry if I hurt you, she whispered. – But I promise that, if I did, no matter how bad I did, I will

always, *always* take care of you.

28th April 2007

* What’s that? Did you bring food?

Mari looked at the bag he held in his hand. She’d seen those bags before. White with a red square and a

yellow M. Had he been to McDonald’s to buy food?

They didn’t usually eat there; mum always said it was better to eat real food, but when she turned seven, Mari had her birthday party at McDonald’s in Sandefjord. Mum had taken Mari and two neighbour girls and they got balloons, toys to tinker with and hamburgers. Once they finished their meals, mum said they could have all the ice cream they could eat and Mari had eaten more than both her friends combined, but mum had just laughed and said it was okay since it was her birthday. Even the cute boy behind the cash register had been impressed; he said it was incredible that such a small girl could eat that much ice cream. She had eaten a little bit more just to impress him. She had eaten so much she got very nauseous afterwards, but the ice cream was delicious, so it was worth it.

* You went to Mickey D’s? Mari asked.
* What? Mickey D’s?

He looked at her for a moment, a puzzled look on his face, then he nodded. – Yes, I have. You want some?

* Oh, yes!

Of course she wanted it, she couldn’t remember she had ever wanted anything as much as she wanted

that bag in his hands. It smelled good, she swallowed the saliva that suddenly filled her mouth.

* I’ll give it to you, he laughed, before he put the bag on top of the tall windowsill she couldn’t reach.
* Later.
* But…

Mari felt tears pressing up behind her eyes. – It’ll be cold?

He shook his head, unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants.

* Better be quick then. If you’re really nice, I’ll bring you a burger tomorrow as well.

She was nice. As nice as nice could be, and not long afterwards even though it had felt like forever, she finally got her burger. She opened the bag carefully, it was indeed a burger, though squished together with a yellowish brown cheese slice and a pickle stuck between two flat sesame seed buns. She picked it up, the smell made her mouth water again. Had burgers from McDonald’s always smelled this good? The burger was still warm; not too hot to hold, but just warm enough to hold and eat. She was about to dig in, when she stopped and looked at Ari.

He smiled and nodded.

* Eat up, my little wagtail. You’ve earned it.

She took a small bite. Then a big bite and a bigger one. It was good; the best burger she’d ever had, maybe even better than the burger she had on her birthday. She made herself eat the last pieces very slowly. She wished mum could see her now. Mum had always told her she should chew her food first and then swallow it, rather than gulping the meal down all at once. This time Mari ate very slowly, chewing everything into a fine paste that almost disappeared on her tongue while tears ran freely down her cheeks. She’d wipe them away with the back of her hand. The burger was gone much too fast, only the empty bag was left. She looked over at Ari, he’d sat on the mattress watching her, she’d almost forgotten he was in the room.

* I’ve been good, haven’t I? she asked.

He didn’t answer, merely picked up the wrapper and got ready to leave.

* Daddy, she said and gripped his sweater, made him look at her. – I was good, wasn’t I? Wasn’t I?

He looked down at her, stroked her hair ever so gingerly and nodded.

* Yes, little wagtail. You were good.

When Ari came back the following day, he’d forgotten about the burger.

The sun had been up for a few hours now, but the hand had just passed seven o’clock when Håkon walked through the door at the police station. He nodded to a dark-skinned lady cleaning the reception room floor. He couldn’t remember seeing her before, but unlike his colleagues, he was terrible at remembering names. That she was dark-skinned didn’t make it easier – every cleaning associate at the station were dark-skinned.

* Hey, Håkon, she beamed, her clear Vestfold-dialect ringing in the air. – You’re up early, did you have

a nice weekend?

* It was alright, he said and almost ran into his own office before she could ask any more questions, or

discovered that he had no idea who she was. He was also bitterly aware that he didn’t have much to tell. After his shift ended on Friday, he’d gotten from McDonald’s that he ate in front of the television and then dozed off on the couch before evening news came on. He hadn’t even left his apartment on Saturday, mostly because he had his nose glued to Jørn Lier Horsts new novel, one of the few crime novelists he could stomach. Horsts books were at least realistic when it came to police work and weren’t full of speculative blood, guts and general bullshit, like too many crime novels tended to be. Sunday he had managed to leave his apartment however, as he attended Sandefjord Football’s match against Tromsø at Komplett.no Arena, and seeing Andreas “Tegan” Tegstrøm bag the winning goal was the absolute highlight of the weekend. Unfortunately the other results from this weekend’s football action hadn’t been quite as delightful, and Håkon ignored the thought of how much he had lost in bets.

He walked over to the window, peered outside; the sun shone, but it was still early for the streets to be almost deserted. Most of his colleagues usually came in late on Monday, hurriedly so, griping and pissing over having to grab hold of their balls and get the new week kicked off. Håkon himself was glad the weekend was over.

The stack of papers from last week lay untouched on his desk. He picked up the top sheet and read. A stabbing incident, possibly drug-related, someone trying to cash in on old debts. He sighed. Most of his days in Oslo had been spent trying to solve drug-related crimes – robbery, murder and drug overdoses – and even though Sandefjord had been spared most of those cases, it seemed to become a growing problem here as well.

Shit always hits the fan, he thought, and suddenly thought of Sissel’s face a few weeks earlier. He had gone to the optometrist to get new lenses when he had seen her on the sidewalk outside of the big glass windows. It had been a cloudy day, but she wore sunglasses, so big they covered half her face. He still could see a blue mark crawl down her cheek, almost invisible under her tanning lotion, just like he had seen it on his own mum’s face one time too many. He had wanted to run after Sissel, question her about it, but blimey, what good would that do?

Domestic violence was what he hated about his job, to seek out families where the kids often met him at the door, crying, despaired. They had called the cops, terrified that dad – it were dads, more often than not – would kill them or their mum. The rows would stop when the cops showed up, and some dads would have to be brought down to the station in some cases, but in most instances, both parties quickly and abruptly agreed it was just a disagreement that had gotten out of hand too fast. The bruised and beaten women who pressed charges were the exception and not the rule, and the police would leave, well-knowing that it wouldn’t be the last time his fists would use her face or body as a punching bag. Eventually the kids would stop calling and would isolate themselves or hit the streets instead, making friends they probably shouldn’t be making and when they undoubtedly got a girlfriend, history repeated itself. No matter how much they loved their girlfriends or partners, no matter how much they wanted things to be different, it was as if their father’s sins lay dormant in their fists.

Was it that way for Petter, as well? Had he inherited the rage from the Supreme Court justice? Was it genetic, or was it the result of a violent upbringing that he now took out on Sissel?

Håkon studied himself in the mirror that hung on the back of his office door. He’d never hit a woman, had never wanted to. There hadn’t been many women to hit either. After Sissel there had only been a few short-lived affairs, mostly a night here and there, none that had stirred any type of feelings or made an impact on him. But if he ever did love again or if he made himself vulnerable, would his dad’s curse exist within him, too?

The gardener had begun removing moss from the lawn at Hillside House. Sissel walked over and hunched beside him.

* I wouldn’t mind some white rose bushes in the flower beds alongside the fence, she said.

The gardener nodded.

* Sure thing, I understand you might need a change, he said and got up.
* Oh? Why’s that?

Sissel got up as well, but still had to look up at him, he was surprisingly tall, almost two metres tall.

* Well, I mean, he hesitated. – Flowers are a very personal thing.

Sissel looked at him, amazed.

* Yes, that’s exactly it!
* Karin loved lilies, but I take it you’re not?
* No, she hesitatd. – Not really, I much more prefer roses.
* Flowers do have their own personality; did you know that?

Sissel didn’t answer, just shook her head.

* Take lilies, as an example.

The gardener bent down and barely touched on the of the orange-leafed lily, a few leaves fell to the

ground.

* They seem so frail and fragile, but in reality it’ll take a lot of force to break one of those things off.

I’m very similar to Karin in that regard; I love lilies, and I think these emperor lilies are among the proudest of most beautiful of them all.

* Come to think of it, I wouldn’t mind having a sandbox here, Sissel said cautiously. – Eivind would

probably love it, and this is flower bed is right outside the veranda door, it would be perfect. I could sit inside and watch him play…

* No!

The gardener looked at her distrustfully, his face pale and ashed, seemingly on the verge of fainting.

Sissel looked at him quizzically.

* There are many other flower beds here, so I don’t see the big issue in removing this one…?

The gardener shook his head forcefully, before giving her a weak smile and a slightly calmer tone.

* I’m sorry, but I really love this flower bed. It’s a gorgeous eyecatcher, and it’s the pride of this

garden. I’d be sad to remove it but I’ll tell you what; I’ll make a sandbox for you anywhere else in the yard.

Sissel looked at the colourful flowers and didn’t quite understand what was so amazing about the orange lilies that only bloomed for a few short weeks in the summer and then died. The garden was full of much prettier flowers, why were these flowers so important to him?

* We’ll see, she said evasively. – I’ll think about it.

She turned around as she walked back into the house through the veranda door. The gardener observed

her still, a strange expression on his face. She waved at him as she turned her back to him a second time. So much fuss about some overgrown lilies, she thought. Eivind’s growing fast, so either way, it’s about time I did something with the garden so he can play there. As soon as the emperor lilies die off.

When she came back inside, Petter stood next to the large veranda windows with a half-full glass of red wine in his hand.

* What did you and the gardener talk about?
* The flower bed. I’d like to remove it and put a sandbox there instead.
* Is that so?

He walked over to her, close.

* What else?
* I don’t know, the soul of the flowers?

She tried to remember the conversation, but drew a blank. All she saw was the black glow in his eyes.

* The soul of the flowers? Don’t try to bullshit me, you spoke with him for almost fifteen minutes. I

stood here watching how you looked at him. Is that the kind of men you like? Old men, burnt to a crisp…

Without thinking as much as a thought, she turned around, sizing up the gardener, saw the muscles rippling under his mesh shirt. Petter must have seen what she saw.

* I only like you, she said quietly. – He’s much too old for me.
* Don’t lie to me! I saw you drooling right now.

He kicked her leg. Once. Twice. Her mouth opened, she howled in pain, he pushed her onto the couch,

his glass fell and shattered on the floor.

* Shut up! Try to consider your sleeping son, would you?

She swallowed her cries of pain, drowned her head in the pillow and bit the brocade.

He kicked again, she didn’t scream. Another kick and she bit her lips bloody but still didn’t scream. He

lifted her up by the hair, studied her eyes, pushed her back a little so his punch would be more impactful, her head thrown backwards by the flat of his hand, he still held Sissel by the hair, she was screaming now. Petter’s teeth unfurled from his lips like a wolf, then yanked her head to close to his.

* If you ever think of cheating, as much as bloody think of cheating on me…
* I’m not, she groaned. – You know I’m not…
* You’re not and you won’t because you know what’s good for you. You’re mine, and mine alone. I

don’t fucking share and I’ll never let you go. Never! Do you hear?

She nodded, what little she could, he let go of her hair and stared at her eyes – almost staring into her soul – and gently stroked one hand over the cut on the corner of her mouth.

* Poor Sissel, you’re bleeding. Can you tell how sensitive it is?

He forced her mouth open, guided his index finger in, pulled it out slowly, then pushed it back in, his

thumb pressing on the cut on her lip. He grabbed her and pushed her down, she was kneeling now, a sharp pain cut through her leg as her knee hit the carpet flooring. She tried to lift herself up, but the weight of Petter’s hands held her down.

* Suck me off.

He unzippes his pants, hands trembling slightly, he was hard already and it pulsated eagerly, swollen and

bluish red, she opened her mouth as Petter grabbed the back of her head and slid all the way in; into her mouth and down her throat. Once, twice, she gagged and retched as he emptied himself. His dick fell limp out of her mouth. He picked up a napkin from the table, and wiped himself off neatly. He zipped his pants back up, and threw the napkin on the floor. His distrustful eyes scanned his surroundings. The stains on the carpet – cum, wine, blood, the shattered glass, thousands of crystallized glass pieces.

* What a dirty fuckpig slag you are. Clean up after yourself.

Petter was up already, and sat next to the kitchen table the following morning. She knew that her attempts to cover up her bruises with makeup, her bruised cheek was still visible. She groaned every time she moved; her right leg was swollen and sore. Her whole body ached.

* Would you like a cup of coffee? Petter asked.

She nodded, he poured her a cup.

* We need to talk, he said. – This has gone on long enough.

She tried to hide her sigh. After every beating he’d give her a lesson where he told her why he treated

her the way he did. How bad or sad it was that she couldn’t behave properly. That she had to stop hurting him. But she did try, and she knew that did – that she had honestly tried to be who he wanted her to be, to behave appropriately, avoid hurting him. But nothing worked; no matter what she did or how hard she tried, it wasn’t good enough.

* I’m sorry, she said and sipped the coffee, the hot liquid stung her sore bottom lip.
* Don’t bother thinking about the sandbox, Petter said without acknowledging her apology.
* I’ve spoken to the doctor about Eivind.
* Oh? Why?

Sissel put the coffee mug down on the table in front of her. Her hand trembled, and the scolding hot

coffee squirted up her wrist, but she felt nothing.

* The boy is a year and a half now and he’s terribly slow. He doesn’t say shit, nor does he walk much.

Christ, we’re lucky he can even manage to stand upright some days. Everyone can see there’s something wrong with him, present company excluded.

Sissel shook her head frantically.

* He learns new things every day, he…
* Stop right there! The boy’s a fucking idiot and it’s your fault.
* What do you mean?

The words came out as a whisper and only her eyeballs kept her from crying.

* There are no retards in my family, Petter said firmly, - so this is obviously your fault. If you had only

taken better care of yourself while pregnant, then I wouldn’t have to deal with you birthing a moron.

Petter’s voice cracked; for a brief moment he sounded as if he was crying as well. Then he was calm, abruptly so, his voice almost mild.

* Dear, I want you to stop taking the pill so we can try again. Have a real child this ti—
* Never! Never! Never! I don’t want another child now. Eivind is our son, our child, and if you’re

ashamed of him, that’s your problem, not mine!

Petter gave her a disgusted look.

* Dear Sissel, I only want what’s best for us all. Little Eivind needs more than you can give him, and I’ve

already spoken to NSPCC about the possibility of relief work on their side to help you out. I mean, you can tell that a dim-witted child is too much to deal with for you, can’t you?

Petter smiled down at her, his voice was soft and convincing. – The boy needs someone else, someone who can stimulate him and follow up. It’s for his own good, all of us actually, you understand that, don’t you?

She shook her head and Petter’s smile vanished instantly.

* I don’t give a fuck what your opinion is because your opinion doesn’t matter. That boy is gone, do

you hear me? He’s gone, one way or another!

Petter stormed out of the room and she heard his Mercedes speed away soon after. Her son screamed behind her, his father’s burst of rage had frightened him terribly. She limped over to him and put him on her lap, she wriggled around nervously before calming down. What had Petter meant, “one way or another”?

Eivind wasn’t going anywhere. If she had to choose between Petter and her son, she’d choose her son without a moment’s hesitation, fully knowing she could never leave Petter. He’d never let her leave. Had he really been in contact with the NSPCC? He looked at his home-office door, she knew he kept his mail there. Petter had told her countless times that his office was off-limits to her. She didn’t have a choice now; she needed to know if Petter had told her the truth.

Her hands shook visibly when she opened the door. It had been a long time since she’d been in there, but she’d never been in his home office without Petter being present. Despite seeing his car race out of the drive way, she limped on the tips of her toes, trying to be as quiet as possible. The big mahogany desk almost filled the whole room. It was the same desk he had in his office at work, but this room was smaller. She looked around – a few file cabinets, bookshelves with law texts, a box of cigars on his desk. Petter didn’t smoke. Next to the cigars, a small stack of papers, she leafed through them before putting them back neatly. She opened the bottom drawer, where the mail was stashed away. Just a bunch of open envelopes. She leafed through them quickly, bills and advertisements, nothing about Eivind. She looked around. The shelves behind her were full of law books and more work-related books, all neatly organized. There was a steel file cabinet in one corner of the room, the key still in the lock. She turned the key and opened it. The file cabinet was full of red ring binders, all marked by either name or dates. She recognized names from high-profile cases she knew he’d been a part of, but still nothing about Eivind or NSPCC. One of the ring binders stuck out; it was brown, had no labels and was obviously much older than the rest.

She took it out and opened it. It was filled with old receipts, the oldest receipts dated back to the late 80’s. Every receipt had the same recipient: Ariston Gregoriou Papadopoulos. She didn’t know who it was at first, then she felt embarrassed. It was the gardener, of course. But 50,000 crowns per month in 1989, that was an awful lot of money, wasn’t it?

Petter couldn’t have been more than fifteen in 1989, so it must have been his father who paid the gardener so generously, but the payments continued even after his parents died. She studied the dates. Every month Ariston was paid 50,000 crowns, but the last receipt was different. Sissel stared. The date read 16/07/1995, and the amount paid was… what, 250,000 crowns? It was still paid to Papadopoulos, but this receipt had a different account number. Sissel shook her head in shock. 250,000 crowns? What on earth did the gardener do that was worth a quarter of a million crowns?

Headlights from the outside made her jump, she almost dropped the ring binder on the floor. How long had she been standing here? Had Petter come back already? The headlights came closer, then disappeared, and Sissel breathed a sigh of relief.

She heard Eivind plod around in the kitchen, she took a picture of the last receipt with her phone before she carefully put the ring binder back in its place so Petter wouldn’t notice she had rummaged around in there. She exited the office, closed the door carefully behind her, and went to her son. He smiled when he saw her. When she went to mix a pack of instant porridge, she noticed a white envelope and the kitchen counter. Petters name was on the front, black letters, already opened. Petter never leaves the mail in the kitchen, he always brings it to the office, she thought. He left this here so I’d see it.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled out the white A4 sheet of paper. She recognized Jørgen Wurths handwriting, even before reading the letter.

*Pregnancy-related depression, presumably due to conceiving too early in the grieving process and dealing with the trauma of losing her daughter… exhibits alcoholic tendencies, large alcohol consumption as well during the pregnancy, unfit as a mother…*

She read and sobbed, alternated between the two. The air tightened around her, her eyes darkened; she gripped the edge of the table, gripping the rough wood. Why had Wurth written that? It wasn’t true at all; she hadn’t been depressed during her pregnancy, she had loved every minute of her pregnancy and loved Eivind from the moment she saw him in the womb. What kind of relationship did Wurth and Petter really have? Had Petter bribed him?

She took the letter and tore it apart, small paper pieces falling to the floor. Eivind laughed and tried to catch them, thinking mum wanted him to play with them, but she didn’t stop until the kitchen floor was full of stamp-sized pieces of paper and the letter was no longer in her hands. Fuck that, she thought. I’ve lost one child, I’m not about to lose another.

Petter was seemingly willing to any means at his disposal to rid himself of Eivind, and he’d never tolerate her leaving, unless she could find something to use against him, something that wouldn’t stand the light of day? Petter never hid the fact he did whatever he could to win a case, so he probably was no stranger to either bribery or other crimes. Wurth also had something to blackmail Petter with; Sissel doubted very much Petter would have let him use the apartment otherwise. There was *something* there. But where?

The thought of the receipt for 250,000 crowns wouldn’t let go. The amount was very high, and there was something about the date, something she ought to remember. Maybe something big had happened that, a royal wedding or a tragedy of some sort?

After she had fed Eivind, she sat down by the computer. She punched in the date on the receipt – 16/07/1995. She checked Google first; a plethora of video clips and pictures regarding the massacre at Srebrenica where 7000-8000 Bosnian Muslims were brutally murdered. She was ashamed that she hadn’t remembered it but knew that wasn’t the reason why she remembered the date; both now and then, Sissel cared nothing about foreign affairs. She kept looking, digging past trivialities, recipes and interior design when…

Seven pages later and she had found an old article on Dagbladet.no regarding a search and rescue for a missing girl that had just ended as the girl was presumed dead, drowned. No names were mentioned but Sissel didn’t doubt that the article was about Caroline, and that’s why she remembered the date. Karin had shown her newspaper clippings and talked about that tragic day very often. Sissel looked down at the receipt on the table in front of her. What had Petter spent so much money on that day? Could there be a connection? Could the money have something to do with Caroline’s disappearance?

* Mummy?

Her son’s voice ended her musings; he looked at her with narrow eyes, he usually napped right about

now. Sissel took him by the hand and walked him to his bed. He was asleep a few minutes later.

She walked into the kitchen and looked out the window, her eyes landed at the gardener’s flat in the garden. The gardener was outside, plucking weeds. She grabbed the babycaller and walked out to him.

* Hey, she said and attempted to hide how nervous she was.

Ariston gave her a puzzled look, put the garden shears down on the lawn and got up. His height surprised

her once again, he was at least a head taller than her.

* I’d like to talk to you if you’ve got a minute, she said.
* Okay? What’s up? he said with a smile.
* Petter asked me to archive some old receipts, she lied, - but I don’t know exactly what to archive

them as. Is it true that you are paid 50,000 crowns per month?

* No, he said, puzzled. – That’s not right. I write a list of what I do every day and it’s usually not that

much. But… Ariston pointed at the house, - Karin usually takes care of that stuff, maybe you want to talk to her instead?

* But I’ve already sorted the old invoices, and they showed you were paid 50,000 before? From… 1989

to 1995. Does he pay you less nowadays?

* Oh, back then, yes, I thought you meant currently. I worked a lot more when I was younger. He

smiled.

* I’m an old man now. Why do you ask if you already know the answer?

Sissel didn’t answer the question, she handed him the mobile phone with the picture of the receipt for

250,000 crowns.

* But what about this? What do I file this as?

Ariston cast an uninterested glance at the phone, but his eyes widened, then grabbed the picture of the

invoice very carefully. His jaws trembled, his free hand opened and closed. His face turned a bright red, sweat dripping down his forehead. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he stuttered out an answer.

* I… know… nothing… about… that.
* But it’s for you? It was paid to your account.

Sissel pointed at the screen. – Your name is right there.

* That’s not my account, Ariston yelled and threw the mobile phone on the ground, listed off a few

Greek phrases Sissel figured were unfit for polite company and used his arms to drive some sort of point home. – That’s got nothing to do with me!

Then he turned his back to her and stormed out the garden gate. Soon after, Sissel saw his small, blue car start up and speed away.

She bent down, picked up her phone and walked towards the house. As she passed Karin’s flat, the front door opened. Her sister-in-law stood in the doorway.

* What the hell happened?

Sissel stopped and looked questioningly at Karin. They’d only seen each other, greeted each other only in

passing when they met at the postbox or if they happened to meet out there in the front yard. Karin never had time to talk, and Sissel couldn’t be bothered insisting. Karin looked tired and haggard. Her hair looked dry and worn, her face unnaturally pale and one eye slightly discoloured yellow; a trace of an old bruise, mayhap?

* Hey! What happened to you? Sissel pointed at her eye. – Did you hurt yourself?
* I walked into a closet door, Karin said dismissively, making it apparent she didn’t want to talk about

it. – I can be very clumsy sometimes. What was Ariston going on about? I’ve never seen him that mad before.

* He didn’t like that I asked about his pay, Sissel said slowly. – He said I should ask you instead. You still

maintain Petter’s books, yes?

Karin nodded.

* Did Ariston really get 50,000 a month from 1989 to 1995?
* I think that’s right, yes. Why do you ask? Karin wondered and took a step backwards as she pulled

the door after her.

Sissel stuck her foot in the door, jarring it.

* That was a lot of money back then, and I’m confident there were plenty of Polaks who’d do the same

job for far less?

Karin shrugged and didn’t answer.

* I think it’s weird, Sissel insisted. – Not to mention this one.

She showed Karin the picture of the invoice. Karin only threw a cursory glance at it; it was obvious she

already knew what it was for.

* Come on, Sissel said. – Come on, I thought we were friends?

Karin opened the door a little, casting an uncertain glance down the road.

* We’ll hear his car before he’s here, Sissel said reassuringly. – How about we sit and talk in the garden?

Karin nodded, took a step forwards and closed the door behind her. Sissel supported her on the way over

to the gardener’s flat and sat on the stairs. Even though the sun shone, the flagstones were cold.

* Why did the gardener get all that money?

Karin looked away. – It’s a long story, and I presume there’s plenty you don’t know already.

* I’ve got all the time in the world.

Karin thought for a moment, then gave Sissel a weak smile.

* I can at least give you the abridged version. It started when I got pregnant.
* I know about that. Petter told me you were raped?
* Raped and raped, Karin said quietly. – The truth was that I’d have a brief and unseemly relationship

with Nicolai, the gardener’s son. I wanted the baby, so I didn’t say anything at home until it was too late. Nico said he loved me and that we’d marry, and even though I didn’t love him, I thought that it probably wasn’t too important; the child was more important, after all.

Karin was silent, bent down and picked up the garden shears Ariston had put away. The brilliant steel reflected the sunlight. She walked over to the rosebush, cut the stem off one blood red rose, squeeze a fingertip against a thorn. Fresh blood seeped through.

* What happened then? Sissel asked.
* My father was completely against it. Nico wasn’t God’s gift to humanity; he smoked a little weed and

things like that and my father threatened to press rape charges against Nico if he didn’t disappear. My father was a judge, so nobody doubted how that would’ve ended. That’s why he left Norway for Greece; he had a grandmother on his father’s side he could stay with.

Karin looked away, her face saddened.

* I only found out about my father’s threats later, so I initially thought Nico had abandoned me. My

father wanted me to give birth at a secret location and that Caroline would be adopted later on, but I refused. The official story became that Nico raped me, and fled the country. His dad received a high salary as hush-money, and most of the money would be sent as payment to Nico for staying away from me and out of the country.

* How cruel of him! Nico was his only son!
* You’re telling me. Karin stuck her bleeding finger in her mouth, and tasted her blood. - But the

money benefited Nico as well.

* But… Sissel tried to remember what Karin had said the last time they spoke of Nicolai.
* Didn’t you say you met him here later? Did he come back, anyway?
* Yeah, I met him randomly in Oslo, *one* time before Caroline disappeared. He had started doing far

stronger drugs than weed, and was bitter and angry because everybody had let him down. He wanted to meet Caroline, but I said no. He wasn’t someone I’d present as her father, and I had already told Caroline har father was dead.

Karin went silent again.

* And then? Sissel was impatient.
* Nico was furious. He said I couldn’t deny him the right to see his daughter. He said he’d take a DNA

test and get custody with court approval. He threatened me and told me he even wanted to see Caroline in kindergarten. Can you imagine how she’d react if some long-haired drug addict had shown up and said he was her dad?

Karin shook her head, the thought visibly upsetting her still.

* Petter went to Oslo and was able to pay Nico to see reason. I never saw him again, and later that

year, Ariston said Nico had died of a drug overdose.

Karin went silent yet again, but pressed on after a moment.

* It’s sad to say it, but I was glad. Ariston was devastated of course, he had lost his son and grandchild

at roughly the same time. He was on sick leave for several weeks, probably struggling with a guilty conscience over abandoning his son.

Sissel sat there, silent, trying to envision the family drama that had unfolded. All that because of a pregnancy? It wasn’t even that long ago, and it wasn’t uncommon to have children out of wedlock? Maybe it was different in a judge’s family?

* So Petter paid 250,000 crowns to get rid of Nicolai for good?

Kari nodded and smiled, but the smile never reached her eyes.

23rd July 2008

Steps above Mari’s head. Different steps, her body reacted faster than her brain. Mari leapt up to the top step and yelled.

* Help me, I’m down here, help me!

Her brain caught up to her and knocked sense back into her. What if she was wrong? What if it was Ari?

What if Ari had bought new boots or shoes? He’d be disappointed in her, like he had been when she tried to run away. That had been bad; he’d been rough and mean, as if he wanted to punish her for disappointing him, time and time again. She shut her mouth and listened. It was quiet up there now, as if the person upstairs held their breath, too.

Then she heard someone pull the rug away that she knew Ari had placed on top of the hatch, she heard a chair being moved. Someone yanked the padlock, a man’s voice cursed, it wasn’t Ari.

* Hey! I’m down here, please save me, please! Save me, please!

She screamed herself hoarse, but she couldn’t stop. The man upstairs cursed again.

* I don’t have the key. Who are you?
* Mari! I’m Mari!
* Oh… my God. THAT Mari? Sissel’s Mari?
* YES! I want my mum! I want mummy! MUMMY!
* Have you been here this whole time?

Disbelief in the new man’s voice.

* YES! How long has it been?
* Almost three years.

The new man’s voice cracked. He mustn’t cry, she thought. Not now, he’s got to save me!

* I WANT OUT!
* Do you know where the key is?
* Yes, it’s on his belt.
* Shit. Okay, hang on, I’ve got to find something to break the padlock.

The steps moved away. She heard the new man rummage upstairs, imagined him opening drawers, the

cabinets. She tried to think if she had seen something to unlock the padlock with, maybe break it… the axe!

* There’s an axe by the front door, she yelled. – He chops wood with it.

She regretted saying it. The steps faded. Mari wanted to yell that he shouldn’t go. He should stay and

watch her and take care of her.

A vicious bang right over her head, then another. She fell down the stairs and ended up on her back on the hard cement floor, but felt no pain whatsoever. She crept to the corner of the mattress, sucking her thumb like a baby, eyes fixed on the hatch. The new man was through now, the hatch opened; a shadow appeared behind the new man just as he was about to step down into the basement.

* Why the fuck are you here?

The new man turned and looked up at Ari.

* How could you…?

His voice cracked as he pointed downwards, pointed at Mari. – After what happened with poor Caroline?

How could you? I believed you when you said what happened with Caro was an accident, but I get it now. I see it clear as day. You’re a weak, pathetic, sick bastard, a-a-a goddamned paedo—

Ari interrupted him, angry, shaking his head.

* You don’t get it at all, it’s not what you think it is! Everything went wrong with Caro, but it’s different

with Mari. We love each other and care for each other. Isn’t that right, Mari? Isn’t that right?

Mari looked away, didn’t want to answer but didn’t dare not to.

* Yes, daddy.
* Oh my God, you’re sick. You’re fucking sick. She’s just a child! An innocent fucking child!

It sounded like the new man’s voice was cracking again. Mari wanted to tell him not to cry. Didn’t he

know Ari got even madder if you cried?

* This is none of your business, Ari yelled. – What the fuck did you come here for?

The hatch slammed shut. They were yelling up there, but Mari couldn’t tell what they said. She got back

into the farthest corner of the mattress. She gripped Teddy as tight as she could, held her hands in front of her ears, rocking back and forth, back and forth, while singing or humming to herself, lalala lalala…

After a while, she didn’t know how long, it was quiet upstairs. Mari had fallen down on the mattress and removed her hands from her ears. She was freezing, her hands were ice cold, but she kept on singing. It helped. She sang while she rocked back and forth and side to side, lalala lalala…

Petter had called Sissel to let her know he had to work overtime and wouldn’t be home until midnight. Sissel put Eivind to bed like she usually did, and sat down in front of the living room window to wait for the gardener. It was odd he hadn’t come back yet; he was always at home at night, and usually in front of his computer. There had been many a night where she had stood and watched the flickering blue light through his living room window and thought he was probably saving on electricity, since that’s the only light that ever shone from his house.

She suddenly decided she should pay his house a visit, and went to the key cabinet in the hallway. She saw big key chain, each key elaborately marked with numbers. There was a list inside the cabinet indicating what key would fit what lock, and she discovered key number twelve fit the gardener’s house. She checked on her son before she left. Eivind slept with a smile on his lips and his pacifier safely in his hand. She grabbed the babycall and walked into the night.

She turned the ceiling light on. The small kitchen was spartan in decorations, but sparkling clean. Not a single mug or glass cup was left in the kitchen sink. A checkered wash cloth was folded rather elaborately on the otherwise empty countertop. She opened one of the old cabinet doors; two plates, two bowls, two glasses. Two of everything placed neatly in the cupboard. There wasn’t much in here to indicate that an old bachelor lived here, she thought; the man who spoke warmly of how roses and emperor lilies had souls, but it was obvious he liked cleanliness.

She went further into the house, through a doorway curtain and into the room he used as a combined bedroom and living. A studio, Sissel thought. That’s what it’s called. It was clean and tidy in here as well; the corner bed was made and with a blue bedspread. A small sofa, a teak coffee table, an old-fashioned TV, a desk with a computer on it. Her eyes landed on the photographs above the sofa; there were five of them, and they looked old. Karin was in three of the photos; she had her arm safely around her little brother in one of them and they weren’t old in those photos either, they appeared to be teenagers.

She let her gaze rest at Petter. His big, blue eyes shone with laughter and simplicity. When he did get so serious, so angry? The thought made her feel ashamed. He was her husband, and if he was angry with her, it her fault. She should’ve behaved better so he wouldn’t hurt as much.

She sighed and studied the pictures again. In one of the pictures, Karin was still a child about ten, maybe twelve years old. An older boy stood next to her, presumably Nicolai, the gardener’s son. He was tall and ungainly with a brand new haircut, marked cheekbones and large eyes. The last picture only had Caroline in it; she smiled to the photographer. She seemed like a gorgeous, little girl.

In her peripheral vision, Sissel saw a flashing light in the corner. Ariston hadn’t turned off his computer before driving away. She put the chair close to the desk and sat down. The chair creaked ever so slightly under her weight. The silence made the creak sound much louder than it actually was.

She clicked the mouse, the computer was not locked. The screen flashed blue, she jumped as the desktop picture appeared before her. A flower. What else? The desktop was full of icons – pictures, documents, Internet Explorer, Photoshop. Where to start, Sissel thought? She clicked on the photo album, and stared right at a picture of Caroline.

A scream startled Sissel badly; she felt as though she had jumped right through her own skin, then she figured out where it came from. The babycaller. Eivind had woken up. She walked up from the computer towards the babycall and back to the computer again. Caroline was on her back on a light blue blanket and Sissel recognized it as the same blanket on the bed next to her. Caroline’s eyes were closed, her hair spread over the pillow. She’s asleep, Sissel thought, but there was something disconcerting about it. Her face was pale, her hands folded across her chest, an orange emperor lily stretching from her small hands and almost touched her chin. Small kids didn’t sleep like that, did they? It seemed… arranged, decorated, almost as if…

Eivind screamed again. He wasn’t used to sleeping alone, poor fellow. She had to comfort him. As she opened the door, stepping into the night the second time this evening, she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye. Something hard hit her temple, and everything was black.

The babycall fell onto the flagstones. Her son’s intense screams filled the air.

*Shit!*

*He looked at Sissel as she lay at his feet. What the hell was she doing there? What could she have seen? He stepped over the lifeless female body and walked into the gardener’s house. The first thing he saw was the light from the computer, and the last picture they had taken of Caroline filled the screen. Shit!*

*He walked over to the computer and turned it off, pulled out every cord and found an empty plastic bag under the kitchen sink, and put the laptop and cords in it. Looked around the small house, checked out the pictures on the wall, memories of far happier times. He knew he’d never see these pictures again, the last time he’d step foot in this house again, the last time he’d be right here. He looked through the kitchen window, up towards the garden and the large mansion. He’d thought that they must be happy, those who could afford such a splendid home, who could afford anything they wanted. He knew better now, knew that money hadn’t made them happier, only meaner, and remembered Petter as a child, a teenager, an adult. He grabbed the plastic bag and opened the door. Sissel lay sprawling on the flag stones. Was she dead? Was she breathing? He resisted the urge to check, and stepped over her once more. He checked his wristwatch, it had been two hours. He’d already been gone far too long. Poor Mari, sick and alone, she was probably scared. Everything would be better now, though. He was going to do what he should’ve done a long time ago.*

* Sissel? Sissel? Are you awake?

She woke to Petter’s voice, her eyes flickered and opened. The light was sharp and cold and she quickly

closed her eyes again.

* Where am I, she whispered.
* At the hospital. You were unconscious. The doctor says you have a concussion and have got to rest,

but you’re in good health otherwise.

* Eivind! Where’s Eivind?

She sat up sharply in the bed. Her head ached tremendously, the room didn’t stand still.

* Where is Eivind?
* He’s doing good. He sat in his bed screaming when I came home, but he’s fine now.

Sissel fell back onto her pillow, she closed her eyes again, the room had stopped spinning.

* I think… I think someone knocked me out.
* Yes, Petter said while clenching his fists. – Did you see who?
* No, I didn’t see anything. It happened very fast. Did you find me?
* Yeah, I almost tripped over you on my way in. I thought you were dead at first; you were cold to the

touch and barely breathing. You scared the shit out of me. What were you doing in the gardener’s house?

* Well, I…

Sissel was about to explain when the door opened behind them, and officers Håkon Haakonsen and

Anders Gullbrandsen stepped into the room.

* We would like to speak with Sissel, Håkon said in a serious tone.
* Of course, Petter said and moved to the other chair in the room.
* Alone.

Petter got up reluctantly. – Alright, but do be careful. She’s had a rough time.

Petter slammed the door behind him. Håkon extended his hand.

* Nice to see you again. Recent events considered, you look good.

She returned the handshake. How strange, she thought. We’re shaking hands. We’ve never done that.

* Thank you. Got to admit I still think it’s strange to see you in uniform, she said. – I remember you as

tall and ungainly. It’s got to be…

She tried counting backwards.

* Over 13 years ago, Håkon said with a smile.
* Weren’t you convinced back then that you’d never stick around? Didn’t you move to Oslo?
* Oh, I did, but I’ve found out I much prefer Sandefjord. Working as a police officer is much quieter and

calmer here than in the capitol. He smiled again.

* No matter, it’s always good to see you, but I’m afraid we’re here on business this time as well,

concerning things in your gardener’s past we’d like to know more about. Are you up for a chat?

* Sure thing, Sissel smiled. – It’s just a headache.

Håkon and Anders sat in their own chairs.

* Do you know this gardener well?
* No, Sissel said and shook her head. – Barely at all, if I’m on honest. He kept to himself and Petter

doesn’t want me to do yardwork, so we barely ever spoke.

* Why were you in house, if you barely knew him?

Sissel blushed.

* Because… because I found…

She shut up. Petter would be furious if he discovered she’d been snooping in his office. Håkon looked at

her questioningly.

* What did you find?
* Nothing, really…

Sissel blushed again and looked away. Her big eyes welled up. Håkon lifted her hand as if to dry her tears,

then pulled his hand back, and sat waiting for Sissel to speak.

* I was just curious, she said.

She told everything Karin had told her, without mentioning her own suspicion of her husband.

* 250,000 is a lot of money, she finished, - and while Ariston said he didn’t know anything about it, the

account was in his name. And if he had nothing to do with it or knew anything about it, why did he get so mad?

Håkon stared blankly into the air, as if pondering her words and for a long time all three sat silent. Sissel finally broke it.

* Did you check his computer? Maybe you could find some clues there?
* We have searched his flat, or house if you will, but finding clues on the computer won’t be easy. It’s

gone. Whoever knocked you out probably took it. Did you see who it was?

* No, it was too dark and it happened rather quickly.
* Could it have been Petter? Håkon asked. – Your doctor said you’re covered in bruises and scabs, old

and new. They kinds of scabs and bruises you don’t exactly get on your own.

Sissel looked away and pulled the sleeves of the hospital gown further down her arms, but Håkon leaned in and pulled her sleeves up to her elbow. Her arm was covered in bruises in all shapes, sizes and colors, from blue to dark purple.

* You should press charges. You shouldn’t tolerate being treated like this, Håkon said.

Sissel shook her head and pulled her arm back.

* It’s fine, she mumbled. She wondered to herself if it was possible it had been Petter who knocked

her out?

* Wasn’t it Petter who got me to hospital?
* Yes, Anders said. – He called the hospital first, then called us.
* See? Petter didn’t do it. Have you spoken with the gardener?
* No, he hasn’t shown up yet, but we’ve got a warrant for his arrest.
* I don’t know what he’s done, but he had a strange picture of Caroline on his computer. It looked like

she was sleeping, but she seemed so…

Sissel pushed through, said the unthinkable, her voice barely audible.

* It looked like she was dead.

The second the words were out of her mouth, the door opened and a doctor stood in the doorway. He

gave the two police officers a dour look.

* The patient has a concussion, he said annoyed. – She needs rest.

Both Håkon and Anders got up.

* Sorry, doctor, Anders said. – We’re done here.
* This bloody thing doesn’t make sense, Håkon said when both were in the service car on the

way back to the station.

* Why the ruddy hell would Petter pay a quarter of a million crowns to get rid of Nicolai? There’s no

way Nicolai had a chance in hell of getting any kind of custody if he was a drug addict. That he was accused of raping and basically blackmailed into abandoning Karin is bad enough, but Petter’s dad did that, and he’s long dead. None of this should frighten solicitor Petter Eliassen to open his wallet wide open. I just don’t believe it.

* Maybe he just wanted the guy away from his niece and he’s got plenty of money to spend, Anders

asked. – Maybe this was the simplest solution?

* That’s possible, true enough. But 250,000 is a ridiculous amount of money? A druggie would be

happy with much less than that, wouldn’t he? What if Caroline didn’t drown after all, but that Petter paid the gardener to make her disappear? That would explain both the picture of the dead girl on the computer, and that Ariston thought it was good idea to make himself scarce.

Anders shook his head.

* If that’s the case, what’s the motive? Why would Petter want to kill his five-year-old niece?

Håkon shrugged.

* It could’ve been an accident, with the gardener as a witness. Maybe Petter bribed him into shutting `

up? Either way, we’ve got to get a warrant out for him, since all evidence points to him being Sissel’s attacker. He probably panicked when he realised she’d been snooping around. Just our luck the bloody computer’s gone too. I’d love to get my hands on it and take a closer look at that picture Sissel mentioned.

Anders nodded.

* When it comes to Petter, I doubt he’s as devious and conniving as you think he is. He’s a bloke with

way too much disposable income and those people tend to be obnoxious. But, changing the subject, have you seen Sissel and Karin? How similar they look?

* Yes, Håkon said and smiled. – But Sissel’s the looker.

Petter and Karin were questioned the next day. Karin explained she was asleep when Sissel was attacked and hadn’t heard anything. Petter had worked overtime, nothing unusual about that, Sissel could probably confirm that. And no, there weren’t any witnesses there, but they could check his computer logs to verify the time he left. When they asked about the gardener, both shared an almost identical story. He’d been with them since they were kids, his wife and son had died too soon, but he’d found great comfort in his granddaughter. Caroline. He was a kind and patient person they thought couldn’t harm a fly. None of them could fathom who could’ve assaulted Sissel, but both were sure it couldn’t be Ariston. Maybe a random burglar?

Sissel left the hospital the next day of her own accord. The doctor recommended a few more days and the police had asked her to stay there since they hadn’t apprehended her assailant yet, but she didn’t listen. Her head had stopped aching and the world had stopped spinning. There was no reason for her to lay in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling. Besides, she missed her son.

She wandered aimlessly around the big house. Eivind lay on the couch, half asleep. Petter had left already, presumably to work, the house seemed emptier than usual.

Petter had been questioned twice at the station, but he had seemed totally relaxed, almost chipper, when he came back, and if it was true what both Petter and Karin had said, that the 250,000 crowns were payment for the gardener’s son’s return to Greece, he hadn’t done anything illegal. Morally reprehensible to bribe people to disappear, sure, but not illegal. It’s too late for Petter to worry about morals, Sissel thought and looked out the big living room window. The gardener’s house was still dark and empty. Petter had already put out an advertisement for a new gardener, so it was obvious he thought Ariston wouldn’t come back.

She thought it was much too soon, but Petter insisted. He claimed the garden was too big to be left untended for weeks, and she could see he was right. The lawn was already unkempt.

Where was Ariston? Was he really her assailant? If he hadn’t done anything wrong, why had he run off? Could it be that it was as she feared, that it was Petter who was behind Caroline’s disappearance? But why did Petter want to get rid of his niece, and why was his gardener in on it?

She imagined the gardener, hunched over in the yard, where he lovingly tended the flowers. She remembered how his big hands had moved the small leaves so they’d get enough light, removing dead debris. Were those hands able to kill? A small girl, and not just any small girl, but his own granddaughter? For a quarter of a million crowns, paid by the girl’s own uncle? Was it truly possible, or could Petter have had one of his rages and killed Caroline on accident, and paid the gardener to clean it up?

Sissel scanned the garden. The orange emperor lilies began to droop, most of the big leaves had already fallen from the stem and spread out over the flower bed. The gardener’s favorite flowers, she thought. The flowerbed she hadn’t understood why he didn’t want to remove it. Did it hide something, perhaps?

She went to the toolshed in the garden, and pulled out gloves and a spade. The sun shone. It was about 20 degrees outside, but she still wrapped Eivind in an extra blanket before putting him in the stroller. He smiled up at her. Seven small teeth glistening in his upper jaw, his bright hair almost white in the sunlight. She was happy he didn’t look like Mari. It made it easier to be happy, wholeheartedly happy, without that chest jolt that so often came – sometimes as a small pinch, other times paralyzing – every time she saw a child that resembled Mari, a girl that smiled, kids with similar clothes. Eivind was just Eivind and totally different. Far more demanding and needy, but just as loved. Maybe more so now, she thought, now that I know how painful loss is.

The spade slid into the soil and the first emperor lily gave way, the orange leaves fell to the ground. Her heart pounded, hands clammy, she couldn’t free herself of the thought of what may lay beneath the black, damp soil. She controlled herself enough to not dig straight down, but scraped the topsoil away, removed the flowers and pulled the roots. While she worked, she listened, waiting for Petter’s car to pull into the driveway any minute now – what would she say if he came home? I’m going to have a sandbox here no matter what Petter says, she thought. Petter hadn’t mentioned the NSPCC or anything else since she’d returned from hospital; she hadn’t dared to bring it up. Eivind’s not going anywhere, she thought, so he’s going to need a sandbox. She shook her fear away. If Petter was innocent, he couldn’t get mad if his son had a sandbox? But what would she do if she found something?

The flowers were gone an hour later. A big square of dark soil was all that lay before her. I should dig deeper, she thought. Her back protested a little, not used to the physical labour, sweat dripping down her forehead. She dried it off with her hand, sweat replaced with damp soil; she sniffed the smell of grass, emperor lilies and raw soil.

Again, the spade slid into the soil, but she realised this kind of work was harder than she’d thought about three or four shovels later. She wiped sweat off her forehead once more and was glad Petter couldn’t see her, sweaty and earthy. He wouldn’t have liked it. He definitely wouldn’t have liked it.

She pushed the spade into the soil once more. It hit something hard, the spade clanged, the sound made her stomach coil somewhere in her gut. It startled Eivind, and he cried.

* There, there, it was only a rock, she said loudly, rocking the stroller back and forth, he stopped crying

and focused on his pacifier. – Only a rock.

She bent down and noticed the rocks were covered by something, plastic, maybe a piece of a black garbage bag? She poked the bag with the spade, but it didn’t tear. The plastic was thicker than she had thought, thoroughly taped with clear, almost rotten packing tape. She used the spade to scrape around the plastic, stared at the oblong plastic package that appeared from the soil below. The size could fit, she thought, and caught herself hoping it was anything else but what she feared. An animal carcass, maybe the judge had a dog? Or something completely different; anything, something.

Sissel walked back to the toolshed and brought garden shears with her. She used to it carefully cut holes in the plastic and discovered it wasn’t just one plastic bag, but many. One inside the other, and taped together. She broke through the plastic, the last plastic bag folded itself in front of her.

There was a partially buried body down there. Two empty eye sockets stared up at her. Once it had a face, now it only looked greenish and doughy, but it was still a child. The stench hit her nostrils like a flood; the nauseating and almost sweet smell filled her nostrils and her mouth. She couldn’t help it; she threw up and filled the empty eye sockets with breakfast and stomach acid. A second later she wondered if it was Mari down there, then she recognized the jewelry around the child’s neck. Full of soil and brown and matted down even in the strong sunlight, but still very recognisable -a small golden heart, just like she’d seen on the picture her sister-in-law had shown her many times before.

Sissel screamed.

* KARIN!

She yelled while running towards Karin’s front door, her son yelled behind her as well, awake and afraid.

She stormed in the flat door, suddenly realizing she’d never been inside this flat before. The two on the couched stared at her, terrified.

* Petter? You’re here?

She saw her own white face on the mirror on the wall, heard her son scream behind her. Petter, bare

chest, her sister-in-law, both on the sofa. Petter jumped up.

* Sissel? What the fuck are you doing here?

Karin got halfway up, ran a confused hand through her hair, then flopped back down on the sofa. Sissel

couldn’t get a word out, just pointed behind her with one hand, towards the garden. She was still screaming, but it belonged to a stranger; a kind of howling, a screaming she didn’t recognize. Someone inside her was screaming.

* My God, woman, what is it?

His eyes trailed her hand, out towards the garden. The flower bed with the emperor lilies weren’t visible

from where they stood.

* Calm down, what is it?

He lifted his hand smacked her across the face, the clap filled the room. It was quiet, even Eivind went

quiet out there in the yard. Petter raised his hand again, Sissel instinctively backed away. The fog lifted just a tiny bit.

* A… child… in the flowerbed, she’s dead.

He looked at her in disbelief, then all three of them ran outside. Petter first, still without a shirt, his back

had red stripes on it, she saw it but her brain didn’t register it at first. The focus was on the flower bed. Petter was there first. He stopped when he saw it. The spade, the pile of wizened lily leaves, the hole with the skull.

* Don’t come any closer, he shouted.

Sissel stopped, but Karin kept coming. She ran all the way to the flower bed, stopped at the edge and

looked down. Petter barely managed to catch her as she fainted.

The garden had filled with policemen an hour later. Sissel could see Håkon and Anders down there, they wandered about the garden a little aimlessly, back and forth. The body was still there. Someone would walk over there from time to time, then walk away, as if in disgust.

Sissel sat apathetically on the sofa in front of the window, looking at them. They seemed both sure of themselves and distraught at the same time. They spoke a lot together, but did very little. It was as if they were waiting for someone, maybe someone to remove the body?

The neighbour girl had picked up Eivind, and Petter had given Sissel a pill that made her uncomfortably slow, she was afraid of falling if she stood up. Still, she was glad she felt the cotton wrapped around the emotions and confusion she felt. The certainty that the body had laid buried there, just a few metres away this whole time, was too much to bear.

Petter was again questioned by police, by an unknown policeman this time. Unknown, to her, at least. Sissel only heard fragments of their conversation through his office door. His tone was curt, she understood that well enough; they had found a body in his garden, after all, in a flower bed that now almost appeared to be a grave in what had been peaceful, colourful spot surrounded by freshly mowed green lawn and well-maintained thuja bushes. How could someone have buried a child here without him knowing? Was it possible? He seemed just as shocked as she was, she could’ve swore he seemed unaware what lay hidden beneath the emperor lilies. Maybe he was just a great actor?

Karin had fallen apart completely in the flower bed, sure as day that Caroline lay there. Petter had forcefully restrain her. Eventually she’d taken the same pills Petter had given to Sissel, probably more or stronger; they had knocked her out, she lay asleep in her flat. The police looked in on her regularly, perhaps out of fear she had been overmedicated, more likely hoping to question her as well.

It seemed they had already lost interest in Sissel. She couldn’t tell them much, anyway; the flower bed had been there long before she had moved in, she was only trying to build a sandbox for her son and, no, she hadn’t recognized the dead girl, but the necklace made her realise it was Caroline.

It took them six hours before they were done. The men and women in the white plastic suits had taken countless pictures of the flower bed and the body, before eventually taking the remains in the black bags with them and left. The flower bed was still cordoned off – red, white and blue plastic ribbons – around the area where emperor lilies had dropped its petals earlier in the day.

Petter didn’t go down to the station, but was told to check in the following morning for questioning and DNA-test. Karin was still asleep, but Petter promised to bring her as well. Eivind was still with the neighbour, the girl’s mother had taken responsibility for Eivind when she realised what was going on in the garden.

Sissel was oddly indifferent; her thoughts flew but never landed and she wondered what kind of pill she had taken. It must be strong, she felt an unhappy intoxication, she could think but couldn’t feel. She assumed she was happy about that fact.

When she awoke the next morning, the house was quiet. Petter had woken up earlier and left. The driveway was empty, the garage door closed. Where was he now? Was he working today, or was he with his sister like he had been the day before? Close together? She didn’t want to finish that thought, it was too monstrous, but she’d seen the two together on the sofa, him without a shirt on and with scratches on his back? What kind of man was she married to? And Karin, how could she? Her anger simmered, she had to fight to keep it in check. She wanted to scream, wanted to break their porcelain all over the living room, break everything she knew he cared about. She didn’t.

She went to her son instead, looked down at the bed where he lay asleep, gently caressed his cheek. His skin warm underneath her palm. He awoke, opened his eyes, stretched and smiled.

* You’ve got to get up, we have to pack a few of your things, she said and lifted his warm body up and

out. – We’re going to the cabin.

She pulled out two medium sized suitcases and started bagging his most important clothes, a bag of diapers, the teddy bear he needed to fall asleep. She walked into her own room, stared into the closets for a moment, brand clothes worth thousands upon tens of thousands. She sighed, picked up some pants, underwear and four tops. If she was lucky, she could pick the rest up later and if she couldn’t, she’d have to make do with what clothes she had left at the cabin. She knew she couldn’t bring more than she could carry. Eivind began whining behind her. She looked at the clock; it had already passed ten o’clock, he must be hungry.

* You’ve got to wait, dear. We can eat later.

She went to the kitchen, found a few bananas and some children’s food from the refrigerator, threw it in

one of the suitcases despite it being almost stuffed to the brim. She grabbed her son by the hand and pulled him along with her. The whine became full-blown cries when he realised they were moving away from the kitchen and that the food he expected would have to wait.

* Hush now, dear, we’re going to eat later, she said calmingly, but he only screamed louder. The front

door opened suddenly.

Petter’s body blocked the whole doorway, his eyes scanned the suitcases, moved over to his son and landed at her. His face stony, only a vibrating vein in his neck showed his rage.

* And where are you two going, if I may ask?
* I’m moving, she said and took a step towards him, Eivind close to her still, his arms wrapped around

her neck.

* You’ll do no such thing, he said. His voice was cold, almost nonchalant, but she wasn’t fooled; she

could hear the vibrating string buried deep down in that voice. She had heard it before.

* Bloody hell, she exploded, she had forgotten about Eivind, who started to cry, forgot about her fear

of that same vibrating string in his voice, forgot to think.

* You’re fucking your sister, for Christ’s sake, and you think I’ll stay?
* My God, woman! His smile scornful, overbearing. – You’re wrong, you’ve obviously misunderstood. I

only used her shower. You were sleeping, and I didn’t want to wake you up. She’s my sister, so get a hold of yourself. I would never…

His voice was mild, as if speaking to a child.

* Fucking lies, don’t treat me like an idiot! she yelled as tears fell freely down her face.

She hated it. Hated it when anger made her cry, but the tears wouldn’t stop, the collective

Disappointment too great, the pain an overwhelming reminder that she would never stop loving him, but didn’t want to see him ever again; loved him, hated him, had to get away him, her asshole husband. Her son started kicking, crying became screaming, and soon enough he howled. She made a move to force her way past him. Petter sidestepped, she almost lost her balance. Then she stood there alone. Petter had ripped Eivind out of her arms and held him close; not lovingly, hard. Too hard, she thought, she saw Eivind’s white skin, turn red from Petter’s grip.

* Just go, he said. – But Eivind stays with me. And if you ever make such absurd accusations again, I’ll

make you never see Eivind again.

* Let him go, she screamed. – Eivind is mine, you don’t even want him
* No, Petter said and looked at his son with obvious disgust. – You’re right. But if you leave, you won’t

have him, either.

His son howled louder. Petter gripped him harder around his shoulder. A hand flew forth and the crack silenced the scream, then silence fell like a heavy blanket. A dark red spot spread across Eivind’s cheek. He stared horrified at his dad, sobbed once, tears pouring out of his large eyes.

* There, there, son. No more of this pansy-arsed upbringing shit, Petter said and looked coldly at

Sissel.

* What about you and your move?

She shook her head, felt the tears, saw him walk to the front door. Her son looked at her over his

shoulder, put one hand out to her. She ran after them. Petter pushed her back, she fell on the dresser, and before she could get back up, they were gone. Soon after she heard his car start, then spin out of the driveway and disappear. She sank to the floor, crying.

They came home late at night. Her son stretched his arms and cried the second he saw her. Petter waved her away when she got close.

* You’re still here? Thought you were moving?
* No, I can’t…
* Can’t what? I’m not stopping you, am I?
* Just give me Eivind, she pleaded and heard how pathetic her voice sounded. Thin, pleading, pathetic.
* He’s better off with me. Any judge will agree with me there, Petter said calmly. – No one would grant

custody to a drunk slag like you, someone who jumped into bed with a man instead of watching her daughter. I can get plenty of witnesses to provide testimony of you drinking during the pregnancy, including your psychiatrist. Anyone who knows a thing or two about kids knows the end-result. So if you want to see your son in the future, I’m part of the package, he said grinning.

* But that’s just a bonus, isn’t it? he said mockingly, taking a step closer, lifting her chin. – Because you

love me still, don’t you?

She had no choice. She stayed. They got up together every day. When Petter went to work, Eivind went with him. He’d taken her car keys so she couldn’t follow them. She didn’t know who took care of their son while Petter worked, but Eivind had a fresh diaper when they came home, so he was taken care of, at least, and he didn’t seem to be in any discomfort. When Petter had to go out of town for a case – in Oslo, Bergen or Stavanger – they’d be gone for days. The nights when they were home, Petter would lock Eivind in his room with the key hanging on a string around his neck. He’d demand sex at night; it was as if degrading her that way turned him on, knowing she didn’t dare to deny him anything. His power over her lay in the room next door crying, the key around his neck scratching the area between her breasts as he pumped up and down, resting on her back when he plowed her from behind. That’s how he liked her best; like a dog, a beaten bitch. He knew she hated it.

* Tell me you love, he moaned in her ear, crushing her breast in a vice-like grip, bit her neck bloody.
* I love you, she cried.

*He stared disbelievingly at the front pages screaming at him from the news rack. They’d found Caroline! How was that possible? He bought two newspapers and ran back to his hotel room, hands trembling as he flopped down on the narrow full-sized bed and opened the newspaper.*

*He was left sitting, staring into the pale yellow wall once he was done reading. Even though it wasn’t spelled out as such, the VG-journalist clearly felt that Ariston was guilty of murdering that child, and that solicitor Eliassen was probably involved. He moaned and thought back. They didn’t understand anything. It wasn’t even murder.*

*He’d just been to the ATM and checked that Petter had deposited the money when he saw Petter park his car a few cars down from his at the pier. Petter, Karin and Caroline had exited the car, when Caroline spotted a kitten underneath the car. She had kneeled and bent down to lure it out, but when she got up, both adults were gone. Her bottom lip quivered and he’d approached her to comfort her, give her a hug. When he suggested they’d take a drive while waiting for mum to come back, she hesitated for only a few seconds before taking his hand.*

*And afterwards, he didn’t have a choice. All the newspapers wrote she had most likely drowned, and he couldn’t bring her back to them. No one would believe it was an accident.*

The hum of the car outside lured Karin to look out the kitchen window. She stood there, partially hidden by the curtains as the police car parked in the driveway outside. The driver’s side door opened, and recognized the bald man as soon as she saw him over the roof of the car. It was the same police officer that had questioned Petter at the office, the rude one. She felt a cold claw in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes, wanted him to get back into the car and drive away.

When she opened her eyes again, he was still there. He stood completely still staring at the house, his face serious, almost grey, then he disappeared around the corner. She heard his steps; first on the gravel, then on the brick stairs on the outside. He stomped his feet a few times before ringing the doorbell. Karin put the coffee down on the table to put a piece of gum in her mouth. Her body felt heavier than usual, the hand gripping the door handle, trembled visibly.

Håkon stood at the top of the stairs and looked down at her before extending his hand. She didn’t take it, only shook her head. He opened his hand, something flashed in the sun. She recognized it at once. It was the heart-shaped pendant Caroline had gotten from Petter on her second birthday, the name “Caroline” written elaborately in thin, yellow gold. She opened the door and let him, her legs trembling slightly.

* I suspect you know why I’m here?
* It’s guaranteed that it’s Caroline?

He nodded.

* How did she…

He interrupted her.

* Do you mind if we sit?

She nodded, and took a sit at the kitchen table. Håkon put a hand around her shoulders, she pushed

them away.

* How did she die?
* I’m sorry, but we don’t know a lot just yet, but I wanted to let you know before the media starts

Digging. What we do know is that there weren’t any signs of external trauma or violence. We reckon we’ll know cause of death when we get the autopsy report, but that could take a couple of weeks.

She looked out the window, his words floating around on cotton. She could see one of the neighbours down the street stare up at the house and the police car. A bird tweeted somewhere between the branches, and a short moment later, the sun appeared through the clouds and shone directly onto the bald cop’s head.

It’s a beautiful autumn day, really, she thought, then everything went black.

When she woke up, the police man was leaning over her; a wash cloth in his hand, her forehead was wet.

* Do you feel better now? he asked worriedly.

She got up, the room spun for a moment. She took a step back, he extended his hand to steady her, it

was warm against hers. Then it was quiet, both in the room and inside Karin. The sun shone outside. She turned to the police officer and forced herself to smile.

* Yes, I’m better now.

They sat down on the sofas right in front of the big bay window, the policeman sizing her up with a

Worried look. Then he told her what little he knew, which was more than she wanted to know. She had been waiting for this. She’d been dreaming of this. They had found Caroline, but the ending was all too wrong.

The sat silent for a long time before the policeman again broke the silence.

* We’re confident that this gardener of yours is involved, and he’s wanted both nationally and

Internationally, but we’re working on several theories until we find him. Right now, we don’t know if it’s murder or an accident that he attempted to cover up. Caroline could also have been kidnapped by someone…

Håkon went silent again.

* If that’s the case, the usual course of events is that men like that often keep the child under

surveillance before making a move, and I know it’s been a while, but do you remember anything unusual before Caroline disappeared? Anyone that spoke with her, something she spoke about? At the playground, in the shops? Someone extra kind to her, something that made you react? Someone else besides the gardener?

Karin stared blankly, then shook her head.

* No, I don’t think so, but Caroline was a trusting child, and even though we told her not to, she spoke

to strangers all the time.

She looked up at Håkon.

* Do you know where Ariston’s at?
* Unfortunately, no. As I said, we have warrants for his arrest and we’ve sent a request to Europol to

find out where in Greece he’s from. It’s not unlikely that he traveled there, but there’s been nothing new on his phone or his bank account after he disappeared, and we still don’t have any sightings to go on. It’s as if the earth ate him whole.

Håkon bit his lip as the last words flew across his lips – what was he thinking? Karin didn’t seem to take offense, she only nodded.

* Can you tell me when you planted those emperor lilies? Caroline was buried deeper than the

flowers, so there’s a theoretical possibility that she was buried there before the lilies were planted. But who planted the flowers?

* Ariston did. He chose the emperor lilies because Caroline loved them. Think they were planted a few

months after she went missing, I think.

Karin quieted down, gasping for air. The room spun again, she concentrated on breathing. In, out, in out. When she regained control, she asked:

* Was she alive until then? Do you think she was alive until that flower bed was made?
* We don’t know enough yet, we’ll have to wait for the autopsy report, unfortunately, Håkon said

calmly.

* The body was wrapped in several layers of plastic and was surprisingly well-kept, we’re hoping we

can give you an answer soon enough.

Håkon got up, extended his hand. – I won’t bother you more today, but we’ll have to speak again later. We’ll bring Petter in for questioning again and everyone else who’s been in the yard for that matter, probably by tomorrow. Please don’t hesitate to ring us if you remember something, even if it doesn’t seem important, even the smallest details can help. And I’ll get back to you the second we have the autopsy report. Do you have someone to come spend time with you, or do you want me to call someone for you?

Karin shook her head.

* I’m fine. Petter will be home soon, but right now I’d like to be alone.
* Are you sure?

He looked at her questioningly, she nodded.

* I’ve been prepared for this for quite some time now, a pale smile across her face.
* For many years, actually. I’m fine.

Karin got up and followed the policeman to the door. She stood in the doorway, watching him leave, the

sun shone on his bald head. He got into the car, looked at the house one last time, lifted an awkward hand as a wave before he started the car and drove away.

As soon as the car was out of sight, she grabbed a scarf that hung on the coat stand, tying it twice around her neck. Caroline smiled at her from her picture frame on the dresser, her daughter stood safely between her and Petter. The picture was taken in the garden, the white apple tree blooming. The gardener had taken the picture for them, and afterwards, when Ariston had turned his back to them and walked away, Petter had kissed her and promise to take care of her and Caroline forever. It was the last picture she had of Caroline. Sobbing, she flipped it over and went to the garden.

Petter put the carseat with his sleeping son down on the hallway floor and studied today’s mail; all neatly bunched on the small table right inside the door. A bill from Telenor, the rest were advertisements. He took his shoes off and straightened the door mat a little. He heard Leonard Cohen’s rusty voice from the living room. *So long, Marianne.* He followed the music. The room was empty, two open phot albums on the dining room table. He turned the stereo off. Pleasant silence.

* Sissel? Where are you?

She didn’t answer. The house was just as silent as before.

* Sissel?

He remembered. It was Wednesday, and Sissel was at her weekly appointment with Dr. Wurth.

As he turned to walk back to the kitchen, he noticed a tiny movement outside the living room window. He turned around, stared at the window, at the apple tree; red apples hung from the branches, not quite ripe.

The woman’s body swing slowly towards him. Karin’s face was rigid, almost smiling, the pale skin seemed translucent in the sunlight. A white silk scarf around her neck; he had given it to her for Christmas the year before. It was the first time he’d seen her wear it.

*She was dead. He looked at the obituary, short and standardised. “Our dear Karin Eliassen died suddenly and unexpectedly on the 1st August 2008. The funeral was held in private.”*

*He pictured her in his head, she’d been so beautiful as a child, always cheerful, always smiling. She’d always been nicer than her pompous brother, even as an adult. He had loved her. Now she was dead.*

*He slammed his fist into the tabletop in front of him. Once. Twice. Over and over, didn’t feel pain, didn’t notice the tears streaming down his face. He didn’t stop until his arm hurt and blood ran from his fist and the pain in his hand deafened the pain on the inside.*

*She was dead. It was wrong. All wrong. It should’ve been her fucking brother.*

6th August 2008

* Why are you so serious, daddy?
* I’m serious? Doofus.

He laughed, but she saw it wasn’t real. His eyes didn’t smile.

* Are you ill? Are you dying?

He looked at her, horrified.

* Dying? Why do you think that? Of course I’m not dying.
* But…

He sat on his haunches, pulled her close.

* You’re right, though. Someone did die and it’s a little sad. Do you remember asking me about who

had drawn those drawings on the wall?

* Yes, Mari said and looked at the brick wall below the boarded-up window, where the drawings were

still faintly visible.

* Caro drew them. She was a cute, little girl, just like you. But she got sick in her stomach and died.
* Poor her! And poor you!
* Yes. And I found out today her mum died as well.

Mari got chills, they ran down her back.

* That’s sad. Did you love her? How did she die?

Ari looked at her and smiled sadly.

* Yes, I loved her very much. But I think she missed Caro so much that I think it’s okay for her to not

be alive anymore.

* Oh, that’s sad. Do you think my mum misses me like that, too?

His face darkened.

* No, your mum doesn’t miss you. She wanted me to kill you, so she’s just happy you’re gone.

Then he smiled, pulled her close, stroked her hair, down her neck, kissed her earlobe lightly.

* But you’ve got me, little wagtail.

His hand played with her hair, which had grown much longer while here in the cellar. She felt it was in

the way, he refused to cut it.

* Let’s not think about your mean mum anymore, okay? I saved you from her, aren’t you happy about

that?

Mari nodded. She didn’t want to be alone in the dark, didn’t want him to leave and never come back, she didn’t want to starve to death.

* Yes, she whispered.

He got up and she looked up at him, high up there. He always seemed extra tall when she laid like this, on the mattress in front of his legs, his head almost touching the ceiling. He was almost as tall as God.

* The autopsy report is here.

Anders pointed to the sheets of paper laying on the corner of the table. Håkon grabbed them, knowing

full well what report he was talking about. He stood there uncertain for a moment with a chicken and curry baguette in one hand and the autopsy report in the other. He brought both with him into his office, Anders right behind him, stopping in the doorway and leaning on the doorframe while Håkon read.

* As the first reports showed, Caroline presumably relatively soon after she disappeared. The cause of

death is appendicitis and because the body was wrapped in several plastic bags, her body was well preserved with only partial decomposition. Håkon listed off medical terms.

* They can’t confirm or deny sexual abuse, he said.
* Still, death by appendicitis is a pretty painful process, Anders said. – Just imagine how afraid she

must've been, Poor thing, sexual abuse or not, being held prisoner somewhere for several months… it must have been hell.

* And all we did was look in the sea, it didn’t even occur to us that—
* That was before our time, Anders interrupted. – Not our fault.
* No, but the poor mother…
* Just as well she didn’t find out, Anders mumbled. – All things considered.
* I should’ve stayed with her. I should’ve made sure someone stayed with her, Håkon said.
* You couldn’t have known she’d off herself. After all those years, how could you know?
* If she did kill herself, Håkon said grimly. Despite all evidence indicating suicide, Håkon had ordered

an autopsy.

* Everything indicates she committed suicide, Anders said. – I don’t think the autopsy report will tell us

anything different.

Håkon hesitated.

* You might be right, but I’m still puzzled. Why hanging? Women prefer pills, and she had a

medicine cabinet full of them. Better safe than sorry with that autopsy, bruv, better safe than sorry.

* Hanging’s guaranteed, Anders said. – If she’d taken pills, there’s a chance someone might’ve found

her in time. Still…

Anders pointed to a paper sheet on the table in front of them.

* You’ve missed one important thing. Check Caroline’s DNA analysis report.

Håkon skimmed it.

* What did I miss? They found nothing, no sign of…

Then he saw it.

* But that’s not possible.

Anders nodded.

* But it is. The DNA analysis is definite; there’s a 99% chance Petter Eliassen was Caroline’s dad.

Håkon put the papers down and stared blankly.

* Holy shit, he exclaimed and looked up at this partner.
* That whole story about Nicolas, the gardener’s son, was just a cover?

Håkon got up, paced the room.

* Petter *did* have a clear motive in killing Caroline. If anyone found out he was fathered a child

with his own sister, his life would be ruined. Who knows? Maybe he even raped his sister? Who wouldn’t ostracize that kind of asshole? Imagine what it’d do his practice? And what about the gardener? Was he fooled as well, or was he in on the plot against his son and that’s why he was paid so bloody well?

* So many questions, yet so few answers. However, legally speaking, Caroline wasn’t murdered,

Anders said cautiously. – She died due to a burst appendix. Could’ve been a tragic accident.

* If she’d gone to hospital, she would’ve most likely survived, Håkon said and got back up. – Bring that

bastard Petter back in for questioning.

The man on the other side of the interrogation table was obviously tired; eyes red and bloodshot. Petter leaned forward and groaned.

* You just found my dead niece, my sister committed suicide. Do we *really* have to do all this right

now?

* I’m afraid we do, Håkon said. – I’m sure you want to know what happened to Caroline, right?
* Of course I do, but I’ve told you repeatedly everything I know. You know damn well I didn’t kidnap

her, I’ve got a bloody shop as an alibi!

* Well, you didn’t tell us everything.

Håkon shoved the DNA analysis across the table and watched Petter’s face go white when he realised

what it was.

* I assume you’ve seen those reports before, and I assume you know what it means. But you knew

that already, right? That you were Caroline’s dad?

Petter looked away, eyes closed. Håkon waited patiently; the solicitor opened his eyes seconds later.

* Yes, I am Caroline’s father, he said quietly and pushed the report away, as if it disgusted him.
* We had sex once when I was fifteen and we both regretted it afterwards. When she got pregnant, I tried to convince

her to have an abortion, but she wouldn’t have it.

Petter sat silent for a moment, no one said a word. He shook his head and continued.

* We couldn’t tell the truth to anyone, but we knew Nico was in love with her, he’d been around my

sister since she was a young girl. So Karin seduced him and you didn’t have to ask him twice. When he found out she was pregnant, he wanted to leave the country with her, even marry her. Nothing like that could happen, of course, it would be…

Petter laughed a hollow laugh.

* Our father was of course beside himself with rage when she told him she was pregnant with the

gardener’s son. I’ve never seen him that angry, and that says a lot. My father got rid of the problem my threatening to charge Nico with rape. He was a judge, and Karin willingly agreed to whatever he said as long as she could keep the kid. Nico wouldn’t stand a chance in court, and we were rid of him, at least until the idiot came back and insisted on having visits with his daughter and, if necessary, demand a paternity test to get the court’s approval for visitation rights at the very least.

* So that’s why you paid that exorbitant amount, the 250,000? To get rid of Nicolai yet again?

Petter stared at the table. His usually confident expression was absent. He seemed genuinely distressed.

* Yeah, I did, it seemed like the simplest solution. Nico babbled about wanting to see his daughter, be

in contact with her, but he wasn’t the father, he was just another junkie. We couldn’t have him here. I paid to get rid of him, and after he left, we never saw him again.

* Do you know where he is now?
* He’s dead. Ariston told us he had died of a drug overdose not long after. He could afford drugs now,

probably more than what was good for him.

Petter looked at the two policemen, as if checking to see if his acerbic comment had worked. None of them answered.

* Either way, he was too far gone by the time he left Norway.
* Do you know where in Greece he landed, or where his family stayed?
* No, I don’t.
* Nothing? Anything could be important; his mother’s name, a city, anything?

Petter shook his head.

* No, unfortunately not. Maybe Karin knew something, but he didn’t like me and the feeling was

mutual, so we didn’t talk much, if at all. I truly don’t know more than I’ve already told you.

Håkon nodded slowly.

* What about Ariston? Do you think he’ll confirm the story if we find him?
* I suppose he would, but he and his son weren’t exactly chummy towards the end. First he’s accused

of rape, then he turns to drugs... I mean, his dad worked for us…

* So the gardener also thought his son had raped Karin, and that Caroline was his grandchild?
* Yeah, and he adored Caroline. I saw him with Caroline on his lap all the time, or they were on their

knees, digging and doing whatever gardeners do.

The men sat silent, then Håkon continued.

* What about the gardener’s wife, do you know anything about her?

Petter shook her head.

* Nothing really, only that she had worked as a maid for us and died when Nico was born. I guess my

parents felt sorry for the widower and single father, and let him continue to live here with his whelp. It was only rarely that the three of us spent any time together growing up, despite Nico being only a few years older than me and didn’t quite fit in. He only lived there because he was the gardener’s son. I let him know that fact a few times, and I’m not too proud of it.

Håkon nodded.

* Okay. I think you’ve answered most of what I wanted to know for now, but… just one more thing.

What really happened the night your parents died?

Petter sat up straight and stared at Håkon.

* What do you mean?
* Were the two of you at home that night?
* No, Petter said. – We were at the cinema.
* Do you remember what film you watched?
* Yes, Petter nodded, - of course. It was “Rain Man”, you know, with Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman.

We came in good spirits and thought it was just nice the house was still empty. It was quite peaceful when they weren’t home.

Petter went silent, his eyes blank and introspective, as if he thought back in time. His voice was hushed and quiet when he spoke.

* The police showed up the next day and said there had been an accident, that my father had crashed

the car into a rock wall.

Håkon leaned forwards to hear those last words.

Petter added: - Both my parents died that night and I didn’t mind.

* You didn’t mind? What about your mother? Were you happy she was dead, too?

Petter looked away and shrugged.

* My mother wasn’t a real mother. She saw everything that man did to us and did nothing to stop it,

did nothing to protect us. Karin and I never had anyone else but each other.

Petter got up and looked down at Håkon’s bald head.

* Well, there’s all my family secrets, ugly as they are. Guess most families are that way, though, right?

Ugly? I regret having sex with Karin, but I have not done anything against the law. So…

He looked at them.

* Can I leave?

Håkon and Anders listened to the interrogation over again. It was the third time now.

* That’s quite a story. Think he’s telling the truth? Anders asked.
* I don’t know.

Håkon shook his head.

* The story makes sense and it’ll be hard to disprove after so much time has passed.
* Children under the age of eighteen can’t be convicted of incest. His sister was older, but she’s dead,

Anders thought out loud. – In other words, he’s right in that he can’t be charged with anything, but absolutely gives him motive in wishing for Caroline’s death. Both friends and clients would’ve ostracized him, I’m sure. They could potentially forgive economic fraud, but having a child with your sister? He’d be persona non grata for all time.

* He had an alibi at the time Caroline disappeared; he talked to that psychiatrist, Håkon said grimly.
* So if he’s guilty, he must’ve had someone else do it for him. Maybe the gardener, and had her buried afterwards in his own yard, below her favorite flowers – his own, private cemetery.

He shuddered.

* Aye. Everything points to the gardener’s involvement, but we can’t prove that Petter’s involved as

long as the gardener’s missing.

14th August 2008

From somewhere far, far away ,Mari felt herself being carried up, up into the light. Someone bathed her in warm water, cleaned her gingerly, combed her hair, caressed her. Was it mum? She tried to open her eyes to check, but she couldn’t. She didn’t know if this was a dream or if it was real; everything was so far away and unreal. Someone put her down. It hurt, but she didn’t have the strength to cry or shout. Something dark and heavy covered her eyes and blocked the light, it was hard to breathe, so much blood… where did it all come from? Then it lifted and she floated away. There was a beautiful meadow below her, full of yellow flowers. Mum sat in the meadow with a little boy that had to be her little brother. They sat and held each other smack dab in the middle of the meadow, but they were crying… why were they crying?

* Mari?

The voice pulled her out of her dream. She didn’t want to, tried to fight it, she wanted to go back to the

Meadow with the flowers, back to her mum and her brother, wanted to tell them they shouldn’t cry, that everything was okay.

* Wagtail, wake up!

She coughed and opened her eyes, and peered into a grey pair of eyes. She tried to remember, but

everything was foggy, she closed her eyes and sank back down when someone caressed her hair tenderly, carefully, gently.

* You’ve been sick for weeks now, he said. – I thought you’d die on me, like Caro did. I’ve been so

scared.

Something dripped onto her forehead, she opened her eyes and looked at Ari. Tears? Was he crying? She turned her head to look around and noticed she wasn’t in the cellar anymore; she was in a bedroom upstairs. She tried to remember… had she been sick?

* But I didn’t die, she whispered, voice barely audible.
* No, you didn’t die.

He leaned over her and clutched her head to his chest, she could hear his heart beat underneath the dark

blue t-shirt. It’s beating very hard, she thought. It’s beating for me.

Håkon walked into the office with papers in his hands, waving them around excitedly. Anders gave him a puzzled look.

* What is it?
* Karin Eliassen’s autopsy report. It’s not conclusive, but it’s no longer indicating that she committed

suicide. He handed the paper to his partner, who skimmed through the report.

* Well, it’s not definite, that’s for sure. The marks around her neck could indicate a violent struggle

before she died, but those marks could also have been caused by spasms at the time of death.

* Look down further. They’ve found DNA under her nails, in her hair, on her body, and it matches DNA

we already have in our database.

* Who?
* See for yourself.

Anders took the sheet of paper, read the name.

* Petter Eliassen.

Petter was on his way to court when they arrived, four uniformed policemen surrounding him, seemingly at random. Had it been anywhere else Petter might’ve reacted sooner, but outside the big building for Oslo Courthouse, uniformed officers were quite common. Two of the officers stopped straight ahead of him, Håkon and Anders. Petter recognized them and nodded, they didn’t move. He came to an abrupt halt, so as to not run into them.

* Hey there! Do you need anything?

Something about his client, Petter was sure of it. What’s he done now? Today’s court case was a

Moroccan kid on the wrong side of the law – drugs, stabbing, the usual. Petter believed that community service would do that kid well, he wasn’t more than seventeen years old.

* We’ve got a few questions we need answers to. I’d like for you to come with us, Anders said quietly,

as if to prevent his words from reaching his colleagues further up the stairs; they cast curious glances in their direction.

* What?
* We’d like to come with us to the station and answer some questions, the police officer repeated,

brushing a blonde lock of hair out of his eyes.

* Eh, sure… sure, of course. But I’ve got a court case now.

Petter checked his watch, ten to eleven. – Could we do it later, say… at about three o’clock?

Anders shook his head. Håkon came closer, Petter took a step back.

* Sorry, this is urgent, Håkon said.
* Sure, but I…

Petter’s head whirred around. It was a warm day, the sun baked the ground from a clear sky. He woke up

maybe three hours earlier and had been convinced that this was going to be a good day; a mild sentence for his client, maybe followed by a dinner at the Theatercafé. Now however, pearls of sweat beading on his forehead.

One of the officers he didn’t recognize, a big burly man almost two metres tall, fumbled the cuffs hanging from his belt. Petter’s gaze locked onto the steel shimmering in the air. Were they going to cuff him?

* Okay, okay, of course I’ll come with you.

He stretched his arms out, attempting to defuse the situation. – What the hell is this about?

* I think it’s better to explain down at the station, Anders said and grabbed Petter around his elbow

and guided him down the stairs to the service car that waited for them.

Sissel paced aimlessly from window to window. The garden outside was dark. Eivind was gone, and she didn’t know where he was. What was she to do now? Petter’s Mercedes stood alone out there in the driveway; one of his colleagues had driven it home, but he didn’t know why the police had picked up Petter or where Eivind was.

The anxiety and worry scratched the inside of her skin. The pills Dr. Wurth had given her couldn’t silence nor deafen her fear.

She picked up the business card she had hid in the bottom drawer, hesitated a moment and then dialed the number. It rang once, twice, three times…

* Hello?

Håkons’s voice. Unrecognizable over the phone: older, formal.

* Hey, it’s Sissel… Sissel Eliassen. I heard that...

She stuttered. Grabbed her big girl panties.

* I heard you brought my husband down to the station?
* That’s correct. He’s been remanded for three weeks by the court, so it might be a while before he

comes home.

* What’s he done?

Håkon didn’t immediately answer.

* We suspect he might be involved in his sister’s death.
* Karin? She committed suicide, didn’t she?
* We’d like to clear that up, and we’d like to talk to you about it, so it’s good that you called, to be

honest. We’d like to know what kind of relationship they had, if maybe they’d had a row, or something.

* A row?

Sissel saw the scratches down Petter’s back clear in her mind’s eye, and tried to hide the irony in her

voice.

* I can stop by one day, no problem, but do you know where Eivind is? Our son?
* He’s not with you?
* No, I’m not allowed…

She whispered, her voice not willing to carry the painful words. – I wanted to move out, move away from

Petter, but he didn’t let me alone with Eivind after that. Petter knew I’d never move away from my son.

* I’ll find out where he is, Håkon said determinedly.

He stood outside her door an hour later, Eivind in his arms. She rushed outside, grabbed her son and smelled his baby hair, caressed his cheek and forehead. Eivind smiled.

* Where was he?
* With a young girl in a flat next to the office. She had tried to call Petter nine times when he didn’t

show up. I just needed to check his phone, that’s all.

* Come in, Sissel said and stepped aside. – Tell me why you’ve arrested Petter. You can’t seriously

think he killed Karin?

* I’m sorry, but the odds of Petter murdering Karin are pretty high.
* Why do you think that?

Sissel was unable to hide her disbelief.

* Caroline and Petter had a child together, Håkon said quietly and studied Sissel. She grew visibly

paler, obviously shocked.

* So what you’re saying is… Caroline was Petter’s daughter? You’re sure?
* 100%. DNA tests don’t lie.

Håkon looked at Sissel, unsure how much he should tell her. He decided to be honest, she would find out

either way.

* Our theory is that Petter grew nervous when Nicolai showed up, and that he paid Ariston, the

gardener, to get rid of Caroline. They buried her in the flower bed outside. When you found Caroline, Karin presumably figured out the connection and threatened to expose him. That’s why he killed her as well, but tried to hide it as a suicide. We’ve found plenty of Petter’s DNA under her fingernails, so she probably resisted.

Sissel opened her mouth, and was about to tell him about what she saw. The two siblings, sitting too close together on the sofa, the scratches on Petter’s back. Then she closed her mouth instead, turned her back to Håkon and looked outside the window, towards the flower bed that still lay as a dark mound of soil, a macabre wound surrounded by green grass.

Karin presumably knew Petter best and she hadn’t thought, not even for a moment, that Petter was guilty of killing her daughter, and that he had killed his sister who, no matter how sick it was, was most likely the only woman he had truly loved?

Sissel couldn’t believe it.

The DNA had gotten under her fingernails before then, while they “enjoyed” themselves and she was digging up the flower bed. Had their sick and twisted relationship gone on for that long, even before Caroline was born? She blinked away her tears, clenched her fists, her nails scratching her palms.

* So that’s why they argued the way they did, she said quietly and turned back towards Håkon. She

avoided his eyes and focused on her son, half asleep on the blanket between them. Little Eivind. Her son was the only thing that mattered now.

* They argued?
* Yes, she lied. – Petter and Karin argued about Caroline the night before she was found. I couldn’t

hear what they said, not exactly, but Petter was furious and when he’s dangerous when he’s angry. I know Karin was afraid of him as well; after she’d had too much to drink one night, she told me Petter had been violent with her since they were kids. Last I saw her, she had a black eye, it wouldn’t surprise me if it was Petter that had hit her. But murder? Do you really think he could’ve killed her?

* I don’t know, right now the evidence is circumstantial at best, but we’ll do our best to find out,

Håkon promised her. He looked at her intently.

* The only solid thing we have right now is the DNA. Knowing Petter, he’s going to get one of the best

defence solicitors that money can buy. We’d have a much stronger case if you’d tell the court the same thing you just told me, that he and Karin argued the night before she died, and that he’s violent when he’s angry.

* Petter will never forgive me if I testify against him, she said unsure of herself, looked at her son,

laying peacefully on the floor next to her feet.

* You’re his wife, Håkon said, - so we can’t demand you to take the stand as a witness.

In that moment, as if her son felt her gaze, he opened his eyes, locked eyes with Sissel and smiled. She

smiled back. She’d never stand it if she lost himn. She’d rather die than lose him.

* I’ll testify, she said.

*The newspapers were filled to the brim about the case regarding the solicitor that had been charged with killing his own sister and kidnapped his niece. He bought and read all the newspapers he saw. Was it possible, that Petter had killed Karin? Or were they wrong, in much the same way they were wrong about Caroline?*

*That time he came back from Oslo and found Caroline dead in the cellar, he’d called his dad. He had no one else. His dad, unaware that his son had come back to Norway, had alternated between rage and despair at first, but once he calmed down, it was his idea to bury Caroline in the flower bed. He could tend to her grave every day, give her a beautiful place to rest, and adorn it with her favourite flowers.*

*When the police found the flower bed, and Caroline, he’d been sure it was just a matter of time before they’d catch him, but… they thought Petter had done it instead? The man who was to blame for him having to hide all these years? Who could only visit his father at night? Live like a criminal in his own country? The man who thought money could solve all problems? The man he hated most of all?*

*It was almost too good to be true.*

22nd August 2008

Ari bent over her, looking at her worriedly.

* Come, he said, - I’ll help you up.
* Why? I want to sleep some more.

Mari whined, she could hear herself whining, but the duvet was warm and she was so tired. She just

wanted to lay here for at least a little bit longer.

* Please?

Ari shook his head.

* I’m sorry, you got sick again and I’ve taken care of you for several weeks, but I’ve got to go fix

something so you have to go back to your room.

* Can’t I just lay here and wait for you? I promise I’ll be good.

He shook his head again.

* No, you’ve got to wait downstairs. I’ll be back soon, I promise. I’m just going to get a nice car for us,

and then we’ll take a nice, long drive, just you and I.

He leaned down and took the duvet off Mari as she sat up. She sat up. It was cold. He lifted her up in his strong arms. He’s holding me like a baby, she thought, and let her head rest on his chest. He smelled of cigarettes and smoke. She wished he’d stop smoking. He could die from it, and mum had always said smoking was bad.

Ari put her down beside the hatch, it stood open. She wrapped her arms around herself, I’ve grown while I’ve been sick, she thought, my arms are longer. Or maybe I just got skinnier, she thought disappointedly.

She looked at him pleadingly, but he pointed at the stairs.

* Go then, I’ll be back soon. I’ll let you come back upstairs, I promise you. I promise. We’ll take a trip

together, you and I, we’re going home.

* The stairs, I don’t want to…

She looked down the stairs, she had walked it many times before, but something was different now.

She went backwards, put her foot down gingerly on the first step. She shivered, it was cold, she felt as if she had forgotten something, something important, but couldn’t remember.

* I can’t remember anything, she whispered, slipping the thumb back into her mouth.
* It’ll be fine, he said, - it’ll be fine. We’re going home.
* Home? Home where?

She knew home wasn’t home to mum anymore. She knew mum didn’t want her. Where was home?

* Wait and see, he said. – Wait and see.
* But I’m cold, she said. - I think I have a fever.
* I know, I know. I’ll find you a doctor, Ari said and put a cold hand on her forehead.
* But please, go downstairs and lay on your mattress. Crawl under the duvet there, so you’ll be warm.

His voice was impatient now. He bent over, lifting the hatch further up, she took another step backwards,

her foot missed a step, hands searching for something to grab onto but found nothing, they waved in the air and she fell backwards. She saw Aris face above her; it was stuck in an odd grimace with his mouth open and she could hear him screaming as the back of her head hit the hard floor with a loud thump. The light bulb in the ceiling spun round and round, faster and faster, the floor rocked under her. She closed her eyes.

The blood that poured out from the back of her skull stained the floor red.

Håkon had warned her that the evidence was circumstantial, and Petter still claimed he was innocent and repeated his own statement about the 250,000 crowns. Caroline was his daughter, and he had most certainly not killed her or his sister. Why would he? He loved both. That they had found his DNA under her fingernails was because she had helped him scratch a bothersome mosquito bite he had on his back.

He would probably have been released quickly if it hadn’t been for Sissel’s testimony. Thanks to Sissel, it was decided that he should be remanded until trial. The chances of Petter destroying evidence were too great.

The police had been there almost all week long, both in Karin’s flat and inside Petters office. She had been told not to touch anything before they were done, nor to remove anything. She figured they wanted her to stay clear of his office altogether. Neither Anders nor Håkon had been there, only strangers, uniformed men coming and going however they pleased, acting as if they lived there and she was the guest. When they were finally done, they brought out several cardboard boxes filled with Petter’s possessions, books, letters, his laptop, binders. Only the mess they had made remained.

Sissel walked over to the window and looked outside; it was early morning and the garden was still dark, she could barely see the shadow of the gardener’s house. She shuddered and walked away. She hadn’t been in there since the night of her assault.

She walked to Karin’s flat instead. She stopped in the living room doorway. I stood in this very spot when I was here last, Sissel thought. She shook the thought away and studied the living room. The police hadn’t cleaned up here either, there were books in the sofa, and the furniture had been moved. Still, it was easy to see that Karin had good taste. The room was painted in bright colours, the furniture was simple and elegant. She walked further in the flat, towards the bedroom and was amazed when she saw the big double bed. She had imagined a full-sized bed, not this giant double bed that filled about half of the room.

She turned away from the bed, towards the closet and opened the door and studied the clothes. They were Karins. Dresses, blouses, exclusive brand jackets, many of them still had the price tag. She pulled out a blue silk jacket, held it in front of her and studied herself in the wall mirror. The fabric felt soft against her body, the blue colour gave a certain shine to her eyes. She studied the tag – size 36, it was the same size she wore. She contemplated if she should try it on, the fabric was soft against her fingers. Petter would hate it if I wore his sister’s clothes, she thought and put it on.

The door behind her creaked. Sissel jumped and turned around. Eivind stood in the doorway.

* Hi darling, did you sleep well?

Her son nodded, Sissel looked at the clock on the wall. Half past eight. She took the jacket off and put it

back in the closet.

* Hungry, Eivind said impatiently from the doorway.

Sissel nodded and shut the closet door behind her.

* Aye, I guess it’s time to eat breakfast now, she said with a smile.

She stretched her arms out towards him, he accepted the embrace willingly, his tiny body was still warm

from the duvet.

* Hungry, he repeated.
* Soon, love, I just have to get dressed first. Go to the kitchen and wait for me there, okay? Monica will

be here soon to pick you up.

Her son smiled, then turned his back to her. She knew he liked the neighbour girl. Monica used to watch him a few days a week and would usually take him to the play area a few hundred metres away, sometimes they went into town to get milkshakes at McDonald’s.

The narrow back walked out the door. The blonde hair curled at the nape of his neck; she thought it was beautiful, but had made an appointment later that week at the hairdresser. Petter didn’t like it when Eivind’s hair was too long, he said it made him look like a girl. I’m going to cancel that appointment, Sissel thought. I’m in charge now.

After Monica had picked up Eivind, Sissel went back into Karins flat once more and began cleaning. She put the books in the shelf, and pushed the furniture back where they were. She opened the bathroom door; it looked like the police had been in a hurry while there. The bathroom cabinet was still opened, tooth paste pill bottles lay scattered in the sink. What had they been looking for? Her brother’s DNA? Proof that Karin had enough pills to kill herself in more comfortable ways than by hanging? Was there really a comfortable way to kill yourself? Hanging was probably the fastest, she thought, and turned away from the mess in the bathroom.

She went back to the bedroom instead and picked up a pair of shoes on the floor next to the bed. Chanel size 39, one number too small for Sissel, but she pushed her toes in, anyway. They were beautiful, but too small. She put them in the closet, neatly beside all the other shoes. She was just about to close the door when her eyes landed on a picture on the short wall of the closet. It was a picture of Jesus on the cross. She stared at it. Was Karin religious? Was she, quite literally, a closet Christian? Sissel removed the frame from the nail on which it hung, to bring it to the window, to the light, so to speak, when she noticed a metal door behind it. A safe? Did Karin have her own safe? Petter had a huge vault in the basement that they all shared, why didn’t she use that?

Sissel opened the sliding closet door as far as she could so she could study the safe door. It was so smooth it blended with the wall. The empty key hole gaped at her. Sissel looked around. Where could Karin have hidden the key?

She tried to reason. Where would *she* have hidden a safe key? If she used the safe frequently, she would’ve hid it in a spot not too difficult to find while at the same time not hidden where someone could spot it on accident. Karin might not have used the safe in years, for all Sissel knew. Maybe the safe was empty and the key was nowhere to be found…

Sissel began searching randomly. The desk drawer, the night stand, jewelry box, with the utensils in the kitchen. She grew more and more eager, more desperate, even removed books from the bookshelf, checker under the mattress, under the night stand cover.

* Damn it, she moaned, sat down and looked at the safe door again. – Where is that goddamned key?

Her eyes landed on the shoes right in front of her. About twenty pairs, all dining shoes, high heels.

Some of them looked unused. They stood in pairs, perfectly placed, the police obviously hadn’t bothered checking the shoes. Sissel couldn’t help laughing. Why would they check the shoes? The idea that Petter had killed his sister inside that closet was remote. All the shoes had been placed tightly together, tips of the shoes pointing out, but not so close they touched each other. Seemed like brother and sister had an equal appreciation for order and structure. Sissel chuckled dryly.

She caught something with her eyes. One of the pairs. The high heeled shoes. Karin had worn that pair the first time they met, and unlike all the other pairs, this one stood a little bit crooked. A little bit askew. As if someone had picked them up and not cared how they put them back down. Sissel leaned over and picked up the purple silk shoe. She noticed at once, her heart skipped a beat. Something lay loose in the tip of the shoe. She turned the shoe upside down. It fell out and laid on the floor in front of her. A thin, long key.

She took the key and put it in the safe lock. It slid right in. Sissel hesitated for a moment before she turned the key, and opened it. The safe was almost empty. It contained a small jewelry box, a frame with a picture of a married couple, some books and yellowed newspaper cutouts. Sissel picked up the picture, black and white in a silver frame, she had seen the couple before; it was her in-laws. Sissel studied her mother-in-law, she was pretty, but in a bland way, and blond like her children, but despite the hair colour both Karin and Petter looked like their dark-haired father. He had the same, intense eyes as his kids did, and was a head taller than his wife. None of them smiled. She recognized the house in the background; it was taken right outside this house. The woman squinted at the photographer, as if the sun – or maybe the flash – was a little bit too strong.

She put the picture down and opened the jewelry box. It held only cheap children’s jewelry, maybe they belonged to Caroline? Or did Karin have these when she was a young girl? None of them appeared to have any real value. The newspaper cutouts were from the local newspaper, one regarding the accident of her in-laws. Sissel skimmed it. The newspapers said the whole thing was a terrible and tragic accident. The other newspaper cutout was the obituary about a week after their death. The glowing words fit very poorly with what both Petter and Karin had told her about her parents. Here, everything was perfect, the judged was described as a pillar of society and an honorable man. One did not speak ill of the dead.

There was a book in the safe as well. Sissel picked it up. It was a diary, sugary pink, with a gold padlock. Like small girls have, she thought. Her thoughts went to Caroline, then pushed the thought away. She disappeared before she started school, Sissel didn’t think she could write. Did the dairy belong to Karin?

The doorbell rang, she jumped and put the diary back in the safe and turned the key before opening the front door. It was Monica, back home with her son.

* Mummy? Hungry!

The nanny laughed.

* He’s the greediest child I’ve taken care of, she said. – Hungry all the time.

Sissel nodded, paid Monica and took her boy to the kitchen. She made him a slice of bread with

Nugatti and cut the bread into small squares. Eivind put one of the squares in his mouth and laughed with teeth full of brown goo. Suddently Sissel was transported back to the beach cabin, she sat next to the crooked respatex table. The smiling child was older and darker. Sissel closed her eyes and pushed her memories back. Mari loved Nugatti, too.

An hour later the house was quiet. Eivind had fallen asleep on the sofa in front of the TV. Sissel did the dishes by hand, she didn’t start the dishwasher for two plates and two glasses of milk, and Petter hated the mess. Besides, she quite liked it, the feeling of hot water on her hands, the clink when two glasses said hello to one another. When Petter was home, she wore rubber gloves. Petter had insisted, as he didn’t want a wife with hands like an old hag. She raised her right hand out of the water and looked at it. It was red, clean, her nails had been bitten down to the cuticles, the hand could’ve belonged to any hard-working woman, only to the expensive diamond wedding ring distorted the image. She twirled it around her finger a few times, before taking it off and putting it on the counter next to her. Foam stuck to her hand, she lifted her hand and blew – small bubbles flying towards the window and coloured by the sun – yellow, blue, pink.

Pink. She remembered the diary again. Pink? How childish. Was it really Karin’s diary? She hadn’t thought Karin to be the kind of person to like pink. Brown, black, grey, dark blue, that’s how she envisioned Petter’s sister, serious and a little bit conservative. Maybe she was different back then? Before Caroline disappeared? Or maybe the diary traced its origins all the way back to Karin’s childhood, full of memories of her upbringing?

She dried the two glasses and plates, put them back in the cabinet before going back into her sister-in-law’s bedroom.

She opened the closet afe one more time, unlocked the safe and took the diary, holding it in her hands, looking at it from every which way, there was nothing written on the outside, she brought it back up to the main house, Eivind was still asleep. She found a pair of scissors in the kitchen and put the sharp tip in the lock. A small metallic click signified its immediate surrender. The book flapped open on the first page, revealing a pink coloured page filled with elaborate penmanship. Blue pen. This was a woman’s handwriting, beautiful cursive slanting slightly towards the right, she recognized it as Karin’s. The ink had bled here and there, probably written with an old-fashioned fountain pen.

Sissel studied the diary again. Should she call the police? Maybe there’s something in here that’ll help shed light on Karin’s death, or maybe something about Karin’s relationship with her brother? She shook her head. I ought to throw this diary away, she thought. Karin wouldn’t have wanted anyone, let alone me to read it, it’s almost like desecrating a grave.

She sat down on the sofa and began to read.

PART 3

THE DIARY

*28th October 1995*

*Dear diary*

*I’ve never been to a psychiatrist before. I’ve never written in a diary before either, not even as a little girl. I’m not the kind of person who likes writing, and I hated writing essays in school and I don’t like psychiatrists, people who have to know everything about you, down to last detail and put you in some booth or another, analyse, twist and turn…*

*But Petter says that I need someone to talk to. He gave me an ultimatum; either seek help and talk to someone, or he’d have me committed. Simple choice really. I don’t want to go to some insane asylum.*

*That’s why I’ve been seeing Jørgen. I at least know him. According to Petter he’s the best psychiatrist in town. I wouldn’t know. I don’t know any other psychiatrist. Jørgen is fair enough, I guess, even though he reminds me a little bit of dad. Something about his tone, his slow speech. Still, both he and Petter agree that it would be good to put my thoughts on paper, to work through my grief that way. Can you shed yourself of grief by putting it into words? Transfer your grief to paper, and poof, it’s gone?*

*I don’t think that’s possible. I don’t think there’s anything that can take the pain away.*

Sissel stopped reading. She looked down at the beautiful handwriting. Jørgen, was that Jørgen Wurth? The same psychiatrist she saw as well? It’s weird that Wurth had never said anything about it, Sissel thought, that he had been Karin’s psychiatrist as well. She shook her head. Of course he hadn’t said anything. Confidentiality and all that.

Sissel got up and looked at the pink book she held in her hand. She put it down for a moment, walked to the kitchen, moved a knife from one side of the counter to the other, her hands trembled. The sun shone outside the kitchen window, the neighbour lady walked past the hedge, staring up at the house. As she saw Sissel, she quickly turned away as if embarrassed to be caught staring. The neighbour lady disappeared around the bend in the road, and Sissel walked back to the living room. The book shone at her from the white leather sofa. What made a grown woman buy a pink diary?

She picked it up and studied the pink pages. Every single had a flower vine down its seam, red roses crawled their way down along with her sister-in-law’s beautiful handwriting.

Sissel swallowed, thinking she shouldn’t read any further. It was a book containing her sister-in-law’s private grief, the same kind of grief she herself carried, the grief of a child that never came home.

She kept on reading.

*23rd November 1995*

*Dear diary*

*I saw Jørgen again today. There’s something artificial about talking when only one person shares while the other just sits there and listens. He asked me today if I written to you and I said no. You and I know it’s not true. I told him I didn’t know what to write.*

*Jørgen said I should start at the beginning, when Caroline was born, or before that. Start with my feelings back then.*

*I laughed out loud when he said it. He gave me a puzzled look and obviously didn’t get it, so I stopped. I didn’t laugh because I was happy. It’s too ironic. I’ve spent years trying to forget, and I’m suddenly supposed to write about it?*

*Still, I’m done with it now. I can still write, if it’s that bloody important to them. Ariston’s working outside the window. He’s fixing the fence around the property today, there’s always something that needs to be done out there. Fences that need paint, gravel that needs raked, flower beds that need weeding…*

*I wouldn’t mind doing yardwork myself, but Petter says that’s what we have the gardener for. He doesn’t think yardwork is women’s work.*

*It’s so stupid it’s almost funny, but I don’t. I don’t like laughing. It looks weird when I read my own words, but it’s true. I don’t like laughing. It makes me feel guilty.*

*If you had been here with me, we would’ve laughed together. We laughed a lot, do you remember? Laughing at the flies buzzing inside the window, laughed at the neighbour’s dog when it got yanked back in midair when his leash ran out time and time again, laughed at nothing, really.*

*Back to Jørgen. He wants me to write about what bothers me.*

*You bother me, Caroline. The memories of you, the thought of you, the fear of what happened to you. Where are you? Are you hurt?*

*I don’t want to write to the diary anymore, I want to write to you. You may never read it, not until you’re all grown up, at least. Maybe not even then. Maybe never, maybe when I’m dead? Maybe you’ll read it to understand me better, understand how much I love you?*

*Everything’s about you, anyway.*

*I miss you so much, all the time. You’ve got to come back to me soon, I know you’ll come. One day. One beautiful day. I dream of it, I dream of you coming back to me.*

*That you’ll one day ring that doorbell, or maybe just walk straight in without knocking. And then, when I turn around, you’ll stand there smiling at me as if you just took a quick ride down to the shops and you’re home. Maybe with your mouth still full of the chocolate you like so much. And when I hug you, your hair still smells of the apple shampoo I washed your hair with that morning. Do you remember? You moaned about me pulling your hair, do you remember?*

The last few words were almost unreadable, the ink had bled badly, probably written with one of Petter’s many exclusive pens, maybe the Mont Blanc pen that lay on the bureau in the living room. You know, kind of casual but still visible to everyone who came to visit.

Every word on those pages radiated pain, and Sissel felt the tears push on her eyeballs as she thought of her sister-in-law sitting and crying and writing in this diary. Surrounded by luxury and money, but without what she really, really wanted.

Her daughter.

*21st December 1995*

*Dear Caroline*

*Jørgen said I should start at the beginning. When I was young, very young, I thought children came with the stork, did you know that? That it was roughly the same thing as Santa Claus, that I could just wish for a blond child, and then, poof, it’d be brought to my my doorstep by a stork, the baby wrapped all snug with a pink bow on the wicker basket. I was terribly naïve, I understood very little. I should’ve taken more time to think and not feel.*

*Anyway, I was definitely not grown up when I was pregnant, even though I may have looked grown up on the outside. None of us had planned what would happen, not the first time.*

*It just… happened, one of those many painful nights. Dad had been drinking and gone berserk before he drove away. He’d drink and drive constantly, but none of the coppers dared stop him. The judge.*

*Mum lay in her room and cried, and I ran to Petter’s room, we used to comfort each other. He lay with a pillow over his head, probably to shut out mum’s crying. He was naked sans the pillow. It was the first time I discovered he’d become a young man. Up until that point, he’d only been my little brother, a boy. When he saw me, he reached for his duvet, but I crawled into bed with him and he made room for both of us. We made love on that narrow single bed, with the full moon outside our window as our only witness.*

*I was in the shower forever afterwards, until I was completely sure all traces were gone, until the memories were left, and I knew deep down I had no regrets. Not really. Petter found a big towel and dried me off, scrubbed until my skin was clean and dry. He didn’t meet my gaze, wouldn’t look at me, we both knew it couldn’t happen again. But it did. I loved him. And poor Petter, was only thirteen.*

Sissel stared at the wobbly handwriting in disbelief. Was that possible? Was that how it happened? She felt sick, her stomached turned. Sissel threw the book down, got up and paced around the room, rubbed her hands together, trying to stop the sobs, stop the storm inside of her. Had it really been Karin that had seduced her own brother? When he was thirteen, and still just a child, barely sexually mature? She’d been so sure it had been the other way around; that Karin had been a victim, just like she was. How could she have been so wrong?

She picked up the book an hour later and kept reading.

*Afterwards Petter tried to avoid me, but it didn’t take long for him to be as eager as I was. We made love every time we were alone in the house and things happened as things have happened since the birth of man. I became pregnant. Petter was terrified and wanted me to take you away, Caroline, but it was impossible. I could never kill you.*

*Nicolai was my saving angel, the gardener’s son, he’d been in love with for quite some time. When I told him that he was to be a father, he was excited. Happy, even. He said he loved me, wanted us to get married.*

*Petter, the fool, was furious and jealous, obviously thinking he’d have me forever. He came up with wild ideas about us eloping to somewhere no one knew we were siblings. You know, sacrifice everything for love.*

*I didn’t say anything to mum and dad, not until they could see it, and by then it was too late to do anything about it. Too late to take you away. Mum said nothing as usual, but dad yelled and stomped around, he became almost desperate, as if I had murdered someone, or worse. They wanted me to go somewhere and adopt you to someone, but I refused. I wanted you, little Caroline, from the moment you kicked the inside of my tummy. I knew that I loved you more than anything or anyone.*

*But one day Nico had gone, his dad said he’d gone back to Greece. It was probably too much for him and he ran away. Still, both my parents and Petter were happy about it, and Petter had even made plans. He was going to be the best solicitor in all of Sandefjord and make lots of money. He promised me everything would be okay, and that he’d always take care of us.*

*12th January 1997*

*Dear Caroline*

*I went to see Jørgen again today. He looks more like dad every time I see him. It’s almost creepy. You don’t want to tell your dad everything, know what I mean? I don’t trust him either, I am almost positive he tells Petter about our conversations. There’s something in how Petter looks at me after I’ve talked to Jørgen, and some of Jørgen’s questions sound more like questions of a jealous lover than an objective psychiatrist. I just don’t think psychiatrists asks questions like that. It’s almost like I can hear Petter asking me instead of Jørgen…*

*But I go there regardless. I have to. Every Thursday, from two to three o’clock. I don’t lay down on a sofa, it’s not like you see on television. I sit in a chair. The walls are cream-coloured and the curtains are drawn, usually. So there we sit, two people in a square bubble. Sometimes I talked. Sometimes I don’t.*

*Jørgen doesn’t say much anyway. I think he’s bored, or thinking of the price of petrol or something. I’m sure he has a nice car.*

Sissel thought back to her own sessions with Dr. Wurth, and pictured him. The intense eyes behind the glass frame, the way he rubbed his hands when he asked about her sex life, the questions about Abdul and past relationships. If Karin was right, it’d explain why Dr. Wurth focused so much on her past; everything Petter wanted to know, he could find out from Wurth.

Did Wurth say what Petter wanted him to in court, as well? She thought of the letter Wurth had written about her being unfit as a mother, how much of his income came from work Petter had sent his way? Karin had probably told Wurth that Caroline was Petter’s daughter, so did Wurth threaten to expose Petter, and was that why he could take over Karin’s new flat? Were the two men cut from the same cloth, tied together in a web of lies and deceit?

*30th May 1998*

*Dear Caroline*

*It’s your birthday today. You’re eight years old. I’ve baked a cake and lit candles for you, one for each year. I do this every year, and I’ll do it every year until you come home to me. You see, I think and I know for sure that you’ll come home to me one day.*

*Until that day comes, I hope you’re doing okay wherever you are and I hope whoever’s taking care of you is treating you well. That they took you because they’re missing their own child, that you are loved. Maybe that had a child before, a child they lost? And they took you to mute the loss? I can almost forgive them if that’s the case; I know what it’s like to lose a child, how unhappy and desperate you become.*

*I light the candles on your cake and hope that you’re sitting at a different table eating cake, that you look up at whoever loves you, and maybe you’ve grown to love them too. Maybe you have a garden outside your house so you can play there, maybe you’re looking forward to seeing all the friends you’ve made. Maybe deep, deep down you remember parts of me? Parts about me? You were only five years old when you disappeared, but you’ve some memories of me, haven’t you? If you hear the song: - I have a baby girl with blue eyes, do you think of me? Do you remember something hidden, yet not quite forgotten? I sang that song to you every night, you loved that song. Do you remember that?*

*Do you remember how we played in the garden, that we built mountains and fjords in the sandbox, and that huge princess castle we built, where you pretended to live while I told you stories of brave princesses who always managed to escape the evil trolls\_*

*I hoped for a long time that you were like those princesses, that you managed to escape, that you would one day stand right here and smile at me. After all these years, I still hope, but now I mostly hope that you are okay, that the trolls who took you from me have learned to love you.*

*The sandbox we played in is gone, by the way. Petter took it away, but it’s okay. You’re too old to play in it now, anyway. The gardener made a flower bed there instead, a round flower bed filled with emperor lilies, the flowers you loved so much. Do you remember him? Do you remember the gardener, Ariston? He used to hold your arms and spin you around and around until you were so dizzy you couldn’t stand upright when he put you back down. And he could push you on your swing for hours on end, until you were finally happy and wanted to come down. He thought he was your grandfather, and I never had the heart to tell him otherwise.*

*The flower bed is gorgeous, by the way, I hope to show it to you some time. I’ve so much to show you, so much to tell. If only you’d come back… the police say you drowned, but I don’t believe them. I’m your mother. I’d know if you were dead.*

Sissel put the diary down on the kitchen table. Karin had been convinced she’d feel it if Caroline was dead, in much the same way she had thought she’d feel it if Mari was dead. But… this whole time Karin had thought Caroline was out there somewhere, she’d been buried a few metres outside of her living room.

She stared out the kitchen window, at the bird feeder that hung outside, a slightly crooked wooden board with a round bowl in the middle. She used to fill it with bread crumbs and bird seeds every morning. Eivind cared nothing for the birds, but Mari had loved them, wagtails in particular. They had a birdfeeder outside their beach cabin as well, and Mari sat quiet as a mouse and watched the small birds as they wagged their tails. That’s how she got her nick name. Little Wagtail.

In that same instant, a wagtail landed on the bird feeder and stared through the window. She got goose pimples all over, it was as if the room had suddenly gone cold. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, imagining her daughter’s voice saying:

* *Look, mum, a wagtail! Isn’t it lovely?*

Sissel swallowed the lump back down her throat and picked up the small, pink book and kept reading.

Karin was now mostly writing about her daily activities, the visits to the psychiatrist. Sissel skimmed through them, and didn’t stop until she saw her name on one of the last few pages.

*22nd June 2005*

*Dear Caroline*

*I know who she is now. I found a receipt for flowers he had received. Petter’s newest conquest is Sissel. Sissel Sørensen. I’ve seen her too. I went to the beach yesterday. I knew Petter would be in court, so I wouldn’t risk running into him, I don’t want him to know that I know, at least not yet. But I saw her, and it’s almost ridiculous how much we look alike. If she had put herself together a little bit better, we could’ve been sisters.*

*Sissel has a seven-year-old daughter named Mari. I sat on the towel right next to them, listening to them talking, but the poor girl was left mostly on her own. Her mom, Sissel, mostly read some sort of awful romance novel from a cornershop or something.*

*I wore a sunhat and sunglasses, mostly because I was afraid Petter had shown my picture to Sissel. Though, come to think of it, I doubt it. Petter’s not the kind of man to carry a picture in his wallet.*

*Anyway, I sat there and watched them. She’s as slender as me, but her body was far flabbier than mine, and her bikini’s a cheap H&M knockoff. She had a sunburnt nose and unwashed hair that just… it just hung there. It was kind of weird to see such a dilapidated version of yourself. But her daughter was cute. Sissel calls her Little Wagtail. It doesn’t fit her at all; the girl looks more like an unkempt baby sparrow, with brown hair sticking straight up, unbrushed of course, but you can’t expect women like that to take real good of their child, can you?*

Sissel’s hands shook, the letters jumped everywhere, she put the book down. Was Karin really there at the beach outside their cabin, did she sit there and spy on them? Did she study Sissel’s cellulites, her nose and bikini, did she think she was stupid because she read cheap romance novels and thought she was a terrible mother because Mari’s hair was next to impossible to tame?

Sissel thought back, or tried to think back. When could that have been? Her last summer with Mari she had worked pretty much the whole time, so there weren’t a lot of beach days. A woman with a sunhat and sunglasses?

Then she remembered. It had been a cloudy Saturday, too cold to be at the beach, really, but Mari had insisted, so they went there anyway. She’d been reading while Mari built a sandcastle and took a few short trips in the sea. Later in the day Mari had whispered that there was a lady next to them, and she was staring at them. Sissel had turned around to look, but the lady had her nose buried in some kind of gossip magazine and hadn’t noticed them looking, so Sissel had forgotten all about her.

The sound of her phone yanked Sissel out of lala-land. She checked the display. Unknown number. Her first impulse was to let it ring, but curiosity got the beter of her.

* Hello?
* Hi, the voice on the other end said, Sissel regretted answering, she wanted to push the red button to

end the call, make that voice shut up. But she didn’t.

* Hi, Petter. I thought you weren’t allowed to call yet?
* I convinced my solicitor to borrow his mobile. I wanted to hear your voice.

His voice was sad. She didn’t answer.

* My solicitor says you’re thinking about testifying?

She remained silent, the mobile felt clammy against her hear, she gripped the plastic harder.

* You know you don’t have to, yeah? he asked.
* Yeah, I know, she said quietly.
* What did you plan on saying? His voice was mild now. – Nothing bad, I hope?

She didn’t answer. Petter cleared his throat after a few seconds. They felt longer than that.

* I’ve been thinking…
* Oh?
* You know, that thing with Eivind, that was silly of me. I was just so afraid you’d leave me. I love you

so much, you know that, yeah?

When Sissel didn’t answer, he kept going.

* I’m wondering if it’d do us good if we, you know, started from scratch. Just you, me and our son?

Maybe remodel the cabin and move there, at least for the summer. Would you like that? I’m sure Eivind would, kids love to swim.

Not Eivind, she thought. He doesn’t like to swim. She used to bathe him with a washcloth so she wouldn’t have to force him into the tub.

* Maybe, she said.
* I-I could work less, spend more time at home. I know I haven’t been the husband or father you two

deserve and… the time I’ve spent in here made me think, made me realize how dumb and silly I’ve been. I love you so much. Could you forgive me? Give me another chance?

He waited, gave her time to answer but she dared not speak. She was afraid her voice would crack, but more afraid for what she’d say.

* Please, he continued. – If you forgive me, I promise to spend the rest of my life trying to make you

happy. Don’t forget that little Eivind needs his daddy, and I need you both.

His voice was soft, she felt how it tugged at her, how much she’d love to believe every word dribbling out of his mouth. Him, her and Eivind, in the cabin at the beach, like any other family.

She saw them both. Petter and his sister on the couch, not a thumb between them. Petter and the woman he truly loved. She who seduced him when he wasn’t more than a child. No wonder he’d become what he was, with a violent father and an older sister like Karin.

* I’m sorry, she said quietly into the cold plastic. – I understand now. It’s not your fault that things are

the way they are. But it doesn’t matter. I can’t take it anymore.

She didn’t wait for a response, just pushed the red button and turned her phone all the way off.

Her hands trembled as she put the mobile on the table, her heart threatened to beat itself out of her chest. Her cheeks were wet, she realized she had been crying, then it felt like everything had been turned inside out, her pain was manifested physically, the longing not for what it was but what it could’ve been, what she had desperately wanted it to be. She buried her face into the sofa cushions, tried to silence her sobs. His voice had brought up everything she had tried to bury, tried to forget or didn’t want to remember. She loved him. How could she still love him?

*20th July 2005*

*Dear Caroline*

*I saw them again today, Petter and Sissel. And Mari. I used binoculars from the other side of the strait, looking at them. They were grilling sausages on the beach outside of the ugly cabin. Petter and Sissel kissed and cuddled each other. Petter hates sausages.*

*Later, Petter sat with Mari on his lap. I watched them, they seemed happy. If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought they were a family. I stood there watching until the fire was nothing more than embers, and they walked back up to the cabin. Hand in bloody hand, all three of them.*

*I’m so sorry, Caroline. Sweet Caroline, this isn’t the way it was supposed to be. He promised to always take care of me. I don’t know what I’m to do if I have to move. I miss you so much, Caroline. And I hate them. Sissel and Mari. I hate them. I want them gone.*

Sissel felt her skin form goose pimples, hate spewing from every cursive letter Sissel had put down about her and Mari. Hate. *Hate*. Was this even the same lady that had shared a bottle of wine at the kitchen table with her, while telling her how happy she was Petter had found himself a good girl? That Eivind was lucky to have such a good mum? How fake could a person really be?

Sissel couldn’t stand the thought of reading any more of the diary and put it down, and thought back. The night they grilled? Hm. She remembered it well. Mari had wanted to grill, and she’d been so sweet that night, even with Petter. They had burned the sausages to a crisp, they had curled up and cracked, but it didn’t matter, it wasn’t important. They were together, and Petter had told her he loved her. Sissel had felt it ring true that night, he really did love her. Where had Karin been? Behind a tree on the other side of the strait, with the binoculars glued to her eyes?

*20th August 2005*

*Dear Caroline*

*It was one of the first times Petter had brought Sissel over, and I didn’t want to meet her. I was on my way to city square when I saw the gardener playing with Mari in the garden. He stood, pushing her back and forth on the swing, just like he did with you, Caroline. It looked as though he had forgotten about you, as if another child – her child – could just walk in and take your place. But I promise you, dear Caroline, that won’t happen. That bastard cuckoo must die, and God has answered my prayers and sent me the help I needed. I know how to do it now.*

Sissel felt sick to her stomach and most of all wanted to throw the bloody diary away, to run away, forget that she had ever read it. Still, she leafed through the pages and read the last two pages. Once done, the room felt much colder, the air tightened around her, the room began to spin, she gasped for air, fell to the floor.

The room spun above her head still, but she forced herself to get a bloody hold of herself. She got up, stared blankly ahead, before she grabbed the diary and ripped out the last two pages, as close to the seem as she could. She balled them together, went over to the fireplace to burn them, then stopped suddenly. She saw Eivind, her son that would grow up in the shadow of his father’s sins. What would it do to him?

She straightened out the two pages, knew she had to hide them. No one could find them, but she couldn’t burn them.

Her hands trembled a half our later as she fished out Håkon’s card. She hesitated a moment before dialing. He answered two rings in.

* Hey, it’s Sissel…
* Hi, Sissel! How nice.

His voice was childishly happy. She caught herself hoping it would stay that way.

* I was just wondering, you know, about that cup of coffee…
* Oh yeah, yeah, that would’ve… his voice became more measured. She listened, someone spoke to

him in the background, she knew he was no longer alone, maybe he was married now?

* Are you home? he asked.
* No! Her voice was horrified, she felt anxiety make its rounds in her stomach. Petter would kill her if

she invited another man into the house, she didn’t dare. – You can’t come here. What about the cafeteria at Hvaltorvet?

He laughed.

* Couldn’t come up with anything nicer?

She didn’t answer, for a moment only their breaths were audible. He cleared his throat.

* Okay, Hvaltorvet it is. They’re open until eight, so how about six o’clock tomorrow evening? I have

the day, if nothing out of the ordinary happens.

* Tomorrow? Can’t we do it tonight instead? Please?

He fell silent a moment, she could hear the worry in his voice when he answered.

* Of course, if it’s important for you, I’ll be there right after my shift ends. I’ll be there at six o’clock tonight.

The chair scraped against the floor as she sat down. She looked around the cafeteria. A man in a suit read a newspaper at one of the tables, on the other side of the café a couple disagreed on something; the man gesticulated with arms to a woman halfway turned away from him, a full shopping cart ahead of her. These malls would do well as a couple’s test, Sissel thought and took a sip from her coffee mug on the table in front of her. She wouldn’t have to take that test with Petter. The shops Petter frequented, there weren’t queues or noise, only eager shop employees that were always too feminine and focused only on making you a satisfied customer as expensively as possible.

Not long after, she saw Håkon come up the escalators, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with a Sandefjord Football logo on it. The almost two-metre-tall body was easy to spot, but a playful kid still managed to run into his legs. His eyes followed the legs all the way to the top, then he ran crying to his mum and dad who were still arguing, obviously terrified of this big man. Sissel could understand the boy; with the supporter shirt and his clean-shaven head, Håkon looked more like a football-hooligan than a police officer.

* Hey, he said and smiled at her. – Sorry about the dress code, but if I had known we’d meet today, I

would have put something more suitable on this morning. But here you go, I’m just a tad obsessed with football. He laughed and sat down. – Do you want anything to eat or drink?

She shook her head. – No thank, nothing.

She pushed an envelope across the table towards him.

* I asked you to come here because of this.
* Oh?

Håkon didn’t say anything else, and didn’t move to open the envelope. He just looked at her.

* It’s a diary, Sissel continued, fumbling for words, despite going through her prepared statement so

many times on the drive here. – It’s Karin’s diary.

She pushed the A4-envelope closer to his hands, he looked at her puzzled, but put his glasses on and opened the envelope. Children laughed behind them, a man balanced a loaded tray past their table, and she wanted to be anywhere else but here, somewhere she could lay down and cry. A peaceful place, she should’ve met it at home after all; anywhere but here.

Håkon opened the diary, studied the pink pages and traced the vine while he read slowly. He’d stop some places and leaf back a page, then he’d continue reading. He put it down when he had finished reading.

* The cuckoo must die, he said slowly. – It sounds brutal, but there’s a big difference between wishing

it was true and making it come true. Do you think she made good on her promise?

Sissel nodded. – Yes, I’m sure of it. I don’t think Mari drowned at all, I think someone killed her. Karin or someone who helped her.

Her voice faltered, she gave up trying to speak. She dried the tears running down her cheeks, a child walking past pulled his mums sleeves and pointed at Sissel. Håkon furled his eyebrows and looked at the diary again.

* It looks like the last pages have been torn out.
* Yeah, I haven’t found them, Sissel said without meeting his gaze. – Have you found anything more

about Ariston?

* No, I’m sorry, we haven’t.
* What about his family? His son?
* His son? He’s dead.
* Right, but wasn’t he buried in Greece? If that’s the case, there must be a death certificate, or a

grave? It’s not *that* long ago.

Håkon shook his head. – Our point of contact at Europol already checked that for us, but couldn’t find anything on Ariston or his son.

Håkon shrugged.

* Greece isn’t the country you’d look to for unparalleled supervision. Corruption is rampant and so are

easy solutions.

* Could you ask them to check Nicolai one more time? Please?
* Of course, he said, putting his hand on her and gripping her wrist. – But where…
* Ow!
* What?

Håkon let go of her arm immediately. – Did it hurt? I am so sorry, I didn’t mean to!

He looked genuinely distraught, she forced a smile and pulled up the sleeves of her blouse.

Håkon stared at the blue, yellow and purple bruises, her arm looked like a colour map from Jotun.

* Petter did that?

She nodded.

She could see his jaws working, moving, his eyes were dark, a deep crease above the root of his nose. The policeman’s cheeks were quivering, the fists on the table were clenched. She felt tears drip down her face again, a mixture of shame and grief, but he didn’t comfort her. She remembered his dad was an asshole too, that his mum hid behind large sunglasses just as much as Sissel had.

Two weeks later

Anders came running into the office. Håkon looked at him puzzled.

* Bingo, his partner said and waved an A4 sheet of paper triumphantly in his hand. – We’ve got an

address. Ariston’s wife was raised in Kodal. She and her brother inherited a house when their parents died, and the reason we haven’t found it yet is because it’s registered in her brother’s name. But I spoke to her brother, and according to him, Ariston took over the house a long time ago. Maybe he’s hiding there?

Håkon studied the address.

* Isn’t that like right up the street from where that wifebeater lives? The guy with the thai lady?

Anders nodded, visibly excited.

* I think it’s the house next door. Remember that someone pulled their curtains shut as we drove

past? That might have been Ariston.

30 minutes later they pulled in front of the small forest house. The flowered curtains were still drawn, the fog lay heavy on the roof. The small front yard was full of damn, colourful leaves, a stark contrast to the red, flaking walls.

* I don’t think anyone’s been here for a while, Håkon said in a low voice. He stepped out of the car and

shut the door quietly behind him. The forest surrounding the house was quiet, no breeze, not even a bird tweet broke the silence. He walked up the steps, pushed the door handle gently downwards without knocking. The door was locked.

He knocked three times, took a step back. Nothing happened, not a sound from within the house. He looked down at Anders, still standing outside the service car.

* We should ask for a warrant first, Anders said.
* Sure, Håkon mumbled, walked down the stairs.

He walked around the corner, the grass went up to his thighs and the dew immediately clung to his

pants. There was a window on this side as well, but the curtains were drawn here too. This had obviously been made into a lawn a long time ago, but years of disrepair it had almost grown into something else. At the back of the house, there was a steep cliff going down to a small lake about fifty metres away.

The fog made everything seemed raw and cold, Håkon thought, but if someone spent a modicum of time maintaining it, would probably be very nice here during summer. Ariston was a handy gardener, if it had been him living here, why hadn’t he fixed the house or mowed the lawn at least?

There was a small window high up on one wall, the only window in the house without any curtains. Håkon stood on his toes, and he was just tall enough. He used his sleeve to wipe the dirt away from the window so he could look inside. It was an old-fashioned bathroom; a sink, a broken mirror, a tub…

His eyes fixated on the tub. The bottom of the tub was covered in brown spots. Was it rust or blood?

The worn front door gave way after the second boot to its face, splinters flying everywhere as the bottom hinge gave way. The door hung crookedly from the top hinge. Håkon hesitated for a split second before he entered the house, but realized the assumption was correct – the house was empty. No one would want to live in this smelly house. He walked into the small kitchen and looked around. The kitchen counter held old dishes full of leftovers – sausages, half-eaten beef patties. Whoever lived here wasn’t a gourmet chef. The leftovers had begun to mold, a half-full glass of something that might have been juice had also molded.

* It’s been a while since anyone were here, Anders said. – But we’re talking weeks, not years.

Håkon nodded and opened the door to his right. It was a bedroom with an unmade double bed, some dirty clothes lay in a pile on the floor, a PC on a small table in one corner. The room reeked of sweat and something more metallic. Håkon had been on the force long enough to recognize it. It was old, dried blood.

* We’ve got to get the techs up here, he told Anders. – Sooner the better. And tell them to take the PC

down to the station. He went further in, opening the door to the small bathroom, saw the oblong window on the wall right where he had looked in. The brown in the bathtub was not rust.

* It could be animal blood, he told himself. – It doesn’t have to be anything criminal, it doesn’t have to

mean Mari was here or involved.

His partner’s yelling made him turn. Anders had pulled away the rug on the kitchen floor and pointed at a hatch. It was locked with solid padlock, but the lock was open; whatever it was designed to protect might no longer be there. Håkon walked up and yanked the hatch open. They stared down into the black hole for a moment, then Håkon pulled his flashlight from his belt and shone a light down the cellar stairs.

He gasped. Felt himself sway. His hope that it didn’t involve Mari was gone.

The tiny was invaded by white police techs from Kripos. Everything was photographed, both in the cellar and the house itself. Håkon and Anders drove back to the office, the drive there had been in total silence, none of them said anything now, either. They each sat and stared into their own computer screens, they had asked the techs to send them pictures as soon as they could.

The worn mattress on the floor, the bedlinen with bloodstains and dirt. The CD played on the table, the kids’ drawings on the walls, the table with the fables. The portapotty that was full of shit, and empty bag of cookies, a dab of water in a bottle. The mold on the walls, the big bloodstains at the bottom of the stairs.

Håkon stared, his eyes dry as sand, tried to shut his emotions out, relieved that he at least didn’t have to deal with the stench that welled up from the cellar room, the musty stench of shit, blood and sweat. The selfish thought hit him like a fist in his gut, he swallowed hard to stop the tears that wanted to break free, but couldn’t stop the tears.

To know that the little girl had lived in that hellhole, was too much to bear. The thought that she might have laid on that shitty mattress when they were in the house next door, when they had seen the suspect in their headlights driving past. That she might’ve been saved if they had stopped.

There was a preliminary report from the techs. Håkon quickly read the report, and it was as he’d feared. The blood at the bottom of the stairs matched Mari’s blood type. They had found visible fingerprints from four persons, two of them had already been confirmed, belonging to Mari and Ariston. The techs had also checked the PC the found in the house for leads, and serial number it was registered to Ariston, but the harddrive had been removed. Cadaver dogs searched the woods, and they had divers searching the Åsrum tarn. Håkon hoped they’d find something soon, a tangible and solid answer. He moaned and slammed his fist at the table so hard his coffee mug fell over, the cold dab of coffee poured over the table. He didn’t notice it. Why the hell didn’t they keep looking for the girl from the start, instead of assuming she had drown, and gave up?

Common sense told him they’d done the only sensible thing, that no other police department would’ve continued looking after finding the girl’s jacket in the sea. But since hindsight is 20/20, there was no doubt they should’ve done a broader search instead of assuming Mari was dead. And now it was his job to let Sissel know.

Both Sandefjord Blad and Byavisa had called to find out what was going on in Kodal, somebody had tipped them about police swarming the place and dog patrols. Håkon had tried to buy time by promising in-depth information the next day, but when that happened, national media would catch the scent of blood and clicks, definitely a case that would fill their headlines for the week or two. It had all the ingredients newspaper readers loved – sex, violence, a victim much too young, a rich and wealthy puppet master, and a foreigner they could hate. The only thing missing was that Ariston was Muslim.

Håkon sighed. There was no way back now. He had to talk to Sissel.

He was about to put his jacket on and get in the car when his phone rang. He looked at the number on the display. It was Anders.

* Get over here right now, his partner said, short of breath. It sounded like he’d been running. –

They’ve found something in the Åsrum tarn!

Six hours later, Håkon entered the gates to Hillside house. He hesitated for a moment before putting one foot in front of the other and up the steps to the front door. The big house filled his mind with bad memories. Every time he’d been here before, something bad had happened. Karin’s death, Caroline’s dead body in the flower bed, Sissel’s assault. There’s a bloody curse over this house, he thought, presumably from the days of the Supreme Court judge; he could imagine what it was like to grow up in this house. He could imagine it very well.

Håkon was about to ring the doorbell, but the door opened before he could. Sissel stood in the doorway, looking at him.

* What is it? Has something happened to Petter?
* No, he said quickly. – It’s not about your husband. Could I come in?

She stepped aside and opened the door.

* Of course, but please be quiet. Eivind’s asleep.

They walked to the living room. Håkon registered nothing had changed since the last time he was here.

Sissel obviously didn’t redecorate and refurnish for the fun of it.

* Would you like a cup of coffee? she asked.
* Yes please, he said, only too happy to stall.

Soon after they sat next to each other on the sofa, Sissel stirred sugar into a cup of tea, Håkon took a big gulp of coffee and burned his tongue.

* What did you want to tell me? she asked.

He swallowed, then recovered his professionalism and his voice was firm when he met her gaze.

* We’ve found Ariston.
* You have? Where? Sissels fingers turned white around the tea cup.
* In Åsrumvannet. He’s dead. We think he killed himself.
* Killed himself? Why would he do that?

Håkon was silent.

* We think you’re right in that Mari didn’t drown after all. We think Ariston kidnapped her.
* Kidnapped her? Have you found Mari? Is she alive?
* No, we… we still think she’s dead.

Håkon forced the rest of the words out of his mouth.

* We haven’t found her yet, but we have found where she was held captive.

Sissel paled, dropped the cup of tea in her hands, it fell and shattered, hot tea soaked her leg, but she felt nothing.

* Where?
* A cabin up in Kodal. We think…, he corrected himself, - we *know* she was held captive in the cellar,

but we don’t know for how long. There’s a lot of blood in the cabin, and we’ve confirmed that it belongs to Mari.

Håkon took her hands in his, looked her straight in the eyes.

* There’s so much blood it’s likely she died there.
* What happened to Mari? What happened to my girl?
* We believe Ariston kidnapped and then killed Mari, either on purpose or by accident. He then

committed suicide when he realized the web was closing in on him, probably after discovering you snooping around his house. We’ve found his computer. It was… empty, unfortunately, but we assume that’s why he came back and assaulted you that night, to get his computer and cover his tracks.

* But what about Mari? Where is she? Why can’t you find her?

Håkon put a hand on her shoulder.

* I promise you, we’re doing everything possible. We’ve searched Åsrumvannet for three days straight

now, and search crews are using dogs in the forest as well. It’s a big area, and…

Sissel interrupted him.

* I want to see it. I want to see where he kept her.
* I don’t think…
* I want to fucking see it!

She said it in a voice that would brook no argument.

A week later

They stopped outside the red house, both sat silent. The walls were cracked, the paint about to peel off. The door was grey, it looked much newer than the rest of the house. Sissel left the car, the door echoed in the woods as she closed it. She stopped and listened. All she could hear was a soft swoosh from the tree tops, leaves greeting the gusts of wind above her.

* It’s so peaceful here, she said.

Håkon nodded.

* The Kripos techs are done searching the house, he said. – They’ve taken all the evidence they need.

We’ve cordoned off this entire area so people and journalists can’t rubberneck or take a look-see whenever they want. It’s only you and I here right now.

* It looks like an old, ordinary house, Sissel said, - just like all the others in this forest. Only a little

worse for wear.

She walked up the three steps, blocks of stones where flowers and grass snuck out between the steps. She pushed the door handle down, it was locked. She looked at Håkon.

* Do you have a key?

He nodded and pulled the old skeleton key from his pocket. His hand was unsteady, it took Håkon three

Attempts to hit the key hole. The door slid open, welcoming them with a loud creak.

Sissel peered into the old kitchen and shuddered. She took a hesitant step into the room; the musty, nauseating smell still lingered despite the techs had left the windows open all week long.

* What’s that smell? she asked.

Håkon didn’t answer, merely opened two of the windows so the fresh forest air could waft through and let them breathe easier.

* You said you found four fingerprints, Sisel, studying the filthy countertop. – Ariston and Mari’s. Who

were the last two?

* One belonged to Caroline, Håkon said. – We don’t know if she came willingly, or if she was held

captive as well. He sighed. – She thought he was her grandfather. The last print isn’t in our database, but we assume it’s Nicolai. He lived with his growing up.

* And you still have no new information on where Nicolai might be? If he’s really dead?

Håkon shook his head. – I had our contact in Europol check one more time, but they found nothing.

Nothing here in Norway either after he reported moving to Greece in 1995.

Sissel peeked into the small bedroom on her immediate right. A closet, a bed frame, a desk.

* We took the mattress, Håkon explained – And his computer stood right there.

He pointed at the small pine desk.

* Was it… did he… in here?
* We don’t know much yet, Håkon said, swallowing hard and walked firmly across the kitchen floor

and pulled the hatch open. He pointed into the darkness below.

* But we think she was kept down here most of the time.

Sissel nodded, she’d read about the cellars in the newspapers already. All the speculation about what

could have happened down there. She’d read everything the first few days and then she couldn’t stomach it, and it seemed that the journalists speculated more and more the less information they had. Håkon switched the light on, she took three small steps down the stairs, so she could see the room below. Her body shook, legs trembling beneath her. She sat down on the stairs.

* You okay?
* I’m okay, she whispered. She knew she wasn’t, tasted the lie as the room spun around her.
* I just need…

She sat there in silence, looked at the spartan cellar room. Another desk here, made of a simple

board that went from wall to wall. On the tabletop, there was a stack of children’s books, five or six CDs, a drawing book, a small blackboard, chalk and some crayons. There was a bed frame with no legs in one corner, no mattress here either. There was a toilet of sorts in the opposite corner. High on the wall, a boarded-up window. The walls were littered with drawings. A child’s drawings. A picture of a lady with a girl in her hand, pictures that were supposed to be the beach cabin. A picture of a small wagtail, all alone on the beach and about twenty drawings of the sun, a happy and yellow sun smiled at her from every wall. The smell was indescribable; she’d never smelled anything like it. It was like… old food rotting in the sun mixed with the stench of a crowded outhouse, full of piss, sweat and shit.

Håkon asked her if she wanted cotton balls smeared with peppermint for her nose, but she said no. Thought if her daughter could stand it for months, years, so could she. She regretted it.

* Holy fuck, she whispered and gathered herself, standing up straight, her legs quivering under her as

she took the final steps down and planted her feet on the naked brick floor.

* This is where she slept?

Sissel pointed at the framed mattress pillow.

Håkon nodded. – We think so.

* And that was her toilet?

The question was redundant and she knew it, but he nodded anyway.

On the floor next to her bed, a CD player and a square brown plastic clock, the cheap variety they sold at

Nille for under a hundred crowns. She looked at Håkon.

* What the hell would she need a clock for down here?

He shrugged. Didn’t answer.

Sissel went to the counter, looked at the CDs there, read the book titles. Sans Familie, Heidi, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Hansel and Gretel, Brothers Grimm…

* So many sad books, she said.
* Maybe that was part of his tactic, Håkon mumbled. – To normalise feeling alone, abandoned, or

feeling horrible. We found…

He stopped. Grabbed his balls and said what his mouth wanted to keep to itself.

* We found pornographic magazines as well, child pornography, next to her bed. We think he tried

to normalise what he did to her, did with her.

Håkon looked at her comfortingly. – But we found Marie biscuits as and chocolate as well, and you can tell she has things to draw on and things to draw with. We think Mari drew everything all the pictures on the walls.

Sissel walked over to one of the pictures of a lady that held a girl’s hand, saw the long yellow hair, the blue-green eyes. The butterfly on the lady’s t-shirt alarmingly similar to one she had in her cabin drawer.

She blinked to keep the tears at bay, turned around and picked up a book, Sans Familie, its pages worn, she saw the small hands leafing through the pages, read the same sad pages over and over. Something fell out of the book, zig-zagged to the floor. Sissel bent down and picked it up, stared at the newspaper cutout in black and white. It was a picture of her, smiling, with Petter right next to her.

Sissel looked at Håkon.

* Why does she…?

The thought struck her, how Mari must have felt as she sat there rotting away in this awful cellar while

her mother had moved on, living happily as if nothing had happened, gone and married the man she hated the most, and smiled a happy smile at the photographer.

Sissel fell down and cried, felt Håkon catch her before she hit the floor. He lifted her up, carried her over his shoulder as if she was a small child. Climbed up the stairs and outside, he put her down gently on the grass outside the house. The clouds flew past above her, a bird tweeted. Sissel closed her eyes and screamed.

Later - it felt like a long time later, but she couldn’t be sure, she had screamed herself empty, he had tried to comfort her as best he could – he helped her back to the car. The clouds had pulled together above them and formed a dense cloud cover, rain drops hitting the windshield. They sat silently beside each other. Håkon drove, used the blinkers to get the hell away from this dirt road and head back towards goddamn civilization. Sissel looked at him.

* What’ll happen to the house?
* I honestly don’t know. Ariston’s dead. We’ll let the Greek government know of his death, and it’s up

to them to alert next of kin with any inheritance claims. If none exist, I assume the government will take it.

* I hope it burns the ground, Sissel said.

The case blew up all over the media. VG, Dagbladet, tabloid magazines, the big news channels on TV and radio, end foreign papers and TV-stations called for a comment. Pictures of the forest house were everywhere, from all possible angles, the curtains were shut so no one could see inside, but many reporters went ahead and reported what might have happened inside those weathered walls. Online news sites posted headlines, screaming at her about a jealous solicitor who wanted his women all to himself. Former mistresses came forwards and told stories about a domineering and heavy-handed lover. “I knew fairly early on that there was something wrong with him” said one blonde after another; one of them he had apparently been with almost all through her pregnancy.

His defence solicitor called it character assassination, furious that anyone at the police station had released statements from the initial interrogations; the few that had been conducted before had refused any further questioning.

Sissel had read everything she could find online with dry eyes; most of what she had read didn’t even coincide with the police reports, much less reality. She skimmed the heartbreaking descriptions, they weren’t worse or better than her own imagination, anyway.

She stopped answering phone calls. She didn’t open the door when they rang her doorbell. She shut herself inside the house with her son, sat behind closed curtains and hoping someone would die. A train accident, a plane crash, a murdered prime minister somewhere, terror. Anything that could take the attention away from the solicitor that had sired a child with his sister and was complicit in the murder of two kids.

Her prayers were answered four days later. A man who had lost custody of his son went berserk with a weapon at a school in Telemark, three children were brutally murdered. Sissel stared at the picture of the three bundles, small and covered with white sheets as they lay in the schoolyard waiting to be picked up. Sissel cried, felt it was her fault, as if she had pulled the trigger and killed three innocent children. She stared at the computer and cried, clutched her son and cried, made food for the two them as she cried, cried as she bathed him, cradled him to sleep for the night. The tears didn’t stop. Her son had stopped giving her puzzled looks, stopped asking her why, just accepted it as one of adult life’s rarities. He had a mummy who cried. It took three days before she ran out of steam and tears, and she was sure she’d never cry again.

When she woke up a few days later, they were back. The photographers, the journalists, the curious. She knew something had happened before she’d even turned on the computer – maybe they had found Mari? She both hoped and feared they had, her fingers were unsteady as she pushed the enter-button, but she was still fairly calm; she had expected it, after all. Unlike those who had lost their kids in the schoolyard a week earlier, Sissel had had years to prepare. While the blue light flickered across her screen and Windows worked itself to the bone trying to open the programs, she was annoyed she hadn’t used yesterday – yesterday was peaceful and quiet – to go shopping, they were just about to run out of bread and milk. The thought amazed her; she wasn’t even hungry, it was as if her brain held the rational and the mundane in a vice, refusing her to let go, to not lose control. Not this time, not again.

Her start page was sol.no, she didn’t even need to search for anything. The headline was all the way at the top, shining at her with great, red letters.

“Celebrity solicitor founded hanged in cell!”

She bit her lip bloody to suppress the scream building in the pit of her stomach. Eivind was asleep, she couldn’t wake him up or scare him. Was it Petter? Could it be anybody else? She kept reading, the solicitor was charged with kidnapping and conspiracy to murder against her sister’s child, the police apologized profusely and had no idea how this could’ve happened. No doubt it was Petter, but why hadn’t she been notified, why hadn’t the police called her?

She got the mobile phone from her purse and noticed it was set to silent. Her screen told her she had eight missed calls from Håkon.

Sissel sat down on the floor with the laptop in her lap, the keyboard wet from the tears she thought were gone. As she clicked her way into the article proper, her phone rang. She got up and looked at it. It was Håkon.

The funeral was held in private. Quiet. Just her, Håkon, Eivind and a few of Petter’s colleagues. The police made sure the paparazzi that had caught wind were kept outside the cemetery gates, but Sissel could see the telescopic lenses flash in the sunlight. One of the blondes from the newspaper stood by the gate and arguing with a policeman. Sissel wanted to walk over and spit at her, but didn’t. The funeral was short, the priest spoke of forgiveness, but didn’t say a kind word of the man in the coffin. No one cried, not even his son.

Håkon was there the whole time. He steadied her away from the cemetery after the body was interred, awkwardly caressed her shoulder before taking Sissel and her son home.

She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. Håkon turned on the radio, a music show, old evergreens filled the small coupe. None of them said a word. She didn’t open her eyes until they had parked outside Hillside House.

* Would you like to come in for a coffee? she asked.
* No, thank you, Håkon replied. – Work beckons, I’m afraid.

She made no effort to get out of the car, her hands twisted uncomfortably in her lap.

* Do you think you’ll ever find Mari?
* I honestly don’t know, Håkon replied earnestly. – I guess I’m starting to lose hope. The forest is big

and full of tarns and hiding spots. Frankly, we don’t know that she’s hiding or hidden either, she could be anywhere. Caroline was buried in your garden, but we’ve already searched without finding anything else.

He watched her eyes wander into the yard and the garden, at the dark gardener’s house outside.

* So I’ll just have to live with the uncertain, forever? I’ll never have the answers I want? I’ll never know

what really happened to my daughter?

Håkon gripped her hands and held them in his.

* Sometimes, that’s just the way it is. Sometimes people do things they regret, that they can’t live

with. That’s just my theory, of course, but even paedophiles can – in their own sick way – have feelings for their victims. Caroline died on him, but the fact that he buried her in the garden he tended every day indicates that he was a remorseful man, a man who grieved. And when it went wrong all over again, when Mari died as well, the couldn’t live with the certainty that he was to blame for the deaths of two innocent children.

Sissel looked out of the car window, eyes landed on the gardener’s house out there. I’ll tear it down, she thought.

Three years later

* Holy shit! That case makes me sick! Håkon exclaimed and threw the VG newspaper at the trash

receptacle underneath his desk. He missed. Anders pulled his leg back instinctively, Josef Fritzl’s face looked up at him from the newspaper on the floor.

* Good thing he’s convicted, I can’t even read about it, it’s too fucked up. Who does that to his own

kids? It’s insane! If I had questioned that madman, I would’ve killed him.

Håkon slammed his fist on the desk. The half-full paper cup with coffee tumbled and a brown puddle spread on his desk, creeping closer to a large stack of papers.

* Goddammit!

Håkon cursed again and moved the stack of papers, then inhaled and shook his head.

* There’s got to be something wrong with Austria. First Hitler, then Natascha Kampusch and now this

goddamn monster, Josef Fritzl. Holy fuck!

Anders came back with a wash cloth and cleaned up the coffee spill.

* There’s tons of crazy stuff happening in Norway as well, he said. – Just think of the Eliassen-case, rich

and famous solicitor and still…

Anders hesitated, looked at Håkon, gauging the seriousness of his colleagues relationship with the solicitor’s widow. Rumour Central here at the station reported that his car was parked in front of her house when he wasn’t at work.

* Damn shame he killed himself, avoiding a trial. I would have loved to have known what really

happened.

* What? We do know what happened, roughly speaking?

Anders looked down at his fingers. – Well. I’ve thought about it a lot since. I questioned the man, and he seemed genuinely surprised when we charged him. I could’ve sworn he had no idea what I was talking about.

* I guess he was a good actor. He had years of experience in court, Håkon laughed. – We most likely

had enough to convict him, at least for murdering Karin and kidnapping Caroline. His DNA on Karin’s fingernails, Sissel’s witness observation of their argument he had with his sister the nighit before, the 250,000 that were transferred to the gardener, plus the solid motive he had for getting rid of his sister and their child. His whole career would fall apart if the truth came out. I think that would be enough for the jury.

Anders didn’t seem convinced.

* Maybe what he said was true as well? That the money was for bribing Nicolai, and that the DNA got

under his sister’s fingernails because she scratched a bug bite? The only thing that really could’ve helped convict him was Sissel’s claim that he was violent and argued with his sister right before she was found hanged. We don’t know what kind of motive Sissel had for testifying against her husband. Maybe she wanted to get rid of him? Maybe she was in love with someone else?

Håkon looked at him without saying a word. He broke the silence.

* Too late now, anyway. Both he and his victims are dead.

Håkon sat on the sofa and looked at Sissel. She stood next to the stereo looking for a CD. Her blond hair fell softly over her shoulders, the light blue silk dress accentuated her slender figure. He swallowed and spun the wine glass with the last sip of wine between his fingers. The words stuck in his throat all night long, ever since he spoke with Anders earlier that day. They still wouldn’t come out. She walked up to him, took his glass of wine and put it on the table, her blue-green eyes tried to catch his brown.

* What is it? You’re quiet tonight.

He shook his head and lifted the wine glass again, gulped the last of the wine, the wine was round in his

mouth, strong aftertaste. It tasted expensive, but he said nothing. She could afford it. He knew Petter left her several millions, tens of millions most likely.

Some of the money had probably been spent. She had opened an art gallery in the middle of town, Gallery Wagtail, where she sold and procured art. He doubted if sales alone could cover the exorbitant rent, but it was clear she enjoyed what she did. Joy had crept back into her eyes, and she was more beautiful than ever.

* I can’t… I’ve tried to let it go, but I’ve been thinking about Petter, he said as he opened another

bottle of wine.

* Oh? She gave him a puzzled look. - Why are you thinking about him now?
* You don’t think it’s sad? The way he died, there not being a trial. Or was it just convenient?
* Convenient? What do you mean?
* I know he was mean to you, but…

Håkon grabbed her hand and kissed it, her hand soft against his lips.

* No. It was something Anders said earlier today, he mumbled and let his eyes rest on the round

flower bed that lay right next to the sandbox outside the window. The ground was bare, the last of the snow had given way to the spring sun, but the flower bed had only naked branches, with exception of one single yellow rosebud about to bloom. Yellow roses means fake, he thought and shook his head. Where did that come from?

Sissel leaned against, the smell of her perfume was… French, expensive, a little too strong. He closed his eyes. When she was younger, she used to smell like apples and lilac.

* Isn’t it a bit strange? Håkon coughed, starting over. – Petter was one of Norway’s best and sharpest

solicitors. I don’t understand how he’d been so stupid as to think he could get away with murder?

* Stop thinking about it, Sissel said impatiently. – I’ve read about it. Psychopaths think they are

smarter than everyone else, it makes them reckless. And while you’re not supposed to speak ill of the dead, Petter had his fair share of psychopathic characteristics.

Sissel opened her mouth, it looked like she was about to say something, then closed it. She leaned over him and started unbuttoning his shirt instead. He could feel the warm breath tickle against his chest, his throat tightened.

* Petter is past, dear, don’t think about him. Think about me…

Afterwards, he walked into the living room to clean the wine glasses and start the dishwasher, despite not being more than half full. He walked ot the window and looked out. The branches on the big apple tree swooned gently in the wind, the apple tree Karin where hanged herself. Or been hanged. The house felt like it was full of bad memories and vibes. Håkon was not superstitious, but there was something about the house; the sounds, the atmosphere. We ought to move to a different house that’s easier to maintain, he thought. Somewhere without tall hedges and fences, somewhere with a pitch and a playground so Eivind could find some friends without calling them ahead of time to ask if they could play. And since Eivind was slightly different, it never was the right time to play. This neighbourhood didn’t care for different; had a zero-tolerance for different, and whatever halo the solicitor’s son had in this neighbourhood disappeared as soon as Daddy Solicitor went to jail. But Sissel had grown to love the house, oddly enough, and didn’t want to move anywhere, let alone talk about it.

Håkon sighed and let his eyes follow the clouds gliding effortlessly across the sky, casting ghostly shadowy fingers over the big garden. He was too weak for her, and he knew it. After he’d taken her home from Petter’s funeral, he’d made a conscious decision to stay away from her. He didn’t want to exploit her vulnerability, and while he doubted the existence of a rule forbidding him to date the dead solicitor’s widow, it still felt wrong to maintain contact with her. But that’s the thing – even though it felt wrong, he had thought about Sissel every day until he ran into her randomly one day in town. She had invited him for a cup of coffee, but she had wine instead of coffee. Håkon, being the ever-gallant gentleman had offered to drive her home to Hillside House afterwards, and she had invited him in.

He’d pretty much stayed there ever since, the year they’d spent together had been the happiest of his life. He smiled as he washed two giant crystal glasses by hand, put them neatly together in the cabinet and went to the bathroom. There was a golden wristwatch on the floor. It was Sissel’s. White gold, with a pattern of small diamonds. He had only seen her wear it once. He picked it up. It was heavy and cold in his palm. How much was that thing worth? A month’s pay? Two?

He brought the wristwatch down into the basement, down to the gym with a ton of different exercise equipment she rarely used, flat screen, tanning booth, sauna. What Sissel called the vault stood in one corner, a massive fire-proof safe, tons of steel, half a metre wide and taller than Håkon. He found the key underneath the CD player. It wasn’t the first time he had to clean up Sissel’s gold.

He turned the key, heard the steel bolts retract in the doors before the heavy slid silently open.

The safe was almost full. Old dias boxes, at least five jewellery boxes, some loose jewellery, several photo albums, a bunch of loose photographs, camera equipment, a shoebox full of bills, 1000 crown bills, carelessly stuffed under the lid that was only halfway on. Probably Petter’s blood money, Håkon thought. How much did he really leave behind?

He picked up one jewellery box, the one on top. A noise from above startled him, it beeped. He managed to knock the whole stack of jewellery boxes over, a few of them opened, rings tumbling all over the floor, gold glistening all around him. My God, he thought, shaking his head, when he realised what the beeping was. Imagine that, a cop scared witless by a dishwasher…

He bent down to pick up the jewellery when he stopped. Where he stood, hunched over, he saw something he hadn’t seen before. On the bottom shelf, tucked into the corner, lay a white envelope. He picked it up, looking at the words written on the front.

*To Eivind, to be opened after my death.*

His stomach turned, he gasped. What the hell was this? Was Sissel sick?

He turned the envelope over. Nothing weird here, it was a normal envelope sealed with a self-adhesive tape on top. He shouldn’t open it. Still, he took into the next room, turned the work lamp on, held the envelope up against the white light. He knew it before his brain had registered what his eyes saw. He saw a vine of roses on pink paper through the white envelope.

He opened the envelope.

*Dear Eivind*

*If you read this, I’ve passed away before you were old enough to tell you the truth about your dad. I don’t want you to think that what the newspapers wrote about him were true. I don’t want you to carry the genes of a murderer. I want you to grow up to be a proud young man, start your own family, have kids of your own. I want you to know you’ve got nothing to be ashamed about.*

*That’s why I’ve saved these two pages, the last two pages of your aunt Karin’s diary. I hope you’ll read them and I hope you’ll understand why I did what I did. I hope you can forgive me, that you’ll understand that what I did, I did out of love for you.*

*Your mum, Sissel*

Håkon sat down on the work bench next to him. Silence from the living room above him. The dishwasher had stopped yelling, and Sissel was out once her head hit the pillow, much thanks to sleeping pills. He looked down at the two pink paper sheets he held in his hand. They were full. His hands shook as he unfolded them and read.

*Dear Caroline*

*I’ve done something terrible, Caroline, but I did it for you.*

*That day, when Sissel visited and I was on my way out, I saw a face staring out through the kitchen window of the gardener’s house. At first I thought I saw a ghost, but then I knew Ariston had fooled us all. Nico wasn’t dead at all. Right now he stood behind the window pane, watching his dad play with Mari.*

*He spotted me as I stared at him. For a moment I thought he’d hide, but he came running outside, pulled me into the house and embraced. And I let myself be embraced. I don’t know why. But I cried.*

*He begged me not to tell anyone that he was here, he was just about to leave, he said. He just had to come back one last time, to visit his dad and remember his childhood and all we’d had together. He said he had visited his dad several times the last few years, always late evening or late at night, so Petter wouldn’t see him and demand Nico return the money he had been given. He told me he had never stopped loving me.*

*I lied and said I had been deeply troubled when his dad told me he had died, that I had regretted refusing him to see you. We both cried, for a long time, over everything that had been, everything that could’ve been different. We sat there, close together. It was dark where we sat, the sun shone outside We sat looking at the two people in the garden. The gardener sat on his knees and showed Mari some flowers, sometimes stroking her hair. The whole thing was quite beautiful, it was just like seeing him with you, Caroline.*

*But it felt wrong, all wrong, and I wasn’t alone in feeling that way. Nico couldn’t stop watching them, the muscles in his jaw constantly moving, his face was red. It was clear seeing how kind his father was with this stranger, this child, infuriated him. Understandable, considering that the same man who gingerly played with that girl had sent his own son away. I also knew Nico hated Petter, the rich man’s son who used every opportunity to remind him that he was a servant’s child.*

*That’s why I asked him.*

*I know it sounds bad, Caroline, but I did out of love for you. So that you’d have somewhere to come home to; a home, a house, a garden, your room. I couldn’t stand the thought that she’d have him, that the three of them were to live here, together in my mouse, the house I decorate, in my life. That her kid would sleep in the room I had made for you, swing on the swing that was made for you. I couldn’t stand it. That’s why I asked him if he could remove her. Take her away. Not for my own sake, but for you. Because I love you.*

*And Nico said yes.*

*We knew it couldn’t happen here in the garden, it’d be too close. But I had watched them a long time, I knew that Mari often played by herself on the beach below the cabin when Petter visited. The beach cabin was perfect. That’s where it had to happen.*

*I told Nico everything I knew about Sissel and Mari, about Little Wagtail, her nickname, what the cabin looked like, that she liked to fish for crabs, that their neighbours only used their cabins during the summer, so they were probably gone already. We agreed that he should try to lure her away without using force; it’d be best if she would disappear without fuss or noise. We’d use a boat, so he could dump her body once away from the shore. If we were lucky, she’d be in the water a long time before anyone found her.*

*I knew when Petter went to visit them, and when they day came, Petter brought the bottle of wine I had bought for them, the sticky white wine he only drank when he was with her. What he didn’t know, was that I had injected a sleeping agent through the cork. Not a lot, just enough to make them sleep.*

*I stood in the doorway and waved goodbye to Petter. Then I called Nico from Petter’s work phone and gave him the go-ahead.*

Håkon read. The truth dawned on him slowly. So crazy and mad. So… slippery and conniving, Karin had fooled them all! And poor, poor Sissel that had lived under such conditions; with her nutter sister-in-law and brutal husband.

Håkon read without thinking, without feeling. How wrong they’d been, all the answers were there, except for what had happened after Nicolai had taken her. Karin didn’t know what happened either, that’s readily apparent now. He flipped the paper, read the last few lines written there. They were written with a pencil, hurriedly so, the letters weren’t nice and neat.

*Dear Caroline*

*The police were here today, that bald guy. They’ve found. Dead. Here in the garden. I don’t get it, was it Ariston who took you? It’s what the police think.*

*It’s not important, it’s too late. Now it’s too late. You’re dead. I have nothing more to live for. My sweet baby girl, mum’s coming to you now.*

He put the papers down. Karin’s revenge had been more effective than she had imagined. Her actions had also killed Petter. It occurred to Håkon that if there was a hell, the two siblings would already have seen each other again.

He got up. The work lamp fell to the floor behind him and crashed loudly, the light flickered out of existence. He let it lay there. He walked up the stairs, into the bedroom. Sissel was still asleep. Her eyes closed. Mouth half open, he could see her pink tongue lolling around in there, he remembered the taste of red wine. He sat down on the edge of the bed, pushing her.

* Sissel?

She didn’t move. He shook her, hard.

She opened her eyes, gave him a horrified look, at the papers he held in his hand. She got up halfway,

eyes wide open.

* What? Have you read them? Give them to me, they’re mine!

She stretched her hand out, he shook his head.

* No, they’re Karin’s, and it’s too late. I’ve read them. When did you find them, Sissel? With the diary,

or later? Before or after Petter died?

He could see her thinking. Her mouth opened, closed. Extended her hand towards the papers.

* Answer me!
* Darling, does it matter? They’re dead. Petter, Mari, Caroline, they’re all dead.

His pain manifested itself physically. Håkon hurt. He drew a large, deep breath. His chest burned, he

realised he had forgotten to breathe while waiting for Sissel to respond.

* Why didn’t you tell me that you knew Karin killed herself? That it was her and Nicolai who kidnapped

Mari? Why did you let me think…?

She looked away, didn’t answer. Didn’t need to. The reason why was too obvious for him to deny. He wanted to shout at her. For the first time in his life, he felt like laying hands on a woman. He clenched his fists instead, hit the wall, a picture frame fell down, the frame shattered and glass spread out on the floor in front of him.

He backed away towards the door, all the while looking at each other. She reached for him, he didn’t take her hand or her arm. His rage bellowed, threatening to remove all control. He backed off. He had to get away.

Away from the woman that had sent an innocent man to prison. Her own husband. Away from the woman he loved, the only woman he had ever loved, the most beautiful woman he had known.

In the room next door, Eivind lay asleep, and Håkon knew if he told anyone what he’d discovered, that boy would lose the only thing he had left. Sissel would be punished and Håkon and his colleagues would receive hell, from management and the media, to have been fooled by the solicitor’s wife: the only one who had anything to gain to have the solicitor removed. How dumb he had been. How easy to manipulate.

He cried, and slammed the door shut behind him, but already knew he’d never be able to report her. He was as sure of that fact as he was sure he’d never be with her again.

DEL 4

MARIA NIKOLAOU PAPADOPOULOS

* Daddy! Daddy! Please get up, daddy!

Maria hit her father in the face, shook him, pulled his arm. He didn’t react. Just lay there on the ground by her feet. His face was ashen, paler than usual.

* Please, she cried. – Don’t die on me.

People around them backed away, yet the crowd crew, everyone stared. A man made his way

through the crowd, pushed her aside, he was the only doctor in the village. She stood by her dad’s feet and held her breath, watched as the doctor gave her dad mouth to mouth resuscitation. Blew air, waited, blew, waited. Her dad moved, lifted his arm, she exhaled, a sigh of relief as she saw his mouth open, and his hand waving in the air. The arm fell heavy on the grass.

It was early morning and the sun gave no warmth just yet, the ground was cold. Poor daddy, he was probably cold. She looked around, thought someone ought to bring a blanket, a duvet, something to put over him. They just stood there, the people, and stared at the two men; the unmoving man on the ground, and the doctor, trying to breathe life into the other.

Then they were alone, just the two of them. They sat at the edge of the dock waiting for the ferry, the boat that would take him to the mainland, to the hospital. To the morgue. She sat with her dad’s head resting in her lap, like she’d done many times before, but now his face had sunk inwards, his cheeks were flatter, she had closed his eyes. He was already becoming a stranger. She stroked his bare head, the completely white head. The toupee he used had fallen off during CPR and was still up there somewhere, on the grass. She wondered if she should ask someone to pick it up and bring it to her. He would’ve hated it, to have someone see him like this, without hair. She discarded the thought. He didn’t need it now. Didn’t need anything now.

She pulled her hand through her voluminous hair, it almost went down to her waist. Her father had loved her hair.

*My beautiful girl, never cut your hair, never. Come here, let me comb it for you, my dear, most beautiful girl in the world…*

When she was a child, they ended every day by him brushing her hair, a hundred long strokes. The first few years, she sat on his lap, later upright, often while her great grandmother sang Greek folksongs in the background. After her great grandmother had gone to bed, he’d sometimes crawl into bed with her and make love to her silently, so that the bed wouldn’t creak. Sometimes he caressed her so the stars came out to say hello, and her heart would beat so hard she was afraid her great grandmother would hear it through the wall. She never did, it was their special secret. He said it was the most beautiful thing two people could ever share, that she was his only one. That he loved her.

She didn’t understand that it was wrong until she as older, but he had stopped by then, anyway. About the same time, he stopped combing her hair. Afterwards, as she hit puberty, he didn’t touch her at all, and rarely gave her a hug. It was as if her body frightened him, he avoided physical contact, didn’t put her on his lap, stopped looking at her with that special look, the look that was reserved for her and her alone. She didn’t understand why at first, what she’d done wrong. She thought she had done something wrong for a very long time.

Then, on a sunny day, she’d seen that look again; only this time it wasn’t aimed at her, he was staring at the neighbour’s grandchild that visited the island one weekend. Her dad had played with the little girl all weekend long, carried her, tossed her in the air, had her on his lap. Maria had looked at them and felt the revulsion and certainty grow, and been relieved when the mother finally came to pick up her daughter and go back to the mainland.

That’s when she understood, how wrong it had been, how wrong what happened to her when she was younger truly was, that maybe her dad was one of those types of people they often spoke of on television. The worst thing of all was that she might not be his special, his only one anymore.

Still, despite being ashamed of it, she had still missed it; his closeness, his warmth, the two beating hearts. It was the only love she’d ever known.

Now he was dead.

Three weeks later

The solicitor approached her. He shook her hand, the sun reflected off his glasses, and she looked away to not be blinded.

* Maria Nikolaou Papadopolous?

She nodded and shook his hand. The solicitor was an old friend of her dad’s, an old class mate. They’d

met briefly when she was younger and needed documents to attend school. He seemed like a big, slightly scary man back then. Now he was about ten centimetres shorter than her, wearing a black suit with a white shirt a little too tight around the gut. His face was round, his jaws loose, the black hair dyed. He took her further into the office, dark wood furniture. She sat down in the deep leather sofa, crossed her legs, watched his eyes scan her stockings. Her stomach rumbled. She checked the clock, it was almost eleven. She should’ve ate something, usually her dad made breakfast.

* It shouldn’t take long, the solicitor said, assumed that Maria was short on time. She shrugged. She

had all the time in the world, her dad was dead and no one waited for her anymore. The thought hit her like a brick, a physical pain, she was eighteen and had no one. Her dad always told her they had each other and that was enough, and had barely spoken with anyone after finishing high school.

When she had moved there at ten years old, there were other families with kids there, but over the last few years, most of those families had moved to the mainland. Only the older guard had steadfastly remained, the pensioners. Stubborn and hardy, they opted to stay in their ever-increasingly dilapidated homes, refusing to move until the coffin drew ever closer.

Maria had suggested they should move too, when she had finished high school and all the other teens left the island to continue their education. Maria dreamed of becoming a doctor and her teacher said her grades matched her aspirations. Before the teacher moved from the island, he visited her home to convince her dad to let her use and grow her considerable skills. A truly special child, the teacher had called her, both intelligent and caring, and with a maturity far beyond her age.

Her father didn’t appreciate the flattery; on the contrary, he was enraged.

* No man, he’d yelled at her after chasing the teacher out the door, - no other man is going to tell me

what’s best for my daughter!

Maria had given up on her dreams of becoming a doctor, and had stayed on the island. When her mother had abandoned them and left, her dad had sacrificed so much to make sure she had a safe upbringing, so she couldn’t leave, didn’t want to leave him all alone on the island. But now… he had left her.

* Maria?

The solicitor looked at her with a question mark stamped on his face. Maria realised he must’ve said her

name several times.

* I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. What did you say?

She made an apologetic gesture, pulled her hand through her long hair and looked at him. Why had the

solicitor asked her to come? She was the only thing her father had, and not much in the way of belongings, so why had he written a will?

The solicitor opened the folder in front of him, leafed through it. Her father’s name was on the folder. He took out a sheet and studied it.

* The island house, it’s yours now. There are no debts or liens attached to it, but you knew that, yes?

She nodded. The small house wasn’t worth much, it was old and worn.

* Yes, of course.
* Then we have the bank deposit of almost, the solicitor counted, - almost 40,000 euros.
* What?

Maria stared. 40,000 euros? They had no money, dad had always said they were broke? Every time she’d

wanted to do something exciting or go somewhere on holiday, he’d said they couldn’t afford it, that they barely had enough money for food.

The solicitor laughed.

* Sure enough, you’re a wealthy woman now. Plus, there’s the house in Norway, that’s yours as well, I

don’t know what the value might be, but…

Maria interrupted him.

* Excuse me, but what? A house in Norway? What are you talking about?
* Didn’t he tell you about the house there? You lived a few years in Norway, did you not?
* We did, she nodded. – But I don’t remember anything from my time there. It’s like my first ten years

have been erased.

* I remember the first time I saw you, the solicitor said. – You’d just arrived here, and he needed a new

passport for you, as you had lost yours during transit. I helped him with the paperwork and you sat on his lap without saying a word. You were the palest child I had ever seen; very thin and serious. I don’t think you were more than ten years old, and you didn’t know a lick of Greek. Do you remember?

* Yeah, we had just gotten here, and the car trip here was awful. Dad had the flu and had been very ill

for over a week, and I don’t think he was well enough to even drive a car. His face was as white as a sheet and looked terrible. I’d been sick a long time as well, since I fell and hit my head, so I was tired and just wanted to sleep. He drove all the way here so I could see a doctor.

She laughed. – I guess the Norwegian doctors weren’t good enough.

The solicitor smiled.

* Yep, that’s how he was. Nothing but the best was good enough for his baby girl.

His eyes swept across her stockings again. She planted both feet on the floor, got up and studied the

Papers on the desk in front of him. There it was, right underneath her home, the address of the other house. There was a picture there as well. She picked it up and looked at it. The house was small and red, the paint was peeling off, boards nailed across the windows.

* It looks more like a ruined cabin, she mumbled.
* Yes, the solicitor nodded. – But Norway’s an expensive country, so you might still be able to get a

nice chunk of money if you want to sell it. I could arrange that for you?

She hesitated, studied the picture again. Why had her dad never mentioned that he still owned a house in Norway? She knew they lived there when she was younger and smaller, before her mother left with another man, a man with money. She knew that her mother and the man with the money had a son, a son they kept and loved… her dad had told her that, how her mother had abandoned them and hurt him deeply, made it so he could never love another woman again. Only her, his daughter, his jewel, his beloved.

Personally, she remembered nothing. Not her mom or her time in Norway. Her dad had told her it was because she fell down a stair and hit her head. She suffered a nasty concussion, and had been confused and sick for almost six months afterwards, and her dad had feared she’d never be the same. Her confusion had passed, but couldn’t remember a thing from Norway. Her memories started with flashes from the exhausting trip to Greece, and then her great grandmother’s joy when she and her dad finally arrived. Most of all she remembered the sun, the wind and how she treasured the sound of the waves. Even the seagulls filled her with its own type of happiness, gliding above her across the sky, squawking down at her. The other village kids didn’t understand her, they hated the intrusive seagulls and thought the waves were too noisy and the sun was too hot.

She only wanted to be outside at first, but if she was indoors, she turned on every light in the house, opened all the curtains to let in the sunlight. Her great grandmother had been appalled by this waste of electricity and complained that the sun faded the furniture and been terrified of what the neighbours might say since they could see everything that went on in the house. No one else in the village did this? What was it about that girl, always wanting to spend time outdoors? How did she go from being one of the palest kids her great grandmother had ever seen to one of the tannest in less than a year, when most of her playmates only wanted to stay in the shade? Didn’t she know she sun ruined your skin, that it would make you look old before you were 20 and would probably give her skin cancer and kill her at a young age?

Her dad explained that this was very common in Norway, it was cold and dark most of the year that when summer came, everyone wanted to spend time outside and bask in the sun.

That’s all he wanted to say about Norway, and he became sad when she asked, so she had stopped. One time – before her great grandmother got weird in the head and had to move – she had suggested they’d try hypnosis to see if she could recover some of her memories. That was after her great grandmother had brought a kitten back to the house one day when Maria sat in the living room and drew pictures. Her great grandmother had put the golden-brown kitten in her lap without warning, and her smile had split the old wrinkled face in two. She’d obviously been confident the kitten would be a success and that her great granddaughter would be delighted with the unexpected present.

Maria had become hysterical instead and pushed the kitten down to the floor, and stormed out the house screaming. Her great grandmother, still standing in the living room, had understood nothing about what just happened. Maria refused to go back in until the cat was gone, and after some sweet-talk from her dad, her great grandmother had relented and agreed to keep it in the bathroom for the rest of the evening. The kitten was gone the next morning. Her dad had taken it away. Maria never said it, but she hoped it was dead.

She’d heard them discussing her afterwards. Her great grandmother thought there was something wrong with her, every child she knew loved kittens? And wasn’t Maria easily frightened and generally jumpy as well? Afraid of the dark, afraid of big crowds, afraid of noise? Could there be something in her past that could explain all this anxiety? Something a hypnotist could explain? Her father had dismissed it out of hand. What good would hypnosis do? There was nothing wrong with his daughter, quite the opposite. She had learned Greek in record time and made good grades in every subject. Besides, hypnosis was expensive and no one did hypnosis on the island. They’d had to travel mainland to do hypnosis, and they couldn’t afford it.

Maria had agreed with him, because the few times she had tried to think back, really think back, concentrated on remembering, it usually ended with a migraine lasting for days before it relented. So what good was it to waste a lot of money on hypnosis if there wasn’t much to remember, anyway? She’d only been a child?

But he’d had a house in Norway all this time? And all that money?

The solicitor drummed his fingers on the desk. He waited for an answer, she tried to focus, looked at the black onyx ring the solicitor wore on one of his ring fingers, tap, tap, tap on the desk. Was it best to let him sell the house in Norway and forget it ever existed, or should she – Maria was surprised the thought was actually tempting – travel to Norway to take a look at it?

* I’ll have to think about it, she said, subconsciously pulling her hand through her hair. Her fingertips

traced the scar she’d gotten falling down the stairs, the only memory she had from her time in Norway.

* Is there anything else? Some… explanation?
* No. Sorry.

He pushed a document towards her.

* You only need to sign her, and I’ll deal the deeds and other formalities. Regarding the house in

Norway, maybe you have someone you should speak with before you make up your mind?

* Speak to?
* Yes, a beautiful young woman such as yourself must have a boyfriend?

She laughed out loud. A boyfriend? My God, her dad would kill her if she brought another man home.

She remembered she was alone now. Her father, her only one, was dead.

* No, I don’t have anyone, she answered curtly, and signed the papers without reading them, her

name written in blue flowed across the sheet of paper. Then she pushed her chair back and got up.

* I assume we’re done?

The solicitor nodded, and opened his mouth to say something, but closed his mouth, deciding against it.

* Thank you, Maria said without extending her hand. She couldn’t stand the thought of him touching

her, she curtsied for the old man instead. He seemed bothered, reminded him of the age difference.

Maybe he won’t ogle my thighs next time, she thought, and curtsied again.

NORWAY

The house looked worse than the picture indicated. It had been four months since she’d sat in the solicitor’s office and saw it for the first time; the house where she presumably grew up. Now it was a reality. A short flight was all it took; a few hours by plane and a half hour by taxi cab through a landscape of yellow fields and reddened trees, where only scattered farms blocked the horizon. Norway was more beautiful and desolate than she had imagined despite reading so much about the country the last few months; the country with very reserved people, extortionate prices and great wealth and, if the UN was to be believed, one of the best places in the world to live. Why hadn’t they gone back to Norway sooner?

She was born here, and somewhere in this country she had a mother named Sissel. Granted, her mother was no better than a whore according to her dad; a whore that had sold husband and daughter for a bastard with too much money and a huge house. Still, a whore could be a mother and Maria had a mother, nonetheless.

Why had he never brought her back here? He’d had the money, they could’ve afforded it. Did he not want to, or did abandonment affect him more than he’d care to admit?

So many why’s she’d never have answered, she thought sadly and paid the taxi cab driver. Seven hundred crowns for a half hour drive. Back home in Greece shew could’ve gone cross-country for that same fare. Still, she thanked him in Norwegian as she stepped out of the black Mercedes. She’d bought language classes online and spent the last four months practicing Norwegian. The language came easy, Maria was not surprised; she assumed she had spoken it fluently and just forgotten about it. Even on the flight over she’d been able to understand most of what her fellow passengers had been talking about. The driver gave her the luggage, one simple suitcase. She didn’t know what she’d need, but realised now she had to buy a thicker jacket. She thanked him again, and stood right inside the gate, looking at the house she’d inherited.

It was obvious that no one had maintained it once her dad left. A white flap of tape was stuck over the door lock, as if it’d stop anyone from unlocking it. The plastic was rigid under her fingers as she tore it off and let the wind carry it away. She’d gotten the key from the solicitor, and it didn’t want to work straight off the bat. She took it out, inserted it again. It only took three tries before the lock gave way and spun the door open.

The door creaked on its inward path, and the musty smell of old and mold hit her square in the face, almost an external force that tried to push her back outside into the fresh autumn air.

Maria let the door stay open as she wandered into the small kitchen. Everything – countertops, chairs and tables – was covered in a thick layer of dust. There was a dirty coffee cup in the sink, covered by a dried green layer of something nondescript.

She opened the first door. It was a bedroom. No mattress, no bedlinen, the room seemed emptied of personal belongings. And empty desk, a closet with its door shut. She was about to walk inside to look at the closet when nausea roared like a raging volcano. Maria ran outside to the front porch, airline food spreading on the grass outside, the orange macaroni contrasted against the green. She sat on the first step waiting for the nausea to subside. The forest floor in front of her was covered in autumn leaves, a bird tweeted from the tree top high above her. It was beautiful. She threw up three more times, the stomach acid burned her nausea away.

She got up as she sun set behind the trees. It started to get cold, far colder than she was used to. Her breath was coloured white in front of her. She blew a little harder and followed the small cloud with her eyes; somewhere deep down in her mind, she knew she’d done this before.

She braced herself and walked back through the kitchen door, avoiding the bedroom. She walked into the small bathroom, the tub was cracked. She suddenly saw herself standing in it, she was young, small, maybe eight or nine, her dad washed her.

* *Turn around, short stuff, put your arms up, there you go…*

Maria smiled at the surprising memory. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad to stick around here a while after all? She needed to clean the house anyway; can’t sell a filthy house at a profit, she thought. And maybe that’d jolt some more memories? Maybe she’d find glimpses of who she’d once been in this tiny house?

Maria was done cleaning the house after about a week -the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom and the small living room. Everything was clean and shiny. She slept on the living room sofa at night. There was something odd about the air in the bedroom; even after a thorough cleaning, the air felt stale and suffocating, and she couldn’t be in the bedroom for long. She’d gathered what few belongings her dad had left and boxed it up. There wasn’t a lot. A few impersonal things; a couple of shirts that were left hanging in the closet, utensils, kitchen glasses. She felt disappointed.

In the bathroom, on the shelf in front of the mirror, she found a long, brown strand of hair. She picked it up and compared to her own, and was sure it was hers. Her dad loved her hair.

*My beautiful girl, never cut your hair, never. Come here, let me comb it for you, my dear, most beautiful girl in the world…*

She hadn’t found any of her own things or anything to indicate a child had lived there. No toys, nothing.

The only thing left was the cellar; the hatch in the kitchen floor and the broken cellar told her it was there, but she left that for last. She didn’t like dark spaces; she hated spiders and other creepy crawlers that she figured were down there.

The next day she still pulled the rug that covered most of the hatch aside. She wanted to put it off, yet again. She straightened her back. The kitchen was sparkling clean, the whole house was clean, maybe she’d put on a pot of coffee? Maybe she should take a trip to town and speak to the realtor instead? She’d been on the phone with him already, and agreed that she’d pop round once she was done cleaning. He had seemed surprised when Maria mentioned what house she wanted to sell. He asked if he knew the house’s history, she said no. What did he mean? Had someone died there?

He hadn’t answered that question, only promised to send her some information through email and said they’d talk about it when she came by. Nothing had come yet, she’d sent reminders the day before.

She looked at the hatch again. She felt the reluctance to even deal with the cellar wash over once more. The small, red Fiat she had rented yelled at her from the driveway. She didn’t need anything, but driving to town to the local grocery store was more tempting than descending into that cellar.

She shook her head, slightly disappointed in herself. She was sure she’d be done quickly, nobody expected a cellar to be in tip-top shape, but she needed to see what it looked like, what was down there in case potential buyers wanted to know.

She bent down and looked at the latch that kept the hatch in place. Did they really lock their cellar doors in Norway? What was down there that scared her dad? Giant spiders? Monster rats? She shuddered, and lifted the hatch.

She reached for the switch, flicked it and was surprised the bulb still worked. A single, solitary bulb covered in dust and cobwebs tried to light the cellar room. The stairs were covered in brown stains, it looked like dried blood. The stench punched her right in the face; an intense but indescribable smell that made her stomach revolt. Something had rotted down there, dead mice and rats, maybe birds that had flown in through the shattered window. She stood quietly at the top of the stairs until her stomach had settled, pinched her nose and breathed through her mouth. She was about to take a step down the stairs, she listened, her skin crawled with goose pimples. What was that? Did a cat just meow?

It was completely silent in the cellar. She stared, tried to see further into the cellar room, the light bulb cast a dim circle of light across the cement floor. The light didn’t reach the farthest wall, the innermost part of the room lay dark. She felt dizzy all of a sudden, the floor rocking under her feet, she sat down on the top of the stairs.

She rubbed her hand over the scar on her forehead. Was it here, in Norway, that she had started hating cats?

Something meowed again, she was damn sure it was a meow, there was a damn cat down there, a goddamned cat, maybe a lot of goddamned cats, sneaking along the walls down there, with their yellow and green eyes focused on the hatch up there, focused at the light, at her…

Maria tried to block the images in her head, tried to focus on her hands, her fingers, her fingernails she’d chewed down to their cuticles, but the images didn’t stop, wouldn’t stop, she was seven, maybe eight, and…

Daddy opened a hatch in the floor.

* *Look here, they’re down there!*

Maria leaned over to see, and she could see a bundle of kittens laying in a wicker basket at the bottom of

the stairs.

* *Oh, how cute, are they asleep? Can I touch them?*
* *Of course.*

Maria remembered.

* *Bloody hell, kid, stop screaming! This is your home now, do you hear? Mum wanted me to kill you,*

*but I didn’t want to kill you. Your daddy came and saved you, your daddy came and saved you, your daddy came and saved you…*

She heard the echo of his voice over and over and over. He had rarely been angry, but she knew that voice belonged to him without a shadow of a doubt. It was as if he was there, sat or stood right next to her, towering above her, tall and aggressive.

Maria concentrated, tried to understand the images that popped up; they flashed by like half-forgotten memories. Were they real, or just fragments of an old dream, an old nightmare, pure fantasy? Daddy had almost never been angry?

She stroked her hair, it felt soft under her fingertips. It felt wrong too; it hadn’t been that long back then, not as soft either. The word “unkempt” popped into her head. Had she been a filthy child?

Maria got up and walked down the last few steps, legs trembled. The thick layer of dust lay as testimony that none had been here for a while. The sun that was drawn on the wall shone at her with faded rays of light, she felt the yellow crayon between her fingers; hard, square. It had broken in half before she was done drawing the sun, but she used the whole crayon until the sun was bright and yellow. Another bed frame on the floor, another absent mattress.

A dresser with a CD player stood right next to the empty bed frame. She brushed away the dust, pressed play, hoping to hear something. She didn’t. Nothing happened. The battery’s dead, she thought. Of course it’s dead after so many years.

She looked around. There wasn’t much more to see, though she felt as if something was missing, more than just the mattress. It floated around her consciousness, shadows she couldn’t quite see. Or, she thought as she looked around the tiny room, maybe the room felt bigger back then. Bigger and colder, like nightmares.

Her phone rang upstairs, she was relieved to finally have an excuse to leave the cellar. Maybe it was the realtor? It was, she opened the email.

“Thank you for the phone call, bla bla bla, so and so forth, we hereby confirm our obligation to sell, yada yada yada…” Then, at the end: “I promised to send you some more information on the house and it’s history. It’s quite brutal and we’re sorry to inform you that it might negatively impact the sales price. Here it is, see for yourself.”

He had attached links to several news articles.

She clicked on one and saw a picture of the house, the yard was filled with police, a service car in the background with flashing lights, a stark contrast to the current silence outside these four walls. Next to that picture, another picture, black and white, of an old man she couldn’t remember seeing. It could be anyone. She skimmed it. He had kidnapped and killed a girl, his body was found in the Åsrum tarn, the girl was most likely buried somewhere in the forest, but she was currently still missing…

Maria shook her head. Her brain tried to reconnect old memories without fully knowing where the dots were. Some information was right, most were not; it had to be about her, did she think she was dead? And who was that old man that supposedly kidnapped and killed her, and then killed himself?

*Had* her mother been looking for her? A police officer apologized for concluding the previous investigation as an accidental drowning. Maria was puzzled. Why did they think she drowned? Still, her apparent drowning was why they hadn’t searched anywhere else, it was only when they found Caroline (who the hell was Caroline?) that they figured out Ariston Gregoriou Papadopolous was guilty and had managed to find this house.

Maria was puzzled yet again. Ariston Gregoriou Papadopolous. Were they referring to the grandfather she’d never met? She studied the black and white picture once more, trying to spot similarities to the picture her great grandmother had on the dresser in her bedroom. The nose and eyes were similar, it might be him, but did they think he had killed her?

Maria rubbed her hand across her forehead, the all too familiar headache knocked on her temples, wanting to come in. She tried rubbing it away and get her memory flowing – why couldn’t she remember? So many questions, so many things that couldn’t possibly be true. She clicked on the next link, a woman stared at her with tearful eyes, and the headline stated she was very sad and missed her daughter very much. Was this her mother? Maria knew her name was Sissel, dad had told her that, but it was the first time she saw her last name. She punched in her mother’s name on Facebook; 13 different versions of Sissel Eliassen were Facebook-members, a few were private profiles with no profile picture and the rest didn’t have profile pictures that matched the picture in the article.

Maria found her way back to the tearful picture, but couldn’t stomach studying her mother’s fake face. She clicked on a link that lead her to an article about Petter Eliassen. The asshole, her whore mother’s new husband.

She skimmed through trials he had won, statements regarding clients, then countless pages regarding him being charged with the murder of his sister and finally a few pages about inmate security in Norwegian prisons after he was found dead, hanging from the ceiling from strips made from his bedsheet. It was not supposed to happen, of course, no one had seen it coming, there’d be no reason to suspect him of being suicidal. The prison’s management apologized profusely and repeatedly.

Maria felt as if she didn’t accept the apology. A red hazy fog appeared in front of her eyes, making her eyes and thoughts vague and unclear, this rage she didn’t know she had, but which had grown since her father’s passing. The hate, the rage, it felt great and painful at the same time, mostly painful. She didn’t notice the tears that welled up, wasn’t aware that she got up, didn’t hear her phone drop to the floor. Only the pain, the fucking pain. Petter Eliassen. She hoped he suffocated slowly, that he suffered.

The fog eased, dissipated. Maria looked around. She was on the floor, her body stiff and sore as she got up. How long had she laid here like that, what had happened to her? She bent down to pick up her phone. It had survived the fall with luckily only a minor crack in one of the edges thanks to the unpleasant meeting between plastic and hardwood.

Maria googled Sissel Eliassen, Sandefjord. A long list of hits, but it was mostly summaries of what the realtor had sent her, page after page about what the media had dubbed “The Kodal Case”. She clicked back, found an article published right after they found Petter dead in his cell, with a picture of him and her mother. Maria studied her mother; it was a colour photo, her mother stood next to Petter, smiling up at him. “From happier times”, it read below the picture. Maria snorted, her mother had obviously managed to fool the police, the prosecutors, everyone to believe it was Petter and his gardener that had planned her disappearance. But Maria knew better, she remembered it now, what dad had told her about her mother.

*They don’t want you. “Kill her”, your mum said. “Kill that pest for me!” You understand that I had to save you from them? You didn’t fit in anymore, you didn’t belong, they didn’t want you. Look at that picture. Look at it and see how happy they are. How happy they are…*

What a bitch, what a fake… and she was her mother!

Maria shuddered, forced her anger back and studied the picture on the screen in front of her. Her mother was pretty, beautiful was a better word, model beautiful, but Maria took solace in that they looked nothing alike. Where Maria had brown hair and more tan, her mother was blond and pale. They only had the blue eyes with the green specks in common.

She clicked on another link, to a more recent picture, of a smiling Sissel in front of her newly opened art gallery, with a link to the gallery’s Facebook-page. It looked stylish, several rooms of walls covered in small and big paintings alike. Probably opened with what money Petter left her after he croaked, Maria thought, the solicitor had left tens of millions of crowns. Her mother’s betrayal seemed to have paid off.

The last picture she found was not of her mother. It was a picture of her son, her half-brother, published about four years ago. “Happy sixth birthday, love mum.” Maria studied the boy. He had a big smile in that picture, obviously a happy child. Was that why her mother wanted him? Had he been cuter and nicer, or was it just because he was a boy?

* *Look, that’s your little brother. They call him their little prince. Isn’t that precious? Aren’t you happy?*

Maria got up and walked into the small bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror, at her long hair. She had always hated her hair that long, but dad, he had loved it.

*My beautiful girl, never cut your hair, never. Come here, let me comb it for you, my dear, most beautiful girl in the world…*

She checked the cabinets for a scissor, didn’t find one. Went to the kitchen and she struck gold. She cut, cut, cut her chin, blood bubbled up, the floor covered with thick, brown hair. The scissor was dull, so she cut, tore, and then cut again. The hair covered the sink around her, she scooped up a handful of her hair, stared at it, cried, screamed, cursed. It burned still, it still fucking hurt, it still hurt so motherfucking bad. The red fog rolled in, rolled over her in waves, it scorched her, ignited her inside, outside, filled every pore. There was too much pain, she couldn’t fit it all inside herself. She sobbed, punched her fists at the cracked porcelain. The red fog cleared every time her fists connected, so she hit harder. Punched her fists bloody, thumped her head in the wall, in the mirror, the mirror split and cracked, first from corner to corner, then into a million pieces. The red fog thickened, nothing helped, nothing would help, she was on fire, there was blood and hair everywhere. She collapsed on the floor exhausted, sobbing. Her mother. How could she? HOW. COULD. SHE?

A month later

Maria started the little Fiat and swung through the gate. In the weeks that passed, her memories flooded her, either in flashes or in much longer sequences. Her mother and Petter that wanted to get rid of her, Nicolai that had saved her, only to turn around and do things to her that no one should ever do to a child. She didn’t know which of her memories was the worst; her mother’s cruel betrayal, or that the man she loved above all else was an asshole. What he did to her had never been beautiful. She knew that now, he had tricked her, that she was special, that what they had and what they did was special, that it had been love. She hadn’t even been the only one; there’d been someone before her, this Caro, that might be Caroline, the girl the newspapers wrote about, that girl they’d found buried in a flower bed under the emperor lilies. Was she her older sister, if her dad really was her dad? Maria didn’t know what was true and what wasn’t. She blamed her dad for that.

Even so, she missed him when she laid in bed unable to sleep. He was dead, and she was glad he was dead, but she mourned. She missed up, crawl into his lap and hear him explain, hear him say that everything she remembered were lies and fantasy, that her memories weren’t real. She made excuses on his behalf. Thought maybe he was damaged himself, that it had been love after all, that he might not know any other way to show it? The last few years were still the ones clearest in her mind, the kind and good years. Mostly good. Even if he wasn’t her real dad, she was the only dad she’d ever had, and weren’t you supposed to love your dad?

She was ashamed of how she felt, a deep, incessant shame. She didn’t want them, but she couldn’t push them away. How could you hate and love someone at the same time?

And not just him, but it was as if Maria had become two people. The little girl, Mari, locked in that basement without anyone, this girl no one loved, not even her own mother. She didn’t understand it – how could *not* love your own child? At the same time, Mari was also Maria, that had thought herself loved by a caring father, a warm great grandmother, the girl who had a home.

Could her mother make her whole?

She met her own gaze in the rear-view mirror. Haircut aside, she looked like Maria, she wanted to be Maria. She didn’t want to remember, but new memories kept popping up all the time. They enraged her. That was a new feeling as well; she’d never been truly angry before. Her grandmother used to compliment her for it; her Nordic temperament, her almost apathetic calm, so different from the Greek temperament. Maria laughed to herself sarcastically as she pulled up outside the hairdresser in Storgata. Her great grandmother should see her now.

A doorbell chirped happily as she walked through the glass dor. She was greeted by a blond with long, red nails, tight pant-suits and a big smile.

* Hi! Are you Maria? I’m Line, I talked to you on the phone when you made the appointment. There’s

usually more of us here, but everyone else are on holiday, so I’m the only one here. And that’s fine; it’s quiet here during the summer because our regular customers are on holiday as well.

Maria nodded, shook the outstretched hand and forced herself to smile, a little uncomfortable with the flood of words and to already be on a first-name basis. On the island it’d be impossible to be on a first-name basis this goddamn fast; apparently it was the norm in Norway.

Line studied her hair. – Yeah, I can see you want to do something about it. Was it your nephew that gave you a faux haircut?

Maria nodded and laughed.

* Yeah, he gave me a haircut while I was sleep, she lied. – I can promise you I was shocked when I saw

my own reflection in the mirror.

* I think we can make you look absolutely smashing, Line said and studied her thoroughly, almost

uncomfortably so. – Your cheek bones are gorgeous and your eyes are magnificent. We should make those pop, you know? Really pop. What do you think about highlights, that’ll give your hairdo a bit more life, don’t you think?

* I trust you, Maria said. – You’ve got free reign.

Line pointed at a chair in the very back.

* Sit right here, and then…
* Could I sit here instead?

Maria pointed at a chair by the window.

* I mean, if that’s okay with you.

Line looked a bit puzzled, but her big smile re-emerged.

* Of course, love, no problem at all. Let me just bring my cart over here; it’s got wheels, so we’re

absolutely fine. Have a seat already, go on, sit!

30 minutes later her hair was cut and washed and the hair dye was livening and lightening her dark hair. She had also found out a whole bunch of information about a whole bunch of people in Sandefjord she knew nothing about and had no interest in getting to know. The single mayor that everyone liked, the businessman who argued about beachlines and fences and everything one could possibly argue about, the football team that were promoted and relegated every other year. Maria tried to smile accordingly and at the right times and pretended to listen to Line’s stream of consciousness. As a married couple came out of a shop on the other side of the street, Maria got the chance she’d been looking for. She pointed and nodded.

* What’s that? An art gallery?
* Yeah, that’s Sissel’s art gallery. Obviously she’s sold another painting and I promise you, she ain’t

cheap. She’s got a regular client base from Oslo that come to shop there, all rich snobs that don’t need to worry about sales or cost; if they see something they like, they buy it.

* Do you know her?
* For sure, I do. She’s one of my regulars, she’s here every eight weeks. Everyone knows who she is.
* Oh?
* Well, she was married to Petter Eliassen, a celebrity solicitor. All us girls were drooling over him, no

one had a clue why he started dating her. You know, pretty cliché and all; falling in love with a single mother when he could have anyone and everyone he wanted. She was pretty, but…

Line fell silent for a moment, – things went south.

* What do you mean?
* Well, it’s been a while now, but Sissel lost her daughter, and Petter went to jail for killing his sister.

And…

Line lowered her voice.

* They found a little girl – his niece – buried in his garden. Rumours had it that Petter and his janitor

had killed her, but they’re rumours after all. Line picked up a lock of Maria’s hair and looked at it.

* Let’s put you next to the sink, I think the hair dye’s done its magic.

Maria thought it took forever and a half to rinse her hair. Line rinsed, massaged, added more shampoo,

massaged some more, rinsed.

* Feels lovely, doesn’t it? Line asked and massaged a little bit more down Maria’s neck.
* Mmmm.
* You’re pretty stiff. I thought you guys were good at relaxing, you southerners I mean. Where were

you from again?

* Greece.
* Your Norwegian is pretty solid for a Greek person?
* My mother was Norwegian, Maria said. – She taught me.
* Oh! Is she from Sandefjord?

Maria shook her head.

* No, Oslo. I think she was in Sandefjord not that long ago to buy art, she lied. – Maybe it was there?

Maria threw her head towards the gallery across the street. – That Sissel lady, she seems to be doing alright, despite everything? Does she have kids?

* Yeah, she’s got a ten-year-old son, but he’s demanding. He’s been here a few times and even though

he has games to occupy himself with, he’s bouncing all over the place. Can’t sit still.

Line lowered her voice again.

* She had that daughter too, you know, the one who disappeared.
* Disappeared?
* Yeah, no one seems to know what happened, exactly. Not even Sissel. First they thought she’d

drowned, then it turned out she’d been kidnapped and kept prisoner up in Kodal for several years. There was a lot of hubbub going on about that, the police got a public beating over it, and the papers didn’t write about anything else for weeks.

* Did they find her? That girl, I mean?
* No, she was never found. They searched the tarns and the forest up there forever, but couldn’t find

anything.

* That’s horrible!
* I know, right? Line smiled. – Would you lean over a little bit so I can cut the hair on your neck?

Maria obediently did so and studied her hands. Her hands were clenched, knuckles white. She forced her

hands open and put them on her thighs, palms down. She took a deep breath, tried to calm down.

An hour later she looked at herself in the mirror and had to admit Line knew more than the art of small talk. Her hair was considerably brighter, and the short hairdo accentuated her cheek bones, and her eyes seemed far larger below her short bangs.

* Thank you so much, she said and smiled, her first real smile that day. – It turned out excellent.
* I know, right? Line said and began sweeping her hair up from the floor.

Maria got up and put her jacket on, the scissors lay on the bench in front of her. With Line’s back turned,

Maria picked up the scissors and let it sink into her jacket pocket. She did this without thinking. Line put the sweeper down and walked to the register.

* Wash, blow dry, cut, highlights, colour. That’ll be 2200 crowns, please.

Maria tried to hide her shock as she fished her wallet up from her pocket, forking over two one thousand

bills and two one hundred bills. Good Christ. She would’ve got the same haircut for a quarter of the price in Greece.

She put on her large sunglasses outside the salon and walked towards the art gallery on the other side of the street. A car slowed behind her, she didn’t turn around, she didn’t know anybody here anyway. She studied the art gallery from the outside, through the big display windows. The display had several colourful and abstract paintings; a black with red spots, one with a few yellow doodled on a green background. The largest painting had a brown, heart-like spot painted on it on an all-black canvas. She leaned forwards, wanted to see the name of the painting. *Heartbreak*. The painting looked like something a small child could’ve drawn, but the red price tag told her it cost 24000 crowns. On sale, no less. Bewildered, she shook her head. Would someone really pay that much for something like that? The paintings looked like something kids would paint or draw, and none of them appealed to her.

A sign hung above the door; Little Wagtail, written in squiggly letters, silver on a black background next to the logo, a simple lined drawing of a wagtail. The bird looked as if a kid had drawn it, too.

Something moved in front of her, startling her, as if she was caught red-handed doing something bad. Inside, behind the slightly dirty glass door she could see a long-haired woman sitting at a table. She sat turned away, hair covering her face, making it impossible to see if it was *her*.

She put her hand on the door knob then quickly pulled it back, as if the cold steel had burned her palm. Her stomach churned with bile, she swallowed it down, a burning sensation running down her throat. Should she turn around? Was this something she really wanted?

Did she want to meet the woman who had abandoned her own child for wealth?

It’s now or never, she thought. She was heading home for Greece soon, and the realtor had already received a bid of half a million crowns for a forest shack. Pretty amazing. If she was ever going to meet her mother, it had to be now. How would she react? Denial and anger? Happiness?

Maria had dreamt about it lately; that her mother would recognize her at once, open her arms and welcome her home. She’d say she was sorry and full of remorse and regret and pain and beg for forgiveness. It was beautiful in the dream, yet she would wake up enraged. Sweaty and enraged, her heart beating out of her chest, as if she had just run the hundred-metre dash instead of laying calmly in her own bed.

She didn’t like it, didn’t want it to be like this, but her rage… she likened it to her rage clustering in one large painful lump in her stomach. She didn’t breathe like she used to. When she tried to inhale, something in her throat blocked it; even her voice had changed. She heard it every time she stood in front of the mirror, telling herself to get a damn grip, while she studied her own eyes in the mirror and wondered about everything new that was inside there, inside of her. Perhaps meeting her mother would make things fall into place, or was it more likely that everything would collapse?

Her hand fumbled around and found the steel in her jacket pocket. Her pulse slowed, the scissor felt like a lifeline, something constant now that the world was rocking around and beneath her. Not that she’d use it. No, never. Even so, she picked it out of the pocket and opened it. The steel was cold, she let her thumb slide along the sharp edge, a red stipe on her fingertip, a tiny drop of blood bubbled up. She shook her head, took a deep breath, sheathed the scissor and put it back in the jacket pocket. She’d never use it. Never.

Maria took a deep breath and was about to go inside, when she registered something blue in the corner of her eye. A parking guard was about to give her a ticket and stick it under the windshield wipers of her rental. She was about to walk over there and protest loudly. Then she shrugged, turned her back to the parking guard and walked into the gallery.

* Hi, can I help you?

The woman in front of her was older than in the pictures. Still pretty, but not even the perfect makeup

could hide the crow’s feet around her eyes, her mouth, her forehead. Worry lines, Maria thought, not smile lines like the old village ladies had.

Sissel looked at Maria, opened her mouth.

* I thought I’d look around, Maria said, realising she had stared too long and too much.

Sissel smiled, and suddenly looked much younger, as if the smiled had wiped years off her face.

* Well, welcome to you. There’s artist names, titles and prices on the white tags next to each

painting, but if you have any questions, feel free to ask.

Sissel walked further into the gallery and sat down a small table to study some papers. She doesn’t

recognize me, Maria thought. She seems to think this is just another ordinary day and she just spoke to an ordinary customer. Shouldn’t she recognise me even if I’m wearing sunglasses? Shouldn’t a mother recognise her daughter?

Maria wandered aimlessly, looking at the walls, mostly abstract paintings mixed in with a few landscapes, a lot of sky and ocean. Prices started at around five thousand crowns, the most expensive cost over one hundred thousand despite that Maria didn’t recognise a single artist’s name. Did people really pay this much for a painting from some unknown hack artist? She guessed so. She looked over at her mother, saw her back. It seemed almost unnaturally narrow, she was skinny. Didn’t she eat?

* If there’s something you’re looking for, I might be able to get it for you if it’s not on these walls,

Sissel said and turned to face Maria.

Maria shook her head.

* No… no, thank you. I’m not financially inclined to afford anything here, but it’s nice to look.
* I’ve got cheaper lithographs and stuff like that in here, Sissel said. She got up and opened a side

room door. Maria followed so close to her mother she could smell her perfume. Suddenly, she was a child again, her mother stood bent over her and combing her hair.

* *There you go, my little wagtail, now you look gorgeous.*

Had her mother used that same perfume back then?

*Sunflower*, the name came from nowhere. Maria imagined a tall, slender bottle.

Sissel put a hand on her arm. Maria jumped, her mother’s face turned puzzled, worried.

* Are you alright, dear? Would you like to sit down for a bit?
* Eh… Maria tried to gather her thoughts, all her feelings that threatened to take control; rage, loss,

sorrow, her body shook and she couldn’t hide it.

* Come here. Sissel guided her to a yellow armchair further in the gallery.
* Sit down, and I’ll get you a glass of water.

Maria followed her mother with her eyes, the narrow, skinny body. She seemed so nice, so kind. Maria knew how they’d been fooled. The men, the journalists, the police. Maria knew better.

She spotted two pictures that stood out; all the way in the back, with the cheaper lithographs. She gasped. Sissel had just come back with the glass of water, and had held it out for Maria to take, but… Maria didn’t take it; just stood there and stared. Sissel looked at her then followed Maria’s gaze. For a moment, all was silent; only a clock tick-tocked somewhere behind them.

* Who made those? Who painted those? Maria asked, taking the glass of water and downing it in two

big gulps.

* My daughter painted those, Sissel said hushed. – They’re not for sale.

Maria got up, walked to the two paintings, the floor swung underneath her, her ears rung. She took off

her sunglasses, stared. A slightly yellowed and aged A4 sheet of paper in a wooden frame, the sheet of paper had only a giant sun on it, childishly drawn with big rays of light.

Maria remembered painting that. It was the sun she stared at every bloody day down there in the cellar. Her crayon had broken in half when she was about halfway done, but she’d used the two stumps until they were gone and mashed the last bit of colour with her fingers. Her mother must have been down there, down in the cellar, seen how she was doing, what kind of life she’d given her daughter. Smelled the porta-potty and the filthy mattress. Maria swallowed to keep the sobs at bay.

There was a second painting, right next to the first. She recognised the logo from outside the gallery. A drawing of a bird, where only the colours and the long tail showed what kind of bird it was. She couldn’t remember when she had drawn it, maybe before, while she still lived at home. She couldn’t remember drawing wagtails in the cellar.

* A wagtail? Maria asked, completely redundant. Her voice was foreign, unrecognisable.
* Yes. My daughter loved wagtails. I used to call her Little Wagtail. It’s why I named the gallery as such.
* Used to? Did she die?
* Unfortunately, yes, she never got to grow up.

Sissel had a sad look on her face and turned her back, obviously didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

* But it’s been a while, it’s better now, though.

For you, Maria wanted to scream. I’m sure as fuck not better, I’m no—

She felt the red fog cover her eyes, the room grew warmer and darker all at once. She looked at the woman in front of her, the poor mother that lost her daughter. Pathetic. Utterly pathetic. As if it was her people should feel sorry for, as if it was her that had spent her childhood on a smelly, filthy mattress, as if…

The red fog was dense now, inpenetrable, like blood. If only they knew, those rich customers, if only they knew they bought shitty art from a woman who sold her child for money.

Maria saw the woman’s back in front of her, the blond hair curling upwards at the nape of her neck, who had her hair cut by the same hair dresser she’d just been to, felt her hand around the scissor in her pocket, the red fog denser and denser, shouldn’t a mother recognise her own daughter?

She didn’t hear a word coming out of her mother’s mouth, only saw her red lipstick, her white teeth. Maria’s fingers clutched the scissor, heart pounding, Maria felt her own pulse, how her heart beat, it hurt so much, it hurt so fucking much. The loss, the pain, it had to end, it had to fucking end.

* I’m Ma—she heard herself say; her voice cold, not like her own.
* Mummy? I’ve bought ice cream; do you want some?
* Hey love, of course I do.

Sissel bent down, took a small bite of the ice cream and gave her long-haired son a hug; the two blond

heads fit perfectly together. It was impossible to see where one head ended and the other began. Maria stroked her own head, the dark locks of hair that didn’t fit in. Didn’t belong.

* What did you say? Something you wondered about? Sissel asked and looked up at Maria, her face

still buried in her son’s hair.

* Who are you? the boy asked. – I haven’t seen you before, have I? Do you want ice cream?

He stuck his hand out, offering it to her. Maria shook her head.

* No, I—I can’t…
* Eivind, go sit down and play your games, Sissel said shaking her head and laughing.
* He’s pretty active, Sissel said, aiming the explanation at Maria. – And now, you know, with the

summer holiday all his friends are gone, so he’s bored.

* None of them want to play with me any other time, the boy said, and kicked a chair so it fell on the

floor in front of them.

* They think I’m stupid.

Maria put the chair back in its upright position.

* That’s mean, she said. – I’d love to play with you, but I don’t have any clue about those gamey

things, I’m sorry.

* My name’s Eivind, the boy said and extended his hand. – What’s your name?
* My name’s Maria, she said and shook his hand. It was soft, chubby and warm. The feelings that

welled up inside of her were unexpected. She didn’t want to let go of that hand again, ever. She wanted to take him with her, play with him, be there so he’d never be alone, never… never disappoint or betray or abandon him… Eivind pulled his hand a little harder, and Mari let go.

* Maria is a nice name, he said with a smile, his blue-green eyes shining at her. – I had a big sister

once, her name was Mari. I never met her, but mum said she was very nice, very kind.

He looked away.

* Much nicer than me, I’m sure.

The sob came from her stomach, Maria tried to stop her eyes from welling up, but failed.

* Are you crying? her little brother asked. – Are you sad?
* No, Maria said and shook her head. – Just allergies, that’s all.

The boy smiled and looked at her excitedly.

* You’ve got the same eyes mum and I do, those weird blue green ones.

Sissel looked at them, Maria opened her mouth, about to tell him it wasn’t weird; she was his big sister after all…

The gallery door opened, tall man in a suit entered.

* Hey!

Sissel got out of her chair, smiled at the man and hugged him. – How nice of you to stop by, it’s been

too long! Her voice was happy. Maria looked at the man, he reminded her of Petter. Dark, handsome, distinguished grey temples. The suit was expensive, a bouquet of flowers in his right hand. Was it one of Sissel’s new conquests?

Eivind seemed sour suddenly, he ran to his mother and tugged her hand. – Can I have another ice cream, mum? Please? Can I go buy another ice cream?

The man answered. He handed Eivind a fifty crown bill.

* Of course you can have more, he said, patting his hair without noticing how Eivind pulled away.
* Okay, okay, Sissel said and smiled at the man. – But that’ll be the last one of the day. And be careful

with those cars, traffic is heavy today.

* Muuuum, I’m ten, the boy moaned, - the kiosk is right around the corner.
* I’ll walk with him, Maria said. – It’d be quite nice with an ice cream, come to think of it.

Sissel looked at her, nodded quickly and smiled, before focusing on the man once more.

* Are you looking for something to put on your wall, or did you drop by because of me? she purred at the man.

Maria didn’t hear what the man replied. The door closed behind them. She smiled down at that blond

tuft of hair.

* I’ve got my car right around the corner here. You want to take a drive and find somewhere to play?

Eivind gave her a doubtful look.

* Grown ups get tired of playing with me. And you’re a grown up. And why do you talk so funny?

She laughed.

* It’s been a while since I spoke Norwegian, I guess I almost forgot how to do it. But maybe I can have

you help me while we play?

* Do you have any toys for boys?

She imagined the bear on the dresser next to her bed and shook her head.

* No, I’m sorry, I don’t have any toys for boys.

Her face lit up in a great, big smile.

* But I do have something much nicer.
* Oh? What is it?
* I have five small kittens in my house not far from here. We can go there and be back long before

mum’s done at work. You want to go?

Eivind nodded and threw only a cursory glance at the gallery before hitting the sidewalk in stride. She reached her hand out to him, and the boy took it. His hand fit perfectly in hers. Maria felt the sun warm her shoulders. They walked up to the rental car, the red Fiat. She opened the car door, and patiently waited for her little brother to scoot into the passenger seat and buckle himself.

I have a beautiful little brother. He looks like an angel, she thought to herself as she ran a hand through his blond hair. His curls slid softly between her fingertips.

But he can’t be called Eivind anymore.

Angelos.

Angelos is a good name for a boy.