



# The Dark Web

WHITE VAN



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with help from AI.



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**THE DARK WEB – White Van**

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Typesetting: Chakib Azzaoui

ISBN: 9788284310602

Printed by: Livonia Print

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## Prologue

Mille walks along the narrow pavement when a white van slows down beside her. The man in the driver's seat lets his gaze slide over her, then drives on.

It is the first time Mille has walked home from school alone. It is supposed to be a secret between her and Lukas, her big brother. They are home alone for a few days. Their parents are at the cabin, painting the living room and bedrooms so everything will be ready for the summer holidays.

The wind tugs at the trees, and the air fills with golden pollen dust. She feels a pressure in her chest; it is getting harder to breathe. She stops, takes off her backpack and opens the outer pocket. *Damn it! The inhaler isn't there. I forgot it at home.*

Mille swings the backpack onto her shoulders and walks quickly toward home. Luckily, it isn't far now.

The white van stops in the bus bay right in front of her. As she gets closer, she sees a picture of a cinnamon pretzel on the side of the van. Above it are the words "Baker Frantzen."

The man steps out of the van. He is wearing a white jacket with black buttons. He unfolds a paper map and looks around in confusion. Then he looks at Mille and says:

– Excuse me, do you know where Utsiktsveien is? My phone has run out of battery, and I only have this old map.

He waves the map and rolls his eyes.

Mille knows she isn't supposed to talk to strangers, so she shakes her head and keeps walking. The man mutters irritably to himself:

– Shit, now I'm going to be late.

He takes a step closer and says:

– Sorry, but I'm really in a hurry. I'm delivering a cake to a wedding, and the celebration starts soon. It's at a place called Utsiktstoppen. Do you know where that is?

Mille brightens and slows down. That was where she and her best friend Aisha had celebrated their seventh birthday a couple of weeks ago. The whole class had



been there, and they'd had a treasure hunt and a disco. It can't hurt to tell him which way to drive, can it?

She stops, turns toward him and says:

– Yes, I know where it is.

She points eagerly to the left and says:

– You have to drive down that road there, then turn right. When you get to a yellow house, go straight ahead until you reach a rainbow mailbox. Then turn left, and then take the first road on the right. Or no, the *second* road on the right. And when you get to the crossroads, turn right again. Then go straight ahead until you reach the little playground, and you're there.

The man raises his eyebrows and says:

– Uh ... Could you show me on the map, do you think?

She nods and walks over to him. He has light, short hair and blue eyes that smile. His nose is slightly crooked. He is younger than she first thought. Maybe only a couple of years older than Lukas, her brother.

Mille looks down at the map. She has been doing orienteering with her father for as long as she can remember, so it is easy to show him where to drive.

The man smiles warmly at her and says:

– Thank you so much for your help. If you'd like, you can take some pastries home with you. I have the van full.

He walks toward the van, waves at her and continues:

– Come on, you can choose whatever you want. It's all freshly baked. I've got school buns, cinnamon buns and vanilla buns. What do you like the most?

Mille hesitates and thinks: *Should I dare? Mum has said I must be careful with people I don't know, because they can be scary. But he looks kind.*

Her stomach rumbles, and she answers:

– School buns!

– Then that's what you'll get!

Mille follows the man to the back of the van. She notices that he limps. They stand in front of the double rear doors.



– Now you’ll get to see the really beautiful cake I baked too, he says. – Are you ready?

Mille nods expectantly.

– One, two, three! he says and opens the doors.

A delicious, sweet scent of cinnamon washes over her. The first thing she sees is a three-tiered cake. It is packed inside a tall cardboard box with a window of transparent plastic. She leans forward and sees that the cake is decorated with red marzipan roses. On top stand two small plastic figures, a man in a dark suit and a woman in a white dress.

– Nice, isn’t it? he says.

– Very, says Mille.

Behind the cake are shelves upon shelves of buns. Some have icing dripping down the sides, others have yellow vanilla custard.

– Yum! Mille exclaims, her mouth watering.

The man tears a paper bag from a holder, hands it to Mille and says:

– Just take whatever you want.

– Thank you! says Mille.

She climbs into the van and takes a school bun. She lets her teeth sink into it. Tastes the delicious mix of icing sugar and coconut melting in her mouth. Soon she reaches the best part, the vanilla custard. Her hands grow sticky with icing. She licks it off and stuffs buns into the bag.

The pressure in her chest grows heavier. *I need to get home to my inhaler.*

The man steps into the van. He is holding something white in his hand.

Suddenly he grabs her with strong arms. Before she can scream HELP, he presses a cloth over her mouth and nose. It smells so sharp that Mille gags. Her legs give way beneath her, and she collapses onto the floor.

The last thing she hears before everything goes black is the van doors slamming hard shut behind her.



## Chapter 1

### One day earlier

#### Sunday, 11 June

Lukas walks into the living room. The audiobook of *The Brothers Lionheart* streams from the speakers. Mille is lying on her stomach on the rug, drawing while kicking her legs in the air. Stuffed animals are stacked in a circle around her.

– Have you seen my cap? Lukas asks.

– Yes, Brumle has it, Mille says, pointing happily at her favourite stuffed animal.

Lukas snatches the brown cap and says:

– Stop taking my things!

– But you weren't using it, Mille says.

– You're not allowed to take it anyway. And aren't you a bit too old to be playing with stuffed animals soon?

– No! I'm *never* going to be too old for that, Mille says.

– I'll believe that when I see it, Lukas says and leaves the living room.

On his way up to his room, Lukas stops in front of the large mirror by the entrance. He pulls off his dark hoodie and straightens his blue polo shirt. Then he flexes his arm muscles and sighs. *Nothing suggests that I've grown any taller. Or that I've gotten bigger muscles. I should work out more. I'm so sick of being the shortest and skinniest boy in class.*

*I wish I were as tall as Dad. And I'm sure Dad wishes I were more like him too. That he had a sporty, outdoorsy son he could go orienteering and elk hunting with. But instead, he got me. A scrawny computer nerd. And Mille, of course, who is perfect*

...

Lukas goes up to his room, sits down at his desk and starts gaming.

After a while, Mille comes into Lukas's room and says:

– I'm bored.

Lukas mutes the microphone on his headset and says:

– Then find something to do.

– But I want to play with you, Mille says.



- I'm busy.
- What are you doing? Mille asks, leaning toward the screen.
- Playing, Lukas says.
- Can I try?
- No, you're too little, Lukas says. – It's rated 12+.
- Oh, that's not fair! Mille says. – I want to as well.
- Mum and Dad won't allow it. So you have to go now.
- Then I'm taking this with me, Mille says, grabbing the small game console

Lukas got from their grandparents for Christmas.

- Be careful with that!

Lukas takes a sip of soda and looks out the window. It's starting to get dark outside. In the small forest beyond, two deer are wandering around. They have brown fur, white tails and antlers on their heads. They sniff around in the leaves. *I should maybe tell Mille so she can see them, but I can't be bothered.*

Lukas puts the soda down and keeps gaming. Soon they will defeat the monsters. He just has to manage to stab the sword into its throat. Just then Mille opens the door and says:

- You have to put me to bed now.

Lukas mutes the microphone and says:

- I'm in the middle of a round.
- But I can't fall asleep unless someone reads to me, Mille says.
- You can read yourself.
- It's not the same, Mille says. – Mum or Dad *always* reads to me.
- But they're not here, Lukas says.
- I'll tell Mum if you don't. You promised Mum!
- Arrgh! Fine. I'll come soon.
- But it's really late, Mille says. – You were supposed to put me to bed ages ago.
- Put yourself to bed! Lukas says. – You're not a baby anymore either.
- But ...
- Close the door! Lukas says. – I said I'll come *soon*.



Reluctantly, Mille closes the door and leaves.

When the round is over, Lukas sends a message to Shad0w\_Striker: – Be right back.

Shad0w\_Striker replies with a thumbs up.

After Lukas has read one chapter in the book Mille picked out, he gets up from her bed and walks toward the door.

– Can't you read a little more? Mille asks. – I'm so curious about what will happen.

– No, you have to sleep now, Lukas says.

– But Mum and Dad always read two chapters. At least.

– I can read more tomorrow, Lukas says.

– But I want you to read NOW.

– Stop nagging, or I won't bother reading tomorrow, Lukas says and leaves the room. He slams the door hard behind him.

– That's so unfair! Mille shouts. – I'm telling Mum!

– Idiot!

Lukas feels anger bubbling inside him. Typical Mille, telling on him to Mum. Now he'll probably get a lecture: *You promised to take good care of Mille while we were away. You have to remember she's seven years younger than you. You must be kind and patient with her. She looks up to you so much.*

As if he cares. *He* wasn't the one who wished for a little sister. He goes into his room, sits down in front of the computer and takes a deep breath.

Shad0w\_Striker is luckily still online. Or Storm, as his real name is. He is 17 years old, three years older than Lukas. They have been gaming together for nearly two years. Even though they have never met or seen each other, Lukas feels that Storm is one of his best friends. Especially after Henri moved to Paris with his family. They had been best friends since kindergarten. At school they were often called "the twins." That was probably because they hung out together all the time, and because both of them had dark hair and green eyes. They promised each other they would always be best friends, no matter what happened. But then Henri's father got a new



job, and they moved. After that, Lukas has hardly heard from him, and he no longer has anyone to hang out with during recess.

Lukas puts on his headset and says:

– Okay, I’m back. We’ve got time for another round, right?

– Yeah, sure, Storm says.

– Good. Just had to put my little sister to bed. Mum and Dad are away for a few days, you see.

– Oh yeah? Storm says. – How old is she again?

– Seven. She’s so much younger than me, and we have *nothing* in common.

– Do you look alike?

– No, Lukas says. – If you searched for “golden child,” you’d see a picture of her. Light, curly hair. And big blue eyes. I’m more dark and mysterious.

– Ha-ha, Storm says. – Show me a picture of her.

Lukas uploads a picture from his phone.

– I see what you mean, Storm says. – She looks damn cute. *Those* curls.

– Yeah, real corkscrews, Lukas says.

– Why do they call them that?

– I think it’s because they’re like a spiral, just like a corkscrew, Lukas says.

– Ah, I get it, Storm says. – So your sister’s in second grade then?

– Yes, at the same school I went to, Lukas says.

– Bekkestua?

– Yeah, you’ve got a good memory, Lukas says. – Which primary school did you go to, anyway?

– A posh boy like you has probably never heard of it, Storm says. – Ha-ha. I grew up in the ghetto, you know.

– Don’t judge those of us from *Bærum*, we’re good people too.

Storm laughs and says:

– Yeah, yeah, there are always a few exceptions.

– By the way, want me to tell you something weird? Lukas says. – My sister has the exact same teacher and classroom I had. The only difference is that she’s insanely good at school, so the teacher loves her. Unlike me.



- I get that it must suck, Storm says. – I was never a school genius either. So I dropped out.
- Seriously, you mean that?! Lukas says.
- Yeah, it’s true! Storm says. – There are more important things than cramming and books, right? You have to find your own way in the chaos.
- What do your mum and dad say about that?
- Mum doesn’t care, Storm says. – And I’ve never even met my dad. So I’m the boss of my own life.
- So what are you going to do now? Lukas asks.
- A mate sorts out jobs for me, so everything will work out, Storm says. – And you know what? Soon I’ll have enough cash to move out on my own. Then I won’t have to live in a freaking shoebox with Mum. Then I can do whatever I want 24-7.
- That sounds good. My parents are pretty strict. That’s why it’s so great they’re away for a few days. Except that I have to babysit my little sister ... She’s so annoying. I wish I were an only child, like you.
- I get that, Storm says. – If you want, I can help you get rid of her?
- Ha-ha, I wish. That would make life sooo much easier.
- Yeah, right? Everything will work out, bro. I promise.

## Chapter 2

**Monday, 12 June**

Oslo Police District

**Armed Robbery: Oslo**

12 June 14:41

The police are searching for a man in his late teens in connection with the armed robbery of a delivery van in Bjørvika today at approximately 14:00. The suspect is armed with a knife and is considered dangerous. The stolen van is a white Volkswagen with registration number NV81752. The van belongs to a bakery.



Identifying marks: On both sides of the van, the text “Baker Frantzen” appears above a logo of a cinnamon pretzel.

The driver of the van was threatened with a knife and was forced to hand over the car keys and a white chef’s jacket. The man was not physically injured and is being attended to by medical personnel.

The suspect has light, short hair, blue eyes and is believed to be approximately 185 cm tall. He was wearing dark jeans and a black hoodie. It is possible that he is now wearing a white, long-sleeved chef’s jacket with black buttons.

The police ask any witnesses to come forward.

Updates to follow.

### Chapter 3

Lukas skips the last lesson. It’s P.E., and the teacher usually doesn’t register absences. He stops by the shop to buy food. Pasta bolognese tonight, with ready-made sauce from a jar. Simple and good. He buys ice cream for dessert to celebrate that Mille has walked home from school alone for the first time.

He cycles home with the shopping bag hanging from the handlebars and lets himself into the empty house. On the dresser by the entrance stands a framed target made of light brown cardboard. The centre is riddled with bullet holes. The target is from the first time Mille went to the shooting range with their father. When they came home, Dad had grinned proudly and called her a natural talent. *Unlike me*, Lukas thinks. *I only grazed the outer edge the few times I went along ...*

He carries the food into the kitchen and glances at the clock. There’s over an hour until Mille leaves school. *Perfect. That gives me time to game.*

On the fridge door hangs a poster for the theatre production he’s going to be in this autumn. His mother had pushed him to sign up for the theatre course. She thought



it would be good for him to do something other than sit in front of the computer and game. She had done theatre herself when she was young and went on and on about how great it was. Performing in front of people, on a stage. *Getting out of your comfort zone*, as she called it. At first he had refused. But when Mum threatened to limit his gaming time, he had agreed to try it for six months.

Surprisingly, he liked it. Now he had been part of it for two years and had made many new friends from other schools. The theatre was a place where he could be someone else for a while. But this winter everything was ruined. Mille wanted to join too. *The golden child*. And their parents thought it was a fantastic idea. Lukas was given the task of taking her to and from rehearsals. Of course Mille sang perfectly and charmed everyone, especially the director. So she got the lead role in the new play they were going to stage. As the freaking Annie herself. While he was just an orphan with no lines. Typical.

Mille's white smile and freckles beam at him from the poster on the fridge. The light curls have been replaced by a red wig. She is wearing a red dress with white lace. Next to her stands the director's cute, scruffy dog.

Lukas sighs. He can't be bothered looking at that poster every time he makes himself something to eat. He tears it down and stuffs it into a drawer.

## Chapter 4

Mille opens her eyes. It is dark around her. Her body is vibrating, and she hears a low humming sound. Where is she?

She sits up. Around her she can make out shelves of buns. Then she remembers. She is trapped in the van!

It is as if her body fills with cement; it is impossible to move. *I should have listened to Mum and never spoken to that man. What does he want with me? I want to go home, to Mum and Dad. And Lukas and Brumle. Someone has to come and save me!*

Suddenly the van swerves sharply. Mille is thrown to the side and bangs her head against a shelf.



Dazed, she sits up. Her eyes fill with tears; her head is ringing.

She curls herself into a ball and wraps her arms around her legs. Rocking back and forth. Her breathing is quick. *No one knows where I am. No one is coming to save me.*

Then she wipes away the tears. Straightens her back and takes a deep breath. *I have to manage on my own.*

She looks around. There are no windows, but a thin strip of light presses in through the back doors. She cannot see the man driving the van, so there must be a wall between them. *Then he probably won't see me escaping!*

She gets to her feet and tugs at the doors. They are locked. She searches for a button or a lever that can open them, but finds nothing.

Mille pounds her small fists against the doors and shouts, "Help!"

The man driving the van shouts:

– Shut up! No one can hear you anyway.

But Mille keeps banging and shouting. Again and again, until her hands are sore and burning.

She presses her ear against the door and listens. All she can hear is the rush of other cars. Maybe the noise from the traffic drowns out her voice? *I have to try to open the door!*

Mille turns and fumbles backwards in the dark. Searching for something she can use to force the door open. Maybe there is an iron bar or something heavy here? She squeezes in between the shelves and searches. The only thing she finds is a plastic cake server. Maybe she can use that?

She picks it up and goes back to the door. Grips the server tightly with both hands. Tries to wedge the tip into the gap between the two doors. But the server is too thick to get in; she can't get a hold.

Mille slams the cake server against the door and screams for help.

*BAM!*

Oh no, the cake server has snapped in two!



She throws it onto the floor and kicks hard at the door. First with one foot, then the other. *Ow, that hurts her toes!* She sits down on the floor and kicks with the soles of her feet while shouting:

– HELLO!?! CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?

Tears press behind her eyes. *What if I never get home again? Never see Mum and Dad again ...*

Mille thinks about how worried they will be when they realize that she is gone. How long will it take before Lukas understands that she has disappeared?

She keeps kicking and shouting for help. Her voice grows hoarse, her throat sore. Breathing is hard, as if her lungs are filled with stones. She tries to breathe calmly, using her stomach. Her breath makes a wheezing sound. *I need my inhaler!*

The sweet smell of buns presses in on her. It feels as if her stomach is about to turn inside out. She tries to breathe through her mouth.

Suddenly, the trembling becomes calmer. Has the car stopped? She hears voices and laughter outside. Maybe someone can finally hear her.

She slams against the doors and shouts for help. Presses her ear to the door and listens. She can still hear calm conversation. They can't have heard her — she needs to make more noise.

She looks around desperately. Then she gets an idea.

She slips in between the shelves of buns. Leans against the shelves. Pushes hard several times. At first they sway, then they topple over each other like dominoes.

*CRASH!*

They *must* have heard that!

She climbs over the shelves, pounds on the back doors, and screams:

–“HELP ME! I’M TRAPPED! CALL THE POLICE!”



## Chapter 5

Mille presses her ear against the cold van door. Her breathing is still wheezing. The vibrations in the van increase, and the voices outside grow more distant. Eventually they disappear completely.

The man driving the van shouts:

– I told you no one was going to hear you.

Then he turns on loud music. The bass thunders through the walls.

Mille sinks down onto the floor and rests her head in her hands. A lump grows in her throat. *Now no one can hear me at all.*

After a while, the van stops, and the doors are flung open. Mille squints against the bright light.

The man stands in front of her. His eyes are no longer smiling; they are sharp and hard. The chef's jacket has been replaced with a black hoodie.

– I want my mum! Mille says, her lower lip trembling.

– Shhh! he says, placing a finger over his mouth.

– And I need my inhaler, Mille says. – I have to go home. Otherwise you'll go to prison.

– Be quiet!

The man stares at her with a flashing look as he lifts his hoodie. A large knife is fastened to the brown leather belt. The sharp blade glints at her. Mille's eyes fill with tears. *What is he going to do to me?*

He lets the hoodie fall back down and says:

– Do you promise to keep quiet?

Mille swallows, bites her lip and nods.

– If you so much as make a sound, it'll be the last thing you do ... he says.

– Understood?

She nods.

The man pulls a black plastic zip tie from his pocket. Makes a loop and grabs one of her arms. He places the loop around her wrist and slips his own hand inside it. Then he tightens it firmly so that their hands are fastened together.

– There. Now you can't run away, he says and drags her out of the van.



## Chapter 6

Storm is not online, so Lukas plays solo. After a while, he goes down to the kitchen to start dinner. The house is still quiet. Hasn't Mille come home yet?

Lukas looks at the clock. 17:30. He had told Mille to leave school at 16:30. She should have been home ages ago, even if she dawdled on the way. Maybe she's in her room playing?

He goes up to Mille's room. It is dark and empty. Brumle lies on her pillow, with the duvet neatly folded over him. The other stuffed animals are stacked on the dresser.

Lukas checks by the entrance. Her white and pink trainers are not there. Nor is her backpack.

Then he notices something. Mille's asthma medicine is standing on the dresser, next to the note he wrote to her: "Remember to bring your medicine!" She has forgotten to take it with her.

Lukas feels a painful knot in his stomach. Even though it has been several years, he still remembers the night Mum woke him up in the middle of the night. She looked stressed and worried. Said he had to get up immediately, there wasn't time to change. They had to go to the hospital with Mille; she was having trouble breathing.

When Lukas came down to the entrance, Mille was sitting on Dad's lap. Her face was white, and she was gasping for air. A rasping sound came with every breath. Brumle had fallen onto the floor. Lukas picked him up and gave him to her. Mille held Brumle in her lap the entire way to the hospital.

The doctor found out that Mille had asthma and gave her medicine that would help. He said it was important that she always carried it with her. It could be dangerous if she couldn't breathe. Since then, she hasn't had any major attacks. The medicine works as it should.

This is the first time their parents have dared to go to the cabin without them. They believed Lukas was old enough to babysit. Lukas was supposed to make sure Mille always brought her medicine to school. She was to walk with her walking group in the morning, and Lukas had promised to walk her home from school. But Lukas had suggested that Mille be allowed to walk home alone today, so he could have time



to shop, cook and relax. It was supposed to be their secret. Mille thought it was exciting to walk home alone for the first time.

Lukas feels his heart beating faster. *I should have gotten up earlier and made sure she brought her inhaler. What if something has happened to Mille? Maybe she's had an asthma attack and can't breathe ... Or maybe she wasn't paying attention to the cars and has been hit. It's my fault if something has happened to her. And if Mum and Dad find out about this, they'll freak out.*

He looks out the window next to the front door. No sign of Mille. If only she had had a mobile phone, he could have called her. But their parents thought she was too young to have one — and too young to walk home alone from school ... *Damn it, why didn't I pick her up like I promised?*

Maybe she went home with her best friend, Aisha, after school? Or stopped at the playground on the way to climb on the new climbing frame?

He puts the inhaler in his pocket and slips on his new white trainers. Then he walks quickly out to look for her.

## Chapter 7

The man grips Mille's hand so that it looks as if they are holding hands. The zip tie tightens hard around her wrist. She glances up at him. He has a tattoo of an octopus on his neck. *It looks scary, as if it is going to attack me with its disgusting suction cups.*

They are in a street with tall buildings. It looks like apartments. Many have balconies with colourful flowers. The walls are decorated with pretty patterns. Just like where her grandmother lives, at Skillebekk. Maybe this is in Oslo too? *There must be someone here who can help me.*

– Come on, the man says and pulls Mille along.

They walk into a wide avenue. Tall trees stand in rows on both sides, with green leaves and clusters of white blossoms. Cars and buses rush past them. Mille looks around desperately. *No one understands that I'm being held captive. They probably just think I'm with my big brother.*



A little way ahead, a woman totters along in high heels. A small, fluffy dog walks on a leash beside her. She has her back turned and white earphones on. *If she turns around, I can try to signal that I need help. Please, turn around!*

Suddenly the woman stops. The dog circles and sniffs at the curb. Then it stands still, bends its hind legs and lowers its bottom.

The woman pulls a black plastic bag from her pocket. She crouches down and picks up the poop. Then she ties the bag and walks on, away from Mille. Finally she turns the corner and disappears.

The man yanks Mille's arm and whispers:

– Hurry up!

He pulls her toward a building of red brick. They stop in front of a black metal gate. The gate has sharp spikes at the top, like arrowheads. The man throws anxious glances around him. He takes a small key fob from his pocket and holds it against a square box on the wall. There is a beep, and the gate opens.

They enter a courtyard with bike racks and picnic tables. There seem to be many apartments around the courtyard. Mille looks around; surely someone must be watching and able to help her? But the courtyard and the windows are empty.

They walk toward a green metal door that is almost hidden behind a climbing rose. The paint is peeling off in large flakes. A rusty sign hangs in the middle of the door.

*If we go in there, it will be even harder to escape. I have to run now!*

Carefully, Mille tries to slip her hand out of the tight zip tie. She twists and turns it, trying to make her hand as small as possible. But it is stuck.

The man looks down at her and says:

– I know what you're trying to do. Just forget it! You're not going anywhere.

Then he takes a key from his pocket and unlocks the door. It creaks as he opens it. They go inside, and he locks the door behind them.

It smells like a shut-in cellar. They walk down a corridor and stop in front of a door with a metal grille. Behind the grille it is dark.

The man presses a button on the wall. A shrill sound rings out. Something moves behind the grille. Suddenly a room appears. *It is a lift.*



The lift doors slide open, and they step inside. The man presses a button, and the lift descends into the darkness.

## Chapter 8

Oslo Police District

### **Armed Robbery: Oslo – update**

12 June 17:36

The stolen van was last observed at Skøyen at around 17:00. It is a white Volkswagen with registration number NV81752. Identifying marks: On both sides of the van, the text “Baker Frantzen” appears above a logo of a cinnamon pretzel. The suspect is a man in his late teens. The man is armed and considered dangerous. He has light, short hair, blue eyes and is approximately 185 cm tall.

The police ask any witnesses to come forward.

Updates to follow.

It is the longest lift ride Mille has ever been on. The lift vibrates and sinks deeper and deeper underground. It is completely dark around them. *Where are we going? And why have they captured me?*

On the lift door, an old map has been taped up. Different tunnels are drawn crossing back and forth. It looks like a labyrinth. Mille sees that there are three emergency exits. She tries to store an image of the map in her mind. *If I manage to escape, I need to know how to get out.*

When the lift door opens, it is as if she is looking at a dark wall. It smells sour and damp, like the cave she found in Østmarka when she was orienteering with her father. Her lungs tighten; it is hard to breathe.

- I need my inhaler, Mille says. – Otherwise I’ll get very sick.
- Shut up! the man says.



They step out of the lift. It is completely silent around them. The man presses a button on the wall. A cold light flickers in the ceiling before spreading through the room.

Mille looks around with her mouth open. The room is large and elongated. The walls and ceiling have been carved out of stone. The ceiling arches high above her. *It must be higher than ten primary schools stacked on top of each other. At least.*

– Come! the man says and pulls her along.

The echo of his voice dances along the walls.

They walk along something that looks like a road. At the very edge on both sides, a yellow stripe has been painted; below it is darkness. Mille stretches her neck and looks down. There are railway tracks there.

Now she understands. She is standing on a platform at a train station. But there are no people or trains here now.

A warm spark ignites inside her. *Maybe a train will come. And someone will see me and realise that I'm being held captive. Then they'll surely call the police, and they'll come here and save me.*

They continue along the platform. Gravel crunches beneath their feet. Mille slows down to use as much time as possible. *A train has to come soon ...*

In several places, stones have fallen from the ceiling and gathered in piles on the platform. They pass dusty wooden crates filled with old ceiling lamps. Beside them lie large rolls of electrical cables and barbed wire.

Mille looks down into the tracks. Then she notices something that smothers the spark.

The rails end in the middle of the track. The station cannot be in use; it is completely deserted.

*No trains come here. Or any people who can help me.*



## Chapter 9

At the end of the platform there is a door. A stack of crates stands beside it. They stop in front of the door, and the man pulls a bunch of keys from his pocket. Just then Mille hears a click, and the door swings open.

In the doorway stands a man in a green hoodie and trainers. He is slightly shorter than the one who captured Mille, but they look the same age. One of his cheeks is covered in deep scars that criss-cross in all directions. He has dark, stiff hair sticking out in every direction, like an old broom. Above his brown eyes are thick black eyebrows.

– I saw you coming, the man says in a deep, rasping voice.

He runs his hand through his hair. Mille flinches and stares at him with her mouth open. *What is wrong with his hand?! It isn't a human hand. It is made of metal; it looks like a robot hand.*

The man with the metal hand stares at her curiously. He raises the hand to her face and strokes the cold metal across her cheek.

Mille stands completely still. She barely dares to breathe.

He grins, waves the metal hand and says:

– Are you afraid of *this*?

The man holding her laughs and says:

– Yes, she *should* be, Ahmad.

Ahmad turns to the other man, claps him on the back and says:

– Well done, Storm. We'll get a lot for that one. You know Nordic looks are popular.

Ahmad flicks a light switch beside the door. Darkness falls behind them. Then he turns and walks into the room.

Storm follows and drags Mille with him. He locks the door and slips the key into his pocket.

Ahmad sits down at a long desk in the middle of the room. It has drawers and cabinets. Several computer monitors stand on the desktop.

The screens are turned away, so Mille cannot see what they show. Next to the monitors are two torches.



She looks around the room. *I have to find a way to escape!*

Water trickles down the stone walls and makes dripping sounds. Metal pipes are bolted to the walls and run criss-cross.

In one corner of the room there is a fridge. Next to it is a stack of empty energy drink cans. Along one wall lies a mattress with a crumpled sleeping bag and a yellow-stained pillow without a cover.

There is only one other door. *I wonder what is behind that door. Maybe it's a way out? If he removes the zip tie from my hand, I can try to open the door. Without them seeing me.*

Storm drags her over to the desk where Ahmad is sitting. Then she sees it. Several of the monitors show images of tunnels and doors. Two of the screens show places Mille recognises: the lift and the train platform.

It feels as if she is sinking into sticky mud. *They have put up cameras everywhere. If I manage to escape, they will surely find me and capture me again.*

Storm looks at Ahmad and says:

– Should we do it now?

– No, we'll wait a bit. There's something else I have to do first. Just lock her in.

Storm nods and leads Mille to the other door. He unlocks it and opens it. Inside is a small room without windows.

Storm pulls out the sharp knife fastened to his belt.

Mille gasps for breath. *Help! What is he going to do?*

– Stand still, he says and brings the knife to her wrist.

He cuts through the tight plastic zip tie that fastened their wrists together.

Mille rubs her sore wrist. Tries to breathe calmly, but her asthma makes it difficult.

Then Storm shoves her into the room, slams the door and locks it with a click.



## Chapter 10

Mille looks around the room. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling. The walls appear to be built of thick concrete. A mattress lies on the floor with a scruffy blanket. Beside it stands a plastic bottle containing something that looks like water. She feels how thirsty she is. *Should I dare drink from the bottle? What if it's a trap and the water is poisoned?*

She unscrews the cap of the bottle and sniffs the opening. No strange smell. She dips her finger into the bottle and licks it. It tastes like water.

*I'll take the chance.*

Mille lifts the bottle to her lips and gulps it down.

Then she sits down on the mattress and stares blankly ahead. Her body feels heavy, as if someone has pulled out the plug and all her energy has drained away.

*I hope Lukas has called the police, or Mum and Dad. That they're looking for me. But what if Lukas hasn't realised that I'm gone. And he's just sitting in front of his stupid computer gaming. Maybe he thinks I'm mad at him because we argued a little yesterday. Or that I'm staying over at a friend's house.*

*What if it takes many days before they realise I'm gone. What if no one finds me. And Mum and Dad never find out what happened to me ...*

Mille presses her eyelids shut. Opens them and takes a deep breath. She takes another sip from the water bottle.

Then she slowly gets to her feet and walks back and forth across the room. *I mustn't give up! I have to get home to Mum and Dad. They're probably looking for me, and I have to help. I have to try to escape.*

She scans the room for something she can use. Maybe there is something sharp she can pick the lock with? She has seen people do that in films. Or maybe there is a secret exit from here? But the only thing she finds is a white hair tie with a pink plastic heart on it. She fastens it around her wrist.

She goes to the door and peers through the keyhole. The two men are standing and talking to each other. Her breathing rasps in her chest.

Mille knocks on the door and shouts:

– Hello! I need my inhaler, or I could die. It's true!



The men shake their heads and snicker. Then Storm says to Ahmad:

– I can sort out an inhaler later today. I know someone who sells.

– Nice, says Ahmad. Then he crouches down and opens a drawer in the desk.

When he stands up again, he hands a thick envelope to Storm and says:

– Here’s what I owe you.

Storm grins as he looks inside the envelope and says:

– Oooh nice, thanks. Now I finally have enough cash to buy my dream place.

Ahmad smiles and says:

– You deserve it. Does your mum know you’re planning to move?

– Nope, and she’s probably going to freak out, says Storm.

– I’m so sick of looking after her. And clearing away her empty bottles and her mess. I mean, it should be the other way round. That she looks after me.

Ahmad nods and says:

– It’ll be good for you to move out, bro. I haven’t regretted it for a second. Now I don’t have Mum and Dad hanging over me all the time. Always wanting to know what I’m doing and who I’m hanging out with. They freaked out after my brother died ...

Ahmad takes a deep breath and continues:

– But now it’s like everything is falling into place. That what happened wasn’t in vain, you know. What we’re doing actually means something.

– Yeah, it’s crazy to think about how many kids we’ve already helped, says Storm.

– And this is just the beginning, says Ahmad, gesturing with his arms. – It’s going to be big. We’re going to force the politicians to do something and change the world. Soon everyone will know who we are.

Storm nods eagerly and says:

– I know. We’re the new Robin Hood, man. And I’m proud to be part of this.

Ahmad places the metal hand on Storm’s shoulder and says:

– I’m so glad to have you with me, bro. I could never have done this without you.

– I’m glad you believed in me, says Storm. – I won’t let you down.



– Never doubted you, says Ahmad with a smile. He nods towards Mille and says:

– Good job with the new girl you found, by the way. We're going to get a crazy amount of money for her. How did you manage it this time?

Storm smiles crookedly and says:

– I know her big brother, Lukas. He tipped me off about her. He was sick of her nagging and wanted to get rid of her. It's a win-win situation, right?

Mille's eyes widen. She presses her hands over her mouth so she won't scream: *You're lying, you horrible person! My big brother would NEVER do something like that to me!*

Storm continues:

– I nicked a bakery van and lured her inside. Little kids, man. They're so incredibly naive and stupid. Believe everything you say.

Ahmad smiles and says:

– You're insanely creative, bro. Soon we'll start phase two, and then you can train the others.

The two men do a handshake and say something Mille cannot hear. Then Storm disappears out the door.

Mille sinks down onto the floor with her back against the door. She pulls her legs in and wraps her arms tightly around them. Her breathing is even heavier now. As if she is underwater and has run out of air. Tears press behind her eyes.

*It can't be true. It must be a misunderstanding. Lukas loves me, doesn't he? But how did Storm know my brother's name is Lukas?*

The room spins, as if she has been on a carousel. She sniffs and closes her eyes.

*What if it's true. That they are friends, and that Lukas doesn't want me as his little sister anymore. That he wants to get rid of me. Just like he did with his old stuffed animals and toys that he sold online. As if they had never meant anything to him. I could never, ever do something like that to Brumle! How can he do something so cruel to me? Is it because I sometimes borrow his things? Or because I wanted him to read more yesterday? I thought families always loved each other, no matter what happens.*



Tears roll down her cheeks. She wipes them away with her sleeve.

Suddenly it feels like an icy snake slithers down her spine.

*If Lukas got Storm to do this, then he hasn't told Mum and Dad that I'm gone. Or called the police. Then no one is looking for me. I am completely, completely alone.*

## Chapter 11

Lukas walks quickly along the route Mille takes to school. He looks around, but sees no sign of her. The playground and the new climbing frame are empty.

When he reaches the school, he goes to the nearest door and yanks at it. It is locked. He tries all the doors at the front and back, but they are closed. He places his hands against his head, leans towards the cold windows and peers inside. The lights are off in the classrooms and in the staff room. The staff have gone home.

He looks around the schoolyard. A few younger boys are playing football; otherwise it is empty. *Maybe she went home with Aisha? I'll go there and check.*

Lukas runs up the winding, steep hill behind the school. He tastes blood in his mouth and his pulse pounds. *Shit, this is worse than P.E. at school.*

When he reaches her house, Aisha is sitting on the grass in the garden playing with the new puppy. It jumps wildly around with its tail wagging and bites at her trouser leg. Lukas leans breathlessly against the white picket fence and asks:

– Is Mille here?

– No, says Aisha, raising her eyebrows. – You're red in the face. Is something wrong?

– Erm ... I don't know, says Lukas. – Do you remember when you saw her last?

– She was at school when Mum picked me up, says Aisha.

– When was that?

– I think it was four o'clock.

– Okay, maybe she's come home now, says Lukas. – I'll go back and check. But if you see her, can you tell her to go home?

– Yes, I will.



With quick steps Lukas heads home. His stomach tightens. What if Mille still hasn't come home? Maybe she's been hit by a car and injured, and is at the hospital?

He pulls out his phone and scrolls through the news:

*"Experts warn of extreme tick summer. This is why YOU should get vaccinated."*

*"Hospital bombed in Sudan overnight. At least 20 people killed, including several children."*

*"This is what the summer weather will be like."*

There are no reports of traffic accidents, but there is a small note about a stolen bakery van. Must have been a hungry thief, Lukas thinks, just like the robbers in *When the Robbers Came to Cardamom Town*.

He keeps scrolling. A framed picture of a sweet, fair-haired girl shines up at him. Lukas recognises her immediately. There have been many news reports about her over the past year. The girl has thick blonde hair and smiles shyly at the camera. In front of the picture, candles are lit, and there is a pile of teddy bears and roses. The headline reads: *"Lilja must never be forgotten."*

Lukas remembers that Lilja was kidnapped and found murdered by a pond in Nordmarka a year ago. She was only eleven years old, four years older than Mille.

It feels as if his breath gets stuck in his throat. *What if something like that happens to Mille ... No, I mustn't think like that.*

He clicks on the article. It says:

Lilja's fate is unfortunately not the only one. Several children have disappeared in the Oslo area over the past year. The parents are distraught. For the sake of the ongoing investigation, the police cannot comment on the case. An anonymous police source says they suspect a connection between the cases.

Further down, Embla, Lilja's older sister, is interviewed. She is fourteen, the same age as him. She looks seriously into the camera. Her long, messy hair makes it look as if



she has been on a week-long camping trip without access to water or a hairbrush. She has the same blue-grey eyes as Lilja.

Another photo shows Embla holding a microphone. He recognises the large yellow brick building behind her. It is the Parliament. In front of her stand hundreds of people holding roses and burning torches. Beneath the picture it says:

Embla took the initiative for the torchlight procession and memorial for Lilja. She is the daughter of the well-known Member of Parliament Karin Solbakken. Today she stood outside her mother's workplace and delivered a powerful speech:

“Today it has been one year since Lilja was found murdered. I will not give up until those who did this to Lilja are imprisoned. So they can never do something like this to others. That is why it is important that Lilja is never forgotten. And to those of you out there who know something about the case: Please tell the police, or me, what you know.”

A stabbing pain spreads in his chest, as if a small animal with sharp claws is crawling around inside. Lukas thinks about Storm and what they talked about yesterday while gaming. Storm said he could help him get rid of his little sister. *It was a joke, wasn't it?! What if he meant it and has taken Mille. That she is hurt or something even worse ... I have to find out whether he has anything to do with her disappearance.*

He kicks off his trainers and shouts:

– Mille, are you here?

He gets no answer.

After quickly checking the house, he sits down breathlessly at his desk. Then he turns on the computer.

Shad0w\_Striker is online.



## Chapter 12

Lukas sends Storm a message: “Game?”

Storm replies with a thumbs up.

Lukas puts on his headphones.

– Hey, I’m heading to training soon, says Storm. – But I’ve got time for a quick round.

– Uh ... I just wanted to ask something, says Lukas, feeling his heart pound. – This might sound a bit strange, but my little sister is missing. You don’t happen to know where she is?

– What do you take me for? says Storm.

Lukas exhales in relief. *That’s what I thought. I was just being paranoid. Mille is probably at a friend’s and forgot the time. Soon I’ll hear the front door open and her bag hitting the floor. Then she’ll sprint upstairs, open my door and ask: “What’s for dinner?”*

Storm laughs and says:

– But seriously. Now your problem is solved, bro.

– What do you mean?! says Lukas, freezing.

– You wanted to get rid of her, didn’t you? says Storm.

– WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?! Are you INSANE!?! I didn’t *mean* it!

– Then you shouldn’t have said it.

– I was joking! says Lukas. – What’s wrong with you?! I thought we were friends.

Storm goes quiet.

Lukas feels a lump growing in his throat.

– Is she ... hurt?

– No, says Storm. – Not that I know of, at least.

– You have to bring her home. Now!

– That’s not possible. The wheels are already in motion.

– But there HAS to be something you can do!

– Sorry, bro. I’m just a small piece in a big game. My job is done.

– Where is she? And who has her?



– Let’s just say: it’s better for you not to know. Safer.

– I *have to* find her.

– No. You have to forget this. Seriously.

– Are you stupid!?! I can’t forget my little sister!

Tears press behind his eyes.

– You don’t have a choice. You have to move on.

– I can’t just move on. She’s my sister. How can you do this?! She’s just a child.

– You’ll never understand this, growing up in your fucking happiness bubble.

This is bigger than you think. Sometimes someone has to be sacrificed to help many others.

– What do you mean sacrificed?!

– I know this sucks, but it’s for a good cause. I promise.

– What are you talking about? How can this be for a good cause? I have to get her back. You *have to* help me! Please. I promise I won’t tell anyone what you’ve done.

– It’s not smart to talk about this here, in case someone’s listening. I don’t want to get locked up.

– Then can we meet somewhere and talk? Just the two of us?

– No. That’s not happening.

– I need my sister back. Please help me. We’re friends, aren’t we? If something happens to Mille, my life is over.

– It’s too late, bro.

– If you don’t help me, I’ll go to the police.

– You do NOT snitch, thunders Storm. – That would go badly. Very badly. For you and your sister. Yeah, you saw what happened to that other girl, Lilja ... You’ve read about her in the papers, right? That didn’t have a happy ending, let’s just say.

Images of the murdered girl, Lilja, flicker in Lukas’s mind.

– Was it y-you who ... killed her?

– No, says Storm. – But I know who did. And he’s not someone you joke with. They don’t call him ‘Iron Hand’ for nothing ...

– Is he the one who has Mille?



– Just forget it. I'll never rat him out. He's like a brother to me, and I owe him everything. Stay away. I'm done with you.

Storm logs off.

## Chapter 13

Nausea surges up from his stomach like a volcanic eruption he cannot stop. Lukas rushes to the toilet and drops to his knees. His body trembles as his stomach heaves.

His eyes fill with tears. He wipes his mouth with toilet paper and sits down on the bathroom floor with his head in his hands. His thoughts spin like a tornado. *What have I done?! Mille has been kidnapped, and it's my fault. How could Storm do this to me? I thought we were friends. How can someone be that sick in the head?*

*I'm in a fucking nightmare. If only I had a time machine, I would travel back and change everything. I would give anything to have her here right now. I hope she knows how much I love her.*

Lukas gets up, rinses his mouth with water from the tap and goes into his room. He paces back and forth across the floor. His breathing is quick.

*Mille must be scared and alone now. Maybe she's hurt ... Poor, poor Mille. It's too horrible to think about. Nothing must happen to her. Even though she's insanely annoying, I love her so much. She's my little sister.*

He sinks down onto the bed. It feels as if the walls are closing in on him. He forces himself to breathe slowly. What should he do? Should he call their parents? They will be furious. If something happens to Mille, they will hate him. Forever. They will never be able to look at him again without thinking about what he has done. He has to try to fix this on his own. There *must* be something he can do.

Should he call the police? If he does, the police will surely contact his parents. Then they will find out everything. And what if the police arrest him and he ends up in prison? No, wait, he's only fourteen, so he probably can't be punished like that? But maybe he can be punished in another way? Maybe his parents will never want anything to do with him again, and he will have to move into foster care?



*I wish I had never met Storm. God, how naive and stupid I've been! I should never have told him about Mille. I even showed him a picture of her.*

*What do I actually know about Storm? I don't even know his last name. Or where he lives. I guess he's from the east side somewhere, he did say he grew up in the 'ghetto'. But it is impossible to know exactly where that is.*

Lukas goes into Mille's room. He sits down on her bed. He picks up Brumle, breathes in the sweet scent and hugs him tightly. He looks at the pile of stuffed animals sitting neatly on her dresser. They stare at him with accusing dark glass eyes. As if they know what he has done.

Lukas thinks about the night before. That Mille begged him to read longer, and he couldn't be bothered. The last thing he said to her was that she was an idiot. Why didn't he spend more time reading to her? If he hadn't gamed more with Storm, this would never have happened. Mille would be sitting on the living room floor now, playing with Brumle and the other stuffed animals.

Lukas thinks about the girl he read about, Lilja, who was killed. It must not end like that for Mille! He has to find a way to save her. And it's urgent. He knows from crime series that it's important to find a kidnapped child before 48 hours have passed, otherwise the chance that the child is still alive decreases ...

*No, that's too horrible a thought. I have to block it out. I have to save Mille. But it's important that I keep track of how long she's been gone, so I have an overview.*

He looks at his phone. The time is 18:35. If Mille left school at 16:30 as they agreed, that means she has already been gone for two hours ... He starts the timer on his phone.

Lukas gently places Brumle back under the duvet. He goes into his own room and sits down in front of the computer. Then he opens the chat with Shad0w\_Striker. He has to try to find out more about Storm.

*Maybe I'll find some clues that can help me save Mille. And afterwards I can give all the evidence to the police. Storm is not going to get away with this. He has to be locked up forever, so he never, ever does something like this again.*



## Chapter 14

Lukas scrolls back through his chat with Storm. To when they first started getting to know each other better.

He skims quickly, then stops and reads:

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Game?

*KongLukas*: I'm in

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Nice

Only sick and messed-up people around me, so I need a break haha

*KongLukas*: What do you mean?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: *I'm at Sunnås doing rehab after an accident*

*KongLukas*: Oh, the hospital?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Yep

*KongLukas*: What kind of accident?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Crashed on a motorcycle

Pretty bad too

*KongLukas*: Shit! What happened?!

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Borrowed a mate's bike and skidded out in a turn

*KongLukas*: Damn!

That doesn't sound good

How did it go?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Still alive as you can see haha

The leg didn't do so well

*KongLukas*: Okay?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Had to fucking amputate from the knee down

*KongLukas*: Oh shit!

Are you serious??

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Nope

Wish I was joking

*KongLukas*: Sounds awful

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Yeah, I've been pretty low

But I'm like the octopus, you know



Smart, always find a way out of the impossible

*KongLukas:* So how are you doing now?

*Shad0w\_Striker:* Still in some pain, but it's getting better

The stump has healed and I've got a prosthetic

You know, a new leg

So now I'm half robot, like Terminator haha

*KongLukas:* What's it like walking with it?

*Shad0w\_Striker:* Weird at first of course

But it's not like those old pirate wooden legs, LOL

It's surprisingly well made, next-level shit

I limp a bit, but whatever

Just looks gangster, right

*KongLukas:* I'm sure it suits you

How long will you be there?

*Shad0w\_Striker:* No idea

They say they need to see how I progress

*KongLukas:* Must be really tough

*Shad0w\_Striker:* Yep

But luckily I've got a real broski as a roommate now

He's the same age as me

*KongLukas:* That's good

*Shad0w\_Striker:* He's been through some insane shit

What I've been through is nothing

Their house was blown to pieces by a fucking bomb attack

He had to amputate his arm

*KongLukas:* Oh shit

*Shad0w\_Striker:* And that's not the worst part

His little brother died from the injuries

If they'd lived in Norway and got proper hospital treatment, he would've survived

*KongLukas:* That's so unfair!

*Shad0w\_Striker:* I know



They barely have any medicine or equipment in that country

It's just chaos

That's why they had to flee here

He's made me realise how lucky I am

And that someone has to do something

The system is totally fucked, man

Lukas looks up from the screen. He gets an idea ...

He searches for the phone number for Sunnås Hospital and dials it. After a few rings, he hears a friendly female voice:

– Sunnås Hospital, how may I help you?

– Hi, um ... My name is Lukas Martinsen. A friend of mine, Storm, was admitted here last year, and it's important that I get in touch with him. But I didn't save his number. And I don't remember his last name. Can you help me find his phone number?

– Unfortunately, we cannot disclose patient information.

– Please, it's very important that I reach him.

– I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to give out that kind of information.

– Okay ... I understand.

– I hope you manage to find his number some other way.

– Me too. Thank you.

They end the call.

Lukas sighs and continues scrolling. He sees that Storm comes home from the hospital. Back to school. Skipping classes. Complaining about his mother.

He stops at a picture Storm sent, of a black jacket. On the back is a drawing of a hand holding a black machine gun. Behind the hand is the globe, in blue and green.

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Cool jacket, right?

*KongLukas*: Sick as hell

Where did you buy it?

*Shad0w\_Striker*: Got it from a mate

You know the guy from the hospital



He's so damn G

*KongLukas: Nicee*

*Shad0w\_Striker: Gotta bounce soon*

Training with the boys

*KongLukas: What do you train?*

*Shad0w\_Striker: Strength*

*KongLukas: Cool, where?*

*Shad0w\_Striker: Not far from Oslo City*

Lots of hot girls at City

So we usually hang there after

You know where that is, posh boy?

*KongLukas: Haha, very funny*

Lukas remembers something. When he spoke to Storm earlier, he said he was going to training. Maybe he's hanging around Oslo City afterwards, like he usually does? If Lukas goes there, he might be able to find Storm. But will he manage it? He has no idea what he looks like. *It's worth a try. It's the only lead I have.*

He checks the Ruter app. The next metro leaves in nine minutes. He buys a ticket and sprints out the door.

## Chapter 15

Oslo Police District

**Armed robbery: Oslo – update**

12 June 20:23

The stolen van has been recovered at Frogner. The police are still searching for the suspect who carried out the armed robbery. The police ask any witnesses to come forward.

Updates to follow.



Lukas stands at the main entrance to Oslo City. His hands are sweaty. The shops are still open. Several groups of teenagers stream in and out through the open doors. Many gather in the square outside. They talk, look at each other's phones and laugh.

Lukas walks over to the pink food truck standing at the side of the square. He buys a Belgian waffle and stands beside the truck. Pretends to be busy eating and waiting for a friend. He doesn't want Storm to suspect that he's spying on him.

After finishing the waffle, he pulls out his phone. He keeps nervously checking the stopwatch ticking upwards. Mille has already been gone for four hours.

He lets his gaze sweep over all the people in the square in front of him. *This is a insanely terrible plan. If I manage to find him, what am I going to do? I can't just walk up and threaten him into telling me where Mille is. Then I'll probably get beaten up by Storm and his mates.*

Suddenly his gaze locks onto something, and he jolts. A boy with light hair stands with his back turned, talking to some friends. He is wearing a black jacket. On the back is a drawing of a hand holding a gun, with a globe in the background. The jacket is exactly like the one Storm sent a picture of. He has a headset around his neck and a black gym bag over his shoulder. It *could* be Storm.

Lukas wipes his sweaty hands on his trousers. Then he carefully lifts his phone and takes a couple of pictures of the boy from behind.

One of the other boys whistles at some girls walking past. The girls turn, giggle and continue on.

The boy in the black jacket raises his right arm towards the friend beside him. They slap palms and slide into a handshake. Then he greets the others in the group the same way, one by one. Afterwards he walks alone across the square, towards Central Station. He limps on one leg.

Lukas feels his pulse pounding. *It has to be Storm. Everything matches.*

He clenches his fists and takes a deep breath.

*I have to follow him. This is my only chance to find Mille.*



## Chapter 16

Storm crosses the street, and Lukas hurries after him. At the steps in front of Oslo Central Station, Storm stops in front of a man with pale skin and messy hair. They exchange a handshake and talk. Storm pulls out his phone, types something, then holds it out towards the man. The man nods and takes something white and shiny from his pocket.

Suddenly Lukas sees what it is. An inhaler. *That can't be a coincidence. He's going to bring it to Mille. That must mean she's alive — and that Storm knows where she is. I can't lose him.*

Storm gives the man a short nod. Then he puts on his headset and crosses the street. Lukas rushes after him. Storm stops at the tram stop and glances up at the screen showing arrival times.

Lukas stands a few metres away. Pretends to read something on his phone while taking pictures of Storm. He is almost a head taller than Lukas. Blue eyes and short, light hair. His nose is slightly crooked — maybe it's been broken?

The sun peeks out between the clouds. Storm takes off his jacket and stuffs it into his bag. You can see his muscles under the black T-shirt. He's wearing a thick silver chain that glints in the sunlight. On the left side of his neck there is a tattoo of an octopus. The tentacles curl upward along his throat.

A blue tram stops at the platform. People swarm in and out through the doors, making it hard for Lukas to keep track of Storm. *What if he gets on without me seeing and disappears?*

Lukas moves cautiously closer. Storm stands still, staring down at his phone.

The next tram is number 15 to Majorstuen. When it stops, Storm looks up and takes a few steps toward it. He positions himself outside one of the middle carriages.

Lukas walks to the rear carriage. The doors slide open, and people stream out.

Storm steps onto the tram. Lukas slips in at the back.

There's a beeping sound, then the doors close. The tram shudders and glides forward.

All the seats are taken, and the aisle is packed with people. Lukas squeezes between them toward the middle carriage, searching for Storm. He can't find him.



*What if he changed his mind? Or noticed I was following him and jumped off?*

A couple stand up to get off at the next stop. Then he sees Storm. He's sitting with his back turned on one of the grey seats, staring down at his phone.

Lukas stands a few metres away. The tram jerks in a turn, and he grabs one of the yellow handrails to keep from falling.

The tram winds westward. Past Nationaltheatret and the Royal Palace. There's no sign that Storm is getting off.

At Solli plass, a dark-clothed man and woman enter the tram. They hold up white ID cards hanging around their necks and say loudly, "Ticket inspection." Lukas' heart starts pounding.

*Oh no! I forgot to buy a new ticket. The old one has probably expired. And if I buy one now, they'll know I've been fare dodging.*

Lukas sees the male inspector stop in front of Storm. Storm holds out his phone. The inspector nods and moves on.

The female inspector comes straight toward Lukas. She stops in front of him and says:

– Hello, ticket inspection. May I see your ticket?

Heat floods Lukas' cheeks. He pulls out his phone and opens the ticket app. He forces a surprised expression and blurts out:

– Oh, sorry! I thought my ticket was still valid. I just took the metro from Bekkestua.

– May I see the expired ticket?

Lukas shows it to her.

The inspector nods, studies him carefully and asks:

– How old are you?

– Fourteen.

– Okay, can you give me your date of birth, name and address?

Lukas does as she says. The inspector types the information into her phone.

They approach another stop. Lukas notices Storm standing up and moving toward the door. *Oh no, he's getting off. I can't lose him!*

A bell chimes over the speakers, and a woman's voice says, "Elisenberg."



Lukas turns to the inspector and says:

- I *need* to get off here.
- You can't get off until I'm finished, she says, continuing to type.

The tram stops. The doors slowly slide open, and Storm steps off.

Lukas looks pleadingly at the inspector and says:

- Please, can I go now? It's important.
- Soon, the inspector says. "I see this is the first time you've been caught

without a valid ticket."

- Yes, and I didn't mean to dodge. I promise.

The doors begin to beep. *They're about to close.*

Sweat trickles under his arms.

– Okay, the inspector says. "A letter will be sent home to your parents informing them that you travelled without a valid ticket. Here is your receipt."

She hands him a slip of paper, which he stuffs into his pocket. Then she smiles and says:

- You may get off now. Remember your ticket next time.
- Okay, thanks!

The doors begin sliding shut. Lukas slips out of the tram just before they close.

He looks desperately to the right and left, searching for Storm.

The only people he sees are a man pushing a stroller and a little girl cycling beside him.

*No, no, no! This can't be happening! Storm is gone. How am I supposed to find Mille now?*

## Chapter 17

Lukas runs down the street. Maybe Storm turned into one of the side streets?

He runs past apartment buildings, restaurants and shops. Peers in through windows. But he doesn't see Storm anywhere. Maybe he went the other way?

He sprints back and runs in the opposite direction. He tastes blood in his mouth and feels his pulse pounding. Runs back and forth.



At last he sinks down onto a bench beneath one of the chestnut trees on Bygdøy allé. *I'll never find him ...*

His hands are shaking, and his back is drenched in sweat. He looks at his phone. It's been five hours since Mille was kidnapped. What is he supposed to do now? He can't risk going to the police. Then Mille could be hurt — or something even worse ...

*Beep, beep!* His phone vibrates in his hand.

**Mum**

21:32

Hi Lukas, how are things at home? It's taking a bit longer to paint than we thought, but it's turning out really nice!

Not quite sure which day we'll be back, is that okay?

**Lukas**

21:35

It's fine

Stay as long as you like

*His eyes sting. I hate lying. Especially to Mum and Dad. But I have no choice. I have to save Mille. But how am I going to manage that, all alone? I wish there were someone I could talk to. Someone who could support me and give me advice.*

Suddenly he thinks of the interview he read in the newspaper, with the older sister of the girl who was killed. She has been in a similar situation and knows what it feels like when your little sister is kidnapped. In the paper she asked that anyone who knew anything should contact the police — or her. And Storm said earlier that the man who killed Lilja is called *Iron Hand*. That could be useful information for her. And maybe she knows something that can help him find Mille?

He takes out his phone and finds the article. Her name is Embla Oddvinsdóttir. *Unusual name — that should make her easy to find.*

After a quick search he finds her profile and sends a message:



**Lukas**

21:49

Hi, we don't know each other, but I have something important to tell you. It concerns your little sister. It's urgent. Can we meet tomorrow morning? You can choose the time and place.

**Embla**

22:03

Okay, I can meet you before school tomorrow. Meet me at Java on St. Hanshaugen at 07:30. If you're a creep, I'll beat you up. I have a blue belt in karate.

## Chapter 18

Mille lies on the mattress, staring up at the peeling ceiling. Her eyelids are heavy, but she can't sleep. Her thoughts swirl and turn into webs.

*I want to go home to Mum and Dad! What are the bad men going to do to me? Will I get hurt? Are they going to kill me?*

Tears well up. She sniffs and turns onto her side.

Then she notices something scratched into the wall. It looks like letters.

She sits up and reads aloud: "Lilja was here."

There must have been another girl trapped in this room. *It was probably her hair tie that I found. If Lilja managed to scratch something into the wall, she must have had something sharp. Maybe it's still here and I can use it to escape.*

She gets up and searches the room again. Runs her hands along the walls. Lies down on the floor and peers around. But finds nothing.

Then she stands in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips and lets her gaze sweep across it. Suddenly she remembers one place she hasn't looked: under the mattress. She runs over and lifts it up. There's nothing on the floor.

She flips the mattress over. Crawls across it on all fours. There's a small tear in the cover. She slips her fingers into the gap. She feels the lumpy foam. There's something small and hard inside. She pulls it out.



It's a thin hairpin. The kind they use in her hair at the theatre when they fasten the red Annie wig. Maybe she can use it to pick the lock? She tucks the hairpin into her sock. *Now the men won't find it if they check my pockets.*

She goes to the door and peers through the keyhole. Ahmad, the man with the metal hand, is alone in the room. He's sitting in front of the computer with his face turned toward her. She has to wait until he falls asleep. Then she will try to pick the lock.

She sits down on the mattress. Her breathing has grown heavier, her lungs wheezing. *What if I can't breathe and suffocate?*

Mille wraps her arms around herself, rocking gently back and forth. Tries to breathe calmly.

Voices outside.

Heavy footsteps approaching. She bites her lip.

A key turns. The door opens.

Storm stands in the doorway and says:

– Come here!

Mille remains seated.

– Now! Storm says, drilling his gaze into her.

She sniffs. Slowly she stands up and walks toward him.

Storm pulls something white from his pocket and holds it out to her.

– Here.

Then she sees what it is. An inhaler!

She grabs it, pulls off the cap and takes two deep breaths in quick succession.

*Pfff. Pfff.*

Her lungs calm down and fill with air. *Finally!*

She slips the inhaler into her pocket.

Storm takes something from his other pocket and hands it to her. *Yum!*

*Chocolate.*

Mille snatches the chocolate, tears off the wrapper and begins stuffing it into her mouth.

While she eats, Storm grabs her arm and leads her into the room outside.



Ahmad is setting up a black metal stand with three legs. On top is a flat square that looks like a screen. He plugs it into a white extension cord and presses a small remote control. Bright light floods out of the square.

Mille shrinks back. *It's a spotlight. What are they going to do to me?*

Ahmad looks at Storm and says:

– Get her ready.

– Okay, Storm says, nodding.

Storm picks up a white piece of fabric draped over a chair, hands it to Mille and says:

– Put this on.

Reluctantly she takes it, her hands trembling. It's a sleeveless dress made of thin lace fabric. Mille shakes her head.

– I don't want to.

– You *have* to, Storm says.

She juts out her chin, plants her hands on her hips and says:

– You can't make me.

– Can't I? he says, lifting his hoodie so the sharp knife is visible.

Mille feels her heart pounding. She swallows and takes a deep breath.

Then she turns her back to Storm. She takes off her pink fluffy sweater and pulls on the dress over her blue trousers. The fine hairs on her arms stand on end.

– Take off the trousers too, Storm says.

Mille turns toward Storm, but remains standing still. Storm places his hand on the knife and steps closer.

She backs away, tears pressing behind her eyes. Reluctantly she unzips and pulls off the blue trousers. They fall in a crumpled heap on the floor.

– And the shoes and socks, Storm says.

– But I'm cold! she sniffs.

He sighs.

– Fine. You can keep them on.

Then he holds out a hairbrush and says:

– Brush your hair.



She does as he says. It tugs painfully as she pulls the knots free.

Ahmad comes over to them. He is holding something black in one hand.

Suddenly Mille sees what it is. A camera. With his other hand he adjusts the spotlight.

The harsh light floods over Mille, and she squints.

Ahmad positions himself in front of her, lifts the camera to his face and says:

– Look into the camera.

Mille's lower lip trembles. She stares at him defiantly and says:

– I'm definitely *not* going to smile.

– That doesn't matter, Ahmad says.

Then he steps closer and starts snapping pictures.

## Chapter 19

Ahmad moves slowly around Mille while taking pictures. Mille looks into the camera lens. *It looks like the eye of a jungle animal about to swallow me.*

After a while he takes a break.

*Ping!* Storm looks at his phone and grimaces. He types quickly. Then he sighs and says:

– It's more nagging from my mum. I have to answer, but I don't have any signal, so I'll go up for a bit. I'll be right back.

– Okay, Ahmad says, nodding.

Storm walks toward the door and mutters:

– God, it's going to be so damn good to move out soon ...

He pulls out the key ring and unlocks the door. Then he steps out and lets it slide slowly shut behind him.

*He forgot to lock the door,* Mille thinks.

She turns toward the surveillance screens on the desk. Storm walks along the platform, takes the lift up, then disappears.

Ahmad turns to Mille and says:

– We'll take a few more pictures.

He continues snapping, moving closer and closer.



– What do you need all those pictures for? Mille asks.

Ahmad doesn't answer.

She continues:

– Aren't you done soon?

Suddenly Ahmad straightens his back, places a finger over his mouth and says:

– Shhh!

He stands completely still, listening.

In the distance there is a pounding, rhythmic sound. The sound slowly grows louder.

Ahmad's eyes widen and he whispers:

– Someone's coming!

He wraps his hard metal hand around Mille's neck and says:

– Now you must be completely quiet, or else ...

Then he grabs her arm, drags her toward the desk and leans forward toward the screens.

Mille rises onto her toes to see the screens better. It's dark on the platform and no one is in the lift. But the rhythmic sound grows louder.

Suddenly she sees something. She claps her hands over her mouth.

Faint beams of light emerge from the tunnel.

The light grows brighter and brighter. Finally a train glides out of the tunnel. *At last someone is coming.*

The train stops. Two dark shadows move on the platform. Suddenly the ceiling lights flood the room.

Mille looks closer at the train. At the front is a yellow crane. Four red, elongated containers are stacked on the wagons behind. Each container is big enough to fit a car inside.

Two men in blue overalls walk along the platform. Mille's heart beats faster. *Maybe they can save me! Or call the police. I have to find a way to escape.*

There is an older man and a younger one. The older man reminds Mille of her grandfather, only with an even bigger belly. He points right and left, explaining something to the younger man.



Ahmad stares at the screens, swearing under his breath. He releases Mille for a moment and says: – Stand completely still!

He fishes out his phone, types and mutters:

– Argh! I’ve lost signal again.

He types again and again.

On the screen Mille sees the men return to the train. Then they start lifting the containers onto the platform with the crane. They line them up in a row. *Only one container left, then they’re finished. Then they’ll leave.*

Ahmad looks at his phone and exclaims:

– Finally!

Then he says into the phone:

– Storm, there are people here. Wait outside until I say so! I’ve got control of the girl.

*Now’s my chance*, Mille thinks.

She makes wheezing sounds, looks at Ahmad and says:

– It’s hard to breathe. I’m just going to get my inhaler. It’s in my trousers.

Ahmad nods, sits down in the chair in front of the desk and stares intensely at the screen.

Mille walks to the trousers, takes the inhaler from the pocket and takes a couple of puffs.

*Pfff. Pfff.*

She stuffs the inhaler into her sock. Then she throws a quick glance at Ahmad. He is still watching the screen.

In a lightning-fast movement Mille spins around and bolts for the door.

Ahmad roars, “STOP!”

Mille hears the chair crashing over and rapid footsteps behind her.

She throws herself at the door handle, pushes it open and slips out. She slams it shut and looks desperately around for something to block it.

Beside the door stands the stack of crates. She leans against them with her whole body. The crates sway before toppling in front of the door with a crash.

Ahmad pounds on the door and shouts:



– Open the door! I mean it. Or you’ll regret it!

## Chapter 20

Mille sprints along the platform toward the train. Her breath tears at her lungs. She lifts her dress with both hands to run faster. She can’t see the men anywhere.

Suddenly it grows darker. Someone has switched off the lights. The only light comes from the train headlights. *Oh no, they’re about to leave. They mustn’t leave me!*

– HELP ME!, Mille screams.

A pounding sound spreads through the space. They have started the train.

– STOP! I’M CAPTURED!

Slowly the train begins to glide forward, away from Mille. She feels like crying, but keeps shouting for help.

The train picks up speed. Finally it disappears into the dark tunnel and is gone.

Mille is left alone, surrounded by darkness. *What am I going to do now? If I take the lift, Storm will probably catch me. He’s probably standing right outside waiting.*

Suddenly the ceiling lights flicker before flooding the room again. Someone has turned the lights back on.

Behind her she hears footsteps. *Ahmad must have managed to open the door. I have to find somewhere to hide. Fast, fast, fast!*

She looks desperately around. The containers.

Mille runs as fast as she can toward them. There is a gap between two of the containers; she squeezes herself inside. Her thin body barely fits.

Rapid footsteps approach.

Ahmad’s deep, rasping voice says:

– Storm, get down here now! The girl has escaped, just like that other brat. We have to find her!

Mille hears the shrill sound of the lift. Someone running, and Storm shouting breathlessly:

– What happened?!



Ahmad explains how Mille managed to escape, then says:

– You search here, I'll go that way. She can't have gone far.

Mille peers out between the containers. She hears crunching footsteps. A shadow moves. She catches a glimpse of short, light hair. *It's Storm.*

She holds her breath. The footsteps stop.

Her heart pounds. *What if he looks in here? I'm easy to spot in this white dress.*

The footsteps come closer.

She squeezes herself further in. Out of the gap, behind the containers. She crawls forward. Suddenly one foot gets caught on something. She looks down. *Oh no, my shoe is caught in barbed wire!*

She tries to kick her foot free, but it only tangles worse. Carefully she tries to lift the barbed wire with her hands, but it cuts deep into her fingertips. She lets go and clenches her teeth to avoid screaming in pain. Drops of blood fall and hit her shoes. She licks the blood from her fingers and tastes metal.

The footsteps are right beside her now.

Mille loosens the shoelace and gently slips off the shoe. Then she stands completely still and listens. Her breathing is rasping and loud. What if he hears it? Should she use the inhaler? No, that makes noise too. She concentrates on breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

The footsteps move to the right side of the containers, nearest the lift. She slips out to the left, onto the open platform. It feels strange walking with only one shoe, so she takes off the other as well. *It's better to walk in socks; I'll be quieter. I have to find a new hiding place.*

Her gaze sweeps quickly around the room and stops at the large stack of railway tracks in the unfinished track bed. She looks anxiously around. She can't see Storm; he must be behind the containers. And Ahmad is nowhere to be seen either.

Mille sits down on the yellow-painted edge of the platform. It's a long way down. She grips tightly and lowers herself carefully. Finally she lets go. She drops into the track bed and lands on her feet. The sharp, dark stones press through her socks into her feet. She presses her hands over her mouth to avoid making a sound.



Then she runs to the stack of railway tracks. Crawls underneath them and peers out through the gaps. *Here I'm invisible. He'll never find me.*

Storm runs toward the lift, glaring right and left. In one hand he holds the knife. In the other he holds his phone.

– I'll check outside, he says.

Then he disappears and there is a shrill sound. *He takes the lift. Only Ahmad is down here now, and I can't hear his footsteps.*

Mille closes her eyes and tries to picture the map in the lift that showed the emergency exits. *There was one exit in the tunnel, where the train just disappeared. I have to get there now!*

## Chapter 21

Mille crawls out from beneath the stack of railway tracks and sneaks along the track bed, hidden by the platform above. The sharp stones make it impossible to run.

Eventually she reaches the dark tunnel. Two thin fluorescent tubes run along either side of the track, casting a cold light. The light flickers; it's hard to see. On one side of the track there is a high concrete ledge, almost like a narrow pavement. *Maybe I'll find the exit if I walk there?*

Mille climbs onto a large stone, swings her leg up onto the ledge and hauls herself up. Then she walks along the narrow edge. She lets her hands slide along the wall, searching for a door or hatch. But the only thing she feels is rough rock.

She moves farther and farther in. Suddenly she feels something flat and cold beneath her hands. She holds her breath and stops. It's a metal door. On the outside she can make out a small green sign showing a man running through an open door, with an arrow. Her heart somersaults. *I've found the emergency exit!*

Mille presses the button to unlock the door, then tries to open it. But the door is so heavy she can't pull it open. *Is it only adults who can open it?*

She pushes and slams her whole body against it. Finally the door creaks open with a loud squeal. She slips through the opening; the door slams shut hard behind her. *I hope Ahmad didn't hear that!*



Mille squints against the bright ceiling light and looks around. She is in a long, narrow corridor.

*At last I can get out of here.*

She sprints forward, upward, inward. Finally she reaches a metal staircase spiraling upward. She runs up two steps at a time. Her chest burns and wheezes. Now and then she stops to take a puff from the inhaler.

At the top of the stairs there is a grey metal door with a white and green emergency exit sign. She opens it and steps outside.

Warm summer air and a sweet scent hit her. She stands on an open asphalt lot where cars and scooters are parked. On one side of the lot grow bushes with small white flowers.

*I did it, all by myself! Soon I'll be home with Mum and Dad! But first I have to find someone who can help me, because I don't even know where I am.*

Mille runs between the cars and out into the street. It has started to grow dark. She scans right and left. There are no people or cars in the streets, and everything is silent.

She sprints forward and reaches a wide road. There are tram tracks there, but she can't see any trams. Where should she go now?

On the other side of the road stands a tall black wrought-iron fence. Old-fashioned lamps mounted on top cast a warm glow. There is a wide ornamental gate. Mille smiles. *I know where I am! It's the entrance to Frogner Park. The one with all the statues that are so fun to climb. Then it's not far home!*

Behind her she hears the sound of rapid footsteps. She slows down and turns around.

At the end of the street she can make out a man running along the pavement. Mille stops. *It looks like a jogger. Maybe he has a phone I can borrow? I remember Mum's number.*

The jogger comes closer. He's wearing dark clothes. Then she sees it. He's limping on one leg. Mille's eyes widen and cold spreads through her body. *Oh no, it's Storm! He's found me!*

Storm roars:



– *Come here! Now!*

Mille takes a deep breath and sprints across the road toward the park. *It's usually packed with people there. There must be someone who can help me.*

## Chapter 22

Lukas lies in bed, staring at his phone. Outside it is dark and silent. His eyes are dry and sore. He searches for news articles about the children who have disappeared in the Oslo area over the past year, and about Lilja's murder. *What if it's the same people who kidnapped Mille? Maybe there's information here that can help me find her? The police must have some idea who's behind it.*

He scrolls and reads. But in every article it says that “the police are reluctant to share information about the case due to the ongoing investigation.”

The house is empty and silent except for the creaking sounds of the old wooden floor.

Lukas puts down his phone and closes his eyes. *I have to try to sleep.*

He twists from side to side, trying to breathe calmly. Images of Mille's face flicker before his eyes. She looks scared and sad. He feels a painful tug in his stomach. *Will I ever see her again? What if we never find out what happened to her? Never know whether she's alive or dead. Always have to live with the uncertainty and wonder if she's in pain. Mum and Dad will be crushed with grief.*

He thinks about the first time he saw Mille. It was at the hospital, the day after she was born. He and Dad went there together. Mum lay pale in the hospital bed in a strange hospital gown, with Mille sleeping on her stomach. Mille lay curled up like a little ball with her bottom in the air. Her back moved as she breathed. Lukas had brought a gift for her, which he carefully placed beside her. It was a small stuffed toy he had chosen himself in the shop. A little dog with light-brown fur and dark-brown ears. Brumle.

Lukas still remembers how proud he was when Mille woke up and he was allowed to hold her in his lap. He gently stroked her soft little head and said in a quiet voice:



– Hi there. I’m your big brother. I’ll take good care of you.

It stings behind his eyelids. *Why couldn’t I take better care of her? Why wasn’t I with her more? How could everything go so wrong?*

He opens his eyes, throws off the duvet and pads down to the kitchen. He takes the theatre poster out of the drawer and hangs it back up on the fridge. He lets his index finger trace over Mille’s freckled cheeks. *If I manage to save you, I’ll be a much better big brother. I promise.*

## Chapter 23

Mille runs through the open wrought-iron gate. Along a path lined with tall trees casting long, dark shadows. Her heart pounds and she tastes blood in her mouth. There are holes in her socks; the asphalt burns beneath her feet. She runs onto the grass and looks around desperately. *There is no one here. The park is empty.*

Rapid footsteps approach. She doesn’t dare turn around to look behind her. *I have to keep running so he doesn’t catch me again.*

Then she remembers something. Once when she was here with her family, she played hide-and-seek with Lukas. She found the perfect hiding place, where he never managed to find her. *I think I can find it again.*

She runs toward the bridge with all the statues. Then left, down toward the small pond. A flock of pigeons bursts into the air. *I hope Storm didn’t see that and realise where I’m hiding.*

Mille crawls into some bushes with large pink flowers. She sits down and looks through the leaves, up at the bridge with all the statues. She recognises the back of the statue of the little angry boy clenching his fists and stamping one foot.

Rapid footsteps approach; someone runs onto the bridge. It’s Storm. He stops, switches on the light on his phone and shines it downward. Straight toward where she is sitting.

Mille hardly dares breathe. She curls into a ball and sits completely still.

The cold evening air makes her shiver. Her nose tingles. *I must not sneeze!*

She presses her hands over her nose. After a while the tingling fades.



Storm turns and walks back across the bridge.

Mille exhales in relief. *He probably thinks I ran somewhere else. I have to get out of here before he comes back.*

She carefully crawls out of the bush. Just then something dark darts across her leg. It is sharp and painful, like claws. She screams, then bites her lip and falls silent.

A fat rat stares at her with black, shiny eyes before scurrying back into the bush. *Oh no, what if Storm heard my scream!*

Mille looks up at the bridge. It is empty. And completely silent.

Carefully she stands and sneaks upward toward the bridge. Then she sprints toward the park exit, along the tall trees. *I have to find a taxi that can drive me home! Even if I don't have money, Lukas can pay when we arrive. Or maybe I should get the taxi to take me to the police, so they can put the bad men in prison.*

Suddenly she sees a shadow beside her. Two hands shoot forward and grab her.

– You're not getting away now, Storm says.

## Chapter 24

Storm lifts the sharp blade toward Mille's throat and says:

– Now you do exactly as I say, or it'll be the last thing you ever do ...

Understand?

Mille nods as her eyes fill with tears. *I was so close to getting home to Mum and Dad!*

Storm lowers the knife. He takes off his hoodie and drapes it over his arm so the knife is hidden. Then he grabs Mille with his other hand and pulls her along.

They leave the large wrought-iron gate and step out onto the wide street. Then they weave through deserted streets.

As they round a corner, a man walks toward them. Beside him hops a small puppy with fluffy brown fur. It tugs at its collar. Mille thinks of Aisha and her puppy and feels a painful stab in her stomach. *What if I never see her again? That we can never play together or have sleepovers ever again.*



The man walks slowly toward them. He is wearing checkered pyjama trousers and a dressing gown and yawns loudly.

Mille tries to catch his eye. *I have to show him with my eyes that I need help.*

Storm whispers to Mille:

– Remember what I said ...

Mille nods.

The man with the dog comes closer. A wrinkle forms on his forehead when he sees Mille's torn and dirty socks. Her big toe sticks out of the left one. He looks at her with concern and says:

– You're awfully late to be out. Did you run out without shoes?

Mille tries to say "*Help me!*" with her eyes.

Storm presses the sharp tip of the knife against her ribs. She lowers her head and stares at the ground.

The man continues:

– Is everything all right, little one?

Mille doesn't dare look up. *I hope he understands that something is wrong, and that he calls the police.*

Storm clears his throat and replies:

– Yeah, everything's fine. My little sister didn't want to go to bed and ran away from home. She has a diagnosis that makes her a bit ... uh ... different. It's not easy for our parents, so I try to help out as much as I can.

– I understand, the man says. – That's good that you found her and are taking her safely home.

Mille glances up carefully. The man looks at his puppy and says:

– Come on, little woof, time for bed.

Then he turns and walks away, the puppy bouncing beside him. With every step he takes, Mille's heart sinks closer to the asphalt.

When Storm and Mille return to the station, Storm says to Ahmad:

– I found her in the end.

– Good! Ahmad says. Then he points to one of the metal pipes on the wall and says:



– Tie her up there.

Storm nods. He opens one of the desk drawers and takes out a black plastic zip tie. Then he drags Mille over to the metal pipe and fastens one of her arms to it. The tie is so tight it cuts into her skin. Storm looks at her with a cold expression and says:

– There. Now it's impossible for you to escape, you little brat. I get why your brother got sick of you.

## Chapter 25

**Tuesday, 13 June**

It is still night, but it is already growing lighter outside. The birds are chirping so loudly that Lukas has to close the bedroom window. A few cars drive past. *People have started heading to work, and I haven't slept a single second. I have to sleep a little and clear my head. Otherwise I'll never figure out how to save Mille.*

Lukas goes into Mille's room, lies down in her bed and pulls the duvet over himself. He takes Brumle into the crook of his arm, just the way Mille always does.

When he was younger, he also always slept with his own teddy bear, Sirius, in bed. He couldn't fall asleep without it, and he remembers the total disaster the one time he forgot to bring Sirius to the cabin. He had to borrow an old stuffed animal his uncle used to have, which lay in a cardboard box in the attic.

It feels as if he is small again, and completely, completely alone. Lukas presses the soft fur against his face and murmurs:

– Brumle, I *have to* get her home again. Please help me!

His eyes fill with tears. They roll down his cheek and make Brumle's fur wet.

Lukas wipes away the tears and lies on his back. He forces his eyes shut and tries to breathe calmly. At last it feels as if he is falling backward, and his body finally relaxes.

He wakes with a start, and instantly remembers everything. Mille is kidnapped. Nausea spreads through his stomach.



Lukas looks at his phone. There are two hours until he is supposed to meet Embla, Lilja's big sister.

He gets up, takes a shower and forces himself to eat a crispbread. He sends a message to his teacher saying he has become ill and needs to stay home for a few days.

Then something occurs to him. *If Mille doesn't show up at school, her teacher will send a message to Mum and Dad. Then they'll get worried and call me. Even if I lie and say she's sick, they'll hear in my voice that something is wrong. And what will I say if they ask to speak to Mille?*

He sends a message to her teacher:

**Lukas**

05:34

I am home alone with Mille for a few days, and she has become ill. She therefore needs to stay home today. I think it will take a few days before she recovers. I have informed Mum and Dad, so you don't need to message them.

Best regards,

Lukas

## Chapter 26

There are no available tables at the café on St. Hanshaugen when Lukas arrives, so he sits on a bar stool by the window. The sweet smell of freshly baked goods presses into his nose. He tries to swallow the nausea.

He still hasn't received a reply from Mille's teacher. What if she doesn't see the message and calls my parents?

Lukas checks his phone: it has been 15 hours since Mille was kidnapped. His hands are cold. *How am I going to save her in time?*

He bites hard on his index fingernail while staring out the window.

*Beep, beep.*



The phone vibrates. He has received a message from Mille's teacher: "Thank you for letting me know, Lukas. Please wish Mille a speedy recovery from me! She is lucky to have a kind big brother who looks after her."

When Lukas reads the last part of the message, it feels as if a cannonball hits him in the stomach. His breath trembles and he wants to cry. *I am the worst big brother in the world.*

He stares out the window. After a while he sees Embla striding along the street. He recognises her from the newspaper photos.

She is wearing a bright yellow, flowing shirt. A brown bag hangs over her shoulder. The wind grabs her messy blonde hair and blows it into her face. Embla pushes it away with an irritated movement.

When she enters the café, her gaze sweeps over the guests. Lukas gives a small wave when their eyes meet. He points to the empty stool beside him.

Embla walks over. She tilts her head while looking at him with her blue-grey eyes. Lukas feels his cheeks grow warm. It is as if she sees straight through him. And she is much prettier than he thought from the newspaper pictures.

As she sits down, she says with a crooked smile:

– I'll have a latte.

Lukas nods, says "Okay" and joins the queue. He shifts impatiently while keeping an eye on the clock. At last it is his turn, and he orders a latte and a cola.

When Lukas sits down beside Embla, the strong sunlight hits her face. She has dark circles under her eyes.

Embla cups the mug with both hands. She blows on the coffee, takes a small sip and says:

– So, what was it you wanted to tell me?

– Promise me this stays between us, okay?

– That depends a bit on what you're about to say.

– Yeah, I understand ... Lukas takes a deep breath and says:

– It's about my little sister, Mille. I can hardly believe it, but ... she's been kidnapped.

Embla's eyes widen.



– Oh no!

Lukas swallows and continues:

– The one who did it says she'll be killed if I go to the police or tell anyone else.

– Shit! What happened?

Lukas tells her everything. About gaming with Shad0w\_Striker, whose real name is Storm. The careless comment about Mille. That he showed him a picture of her. And that she was gone the next day.

He shows her the photos he secretly took of Storm the night before.

Lukas takes a sip of his cola, looks seriously at Embla and says:

– Storm said something I thought you should know ...

– Okay, what?

– He said he knew who killed Lilja, and that he's called "Iron Hand."

Embla inhales sharply and whispers:

– Iron Hand ... So *that's* what he's called. Did he say anything else about him?

– No, not really. Just that he was like a brother to him.

Embla sighs.

– At least it's a *small* lead. Now I know his nickname.

– It's so insane, Lukas says. – Who does something like that to a little girl?

– Yeah, it's unimaginable. That something like that could happen to *my* Lilja ...

Embla swallows and looks down into her coffee.

They fall silent. Then Lukas asks:

– How did Lilja disappear, exactly?

Embla takes a sip of coffee before answering:

– It started with Lilja posting pictures of herself and a bunch of dance videos.

She got loads of likes and followers. The police went through all her chats. A few days before she disappeared, a man contacted her. He wrote that he was a photographer and that Lilja was so pretty she should be a model. He said he could take photos of her for free and share them with people he knew in the industry. Then she would be discovered. Guaranteed.

– Shit, did she *believe* him?



– Yes, unfortunately. He was extremely manipulative and sent her a link to a fake website with pictures of other models. He said he had taken the photos himself, but the police found out they were either stolen from the internet or AI-generated. The day before she disappeared, Lilja agreed to meet him. He wrote that he had a photo studio near where we live, and that she could come there after school. And after that, she was gone ...

Embla stares blankly ahead, her face pale.

Lukas wonders whether he should dare to pat her shoulder to comfort her, but is afraid it will be awkward.

He thinks about what he has seen in crime series, that it is important to find a kidnapped person within 48 hours. And that Mille has already been gone for 15 hours.

Lukas takes a deep breath and says:

– How long did it take before Lilja was ... um ... found?

– A little over a week. The police believe she was killed when she tried to escape. She was found in Nordmarka, but they think she was killed somewhere else. And that they dumped her there as if she were rubbish they wanted to get rid of.

Lukas slowly shakes his head.

– What happened to your sister is horrible ... I'm really sorry for you and your family. It must be one of the worst things anyone can experience.

– Yes. It's like a nightmare that never ends.

– I *have to* find Mille before it's too late, Lukas says.

Embla straightens her back.

– I want to help you.

– You mean that?

– Yes. Maybe we can find “Iron Hand” too.

– But it could be dangerous ...

– I get that, Einstein, Embla says with a crooked smile. – But the people behind this have to be stopped so they never do anything like this again.



## Chapter 27

Embla and Lukas decide to skip school. They go to Embla's place. She is staying with her father this week, and he is at work.

The flat is at the top of an old apartment building. The ceiling is slanted and supported by thick wooden beams. Light streams in through tall, small-paned windows. A glass door leads out to a small balcony. The sound of traffic hums from outside.

Photographs in black frames hang on the walls. Lukas steps closer to look. There are pictures of volcanoes spewing smoke and glowing lava. Barren plains. Mountains with roaring waterfalls. Black sand beaches with towering cliffs. And several photographs of old trains. Some have chimneys releasing smoke, just like in old Western films.

Embla nods toward the pictures and says:

– Dad took those. He brings his camera everywhere. And he loves taking photos when we're in Iceland. He grew up there.

– Cool, Lukas says. – Do you have family there?

– Yep. Grandparents. And an uncle and aunt. So we go there every summer.

A shadow crosses Embla's face.

– Or ... we *did*. Before Lilja died. And Mum and Dad got divorced.

Lukas doesn't know what to say, so he stays quiet.

Embla walks over to the kitchen counter and asks if he wants tea. She switches on the kettle. Lukas says yes, thanks, and follows her.

On the fridge, a newspaper clipping is held up by two magnets. Lukas walks over and reads it. The headline says: "*The Forgotten Station.*" The article is written by Oddvin Jónsson and is about a railway station built in Oslo a long time ago. It is called Elisenberg Station and lies at Frogner, between Skøyen and Nationaltheatret. The station was almost finished in 1980 and cost 100 million kroner to build, but it was never put into use.

There is a photo of an old red-brick building. Beneath it reads: "The station lies 30 metres below this building, at Elisenbergveien 37, on Oslo's most exclusive west side."



He studies the picture. *Something about the place looks familiar.* Outside the building hangs a sign with a curly 'V'. Across the road grow tall birch trees. Then he remembers. It is near the restaurant where they celebrated Grandma's 80th birthday. It was right after the Easter holidays, and they were all there. Grandma, Mum and Dad, Mille and him. *It feels like an eternity ago.*

Lukas still remembers how annoyed he was that Mille talked so much with the waiter. She was allowed into the kitchen to see how the chefs worked. She came bubbling out again and told them everything afterwards. *Why did I get so irritated about that?*

Embla comes over with two cups of tea.

– Dad wrote that article, she says, nodding toward the clipping. – He's a total train nerd and works as a conductor. He's obsessed with that station. It's apparently called the "ghost station."

They sit down at the kitchen table. Lukas takes a sip of tea and says:

– We *have to* find out where Mille is. But how are we going to manage that?

– I have no idea, Embla says. – But it seems like Storm and the one called The Iron Hand know each other.

– Maybe we can find something about them by searching online?

They take out their phones and begin typing. The only results that appear for "Iron Hand" are about old armour, films and books. When they search for "Storm," articles about bad weather, destroyed buildings and how storms form pop up.

Lukas sighs and says:

– There's probably no information about them on the open internet. People like that probably use the dark web to hide what they're doing.

– I've heard a lot about it, but *what* actually is it?

– It's a secret part of the internet that you need a special browser to access.

Everything is anonymous, so what you write and do can't be traced back to you.

Embla frowns.

– Hmm ... so if he uses the dark web, it won't be easy to find him.

Lukas nods and bites his nail.



– You said the man who took Lilja made a fake website. Maybe we can find some clues by looking at that? Do you have the link?

– No, the site has been taken down. But I took some screenshots first. Hang on.

Embla scrolls before holding out her phone so Lukas can see. He leans closer and catches a sweet scent from her hair.

The images show a website with beautiful women and men. They look like professional models, posing in strange positions and staring provocatively into the camera. Embla scrolls further and points.

– Look here, he even added his contact information. He calls himself photographer Tom Krogh and has an email address and everything. The name is probably fake, but maybe he’s “Iron Hand”? And what if he’s behind Mille’s kidnapping too?

– Yeah, that *could* be, Lukas says. – But haven’t the police managed to trace him?

– No, they’ve tried, but haven’t succeeded yet. Everything was created by an anonymous user.

They sip their tea and stare at the pictures. Suddenly Embla sets her cup down hard on the table.

– I just got an idea! We send a message to his email address. I can pretend I want to be a model. If he replies, we can try to find out more about him.

– But we don’t even know if the email is still in use, Lukas says.

– It doesn’t hurt to try. Maybe we’ll get a reply.

Lukas frowns.

– But what if he realises it’s a trap? That we know what he’s done? Then it could get dangerous. For us and for Mille.

– I’ll manage to trick him. I’m really good at lying, Embla says, getting to her feet. – But first you have to take some model photos of me.

– Uh ... okay?!

– To convince him I want to be a model, he needs to see pictures of me. And I have to look damn good so he’ll want to reply. I’ll go change. Get ready!



## Chapter 28

Embla goes into her bedroom and closes the door. She mutters irritably to herself while drawers and cupboard doors slam.

After a while she comes out. She is wearing a tight green dress that highlights her slender figure. Lukas notices her defined arm muscles. *Maybe she wasn't joking when she said she has a blue belt in karate?*

She walks barefoot, holding a pair of black high heels in her hands. Her hair is no longer nearly as messy. She has dark eyelashes, and her lips are glossy and pink. *Shit, she could actually be a model.*

Embla tosses the shoes onto the floor, stands in front of Lukas with her hands on her hips and says:

– Well? What do you think?

Lukas feels his cheeks grow warm.

– Uh ...

*Jeez, this is so awkward. Why can't I say something smart? She looks amazing, but I can't say that.*

Embla looks down at the dress.

– This isn't me at all. I inherited it from Mum; it had become too tight for her.

But it looks kind of model-like, doesn't it?

– Uh ... yeah, I guess. I don't know anything about that stuff.

– Neither do I. Ready to take pictures?

Lukas swallows, nods and waves his phone.

Embla puts on the high heels and lets her gaze sweep across the flat. It stops at the balcony door.

– Let's take the pictures out there.

With unsteady steps she walks onto the balcony and mutters:

– I *hate* high heels.

Lukas follows.

The balcony is just large enough for two chairs and a small round table. An ashtray with old cigarette butts stands on the table. Flower boxes with red and white flowers hang along the railing. A green plastic watering can stands in one corner.



Lukas looks over the edge and feels a drop in his stomach. Cars and buses rush along the road below. On the other side are apartment buildings and a small park with tall trees.

Embla stands with her back against the railing.

– Does it look okay here?

Lukas nods and lifts his phone.

Embla tries to imitate some of the poses the models made in the pictures. She pulls a face and laughs.

Then she composes herself. Flips her hair and stares straight into the camera.

Lukas snaps away. The sun's rays hit her hair and give the pictures a soft glow. As if a filter had been used.

She tilts her head, blinks and pouts. Pulls the neckline of the dress slightly down while looking at Lukas.

Lukas tries not to think about how beautiful she is. *I have to focus. Mille is in danger.*

He takes a deep breath and snaps more pictures. Full-length shots and portraits.

At last Embla says:

– Now we send the pictures!

She goes into the living room and kicks off the shoes. They land on the floor with a thud.

Lukas and Embla sit down at the kitchen table in front of the computer. Embla creates a new email account under a fake name.

– It seems like they're looking for young girls, Embla says. – Both Lilja and Mille were several years younger than me. So I'll pretend I'm ... hmm, let's see ...

12. People often think I'm younger than I am.

She prepares the message, attaches some pictures and clicks "Send."

From: Synnøve Hansen

13 June 10:36

To: [Fotograf.Krogh@gmail.com](mailto:Fotograf.Krogh@gmail.com)

Hi!

I really want to become a model and need to have some professional photos



taken. A while ago I saw some cool pictures you had taken. Can you take some like that of me?

Synnøve, 12 years old

## Chapter 29

Lukas paces back and forth around the flat. *How long does it take before we get a reply from the photographer? If we get one at all ...*

He looks at the clock, turns to Embla and says:

– I can't just sit here and wait. I *have to* do something more. I'm going down to Oslo City to look for Storm. Maybe he hangs out there during the day too, now that he's dropped out of school.

– I'm coming with you! Embla says.

Lukas and Embla stand beside the pink food truck outside the entrance to Oslo City. They scan the square. Many adults hurry past them with serious, stressed expressions.

– We have to make sure Storm doesn't recognise me, Lukas says. – He might have seen that I followed him yesterday.

Embla nods, then suddenly exclaims:

– I know what we'll do! We'll pretend we're a couple.

– Uh ...

Lukas feels his cheeks grow hot. He has never had a girlfriend and has no idea what to do. But Embla apparently does. She steps close to him. She is a little shorter than Lukas and quickly leans her head against his shoulder, smiling teasingly at him. He feels her warmth through his T-shirt and his palms grow sweaty. He quickly wipes them on his trousers. *I hope she doesn't notice.*

Embla takes out her phone and pretends to show Lukas something while they keep an eye out for Storm. She regularly checks to see if they have received a reply to the email.

After a while Embla says:



– Should we go inside the mall and look for him?

Lukas nods.

They walk through the revolving doors, take the escalator up to the first floor and stand by the glass railing where they can see everyone coming and going below.

After searching for Storm for several hours without success, they return to Embla's father's flat. He is still not home.

*Ping!*

Embla looks at her phone and groans.

– What is it? Lukas asks.

– It's just so awkward ..., she says, rolling her eyes. – Dad had a date today and says he's not coming home tonight. And it's not the first time, let's just say that.

She shakes her head, presses her lips into a thin line and says:

– Oh well. Then we'll just make dinner ourselves.

Embla pulls a frozen pizza from the freezer and asks:

– Do you like Hawaiian, with ham and pineapple?

– Sure, I'll eat anything.

– Good. So many people hate pineapple on pizza. They don't know what they're missing.

After they eat, they surf the internet looking for information that might help them find Mille. Lukas feels his eyes sting. He checks his phone. Mille has been gone for almost thirty-one hours.

He turns to Embla.

– We *need* a plan B. What if we don't get a reply from the photographer? The email might not even be in use anymore.

– Yeah, it might look that way, Embla sighs. – I'll check one more time ...

She looks at her phone and suddenly exclaims:

– I've got a reply!



From: Photographer Krog

13 June 23:18

To: Synnøve.hansen@gmail.com

I can see that you have modelling potential. I have a photoshoot in the city centre tomorrow morning and will be finished at 10 a.m. We can meet then.

Where would suit you to meet?

Embla looks at Lukas.

– He believed us! I'll reply straight away.

– But you can't actually meet him. It could be dangerous.

– Not if I meet him somewhere with lots of people. Besides, I know karate, so he can just try something.

– But what if he has a weapon or something? Lukas says.

– He can't be crazy enough to use a weapon if there are loads of people around, can he?

– How do we know? He was crazy enough to kidnap your sister. And maybe he even killed her.

– But this is our only chance, Embla says. – *I have to* find out who killed Lilja. And maybe that will lead us to Mille.

– Okay, Lukas says. – But we have to be very careful.

– Agreed. I'll reply now, and then we'll make a plan.

From: Synnøve Hansen

13 June 23:36

To: Fotograf.Krogh@gmail.com

10 o'clock is perfect. We can meet by the fountain at Nationaltheatret.



## Chapter 30

It has grown dark outside Embla's father's flat. The hum of traffic has become weaker. Lukas looks at the clock, yawns and says:

– It's late. I should go.

Embla tilts her head.

– You can stay over if you want. Dad's not coming home.

– Uh ... stay over?

– Yeah, not like *that*, Embla smiles. – We're not actually a couple.

Lukas feels the heat rise in his cheeks.

Embla continues: – Then you don't have to go home. It'll probably take ages if there are even any buses running this late. You can sleep on the sofa.

Lukas hesitates. *Should I go home in case Mille comes back? No, that's probably completely unrealistic. But do I dare stay over? I've never stayed at a girl's place before and I've only known Embla for a few hours. But she seems really nice, and it's not exactly tempting to go home to an empty house. I'll probably struggle to sleep tonight anyway.*

Lukas clears his throat and says "Ok".

They go through the plan for what they will do when they meet the photographer one last time. Then they set alarms on their phones and say good night. Embla disappears into her bedroom and closes the door.

Lukas lies down on the blue sofa in the living room. It is much harder than it looks. It reminds him of the times his father forced him to go camping and he had to sleep on a thin green sleeping mat. It was lumpy and covered in rows of small squares. He was sure he had a waffle pattern on his back for days afterwards.

He shifts restlessly from position to position. Hears people talking and laughing in the street outside. In the distance a siren wails. Is it a police car or an ambulance? He can never tell the difference.

He checks his phone. It is 2:30 a.m. His mouth feels dry. Mille has been gone for thirty-four hours. *God, time is flying! There are only fourteen hours left until she has been gone for forty-eight hours ... What if our plan with the photographer tomorrow doesn't work? What am I going to do then?*



A metallic sound comes from Embla's bedroom, and light spills out through the doorway. Maybe she's nervous about tomorrow too, or struggling to sleep because she's thinking about Lilja?

Lukas stares up at the white ceiling. *If something like that happens to Mille, I'll see her every time I close my eyes. And I'll never forgive myself.*

## Chapter 31

### Wednesday 14 June

The strong morning light streams in through the living room windows and presses against Lukas's eyes. He has barely slept tonight, and now it is completely impossible. There are no curtains to pull across the windows.

Lukas picks up his phone. The number glows at him and makes his hands tremble. Nearly thirty-eight hours since Mille disappeared.

To try to calm himself, he scrolls through the news.

*"Heat record across the country. 10 certain signs of the climate crisis."*

*"100 aid organisations issue new warning about hunger and lack of emergency relief in Gaza."*

*"Record-breaking drone attack in Ukraine."*

*"Confirms break-up – this is why the love ended."*

He hears sounds from the bedroom. Embla must have woken up. Soft footsteps move toward the door, then it opens.

Embla comes out wearing a short black nightdress, her hair messy. She looks at Lukas and says:

– Hey, how was your night?

– Uh ... I didn't sleep much, Lukas replies.

He doesn't know where to rest his gaze, so he stares down at his phone.

– Me neither. I've slept badly ever since ... Well, you know. Lilja ...

Lukas glances carefully up at her again.

She walks over to the fridge and asks:



- What do you want for breakfast?
- I'm not really hungry, Lukas says.
- Me neither, but we have to eat something.

Embla puts cheese, ham and strawberry jam on the table, along with wholegrain bread and juice. While they eat, they go through their plan one more time.

After eating, Embla puts on the same tight dress she wore the day before. Lukas follows her with his eyes as she throws on a worn, short denim jacket with a leather collar. *It was probably bought at one of the trendy vintage shops that have popped up everywhere. She has a really cool style.*

Embla checks that her phone fits into the breast pocket of the jacket. Then they leave the flat and take the bus to Nationaltheatret.

Lukas's hands tremble and his stomach flutters. Soon they will meet the man who calls himself Tom Krogh. *I hope we're on the right track so we can find Mille!*

## Chapter 32

It is teeming with people on the cobblestone square outside Nationaltheatret station. On each side are doors leading down to the underground station. In the middle of the square is a round fountain that makes a trickling sound. The water forms round, flat patterns, almost like old LP records. From a distance, the fountain looks like a peacock spreading its feathers.

On the left side, a bearded man sits on a stool playing the guitar. He has a black speaker beside him and sings in a surprisingly good voice, "*All you need is love.*"

Lukas recognises the song because his father is a Beatles fan.

People hurry past without looking at the guitarist or the sign in front of him with the Vipps number.

Time to put the plan into action.

Embla stands with her back to the fountain. Lukas sits down on a brown wooden bench outside the kiosk, with a clear view of her. There cannot be more than twenty metres between them.



Embla takes out her phone, calls Lukas and slips it into the breast pocket of her denim jacket.

Lukas answers and puts in his earbuds.

Embla glances at Lukas and whispers:

– Can you hear me?

Lukas nods while looking the other way.

– Remember, if I put my arm over my stomach, you have to come and help me.

Okay? says Embla.

Lukas nods again.

– I won't talk anymore in case he shows up, she says.

Embla paces restlessly in front of the fountain, looking to the right and left. The seconds tick by slowly. Lukas wipes his sweaty hands on his trousers. He scans the square at all the people rushing past. There are men in suit jackets and jeans, women in colourful summer dresses and teenagers with shoulder bags. *It is impossible to know who they are supposed to meet or what he looks like.*

It is 10:00 a.m. The meeting time.

Lukas's heart pounds. *He could appear at any moment now. Or maybe he is already here, standing hidden while watching Embla. What if he has seen me and realised it's a trap, and has left?*

*Maybe it isn't even a man, but a woman? Or maybe a whole motorcycle gang will show up and threaten Embla into going with them. What will I do then? Then I won't have a choice anymore – I'll have to call the police.*

He saves the police emergency number in his phone.

A figure approaches Embla. Lukas straightens up and sharpens his gaze. It is a boy with short blond hair. He is wearing a black jacket and limps on one leg.

The blood drains from Lukas's head and he gasps for breath.

It's Storm!



## Chapter 33

It feels as if Lukas's head is about to explode. Storm was the one who tricked Lilja into meeting him by pretending to be a photographer. Maybe he was the one who killed her, and not The Iron Hand? Or maybe Storm *is* "Iron Hand"?

Storm slows down as he approaches Embla and looks to the right and left. Embla stares straight at Storm. *Maybe she recognises him from the pictures. I hope she can pretend nothing's wrong.*

Lukas gently pushes his earbuds with his index fingers to make sure they are firmly in place. Now Storm is standing directly in front of Embla.

He says:

- You look different from the pictures. Older. Are you sure you're twelve?
- Of course. I'm just a bit mature for my age, Embla says.
- Wait a second . . ., Storm says and steps closer to her.

Suddenly he jerks back and exclaims:

- Shit! It's you from the newspaper. You tricked me!

He lifts his sweatshirt and places his hand on something Lukas cannot see.

Storm says:

- No one messes with me, you understand?

Embla takes a step back, puts her hand on her stomach and says:

- Lukas, he has a knife.
- *Lukas!*? Storm says, staring at her. – What do you mean?

Lukas jumps up and sprints toward her. She throws him a frightened look.

Storm follows her gaze. He flinches and exclaims:

- Oh shit!

Then he spins around and bolts into the crowd.

- It was Storm! Lukas shouts to Embla.
- I know!

They sprint after him. Storm runs past the guitarist, who is now playing "Take On Me" by a-ha. The bass thunders from the speaker as he sings, "*I'll be gone in a day or two.*"

Storm is almost at the station entrance. Embla and Lukas are gaining on him.



Just then, small children in yellow reflective vests pour out through the glass doors. There are so many of them that the entrance is blocked. They walk two by two, holding hands, looking around with wide eyes. Adults wearing orange vests walk beside them, keeping watch. Several of the children sing off-key along with the a-ha song and start dancing.

– Move! Storm shouts, pushing the children roughly aside. They tumble to the ground and burst into tears.

The adults rush in to comfort them.

An old woman yells after Storm:

– Shame on you! I'm calling the police!

Storm disappears through the doors.

Lukas and Embla slow down to avoid crashing into the children. They weave between them, saying:

– Sorry, sorry, but we need to get through!

At last they reach the entrance. They push open the door and rush into the station.

– You check the train station, I'll take the underground! Lukas shouts.

Embla nods and runs off.

Lukas runs to the right, down the stairs to the underground platform. A train is waiting and is about to head east. He leaps over the last steps. Just as he lands on the platform, the doors slam shut.

Lukas rushes to the nearest carriage and frantically presses the button to open the door. But it remains closed. Then the train glides forward with a rushing sound that grows louder and louder. *I hope Storm isn't on it!*

With wide eyes, Lukas peers through the windows. People stand and sit packed tightly together with serious faces. It is impossible to tell whether Storm is there. Finally, the train disappears into the dark tunnel.

Lukas turns and runs along the platform toward the main train station. He stares at everyone he passes, but Storm is nowhere to be seen. Maybe Embla has managed to find him?

He calls her. She answers, breathless:



– Have you seen him!?

– No! Have you?

– Not yet, Embla says. – I’m on the platform where the trains go west. Are you checking the one going east?

– Yes! Don’t hang up, put me on speaker!

Lukas charges deeper into the station, phone in hand. Past the kiosk selling buns. Toward the long escalator. He takes the steps two at a time, brushing past well-dressed people standing still. He bumps into several, who shoot him angry looks. “Sorry!” he blurts out.

When Lukas reaches the platform, a train is just leaving the station. The screen shows another arriving in two minutes. Many people are waiting. Lukas moves back and forth between them, searching for Storm.

The train arrives, people board, and the doors close. The long train pulls away. Lukas looks around desperately.

He raises the phone closer to his mouth and says:

– He’s not here!

– Not here either, Embla says.

– Shit, we’ve lost him! What do we do now?

– Stay where you are. I’m coming to you, Embla says.

Lukas looks at his phone. Mille has been gone for nearly forty-two hours, and they do not have a single clue where she might be. The room spins, a rushing sound fills his head. It is as if he is looking through binoculars, with two dark circles at the edges. *I’m about to faint!*

He staggers to a bench and sits down. He rests his head in his hands, stares at the floor and tries to breathe calmly. The sound of people talking and passing trains feels far away.

Someone sits down beside him. He recognises the green dress. It’s Embla. She places her hand on his shoulder and says:

– Are you okay?

Lukas shakes his head.



– No ... Storm was the *only* lead we had. And it's impossible to know where he is now. I'll never find Mille in time ...

He snuffles and blinks away the tears.

Embla gently rubs Lukas's back and says:

– You can't give up. We've already figured out a lot: now we know Storm was involved in both kidnappings. He's not going to get away with it. We have to find him and save Mille. Come on, let's go back to my place and make a new plan!

## Chapter 34

Mille's arm, which is tied to the iron pipe, is numb and cold. The plastic tie cuts into her skin. She tugs at it, but it is stuck fast.

Ahmad sits focused in front of the computer, typing on the keyboard.

Mille's stomach growls loudly.

– I'm hungry, she says.

Ahmad keeps typing without turning around.

– Hellooo, can you hear me? Mille continues.

– Be quiet. I'm busy.

– But I *need* something to eat. You've barely given me any food.

– Shut up!

– You can die if you don't eat, Mille says. – Dad says so.

Ahmad jumps up so suddenly that the chair crashes backward with a bang. Mille flinches.

He pulls something dark from the desk drawer and walks toward her with narrow eyes.

Then Mille sees what he is holding. Cold spreads through her body. It is a gun.

He leans toward her, points the gun at her head and says:

– Shall I tell you other ways you can die?

Mille bites her lip and blinks hard.

– Do I need to say more times that you should keep quiet? Ahmad says.

Mille shakes her head so hard that her golden curls bounce.



– Thought so, Ahmad says.

He straightens up, walks back to the desk and tucks the gun into his waistband. He picks up the chair, sits down and continues typing.

After a while Mille hears footsteps outside. The door unlocks. Storm comes in. His face is red, and there are dark sweat marks under his arms. He walks over to Ahmad.

Ahmad looks up at him, frowns and says:

– What’s going on?

Storm turns even redder.

– Uh ... just some hassle with my mum again.

– I get that you’re tired. Is there anything I can do for you?

– No, not really, Storm says. – You’ve already helped me loads. But thanks for caring.

– Of course, brother. I care, Ahmad says. – But hey, I’ve got good news.

– What?

– I’ve posted the girl’s pictures on the dark web, Ahmad says. – The bids are pouring in, and I think I’ve already found a buyer. There’s a man willing to pay double the highest bid if he can take her tonight.

– Seriously? Storm says. – That’s great!

– Yes, very. He lives in Oslo, so handing her over will be easy. I just need to check that he’s trustworthy first. Can you watch the girl for a while? I’ll go upstairs and look into it.

– Yeah, no problem, Storm says and nods.

– Good, Ahmad says. – I’ll stop by my flat as well. I need a shower after being down here for several days. But before I go, there’s something I want to show you ... It’s almost time for phase two, and I’ve drafted a text we can post.

Ahmad points at the computer screen and says:

– What do you think?

Storm leans toward the screen and goes quiet. When he has finished reading, he straightens up and says:

– It’s perfect, bro. Now they’ll listen. And act. Guaranteed.



– I think so too, Ahmad smiles. – Then I'll post it.

14 June 10:37

### **Important message to the politicians of Norway**

Every day children are killed in war. Innocent children on their way to school. Playing football with friends. Or standing in line to get food. Many could have been saved if they had enough doctors, medicine, equipment and food.

And what are you who govern Norway doing? Those of you working in Parliament or the Government? You sit safely in your homes. Watching TV and eating Friday tacos. Pretending nothing is happening.

Why aren't you doing more? Is it because it's happening far away? Because it's not your own children?

We all live in one world. Norway has money and power. You like to call yourselves a nation of peace. But where is the peace? Where is the help?

We in *Justice for Every Child* are tired of waiting. Tired of political talk and empty words. We demand action NOW! If not, more children will disappear in Norway. They will be sold, and the income will go to medicine and food for children living in war-torn countries. Next time it could be your child. We know where you live, and where your children go to school ...

#Justice4everychild #J4EC

## **Chapter 35**

Mille pulls her legs up to her stomach and wraps her free arm around them. She is shivering, as if she has been swimming too long in a cold mountain lake. Now she knows what Ahmad and Storm are planning to do to her. *They're going to sell me. As if I'm a doll in a toy store. Who buys a child?! And what is he going to do with me?*



Ahmad leaves the room. Storm sits down on the chair, props his feet up on the desk and starts watching a movie on the computer, full of explosions and a wild car chase. He is sitting with his back to Mille.

*I have to try to escape before Ahmad comes back and takes me to the evil man.*

Carefully, Mille slides her free hand down into her sock. She pulls out the hairpin and inserts it into the lock of the plastic tie. She pushes and fiddles with it, again and again. But she can't get it open. Maybe she can manage to cut through the plastic tie with the pin? It isn't very sharp, but it's made of metal, so it's worth a try.

She starts filing back and forth, back and forth. *I hope Lukas has called Mum and Dad, or the police, and told them I'm gone. And that someone is coming to rescue me.*

*But what if it really was Lukas who asked Storm to capture me? No, that can't be true. Lukas is kind.*

After filing for a while, Mille can see thin scratches on the plastic. She sighs. *This is going to take forever, and I don't have much time.*

Suddenly Storm turns toward her. Mille hides the hairpin in her palm and pretends to scratch her arm.

He frowns, stares at her and asks:

– What are you doing?

Mille looks at him with big, innocent eyes and replies:

– Nothing. But the plastic tie is so tight, it hurts. Can you loosen it a little?

– Forget it, says Storm. – You asked for it when you ran away.

Then he turns his back on her and continues watching the movie.

Mille grips the hairpin tightly and keeps filing. *I have make it!*

## Chapter 36

Lukas and Embla sit around the kitchen table at her father's place. They write down everything they know about Storm and Mille's kidnapping. Maybe there are clues they've overlooked that could help them find her?



They know that Storm is from somewhere on the east side of Oslo. But when Lukas followed him on the tram, he got off at Frogner, on the west side. That could mean that Mille is there.

– Oh, I just remembered something, says Embla. – When Storm disappeared at Nationaltheatret, he might have taken the exit at the other end of the station. That leads out into Drammensveien, right by the Royal Palace.

Lukas nods and says:

– Yes, that’s possible. It’s very close to Frogner.

*Beep, beep!*

Lukas’s phone vibrates.

**Mum** 12:51

Hi Lukas! Good news. We’re almost done painting. We’re planning to head home tomorrow, so you won’t have to babysit much longer. ;-)

**Lukas** 12:53

Ok

Send me a message when you know what time you’re coming

Need to tidy up first

Lukas feels a painful pressure in his chest; his throat tightens.

He gets up from the table, walks out onto the balcony and sits down on one of the chairs. He leans forward, rests his head in his hands and closes his eyes. He feels the warm wind against his face. *What am I going to tell Mum and Dad? That Mille has been kidnapped, and that it’s my fault? And that I’ve kept it from them? They’re going to completely lose it. They’ll never understand or forgive me. I have to save Mille before they come home!*

He checks his phone. It’s 13:01. His mouth goes dry. *Soon Mille will have been gone for 45 hours. I’ll never manage it in time. I wish I could call the police and get help. Let someone else fix this. But it’s too dangerous. What if Storm finds out and hurts Mille?*



Suddenly Lukas remembers something. When Storm pushed the children at Nationaltheatret station, an old woman shouted that she would call the police. Maybe there's a small note about it in the news?

He starts scrolling.

Suddenly he jerks. He jumps up so fast that the chair topples over. Then he runs into the apartment, over to Embla and exclaims:

– Check this article!

He holds out the phone so she can read.

## **The Norwegian Times**

### *Breaking News*

#### **Threats Against the Children of Norwegian Politicians**

*A group calling itself “Justice for Every Child” has today issued serious threats against the children of Norwegian politicians. The police are investigating whether the case may be connected to the disappearances in the Oslo area over the past year, and the murder of Lilja Oddvinsdóttir.*

The threats were posted on several social media platforms today at 10:37. The group demands stronger efforts for children in war zones. If their demand is not met, they threaten to kidnap politicians' children. They claim the children will be sold to finance food and medical aid for children in war-torn areas. The police confirm that they are investigating the case, but for the sake of the ongoing investigation they do not wish to comment at this time.

#### **Looking into Possible Link to the Lilja Murder**

The threats come after several children have disappeared in the Oslo area over the past year, and the murder of Lilja Oddvinsdóttir, daughter of Member of Parliament Karin Solbakken. An anonymous police source says they are investigating whether today's threats may be connected to these cases.

#### **Prime Minister: – Extremely Serious**

Prime Minister **Fredrik Falck** reacts strongly:



– These are extremely serious threats. All politicians and their families must be safe in Norway. The Police Security Service (PST) and the police are cooperating on the investigation, and the case has high priority.

– This is insane! says Embla. – Do you think it’s the same people who took Mille? And that Storm is part of this group?

– It *has to be*! says Lukas. – It can’t be a coincidence.

– This shows how dangerous they are... says Embla. – Should we tip off PST or the police about what we know?

– No, we can’t say anything yet. Then we risk something happening to Mille. If we manage to save her, we can tell the police everything afterward.

– I can’t believe they’re *selling* children, says Embla, shaking her head.

– Yes, it’s horrible, says Lukas. – Even if they want to help children in need, that doesn’t justify sacrificing other children. They’re completely innocent.

Embla’s eyes fill with tears.

– That must have been what they planned to do with Lilja. At least she was spared that. I can’t bear to think about what she might have gone through.

Lukas grows quiet. Then he says:

– I just thought of something. If they’re selling the children, it’s probably happening on the dark web. If we go in there, maybe we can find information about them.

– Maybe. But how are we going to manage that?

– I’m good with computers. I’ll figure it out.

## Chapter 37

Mille grips the hairpin tightly as she files at the plastic tie. The pin slips in her sweaty hand. She wipes the sweat on her trousers and continues. The crack in the plastic tie has grown deeper now, but she’s still only halfway through.

Rapid footsteps approach, and suddenly the door flies open.



Ahmad bursts in. His eyes are wide, and he waves his arms as he says:

– Bad news. My apartment is under surveillance.

– What?! Are you kidding? says Storm.

– No, I’m not kidding, says Ahmad. – There were several suspicious people outside my building. Just hanging around, supposedly by coincidence. A woman with a stroller walked past three times. A man in an all-weather jacket sat on the bench opposite my entrance talking on his phone. And there was a BMW with tinted windows parked further up the street.

– Shit! How did they manage to find you? says Storm. – We’ve been so careful.

– I have no idea, says Ahmad, pacing the floor.

– So what do we do now?

Ahmad stops and says:

– We continue as planned. But there’s one thing I want to ask you...

– What do you mean? says Storm, raising his eyebrows.

Ahmad walks over to Storm and says:

– I know this is a lot to ask... But *if* something were to happen to me, could you take over?

– Of course, brother. I promise.

Ahmad looks Storm in the eyes, places both hands on his shoulders and says:

– Thank you, brother. I knew I could trust you. It’s good to know that what we’ve fought for won’t be in vain. My little brother would have been proud...

A sad expression passes over Ahmad’s face. Then he straightens his back and says:

– Fortunately, I have good news as well. I’ve done a background check on the man who wants to buy the girl. He can be trusted, so I’ve arranged the handover for today.

– That’s good, says Storm.

– It’s not long now. It’s going to happen in the parking garage at Oslo Central Station, at 16:30. We need to get ready soon.



## Chapter 38

Lukas finds information online about how to access the dark web. He starts by downloading a special browser: *The Onion Router*, also known as Tor. Then he visits various online forums, searching for a link that will give them access to the specific part of the dark web they are looking for.

– Is it only criminals who use the dark web? asks Embla.

– Mostly criminals, probably, replies Lukas. – But it’s also used by others who want to remain anonymous. For example, people who live in countries without freedom of speech. Then they can discuss what’s happening and say what they think without being monitored and punished.

– Well, that’s good at least, says Embla.

Lukas keeps searching. Eventually he finds a thread where a user asks for advice on how to sell something that must be done anonymously. Another user shares a link that looks like a random string of numbers and letters.

– I’ll see if this works, says Lukas. – I hope it doesn’t contain any viruses...

He turns to Embla and says:

– I don’t know what we’re going to see, but there could be a lot of awful things there. Pictures and videos of things that are hard to forget. I can do it alone if you want.

– No, I want to do it with you.

– Are you absolutely sure? asks Lukas.

Embla nods firmly. “Yes.”

– Okay. Then let’s try.

Lukas types a few quick commands. A message pops up on the screen:

**Warning:** You are about to connect to *the Dark Web*.

Important information:

- Do not log in with personal accounts (email, social media).
- Avoid sharing your name, address, or other identifying information.
- Be aware that some websites may contain illegal or harmful content.



By continuing, you confirm that you understand the risks and use *the Dark Web* at your own responsibility. Do you wish to continue?

Embla and Lukas exchange a look. Then Lukas clicks “Yes.”

A black page opens with a menu in white text:

### **Buy and Sell**

- o Drugs and Medicines
- o Weapons and Equipment
- o Fake Identification
- o Hacking and Digital Services
- o Personal Data
- o Images of Violence and Abuse
- o Other Goods and Services

– What?! exclaims Embla. – This is insane!

– It’s even worse than I thought, says Lukas. – It feels grotesque to search for where children are being sold... but where do you think we’ll find it?

– Hmm... Maybe under “Other Goods and Services”? says Embla.

– Yes, let’s try that, says Lukas.

He takes a deep breath and clicks.

A new page opens that says: “Information shared here must never be shared with anyone else. Do you wish to continue at your own risk?”

Lukas clicks “Yes.”

Another page appears, and Lukas navigates quickly through it. His stomach tightens; he tries to switch off his brain. *Don’t think about what’s written here. Just pretend it’s a movie.* But he can’t avoid seeing ads where people are offering to pay others to commit violence, murder, and terror.

Embla covers her face with her hands and exclaims:

– Shit! This is completely wild. Can’t the police stop this?



– I know the police monitor what happens here, says Lukas. – And I’ve read about cases where many people have been arrested. But because everything is posted anonymously, it’s hard to find out who they are.

– But can’t they just shut the whole thing down? asks Embla.

– No, it’s not that simple, says Lukas. – It’s not *one* single website or server. The dark web consists of thousands of sites. And to make sure it stays secret, computers scattered all over the world are used. So no one really has full control. And even *if* they managed to shut it down, something similar would probably pop up somewhere else.

– It feels wrong just being on this page, says Embla. – What if the police are watching us right now? Could *we* get arrested?

– I think it depends on what we do and what we look at, says Lukas. – But we have to take the chance. This is the only way we can save Mille.

Embla nods seriously and says:

– I just hope the police don’t suddenly show up at the door.

– Same here. Then we’d have a problem.

Lukas opens a website about “Human Trafficking” and finds a category for children between 6 and 9 years old.

He scrolls down. There are pictures of boys and girls who look frightened and sad. Nausea rises in his stomach. He tries to breathe calmly. *I must not throw up.*

– Poor children! says Embla. – This is horrible! Is there anything we can do to save them?

– No, unfortunately... says Lukas. – We can only hope the police manage to. They’re professionals, and I know they cooperate with police in many other countries.

Lukas suddenly freezes at a picture of a girl in a white dress. It feels as if he’s falling backward into a dark well.

He gasps and cries out:

– It’s Mille!



## Chapter 39

Lukas's hands tremble as he clicks on the pictures of Mille. She looks seriously into the camera. Thankfully she doesn't appear to be injured, but her face is pale and there are dark circles under her eyes. It looks like she has been crying.

Under the pictures it says: "Girl, 7 years old, sold to the highest bidder. Pick-up in Oslo."

Nausea rises in his throat; his head spins. *No, no, no! This can't happen!*

Below the pictures are comments in different languages from anonymous users. Several have placed bids.

Lukas rushes into the bathroom and lifts the toilet lid. He barely manages to lean forward over the bowl before the contents of his stomach shoot up. Tears spring to his eyes; it's hard to breathe.

Embla follows him. She wets a cloth with lukewarm water and gently strokes his back.

When he stops vomiting, she hands him the cloth and says:

– I understand how you feel. I threw up too when I found out what had happened to Lilja. It's apparently very common when you're in shock.

Lukas wipes his mouth with the cloth, sits down beside the toilet and says:

– This is insane. Someone wants to *buy* my little sister.

He shakes his head and looks down at his hands. Embla stays silent.

Then he turns to her and says:

– I saw that someone wants to take Mille tonight. I HAVE to save her before that happens, but I have no idea how.

– Maybe we can figure out where she's being held by looking more closely at the pictures? says Embla.

Lukas nods and takes a deep breath. He tries to stand up, but his head spins, so Embla has to support him.

They go into the living room. Embla finds an energy drink for him. He takes a few greedy gulps. Then they sit down in front of the computer. Lukas leans toward the



screen and stares at the pictures, trying to absorb every detail. He zooms in on one of them, points, and says:

– The wall behind Mille is dark. It looks like it’s carved out of stone, don’t you think?

– Yes, says Embla. – Something is glistening on the wall. It looks like water. Maybe they’re in a cave?

Lukas stands up and paces back and forth across the apartment. It’s impossible to know where Mille is. Maybe she’s in a cave somewhere out in the forest? He remembers that Mille and their father have discovered several caves while orienteering.

His gaze drifts to the newspaper clipping hanging on the fridge door. It’s as if he’s been struck by electricity. He points at the fridge and exclaims:

– The ghost station! Maybe *that’s* where they’re hiding Mille?! It’s at Elisenberg, in Frogner, where Storm got off!

– Yes, shit! You’re right. It can’t be a coincidence.

Storm rushes over to the article and traces the text with his index finger as he reads. Then he turns to Embla and says:

– It says the tunnel is under Elisenbergveien 37. We’re going there right now!

## Chapter 40

Lukas and Embla walk calmly past Elisenbergveien 37, glancing to the right and left. It is a large red-brick building. The state wine shop occupies the ground floor. Sun-tanned people in light summer clothes walk in and out of the store. Above are apartments. Is it really possible that a seven-year-old girl is being held captive here, thirty meters underground? They agree that Lukas will go closer to snoop around while Embla keeps watch on the other side of the street.

– I’ll call and warn you if I see Storm, says Embla.



Lukas nods and walks toward the building. On one side there is an arched opening leading into a courtyard. The opening is blocked by a tall metal gate with sharp spikes on top.

Lukas quickly looks right and left. Then he takes a running start and begins climbing over the gate. His pants snag on the sharp spikes. He manages to loosen them. Then he jumps down on the other side and walks quickly inward.

Suddenly he finds himself in a long courtyard surrounded by tall apartment buildings. The hum of traffic outside is almost gone. There are several seating areas on a neatly trimmed green lawn. A robotic lawnmower hums silently back and forth. In the middle of the courtyard stands a tall tree with pink blossoms on its bare branches.

Outside the lawn are cobblestone paths. Lukas looks around and sees a gray metal door. He walks over and tries to open it. It is so heavy that he has to push with his whole body. He peeks inside. A sour smell hits him, and he wrinkles his nose. Green and gray dumpsters stand in a row.

He closes the door and walks on, past a wrought-iron bike rack. Next to it is a storage shed with a glass door. The shelves are filled with tools.

Climbing plants with white roses wind up the brick wall. Then Lukas notices something. Between the roses is a green metal door. He walks over to it. The paint is peeling in large flakes, but the lock gleams. In the middle of the door is a rusty sign that reads:

Access prohibited for unauthorized persons.

The area is owned and controlled by the Norwegian State Railways.

Unauthorized access will be reported to the police.

His heart beats faster. The Norwegian State Railways was the old railway company.

*This must be the entrance to the station!*

Carefully he presses down the handle. *Damn, the door is locked!*

He turns and sprints out of the courtyard to the metal gate and waves Embla over.

She crosses the street and stops in front of the gate.



Lukas leans toward her and whispers:

– I’ve found the entrance to the station. We have to break in and see if we can find Mille!

## Chapter 41

Embla climbs over the gate, and then they run into the courtyard. Lukas quickly looks around and says:

– I need to find something to open the door with.

He rushes over to the tool shed beside the bikes and opens the door. On the shelves are bicycle pumps, patch kits, screwdrivers, lubricating oil, Allen keys, inner tubes, and a small roll of steel wire.

He grabs a flathead screwdriver and the roll of steel wire.

Then he turns to Embla and says:

– Will you keep watch?

Embla nods and stands with her back to him so she can see across the courtyard.

Lukas tries to pry open the door by wedging the screwdriver between the door and the frame, but the tip is too thick. He curses quietly and throws the screwdriver aside.

He shapes the steel wire so it fits into the lock. Fiddles around inside. *It looks so easy in movies, but how do you actually do it?*

Lukas glances at his phone. It is 15:00. His hands tremble. There is only one hour and thirty minutes left before forty-eight hours have passed. And the handover of Mille to the buyer could happen at any moment. He has to get the door open!

*Click, clack, click, clack.*

That is the sound of footsteps.

Embla whispers:

– Someone’s coming! Let’s sit at the tables and pretend we’re visiting.

Lukas and Embla run to one of the seating areas and sit down. They chat lightly and try to look relaxed. Embla takes his hand and whispers:



– Let’s pretend we’re a couple again.

Lukas nods and swallows. Her hand is soft and warm. *I must not get sweaty palms.*

A woman with gray hair tied up enters the courtyard. She walks slowly, holding a black cane in one hand.

The woman stops, stares at them, and asks:

– What are you doing here?

– Uh... We’re visiting someone, says Lukas.

The woman frowns and says:

– It’s not that foreigner I’ve seen snooping around here, is it?

Embla and Lukas exchange a quick glance without the woman noticing. Then Embla turns to her, forces a smile, and says:

– No. It’s someone called Victor Alexander. He just moved in.

The woman tightens her red lipstick mouth. Nods and mutters something. Then she hobbles on, unlocks one of the apartment buildings, and disappears.

They release each other’s hands, and Lukas continues picking the lock while Embla keeps watch.

At last there is a faint click inside the lock.

Lukas presses down the handle. He has to yank the door several times before it slides open. *Yes!*

He turns to Embla and whispers:

– I did it!

Lukas and Embla step inside and carefully close the metal door behind them.

They creep down a dark corridor. At the end they come to an elevator.

– This must be how you get down to the station, whispers Lukas and presses the button beside the elevator doors.

Thick cables move inside the shaft; a shrill sound echoes.

– I hope no one hears that, whispers Embla.

They look around nervously.

Finally the elevator rises from the darkness, and the doors open.

Lukas and Embla step inside and press the button labeled “Train Station.”



The doors slide shut, and the elevator shudders as it descends into the darkness.

## Chapter 42

Mille keeps filing with the hairpin. The crack in the plastic tie has grown even larger now. She glances up anxiously. Ahmad is typing something on the computer, and Storm is standing beside him.

*I hope they don't see what I'm doing.* Mille continues filing.

Suddenly Storm turns pale. He points at one of the computer screens and shouts:

– What the hell!? There's someone in the elevator!

Ahmad jumps up from the chair, stares at the screen and says:

– Shit, what do we do now?!

Mille's heart starts beating faster. She tries to see the screen, but Ahmad and Storm block her view.

Storm shakes his head and says:

– No, no, no... This can't be happening...

– What is it? says Ahmad.

– I know who they are! says Storm.

– Who?

– It's the girl's brother, says Storm, nodding toward Mille. – Lukas.

Mille gasps. It feels as if a thousand rubber balls are bouncing inside her stomach. *I knew it! Lukas loves me. He's come to save me!*

– Who's he with? asks Ahmad.

– It's Lilja's sister, says Storm. – You know, the one who ran away. The one you killed.

Ahmad frowns, takes a step closer to Storm and says:

– How did they find out where we are?!

Storm's cheeks turn red. He throws up his arms and says:

– I have no idea.

– Did you snitch? says Ahmad.



– No, no, I swear! says Storm, shaking his head hard.

– Are you sure? says Ahmad, staring at him with narrowed eyes. – You two were friends...

– I didn't say anything, says Storm. – That's the truth. I would *never* do that. I'm no snitch.

– Then how else could he have found us?

Storm turns even redder and says:

– Uh... They must have followed me. I tried to be very careful, but I must have messed up. Sorry, I promise... it won't happen again.

Ahmad tightens his lips and straightens his back. Then he takes a deep breath and says:

– Okay. We just have to handle this as best we can. We need to get rid of them immediately. Then we'll sell the girl today, as planned.

Storm nods seriously and says:

– So... you believe me?

– Yes, I believe you.

– Thanks.

– Sorry if I got a little paranoid, says Ahmad. – I know I can trust you, brother.

They shake hands and clap each other on the back.

Mille stretches her upper body to the side and manages to see the screens.

Two people are standing in the elevator. Her heart pounds. *It's Lukas and the girl they were talking about!*

As they step out onto the train platform, Lukas and the girl are swallowed by darkness. Then two thin beams of light sweep from side to side. *It must be the flashlights on their phones.*

Ahmad turns to Storm, nods at the screen and says:

– It's easy to see them in the dark when they're using flashlights. We'll keep the lights off and bring flashlights.

He pulls the gun from his waistband.

Storm nods and draws his knife.



## Chapter 43

Lukas and Embla move forward quietly in the darkness, lighting the way with their phones. They can only see a few meters ahead.

When they stepped out of the elevator, Lukas noticed the light switch beside it. But they didn't dare turn on the lights, because that would increase the chance of being discovered.

It is completely silent in the room, except for the faint crunching sound their sneakers make against the concrete.

– The platform looks almost finished, whispers Embla. – It's strange that it was never put into use.

Lukas nods.

*Beep, beep!*

Lukas's phone vibrates in his hand. The echo of the sound bounces between the bare rock walls.

– Shit, I hope no one heard that! he whispers, exchanging a worried glance with Embla. He switches the phone to silent and checks the message.

**Mom**

15:32

Finally finished painting! We're heading home tonight, just need to pack up first. We're so excited to see you. See you soon!

Lukas presses the thumbs-up reaction.

His stomach tightens; he tries to breathe calmly. *What if we don't manage to save Mille? What am I going to tell Mom and Dad?*

– Come on, let's keep going, whispers Embla, gently touching his arm.

They move further along the platform, sweeping the light from side to side. They pass several large containers.

Suddenly Embla crouches down. She picks something up from the ground. It is small and light and fits in the palm of her hand. She shines the light on it.



It is a pink and white sneaker.

Lukas flinches and exclaims:

– It's Mille's! That must mean she's here!

Then he notices stains on the shoe. It feels as if his heart stops.

Embla and Lukas stare at each other with wide eyes. Both are pale.

Lukas's mouth feels numb as he whispers:

– It's blood. I think we're too late...

## Chapter 44

Mille sees the light from Lukas's and the girl's phones on the computer screen. It looks like they have stopped and are shining their lights on something. They're in danger. Ahmad and Storm could attack them at any moment, with a gun and a knife. *I have to try to warn them.*

Mille shouts as loudly as she can:

– LUKAS, RUN! IT'S A TRAP!

She stares at the screen. The beams of light continue sweeping across the room outside. They must not have heard her.

Mille grips the hairpin tightly and files quickly. Back and forth, back and forth. *Snap.*

Oh no, a piece of the hairpin broke off!

Then she gets an idea. She touches the tip of the pin with her index finger. It's sharper now. *Maybe it will be easier to cut through the plastic tie?*

She files and jabs the needle against the plastic tie.

Now and then the needle slips from her sweaty hands and hits her arm. The skin splits and turns red, and small drops of blood begin to seep out. Mille clenches her teeth and keeps filing. *I have to help Lukas!*



## Chapter 45

It feels as if Lukas's legs can no longer hold him up. The ground sways beneath him. He stares at Mille's bloody sneaker, tears pressing against his eyes.

*I want to lie down on the ground and cry like a little kid. And be comforted by Mom and Dad. Have them tell me this isn't my fault. That they will always love me, and that everything will be okay again. But that's not going to happen. Because it IS my fault. And nothing will ever be okay again. Never, unless I manage to save Mille...*

Embla looks at him with concern, strokes his shoulder and says:

– It might not be as bad as it looks...

Lukas blinks away his tears, swallows and says:

– Something must have gone wrong... but I can't give up. I *have to* keep looking for her. Maybe she's still here. But this is dangerous, so I understand if you want to go home.

Embla shakes her head and says:

– Are you completely stupid? I'm not leaving you here alone. I want to help.

Besides, I'm not giving up until the people who killed Lilja are caught.

Lukas hears faint crunching sounds. He stiffens and whispers to Embla:

– Shh! Did you hear that?

Embla nods.

They switch off the lights on their phones and slip them into their pockets. Embla grabs Lukas's hand. They stand completely still in the darkness.

Footsteps draw closer.

A dark, raspy voice says:

– Where did they go?

– No idea, but they must have heard us, says another.

– We'll find them anyway. They have nowhere to hide. You go that way, I'll go here.

Lukas's heart pounds; his hands are sweaty. His head feels empty, as if his brain has gone into flight mode.

Embla squeezes his hand and whispers:



– We'll hide behind the containers!

## Chapter 46

Lukas and Embla move quietly through the darkness toward the containers. They hold hands, their other hands stretched out blindly in front of them so they won't bump into anything. Lukas glances back and sees a beam of light sweeping across the platform.

*We have to hurry!*

At last Lukas feels the cold, hard surface of a container. They grope around and try to squeeze in between two containers. But it's so tight they can't get in. They press their backs against the cool metal and stand completely still.

A dark voice says:

– Check by the elevator, I'll look by the containers. But hurry up. We don't have much time. There are only forty-five minutes until we hand over the girl.

Quick footsteps. A beam of light rushes past them.

Lukas's pulse pounds. He leans toward Embla's ear and whispers:

– If they're about to hand over Mille, that means she's still alive. But we don't have much time to save her. We need help. We have to call the police.

Embla nods.

They let go of each other and pull their phones from their pockets.

When they tap the screens, their faces are lit up by a faint blue glow. Lukas bites his lip. *I hope they don't see it.*

The footsteps come closer and closer.

Embla groans quietly and says:

– I don't have any signal!

– Me neither, says Lukas. – But I had it earlier when I got that message, so we have to keep trying.

Lukas presses the number he saved earlier. Again and again.

The footsteps are right beside them now.

Lukas and Embla press their backs against the container as they keep calling.



Suddenly they are blinded by light. Someone stands in front of them with a flashlight.

– Hands up! a deep, raspy voice shouts.

Something black and long is brought into the light.

Lukas flinches when he sees what it is. A gun. And it's pointed straight at them.

## Chapter 47

Lukas and Embla slowly raise their hands above their heads. The man aims the gun at them and shouts:

– I've found them!

Rapid footsteps approach. The beam from another flashlight spreads across the platform. A man comes running from the elevator. In the reflection Lukas can see that he limps. It's Storm.

Storm stops, out of breath, beside the other man.

Lukas and Embla stand completely still, hands in the air, each holding a phone. Carefully, Lukas moves his thumb across the screen. *It's impossible to know if I'm hitting the right number... and if I even have a signal.*

– Take their phones, says the man with the gun.

Storm steps forward into the light, toward Lukas and Embla, and says:

– Give them to me.

Embla glances at Lukas and nods slightly toward his phone. Lukas looks at her questioningly. What does she mean?

Then she turns to Storm, looks him straight in the eyes and says:

– I know who you are. You're the one who tricked my little sister, Lilja. It's your fault she was killed.

Lukas bites his lip. *Now I get it! She's trying to buy time so I can call the police.*

Lukas presses desperately on the screen. *Please, please, please, let me get a signal!*

Storm's eyes flicker. Then he stretches out his hand toward Embla and says:



– Shut up and give me your phone.

– Was it you who killed her? Embla asks, boring her gaze into him.

The man with the gun steps closer to Embla and says:

– No, it was me. And I'll kill you too if you don't give me that phone.

That's when Lukas sees it. The fingers gripping the gun gleam. They're made of metal. It's *Ironhand*.

Embla stares at him and shouts:

– You're completely sick! How could you do something like that? To my Lilja?! She was the kindest person in the world. I *hate* you!

– You get one more warning, he says.

– You're never going to get away with this! Embla shouts. – I hope you rot in prison!

*BANG!*

The loud shot rings in Lukas's ears. His body jerks, and he screams:

– NOOO!

Embla's phone clatters to the floor. She stares at her left arm with wide eyes.

– Are you hit?! Lukas shouts to Embla.

It's hard to see in the dark.

– I-I think so... in my arm, Embla says.

Storm bends down and picks up the phone from the floor. Then he walks over to Lukas, holds out his hand and says:

– Give me yours. Now!

Slowly Lukas holds out his phone while still pressing the screen. Then he hears a low female voice from the phone:

– Police emergency.

Lukas shouts as fast as he can:

– HELP! We're at Elisenberg train station! A girl has been shot. And my little sister has been kidnapped!

Storm grabs the phone and says:

– What the hell are you doing?!

He stares at the phone, presses it hard and says:



– Shit! Ahmad, he called the cops!

Ahmad groans and says:

– We have to go now! Destroy the phones!

Storm throws both phones onto the concrete floor and stomps hard on them.

*CRACK!*

Suddenly the ceiling lights flicker before flooding the room with brightness.

Everyone squints against the strong light. It is completely silent.

– What happened?! says Ahmad, looking around with wide eyes. – Who turned on the lights? The cops couldn't have gotten here that fast!?

– It must have been a malfunction, says Storm. – There's no one else here. But I'll check the surveillance cameras just to be sure.

– Yes, do that, says Ahmad. He steps closer to Lukas and Embla and continues: – And take the girl with you, we need to hurry. We're running out of time. I'll deal with these two for now.

– Okay, says Storm and walks quickly along the platform.

### **On the police radio**

*Operations Center:* This is 01 with a PLIVO alert. We have received a report that shots have been fired and that a girl is being unlawfully detained at Elisenberg station. The station is not in operational use but is located in the railway tunnel between Nationaltheatret and Skøyen. So far one injured person has been reported, but the extent of the injuries is unknown. At this time we have no information about the perpetrator. 01 will provide updates.

## **Chapter 48**

Embla is trembling, her face pale. The sleeve of her green sweater has turned red. She presses her hand over the gunshot wound.

Lukas looks at Ahmad pleadingly and says:

– Please, she needs to go to the hospital.



– Forget it, says Ahmad. He tilts his head, stares at Lukas and says:

– So you're the brother of the new girl we have?

Lukas nods.

– You like playing the hero, huh? says Ahmad with a crooked smile. – I'll give you credit for trying to save her. I would've done the same for my little brother... I tried to save him when our house was bombed. That's why I lost my hand and got this prosthesis, he says, nodding toward the metal hand gripping the gun.

Then Lukas remembers. The boy Storm shared a room with at Sunnås. The one who lost his little brother after a bombing because he didn't get the medical help he needed. And who fled to Norway with his parents.

Lukas takes a deep breath, looks at Ahmad and says:

– When you've experienced losing your brother, how can you do something like this to other children?

Ahmad raises the gun and points it at Lukas's head.

– I don't expect someone like you to understand. You have no idea how lucky you are to have grown up in fucking Norway. You're so spoiled here, taking everything for granted. Complaining if the bread is stale or there's no milk in the fridge. Or that you have to wait two hours at the emergency clinic. *Boo-hoo*, he says, jutting out his lower lip.

Lukas swallows and says:

– I know I'm lucky. And that many people don't have it easy.

– *Don't have it easy?* says Ahmad, rolling his eyes. – You spoiled little brat! That's an understatement. It's like two different worlds. My homeland has been bombed to pieces, and it's impossible to get food. You wouldn't survive *one* week there.

Ahmad nods toward Lukas's sneakers and says:

– Do you think anyone there cares about having the coolest sneakers?

Lukas feels heat burn in his cheeks.

– Life is so unfair, says Ahmad. – And we've decided to do something about it. Now you who live here in safe Norway are going to feel what it's like to live in fear.

Ahmad grips the gun with both hands, narrows his eyes and says:



– We can't let you ruin our plan. It's too important. So unfortunately, I have to get rid of you...

– Don't do it! Embla shouts.

Lukas blinks rapidly and holds his breath. *Now I'm going to die. And there's nothing I can do to stop it.*

Suddenly he sees a quick movement beside him.

Embla roars and bends her upper body down. She shoots one leg upward. Her foot hits Ahmad's hand. The gun flies out of his grip and lands on the floor.

Ahmad gapes at Embla in shock.

Then he clenches his fists and narrows his eyes.

Embla raises one arm in front of her face to protect herself, the other hanging limply at her side.

Ahmad slams a fist toward her head, but she manages to block it. He strikes again from the other side. Embla tries to lift her injured arm and grimaces. It's too late. He hits her in the head. She sways and takes a step back.

*I have to do something to help,* Lukas thinks.

He throws himself to the floor and crawls toward the gun.

Ahmad turns toward Lukas.

Embla spins around, roars and kicks Ahmad straight in the stomach. He groans and doubles over.

She lands another kick, this time toward his head.

Ahmad shakes his head, clenches his fists and prepares to strike again. This time he hits Embla's injured arm. She screams in pain.

Lukas grabs the gun from the floor and jumps to his feet. He points it at Ahmad's head and shouts:

– STAY STILL! I mean it!

Embla throws herself aside and runs over to Lukas.

Lukas steps closer to Ahmad and shouts:

– Put your hands up!

Ahmad looks around uncertainly.

– I'm not afraid to shoot, Lukas shouts. – Do what I say. Hands up!



Slowly Ahmad raises his hands.

Embla turns to Lukas, holds out her hand and says:

– Give me the gun. I'll keep an eye on him so you can look for Mille. But watch out for Storm.

– Are you sure? says Lukas. – You're hurt.

– Yes, absolutely sure. I'll shoot him if he tries anything. Run and save Mille!

## Chapter 49

### **On the police radio**

*U-05*: This is U-05. Meeting point is Amtmann Furus plass at Frogner. Train traffic between Nationaltheatret and Skøyen has been stopped. The fire incident commander confirms that the power has been shut off and that police can move safely along the tracks. First priority is to neutralize the perpetrator and secure the area for ambulance personnel. Over.

*Sierra 3-0*: Received, Sierra 3-0.

*Fox 3-1*: Received, Fox 3-1.

Lukas sprints along the platform, feeling his pulse pounding. He sees Storm's back.

Storm glances back and flinches. He stops and places his hand on the knife.

Lukas looks around desperately for something he can use as a weapon. On the platform lie a few stones that have fallen from the ceiling. He grabs a large stone that just fits in his hand. Then he runs toward Storm.

Storm pulls out the knife.

Lukas stops in front of him, gasping for breath and says:

– Where is she? Where is Mille?

– Just forget it, says Storm. He takes a step closer and raises the knife toward him.

Lukas grips the stone tightly. He feels his arm trembling from the weight.

Storm smirks and says:



– You don't think I'm scared of a stone, do you? And with those muscles you'll *never* hit me.

Lukas swallows and says:

– The police are coming. If you let Mille go, I'll tell them you helped. You'll probably get a lighter sentence.

Storm's eyes darken. He steps closer and says:

– I'm not planning on being locked up, if that's what you think.

– Please, Storm, says Lukas. – Help me save her! Please!

– Forget it.

– How can you do this? I thought we were friends.

– I don't have a choice, says Storm. – This is bigger than both of us.

– You don't actually believe what was in the newspaper? says Lukas. – That you're helping other children by kidnapping small, innocent kids here at home?

– Shut up, you have no idea what you're talking about. Drop the stone!

Lukas stands still.

Storm raises the knife, steps closer and says:

– Lukas, drop the stone!

Lukas takes a deep breath and tightens his grip on the stone. *I have to try to hit him!*

Just as Lukas lifts his arm, Storm lunges at him. He presses the sharp blade against Lukas's chest. The knife slices through his sweater.

Lukas feels the cold steel against his skin. He stands completely still, his hands shaking. *I have no choice.*

He drops the stone. It lands with a loud thud on the platform.

Storm shoves Lukas downward and shouts:

– Get on your knees!

Slowly Lukas kneels down. He looks up at Storm pleadingly and says:

– Let Mille go. Please. She hasn't done anything wrong. Take me instead.

Storm snorts and says:

– I don't think we'd get much for you. Besides, it's too late. We've already arranged a sale.



– Do you even hear yourself? says Lukas. – You’re going to *sell* a child? Have you been completely brainwashed?!

– Shut up, says Storm. – This is your own fault. *You* were the one who wanted to get rid of her. I told you to move on and forget about this.

Storm grabs Lukas by the hair and lifts the sharp blade toward his throat.

Lukas squeezes his eyes shut. Images of Mille flash through his mind. *What’s going to happen to her now?*

Light footsteps approach. Lukas opens his eyes. Could it be...?

Storm presses the knife against Lukas’s throat and says:

– Sorry, bro. I didn’t want it to end like this. But you’re not giving me a choice...

A shadow moves behind Storm. Then a bright voice says:

– Let go of my brother, you meanie!

## Chapter 50

### On the police radio

*U-05*: This is U-05. I want Sierra 3-0 together with Fox 3-1 to move in immediately. We are facing an unknown perpetrator and time is critical. You must take risks, but do not forget the tactical principles. Over.

*Sierra 3-0*: Received, Sierra 3-0.

*Fox 3-1*: Received, Fox 3-1.

Mille stands right behind Storm with a black metal rod in her hands. It looks like part of a stand.

Lukas shouts:

– Mille, run and hide! He has a knife!

– Not without you, Mille replies.

Storm turns toward Mille, smirks and says:

– You think I’m scared of a little seven-year-old?

– You should be, says Mille and swings the metal rod at Storm’s head.



Storm roars. He releases Lukas and walks slowly toward Mille with the sharp knife held in front of him.

Mille backs away in fright, waving the rod in front of her. Storm lunges forward, slashing the knife toward her. It nearly hits her stomach.

Lukas grabs the stone and jumps to his feet.

He runs after Storm and smashes the stone with all his strength against the back of Storm's head.

Storm staggers and turns toward Lukas.

They look each other in the eyes.

– Don't... Storm whispers.

Lukas strikes again, even harder this time.

Blood trickles from Storm's head, running down the side of his face. The knife falls onto the platform with a clang.

Storm sways a few steps to the side. Then he collapses and lies motionless on the platform.

Mille stands with wide eyes, her lower lip trembling.

– Is he... d-dead? I didn't want him to die!

– Neither did I, says Lukas. – But I didn't have a choice.

Lukas picks up the knife and tucks it into his belt. He bends down and checks Storm's breathing.

– He's breathing. He's still alive.

Lukas walks over to Mille.

– Are you hurt?

She shakes her head and drops the metal rod.

– I've been so incredibly scared for you, he says and hugs her tightly.

– We need something to tie him up with. He could wake up at any moment.

Mille pulls something from her pocket.

– We can use these.

She holds up a bundle of black zip ties.

– That's perfect! Where did you get them?

– From the bad man's desk.



– How about that, Lukas says and smiles.

He stuffs a few of the zip ties into his pocket and keeps a couple ready in his hand.

Then he sits down beside Storm. He gathers his arms, loops a zip tie around his wrists, and tightens it.

Just as Lukas is about to fasten a zip tie around his feet, he hears loud noises. He turns around. It sounds like someone is fighting. The noise is coming from the other side of the containers, where Ahmad and Embla are.

Embla screams.

Ahmad shouts:

– Stand still! Get down!

Embla cries:

– No! Don't! Please!

*BANG!*

Embla screams.

## Chapter 51

The echo of the gunshot and Embla's scream ricochets through the tunnel walls. His ears are ringing. Lukas stands frozen in place before he shouts:

– EMBLA!

He turns to Mille and says:

– Wait here!

He grabs the knife from the belt and sprints towards Embla and Ahmad.

As he rounds the corner of the containers, he comes to an abrupt halt.

Embla lies motionless on the ground. Ahmad stands in front of her, the gun in his hand. She is pale, her face drained of color. A pool of blood beside her is slowly spreading. Embla presses her hands against her stomach, moaning in pain. Her sweater is dark red. Her eyes slide shut.

– Embla, don't die! Lukas shouts.



Mille appears beside him with the metal rod. She gasps and cries out:

– Oh, no!

Lukas looks at Mille in alarm and says:

– I told you to wait over there!

– But I wanted to help, Mille says.

Ahmad aims the gun at Lukas and Mille.

– Drop the weapons!

Lukas exchanges a glance with Mille and says:

– We don't have a choice.

Slowly, they place the metal bar and the knife on the floor.

Ahmad points at Lukas and says:

– Get down on your knees.

– On one condition: you let my little sister go.

– Fuck you! Get down, or I'll shoot her right now, Ahmad says, aiming at Mille.

Tears well up in Lukas's eyes. He turns to Mille and says:

– I'm so sorry I dragged you into this. I love you more than anything.

– I love you too, Mille says.

Ahmad takes a step toward Lukas and shouts:

– I said get down!

Slowly, Lukas does as he's told.

Ahmad gestures to Mille with one hand and says:

– You. Come here.

Mille looks at Lukas, her eyes shining with tears, and remains where she is.

– Now! Or I'll shoot! Ahmad yells.

Mille's lower lip trembles. She takes a deep breath and walks toward Ahmad in tiny steps.

Ahmad grabs her and pulls her close.

Then he raises the gun, aims at Lukas, and says:

– Say goodbye to your big brother.

– NOOO! DON'T DO IT! Mille screams.

She drives her elbow into Ahmad's ribs. He jerks and loses his balance.



Lukas springs to his feet. *Now's my chance!*

He throws himself at Ahmad. They crash to the floor, and the gun slips from Ahmad's hand.

Lukas and Ahmad roll across the ground, fists pounding into each other.

Ahmad strikes Lukas in the head, rolls on top of him, and pins him down with his full weight. He clamps his metal hand around Lukas's throat, tightening his grip as he roars.

Lukas's eyes are wide open. He tries to tear Ahmad's arm away. It feels like his head is about to explode. Bright specks dance before his eyes. He gasps for air.

– LET GO OF LUKAS! Mille shouts. “NOW!”

Through blurred vision, Lukas sees that Mille is holding the gun. She's aiming at Ahmad.

Ahmad looks at her.

– Do it now! Mille shouts. – “Or I'll shoot!”

Ahmad loosens his grip around Lukas's throat but still holds onto him.

Lukas gulps for air, his head ringing.

– Give me the gun before someone gets hurt, Ahmad says. “You have no idea how to use it. What if you hit your brother and he dies?”

– “Shoot, Mille, Lukas says hoarsely. “Just do it. I *know* you can. Pretend you're at the shooting range.”

Her hands are shaking. Mille takes a deep breath. Grips the gun tightly. Plants her feet slightly apart and closes one eye. She draws in a breath. Then she pulls the trigger.

*BANG!*

Lukas's eyes fly open.

Ahmad roars in pain and releases him. He blinks rapidly and looks down at his shoulder. Blood seeps into his hoodie. He presses a hand against it, looks at Mille, and stammers:

– W-where did you learn to do that?!

Mille tosses her head and says:

– Just because I'm little doesn't mean I'm stupid.



Lukas staggers to his feet. He pulls a zip tie from his pocket, forces Ahmad's hands together, and binds them.

Ahmad moans in pain. Embla lies motionless on the platform, her eyes closed.

Suddenly Mille cries, "LOOK!"

Lukas looks up. Mille is pointing toward the tunnel.

Dark-clad figures run silently out of the tunnel and onto the platform.

They move in formation. The one in front carries a black shield. All of them have pistols in their hands. They wear helmets with visors covering their faces.

– It's the police! Lukas says. "We're saved!"

The officers spread out around them, backs to each other, guns aimed outward across the space.

Lukas steps toward one of the officers and says:

–I was the one who called you.

Then he points at Ahmad and says:

– He's the one who shot her, and who kidnapped my little sister.

The officer nods, walks over to Ahmad, and cuffs him.

A policewoman approaches Lukas and Mille and asks:

– Are you hurt?

–No, they answer.

– Good. Are there any other perpetrators here?

– Yes. A boy, Lukas says.

– Is he armed?

– Not anymore, Lukas says. "We tied his arms together and took his knife.

– Good. Where is he? she asks.

–I can show you, Lukas says.

–No, you need to stay here, she says. It's safer.

– Okay. He's on the platform that way, Lukas says, pointing.

The policewoman takes a colleague with her, and they run down the platform with their guns drawn.

Lukas walks to the end of the containers, leans out, and watches them.

That's when he sees it. The platform is empty. Storm is gone.



## Chapter 52

Ahmad is crouching between two police officers, his hands secured in handcuffs behind his back.

– You’re coming with us to the station, one of them says.

They support him as he gets to his feet.

Embla is helped up by another officer and has opened her eyes.

As Ahmad passes her, she looks at him and says:

– I told you that you would never get away with this.

Ahmad snorts. Then he turns toward Lukas and stares at him with narrowed eyes.

It looks as if he mouths something silently.

A chill runs down Lukas’s spine. *It felt like a threat.*

Ahmad is led away along the platform.

A police officer lifts a black radio with a thick antenna and says:

– The area is secure. Ambulance can access the platform.

Lukas crouches down beside Mille. He places his hands on her shoulders, frowns and asks:

– How are you? Did they do anything to you?

– They locked me in a room and took pictures of me, Mille says.

– Ugh, that’s disgusting! says Lukas.

His eyes fill with tears. He strokes her soft curls and says:

– I’m sorry, Mille. I’m so sorry about everything... I never wanted anything to happen to you.

Mille throws her arms around Lukas’s neck and says:

– I *knew* that!

Lukas hugs her small body tightly and says:

– I’m so unbelievably happy to see you again.

Behind him he hears footsteps and turns around.

Out of the tunnel come a man and a woman in red coveralls and yellow reflective vests. Finally, someone who can help Embla!

The man carries a white case with a red cross on it. They run over to Embla, cut open her sweater and examine her.



– It doesn't look too bad, the woman says to Embla. – You've been lucky.

Embla gives a faint smile and says:

– Lucky is one way to put it.

They lift Embla onto a white stretcher.

Lukas takes Mille's hand and together they walk over to Embla.

Embla looks straight at Mille and asks:

– How are you?

– I'm okay, says Mille.

– I'm so glad to hear that, says Embla. – You've been incredibly brave.

Mille smiles proudly and says:

– You and Lukas have been too.

Mille looks at the bandage on Embla's stomach and arm. She points and asks:

– Does it hurt?

– It's better now, says Embla. – I've been given something for the pain.

Suddenly Embla stiffens. She points at the hair tie with the pink plastic heart around Mille's wrist and says:

– Where did you get that?

– In the room where I was locked up, says Mille.

– I think it's Lilja's, says Embla. – I gave her one like that for her birthday. She wore it *all* the time.

– I saw that someone named Lilja had written her name on the wall. Do you know her?

– Yes. She's my sister. Or... she *was*...

Embla swallows.

– Then I want you to have it, says Mille. She slips the hair tie off and gently fastens it around Embla's wrist.

– Thank you so much, Mille, says Embla with teary eyes. She takes her hand and squeezes it.

The male paramedic says it's time to take Embla to the hospital. They carefully lift her.

Lukas turns to the man and asks:



– Is she going to be okay?

The man nods and says “yes”

– Are you sure? says Lukas, with a crease between his eyebrows.

– Absolutely, says the man warmly. – We’ve stopped the worst of the bleeding and there’s no damage to vital organs. She’s going to be fine.

Lukas exhales in relief. He gently squeezes Embla’s hand and says:

– I’ll text you later. If you want, I can come visit you at the hospital tomorrow?

– I’d like that, says Embla. – I’m so glad we managed to save Mille.

– Me too, says Lukas. – And I could *never* have done it without you. Thank you, thank you so much, Embla. Lilja would have been really proud of you.

Embla’s eyes fill with tears. She nods and places one hand over the hair tie around her wrist.

Lukas leans forward and gives her a warm hug. She softly kisses him on the cheek.

Then they carry Embla away along the platform.

Lukas stands there watching her go.

## Chapter 53

Lukas and Mille sit on the platform wrapped in two warm blankets. They have been examined by a paramedic and given food and drink.

A policewoman approaches and asks them to describe what Storm looks like so they can issue an alert. After describing him, Lukas remembers the cold look Ahmad gave him before being led away. And that it seemed as if he silently mouthed something threatening. He looks at the policewoman, clears his throat and asks:

– Could Ahmad or Storm be dangerous to us? I mean... do you think they might want revenge?

– No, you can feel safe, she says. – We’ll make sure you’re well protected and properly followed up. Ahmad will likely be in prison for a long time. And we’ll do everything we can to catch Storm too.



Lukas nods. Then he says:

– There’s something I haven’t told you yet: Ahmad and Storm tried to sell Mille on the dark web. And they had arranged to meet someone today who was going to buy her.

The policewoman looks at him intently and says:

– Okay. Do you know anything more? Had they agreed on a time for the handover?

– I heard them talking about it earlier. And then there were forty-five minutes until they were supposed to meet him. But I don’t know anything else.

– How long ago was that, do you think?

– I don’t know, says Lukas. – Maybe fifteen minutes ago?

The policewoman quickly checks her watch and says:

– Okay. Do you know where the handover was supposed to take place?

– No, unfortunately, says Lukas.

– But I do, says Mille, straightening her back. – I heard one of the men say it was at the parking garage by Oslo Central Station.

– That’s *very* good that you told me this, the policewoman says. – Wait here.

She steps a few meters away, stops with her back to them, takes out her phone and speaks while gesturing with one hand.

Then she returns and says:

– Okay, here’s the situation: We believe the person who arranged to buy Mille is someone we’ve been monitoring on the dark web for a long time. Someone who has committed several criminal acts against children. But we haven’t been able to identify him yet.

– If you hurry to the parking garage, maybe you can arrest him, says Lukas.

– Yes, but there’s a problem: We don’t know what he looks like. Or even whether it’s a man or a woman, though we believe it’s a man based on the writing.

– Can’t you just go there and try to figure out who it is? says Mille.

– We can, but there are often many people there at this time of day. It can be difficult to determine who it is. And we can’t risk him suspecting that the police are present and leaving. But there is one way we might be able to lure him out...



– How? asks Mille.

The policewoman clears her throat, looks at them both seriously and says:

– I know you’ve been through a lot, and this is a big thing to ask. But if Mille comes with us, we can try to lure him out and arrest him.

Lukas takes Mille’s hand and says:

– WHAT!?! You’re going to use Mille as bait?

– Yes, I know it sounds risky, the policewoman says. – And we don’t usually operate this way. But it’s the only opportunity we have right now.

– But isn’t that dangerous? says Lukas. – What if something happens to her?

– We will protect Mille so she won’t be harmed. A plainclothes officer will stay with her the entire time. His name is Omar, and he’s very experienced. And there will be many officers in the parking garage ready to intervene if necessary.

Mille clings to Lukas. Her hands are sweaty.

The policewoman kneels in front of Mille and says:

– What do you think, Mille? Would you be willing to help us catch him?

Mille bites her lip and falls silent. Then she says:

– It’s really disgusting to think that he buys children.

– Yes, it’s *really* disgusting, the policewoman nods.

– I don’t want him to do that to other kids, says Mille. – But *if* I’m going to help, I want Lukas to be there too. She looks up at Lukas and asks:

– Can you?

– Of course, says Lukas.

The policewoman slowly shakes her head and says:

– Your brother unfortunately cannot come along. It wouldn’t be safe.

– Then I won’t do it! says Mille.

The policewoman takes a deep breath and says:

– Okay, I understand that you want him there. We’ll make it work. But it’s very important that you do *exactly* as we say so you stay safe. Okay?

Lukas and Mille nod.

– Good. Then I’ll contact your parents and ask for their consent, she says.



## Chapter 54

Oslo Police District

### **Deprivation of liberty: Oslo**

14 June 16:28

A seven-year-old girl who was deprived of her liberty in Bærum on her way home from school on Monday has been found safe in Oslo. The girl was rescued by her fourteen-year-old brother and a girl of the same age. The children are being cared for by the police and health services.

One of the suspected perpetrators behind the deprivation of liberty has been arrested. Another suspect is still at large. He was wanted yesterday for an armed robbery of a bakery delivery van. He is a seventeen-year-old boy, approximately 185 cm tall, with short blond hair. His first name is Storm, but he may be using another name. He was last seen on Frogner in Oslo, wearing a black hoodie and a silver chain around his neck. Distinctive features: His nose is slightly crooked. He has a prosthetic from the knee down on his right leg and limps when he walks. On the left side of his neck he has a tattoo of an octopus. The suspect is considered dangerous. The police urge the public to exercise caution.

The police wish to contact witnesses and others who may have information in the case.

Updates to follow.

## Chapter 55

Mille sits in the passenger seat next to Omar. She glances at him. He has dark hair and stubble. Around one hand he wears a thick silver chain. Several of his fingers have silver rings. He is wearing a grey hoodie, faded jeans and sneakers. *He does not look like a police officer.*



The car drives down into the parking garage at Oslo Central Station. Rows of cars are parked close together. Omar finds a free space and turns off the engine.

He runs a hand through his dark hair, ruffling it slightly. He checks that his gun is securely fastened in the holster at his hip, inside the waistband of his trousers, then pulls the hoodie down over it.

Mille unbuckles her seatbelt, stares out the window and asks:

– Where is Lukas?

– He’s in the black van over there, Omar says, pointing toward a black van with tinted windows parked behind a white pillar.

Omar looks at Mille and goes on:

– Even though you can’t see him, he can hear everything we say through a radio in the van. And when we’re out in the garage, he can see you on a screen. We’ve placed several hidden cameras here.

– But what if the man does something dangerous? Mille asks.

– What if he has a gun?

– We will take very good care of you, Mille, Omar says.

He points around the garage and says:

– Do you see the parking attendant? And the woman getting help from the red roadside assistance vehicle? The man talking on his phone over there? And the scruffy guy with a plastic bag collecting empty bottles from the bins?

Mille nods.

– They’re all police officers protecting you. And there are more you can’t see. All exits are blocked or monitored. You are completely safe.

He taps his ear and says:

– We have invisible earpieces and microphones so we can talk to each other.

Omar glances quickly at his watch and says:

– We need to go now. But remember what we talked about: Don’t say anything to the man we meet. And pretend you’re scared.

– I don’t have to pretend... Mille says looking down at her hands with a frown.

– You’re safe with me, Mille, Omar says, placing a hand on her shoulder. – I’m good at protecting people. I’ve even protected the King.



- Have you? Mille says and looks up. – Did you work at the palace?
  - Among other places.
  - Have you seen the King wearing a crown?
  - No, I haven't, Omar says with a smile. Then he takes her hand, squeezes it gently and asks:
    - Are you ready?
- Mille feels her heart beating. She bites her lip and nods.
- They step out of the car.

## Chapter 56

Lukas sits in the van with dark-clad police officers. Some look out the windows, others stare at the laptops in their laps showing the parking garage and entrances. It is completely silent except for occasional distorted radio sounds.

On the dashboard is a radio with a small screen, a black phone with a thick antenna and many buttons and switches. Lukas leans forward. *I wonder which one turns on the siren.*

The officer beside him tilts the laptop so Lukas can see. Mille and Omar stand still by an orange wall, holding hands. They have not seen any suspicious people yet. Lukas bites his nail. *Poor Mille. She looks really scared. Why is this taking so long? Maybe the man realised it was a trap and took off. Or maybe we're too late.*

The radio crackles and then a voice says: "A person in a dark jacket approaching the entrance at the Central Station. He is carrying a brown laptop bag and is talking on the phone."

Lukas stares at the screen. A balding man enters the garage. He walks past Omar and Mille without looking at them, still talking on the phone and nodding seriously as he talks.

He takes up his car key, presses a button. The lights of a grey car flash. He gets in, starts the car and drives out of the garage.



The radio crackles: “Male observed in driver’s seat of a white Lexus with tinted windows. The car is parked in section A, to the right of the exit toward Bjørvika. We are checking who the owner is now.”

The camera zooms in on the white car. Lukas sees a dark shadow in the front seat. The radio crackles again: “It’s a rental car.”

The door slowly opens. A man steps out of the car. He has light hair, glasses and blue eyes. He wears a beige jacket, a checked shirt and blue trousers.

*He looks completely ordinary, Lukas thinks. It could be someone’s dad from my class. Could it really be him?*

The man walks slowly toward the exit where Mille and Omar are standing, glancing nervously around.

When he reaches Mille, he quickens his pace. He stops before them, takes a look at Mille and says:

– You’re even cuter than in the pictures.

Mille stares at the ground.

Omar clears his throat and says:

– Are you the one I arranged to meet?

The man nods.

– Have you transferred the money as agreed? Omar asks.

– Yes.

– May I see proof?

The man pulls out his phone from his jacket pocket and holds it up in front of Omar.

Omar pushes Mille behind him and shouts:

– Armed police! Hands out to the sides! Show me your hands! Stand still, stand still!

The man flinches, turns and runs toward the exit.

Omar chases him, and grabs a hold of him. The man waves his arms, struggles free and runs again. Omar charges after him and throws his full weight at him. The man pitches forward and hits the ground, with Omar on top of him. Omar pins him down.



With his face on the ground, the man says:

– Please, I haven't done anything wrong.

– That's for the judge to decide, Omar says. He pulls the man's arms together behind his back and snaps handcuffs onto him.

Two other police officers approach and escort the man into a car. Omar walks back to Mille, crouches down, and says:

– Are you okay?

Mille nods and says.

– I want to see Lukas. And Mum and Dad.

– I understand that, Omar says. I'll call your parents now so you and Lukas can speak to them. I heard that they were at the cabin, but they are coming home tonight. After you have talked to them, I can drive you home in a police car.

– Yesss! Mille exclaims.

They walk toward the van where Lukas is sitting. Lukas pushes the door open, jumps out, and runs toward Mille. He gives her a big hug and says,

– You were amazing, Mille!

Mille smiles proudly.

After they've spoken with Mille's and Lukas's parents on the phone, Omar drives them home in a police car.

–Can you turn on the woo-woo thing? Mille asks.

Omar smiles and says:

– No, unfortunately I can't. The siren can only be used when it's urgent.

– Oh, that's so boring, Mille says, pulling a face.

As they park in front of their house, Omar says:

– Before you go, I have some good news. The police have seized Ahmad's computer, and they found a lot on it that can be used as evidence in the case against him. He'll probably be in prison for a long time. They've also deleted the post and the pictures he put up of Mille on the dark web.

– That's good, Lukas says, taking Mille's hand and giving it a squeeze.



## Chapter 57

When Lukas and Mille gets home, she runs upstairs to her room. Lukas follows.

When he reaches the upstairs living room, the door to her bedroom is open. He hears Mille talking, so he tiptoes over to the doorway and peeks inside.

Mille is sitting on the bed with Brumle in her lap. She's speaking softly to him and says:

- Did you miss me?
- Were you scared that something had happened to me?

Brumle nods.

– You don't have to be scared anymore, Brumle. I'm home again, and I'll take good care of you.

She wiggles his paws and gives him a hug.

Then she starts singing "Tomorrow" to Brumle, one of the songs from Annie.

Lukas gets goose bumps and a lump in his throat as she sings.

When Millie finishes, he walks into the room. He sits down beside her on the bed and says:

- You're going to be absolutely *amazing* as Annie.
- Do you think so?
- Yes, truly, Lukas says.

Mille bites her lip and says:

- I just hope I can remember all the words...
- I can help you practice.
- You can?! she says, beaming.
- Of course, Lukas says, giving her a hug.

## Chapter 58

Norway's Gazette

Right now



### **Kidnapped 7-year-old girl rescued by her older brother**

*OSLO: A 7-year-old girl who was kidnapped on Monday was rescued today by her 14-year-old brother. He was helped by a girl his own age, who was shot during the dramatic rescue operation.*

The 7-year-old girl was abducted on her way home from school in Bærum by a man in a white van. Today she was rescued by her 14-year-old brother—with help from a girl the same age. The two teenagers managed on their own to uncover where the girl was being held captive and alerted the police. The police responded and arrested the alleged main perpetrator, a 17-year-old boy.

The 14-year-old girl who took part in the rescue was shot by the perpetrator. The girl is being cared for by medical personnel, and the police state that she is not in life-threatening danger.

### **Police: “A breakthrough”**

Lead investigator **Per Asle Amundsen** confirms that today’s events mark a turning point in a wide-ranging investigation.

– For a long time, the police have been working to uncover criminal actors who offer minors as commodities on the dark web. The investigation has been named “Operation The Dark Room,” says Amundsen.

– The police have worked closely with police in several countries and received assistance from Kripos. Today we have had a major breakthrough, thanks to two brave teenagers and a little girl. Their identities must be protected, and they are therefore not named. But thanks to them, more lives have been saved—both now and in the future, he says.

### **Suspected of murder and multiple kidnappings**

The alleged main perpetrator who has been arrested is also linked to several other cases under investigation:



– He is suspected of being behind the murder of Lilja Oddvinsdóttir, the daughter of Member of Parliament Karin Solbakken. He is also suspected of being involved in the disappearance of several children in the Oslo area, says Amundsen.

– The police’s main priority going forward is to find out what has happened to these children and try to bring them home, he says.

Amundsen states that the police have issued a wanted notice for another 17-year-old boy suspected of involvement in these cases. The first name of the wanted boy is Storm: he has light, short hair and an octopus tattoo on the left side of his neck. He has a prosthesis from the knee down that makes him limp when he walks. Amundsen asks witnesses and others with tips in the case to contact the police.

According to Amundsen, the police have arrested a man in his early 40s who is alleged to have arranged to buy the 7-year-old girl on the dark web.

### **Warning parents**

Per Asle Amundsen cannot comment on details of the investigation, but takes the opportunity to issue an appeal:

– A common feature of these cases is that children have been contacted online by people pretending to be someone else. I want to emphasize how important it is that parents, teachers, and everyone who is in contact with children teach them to be cautious about what information they share online. It can be vital.

– It is adults’ responsibility to teach children that they must never meet a person they have gotten to know online alone. It is also adults’ responsibility to make children feel safe enough to tell someone if they experience something that isn’t okay online or elsewhere.

Amundsen stresses that this also applies in cases where children have done something they regret, for example sharing personal information or nude photos of themselves.

– Children must know that it is never too late to tell an adult and get help, he says.



## Chapter 59

Lukas makes eggs and bacon for supper, and Mille devours it.

When she finishes, she grows quiet. She looks down at her hands and twists them tightly together.

– How are you doing? Lukas asks.

– Uh... there's just something I've been wondering about, Mille says, looking up at him.

– What?

– That Storm... how did you actually know him?

Lukas feels his cheeks burn.

– He's someone I've been gaming with for a long time. I thought we were friends. I was very wrong about that.

– But... did you tell him you wanted to get rid of me? Mille asks, her eyes shining.

– No! Lukas says. – Or... I mean... I said something *really* stupid after you and I argued that day. You know, the night before you disappeared.

– What did you say? Mille says.

Lukas rubs his palms over his face and says:

– It really hurts to say... because I *didn't* mean it. But I said he was lucky to be an only child. And after I said that, Storm said he could help me get rid of you. I thought it was just a joke. I would *never* have done anything to hurt you. I hope you believe me.

Mille nods.

Lukas continues: – So... when you were gone the next day, I was terrified. I *hate* myself for being that stupid.

Mille tilts her head and says:

– But you were the one who saved me. And it's not your fault he was mean.

– No, but I should never have trusted him.

Lukas reaches across the table, places his hand over hers and says:



– I’m sorry, Mille. I wish you had never gone through this. I feel like the worst big brother in the world. Even if I’m not very good at showing it, I love you very much.

– I know, Mille says with a smile. – I love you too.

When Lukas walks into Mille’s bedroom, she is already in her pajamas. Her bedside lamp is on. She lies in bed reading a book, Brumle tucked under her arm.

Lukas fights back tears. *It’s almost too good to be true. Mille is safely home again.*

She turns toward him. Her eyes are narrow, the way they get when she’s sleepy.

– Is it long until Mum and Dad get home? she asks, her voice creaky with tiredness.

Lukas swallows and says:

– It’ll be a while. It’s a long drive. But they’re coming as fast as they can. Shall I read to you while we wait?

– Would you?

– Yes, of course, Lukas says. – I’m curious to see what happens next in the book.

Lukas sits on her bed with a pillow behind his back. Mille leans against him, Brumle in her lap.

He begins to read.

While he reads, Brumle bounces on her lap.

When Lukas is about to start a new chapter, Mille looks up at him.

– You know what? I’m glad you’re my big brother. And so is Brumle.

Lukas’s eyes fill with tears. He wraps his arm around her, pulls her close and says:

– And I’m super glad you’re my little sister, Mille. Truly. I’m very, very proud of you. You even saved my life today. Twice.

He strokes her freckled cheek.

Mille smiles and lifts both arms, flexing her “meatball muscles.”

– I’m a superhero. With suuuuperpowers.

Lukas smiles and says:



– You’re definitely a super little sister.

He keeps reading aloud. After a while, Mille’s breathing grows calmer and her body heavier. She leans against him, rubbing her eyes with her small fists.

– You can go to sleep if you want, Lukas says softly. – I can sit here until you fall asleep.

She looks up at him, smiles and murmurs, “Thank you.”

Mille crawls under the duvet with Brumle in her arms. Lukas tucks the blanket around her.

He turns off the light and sits down on the chair beside her bed. A strip of light enters the room from the door left slightly ajar.

Mille falls asleep after just a few minutes.

Lukas remains sitting there, watching her. Her small, innocent face. The steady breathing. The beautiful golden curls spread across the pillow like rays of sunlight.

His eyes fill with tears. He thinks about everything that has happened. And everything that could have happened. How terribly wrong it could have gone.

It’s unbearable. He has to put those thoughts on pause.

Lukas wipes away his tears, takes a deep breath and quietly slips out.

He goes into his own room across the hall, leaving both doors open so he can hear Mille if she wakes or has a nightmare.

He sits down at his desk, picks up his phone and sends a message to Embla.

**Lukas**

19:43

How are you?

**Embla**

Better

They’ve patched me up

But I have to stay at the hospital for a while

How’s Mille?



**Lukas**

Good to hear you're doing better!  
Mille's okay. She's sleeping now.

**Embla**

That's good! Tough girl.

**Lukas**

Yes, she really is.  
I'll come visit you tomorrow.

**Embla**

Great, looking forward to seeing you!  
We were a legendary team, don't you think?

**Lukas**

Absolutely! :)  
Lukas feels a tingling sensation inside him.  
He turns on his computer to game.  
The machine hums, and blue light spreads across the room.  
Then a new message pops up.  
A chill runs down his spine when he sees who it's from.

20:03

Shad0w\_Striker: 1-0 to you in the first round  
But the match isn't over.  
It has only just begun.



## Epilogue

**One month later**

**Lukas**

Hi, how are you?

**Embla**

Heey! Still enjoying Italy

My wounds are healing nicely

I'm lying on a sun lounger right now, looking out over the sea

**Lukas**

Niiice! You're only missing one of those umbrella drinks

**Embla**

Yeah :) Are you still at the cabin?

**Lukas**

Yeah. The weather's really nice here now, so we're swimming a lot

**Embla**

Sounds amazing

You haven't heard anything more from Storm, have you?

**Lukas**

No, thankfully. I hope I never hear from him again

But I do wonder what he's up to...

**Embla**

Same! I hope the police find him



Is Mille still doing okay?

**Lukas**

Yeah, she seems completely normal during the day, actually  
But she's still having quite a few nightmares  
Last night she climbed up into the top bunk and slept next to me

**Embla**

That's good that you can comfort her  
How are you sleeping?

**Lukas**

Still struggling a bit  
My thoughts kind of spin extra at night  
But it helped talking to that psychologist

**Embla**

Same here  
By the way, I had a nice dream about Lilja last night  
She was smiling and laughing as she ran along her favorite beach in Iceland  
It's black lava sand with really beautiful stones in black, gray  
and orange

**Lukas**

Sounds like a beautiful dream

**Embla**

Yeah, and in a way it felt good to see her again, even if  
it was just in a dream

**Lukas**



I understand that

Is it next week you're going to Iceland with your dad?

**Embla**

Yes. I'm going to that beach and find a stone  
to place on her grave

I'll try to find one shaped like a heart

**Lukas**

She would probably have liked that

**Embla**

I think so too

**Lukas**

When are you coming home again?

**Embla**

The week before school starts

**Lukas**

Me too

Shall we do something then?

**Embla**

Yees!

Preferably something that doesn't give me more bullet holes

**Lukas**

Ha ha, I think we can manage that

Looking forward to it!





**Author Hanne Gjerde** (born 1972) works as a lawyer at the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families. In her writing, she often explores the relationship between humans and machines. Hanne Gjerde won the Book Devourer Prize in 2024 for her novel *The Eternity Game*, an award in which around 120,000 primary and lower secondary school students take part in reading and voting for the best book of the year. In 2025, she was once again nominated for the Book Devourer Prize with *Mr. AI*, which is one of the super-finalists in the 2026 edition of the award. (Photo: Kirsten Sjøwall)

**More books by Hanne Gjerde:**

Mr. AI, 2024

The Eternity Game, 2022

The Wishing Machine, 2019

The Magic Doll Factory, 2018

Best Friend in a Can, 2017