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**Glowing reviews**

*“...literary miracle of a book.”* Dagbladet, 6 out of 6 stars

*“... nothing less than magnificent.”* VG, 6 out of 6 stars



Maja Lunde and Lisa Aisato (photo: Mattis Sandblad, VG)

## **PRAISE FOR THE SNOW SISTER**

### **True Christmas joy! (6 out of 6 stars)**

***The Snow Sister* is an unusually exciting advent book about death, grief and ghosts, which says something fundamentally wonderful about celebrating Christmas and togetherness among the living.**

“In twenty-four chapters leading up to Christmas Eve, readers follow Christian’s search for a way to celebrate Christmas, and enjoy a luxurious book that is nothing less than magnificent...

The book is luxurious, and intended to last for generations. It features exclusive paper, gilt edging, decorated end pages and a sewn binding. The only thing that’s missing is a silk ribbon bookmark. *The Snow Sister* is an investment in Christmas joy for many years to come.

*The Snow Sister* is a beautiful, atmospheric and wise book that contains all the heart desires. It is a book to take out and read in the run up to Christmas year after year – a reminder to be grateful for life and all the good things that await.”

-VG (Norwegian newspaper), 10 October 2018 by critic Kristine Isaksen

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### ***The Snow Sister* – an outstanding Christmas story A new classic of Norwegian Christmas literature has arrived (6 out of 6 stars)**

“Finding weaknesses in this book isn’t easy. It has everything one would expect from a Christmas story – it’s exciting, gorgeously presented, full of sadness and joy – and just the right amount of sentimentality.

Maja Lunde’s story is beautiful and inspiring, and Lisa Aisato’s illustrations are in a league of their own. Aisato is already well-known for being a formidable illustrator, but here she surpasses herself with images full of emotion, wonder and physical details that sparkle with Christmas spirit...

The story is a challenging one, but Maja Lunde does an excellent job of untangling the story’s complications, evoking laughter, shudders and tears along the way until everything is finally resolved in this literary miracle of a book.

This book is about more than Christmas. It’s about friendship, sibling love, coming together as a family and accepting the mercilessness of death that threatens every happiness. All this is woven into a fable that shines with a willingness to let life emerge victorious. A new classic of Norwegian Christmas literature has arrived.”

-Dagbladet (Norwegian Newspaper), 24 October 2018 by critic Fredrik Wandrup

## THE SNOW SISTER: FOREIGN SALES

- Bulgarian Uniscorp
- Chinese (simplified) Zhejiang Literature & Art
- Croatian Naklada Ljevak
- Czech Host Publishing House
- Danish Turbine
- Estonian Rahva Raamat
- Finnish Schildts & Söderströms
- Faroese Bokadeildin
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- Romanian Editura Art
- Russian AST
- Slovakian Tatran
- Spanish, Catalan Editora Bruguera & B de Blok (PRH)
- Swedish Bonnier Carlsen
- Turkish Can Publishing
- Ukrainian The Old Lion Publishing House

# THE SNOW SISTER by Maja Lunde

English test translation by Mark Neil Patterson

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## CHAPTER ONE

This is a story about Hedwig - about how she became my best friend, and how I lost her. And it's a story about my sister June – already gone, but still with me today.

The first thing I saw of Hedwig was her nose. Covered in freckles, pressed against the glass window of the swimming pool as she stood there alone. On the outside, looking in. Snow was falling gently on her, resting on her hat, and on the red hair poking out from underneath, and on her thick, woollen cloak. The cloak was as red as her hair, bright as Santa's suit.

I'd been swimming for a while. I used to swim a lot back then, almost every day. Back and forth, measuring the length of the pool over and over again. Under the water more than above it, occasionally raising my head above the surface to take a breath before diving back underwater. I didn't have to think of anything while I swam. All I needed to focus on was my breathing, my strokes, and the water. I was quite good, too – it's hard to swim every day without getting faster and faster over time. Improving by a few tenths of a second, every single day.

In the beginning, the only reason I'd started to swim was because John did it. He was my best friend, and since neither of us was especially keen on football, swimming it was. As it happens, he was there the afternoon that Hedwig showed up.

He'd arrived later than me, and I remember him standing by the side of the pool, shivering. He was looking cautiously at the water, as though he was dreading jumping in. I swam over to him, hauling myself out of the water to stand beside him.

"Hi", said John.

"Hi", I said.

"Is it cold?" he said.

"A bit", I said. "Just the way it should be."

"OK", John said.

"It's colder outside", I said.

"Yeah", John said. "It's snowing."

"Yes", I said.

"It was snowing more yesterday", John said.

"Yeah", I said. "Maybe."

"Yeah", John said.

"Yeah", I said.

And that was that. I watched the water dripping from my body, down onto the blue tiles. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* I should say something, I told myself. John must have been freezing, because just then he wrapped his arms around himself tightly, as though hugging himself. He got cold quickly – unsurprising for such a tiny, skinny twig of a boy. The shortest in the class, next to me. Something else we had in common.

Perhaps you're thinking that the only reasons John and I were friends were that we were both short and didn't like football, and that we didn't have much else to talk about. But

we'd always had plenty to talk about, before. We used to chatter constantly, from the moment we met up on the way to school each morning, until we both had to go home at the end of the day. I never had to think about what to say when I was with John. It was like he was a magnet, pulling words out of me in long sentences, stopping only to give him a chance to respond in kind. And laughter. John and I always used to laugh a lot. Hysterical laughter, the kind that leaves you rolling in tears on the floor. Trilling laughter, my mother used to call it. She said it was the best sound she'd ever heard, as though white, round pearls of laughter were spilling from our mouths.

But that was before. After that summer, we didn't laugh any more, and it was getting harder for me to find anything to say whenever we were together. Our conversations these days were short, sometimes just a few words about the weather. I'd never talked about the weather so much as I had in the past six months. I'd always thought of the weather as something only grownups talked about, but not now. There certainly weren't any glittering pearls of laughter. Not anymore.

Perhaps you're thinking that my life was sad and empty, with no talking or laughing. And you'd be right. It *was* sad and empty. Until Hedwig turned up.

John clearly didn't want to be stand there freezing for any longer, and I had no particular desire to just stand there and drip. So, into the pool we both went.

I kept swimming lengths. Back and forth, back and forth. John started out doing lengths alongside me, but he soon fell behind, unable to keep up. I was quite a bit faster than him these days, after months of swimming almost every day.

Head above water, breathe in. Back under, then breathe out. New stroke. Kick. Don't think about anything else.

But suddenly, it was impossible to concentrate. I noticed that the lifeguards had decorated their booth in time for Christmas, with blinking, coloured lights around the window facing the pool.

Christmas. That's right...it was almost Christmas. The best time of the year. Plenty of people think of Christmas as the best day of the year, but I had more reason than most. It's my birthday. That's why I'm called Christian. And this year I was turning ten, even – a round number, on Christmas Eve itself. Reason enough to be excited, or so you'd think. But I wasn't excited at all.

I'm sure you have plenty of ideas of how Christmas should be. *Where* you'll be, *what* decorations you'll be hanging on the tree, *how* it should smell, and *who* you'll be spending it with. You doubtless want it to be pretty much the same, every year. So did I. Christmas at our house had always gone something like this:

Mum and dad would decorate the tree the day before Christmas Eve, after my sister and I had gone to bed. When we woke up on Christmas Eve, I was always afraid that they wouldn't have managed to get everything finished in time. I'd open my bedroom door as quietly as possible, tiptoe over the floorboards to the stairs, and down towards the ground floor. I'd stand there silently, listening for the telltale sounds of Christmas - the jangling of angel chimes above the fireplace, the crackle of wood burning in the hearth, and the music mum would always be playing. A boy's choir, singing *We wish you a Merry Christmas*, or *Joy to the World*. The singing was beautiful, so beautiful that it sometimes brought tears to my eye as I stood there, silently listening. When I was certain that everything sounded the way it was supposed to, I'd creep further down the stairs, and over to the door into the living room, where I'd stop again, this time to inhale, deeply. The smell needed to be just right, too – that heady combination of pine, incense, gingerbread, oranges, cinnamon and cocoa. That

last smell was the best of all. Once I was sure everything was in place, I'd finally risk opening the door properly.

At first, I would stand there, blinking, because you could barely see the room for all the decorations. Everything would be so perfect, so warm, so golden, and so beautiful, that I could barely breathe. Then there was mum, and dad, and they'd both be hugging me, wishing me *Happy Birthday*, and *Merry Christmas, our little Christmas baby*, and *come on, let's have some cocoa, and breakfast, all of us together*. And there, sitting at a breakfast table piled high with food and decorations, would be my sisters, smiling warmly. We'd wish each other a merry Christmas, all three of us. Little Augusta, born in August. Me, Christian, the middle child, born on Christmas Eve. And June, the oldest. You can probably guess when she was born.

June. My sister. Every Christmas, she'd been there. But not this year. This year, her place at the table would be empty. She was dead. Dead, and buried in the churchyard. It was no surprise that I was wondering what this Christmas was going to be like, that afternoon, as I swam back and forth in the swimming pool.

I tried to focus on my swimming again. Up, breathe in, kick, down, breathe out, kick. But then I mistimed my breathing, my windpipe filling with water, flooding my nose and throat. I made my way to the shallow end and put my feet down, coughing. It was then, as I stood spluttering and coughing, waist deep in the water, that I saw Hedwig. She was standing outside in the snow, looking in, her freckled nose pressed so hard against the glass that it was completely white. Suddenly, she must have noticed me staring at her, because she pulled back from the window and looked at me, puzzled. I looked around. Nobody else seemed to have noticed her. John was still swimming back and forth, unable to see anything but water. But I saw the girl, and she saw me. Then she raised her hand, and waved to me.

I raised my own arm, waving back. That was when she smiled, the biggest grin I'd seen in a long, long time.

## CHAPTER TWO

She was still standing there in the snow when I left the pool. Not standing by the window, but by the entrance. Her red cloak was lit up by the street light overhead, snow glistening on her hat. She was hopping from side to side, obviously trying to keep warm. Then she spotted me, smiling that broad smile again, before running over and skidding to a halt in front of me in the snow.

"Finally! There you are!" she exclaimed.

"Errr...yes", I replied.

She just stood there, looking at me. I didn't know what to say. She'd obviously been waiting for me. But why? Had I met her before? Should I recognize her? Had she gone to my school? Maybe a cousin, some distant relative I'd met at a family get-together? I racked my brain, but couldn't remember ever having seen her before. Besides, I was sure I'd have

remembered that face. Small, and freckled, with grey eyes that sparkled in the wintry darkness, and a huge, grinning, gap-toothed mouth.

"I'm Hedwig", she explained. "No, hang on...I should introduce myself properly. My full name. It's Hedwig...oh, I wish I could say 'Hedwig Victoria Johanna Rosendal Ekelund', or something like that...but I'd be lying. And you're not supposed to lie, obviously, especially when you're meeting someone for the first time."

She paused to take a much-needed breath. She was gabbling, talking faster than anyone I'd ever met, and if she hadn't paused for breath she'd probably have fainted. She held out her hand, and continued:

"My name is Hedwig Hansen, I'm afraid. Just Hedwig Hansen. You probably think it's simple enough, just being called Hansen. That's what some people say. 'That must be practical'. But that's probably just because they've got far more exciting names themselves, and haven't thought about how boring it must be just to be called Hansen. I didn't even get a middle name, not even something simple like Anna or Ruth, or even something as boring as Karen, shoved in between Hedwig and Hansen. I'll always resent my parents for that, you know, for not being at least a little bit more imaginative when they were thinking up names for me..."

"Err...OK", I stammered, by way of reply. "I see."

I was stumped. I'd never met anyone who seemed to have so much to say, so quickly, and there didn't seem to be an obvious response to any of it. But then I noticed her hand, still stretched out towards me, and I managed to shake it.

"I'm Christian", I said. "Christian Wilhelmsen".

"Hello, Christian", said Hedwig. "You have no idea how incredibly happy I am to meet you."

"Err...no, I suppose not", I replied.

"Should we go?" she asked.

"Yeah", I said. I was on my way home anyway, and if Hedwig wanted to follow me, I couldn't exactly say no. She skipped excitedly along the pavement alongside me, looking every bit as incredibly happy as she claimed to be. I could barely remember seeing anyone look so happy before, ever.

"You were swimming really well", she said, with a smile. "Back and forth, back and forth...and so fast! How did you learn to do that? How long have you been able to? Do you train often?"

"Yes", I replied.

"I bet you do. It looks great fun, just swimming back and forth like that, swishing through the water like a fish. Or a shark. Do you ever think about that? That you're like a shark, racing along looking for something to eat? A big, scary shark. Or maybe a dolphin, all happy and jumpy. I love dolphins, don't you? It's like they're smiling all the time. Have you noticed that? The way dolphins are always smiling? It's probably because they like swimming so much, don't you think? They have to smile all the time because they're so happy about being able to swim so fast."

"...Yes...", I managed.

"You don't say much, do you?" said Hedwig. "But I really like you anyway, and I could see how good a swimmer you are. Do you know how lucky you are, being able to swim like that?"

"I've never really thought about it before", I told her.

"You should think about it properly," said Hedwig. "Really think about it carefully".

Then, for the first time, she was silent. I looked at her. She wasn't smiling anymore, her face almost stern as she looked at me, as though she was annoyed that I didn't understand how lucky I was to be such a good swimmer. Then, suddenly, I understood.

"You...you can't swim, can you?" I asked.

She didn't answer straight away, but her eyes went blank.

"No."

She drew a deep breath, as though she was trying not to cry.

"It's my biggest wish in the whole, wide world", she said softly. "I think I'd be a more complete person if I could swim."

"You look pretty complete to me", I said. "If that's any comfort, I mean."

But Hedwig didn't reply. We walked through the snow in silence for a while, until we reached the centre of town. The Christmas decorations were up, just as they were every year. Pine wreaths hung between the buildings, decorated with bright lights and red ribbons.

The silence was almost deafening after all that talking, and I looked over at Hedwig. She turned her head, gazing up at the lights as they shone above us.

"Luckily, there are plenty of other things in the world to enjoy", she said.

"Maybe", I said.

"Christmas, for one", said Hedwig. "Isn't it just so mind-blowingly beautiful that it feels like your heart is going to burst?"

"It's pretty good", I conceded.

Normally I loved it when they'd finally hung up all the Christmas decorations, but this year I hadn't even noticed that they were there, even with only a week to go until the big day. Not until right now.

"Pretty good?!" Hedwig exclaimed. "Is that all you have to say about Christmas? The most beautiful, wonderful, cozy and perfect time of year?"

Suddenly, she seemed almost angry at me. "Do you know what I think?"

"Err....no?"

"I think maybe you swim *too* much."

I didn't reply, suddenly irritated. Who on earth was this girl, anyway? She'd just appeared out of nowhere and followed me home, and now here she was, poking around inside my head. Acting as though she knew me!

"I'll swim as much as I like", I snapped.

"Yes, you do that", said Hedwig.

"And why don't you just learn to swim, then, if you want it so much?" I asked.

"That's none of your business!" She stared at me, her eyes glowing again. But this time, it was with anger.

"Bye, then. Hope you enjoy your dinner" I said.

"Same to you. Enjoy your supper" she replied.

"I have dinner before supper, actually", I said.

"Like I care", snapped Hedwig.

"I think you talk too much", I told her.

"And you're too quiet. Like a turtle in a bad mood", said Hedwig.

"Bye", I said.

"Goodbye, and farewell", she said.

"I'm going now", I said.

"Fine", said Hedwig.

So off I stomped through the snow, going as fast as I could. What a stupid girl, I thought to myself. Stupid, and unable to shut up. And she used so many strange words! At least I was never ever going to see her again. Never again, not for a second.

But then I heard her voice behind me, once again.

“Christian?”

I kept walking. There was no way I was going to turn around.

“Wait!” she called after me. “Christian, wait. I’m sorry!”

### CHAPTER THREE

I kept on walking for another few metres, but Hedwig was still calling after me. “I didn’t mean it!”

Then I heard running footsteps behind me. I stopped, and turned around. She was sprinting, running so fast she was almost flying, and by the time she’d caught up with me she was out of breath.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry”, she panted. I didn’t know how to respond. Maybe I should apologise too? But there didn’t seem to be much point, since I’d already decided I didn’t want anything to do with her.

“I need to get home”, I told her.

“Do you really have to?” said Hedwig.

“I’ve got homework”, I said.

“But it’s Friday”, said Hedwig.

“Extra homework”, I said. “Lots of...err...weekend exercises. It’s a new thing my teacher’s started with.”

“But I thought maybe we could be friends”, said Hedwig.

“Friends?”

“It sounds weird, doesn’t it?” she said. “But I think we’ll both really regret it if we don’t become friends. If we just leave now, we’ll forever wish we hadn’t.”

“Umm...” I said. “Forever?” This girl was probably the strangest person I’d ever met.

“So, instead of going separate ways, I thought you could come home with me”, she said.

“You think?” I said.

Suddenly, Hedwig smiled again. It was such an enormous smile, it was hard not to smile back.

“We could make cocoa”, she said.

“Cocoa?” I replied.

It was downright spooky. As you might remember, cocoa is my favourite thing in the whole world.

“And I’ve got gingerbread”, said Hedwig.

“Gingerbread”, I mused, suddenly aware of the rumbling emptiness in my stomach.

Gingerbread is another of my favourites. Especially with cocoa.

"It's not far", said Hedwig. "I live right round the corner. Number two, Fjord street."  
"OK, then", I conceded. "I suppose my homework can wait. Since you've got cocoa."  
And that's how I ended up going home with Hedwig Hansen.

Her house was old, the walls whitewashed. It stood in the middle of a large garden, snow lying heavily on the trees and bushes. Light was shining from every window, warm and bright, and on the front door hung a beautiful pine wreath, decorated with a dark red silk ribbon. They were obviously prepared for Christmas already.

Hedwig opened the door, and stepped inside.

"Hello?"

Nobody replied.

"They must have gone out for a walk", said Hedwig.

I took off my shoes, and placed them on the floor by the door. There were plenty of other shoes there already – brown men's shoes, black women's boots, and a few boy's shoes that looked about the same size as mine.

"Do you have a brother?" I asked.

"Yes", replied Hedwig. "A big brother. I can't wait for you to meet him – he's such a good artist! I draw myself sometimes – I have the most fantastic images in my head. I can see exactly how I want them to look, but I just can't get them to come out right on the paper. Do you understand what I mean? It all just comes out as stiff, ugly pencil lines, not like anything real. But my brother's drawings...it's like the figures are just going to jump out of the page and come to life. I really hope you get to meet him some day, then you'll see..."

She took my jacket, hanging it on a hook alongside her own. It was lucky that there was enough space – the entire hallway was stuffed with winter clothes, thick jackets, scarves, and woolly hats.

"Welcome to Twig Villa", announced Hedwig. "My favourite place in the whole wide world."

"The house has a name?" I asked.

"Every self-respecting house should have a name," said Hedwig. "Doesn't yours have one? You should tell your parents that you all need get your heads together soon and come up with something really fun. Twig Villa is pretty good, I think – sort of cosy and homely. I knew I was going to like it here as soon as we moved in – a house with a name like that is bound to be a good place to live."

"Yes", I agreed, "I suppose it is. When did you move here, anyway?"

"Oh, when I was little. Come on", motioned Hedwig. "The kitchen is this way."

She led me into a long corridor, lined with doors. Some of them were open a crack, but I couldn't see through into the rooms beyond. Hedwig hurried along to the third door on the left, and opened it.

The kitchen was large, with blue walls. The delicious smell of food, and gingerbread, was enough to make me feel even hungrier. Pans and casserole dishes hung from the walls, and next to the oven was a jar decorated with flowers, packed with whisks, spoons, and spatulas. Hedwig was obviously used to doing this, because now she was jumping up to lift a saucepan down from one of the hooks on the wall, spinning round towards the oven, and set it down on it on the hob. She fetched some milk from the enormous fridge, then some chocolate from one of the drawers, poured a splash of milk into the saucepan, and broke a few pieces of the chocolate into it. She began to stir, using a whisk from the jar.

“Do you cook often?” I asked her.

“Absolutely”, she replied, “especially cocoa.”

She whisked the contents of the saucepan without spilling a drop, then she suddenly realised something.

“We do need some cream!”

She hurried over to the fridge and took out a bowl, already full of whipped cream.

“We had it for breakfast”, she explained.

“You have cocoa for breakfast? On a school day?”

“Almost every morning, at least if I have anything to say about it.”

“You mean you get to decide?”

“What do you think?” She laughed, and I could see the wide gap between her teeth. Eventually she poured the cocoa out into large, blue mugs, spooning a generous dollop of cream into each of them. She dumped a box of gingerbread on the counter, and spread her hands.

“Help yourself, honoured guest. Seriously, you have no idea how glad I am to have met you.”

And as we sat there in the kitchen, the cream from the cocoa sticking to our lips like thick, white, old men’s whiskers, I realised that she wasn’t the only one who was glad we’d met. Not only that, but I had the strangest feeling that our meeting would prove to be important. I had no way of knowing just yet that Hedwig was going to change my life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

When we’d finished the cocoa, I started to think that it might be time to head back home. I didn’t particularly feel like leaving, but there are kind of limits to how long you can stay at the home of a girl you’ve never even met before.

“I should probably be going”, I told her.

“Probably?”

“Yes...shouldn’t I?” I could hear the statement become a question.

“‘Probably’ doesn’t count”, she said, and laughed.

“Huh?”

“Oh, it’s just something my brother always says. And he’s right, as usual. If you only *probably* have to go, it means you can *actually* wait a bit, if you ask me. I’m sure that’s what he’d say, too.”

“Oh. Yeah”, I said.

“Do you like hide and seek? I do hope so. Everyone in their right mind enjoys hide and seek. And since you just happen to be in the best hide and seek house in the whole city, you can’t really say no to a quick game, can you?”

“Probably not...”

“‘Probably’. There you go again, with that ‘probably’. No. You *definitely* can’t.”

“...OK”, I said.

My stomach was tickling with excitement. A game of hide and seek in Twig Villa sounded like the most fun thing imaginable.

“You hide, I’ll seek” said Hedwig. “It wouldn’t be fair for me to hide first, because I know this house inside-out, and you’d never be able to find me anywhere. And if there’s one thing I don’t want, it’s for you to lose me.”

She stood by the door. “I’ll count to twenty”, she said, covering her eyes.

“One...two...three...”

I ran out into the corridor, quietly shutting the kitchen door behind me, and looked around. There were three doors on each side of the corridor, with a staircase at the far end of the hall leading up to the next floor. I hurried over to the nearest door, opening it and glancing through to see a living room. I slipped carefully inside, looking around. The wallpaper was green, the room heated by a black iron oven in the far corner. This room, too, was filled with seasonal decorations, the windows lined with cut-out Christmas elves and bright red flowers. A big, soft, velvet sofa stood against one wall, stuffed with soft cushions that reminded me of an old lady. I was almost tempted to clamber onto the sofa and bury myself in them. I was meant to be hiding, and this room didn’t seem to have many good hiding options.

I rushed back out into the hallway, hearing Hedwig’s voice as she continued to count.

“Ten...eleven...twelve...”

I opened yet another door. A huge library this time, the walls covered with books. Most of them looked old, all red leather and golden lettering. The carpet was thick and heavy, a white rocking-chair resting beneath the window. In the window stood an advent wreath, three of the candles burnt halfway down – just as it should be, with the fourth Sunday of advent soon.

But there was nowhere to hide in here, either. I was going to have to get a serious move on. I stepped quickly back out into the hallway.

“Fifteen...sixteen...seventeen...” Hedwig counted.

I was about to turn away from the library when a glimpse of something in the corner of my eye made me stop. What the...?

I took a few steps back into the room.

Strange...

I could have sworn that the rocking-chair had been a clean, bright white. But there it was, suddenly grey, worn-out, and dirty.

I stood there. Blinked, rubbing my eyes. It had to be a trick of the light, I thought. From one side, the chair looked clean and white, from the other side, it looked grey and dirty.

A trick of the light. It had to be.

“...nineteen...twenty...”

Quickly, now I had to find somewhere to hide...

I rushed back out towards the corridor, casting a final glance at the rocking-chair, which suddenly appeared to be bright white once again. Yes, it must have been the light that tricked me.

I opened another door, which turned out to lead into a narrow cupboard. I squeezed my way inside, just as I heard Hedwig’s voice:

“...Ready or not, here I come!

I heard the floorboards creak as she stepped out of the kitchen. Her footsteps were silent on the soft carpet, but I'd left the cupboard door open a crack, just wide enough that I could watch her as she tiptoed forwards.

She looked into the first room, then the next, taking her time. Then she headed upstairs to the first floor, and disappeared. She was gone for a long time. In the meantime, I stood waiting in the cupboard. After a while it began to feel uncomfortably cramped. The smell of solvents and cleaning products stung my nose, the bristles of a broom scratching the back of my neck. I shuffled around, trying to find a more comfortable position, but it was impossible to move without risking dislodging things from the shelves surrounding me. Then I started to think about the rocking-chair again. It was just the light. Had to be. But still...I'd never seen a trick of the light that good before.

If it was the light.

The house was completely, utterly silent. I couldn't hear Hedwig at all. She was taking so long...what if she'd just left? What if I was completely alone in the house? I wasn't exactly scared of the rocking-chair, but still...this was Hedwig's house. Being here without her felt strange. Being here alone.

Perhaps I should go and look for her? Perhaps she'd decided to finish the game without telling me...

But just then, before another thought could cross my mind, the door burst open. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

There was Hedwig, in the open doorway, laughing.

"It worked! I knew you were there the whole time, I could see your eyes in the dark as I went past. I thought I'd let you wait there for a while, so I went upstairs just to fool you – I came back down the back stairs, so I could sneak up from the other side without you seeing me. Did I scare you? Come on, Christian, say something...did I really scare you? You're as white as a sheet...I wasn't trying to frighten you, I just thought you'd think it was funny. Sorry if I scared you...sorry."

She was right, I was shaking, and my face felt pale. Yes, she'd given me a shock, but that wasn't why I was shaking. It was the rocking-chair. But she looked so upset that I forced myself to smile.

"It's OK", I reassured her. "You just gave me a shock, that's all."

She laughed again.

"I did, didn't I! I'm good at that, you know. Do you want to look for me now? I promise not to hide anywhere too impossible to find."

I looked down at my watch.

"It's dinnertime soon. Now I *have* to go."

"Do you have to?" she asked. "Really?" She looked disappointed, as though I'd just confiscated the biggest, best present from under the tree.

"Won't you be eating soon as well?" I asked.

"Yes", said Hedwig. "I suppose I will."

I walked over to my winter shoes, and lifted my jacket down from the hook.

"I'll see you, yeah?" I said.

"You'll have to", said Hedwig. She lit up. "Will you come back tomorrow?"

"So soon?"

"It's Saturday tomorrow – you can come for breakfast. I'll make it! You won't believe how good I am at frying eggs!"

I had to laugh.

“But I’ll probably be having breakfast at home...”

“Awww,” said Hedwig, disappointed. “But afterwards? Couldn’t you come over after? Please? Please, please, please!”

I nodded. “Yeah, that should be OK.”

And as I left, I realised that it would be more than OK. For the first time in a very long time, I was actually looking forward to something.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I hurried home through the streets from Hedwig’s house. It took a while, because she lived on the other side of town, but I could still feel the warmth from Twig Villa. Just imagine living somewhere like that, already beautifully decorated for Christmas! Back home, we still hadn’t put up so much as a single bauble. It felt like mum and dad hadn’t even noticed that there were only six days to go until Christmas. Not yet, anyway.

But perhaps they’d remember today, I thought. Perhaps mum had bought some flowers at the market on the way home. Maybe dad had dug the advent wreath out from the basement and polished it up all nice and shiny, just the way it was supposed to be. Perhaps he’d called mum and asked her to pick up four nice tall, purple candles to put in it. Perhaps three of them would be lit by the time I got home.

I thought about it as I hurried home, the same way I did every day. Nothing had changed. Not a single trace of Christmas in our house.

And then I was home. I opened the door and went inside, just as the clock struck five. It smelt of fishcakes.

Fishcakes. Could it be a sign? Fishcakes don’t exactly feel like Christmas. They don’t even feel like Friday, to be honest. But recently, it seemed like we were eating fishcakes all the time. Fishcakes, or meatballs, or fish fingers. It was as though my parents had forgotten that we could eat anything else.

My sister Augusta came out into the hallway.

“Dad says it’s time for dinner”, she said.

“OK”, I said. “Hi, by the way.”

“Hi”, she said.

Augusta is five, and reaches almost all the way up to my chest. She smells like kindergarten – that distinct mix of soap, milk, and wet wellies. Her cheeks are soft and smooth, and I love to press my nose into them. But I’m not always allowed – and when Augusta says no, it means no. Augusta tends to know what she wants. She can get so angry that mum throws her hands in the air, crying out that she doesn’t know what to do with this kid. Dad always says it’s a miracle Augusta hasn’t blown up like dynamite by now. They used to call her The Dynamite. But they hadn’t called her that since the summer. It had been a long time since Augusta exploded.

I followed her into the kitchen. The dinner was waiting on the table. Boiled potatoes and fishcakes, with grated carrot. My heart sank. No advent wreath today, either. Not even a single flower.

Mum rustled my hair, and dad gave me a quick hug.

"Hi, Christian", said mum.

"Did you have a nice day?" asked dad.

"Yes", I said.

But I didn't say any more, because nobody was expecting me to. It was just the sort of question they asked, not something they really wanted to hear about.

"How about you?" I said, taking a potato.

"Yes", said mum.

"Yes", said dad.

'Yes", said Augusta.

Then we peeled our potatoes in silence. I glanced across at mum, then at dad. They looked completely normal. Just the way they always had. Mum, with the same old haircut. Dad, with the same old glasses. They'd looked the same for as long as I could remember. But still, they'd changed over the past few months. It was like there were two imposters sitting there, imitators who didn't quite understand how mum and dad *were*. The way mum used to talk about something funny that had happened at work that day, or the way dad was always planning what we were going to do, both this weekend and next year, and the way he would jump up and down in his seat with excitement. Or the way mum could laugh so loud it was almost embarrassing. Dad must have loved that laugh, because he said it was the first thing he fell for.

But they weren't like that anymore. They weren't themselves. They just looked that way.

Suddenly, the potato stuck in my throat. What if that was really what had happened? What if mum and dad really had been replaced by imposters, pale imitations of the real thing? What if my real parents never came back?

Even Augusta was just a copy, sitting there silently, carefully shovelling pieces of potato into her mouth with a fork. Not spilling any, not even losing her temper for a moment. I realised that I missed The Dynamite, really missed her.

...But most of all, I missed June. I missed my big sister. And that's what we all did, I knew that. I wished we could go to the churchyard, to visit her, but mum and dad never wanted to. I didn't know why. I'd gone alone, one time. The grave stood dark and empty, no flowers or candles. Apparently she was lying down there. June. It was impossible to grasp. The only thing left of her was a cold gravestone. It was as though my own heart had turned into that same, cold stone as I stood there, and I couldn't bear another second of it. I'd hurried away, and had never been back.

"Yes, yes", mum said.

"Yes", dad said.

"I see it's been snowing again", mum said.

"Yes", dad said.

The weather was obviously the only thing we could talk about here, too. Was this just how it was going to be from now on?

No. No, that couldn't be.

"I've thought of something," I began.

"What?" asked mum.

"Perhaps we should take out the candlesticks?" I said.

"The candlesticks?" dad said.

They both looked at me. It was as though I was talking about something mysterious, from outer space. As though they'd never even heard of candlesticks.

"It'll be the fourth Sunday of advent soon", I said.

"You're right", mum said.

"True enough", dad said.

"Should we do it, then?" I said.

"Perhaps it's time", mum said.

"I suppose you're right", dad said. "Look how much it's snowing."

Then they talked about the weather again, how wet and heavy the snow was.

After dinner, mum went outside to shovel snow. I looked over at dad. Surely now he would go down to the basement to dig out the candlesticks, and the polish. But he was obviously too busy tidying the kitchen. Then he turned his attention to the washing machine, while mum vacuumed. Too clean. They were both very keen on making everything clean, far more than they'd ever been before.

By the time I went to bed, there was no sign of the advent wreath or purple candles on the kitchen table. But I could feel a cold flame burning deep inside me. A tiny flame, but an angry one. I curled up beneath the covers, bitterly aware of how sick of it all I was. Sick of these strange, imitation parents, who couldn't get anything right. Sick of how everything was just as it always was before, but at the same time completely different. Sick of fishcakes. Sick to death of fishcakes!

## CHAPTER SIX

I hurried over to Hedwig's first thing after breakfast the next morning. She was already outside when I arrived, rolling a huge ball of snow around the garden. Before long, it was so big she couldn't move it any more. She didn't hear me until I was right alongside her, on the other side of the white picket fence.

"Hello", I said.

She turned and smiled at me, all her teeth showing. "You came!" she exclaimed.

"Yep", I said. "I suppose I did."

"You made it! I almost didn't expect you to. No, absolutely not...I mean, I hoped, I crossed all my fingers and toes, even folded my hands together and prayed a little, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it. It's probably too good to be true!"

"Probably doesn't count", I reminded her.

She laughed, then, and leant against the giant snowball.

"Come on, you have to help. I can't move it another inch."

I opened the gate, and walked over to her. Together, we managed to push the snowball a little further through the deep snow, growing bigger with every metre. Eventually we couldn't move it another millimetre, even with both of us pushing together.

"It's not going to get any bigger than this", Hedwig said. "But this will do."

"Yes," I said. "Do for what, exactly?"

"Err...I'm not actually sure. What do you think? We could build a snowman. I've got a carrot inside, and an old hat we could use. I might even be able to find a pipe. But a snowman is so *ordinary*, don't you think? We must be able to come up with something else. A snow lady, perhaps...that's a bit less standard. Or a snow baby, perhaps? A great big, crawling baby, that would be something else. Or an old lady, a proper grumpy old lady. Or a wild cousin, or..."

"A sister", I said.

It just came out.

"A snow sister!" Hedwig said. "You're not as stupid as you look, Christian!"

"We don't have to", I said. "Perhaps a grumpy old lady would be better."

"Nonsense," said Hedwig. "Let's make a sister. A big sister. I've always wanted one of those. It's not that I don't love my big brother, but I always wanted a sister too. And now I can have one. Made of snow."

So, we built our snow sister together. The snow was firm, easy to shape, and Hedwig was good with her hands. We rolled up a smaller ball and placed it on top of the first one, then another even smaller one on the top. Then we added shoulders and arms to the figure. The biggest ball at the bottom became a wide skirt.

"She's all dressed up", Hedwig said. "For Christmas."

We gave her long hair, made of snow, carved her a snow nose, and made small, dark eyes using pinecones. Last of all, Hedwig put together a bouquet of pine twigs, and placed it in her snowy hands.

"Those are roses", she said. "Don't you think a big sister like this wants roses for Christmas?"

"Absolutely", I said.

I couldn't bring myself to say any more. I don't know how it had happened, but the snow sister looked like June. She was the same height that June used to be, her hair was the same length, and there was something about the shape of her chin that looked just like June.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Just imagine...imagine if I opened them now, and June was actually standing there. Alive.

I forced myself to open them. Stupid Christian. It was just snow. Snow from Hedwig's garden, a few twigs and pine cones, and nothing more.

I felt a lump in my throat, and turned away. Hedwig laid her hand on my arm.

"What is it, Christian?"

"Nothing", I said. "It's nothing."

She looked at me for a long time, but I couldn't meet her gaze. I was scared that I was about to start crying. I just looked away, at the snow, at the trees, at nothing. But Hedwig's hand was still there.

"Does she remind you of someone?" she asked, softly.

I finally managed to look up. Hedwig was watching me with those grey, kind eyes of hers. I nodded.

"Wh...who?" Hedwig said.

"I had a sister", I said. "She died this summer. Just before her birthday. She would have been sixteen."

A breeze blew through the garden. Hedwig's eyes went blank, but I couldn't tell if it was the wind or what I'd just told her. She leaned forward suddenly, giving me a quick little hug. She was completely silent, as though waiting for me to say more. I could, I thought.

Hedwig was the sort of person you could just tell things to. But I didn't manage to say it. I was too scared that I'd start wailing, unable to get a word out. Instead I reached my hand out and squeezed her arm, quickly, to let her know that I was glad she was there.

She must have realised that I wasn't going to be able to say anything else right now, because she smiled and wrapped her arms around herself for warmth.

"I'm cold", she said. "And hungry. It feels like I haven't eaten in fifty years. I promised you an egg, didn't I? Perhaps we should go inside?"

"OK", I said. "Thanks."

As I took off my cold, wet clothes full of snow, feeling the warmth of Hedwig's house flooding my body, the tight feeling in my throat thankfully faded. Twig Villa was even cosier than I'd remembered it being. All the doors in the corridor were open now, as though the rooms were welcoming us in. But the house was very quiet.

"Are you home alone today, too?" I asked.

"They're shopping", explained Hedwig. "And my brother is probably out skating."

"Aha."

"If you stick around for a bit, I'm sure you'll get to meet them." She said that last bit very quickly.

"Yes..." I said, as I walked towards the kitchen. "Do you want a hand with those eggs?"

"Help frying eggs?" she said. "Now I've heard everything!"

She pointed towards the living room.

"No, you just sit down through there. It'll be ready in a moment."

I clambered up into the big sofa, stuffed with cushions. It really was like sitting in the soft, warm lap of an old lady. The embers in the iron stove were glowing, as I stretched out my feet towards it and felt its heat warming me, inside and out. Soon the smell of fried eggs and bacon was emanating from the kitchen, and I felt my mouth beginning to water.

I curled up into a warm, tight ball, but just then I noticed something outside the window. A man was standing by the garden gate, looking in. He was old, like a grandfather, with a long, grey beard. But there wasn't much else grandfatherly about him. He was staring up towards Twig Villa with a strange look on his face. Angry...or sad...or maybe both? I sat up, and moved closer to the window, hiding myself behind the thick curtains as I looked out at him.

He put his hand on the gate, then hesitated. Was he going to come in? Could he be one of Hedwig's family? I hoped not, because something about that man scared me. That extreme sadness. Or anger. Or whatever it was now.

He pushed the gate open, and walked slowly into the garden, hesitating with every step. It was as though he couldn't decide if he should continue or turn back.

I hurried back into the corridor, and called out to Hedwig in the kitchen:

"Hedwig, come here. There's someone out there. You have a visitor."

"OK, OK, wait. I'm coming. Is there someone there? That can't be right."

She was frowning.

"He doesn't look too happy", I said.

We went to the window together. I still wanted to hide behind the curtains a little, and it looked as though Hedwig felt the same way. So there we stood, behind the thick velvet curtains, staring out into the garden.

"But where is he?" Hedwig said.

"I don't know", I replied. "He was right there."

"Where?" she asked.

"He'd just come through the gate into the garden."

We stared out at the path that headed up towards the front door. It was empty. The man had vanished.

Hedwig turned to me.

"Are you winding me up?"

"No", I said. "I promise. There was a man out there, just now. Have you got a granddad, or something?"

"No", said Hedwig. "They're long gone."

"Or an old uncle?"

"Not that I know of."

"Or a..."

"Forget about the old man", said Hedwig. "The eggs will be overdone." She ran back to the kitchen.

I stayed, standing by the window. The garden was full of footprints, both Hedwig's and my own. The path was well trampled, and there was no way to see if the man had trodden on it or not. Suddenly, I groaned. Perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps he'd never been there at all?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

We set the table in the purple-walled dining room.

"The advent room", Hedwig said. "Isn't it great?"

"Yes, it's lovely...have you finished decorating already?" I asked. This room, too, was full of Christmas decorations. White paper angels hung in the windows, red ribbons dangling from the chandelier in the ceiling. In the middle of the table stood a great advent wreath, with fat, round candles. There seemed to be advent wreathes in every room.

"Finished? No", said Hedwig. "There's loads of the house left to decorate. It's important to decorate everywhere. You know why?"

"No?"

"Because it wouldn't be fair if the bathroom wasn't decorated, and the living room was. What if the bathroom got jealous?"

"Jealous?" I had to smile.

"Houses have feelings, I think. Every room. Especially here, at Twig Villa, if you know what I mean."

"Yes", I said. And I did. Twig Villa *did* feel like a living thing. I was about to ask about the rocking-chair, which had looked both old and new at the same time, and if Hedwig had ever noticed anything like that here. But she was talking so quickly that I didn't get a chance to speak.

"I love decorating", she said. "I think every little nook and cranny should be done up nicely for Christmas, don't you? Christmas Rule Number one: there's no such thing as too Christmassy. Even the pantry cupboard gets to be decorated. I've got a special elf who gets to stand in there, so even when you're just going to get something as boring as a broom, you

don't forget that it's Christmas. That's how it should be, I reckon. Christmas is such a wonderful time of year that it's important never to forget about it."

I nodded, thinking of our own advent wreath, still undisturbed in the basement.

I thought about it for the rest of the morning. It was as though I couldn't think of anything else. I said goodbye to Hedwig, and headed home.

When I came through the door, mum and dad were both sitting on the sofa reading their newspapers. They obviously had plenty of time. More than enough time to find the advent wreath, I thought. But since they'd clearly forgotten it again, I headed down to the basement myself.

There it stood, on the shelf in front of a box of Christmas tree decorations. It had managed to get pretty grey and dusty during the year it had been lying there. But I took it back upstairs, finding the polish and a rag at the back of the kitchen cupboard. I rubbed in the polish, letting it work for a while, just the way I'd seen my dad do it. Then I rubbed it dry again.

Now it was starting to look like itself again.

I rubbed and polished until I was sure that every speck of grey had vanished. Then I set it in the middle of the kitchen table, and just looked at it for a while. It looked just the way it should be. Shiny, polished, and smooth.

Now I just needed candles.

I dug through the kitchen drawers for a long time before I discovered an old box of candles, and a box of matches. Mum and dad used to light candles a lot, especially during the autumn, when the nights began to draw in. But this autumn, they'd just made do with ceiling lights. This box must be from last year. The candles were white, but they would have to do.

I took out four candles, and placed them on the wreath. It was difficult to get them to stand up properly, but I wedged them in place with metal foil, just the way I'd seen dad do it before. Then I lit three of them, and took a step back.

Apart from the candles being white, the wreath looked just the way it was supposed to. I felt a small spark of excitement inside. Finally it was advent here, too!

Just then, dad came into the kitchen. He walked towards the coffee pot, to refill his cup. He didn't seem to have noticed the wreath.

I coughed, loudly.

"Oof", dad said. "Are you getting a cold?"

"No", I said.

"Remember to wear a scarf, you hear?" dad said.

He lifted the coffee pot and poured, half-filling his cup. Then he walked back towards the living room. I coughed again, louder this time.

Dad stopped. He looked at me.

"Are you OK?"

He still hadn't noticed the candles on the table. My old dad would have noticed them right away. He noticed things like that, especially when I was doing them. But this new, imitation father was slow. So slow that I wasn't sure he deserved to have me decorating for advent.

I swallowed. But I mustn't get sad now. Mustn't cry.

"I've decorated for advent", I said, as quickly as I could, pointing to the wreath on the table.

"Ah", dad said. "So I see."

"Yes", I said. "Look."

"Where did you find that?"

"In the basement."

"Oh, right." He drew a deep breath. "Three candles, I see..."

"It'll be four tomorrow", I said.

"Time flies", said dad.

"Yes", I said.

"And you found it yourself."

"Seemed as though you'd forgotten", I said.

"I suppose we had", he said.

"So I took care of it", I said. "I've polished it and everything. Just the way you usually do."

"That's good", he said. "Very good, Christian."

But it didn't look like he meant it, because his eyes were hollow. He ruffled my hair, took his coffee cup, and went back to the living room.

I stood there in the kitchen, alone, next to the four candles of the advent wreath. They looked sad, I thought, sad and lonely. The wrong colour, too. I hurriedly blew out the three that were already lit. Smoke hung heavily in the air, blue and acrid. Stupid candles, I thought. Stupid advent.

I left the kitchen, and went upstairs to my room. I slammed the door behind me, but obviously nobody heard it. I threw myself down onto the bed, burying my head in the pillow. I lay there, my whole face pressed down into the pillowcase, until I had to turn my head because it was impossible to breathe.

Think happy thoughts, Christian, I told myself, happy thoughts. Usually, when I wanted to think happy thoughts, I'd think about Christmas. But that didn't work now. Christmas, it seemed, was cancelled, this year.

So, my mind turned to Hedwig. Her kind face, that laughing mouth. I tried to remember the sound of her laughter, warm and wild at the same time.

It helped.

Hedwig, I thought. She'd been so nice to me. It was time for me to do something nice for her, too. Something she'd really appreciate.

And I could think of just the thing.

I got up from the bed, moving over to my desk, and found my piggy bank. If I hurried, I could just make it to the shops before they closed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Good morning" I said, hurrying into Hedwig's hallway. It was only nine, but I couldn't wait any longer. Ever since I'd bought her present the evening before, I'd been looking forward to seeing her again.

Hedwig looked at me, surprised.

"You're early", she said. "And your face is bright red. Did you run all the way here?"

"No..." I said. "Well...maybe a bit."

I couldn't stop smiling. I was bubbling with excitement. I couldn't wait to see Hedwig open her present.

I struggled out of my jacket and shoes while Hedwig looked at me, curious. The house was silent. I opened my bag, digging out the gift. It was packed in blue wrapping paper, covered with pink flowers. I'd asked the lady in the shop to find some normal wrapping paper, because I didn't want pictures of Santa all over it. After all, this present had nothing to do with Christmas.

"For me?" Hedwig said. She looked so surprised that I laughed out loud.

"Yes, it's for you."

"But it isn't Christmas yet", she said.

"It's not a Christmas present", I said. "Go on, take it."

I almost shoved it at her, before she raised her hands to take it from me. She stood for a moment, just looking at the parcel. She lifted it, shook it a little, squeezing it carefully.

"It's not too big", she said.

"No", I said.

"But soft", she continued. "Some people say that soft packages are boring, but not me. Packages are never boring. That's what's so great about them. Just the fact that something is packed, makes it exciting. It's not until you open it that you find out if it's boring or not, and by then it isn't a package anymore, is it? That means it's silly to say that soft packages are boring. That's what I think, anyway."

"Yes", I said. "You might be right."

"Nice wrapping paper, too", she said.

"Mhm", I said. "Are you going to open it now?"

"OK, then."

But she just stood there, looking at the present. Then she looked at me, suddenly.

"I'm so excited!"

"Then you should open it."

"But as soon as I do that, I'll find out what it is."

"That's sort of the idea..."

"But then I won't be excited anymore."

"No...and...?"

"Don't you get it? It's so...*exciting*, to be excited! It's like my heart is ice skating, spinning and pirouetting round and round until I'm dizzy, wonderfully dizzy. Do you know what I mean?"

"Err...in a way, perhaps."

*My heart is on ice skates, and pirouetting, and wonderfully dizzy.* Hedwig really had the strangest way of speaking. I didn't know anyone like her. Nobody even remotely like her.

"But now you *have* to open the gift", I said, smiling.

"Yes, you're right", said Hedwig. "There are limits to how many times a heart can pirouette."

We took the gift with us into the red living room. She laid it on the table, and we both sat on the sofa. Then she began.

First, she loosened the knot on the ribbon. I don't know how you do it, but when I'm opening a present I usually just rip off the ribbon, scrunch it up, and throw it away. Or I'll use

scissors to cut it off if it's too tight. Either way, though, I throw it away. But not Hedwig. She used her fingernails to carefully loosen the knot, before completely unfastening it, before wrapping the ribbon up into a tidy little bow.

Then she went to work on the paper, slowly peeling the tape loose at each corner. When everything was unfastened, she just sat for a moment, staring at the paper. Then she took a deep breath, and folded it to one side.

I don't think she realised what it was at first, because she wrinkled her eyebrows and tilted her head quizzically to one side. Then she took hold of the red fabric, and lifted it up.

"A bathing suit!"

"They had them in blue and black as well, but I've seen how much you like red, so I got this one."

"Christian!" she said. A beaming smile spread across her entire face.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She leaned over, giving me an enormous, warm hug. I hugged her back, feeling my heart, too, do a little skating. I couldn't remember seeing anyone this happy to receive a present from me before. It was totally worth spending almost all my pocket money on!

When we were finished hugging, she just sat there, looking at the bathing suit.

"Are you ready, then?" I said.

"Ready for what?" Hedwig said.

"To learn to swim, of course."

"What!?"

"I thought I could teach you how to swim. That's why I bought you the bathing suit."

"What, now? Today?"

"Why not? The pool's open."

She laughed.

"No, why not?"

I went out into the garden while she got packed. I already had a towel, swimming trunks, and shampoo with me, so I was ready to go. It had only been two days since the last time I swam, after school on Friday. But it felt far longer. At least a week, maybe more. Strange. Perhaps it was because I'd met Hedwig? Only two days, but it felt like we were old friends already.

I walked over to the snow figure we'd made. I took off one glove, and placed my hand on our snow sister. The air was colder today than yesterday, and she was hard as ice. If it stayed this cold, she'd look this good for a long time. I brushed away a light dusting of snow that had fallen on her during the night.

Just then, I heard a sound from the garden gate. It creaked loudly. Someone was coming in. I looked around the snow figure, and recognised him immediately. It was him. The scary old man.

He took a few steps into the garden. His footsteps were silent on the soft, cold, fresh snow. He was walking hesitantly, again, as though he hadn't quite decided whether to continue or to turn back.

Then he stuck a hand into his pocket and dug around inside. There was a faint clinking noise, then he pulled a bulky keyring out of his pocket, and selected a key, holding it out in front of him. It was big, and rusty. It looked old.

He continued for a few more steps, key in hand, then stopped again, lifted his head, and looked around.

I ducked behind the snow sister, and waited for a while. There was no way he could see me back there, but then I noticed my breath. It was making thick, white clouds above me in the air. What if he could see it?!

I clapped a hand over my mouth, and held my breath.

When you swim a lot, you get good at holding your breath, because you do it so often, whenever you're underwater. I knew I could hold my breath for at least sixty seconds. I began to count.

One...two...three...four...five...

Perhaps if I just stayed here, without breathing, he would leave again. Unless he was going into the house. But why would he do that? For that matter, why did he have a key?

Six...seven...eight...nine...ten...

And what would happen if Hedwig were to come out just as he was going in? Perhaps I should warn her. There's a man here, I should say, a stranger. And for some reason, he seems to have a key to your house.

Eleven...twelve...thirteen...fourteen...fifteen...

Come to think of it, where *was* Hedwig? And what had happened to the man? The fact that I couldn't hear his footsteps was frightening, because it meant he could be anywhere without me knowing. What if he was standing right behind the snow sister now, looking right down at me? Or perhaps he'd already gone...but where was Hedwig?!

## CHAPTER NINE

I twisted round, so I could make out a glimpse of the front door, just as Hedwig emerged. She'd packed everything she needed – and it looked like there was quite a lot of it – in a big, flowery handbag. Her face was beaming.

“Christian? Sorry I took so long, I've never been to the swimming pool before and I wasn't sure what I was going to need. But now I'm ready. I hope you haven't died of boredom...Christian? Christian? Where are you?”

She stepped out and began to head down the path. This time, I thought. This time, she'll actually see this strange, old man. And he would be bound to see her. But nothing happened. She just shouted my name again.

“Christian? Weren't we going to go swimming?”

I stepped out, quickly.

Hedwig was standing in the middle of the path, with her big flowery bag, looking questioningly at me. Once again, the old man was nowhere to be seen.

I glanced around, craning my neck to look both up and down the street, but there was no sign of him.

“Hang on”, I said to Hedwig, before running out of the garden gate and around the street corner to see if I could spot him.

Nothing.

I hurried back to her. He must have left in a hurry, and silently. I was annoyed that he'd gotten away so easily.

"What is it?" Hedwig asked.

"It was that old man again", I said.

"Which old man?"

"The one who was in your garden last night. He disappeared suddenly, remember?"

She looked at me, and opened her mouth as if to say something, but then she bit her lip.

"He had a key", I said. "He had a key to your house."

Hedwig bowed her head, looking down at the snow in front of her.

"You must know who he is" I said. I felt a sudden flash of irritation – not just at the old man, but at Hedwig, and her sudden secrecy.

"He had a key!" I said.

Finally, she looked up.

"I might know who he is..." she began, slowly.

She looked very serious, and I caught a glimpse of something in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. Fear.

"Yes?"

"But I'm not sure if I can tell you..."

"Why not? Are you...are you afraid of him?"

"I might not be able to say why, either."

"But...what is it? Who is he? Why does he have a key?"

Hedwig took a step towards me, then suddenly dropped her bag in the snow and threw her arms around me.

"Christian", she said, "there are some things I can't tell you. Not yet. But I hope you will be my friend anyway."

"I don't want us to stop being friends", I said. "But doesn't it scare you, the idea that he has a key? That he can just let himself into your house?"

"No", she mumbled, her face buried in my jacket. "No, I'm not scared. Not about that."

"But why can't you just tell me?" I said.

"Please, Christian. Don't ask me any more questions", she said.

"Can you promise me you're not afraid of him?"

She nodded.

"I promise."

But it didn't look like she meant it.

If she was afraid...if he could just let himself into the house when she was there alone...

But I didn't get the chance to say anything more, because Hedwig suddenly straightened her hat, and looked directly at me as though nothing had happened.

"Can we go now? We were going to go swimming. Oh, I can hardly wait to learn! Can we go now, Christian? Please?"

"...OK", I said. "I suppose we can."

"Hooray!"

The pool was quiet now, just before Christmas. Everyone was busy, hurrying to and fro between shops, and Christmas grottos, and baking, and chopping Christmas trees in the woods, and all the fun things you do in the run-up to Christmas. Hedwig and I had the whole pool almost to ourselves.

I started in the shallow end.

Hedwig hesitated. I could see that she was shivering.

"First, you just need to get used to the water", I said.

"Errr..." she said, climbing cautiously down the steps.

"It's cold", she said.

"It won't bite", I said, remembering that my dad always used to say the same to me when I was first learning to swim.

"We'll see about that", she said.

"You'll get used to it", I said. "You just need to sink down into it, until it's up to your neck."

She nodded, but didn't move.

"Come on. Like this", I said, showing her. "Just bend your knees."

She crouched, slowly. Eventually we were both squatting down, the water reaching to our chins.

"Now, just hold your breath, and dip your head under", I told her.

"No!" Hedwig said. "What if I get my lungs full of water?"

"Yes", I said. "Just don't breathe in. You can blow some bubbles."

I ducked into the water to show her, but not for too long, because I wanted to make it look easy for her. I smiled as I stood back up.

"See? Easy as you like."

"Hmm", Hedwig said.

Eventually, she took a deep breath, and dipped below the water. I thought she'd come straight back up, but the only thing that disturbed the surface was a few small bubbles. She stayed and stayed down there, under the water.

Finally, she sprang up in front of me. Water was streaming from her hair, flattened like a red-brown helmet against her scalp.

"Did you see?" she said, laughing loudly. "I did it!"

She tried a few more times, but then I told her we should head up to the side of the pool.

"Out of the water?" She looked disappointed. "But now I've managed it!"

"We should practice some kicks", I explained.

Hedwig was a quick learner. She watched for a while as I demonstrated how to kick, then lay down on the tiles beside me, and joined in.

"You're good!" I said.

I heard my voice, suddenly sounding just like my dad's. That's just the way he used to praise me, whenever he was trying to teach me something. The encouragement helped, I knew that. There was nobody better at teaching than my dad.

"Since you're doing so well", I continued, "we can get back into the water."

"Yippee!" Hedwig said.

"Just do what I showed you with your legs, and move your arms like this." I showed her how to do the crawl.

"Like this?" she said, copying me.

“That’s right”, I said.

“Just like this?” she said.

“Exactly”, I said. “Then you just lean forward and start swimming. Simple as that.”

I leaned forward to show her, kicking off and moving my arms in a wide motion, just like dad had taught me to swim the summer I turned seven. I swam a few metres forward, then back to Hedwig.

“It’s easy”, I said.

“It looks easy”, she said.

“You can do it”, I said.

“I’m going to be fantastic at it!” she said.

Then she threw herself into the water.

I suddenly remembered how difficult it had been, learning to swim, and how pleased I’d been when I finally managed it. Bubbling with excitement. It must have felt the same way for Hedwig, now. Lucky her. But it felt pretty good to be the teacher, too. It was the first time I could remember actually teaching something to someone else. Usually it went the other way around, with someone else, usually an adult – dad, or mum, or a teacher – teaching me. But now it was my turn, and Hedwig was sort of my responsibility. If she couldn’t swim, it would be my fault.

I felt my heart pounding hard, and hoped she could do it.

## CHAPTER TEN

Hedwig swam straight towards the deep end, already sure and certain. I was happy to see how confident she was.

Everything seemed fine, at first. She was doing everything I’d showed her. Her arms moving quickly back and forth, her legs kicking up and down. Everything looked just right.

She managed to make it a few metres, but that was probably mostly just momentum from kicking off. Then she stopped. I could see her struggling, her arms and feet splashing wildly, but she wasn’t moving forward.

The only way she was going was down.

I stood, completely stiff. She waved her arms frantically, splashing and struggling, but it didn’t help. She was sinking.

She’d made it just far enough that her feet could no longer reach the bottom, and couldn’t move forward or back. Or up. She just sank. Drowning.

Suddenly, I seemed to wake up. I swam out to her, as fast as I could, reaching out to grab her. She gasped for breath as I pulled her head up above water, then pulled her back until we could both reach the bottom. Only then did she manage to speak.

“It...it was lucky you got here!”

“Sorry”, I said. “I shouldn’t have let you swim where it was deep.”

“It was my fault”, she said. “Not yours. But...I was so sure I could do it.”

“You’ll manage it soon”, I said. “You just need to practice some more.”

And practice we did, over and over again. We stayed in the shallow end, because I had no desire for another near-drowning. Hedwig clearly felt the same way, because she did exactly as I instructed. She was a good, patient student, and I'm pretty sure I was a good, patient teacher.

But it made no difference how good either of us was. Or how patient.

The problem was that it was impossible to teach Hedwig to swim.

However hard she tried, she just sank. Every time. We tried breaststroke, backstroke, and front crawl. I tried to teach her all the tricks my dad and my swimming teacher had taught me, but nothing worked. Hedwig simply could not swim.

In the end, she was just standing there, in the shallow end of the pool. Her eyes, usually so full of excitement, were dead.

"Are you OK?" I asked, putting my arm gently on hers.

She didn't answer.

"Hedwig?"

"I can't just give up" she said, softly.

But it didn't look like she meant it.

"Maybe we should take a break", I said.

She nodded, unable to look at me.

"Yes, I think we need a break."

We sat down on a bench, by the window.

"You were standing right there" I said, pointing. "The first time I saw you. Your nose was pressed up to the glass, like this", I said, pressing on my nose. "You looked like a friendly pig."

I'd hoped it would make her laugh, but she remained silent. I saw that her eyes were completely blank. She was so disappointed that it hadn't worked.

"Hedwig?" I asked, cautiously.

She nodded quickly.

"Yes, yes."

"It's not a big deal if you can't manage it today", I said. "We can keep practicing until you're swimming like a fish. Or a dolphin."

"I can't just give up", she repeated, as though it was something she'd learned by heart.

She drew a deep breath. "It's just..."

She fell silent.

"Yes?" I said.

"I'm not sure if I'm ever going to be able to do it."

"What?" I said. "Of course you will."

"It's not like my body doesn't want to", said Hedwig. "It's like it's...how to put it...physically impossible for me to swim."

"You certainly aren't the most natural swimmer", I said. "But it can't be impossible."

"Yes", Hedwig said. "I think maybe it is."

"But why?" I said.

She turned her head, staring at me. Her mouth opened, as though she was about to say something. Like there was something she had to tell me, something big and important. But then she fell silent.

"We can keep going, I suppose", she said, quietly.

"Yes?" I said.

She stared at the pool, as though dreading the thought. "It'll work eventually."  
I didn't know what to say. It wasn't supposed to be like this, this wasn't how I'd imagined the day going. I'd been looking forward to watching her manage it, and now everything was just sad.

"But it's good to get some rest, sometimes", I said. "You can't learn anything when you're exhausted."

That was something else dad always said to me, when I lost the will to carry on.

"Is that right?" Hedwig said, hopefully.

"Yes", I said. "That's how it goes when you're learning something. First you practice, then you rest. Then you need to try again. When you try again after taking a break, you'll suddenly find you've learned plenty, even without doing anything."

"Is that true?" Hedwig said.

"Completely true", I said. "Now I think you should go home, and have a lie down on the sofa. That big, comfy sofa, with all those cushions."

"That's probably a good idea", Hedwig said.

"Yes", I said. "It certainly is."

We met up again outside the pool, after we'd both showered and changed. It was snowing, and Hedwig lifted her face towards the sky. She looked like herself again, her happy self, all traces of sadness vanished.

"Isn't this lovely?" she said. Snow was resting on her face.

"Mhm", I said.

I held out my hand, watching three big snowflakes land on my glove.

"Do you ever think that snow is just water, really?" Hedwig said. "It's strange that something so black and dark and dangerous can become so light, and soft, and beautiful."

"Yes", I said. "I mean...I hadn't thought of it like that before."

"Every snowflake is unique", Hedwig said. "And it's nature making them that way. Every single one, completely different from all the rest. Have you noticed that?"

"No", I said. "I hadn't thought of that, either."

The snow crystals lay, almost weightless, against the wool of my glove. And she was right. One of them looked like a star, with six points. The next looked more like a cog, while the third reminded me of a blooming rose.

"Nothing gives me that Christmas spirit quite like snow", Hedwig said.

She smiled at me. "What does it for you?"

"I don't know", I said.

Of course, I did. The smell of gingerbread, pine leaves, incense, and cocoa. A perfectly decorated Christmas tree. The sound of angel chimes...but I couldn't explain all that to Hedwig. That would mean I'd have to explain about June, too.

"I have to go home", I said. "You should, too. You need to get plenty of rest. That way you're bound to be great."

"Yes", Hedwig said. "But Christian?"

"Mhm?"

"Can we do something I'm good at tomorrow?"

"What do you mean?"

"Instead of swimming, I mean."

"Yeah? OK. What do you want to do?"

"Go skating!" Hedwig said, smiling through her freckles. "Do you have skates?"

“Yes...” I said. “But I’m not very good.”

“Then that’s perfect! Let’s meet at the skating rink in the park, at three.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

As I walked home from the swimming pool, I was still thinking about Christmas spirit. Hedwig got it from snow. I got it from the smell of gingerbread.

But what exactly is Christmas spirit? Isn’t it strange, the way you know exactly what it feels like, but it can still be so hard to describe the feeling? Christmas spirit is like a soft, plush sensation, tickling your toes and making your heart beat faster at the same time. But not so fast that it gets uncomfortable. Christmas spirit is a feeling powerful enough to make you want to throw out your arms and hug someone. Christmas spirit makes you want to sing, to laugh, puts a lump in your throat, all at the same time. If Christmas spirit had a colour, it would be warm and golden, even though Christmas itself is obviously red. Because Christmas spirit lit something up inside me, like a warm torchlight.

And Hedwig was right, snow could definitely give you the Christmas spirit. Especially the way it was snowing now. Not too heavy, not too wet, but not too biting cold either. Just light, delicate crystals, dusting the rooftops and trees and pavements. Covering up everything ugly and grey, muffling all sound, as though the world were wrapped up in a soft sheepskin rug. Even though the snow itself was cold, it was like it made the world feel warmer, cosier, and safer.

I walked slowly through the snow, basking in it. I was in no hurry. Nobody was waiting for me. And when you feel that good, you want to make the experience last for as long as possible. I kept myself warm by thinking about what I was going to do when I got home. Bake some gingerbread, maybe. Or stick some cloves in some oranges. Or wrap Christmas presents – I’d already bought them for the whole family. Dad was getting a coffee mug, mum was getting some earrings, and Augusta was getting a pair of football socks. She was great at football, not like me. All that was left to do was wrap them. I wasn’t good at it. It was the corners that gave me trouble, and I always ended up using far too much tape. It was hard to get the ribbon tight enough, too, but it was worth it to curl the ends up afterwards. The longer the ribbon, the better. June had taught me how to curl a ribbon properly. When she’d wrapped her presents, she always saved the ribbon for me, so I could curl it. She knew how much I enjoyed it. June was like that. She was always so kind, so thoughtful. Right now, it didn’t hurt to think about it. It just felt nice. It was sort of like she was here with me, even though she was dead.

The shops were open late on Sundays, leading up to Christmas. People were everywhere, rushing to and fro, bags and parcels bundled under their arms. They looked stressed, but not angry. Perhaps they were enjoying the snow as much as I was.

I was about to turn the corner into my street when I saw someone leaving the post office across the road. Suddenly, all my Christmas spirit was gone.

It had to be him. The old man, from Hedwig's garden. The man with the key. I stopped, looking hard at him. The same scarf. The same hat. The same worn-out, green winter coat. Yes, it was definitely him, even though his facial expression was different. He didn't look so angry or sad today, just tired. He hurried off, with a large parcel tucked under his arm that he'd clearly just picked up from the post office.

I stopped. I was on my way home. And I'd been planning to bake gingerbread....but here was that man again, and this time I couldn't let him slip away from me.

He moved quickly, and I had to hurry to keep up with him. I ran across the street, continuing along the same side of the road as the man himself, careful not to get too close. I didn't want him to spot me following him, but I didn't want to fall too far behind either. I didn't want to let him out of my sight.

I was terrified he would turn around and notice me. But at the same time...even *if* he saw me, it wouldn't really make a difference. After all, although I'd seen him, he'd never seen me before. If he turned around, I thought, I could just look the other way. Maybe whistle innocently, or something.

No...maybe not whistling. That would look *too* suspicious.

Fortunately, the man didn't turn around. He just kept walking, keeping up the same pace. Perhaps there was somewhere he needed to be? He wasn't cautious, like when I'd seen him in Hedwig's garden.

He vanished around a corner, and I hurried after him, half-running. What if he disappeared again?

Luckily, when I reached the corner, he was still in sight. He'd made it quite a long way down the road.

It was a quiet, dark, narrow back street. No Christmas lights here – one of the street lights was broken, in fact, blinking on and off with a humming sound. I scurried past several small shops, their windows lighting up the snow outside. But the further I went, the quieter the street became.

No cars passing by. No people, either. It was just that old man ahead, and me. He was still walking fast, taking at least two steps for each one of mine. I jogged after him, scared that my feet were making far too much sound against the pavement.

Now I was more concerned than before about the possibility of him turning around. If he saw me now, it would be a lot more obvious that I was following him, now that it was just the two of us here. But I had to take the risk. Because he had something to do with Hedwig, something she didn't want to talk about. She was scared of the man – perhaps he wanted to hurt her? If I could find out what it was, perhaps I could help.

He turned yet another corner. I ran after him, and suddenly my breath froze in my throat. He'd headed into a narrow alleyway, and I could just see him by a door, a little way further along. He pulled out his keychain again. The same keychain!

I could hear the keys, clinking. He'd obviously found the key he was looking for, and inserted it into the lock. It turned, and the door opened. The man went inside, closed the door, and turned on the light. It blared out onto the snow from both the window in the door itself, and the larger storefront window beside it.

I stood stock still, frozen on the street corner. What on Earth was I going to do now?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I took a few deep breaths, which helped a little, before pulling myself together and continuing around the corner. The old man's shop was the only one in the narrow street. It didn't exactly appear to be flooded with customers.

The shop window was covered by a pair of pale curtains, making it impossible to see what was going on inside. But the sign on the door was clear. *Open*, it said.

I walked over to the shop, before stopping. I had to go in...yes, I had to. But what was I going to say? I should have some sort of plan, I thought. Perhaps I could just ask what time it was? Or perhaps I could pretend to be lost, and ask him for directions? Otherwise, I could always pretend I was looking to buy something, whatever it was he sold. Yeah, that wasn't a bad plan.

Just then, I heard a noise from within. A rhythmic noise, probably coming from some sort of machine. A high-pitched ticking, or banging...no, more like a combination of ticking and banging. Eventually, I summoned up my courage, reached out and grabbed the door handle firmly, and turned it.

The sound grew louder. That was the first thing I noticed. The second thing I noticed was a strange smell. At first, I didn't recognize it, but it seemed familiar. It reminded me of school, of notebooks, of exams, and...ah, now I understood. It was the smell of ink.

There was a curtain hanging just behind the door, and I pulled it aside. I couldn't see the old man anywhere, but still, there was more than enough to look at. The walls were covered with pictures – no, not pictures. Cards. There were cards everywhere, in all shapes and sizes. Big birthday cards, tiny baptism cards, simple congratulation cards, elaborate confirmation cards. And Christmas cards, naturally. The most beautiful Christmas cards I'd ever seen. Angels, and reindeer, and yule goats, and pigs...small, chubby baby Jesuses, and fat, smiling Santas. Wreaths, and stars, and Santa's workshops...some of the cards were embossed with gold, some with silver, and some were liberally sprinkled with glitter. Oh, they were lovely!

My gaze came to a halt on one card in particular. It was huge, the size of an entire artist's pad, depicting a snow-coated landscape beneath a vast, starry sky. A sled was swishing through the snow, drawn by two white horses. The people in the sled were wrapped up warmly in thick furs, as the sled approached an old farm, warm light emanating from every window. It looked like somewhere I wanted to be, I thought. That should be me, under those warm furs, heading to celebrate Christmas on that old farm.

I turned to examine another card, this one showing the inside of a music shop. The shelves were lined with cornets, saxophones, and trumpets, all gleaming brightly. In the middle of the shop stood a great big Christmas tree, decorated with tiny instruments. A host of small, fat cherubs filled the air between the shelves and the tree, each playing an instrument of its own. They looked alive, as though they could fly right out of the card towards me, and it almost seemed as though I could hear the music playing as I looked at it.

I walked further into the shop. A big machine was standing in the middle of the floor, evidently the source of that ticking, banging noise. Every second, a new card flew out from a slot on the side of the machine. It was a printing press! The old man's shop wasn't a shop, it was a printer's.

But where was *he*?

I took a few more steps, resisting the urge to stop and examine every card on the wall. That wasn't why I was here.

At the back of the shop, I discovered another curtain. This one wasn't entirely shut, and in the space beyond I caught sight of the man. He was sitting at a desk, something in his hands. Something made of metal, some sort of iron band...or strip...I moved closer, but he turned away. I heard him open a drawer, placing whatever he had in his hands inside. Then I heard his footsteps, moving towards me. Suddenly, the curtain was drawn aside.

I scrambled back a few steps, in shock. The man was clearly startled too, judging by his slight jump.

"Wow!" he said.

"Yes", I said. "Wow...errr...I mean, hi."

The old man stared at me. Up close, he looked even scarier than he had before. Big, bushy eyebrows, above angry, tight-set eyes.

"You scared the pants off me, boy", he said.

"Sorry", I said.

He took a step towards me, his eyes opening a little wider.

"Are you lost?"

"No..."

Time to say something clever, I thought. He had no idea who I was. So far as he was concerned, I was just some random kid who'd wandered into his print shop. I'd never been much good at lying. Augusta was a natural – she could tell a fib so convincingly, she could almost fool herself. But I'd never got the knack. My lies tend to be transparent, easily seen-through. But I had to try anyway.

"Well...yes", I said. "Maybe a bit."

"Are you, or are you not, lost?"

"I've got a bit lost, but I was thinking about buying some Christmas cards", I said.

"And it looks like you have loads of them, so I guess I'm in luck..."

He continued staring at me, more surprised than angry.

"You've got lost, and now you want to buy Christmas cards?"

"Err...yes", I said.

I should practice lying. This wasn't going well at all.

But then, suddenly, the man broke into a smile. His face lit up behind all those whiskers, and suddenly he didn't look the least bit frightening.

"But I don't sell Christmas cards here", he said.

"Oh?" I said. "But what about..." I pointed at the cards that covered the walls from floor to ceiling.

"I print them", the man said, "and sell them to shops. But not individually. You're probably not looking to buy a hundred at a time, do you?"

"No", I said. "I suppose not."

He tilted his head to one side, looking at me. His eyes sparkled.

"You can have one", he said. "You choose."

"Really?!"

"Just be quick, before I change my mind."

"Oh, wow", I said. "Thank you!"

I looked around. Choosing just one, from such a fabulous selection, was impossible. I reached out towards the card with the sled. Just imagine having that for myself...I could hang it above my bed, look at it every night before I went to sleep. Perhaps even dream my way into the scene itself...but then I spotted the card with the music shop. If anything, it was even nicer, and definitely more fun. I could put it above my desk. Homework would be a

breeze, with something like that to look at. Then there was Santa's workshop...I loved the elves, they were so funny. Then there was a manger scene, a town square with a huge Christmas tree in the centre, a tree surrounded by dancing reindeer...

The key man suddenly laughed.

"Any you think are OK?"

"Yes!" I said. "All of them. Not OK, I mean. They're great."

"Take two, then. Or three."

I found myself liking him more and more. But even narrowing all these cards down to three seemed like an impossible task.

"Would you like something to drink, while you're thinking about it?" the man said.

"Maybe", I said. "I mean, yes, please."

"Such a polite young man", he said, with a smile.

"I try my best", I said.

"But you've forgotten to introduce yourself."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I quickly reached out my hand.

"Christian."

He took it. His grip was strong, his hand engulfing mine.

"Very nice to meet you, Christian", he said. "I'm Henrik."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Henrik brought me a glass of lemonade, served at a table he had in the corner of the room. I took several quick slurps, one after another, because as long as I was drinking I didn't have to speak.

Henrik looked at me.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm nearly ten."

"Ten, eh? You're short for your age."

"A bit, yes."

"I used to know a boy who looked like you", he said.

"Oh?"

"Are you bad at football?"

"Yep."

"So was he. Do you know what he used to do, when the others were out playing at breaktime?"

"No?"

"He'd sit inside and draw."

"Oh."

"He drew his way through primary school. And middle school. Eventually he made a career out of it."

He stretched out a hand, gesturing at the cards hanging all around us, and suddenly I understood.

"It was you!"

"You're certainly right about that."

"So, you drew all these yourself, you didn't just print them?"

"Every single one."

"I can't draw", I said. "But I can swim. I've got a friend who swims, too."

"Do you have many friends?"

"No. Just him."

I thought for a moment. I had Hedwig too, now, I supposed. Besides, I wasn't entirely sure if John and I were still friends. It hadn't felt like it, not lately.

"I mean, I have two, I think", I corrected myself. "I've got two friends."

"Two good friends are better than a hundred bad ones", Henrik said.

He refilled my glass, which was already empty.

"Did you like the lemonade?"

"Yes", I said.

"Have as much as you like, I've got more."

He smiled again, and I realised that I liked him a lot.

"How does it work?" I asked, pointing at the printing press.

"This old thing?" He stood up, resting a hand on it. "I call it Martha. Every machine here has a name."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Every self-respecting machine should have a name."

"Perhaps they should."

"Come here", Henrik said. "I'll show you how to do it."

He took out a tube of ink, spreading it on the big metal cylinders.

"One colour at a time", he said. He pressed a big, red button, and the cards began to fly out. Just red, at first. Then he added some blue. The blue ink combined with the red, becoming purple. Eventually he added some yellow, which created all sorts of shades of orange and green as the pigment blended with the red and blue. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the machine as it spun, and the cards as they emerged, looking better and better as each new colour was added.

The time flew by, and as my cheeks grew rosy-warm, I completely forgot why I was there. There were so many buttons to press, levers to pull, and things to take care of, that I couldn't think of anything else.

Eventually, all the cards were fully printed, a great pile of them, four to each sheet of card.

"Now we have to cut them", said Henrik. He led me over to another machine.

"I call this one Clara."

"Why?" I asked.

"Don't you think she looks like a Clara?"

I laughed. "Yes, she does!"

Working together, we put the pile of card on a metal tray, and Henrik showed me how to pull down the great long lever, causing a blade to carve through the pile, cutting it in two. We repeated the process one more time, cutting four cards out of each sheet.

"There you go."

He gave me one of them. "You can have this one too, to say thanks for your help."

"...Thanks", I said.

He smiled at me. "Should we do another pile?"

"Yes", I agreed.

But then my mind returned to Twig Villa, and to Hedwig. That was why I was here. And now we'd become such good friends, now we'd drunk lemonade and printed cards together, surely there was no harm in asking?

"There was something I wanted to say", I began. "Something I was wondering. I've seen you before...before today, I mean."

"Oh?"

"Outside..." I hesitated. "Outside Twig Villa."

"What?"

Henrik's mood seemed to harden, instantly.

"I've seen you standing outside Twig Villa", I said.

"You have, have you?"

He turned away from me abruptly, beginning to sweep up scraps of paper from the floor beneath Clara.

"Henrik?" I said. "Aren't we going to make some more cards?"

He pulled up his sleeve as if to check his watch, but it didn't look like he was really looking at it.

"It's getting late", he said. "I've got a big order due out early tomorrow. I should be getting a move on."

"But..." I gathered up my courage again. "What were you doing at Twig Villa? You had a key, but then you didn't go in..."

He stared at me abruptly again, and now he had that same mysterious look I'd noticed the first time I saw him. Was he angry, or sad, or both?

"Stay away from that house", he said.

The dustpan and brush in his hands were shaking.

"But why...?"

"Just stay away."

"But..."

"And now, you should go. I need to work."

I hurried home, arriving just in time for dinner. I still hadn't mentioned anything to mum or dad about either Hedwig or Twig Villa, so I didn't say anything about Henrik or the printing shop either. Once, they might have noticed that I was strangely quiet, but not these days. I went to bed as usual that night, and went to school as usual the next morning. But the whole time, I was thinking about Henrik. Why had he become so angry? What was it about Twig Villa?

I wasn't able to take in much at school, but it wasn't a big deal. It was the second last day before the holidays, and we weren't being taught much anyway. I just thought about the old man, and about Hedwig. After school I rushed home, guzzled down a sandwich, and threw my skates into my bag. I was going to have to ask Hedwig herself. I just had to.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Every winter, the paddling pool at the city park was turned into an outdoor skating rink, and that was where Hedwig and I had arranged to meet. Twilight was drawing in as I arrived, the light turning pale and blue, and big, yellow streetlamps were glowing all around the rink. It looked like a gleaming yellow planet, in the middle of all the blue.

I saw Hedwig long before she saw me. She had the whole rink to herself, and was making the most of it. I could hear her skates swishing as she glided from one end to the other. She was completely steady, her movements apparently effortless. She took a chance, leaping up from the ice, before landing smoothly back on her feet. She took two more long, flowing steps, before twisting into a pirouette. Round and round, with no sign of dizziness. Round and round, a freckled spinning top in a red cloak.

She spotted me, and her face lit up.

“Christian!”

She skated over, coming to an abrupt stop right in front of me.

“Have you got your skates?” she said.

“Yes”, I said. “But I’m not as good as you. Not even close.”

“You’re a good swimmer, though.”

I sat on a bench, and wriggled into my skates. They were a pair of black hockey skates, that my mum had bought at a flea market. They were a little wide, but pinched slightly at the toes. I’d never really liked skating much.

But Hedwig took my hand, leading me out onto the ice.

“Come on. You won’t fall.”

I felt stiff as a board. With every tiny lump in the ice, I grew more and more afraid.

“You need to relax”, Hedwig said. “Trust me.”

“OK”, I said.

And I tried. I really did. Slowly, it became easier, because I could tell she was looking out for me. Every time I felt that I was about to lose my balance, she held onto me a little tighter.

“You’re doing it!” Hedwig said.

Afterwards, we sat on the long bench. I glanced over at Hedwig. Her cheeks were red, her eyes laughing. But even though she was happy, and even though I knew it was probably going to ruin a lovely afternoon, I couldn’t stop myself from asking about Henrik.

“I saw the key man”, I said. “Again”.

“The key man?”

“The one who was outside your house.”

Hedwig turned away, staring at the tips of her skates. She lowered one of them, brushing it against the ground.

“Should we skate some more?” she said. “Or do you have to get home soon?”

“I found out that he’s called Henrik”, I said.

She trembled.

“Henrik...” she murmured.

"I think you should tell me who he is. Why are you afraid of him?"

She kept staring at her skates. At first she seemed unable to reply, but finally, she turned to face me.

"I'm not afraid of him. Really, I'm not."

"No? Then what is it?"

"I can't talk about it yet", she said, quietly. "But I still want to be friends."

"Of course we can still be friends anyway. I just don't understand why you can't talk about it?"

"You don't want to tell me everything, either", Hedwig said.

"That's true", I said. "But it's not as though I've got loads of secrets."

"You've said almost nothing about your sister, for example. But I'm not bugging you about it. You just can't tell someone everything, not all at once."

Suddenly, I felt a lump in my throat. She was right. She'd been so good, not pressuring me about anything.

"I can wait until you're ready", Hedwig said. "But I really want to hear about her. When you're ready."

I took a deep breath.

"And if I am? Ready, I mean?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

"Then I can listen for as long as you need me to."

Did I dare?

At school, plenty of the teachers had asked if I wanted to talk about what had happened. But every time I tried, I went silent. It didn't feel important to talk about it. Or right. They all knew who June was, anyway, and for some reason, that seemed to make it even harder.

Hedwig had never met June. She'd never met my family. Only a few days ago, she hadn't even met me. But even so, or perhaps because of that, there was nobody I'd rather tell all of it to than Hedwig.

All at once, it felt both right and important to talk about it. It was as though the words were piling up inside me, and they needed to get out.

So, I started to talk about June. About my sister. June, the happiest person I'd ever known. My big sister, who laughed louder than anyone else, always so funny, and a little wild. Who grew faster than anyone else I knew, quickly growing as tall as dad. Tall, and bright, and chaotic. Who let me sleep next to her at night when I'd had a nightmare, rustling my hair and telling me that nothing bad would happen.

But something bad had happened, and I didn't understand why. June had grown quieter, all of a sudden. She didn't laugh as often. She stopped acting out. She stopped being funny, and when I crept into her bed at night, she'd turn her back and tell me to get out.

"Was she sick?" asked Hedwig.

"No..." I said. "It wasn't a normal sickness, like the flu or anything. It was a sort of...sadness."

I kept talking. About how June couldn't go to school anymore, just stayed at home. About how mum and dad had also grown steadily quieter and quieter. Nobody had known what to do. And June, who'd always grown so fast, started to shrink. She lay there in bed, getting thinner and thinner, so sad that she couldn't bring herself to eat.

I told Hedwig all of it. But then I had to stop for a while, because the hardest part of all was coming.

Hedwig took my hand. I think she understood how much it hurt. But it felt good, too. I'd never spoken to anybody about this before. About the summer June died.

"In the end, she was so thin she had to be taken to the hospital."

"But wasn't that a good thing? That she got help, I mean"

Hedwig squeezed my hand. I had to take a few deep breaths before I could continue.

"No, because once she was at the hospital, she just got worse", I said. "She got a lung infection. And she was so thin already..."

"And then she died?"

"...Yes", I said. "Then she died. It shouldn't have happened. The hospital said that sort of thing doesn't happen. Mum and dad said that sort of thing doesn't happen. But it happened anyway."

I could feel something warm running down my cheeks, and turned away so Hedwig wouldn't notice. But she let go of my hand, and wrapped both her arms around me.

"Oh, Christian..." she breathed.

She pressed her cheek against mine, and I could feel her tears mixing with my own. We sat there, silently, for what felt like a long time.

Then we let go of one another. Hedwig took off her glove, dried her cheeks, and dried mine too. Her hands were warm.

"Tears are just water", she said. "And water can turn into snow."

I don't know if it was supposed to be comforting, but it was a lovely thing to say.

"How are things now, then?" she said.

"Now?" I said.

"How are things at home?"

"I don't know. Everything's just so quiet all the time. And it doesn't even seem like mum and dad are planning to celebrate Christmas at all. I think they've forgotten how."

"But you have to!" Hedwig said. "You have to celebrate Christmas!"

"I don't know", I said.

"You said June was always so happy", Hedwig said.

"She was. Before she got sad. She was the happiest person I knew. But I think they've forgotten that, too."

Hedwig took my hand, squeezing it softly.

"It's good they have you, Christian."

"What do you mean?"

"You can show them. You can help them to understand."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I walked home quickly. Hedwig was right. Mum and dad had forgotten all the good things about June. How she used to laugh, all the funny things she said, how her voice would rise and fall as she spoke, all the strange things she knew. Perhaps it would help them to remember the good things, not just the sorrow.

The only picture of June mum and dad had on display was an old school photo, where she looked shy and serious. But I knew there were plenty of other photos in the house.

I got home before them, and started to look right away. I searched through drawers, opened the doors to all the old cabinets, and dug to the very bottom of the big chest in the living room. Eventually, I found the photo albums in mum's desk. I dragged them out and started to flick through them. A warm feeling spread from my stomach as I looked. We'd had so much fun together as a family, all five of us, before. Especially us kids. I could remember how it felt to run through the lawn sprinklers in summer, all three of us sitting in the car together with ice creams melting into our laps, hurtling down the ski slopes in winter, racing to the bottom. Lying on the ground in the shelter we'd built together one spring day out in the woods, looking up at the sun as it shone through the branches and leaves.

June had been the first one to run through the sprinklers, the one who'd persuaded mum and dad to buy us ice cream. It was June who'd come up with the idea of building a shelter, and June who'd fastened the first, thickest branches between the trees.

I eventually stopped on a big photo of my sister. She was wearing a yellow summer dress, laughing at whoever it was taking the picture. It was almost as though I could hear her laughter, drifting out of the photograph. It trilled, as mum would have said. White, trilling pearls of laughter.

Carefully, I slipped the photo from the album. Then I took it out, and hung it on the fridge. It was right at that moment that the front door opened, and mum and Augusta arrived home.

I heard them in the hallway. Augusta was complaining. She was tired, worn out after kindergarten. She didn't want to get undressed. Before, back when she was The Dynamite, she would have shrieked until mum couldn't take anymore, and helped her. But now Augusta was just complaining softly, and eventually gave up and took off her own coat and shoes in silence.

Then she went into the living room, straight to her dolls. She sat there, playing, without a sound.

Mum came through to the kitchen. She rustled my hair, the way she always did. Said hi, the way she always did. Asked how my day had been, the way she always did.

Then she stopped dead in front of the fridge. Slowly, she reached out her hand, touching the photo of June.

"Where did this come from?" she asked, not looking at me.

"From the album", I said.

"And why did you hang it here?"

Just then, Augusta came in. She saw the picture in mum's hand.

"June!" she said. And she smiled at the photo. June looked so happy that you just had to smile back.

But mum didn't notice. She just turned to me, her voice soft and serious, and said:

"I don't want you taking things out of the photo albums, Christian."

"It's not a thing", I said. "It's June."

Mum turned to Augusta.

"Go to the living room, please. I need to talk to your brother."

"But..." began Augusta.

"Now, please", mum said.

And Augusta slouched away, back to her dolls, where she sat down quietly to play again. I missed the old Augusta. She'd never have done something like that.

"Should we sit down?" mum said, gesturing towards the kitchen table.

She said it like a question, but I knew I didn't have a choice, and sat down.

"Dear Christian..." mum said. "I know you want things to go back to how they were before."

"Yes", I said.

"But they won't", mum said.

"I know that", I said.

"And June isn't coming back, even if we hang up photos of her", mum said.

"No", I said. "But that wasn't why I..."

"And I don't think it'll help if we go around with her face hanging everywhere. Or if we visit her grave all the time."

"It wasn't everywhere", I said. "It was just on the fridge. And we never visit her grave at all."

"We just need to wait", mum said. "It'll get better eventually...at least, that's what they say."

The last part was spoken mostly to herself, without looking at me.

"I know", I said. "But can't we just have one picture, at least?"

"It's going to take time", mum said.

"Just one picture?"

"We have to be patient, Christian."

She stood up, bending down to give me a hug. But it was a strange hug. Not a real, mother's hug. Just a copy of one.

June was still lying on the table, smiling up at us, but then mum took the photo with her, into the living room. I watched her through the doorway as she put the photo back in the album, right where it had been. Then she put the album back in the desk, and closed the drawer.

I stayed at the kitchen table. I couldn't say a word. Once again, I felt those stupid tears, fighting to get out. They stayed there for the rest of the day, pressing against the inside of my chest. I couldn't say a thing as we ate dinner. Not afterwards, either. I could barely eat a bite. But apparently nobody noticed, because everything was as silent as ever.

After a while I went up to my bedroom, alone. I stood there, in the middle of the room, swallowing and swallowing. I just wanted the lump in my throat to go away, so badly.

But it wouldn't. It was going to take time, just like mum had said. Perhaps photos of June weren't going to help. She was probably right.

Stupid Hedwig, I thought. Always so happy. She thought everything was so simple. And it was simple, for her, in that big, warm house, where it was already Christmas in every room, and where everyone was probably happy and laughing the whole time.

But she was wrong, I thought. She didn't have a clue what it was like here. Not a clue.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. And the lump in my throat didn't get any smaller. It was three days to Christmas. Just three days. And nothing was going to change here. It wasn't really going to be Christmas at all.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I was angry at school the next day. It was the last day before the Christmas holidays, and everything was supposed to be so great, just eating sweets and having fun. But I wasn't having fun.

I was angry when I went home from school, too, and it didn't help to see John waiting for me by the gate.

"Hi", he said.

"Hi", I said.

"So, it's the holidays", he said.

"Yes", I said.

We walked a few meters. He looked at me.

"Lots of snow", he said.

"Yes", I said.

"I've never seen this much snow before."

"Yeah, well", I said.

He didn't say anything else. I didn't either. That was just the way things were with us, now. I walked faster. I wanted to go home...No, I didn't. There wasn't going to be anything nice there either.

"By the way", I said, "I don't like talking about the weather."

"What?" John said.

"Only grownups talk about the weather all the time", I said.

"Maybe you're right", John said.

"I don't want to talk about the weather any more", I said.

"OK, then", said John. "We can talk about something else, then."

"Yes," I said.

But neither of us said another word. And that was fine. Talking to John was boring, anyway. Actually, it was boring talking to anyone.

I walked even faster, and John couldn't keep up. I snuck a glance back at him. His legs were two thin twigs, poking out of oversized winter boots. John's feet looked to be the only parts of him that were growing. A long scarf covered half of his face, the other half hidden by his hat. Just a small strip of his face, poking out in between. You don't need to be able to see much of a person to understand how he's feeling, when you know him really well. And I could see how John was feeling. He was sad. Truly, deeply sad.

But I didn't really care about that, did I?

We reached the junction where we usually said goodbye to each other, and I started to turn my way. I couldn't be bothered to say goodbye. Couldn't be bothered with any more stupid talk about anything at all.

"Wait", John said.

I turned around.

"What is it?"

He took off his bag, opened it, and took something out. A present.

"Here you go", he said, holding it towards me.

I took it.

“...Thanks”, I said.

I didn't have a present for him. We always gave each other something, but this year I'd completely forgotten. Perhaps I should say something. Come up with an excuse. But why should I bother? It wasn't as though we'd *arranged* to give each other presents. Was it my fault that he'd given me one anyway?

“Merry Christmas”, John said.

I could feel my cheeks glowing.

“No”, I said.

“What?”

“There's not going to be any *Merry Christmas*” I said, shoving the present down into my bag.

“Oh”, he said. “I suppose not, then.”

“I have to get home”, I said.

“Yeah...OK...bye”, he said. And off he went, on those thin legs and those big boots. His body was almost invisible behind his rucksack, and I couldn't see his head as he lowered it down between his shoulders.

There was a pain in my throat. It burned.

I turned back around, walking as quickly as I could. Stupid John, I thought, who only wanted to talk about the weather. Stupid John, who didn't understand a thing. Perhaps I could walk it off. But it didn't help. The pain in my throat grew and grew until it felt like it would choke me, and I was so angry...angry at John, and at mum, and dad...and even at June, who'd just died.

Why did she have to die? Why did you have to just go and die like that, June?!

I stormed round the corner, straight into somebody.

“Ow!”

“Hi!”

It was Hedwig. I'd crashed into her. Right into her forehead – it must have hurt. But she smiled. She was always smiling, that stupid smile of hers.

“It's you”, I said.

“Christian”, Hedwig said. “I was looking for you! And now I've found you.”

“Apparently”, I said, putting my hand to my own forehead. It had hurt me too.

“I've been thinking so much about you!” Hedwig said. “Ever since yesterday. How things went at home, with your parents...did you talk to them about June? And I've been thinking so much about you, and about her...I wish I could have met her, she sounds so funny, and nice. Such a great sister. How lucky you were, and how sad it is that she's gone!”

She talked, and talked, the same as ever. I started walking. Previously I'd liked the way she talked, the way she lit up as the words danced out of her. But now, it felt different.

“You ask a lot of questions”, I said.

She looked at me, puzzled.

“You just ask, and ask”, I said. “But you never want to hear the answers.”

She stopped. The light vanished from her eyes.

“That's what my brother used to say, too”, she said, softly.

“Yeah? A smart guy, that brother of yours”, I said.

“Sorry”, said Hedwig. “But I just wonder about everything. I've got so many questions inside me, and I can't wait for all the answers. Do you know what I mean? They're all lined up, in a row, pushing to get out, and I can't keep them in. Don't you ever feel that way, Christian? That there's so much inside you that wants to get out, and...”

"You're doing it again", I said.

"Oh." She clapped her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"You want to know everything about me", I said. "But you won't tell me anything about yourself."

"But I'm trying. Really, I am. It just isn't as easy as that."

She looked at me with big, honest eyes. And suddenly, I was the one with questions.

"How hard can it be? Let's take it one question at a time. I've got tons of them. How do you know Henrik, for example? And what was he doing outside your house? And why haven't I met your family yet? And what's up with that rocking-chair? What is it with your house, anyway?"

I took a deep breath. Then, suddenly, I thought about what she'd just said.

"And what did you mean, about how your brother always used to say that you ask and ask, but never want to hear the answers?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You said *used to*. That he *used to* say that. Why did you say that? Why not 'he always says that'? What is it – is he dead, or something?"

Hedwig reached out, towards me, but I didn't take her hands.

"Oh, Christian..." she said, softly.

"Yeah", I said. "Now I want you to answer. Now it's your turn to tell me."

"But I can't", she said.

She looked down, unable to meet my eyes.

"Then I don't want to be your friend anymore", I said.

"What?" she said.

"I don't want to be your friend. I don't need friends. Especially friends who can't even be honest with me!"

"Christian, no..."

"Yes", I said.

And then I wanted to go. But she grabbed my arm.

"You can't", she said. "Because you're the only one who..."

"I can do what I want", I said.

And I walked away. Long, angry strides. One, two, three steps. Four, five, six. But suddenly, they weren't as long. Seven, eight, nine. Or as angry. Ten, eleven, twelve. And suddenly, I regretted everything. She was probably standing there, watching me walk away. Poor Hedwig. I didn't need to be that angry. That cruel. She probably had plenty of reasons for not wanting to tell me everything at once. We'd only been friends for a few days...thirteen...fourteen...fifteen...she was probably standing there on the pavement, crying.

I turned around.

But she wasn't there.

She wasn't there, and her footprints had already disappeared beneath the falling snow.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I kept walking the streets for a long time, until my feet were frozen solid. No, not just my feet. All of me. Because I hadn't been kind. No, not at all. Not to John, or to Hedwig. It felt like an icy fist was clenched tight around my heart, and the longer I felt it, the worse it got.

Finally, I managed a sensible thought. I should buy John a Christmas present. A really good one. I was going to have to think carefully about what it should be.

Then I had another sensible thought, and it was that I owed Hedwig an apology. Yes, I should apologise. Right away, even if it meant being late for dinner.

As soon as the thought occurred to me, the icy fist around my heart relaxed a little.

I ran the whole way to Twig Villa. I hoped she would be out in the garden, so I could say sorry immediately. But when I got to the house, it was completely dark. Not a single light to be seen, at any of the windows.

The garden hadn't been shovelled either, even though it had snowed heavily since Sunday. I waded through deep snow all the way to the front door. Strange...it had been shovelled the last time I was here...

And strangest of all: our snow sister had disappeared. Where she had once stood, the snow now lay flat and undisturbed. Had Hedwig destroyed it because she was angry with me?

I knocked on the door, hard and long, but nobody answered.

So, I walked back down the steps, and stared up at the house. Perhaps she was sitting there in the dark, looking out at me. Perhaps she was angry. Was that why she wasn't answering the door?

"Hedwig", I called, gently.

Nothing.

"Hedwig?" I called again, a little louder now. "I'm sorry!"

Nothing happened this time, either.

"Hedwig?!"

...Still nothing. What should I do now?

I stayed there a while, looking at the house, when I noticed something I hadn't seen before. The white paint was peeling from the walls, hanging in long, loose flakes. And one of the windowpanes on the ground floor was smashed. It must have happened since I was last here. I could see a curtain dangling loosely. That had to be the purple room, didn't it? But the curtain looked old, rotten and tattered.

My heart began hammering. Something wasn't right. Something wasn't right at all. There was something wrong with Twig Villa. Perhaps I'd come to the wrong house? Perhaps I'd made a mistake? But no, the address was right. Number two, Fjord street, just as it always had been.

And where was Hedwig?

Before I even realised what I was doing, I was walking over to the broken window. I reached inside, my fingers finding the window clasp. My hand was shaking as I opened the window.

My whole body was shaking once I climbed inside.

At first, I just stood there, my heart pounding in my ears. The first thing I noticed was how cold it was. My breath froze and hung in the air as soon as I got inside. Before long my

eyes adjusted to the gloom, and when I realised what I was looking at, I let out a small shriek.

Everything was different. The green wallpaper hung in shreds on the wall. The soft sofa was covered with a white sheet, and everything was covered with dust.

I closed my eyes. This couldn't be happening. Where were the cosy rooms I remembered? I'd been here just two days earlier. What on earth had happened?

Slowly, I opened my eyes again.

It was still true. Dust was lying in thick layers over the furniture and floor. I noticed a pile of mouse droppings in one corner.

I rushed through to the corridor, and into the library. The shelves were empty, and someone had stacked the furniture into a pile in the corner. Only the rocking-chair was still standing in its usual place. It was no longer clean and white, though, but full of scratches and scuffs, grey with dust. Just the way it had looked the day Hedwig and I played hide-and-seek, when I'd thought the light was playing tricks...

This couldn't be real. It just couldn't. I had to be dreaming. I was bound to wake up soon. Any minute now.

I returned to the hallway, and opened the door to the kitchen. That beautiful, blue room, where Hedwig and I had enjoyed our cocoa, was almost empty. The fridge was speckled with rust, and spider's webs hung from the ceiling.

I heard the sound of breathing, fast and frightened, and suddenly realised it was coming from me. Then, I heard something else. A key, in the lock on the front door. It turned once, and the door creaked. Someone was coming in.

I saw a shadow pass across the floor in the hallway, outside the kitchen, and crouched down behind the door. A large shadow. A man's shadow. His steps were heavy as he walked along the hall.

The footsteps were drawing closer, when a floorboard creaked. I tried to remain as still as possible, not moving a muscle. Not even daring to breathe.

The shadow passed by the door, and I breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't come into the kitchen.

I looked around, searching for somewhere else to hide, because if the man came back and started looking around, he'd discover me instantly.

Perhaps there was space under the kitchen bench. I tiptoed across, opened a cupboard door as silently as I could, and crawled inside.

It smelt so mouldy in the cupboard that I almost threw up. I was curled up, my knees and neck bent almost double, but even though I made myself as small as possible, it wasn't enough. I'd always wished I was taller, but suddenly I was far too tall, because I couldn't get the door closed. However tightly I pulled my arms and legs together, they were too long, my body too bulky.

Then I heard the footsteps again. The man was on his way back, and this time he came *in* to the kitchen.

I tried to hold the door shut, but there was nothing to hold onto. The handle was on the outside, the inside completely smooth. So smooth that I lost my grip...

The door creaked slowly open. I could see the man standing there, in the room. I closed my eyes. I was about to be caught...

"Christian?"

It was a familiar voice. A very familiar voice.

I opened my eyes again, and stared up at Henrik.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

At first he looked confused to see me, but then I could see him becoming angry, his eyes shrinking and his voice deepening.

“I told you not to come here. You’ve got no business being here.”

“I know”, I said. “I’m sorry.”

I crawled out of the cupboard, and stood up before him. I stared down at the bare floorboards. It felt safest that way.

“Now you tell me why you’re here”, he said. “This is my house, and I don’t want anybody coming here.”

“Your house?” I said.

Now I had no choice but to look at him in confusion. “But why don’t you live here?”

Henrik turned his head, so his face was hidden in the shadows.

“I just can’t”, he said. “All I can think about when I’m here is my sister.”

“Your sister?” I said. My voice seemed to be coming from a long way off.

“Hedwig”, he said. “My little sister. It’s as though she’s still here, in every room.”

I stood there, straight and tall, as though everything was normal. As though this was a normal conversation. But inside me, a blizzard.

“Where is she now?” I managed to ask. “If she’s not here?”

“In the churchyard”, said Henrik. “Hedwig is dead.”

“D...d...dead?”

“She died the day before Christmas Eve, the year she turned ten”, said Henrik.

His face twisted into a grimace, as though it hurt him to think of it. “It was fifty years ago.”

“...What?” I said.

“Fifty years ago this year.”

“No!” I said. “That’s impossible!”

“Yes”, he said. “I had a sister who died when I was just a boy.”

“No! You didn’t have a sister! No, Hedwig can’t be your sister! It’s impossible!”

And I ran. Away from Henrik, away from Twig Villa. Hoping I could just run away from everything.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I swam. Back and forth, the length of the pool. Over and over. I only came above the surface to draw breath, otherwise I stayed underwater, where I could feel the water rushing against my face as I swam.

This was the only place I could be, I thought, kicking harder. The only place. At home, everything was still sad, school was closed for the holiday, and I couldn’t bring myself to visit John after the way I’d behaved. We were no longer friends, I was sure of that. A Christmas present, given or received, wasn’t going to change that.

The only place I'd been able to go lately had been Twig Villa, and it turned out that it didn't even exist. And the only friend I'd had was Hedwig, and she didn't exist either. She was...she was...

I had to steel myself even to think the words.

That Hedwig, my only friend, was...a...ghost.

It couldn't be true. That sort of thing was impossible. That Twig Villa could be there one minute, warm and fantastic with every corner decorated ready for Christmas, only to turn into an empty shell filled with cobwebs and dust. And that Hedwig had been there with me, a living, breathing person, with laughter and freckles on her nose, when she'd really been buried fifty years ago. No. That sort of thing didn't happen.

But it was true. Twig Villa, and Hedwig, had been as real as me. The house was the warmest, cosiest place I'd ever been. Hedwig was the most alive person I'd ever met.

I missed her so much it hurt. What would she have said, I wondered? What would she have thought, about a ghost house and a real, live ghost?

She'd have smiled, I thought, so broadly you could see the gap between her teeth, wrinkled that freckled nose, and said...yes, now I knew what she'd have said...

*Incredible, she would have said. It's incredible that something like that could happen, even if it's not really possible, because there's more to this world than you or I could ever explain, and isn't that amazing? Something to get excited about, isn't it, that the world is so full of impossible, inexplicable, fantastic things we don't understand, that's what makes life worth living, Christian. Don't you think? That's what makes life exciting!*

Something like that, I was sure of it.

But she wasn't here, so she couldn't say it. Because she was dead, and buried in the churchyard. Just like June.

After I was finished swimming, another question ran through my head, again and again. Why had I met Hedwig? Why had she been standing there, outside the pool, nose pressed against the window, looking at me? Was she supposed to help me with something? Was I supposed to help her?

No, there was no meaning to it. I'd just had a few nice days – yes, some really wonderful days – and just for a while, I'd thought that things might actually be getting better. That there might be a proper Christmas this year too.

But Hedwig had turned up almost as if to trick me. Because things weren't going to get better. Nothing was going to be good.

I swam until the lifeguard told me I had to leave, that the pool was about to close. I walked slowly home, through the snow. It wasn't so cold today. The snow was even melting in a few places, turning to grey slush in the streets. I could feel the water soaking through my boots. Snow really was just water, after all. Ugh.

I ate a sandwich for supper, alone in the kitchen. The advent wreath stood in the middle of the table, still with the same four white candles. Nobody had replaced them with the purple ones or lit them today, either. There was no point to it. No point to Christmas at all.

I stood up, quickly, took out the four candles, and threw them in the bin.

Tomorrow was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. It might as well have been any old Monday in November. Here there was no trace of Christmas, or of my birthday, which were, after all, one and the same. I'd done my best, but it hadn't helped in the slightest. Not when I was the only one in the family trying.

I couldn't stomach any more of the dry sandwich, and threw the remains in the bin on top of the candles. I went to bed without even saying goodnight to mum and dad. I don't think I've ever felt so sad, so angry, so confused, before or since. Not even when June died, because at least when I'd cried then, I'd been offered some sort of comfort.

I was too sad, too angry, too confused, to speak. Too sad, too angry, too confused to cry...to sleep, even. I just lay in my bed, silently, feeling almost paralyzed.

But then...while I lay there, thinking that nothing was ever going to be good ever again, I heard my bedroom door open. Small footsteps tiptoed across the wooden floor. A floorboard creaked, then I heard someone stop next to my bed.

I turned around. There was Augusta, my little sister.

"Hi", she whispered.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Can't you sleep either?" she whispered.

"No", I whispered.

"I'm thinking about Christmas", she said.

"You are?" I said.

"That there isn't going to be a Christmas", she said. "Not without June."

"Oh", I said. "Me too."

"Can I sleep in here?" she said.

"...Yes. Of course."

Augusta crept under the duvet, pressing herself tight against me, just the way I always did when I crept into bed with June. She lay there with her head right below my face, her soft hair tickling my nose. I sniffed her a little. She smelt the way she always did, of soap and milk and wet wellies. The best smell in the world. And she was completely, totally alive.

I heard her breathing growing slower and slower, until eventually it was completely even. She was fast asleep.

And there, with my arms wrapped around my little sister, her hair tickling my nose, I finally fell asleep too.

Augusta was sleeping just as soundly when I woke up the next morning. It was getting light outside, a few stray sunbeams sneaking in through a crack between the curtains, shining down on my little sister. She made a few quiet noises, turning a little, but she didn't wake up.

I lay there, watching her. She looked even smaller when she was asleep. I carefully stretched out an arm, wrapping it around her. I had to look after her, I thought. She had nobody else.

It was almost the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, and she had nobody except me.

Augusta was five. There's nothing more important than Christmas, when you're five. The fact that the 24<sup>th</sup> of December was my birthday...that didn't matter. But that it was Christmas Eve, that Augusta would get to celebrate Christmas...that mattered. That meant something.

I slipped out from under the duvet. She half-woke, her eyes flickering open.

"Just sleep", I said.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"There's something I have to take care of."

"What's that?"

“You shouldn’t ask things like that. It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow, and you’re allowed to have secrets the day before Christmas Eve.”

“Christmas”, said Augusta. She suddenly looked wide awake.

“Christmas”, I said. I smiled at her, then bent down to give her a warm hug, before slipping myself free.

“Will it be Christmas?” she asked.

I nodded. “I promise.”

Yes, it would be Christmas. For Augusta’s sake. And I thought I knew how I could make it happen.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

I ran all the way to Henrik’s print shop, and by the time I got there I was completely out of breath. The door was open – he must be working, I thought, even though it was almost Christmas. I was right. There he was, inside, bent over one of the machines, with a thick stack of blank cards in his hand. He looked sad, I thought, his movements slow and heavy. He hadn’t heard me come in, not noticing my presence until the machine fell silent.

Then he lit up.

“Christian!” he said, dropping the pile of cards. “You came! Thank you, thank you.”

He took a step towards me, stretching out his hand.

“I wanted to talk to you, but I didn’t know where you lived. I’ve been feeling awful. I didn’t mean to scare you, I just got angry when I found you in there. The house is falling apart. The floors are so rotten you could fall through them. But mainly, I was just sad. I get that way whenever I think about my sister.”

I took a step towards him, too, and took his outstretched hand.

“Can you tell me about her?” I asked.

“About Hedwig? ...Yes, Christian...yes, of course I can.”

Once again, we sat down at the table in the corner, and once again, he brought me a glass of lemonade. But I drank it more slowly today, trying to stay as quiet as I could. I wanted to be as quiet as possible as he spoke, to hear every single word.

“It was fifty years ago today”, he said. “To the day. We’d bought a Christmas tree together, Hedwig and me. We’d dragged it on a sled, all the way back home to Twig Villa. We were going to decorate it together, all four of us, that evening. It was the only thing left to do. Otherwise, every room was completely decorated. You can’t imagine how beautiful everything was.”

“Yes”, I said. “I think I can.”

He looked at me for a moment, as though there was something he wanted to ask, but then he pulled himself together, and continued.

“Afterwards, us kids were free. Mum and dad were out, doing the last of the shopping. Back then, we used to go skating on the fjord. The children would all go out there. The one who went the furthest out was the bravest.”

He paused. Not for my sake, but inwardly.

"She was wearing her red cloak", he said. "And she was a good skater. Really good. Spinning round and round like a spinning top."

"That's just what I thought, too!" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"No. Nothing", I said.

He took a long look at me, before continuing, slowly.

"I don't think she meant to go out so far. She wasn't the sort to push herself like that. She must have just forgotten, because she loved skating so much."

I held my breath.

"I was distracted", he said, his voice growing weaker. "I was talking to a boy from my class. Suddenly, I noticed how far out she was. There was fog on the ice, and I could hardly see her any more. I remember shouting – *Hedwig!* – but she didn't reply. Perhaps the sound of her skates on the ice was too loud for her to hear me I called her name one more time, but she just kept going. And then..."

He looked down into his glass, but didn't drink. A heavy tear ran down one of his cheeks.

"And then I heard a scream."

"From her?"

"Short, and high. She hit thin ice. Fell through a hole."

"And she couldn't swim", I said.

He looked at me, sharply. "How did you know that?"

"I didn't", I said, hurriedly. "I was just guessing."

"I ran after her. I could see her arms, thrashing in the water. But she didn't make a sound. People don't, you know, when they're drowning. Her arms were all I saw, and I skated towards her as fast as I could."

"And then?" I could hardly breathe.

"Then I couldn't see her arms anymore. She'd slipped down, under the ice. We searched, and searched, but when we found her, it was too late."

He stood up, suddenly. It was as though his whole body was restless, unable to sit still any longer. He walked quickly into the back room, and I heard him open a drawer and take something out. Then he came back, and he was carrying something with him.

"Her skates", he said. "When we finally got her out of the water, they were still on her feet. I've never been able to bring myself to get rid of them."

Hedwig's skates...that was what I'd seen him sitting with, the first time I was here.

Henrik stood with the skates in his hands, looking at them as though he didn't know what to do with them. Then he put them down on the table, between us. I lifted a hand and gently brushed my fingers over the cold metal blades.

"I've never been able to get rid of the house, either", he continued. "Even though it's just standing there, falling to pieces."

"But why don't you move in?" I asked.

He sighed, and sat back down.

"Because it still feels like she's there", he said. "Just going from room to room, unable to understand death. As though she doesn't want to die. And that's true, I think. If anyone loved life, it was my sister."

"Yes", I said.

And I could feel my heart beating a little faster. Because if anyone truly loved life, it was Hedwig.

"Sometimes I even think I can see her, you know", Henrik continued. "Her shadow, just around a corner, or a hint of her red hair."

He sighed again, turning away.

"You probably think it sounds stupid", he said. "As though I believe in ghosts."

"No", I said. "I don't think it sounds stupid at all."

He smiled. A light reflected in his eye, and now I could see who it was he reminded me of. Even though he was a man, and fifty years older, he had Hedwig's eyes.

"Thank you, Christian", he said. "You're a good kid. I hope your friends appreciate you."

"I don't know..." I said. "I'm not always the best friend. In fact...lately I don't think I've been much good at all."

He looked at me. It was as though he was looking straight through me, but in a good way, as though he understood far more than he was saying.

"If you've done something you regret, you can always make it right", he said. "And if they're a good friend, they'll forgive you."

I nodded. He was right. I had to make it right, properly. And suddenly, I knew how. It had to be done today, even though I also had to make sure Augusta got her Christmas.

"Do you...do you think I could borrow the skates? Just for this evening?"

Henrik looked down at the skates, running a finger over the white leather.

"You want to borrow them?"

"It's to make things right. With a friend", I said.

He took a long, steady look at me. He drew a deep breath, as though he wanted to ask me something, but he held back. Eventually, he said:

"It wasn't just by chance, was it? You weren't at Twig Villa just to mess around?"

I shook my head. "No, that wasn't it."

"And you know something about Hedwig?"

I nodded.

Suddenly, he shoved the skates towards me.

"You can borrow them. But I want you to tell me everything, some day. Do you promise?"

"I promise", I said. There was nothing I'd rather do than talk about Hedwig.

"But it wasn't the skates you came for, was it?" he asked.

"No", I said. "It was for the printer's."

He looked at me, questioningly. I felt eager.

"I need help to make a Christmas card", I said. "No. I need help to make lots of Christmas cards."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I heard Augusta, mum, and dad's voices on the porch before they let themselves in. They'd been at work and at kindergarten, even though it was Christmas eve, but that was alright because it meant nobody had been there to see what I'd been working on all morning. And now, finally, I was ready. I sat on the sofa, waiting. But just because I was sitting down didn't mean I was relaxing. My body felt as taut as a bow. It was now or never.

I listened as the key turned in the lock. They came inside, turning on the light in the corridor. I could hear the click of the lightswitch, and saw a small strip of light beneath the door. They wouldn't be able to see it. Not until they opened the door to the living room.

I listened as they hung up their coats. They were quiet now, perhaps sensing that something was up.

Then they came into the living room, turned on the light, and just stood there, blinking their eyes. Mum, dad, and Augusta.

This is what they saw: Christmas cards, hanging everywhere. Big cards, small cards, cards with glitter and gold, glossy cards, matte cards, coloured and black & white. Every card as beautiful as only Henrik could make them. And all of them with pictures of the same girl.

"It's June!" Augusta said.

I'd taken the whole album with me to Henrik, and together we'd selected as many photos as we could. Some of June as a baby, some as a two-year old in nappies, her first school photo, her confirmation portrait, and many, many more. In most of the pictures she was smiling, sometimes even laughing, the way she so often did. These were photos of the June I remembered.

But they weren't just photos of June. There were photos of my sister together with the rest of us, too. June in mum's arms, June playing badminton with dad, June with Augusta perched on her shoulders, June and I in her bed snapped early one morning.

Augusta ran to some of the cards, taking them down and looking at them.

"Look! They're beautiful!"

Mum and dad said nothing at first, just walking around the living room looking in silence. Stopping to look at every card, every single one, running their fingers over June's smile.

Augusta took a few cards down, gathering them in a pile.

"Can I have this one? And this one? And this one."

"Yes", I said. "Of course."

Augusta beamed. "Thank you!"

But mum and dad still hadn't said a word.

I stood up.

"Do you want any of them, too?" I asked them.

They didn't reply. Just kept going from card to card, their faces blank.

I felt my heart beating fast. They still didn't seem to have anything to say. They still didn't understand. I might have to try even harder.

"I've tried to do what you said", I said gently. "Take time, let it help, and so on. Not talk too much about June, because then I might forget about the pain. But it hasn't worked."

They were both staring at me.

"Because I don't want to forget how sad I was", I said, raising my voice now. "But I don't want to forget how happy June was, either. I want to remember everything. June is

always going to be here. Even though she's dead. It's not like the dead just disappear. They're still here." I was almost shouting. "June is still part of our family."

I stared at them, first at mum, then at dad. I suspect I may have been glaring. They certainly looked shocked.

"That's why I've decided we need to stop pretending it'll pass by. Instead, we need to talk about June, and look at pictures of her, and remember her every single day. Because she was happy. She was very happy. And so can we be, again."

Then I shut my mouth. I was done. There was nothing more to say. I hadn't said this much to them in one go since June died. Possibly not even before, either.

Mum and dad just kept staring at me. Then they looked at each other, then back at me.

"I think Christian's right", said Augusta.

Mum opened her mouth, as if to speak. Dad did the same. But no words came out.

Then I became angry.

"Are you just going to stand there?" I asked.

Dad took a step towards me, but it was apparently only going to be one step.

"Christian?" he said, quietly.

His voice was still completely flat. A copy of dad's voice.

"You can think about it", I said. "About how things are going to be around here. Now I have to go out."

"What?" said mum. "Where are you going?"

"I need to take care of something else", I said. "Something that doesn't have anything to do with you. Something for a friend. I need to make something right with a friend. And I have to do it now, this evening."

I stepped out into the hallway, pulling on my coat and boots, and picked up my bag.

"Christian?" said Augusta.

Mum followed me.

"Wait, Christian..."

But I didn't have time. No time to think about how stupid I thought they were. No time to think about how sad it made me that not even the Christmas cards had been enough to persuade them to change. Not even time to be angry.

I opened the door and ran out into the dark evening, pulling my bag over my shoulders. In it were Hedwig's skates.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I was warm and out of breath by the time I reached the churchyard. It lay silent in the evening gloom, but there were candles burning, freshly lit, by many of the graves. I found June's grave, and stood there for a while. It looked dark and lonely. I wished I had a candle with me, but there was no time for that now. That wasn't why I was here.

I turned, and looked around. The churchyard was enormous, row after row of gravestones. Far more than I could count. Between the trees, I could make out glimpses of

the fjord. Hedwig had disappeared out there, I thought, and a cold shiver ran down my spine.

Slowly, I started walking. I had to stop by every stone to see who was buried there. So many names, I thought. So many dead people. Most of them had lived long lives, into their seventies and eighties. But here and there were the graves of children, I could see, because there were just a few short years between the dates of birth and death. I grew sad every time I stopped by a grave like that.

*Hermine Claussen 1958-1966*

*Peder Berg 1932-1941*

*Klara Agate Kjelstrup 1925-1929*

There were short poems engraved on some of the stones, or a few brief, sweet words alongside the names. I read those too:

*Beloved and missed*

*With us in our memories*

*In our hearts – never forgotten*

*Sleep well, my love*

*Nobody who was loved is forgotten*

Time passed, but I lost all track of it. Perhaps I'd been there minutes, perhaps it had been hours. And then I started to feel as though I wasn't going to make it. I wasn't going to find Hedwig's grave. There were just too many of them. Too many names, too many dead people.

I just stood there. It was getting colder, and I was starting to freeze. My breath hung heavily in the air, bright white against the darkness. I could still feel the weight of the bag on my back, one of the skates digging into my shoulder. I'm not going to make it, I thought, I'm just going to keep walking around and around looking, forever.

But then I heard something. Soft footsteps behind me.

I turned, quickly, glimpsing a shadow between the trees. Then I heard a low voice, saying:

"It's here."

I hurried towards the voice.

"Hello?"

But the shadow vanished. I kept going anyway. And then I saw it. The grave.

*Hedwig Hansen, it said. Rest in peace.*

I swallowed. Until that moment I'd still been hoping, deep inside, that it was some sort of joke. That Hedwig was a real, living person, not lying here in the churchyard, dead and buried.

But here she was. And here she wasn't. Because the Hedwig I knew was every bit as alive as I was, even though she was dead.

Perhaps she was still there, lying in the earth, or perhaps she'd rotted away long ago. But she was here anyway.

She was here.

And now she appeared again. A shadow broke away from the trees, walking towards me. Slowly she grew clearer. More and more solid. The red cloak, her curly hair, her freckles, those two eyes shining so brightly.

But not with joy, the way they usually did. She didn't have to say a word for me to understand. Hedwig's eyes were shining with despair.

"Hedwig", I said. "I'm sorry for all those stupid things I said. I didn't mean any of it. I'm sorry."

I walked towards her, wanting nothing more than to give her a big hug. But something about her made me stop. She looked as though there was something she wanted to say. But for the first time, she was struggling to get the words out.

"It...it wasn't your fault", she stammered.

"Yes, it was", I said.

"It's my fault I'm still here."

I didn't understand. She must have seen it, because she tried to explain.

"I'm just so scared to die", she said. "Life was so good. Mine was, anyway. I loved being alive."

"That's what he said", I said.

"Henrik? My brother?"

"Mhm."

"I thought that if I could just stay here, among people, that I might keep living somehow. I waited and waited. Before you turned up, nobody could see me. Nobody could hear me. Except Henrik, maybe. I kept trying to get through to him, and sometimes I think he could almost see me. It made me so happy."

"He could", I said.

She lit up. "I knew it!"

"But it made *him* sad", I said.

Her smile faded. "Oh", she said. "That wasn't what I wanted."

"He wants you to move on", I said, swallowing hard. "And so do I."

I wasn't sure if I meant it. Not really. I was going to miss her so badly that I could feel the pain tingling in my fingertips already. But I knew that I had to say it. For her sake.

"I have something for you", I said.

I shrugged the bag off my shoulders, and pulled out her skates. She shivered when she saw them.

I pushed them towards her, but she didn't want to take them.

"What do I need those for?"

"It's fifty years today", I said. "Right now, this evening."

"I know that", she said. "I've counted every single year, every single day. Every single hour."

"You don't need to put them on", I said. "But I think we should go down to the fjord."

"The fjord."

Suddenly she shivered, as though caught in a powerful gust of wind.

"We can go together", I said. "And you don't have to decide anything yet."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Without waiting for a reply, I started to walk down the path. It led to a gate in the hedge, and beyond it was the shore. I didn't look back, but I could hear Hedwig's footsteps in the snow. Uncertain, hesitant, but at least she was following me.

I stood on the bank, looking out across the ice. It was covered with snow, but various small paths and skating tracks had been shovelled clear. I started to walk along the bank, turning now to see if Hedwig was coming with me. She was. She wasn't looking at me, just at the ice, and her eyes were black with fear.

I felt so sad for her, but kept walking. I knew it was the right thing to do.

One of the paths carved into the ice led out so far that I couldn't see where it ended. That's when I finally stopped. I looked at Hedwig, and I could see instantly that this had to be the right place. This was where she'd gone out, that day fifty years ago.

I drew a deep breath, and handed her the skates. This time she took them, but without looking at me. Her face was locked tight. Like the frozen fjord, I thought.

She sat on a stone by the shore, and began to pull the skates on. I just stood there, watching her, not knowing what to do with my hands. Should I put them in my pockets, or just let them hang by my sides? Suddenly, I felt an enormous lump in my throat. I didn't want her to go. I just wanted her to stay here, with me. For fifty more years, or a hundred. But I didn't say anything. I mustn't, for her sake.

She had the skates on now, and got up from the stone. She stood before me on the ice, and finally, she looked at me. Tears were pouring from her eyes. She wiped her hands across her cheeks to wipe them away, but they just kept running.

"I don't have to", she said, her voice almost silent. "I don't have to go. I can stay here a bit longer. Until tomorrow, at least. Or until Christmas. We can go to Twig Villa and drink cocoa. One last time. Can't we, Christian? Please?"

Every inch of me wanted to say yes, just *one* more cup of cocoa. There was nothing I wanted more.

"No", I said. "We can't. You know that. I can't see Twig Villa any more, not the way it was. Soon I won't be able to see you any more, either."

I felt something like a sob, rising in my chest, pressing at me from within. I just wanted to cry, to howl, but I drew my breath and tried to stay calm.

"You have to go now, Hedwig. You need to."

She nodded. Tears were flooding her cheeks, and I could feel them on my face as she bent forward to hug me. Once again, they mixed with my own, and this time neither of us tried to dry them.

She held me like that for a long time, and she felt warm and alive.

"Goodbye, Christian", she said.

"Goodbye, Hedwig", I said. "I'm going to miss you terribly."

Then it started to snow. Light, delicate snow crystals, dancing down from heaven. Hedwig let a few of them land on her glove. Then she took my hand and held it up, so the snow could land on my glove too.

"Every time it snows, you can think of me", she said. "Remember that I'm in every single snowflake."

"You're my snow sister", I said.

Hedwig nodded. "Yes, I want to be."

“Goodbye, snow sister”, I said. “We’ll meet again.”

“We’ll meet again”.

Hedwig sniffed, wiped her cheeks one last time, and turned to face the fjord.

Her first skated step was uncertain, but still carried her a few metres away from me. The next was steadier, carrying her further away. The third was confident and smooth, and she was a long way off now.

She didn’t turn around. I just watched her back, that red cloak moving determinedly forward. I heard the sound of her skates, as though they were singing against the ice. Now she’s going to disappear into the dark, I thought. Now she’ll be gone. Now she’ll be getting into danger. Now...

But now, suddenly, something happened. The dark clouds parted, and through a gap between them I could see the sky. A star was shining, bright and clear, down onto the ice.

Hedwig set her course towards the strip of light. She was moving fast now, gliding into the light, because the star was shining brighter and brighter. It was like a sun. A warm, yellow sun.

Soon she reached the point where the light met the ice. She almost stopped, swooping slowly into the light. Then she turned towards me. I could see the joy on her face. Real, true joy.

As she stood there, a figure appeared. I didn’t see where it came from, but suddenly it slipped into the starlight. It was a girl, older than Hedwig. She stopped for a moment, and looked at me. And she smiled. It was a smile that said that nothing could possibly be wrong, that everything was OK. That everything was safe.

It was June. My sister.

I raised my hand and waved to her, and she lifted hers and waved back. Then June turned towards Hedwig, taking both of her hands. At first they just stood, looking at each other, as though they were introducing themselves.

Then Hedwig nodded.

Slowly, the two girls began to spin around. Pirouetting together.

At first they spun slowly, round and round.

Then faster. Spinning, and spinning, neither of them stumbling or swaying.

Round and round.

Faster and faster.

Before long, it looked like only a single figure was out there, spinning. They looked like a single spinning top.

Snow whirled up as they spun around. More and more snow. The snowflakes glittered and sparkled around them, rising into a cloud of snow that enveloped them both until I could see nothing else, just the crystals swirling in the air.

And then the snow fell on the ice, and the clouds parted. But June and Hedwig were gone. The snowflakes were all that remained.

At that very moment, the skies turned dark again, blocking out the star. The light disappeared.

I just stood there. Alone in the cold, in the winter, the night, the dark. I was so glad to see June that I cried harder than ever.

...But I was crying because I missed her, too. June. My big sister. Every single part of her. Her smile, and the tears, and the way she used to hold me at night when I was afraid. But now I was completely alone again. I didn’t even have Hedwig anymore.

I was completely, utterly alone.

I just stood there, and gasped when I heard voices behind me, from the churchyard. Three voices. One thin, one light, and one deep, that I knew very well indeed.

“Christian!” they shouted. “Christian, are you here?” shouted the deepest voice.

I couldn’t answer.

“Christian?” said the lighter voice. “Christian, hello? Baby?”

Then the lightest voice of the three called out. “Dear brother?” it shouted. “Dear big brother, where are you?”

Then I breathed deeply, and finally managed to shout back.

“Yes, I’m here! Mum, dad, I’m here! Augusta, I’m over here!”

Then I ran up the path, towards the churchyard. My feet flew through the snow.

At the same time, I saw them come running through the churchyard towards me.

We ran until we reached each other, until I could finally feel their arms around me. Mum’s, and dad’s, and Augusta’s.

I hugged them, all three of them, and they hugged me, the way they used to. Just harder, and warmer. And I was crying harder than ever, but now they were happy tears.

Because I wasn’t alone. I had them. Mum, and dad, and Augusta.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I opened my eyes, and at first I couldn’t remember which day it was. I stretched out in bed, my arms behind my head, making myself as long as possible, and felt my body slowly come to life. My whole body was tingling, from the tips of my toes all the way up to my fingertips.

I leapt out of bed. For months, it had felt as though something was pulling me down towards the ground. It had felt like...like I was carrying a very, very heavy weight on my back. But now the weight was gone, and it suddenly felt as though I could fly.

I stood like that in the middle of my room, just breathing. Yes...I was sure that if someone were to give me a pair of wings, right now, I’d have felt exactly the same sense of relief.

But now, for the first time, I remembered what day it was.

It was Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve, and my birthday.

And suddenly, a shiver ran through me.

What if...what if it still wasn’t Christmas in our house? What if mum and dad were still just those strange copies of themselves, if they’d forgotten everything we’d talked about last night? What if it wasn’t Christmas, and everything was still just grey and cold?

I opened the door as quietly as possible, and stepped out onto the landing. I stood there for a while, my ears on stalks.

Silence. Complete silence.

I tiptoed across the floorboards, over to the stairs, and down to the ground floor. There, where I stopped every year, I stopped now too. Listening to see if I could hear anything.

And was that...was that music?

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come  
Let Earth receive her King  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And Heaven and Nature sing*

A warm shiver ran down my spine. It was so beautiful!

I took a few more steps, and now I could hear the jingling of angel chimes, too. And the crackling of the fireplace.

The sounds of Christmas, just the way they should be.

I hurried down the stairs, and inhaled deeply. Yes...the smells of Christmas, too. Of pine needles from the tree, incense from the burner, and gingerbread and clementines and cinnamon and cocoa. Everything was there!

Now I didn't have a second to waste. In two bounds I was at the door to the living room.

And then...then, I opened it.

I stopped dead in the doorway. I just stood there, stiff, and all I could do was blink a few times.

Everything was so perfect, and warm, and beautiful, and golden, that I could barely breathe.

The Christmas tree stood in the centre of the room. It was enormous, thick and dark green, decorated from top to bottom with elves, and stars, and hearts, and flags. Everything a Christmas tree should be, but somehow even more beautiful. It was the most beautiful tree I'd ever seen. Especially because of one thing: June was hanging on the tree. The Christmas cards Henrik and I had made were hanging from the branches, and my sister was smiling at me from between the blinking lights.

The rest of the room was smiling too. Decorations were everywhere. On the cabinet by the fireplace, right where it always stood, was the Nativity scene. Around the window were pine wreaths, with red ribbons, and on the shelf above the fireplace were the cardboard angels that June, Augusta, and I had made over the years. There were quite a few of them, I can assure you.

And in the middle of the table was the advent wreath. It had been polished until it shone, and contained four new, purple candles.

I let out a gasp of delight.

It was Christmas.

It was really Christmas!

But I still haven't told you the best part. About mum, and dad, and Augusta. All three of them were there, coming towards me, still in their dressing gowns and pyjamas. But they didn't look the least bit tired. They looked like themselves. One after another, they squeezed me tight.

"Happy birthday", said mum.

"Happy Christmas, our Christmas boy", said dad.

"Hoorah!" said Augusta.

So we sat down together, around the breakfast table, groaning with cheeses, and clementines, and little sausages, and salmon, and cured meats, and scrambled eggs, and everything delicious. And we ate. It was, I guarantee you, the best breakfast I've ever eaten in my life.

When we'd eaten until we couldn't force down another bite, and drunk cocoa until it felt like I was made of chocolate, I put my cup down and looked around at my family. At my mum, my dad, and my little sister. All three looked as though they could explode with sheer happiness. Not just that. They looked like themselves.

"You..." I began.

They turned to look at me.

"I have a wish", I said. "A Christmas wish."

"We've already bought the presents", said mum.

"It's not a present", I said. "Or...well, maybe it is. But it's not something you can buy with money."

They looked at me, questioningly.

"I want us all to go to the churchyard together", I said. "All three of us, this afternoon...I want to visit June's grave."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

After breakfast, I put my clothes on and went outside. Mum and dad and Augusta were running their final Christmas errands, but I had another plan. I wanted to visit John, my best friend. I hadn't told him I was coming. I didn't dare, because I was terrified that he would be angry at me, and refuse to let me visit.

I saw John, long before he saw me. He was playing in the garden, rolling an enormous ball of snow into a snow fort, his back to the road. The sight of that back hurt. It was a sad back, I thought. A lonely back.

I hurried to the fence.

"Hi", I said.

John obviously hadn't heard me, because he just kept rolling the snowball. Bigger and bigger.

"Hi" I said, again.

This time he heard me, because he turned around and saw me.

"Hi", he said.

He sniffed a little, apparently coming down with a cold. He wiped under his nose with a woollen mitten, full of snow.

I reached out towards him, holding his present. He looked at it, not taking it.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A present", I said.

“What for?”

“It’s a Christmas present.”

“But what is it?”

“I can’t tell you, or it’ll spoil the surprise.”

“Oh”, said John.

Finally, he reached out his hands and took it.

“Thank you”, he said.

“You’re welcome”, I said.

He shoved the parcel into his pocket, then turned back to the snowball. He leaned against it with all his weight, but there wasn’t much to him, and he clearly wasn’t going to be able to budge it.

I steeled myself, then hopped over the fence, leaning against the snowball alongside him. I still couldn’t bring myself to look him in the face, but still, I began to push. He said nothing, but didn’t stop me either. Together we managed to move the ball another few metres through the thick snow, growing with every rolled step. It felt good, just being there in the garden with John.

Eventually, we couldn’t move the snowball another millimetre, even with both of us pushing together.

“Well, it’s not getting any bigger than that”, I said.

“No”, he said. “What should we do with it, do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know...what do you think? We could build a snowman, if we roll another two snowballs.”

Two more snowballs, I thought. That means I’ll be able to stay here with John a bit longer.

“Yes...” said John. “Perhaps...”

“Or”, I said, “we could build a fort. But that’s going to take a lot more snowballs.”

At least eight, I thought. That would mean staying for a lot longer. Maybe an hour or more.

“Hmm”, said John. “You know, that might work...”

“No”, I said. “Now I’ve got it! Let’s build two forts. And then...then, when we’re done, we can have a proper snowball fight!”

John looked at me, his face still serious. But then his mood appeared to shift. His eyes sparkled, his mouth breaking into a big grin.

“A snowball fight”, he said. “We’ll need to make plenty of ammo. And cannons. And we’ll both need to come up with proper names for our kingdoms, and...”

He continued outlining plans. The words were pouring out of him, and soon they were pouring out of me too. I was so happy I just had to laugh, and then John started laughing too. It was the kind of laughter mum called ‘trilling’ laughter, rolling out of us like white pearls.

We chatted some more, and then we laughed even more. My best friend, John, and me.

I was there for a long time. Until it started to get dark. But I’d already arranged to meet John again the day after. The forts were finished, and now we were ready for war.

I ran all the way to the churchyard. The first thing I noticed were the lights, even more than there had been yesterday. By almost every gravestone was a candle, burning. There were

people standing by many of them, big and small, old and young. All of them were there to give a little time to the dead, even on Christmas Eve. I hurried between the rows of graves, all the way to Hedwig's. A candle was burning by the stone, and the grave was decorated with a big, dark green wreath with bright red berries. It felt Christmassy, just the way Hedwig would have liked it. Henrik knew his sister well, even if he hadn't seen her in fifty years. I ran a hand over the gravestone, and whispered:

"My dearest snow sister."

I stood there for a while, my hand resting on her gravestone. I would take care of it, I thought, with Henrik. I hoped we could stay friends, he and I. And we did, I promise you. Eventually Henrik moved back into Twig Villa, fixing it, and painting, and polishing and sawing until it looked like itself again. It was so wonderful! Just the way it had been fifty years ago, except possibly *even* nicer...but that's another story. Perhaps I can tell it to you one day, if you'd like to hear it.

I continued through the churchyard. It was getting darker, and all the visitors were slowly looking more like dark shadows. But three of the shadows stood out. I recognised them immediately. Mum, dad, and Augusta.

They were already waiting by June's grave. I hurried over to them. Nobody said a word, but dad pulled me into a tight hug, and I could feel the warmth of his body through his winter coat.

Mum brushed some snow from the gravestone. There it was. Her name. My sister's name: June.

We bowed our heads, all four of us, working together to brush away the rest of the snow from the stone.

Then dad took out five small candles. He set them down in a circle in front of the gravestone.

"Five candles", he said. "For the five of us."

In the centre, mum placed a small pot of white flowers.

"Christmas roses", she said. "They can handle the frost."

"Roses for June", whispered Augusta. "She'd like that."

We stood up, standing around the grave. Augusta and I stood in the middle, mum and dad on either side. They reached out their hands, towards the gravestone and towards us. And the five of us stood there, holding each other.

"Happy Christmas, June", I said.

"Happy Christmas, June", we all chorused. Together.