

Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2025*



Men Falling

He is finally dead. The brilliant writer, the master manipulator. The man convicted of rape, then acquitted. Now, collapsed on the street and instantly dead. For journalist Selna Bru, this incident is the best birthday gift she could have asked for.

RT Remi destroyed her career, branding her a plagiarist and left her with nothing. With his death, she is given the chance to reclaim her name and expose the world that protected him. But as she digs deeper, she finds herself trapped in a web of power, lies, and deceit. Suddenly she finds herself not just an observer, but also a player.

Looking for love in all the wrong places, Selna might also fall victim to her own weaknesses, blinding her when she needs to be at her very sharpest.

Men Falling is a suspenseful novel about power, truth and the fine line between justice and revenge. Blending psychological intrigue, MeToo revelations, and crime elements, it pulls the reader into a world where no one are really who they seem.

Ellen Sofie Lauritzen

b. 1985

Ellen Sofie Lauritzen is a Norwegian writer, journalist, and literary critic based in Oslo. She holds degrees in literature and film from the University of Oslo and the University of Cape Town, as well as a master's in journalism from New York University. Lauritzen has worked as a journalist and critic in South Africa, New York, and Norway, exploring topics such as feminism, gender inequality, as well as global issues like climate change and overfishing. She made her debut with the non-fiction book, *We'll Talk Next Week*, an account of dating in the app era.

In 2021, Lauritzen published her first children's book, *Cat NOW! Plz*, which received critical acclaim and was sold to Denmark. She is currently a literary critic for NRK and Dagens Næringsliv, where she writes reviews and discusses literature.

Lauritzen lives with her cat, Alf.



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CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Men Falling
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SYNOPSIS

It is early spring, and Selna wakes up on her 40th birthday feeling utterly disillusioned and at rock bottom. Without a job, a partner, or friends. The only one still with her is her cat, Boris. She cannot envision a future for herself. She has no children, and now it seems too late.

Selna rents a shabby apartment in the east of Oslo, as the bank won't approve her for a loan. She has barely stepped outside her door for months.

While checking her social media for birthday wishes, she notices that RT Remi has died. Remi was a renowned and critically acclaimed author who for many years ran the popular literary scene known as The Cave in a prestigious apartment in the posh part of Oslo. Admission to The Cave was by invitation only.

Inside a backroom, Remi is said to have drugged and raped five women. He was charged and steadfastly maintained his innocence in court but was sentenced to prison – until he appealed the verdict and was acquitted by the court. And now he is dead.

The police do not suspect any foul play: heart failure is a common cause of death for men over fifty, and Remi had been through quite a lot. The news of Remi's death is the best birthday gift Selna could have received. For he is the reason she is hiding in her apartment. After his acquittal, Selna conducted an extensive profile interview with him. When she received the proof for review, she noticed that Remi had added several new paragraphs to the text. Selna did not dare to reject the changes as they improved the article. What she failed to notice was that Remi had copied one of the paragraphs from another text, an essay about his authorship, without acknowledging it. The profile went viral, Selna was on the brink of a breakthrough—perhaps even a permanent job in the paper—until an observant reader recognised the plagiarised paragraph and posted it on Twitter. Result: Selna was publicly shamed and lost both her job and her dignity.

Then Selna receives a call from the legendary publishing editor Beatrice James, who invites her to a meeting at the publishing house. Beatrice knows about Selna's fall. She wants her to write a true crime book about RT Remi's life and death; to walk in his footsteps, delve into his life and the lives of those around him, recount the legendary evenings at The Cave, interview the women who reported him, talk to those who believed he was innocent, and those who thought he got what he deserved.

But there is urgency. One of the last things Remi did before he died was to submit the first draft of his memoir, «Victim», which is to be published posthumously by a competing publisher; they need to release Selna's book first. She is given a deadline, just before Christmas. Selna feels overwhelmed; she is not an investigative journalist, but she still accepts the assignment. Partly because she wants to take revenge on Remi and reclaim her name. But also because the advance payment gives her the means to freeze her eggs.

Fortunately, not all of her friends have given up on her: her friend André is still around. He asks to stay with her for a while after breaking up with his boyfriend, and he assists in his own way with the book project.

Selna starts her project by attending Remi's funeral. There, she recognises a tall, gangly man. Outside the church, she strikes up a conversation with Annie. She is a friend of Lisa, one of the five women who reported Remi. But Lisa is dead. After the appeal and Remi's acquittal, she committed suicide. Annie is angry and revengeful. She informs Selna that the memorial will be held at The Cave, and Selna goes there. She has never been to The Cave before and is disappointed; it's just a run-down apartment. She spots Beatrice James in conversation with the tall man from the funeral, and recalls who he is: Filip Sand, the man who founded The Cave together with Remi.

While snooping around, she discovers a door in the kitchen wall that leads to a small apartment with multiple rooms. One of the rooms appears to have been Remi's office. There, she finds a notebook – "The Cave Book" – which she stuffs into her bag. While rummaging through the room, she is caught – by Filip Sand. And he is not happy.

Selna arranges a meeting with Fredrik "Fredde" Cassermann at Cassermann Agency, the publisher of Remi's books. Cassermann describes Remi as a sleazy cultural figure who got far too drunk. He offers to represent Selna's book, but she is sceptical; she suspect he might have something to hide. Perhaps he took part in the abuse?

She manages to track down two of the women who reported Remi: Karoline Hallén and Malin Prytz. Their experiences are similar: they woke up in a dark room in a strange bed with a sleep mask on, unable to remember anything from the previous evening. But Malin remembered the sound of piano music in the background. The sound still makes her unwell.

Eventually, Filip agrees to be interviewed. They meet in the forest on several occasions, and Filip talks about his friendship with Remi. They became acquainted in their early twenties when Filip was working for the student newspaper and RT was one of the new arrivals. RT was born and raised in Belgium with Norwegian heritage and learned Norwegian by reading Ibsen and Hamsun. It quickly became clear that he was a talented writer, and Filip took him under his wing. Soon, they became best friends. When Remi inherited a large apartment from an old uncle, Filip moved in. And there, they started The Cave together, he tells Selna.

In these conversations, Filip also reveals that he saw how unpleasant RT became when he got drunk, but he never intervened. He didn't dare confront him as RT would get angry, almost violent. Eventually, Filip distanced himself from both The Cave and Remi. By the time Remi died, they hadn't spoken in years. He is still haunted by guilt for not doing more to stop him. Selna is charmed by his honesty.

As she continues working on the manuscript and meeting sources, Selna also begins hormone treatment to mature her eggs for retrieval and freezing. The hormones affect her both physically and mentally. She also receives several mysterious anonymous messages. Someone is watching her.

She makes several discoveries. At the back of "The Cave Book," she finds some photographs, childhood pictures of RT. These lead her to a waffle stand in a small town in the middle of the country. There, she

meets a woman named Ruth Therese, who insists she is RT's twin sister. She explains that Remi's real name was Roy Thomas Hansen and that he was not Belgian. He "escaped" from the village on his eighteenth birthday to reinvent himself in the capital. RT had only one friend during childhood, Olve. But at some point, they had a falling out. Selna seeks out Olve, who runs a farm nearby. In the middle of their conversation, she receives a message from Filip. He invites her to dinner. Selna cuts the interview short to catch the train—and make it in time for dinner at Filip's. She knows it is not ethically sound, but she can't stay away. It ends with Selna and Filip sleeping together.

The next morning, Selna rushes to a sauna to meet Gina Bull-Hansen, one of the women who reported being raped at The Cave. Gina tells Selna about a particular perfume scent; the memory is so vivid she can almost smell it now.

Summer arrives, and Selna and Filip start a relationship. This is a happy time; Selna is in love and making good progress on the book. But she needs more scenes to her story. So, she goes to the student newspaper where Filip and RT first met. There, she discovers an old newspaper clipping framed behind glass - an article about the opening of a new literary scene: The Cave. She recognises the three young people in the picture: RT Remi, Filip Sand—and Beatrice James. A shocked and confused Selna confronts Beatrice about it, but the editor claims it was all a misunderstanding. She was never involved in starting or running The Cave. Beatrice admits to knowing both Remi and Filip from the student paper, but omitted to mention it because she did not want to influence Selna's work. Beatrice apologises, and Selna forgives her.

Selna also meets Remi's former editor, Karen Winther-Mohn. Karen is puzzled that Remi was even accused of raping these women; she is convinced that he was gay. With this information in mind, Selna returns to Olve, who confirms that he and RT were teenage sweethearts. But they had a falling out. According to Olve, RT lacked sexual drive; he was asexual. Selna discusses this with Filip, who doubts it: according to him, RT was quite the womaniser. Selna also informs Beatrice about this and mentions the anonymous messages. Beatrice advises her to be careful.

After an autumn party at the publishing house, Selna discovers that she is pregnant. She panics; the timing is terrible—she and Filip have only been dating for a few months, she's about to publish a book and hopefully become a new literary sensation—yet she also feels a pang of happiness. Perhaps they can make it work. She invites Filip to dinner the next evening to break the news, but Filip doesn't show up. Selna becomes both angry and worried – is he ghosting her, or has something happened? She decides to go look for him. On her way to his apartment, she sees someone familiar: Beatrice James. Selna hides behind a car, confused about what Beatrice is doing in Filip's neighborhood. She rings his doorbell, but no one answers.

The next day, she visits the last woman, Pia Jeanette Franzen. Pia says she spoke to one of RT's friends the morning after the assault but does not specify which friend. Selna feels something is off. On her way home, she stops by Filip's apartment again. To her horror, she sees police tape blocking the entrance and a body being carried out on a stretcher.

Selna is visited by the police, who confirm her worst fear: Filip is dead. She is summoned to the station, where they confront her with the aggressive messages she had sent Filip on the evening he didn't show up. Selna begins to fear that the police suspect her.

Autumn sets in. Selna mourns in solitude; she can't tell anyone about Filip, as their relationship was secret, since he was a source. Meanwhile, her belly – and the manuscript – grow. The thought of finishing the book is the only thing keeping her going.

A video circulates on social media. It was filmed from inside a café window, showing Remi standing at a bus stop. And then he collapses. Selna goes to the same café and meets the guy who filmed it. He tells her Remi was indeed at the café, on a bench outside, but he wasn't alone: a woman was with him but left shortly after. Selna's suspicion is confirmed: the woman on the bench is Beatrice James. She heads to the publishing house to confront her. While Beatrice is away in a meeting, Selna examines the photos on the corkboard in her office. One of the photos is Beatrice and a girl. Selna recognizes her: it's Lisa. When Beatrice returns, Selna confronts her with what she now knows. Surprisingly, Beatrice reveals that Lisa was her niece. They were very close. It was Beatrice who got Lisa an invitation to The Cave, and now she feels immense guilt over what happened to her. Beatrice explains that she met RT Remi at the café. The plan was to confront him about what he had done, but she lost her nerve. Selna doesn't know what to believe anymore but chooses to trust her editor.

A few days later, Selna is at the library trying to work but struggles to concentrate. She googles images of Beatrice and Remi but finds nothing. Instead, several pictures of Beatrice with a popular crime author appear. Selna looks up the author's latest book and sees that Beatrice is mentioned in the acknowledgements. Selna recalls something Beatrice once said: "I've edited enough crime novels in my life to know what works." She sits down with the book.

That evening, she visits Beatrice at home to confront her with her findings. She reads the ending of the crime book aloud to Beatrice, where the investigator Hulda Holte reveals a poisoning murder. Now Selna is convinced: Beatrice poisoned Remi. And this time, Beatrice lays all her cards on the table. She tells how she invited him out for coffee and poisoned him by spiking his cup. But what shocks Selna the most is that Beatrice says she killed the wrong man. While reading Selna's book manuscript, Beatrice noticed several inconsistencies. RT never got violently angry when drunk; he usually blacked out and fell asleep. The stories from Olve, Ruth Therese, and Remi's old editor also made her suspicious. And the anonymous messages had her on alert. Was Selna in danger?

The answer to who the perpetrator is hides in the manuscript, says Beatrice. Without realizing it, Selna has given Beatrice the clues. The perfume scent. The piano music. RT didn't use perfume, but Filip did. RT only listened to hip-hop, while Filip was obsessed with classical piano music, especially Bach's Goldberg Variations. The "uncle" wasn't a real uncle but RT's "sugar daddy." The only ones who knew about him were RT, Beatrice – and Filip.

Remi told the truth: he was indeed a victim.

Filip is the perpetrator, says Beatrice. She admits to killing him, the same evening he was supposed to have dinner with Selna. According to Beatrice, Filip had always been fond of her, and when she showed up at his door, he was not reluctant. She gave him the same thing he gave the five women. And when he lay unconscious on the sofa, she strangled him with a belt, making it look like a sex game gone wrong. Beatrice did it to save Selna. She didn't want Filip to claim another victim.

Selna reacts with shock and anger. She tells Beatrice she saw her on his street that evening and threatens to go to the police. Beatrice becomes stern. If Selna goes to the police, Beatrice will portray her as a crazy author the publisher has rejected. Plus, she will 'out' Filip. Selna doesn't want the father

of her unborn child revealed as a rapist, does she? If Selna tells anyone about what Beatrice has done, Beatrice will sever the partnership and demand the advance back. Without money, what will Selna do? Beatrice advises her to go home and finish the book, keep Filip their secret. No one needs to know. Let Remi be the perpetrator; after all, he is already dead.

Epilogue:

It is winter. A heavily pregnant Selna prepares for the book launch at the publishing house. Her agent, Fredde Cassermann, informs her that the book has been sold to Denmark, and Netflix is interested. Beatrice James is also present; she is to interview Selna on stage. "Are you ready?" she asks, placing a hand on Selna's pregnant belly. "It starts now. "

MEN FALLING

(MENN SOM FALLER)

by

Ellen Sofie Lauritzen

Sample pages 5-36 and 101-105 translated from the Norwegian by Charlotte Barslund

How did he get in? He is not supposed to be here.

He presses himself against her forehead, she can feel his warm breath.

'Stop it,' she mumbles, turning onto her side, but he doesn't, instead he starts to nibble her shoulder.

Boris!

She pushes him off her, rolls onto her back and stares at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling that someone else has put there and which she hasn't bothered taking down because what if.

Yes, what if.

Her mobile vibrates on the bedside table. A new text message.

CONGRATULATIONS, baby girl. A milestone! Hope you celebrate (but not too much). Hugs from mum <3

The parquet flooring is icy under her feet, but she can't afford to turn on the underfloor heating. The whole flat is freezing cold. Cold and beige like every other rented flat in this cheap housing block, yet another copy of the other blocks in this new part of town, all called Gate or Heights or Garden something. Boris darts past her out into the narrow living room cum open plan kitchen, which is just a fancy way of saying that she can almost touch the fridge from her sofa. He stops in front of his bowl and gives her a wounded look.

Poor old Boris.

She makes coffee, tips dry food into his bowl, she feels a pang of guilt as he wolfs down the food. She ought to feed him something better than the cheap supermarket crap.

She pours herself a glass of water, drains it and peers out between the dusty blinds that are always down. It is raining. Her head is pounding. She must stop drinking alone. But who else can she drink with?

Her fridge contains a rind of cheese, a soft cucumber, a nearly empty jar of fig jam, furry with mould. Yesterday's almost empty bottle of wine is sitting in the fridge door. She tips the dregs into the glass, why not, it is her special day. Cheers.

While the coffee is brewing, she practically crawls into the kitchen cupboard, rummaging through greasy saucepans, frying pans and colanders. She knows the mug is in there somewhere, in the far corner, she remembers her mother being given it as a present and she herself thinking: You're old now. How old could she have been at that time, seven years, eight?

The mug is red, it has a sturdy handle and a caption in fat, black letters:

I'M 40 AND DAMN PROUD OF IT!

She took it with her when she left home, as a joke. Now she rinses off the dust, she might as well own it. *Main character energy*, and all that. Become the heroine of her own life, as her shrink always tells her, she hasn't seen him for ages. She can no longer afford him. And also she doesn't want to leave the flat.

She pours coffee into the mug and takes it with her back to bed. She spends three seconds considering reinstalling the dating apps, but no, she is a reject now, along with young incels and balding over fifties. She is a forty-year-old childless woman with a cat. Swipe left.

Besides: Someone might recognise her on the apps.

The mobile vibrates in her hand.

Hi Selna! The fertility app alerts her. *You are ovulating from now and until tomorrow morning!*

She closes it. Shuts her eyes. The back of her head is itching.

No man has ever said that he wanted a child with her. Instead men have used words such as nightmare and crisis, and she has dutifully swallowed contraceptive pills, inserted vaginal rings, battled her way through mood swings, thrush, acne breakouts, headaches and spotting.

Not one of them has ever asked what it is like for her. What it costs her.

The last man for whom she had a coil fitted, declared that the cost of that matched what it cost him to charge his Tesla. From which she also benefited.

That makes us even, he said.

He dumped her a month later. It wasn't him, it was his heart, it didn't want it.

She had the coil removed.

Why is she someone you don't want to have a child with?

When people ask as they still do - *Have you had the quality of your eggs checked? Have you frozen them? You ought to freeze them, you shouldn't leave it too late* - her childless body is a never-ending topic of conversation, she reels off her standard response: On principle she is against commercialising female

biology, egg freezing is a predatory assault on the female body, and so on and so forth. The truth is she can't afford it.

How did she end up here?

She used to have a by-line. She wrote portraits, she interviewed authors at literary festivals, grey heads nodding and umming and ahing at her questions.

Now she has nothing. No job, no boyfriend, no children.

She has just turned forty, she rents a microscopic flat in some grey urban sprawl dumped between arterial roads and industrial buildings because the bank refuses to give her a mortgage. She talks to her cat. The others she talks to are Nina from the benefits office, her family doctor, Dr Ole, but neither Nina from the benefits office or Dr Ole have texted her happy birthday, Dr Ole won't even prescribe her more sleeping pills. You've had enough, Selma, he says. So she resorts to melatonin, a double dose. But it doesn't help, nothing helps.

The mobile lies cold in her hand, the screen is black, she wavers. She left *all* social media after what happened.

Her thumb finds the blue "f", she stares at the screen, her heart pounding as the page opens. A piercing sensation, a shiver goes up her spine and right to the roots of her hair. Because there *he* is. She recognises him instantly. He is probably fifteen years younger in that photo, but it *is* him.

He is leaning against a pale blue wall. His white shirt is half open, his hands buried deep in the pockets of his jeans. The lower half of his face is saggy, it doesn't match the rest. He has drooping eyelids, a rather downy beard. His hair is thin and the colour of wheat.

He has done enough damage.

She checks her wall and is confronted by a ten year old version of herself on a beach, she is making a peace sign and pulling a face as she always did at the time.

CAN'T BELIEVE THIS CUTIE IS FORTY TODAY!

Her mother has added five red hearts and a laughing face with tears of joy emoji. Two likes.

She could murder her.

She reads birthday greetings from people who don't know her well, who definitely don't know what she has done. She reinstalls Instagram, perhaps someone has posted something, a story if nothing else. But no. Nothing. Her eyes well up. Steeling herself she scrolls through pictures of the perfect brunch table, perfect kittens, perfect babies, perfect flats with perfect lighting.

There he is again. With a bouquet of flowers in his hand, the same flimsy strands of hair on his head. A wry sneer across his lips. Underneath the photo someone has posted a black heart and the caption:

RIP RT

She sits upright in bed, scrolling past comments and broken hearts. Her fingertips are itching. She opens an online newspaper, encounters the same PR picture of him, white shirt, a dull gaze, hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans.

DIED SUDDENLY, it says in a fat, black font.

What the hell?

RT Remi, the well-known author and arts personality, died Saturday morning after becoming unwell. Bystanders tried to resuscitate him, but his life could not be saved. Remi was declared dead at the scene.

Hang on. Saturday, so that was yesterday? What was she doing yesterday? Nothing. Getting drunk on her own, she can't remember, one day morphs into the next, her brain is mush. She touches her earlobe, squeezing the fleshy part hard between her thumb and index finger.

Remi ran the literary meeting place, The Cave, in Oslo for more than a decade. Controversy has surrounded the author in recent years. In 2018 he was charged with five counts of rape. The assaults allegedly took place during events at The Cave. In 2020 he was sentenced to ten years and five months in prison for five counts of rape. Remi appealed his conviction, and in February last year his conviction was overturned.

READ MORE: *His crazy life.*

She stops at another picture of him standing next to the culture minister on a stage, the minister in a navy skirt suit, he in a coarse, double-breasted tweed suit, both of them smiling, he is holding up a statuette of a troll as if it were a football trophy. His other arm is wrapped around the waist of the culture minister, his hand digging into the blue fabric.

Selna touches her throat with one hand, her fingers find the gold heart, the vein straining against the thin skin.

He is dead.

It is the best birthday present she could have hoped for.

Then her mobile rings.

Unknown number.

She doesn't answer it, of course not. Taking calls is high up on the list of things she prefers to avoid, along with bungee jumping and street interviews. Back then, before this, that is, when she had no choice but to ring a source, she would always write down in advance everything she would need to say from hello, my name is Selna Bru – Selna with an N, yes – thank you for your time, have a nice day!

Now she never answers her phone, but for completely different reasons.

She copies the number into the search engine. No hits.

She opens the friends group she had previously left, or at least muted, scrolling through the thread while trying to ignore everything they have posted since she dropped out of it, most of it is stuff about children. Her friends clearly aren't bothered that she is no longer there, they just carry on their chatter, they have stopped tagging her, they have stopped asking how she is, they don't congratulate her either, and she understands them, but it still hurts.

She keeps scrolling until she reaches yesterday.

Vilde: OMG OMG OMG OMG! RT is dead! 🤖

Rina: WTF!?!

Vilde: THANK YOU GOD

Ida: hope there's room for him in hell 😈 👤 🐼

Rina: 📝 👤

Ida: That's karma for you 💀

Rina: HE HAD IT COMING

Vilde: insane! Cause of death anyone?

Ida: 🙄 🙄 🙄 party + drugs +drinks + 50something man = heart attack?

Vilde: + drugging teenage girls.

Ida: lol, spot on

Rina: it had to end that way 🤖

Vilde: One less creepy media guy ? ? ?

She resists the urge to make a meme and post it on the chat, instead she reads on. Her friends, for want of a better word, have multiple theories. Most of them are ridiculous such as RT Remi overdosing or dying from shame. Perhaps it was a suicide camouflaged as a heart attack, writes one, that would have been just what a guy like him would do.

She really does have some very silly friends.

Right now she is sitting alone in her bed on her fortieth birthday with a dusty coffee mug, friends who don't care and a fat, indifferent cat as her only company, with zero plans and zero future, thanks to *him*, she hopes he choked on his own vomit.

A heart attack is too easy. You don't feel a thing, your heart stops and you drop dead. Game over. She would want him to suffer.

The rain is lashing her face. There is practically nobody outside, just a few dog walkers, and anyway her hood hides her face.

She jogs through the grey housing estate and its narrow, shadowy passages, underneath balconies with a view of other balconies, past craters that will become new, grey blocks, towards the French bakery, her breathing shallow, her legs leaden. She once listened to a podcast about authors who entered into a state of flow when they went running, some would construct the entire plot of a book, one even had their marathon personal best tattooed on their bicep. She has never experienced a runner's high where everything flows, mostly all she can think about is that everything hurts. But today she is thinking about him. That he is gone.

At the bakery she buys a chocolate croissant *and* a brioche because why the hell not, it's her bloody birthday, she can have whatever she likes. Today she is going to say yes to everything. Yes, or oui, to French pastries. She eats the croissant standing in a subway covered in graffiti, she stares out at the rain, she gets crumbs on her running top.

Her pocket vibrates, she takes out her mobile. The same number.

Who would want to call on her birthday?

Perhaps it is someone delivering flowers? Or a takeaway? Perhaps someone cares after all?

You're going to start saying yes, remember, she reminds herself, clears her throat and swipes a greasy finger across the screen. 'Hello?'

'Is that Selna Bru?'

'Yes?' she replies, but not without some hesitation.

The voice on the other end is female and she doesn't sound like she is bringing flowers.

The publishing houses sit facing each other on an octagonal square; two symmetrical buildings with bay windows and curved glass.

Selna crosses the square, dodging puddles, then jogs past the fountain. The windows in the building, which is the colour of marzipan, are dark apart from four on the first floor to the right. Her fitness watch tells her that twenty-five minutes have passed since the mysterious telephone call and that she is still in the red zone – that can't possibly be a good thing. The pastry sticks in her craw, she should never have run to the station, she should have got her breath back and bought some chewing gum to remove the greasy taste in her mouth. It is too late to do anything about that now, she thinks and pulls open the brass door.

The reception is empty and dark with bookshelves reaching up to the ceiling, she stops for a few seconds, her arms hanging loosely by her sides, listening to her own breathing. What is she doing here? Has she been set up? Then she hears the faint sound of quick footsteps above her head, a door is opened upstairs. The female voice from the phone call calls out: 'Up here!'

Selna looks up and meets her gaze at the top of the stairs.

Beatrice James. The legendary publisher.

'I saw you from the window. Sporty,' she says to Selna who has started making her way up the stairs. Selna considers making a joke about post run fatigue, but decides against it. She is pretty sure Beatrice James doesn't run. If she exercises at all, she probably does Reformer Pilates. Something pure, exclusive.

'Thank you for making the time,' Beatrice James says. Her lips are coral and she is shorter than Selna had expected, her dark hair is cut to the nape of her neck, smooth and striped with silver. She is wearing a black jumpsuit in a heavy fabric. Her nose is small and sharp, her jaw line angular, her laugh lines, however, soften her harsh features. How old is she, early fifties?

'I was in the area,' Selna lies, she should have gone home and changed, but she didn't want to risk missing out on the assignment. Beatrice James had said it was urgent and she doesn't seem particularly bothered by the smell of sweat. Or she is keeping it professional.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you on a Sunday,’ Beatrice James says, leading the way down corridors, past busts of long dead publishers and empty offices. ‘But I’m afraid it can’t wait.’

She shows Selna into a corner office big enough to accommodate her entire flat. Four rectangular windows face the square, in the bay window is a fancy black armchair she recognises from the feed of furniture she can’t afford.

‘What a spacious office,’ Selna says.

Beatrice looks about her as if seeing the room for the first time. ‘You can say that again. When I started here a century ago, I was put in a box room. No one said hello to me, I knew no one in this business, before I came here I was the editor of *Ms.*,’

Selna nods as if she knows what that is.

‘Some of the male authors felt we were excluding them,’ Beatrice says, ‘so they responded by publishing a counter magazine featuring writing by male authors only. They called it *Mister*. Petty or what? And they say people are thin-skinned these days, ha. But enough of that. May I offer you a cup of atrocious coffee?’

When Beatrice has left, it dawns on Selna that she will never be able to find her way back to the reception on her own. She has no idea what she is doing here, all Beatrice said was that it was confidential. Her palms are tingling, tiny little needle pricks right under her skin. She feels a surge of nausea, but she can’t afford a panic attack here, now. She tries to get her breathing under control, inhaling deeply into her stomach, just like her shrink has taught her. She counts to three. She looks about the room. One wall is covered with well-stacked bookshelves, facing it is a charcoal grey seating arrangement of a sofa, an armchair and a glass coffee table, there are piles of scripts everywhere, she can make out comments and underlining. In the corner behind the seating arrangement is a gigantic desk in dark wood which undoubtedly needs an entire crew of people to move it. On the wall behind the desk is a cork notice board covered with thank you cards and photographs, she walks up to it and studies the pictures: Beatrice James and a crime queen who, for some reason, always wears yellow glasses, each of them clutching a bouquet of flowers. A younger version of Beatrice and a girl, her daughter presumably, out picking blueberries. Beatrice and a group of authors at a garden party, broad red wine smiles.

‘If I were you I would drink it quickly.’

Beatrice is back with two white china mugs bearing the logo of the publishing house. She hands one to Selna before she starts clearing away papers.

‘The cream of this autumn’s books,’ she says, placing the pile carefully on the floor. ‘They won’t sell. People don’t read books anymore. Please take a seat.’

While Selna sits down on the sofa, Beatrice continues to rage at the dwindling market and staff cuts.

‘The next few years will be a bloodbath, but by then I’ll be enjoying my pension and life on a tropical island,’ she says, she sits down at the other end of the sofa and crosses her legs.

‘Are you retiring?’ Selna says and takes a sip. Beatrice wasn’t wrong: the coffee is truly disgusting.

‘That’s the dream...’ Beatrice smiles faintly. ‘But first I want to publish a bestseller.’

‘You just said people don’t read books anymore?’

‘Touché,’ Beatrice says. ‘But they’ll want to read *this* book. RT Remi,’ she says. ‘I believe you knew him.’

The sound of his name is a sharp fruit knife in her back. Selna stutters, trying to explain herself, but Beatrice James waves a small hand in the air to stop her.

‘Relax, I didn’t like him either.’

‘Did you know him?’ Selna says, taking a tiny sip of the revolting coffee, just for something to do.

‘Everyone knows everyone in this business,’ Beatrice says. ‘I knew of him. And of the rape rumours.’

‘Rumours?’

‘Well, the rapes then.’

Beatrice looks towards the window. Selna holds her breath.

‘He was writing an autobiography,’ Beatrice says at last. ‘For the publishing house just across the square.’

She nods towards the window. ‘A juicy tell-all. About the charges, the trial, his acquittal, everything he *suffered*. Get this, the working title is: *Victim*. It will be published posthumously, I believe the script is a right mess and that they have allocated a whole team to finishing it. Because it’s hot property. I’m sure you understand,’ she says and turns back to Selna. ‘As far as I can gather their book will be published next spring. It’s important for us that we get there first.’

She takes a sip of her coffee and pulls a face, her lipstick leaves a coral stain on the china.

‘Now do you understand why you are here?’

‘No?’ Selna says and coughs. The mug is damp and slippery in her sweaty palms.

‘You will write the other side of the story.’

Beatrice sets down her mug. 'How does this sound to you?' she says, leaning forwards on the sofa. 'A literary true crime book about the rise and fall of the author RT Remi. About abuse of power, sexual assault and violence in the name of art at the heart of the country's most celebrated literary scene. What really went on in The Cave? How was he able to carry on for so long without being caught? Without anyone saying anything? How did he get away with it?'

She looks across at Selna who genuinely has no idea how to react.

'You will need to talk to his victims, the women who testified against him, those who frequented The Cave, people who knew him,' Beatrice continues. 'Because people must have known. I want you to take the reader inside The Cave. Make us understand what made that flat the only place in the whole world you wanted to be. I'll give you an advance of 200,000 kroner, say, and the rest when you deliver your first draft. That's in addition to royalties and money from foreign rights sales. This book has international potential.'

A warm sensation ripples through Selna, she visualises a vast hall filled with stands, books everywhere, posters with her face, a stage. People flocking to hear her, the new literary sensation, they queue up to buy her true Nordic noir, her revelations about the author who raped women in his spare time – and was acquitted.

'But, hang on,' she says and looks up at the editor.

'A book written by the woman who lost everything after meeting RT Remi,' Beatrice James says.

She runs home from the station, ignoring construction cranes, the never ending scraping of diggers and the infernal drilling, almost oblivious to her grey, beige and glass surroundings.

All she can think about is this: Beatrice James wants her.

The look in her eyes when they shook hands, her voice bordering on anger: *Don't you want to make him pay?*

Yes, damn right I do.

A sour spring wind blows straight through her, the sweaty running clothes sticking to her body. Now shivering, she sprints towards the ugly, grey concrete blocks, today she will treat herself to a long, hot shower without worrying about the cost. A cluster of women pushing prams come towards her, they take up the whole pavement, she has to run out into the street in order to get past them. Are they her target readership? Will they read her book, discuss it in their book clubs, post pictures of it on Instagram next to a coffee cup?

If she can find evidence to prove that he did in fact rape the women, and got away with it. *If* she can get the women to talk, get them to open up about their trauma, their ruined lives. *If* she is also able to write persuasive prose about the absence of legal protection for rape victims in the richest country in the world, will it be enough?

She swings by the convenience store, buys an energy drink and a Lion chocolate bar.

This is her chance to pull herself out of the gutter. She has been thrown a lifeline. She is done wallowing in self-pity, she will channel her rage, take back control, write a stomping bestseller, reclaim her name, she thinks and adds a packet of flatbread and tub of prawn cocktail.

After all, what can *he* do about it now? He is already dead.

But time is of the essence, the book must be ready by Christmas so it can be published before *Victim* comes out. Beatrice had been completely unfazed when she explained this, they work with books like this all the time, she assured her, probably to calm Selna's nerves.

While she queues to pay, her heart starts racing again: How will she do it in time? And where should she begin?

She doesn't belong to that tribe of investigative journalists who get a kick out of trawling through accounts and tax returns, she has never submitted a Freedom of Information request, she has stuck to less contentious subjects: travel features, portraits and promotional interviews. She is genuinely good at getting people to open up, all you have to do is chat to them, pretend you care, ask open questions, *tell me more*.

People really do love to talk about themselves, she thinks and takes out her credit card.

The day her boss called and told her to conduct a “raw and honest interview” with RT Remi, she hadn’t dared to say no although everything inside her protested. She had a short term contract working on the Saturday supplement, she had just started to cut her teeth on writing portraits, and her boss had decided it was smart move to add a woman to the team. Selna had a staff card on a lanyard around her neck, she felt important when she swiped her way through the security gate and took the lift up to the large, open plan office on the ninth floor with a view of the Oslo Fjord. The sharpest pens worked here. Now she was one of them.

‘I’m soooo bored with MeToo,’ her boss sighed. ‘Me too,’ Selna replied, her boss laughed and told her what the paper wanted for the Saturday edition: ‘A more exciting and surprising take on the classic MeToo story, a bit sexier, if you know what I mean. True, Remi is a free man now,’ her boss said. ‘But we all know he likes to flirt.’ Her boss fell quiet, and then it came: ‘And you know how to flirt, don’t you.’ Selna was confused, was it a question, a statement or a joke? It was not until afterwards she realised what she should have said, that she should have got angry, offended, told her boss that she was not allowed to say that now, and that she thought women should look out for each other, instead she said *heh*, her boss said *fine*, and that was that.

Everyone wanted to talk to RT Remi after his conviction was overturned, but *he* had come to them via the female press officer at his publishers. RT Remi wanted to *tell all* to the newspaper with the most sensitive pens. In translation: he wanted to be read by the right people. In addition to Selna, the sensitive pens consisted of three white men in their mid-forties with receding hairlines, they rode cargo bikes wearing flapping woollen scarves and anoraks that cost two weeks’ wages, they had seven children in total, they supported the same champions league team, ghost wrote political memoirs, lived in well-kept garden cities with their families and did. Not. Have. One. Single. Worry. In. The. World. They wrote portraits of CEOs and politicians. She was given artists. And RT Remi. She chose to ignore the fact that Remi had asked specifically for a woman.

She prepared as if for a viva, she read everything she could about the trial, every interview with him, she re-read his debut novel, summaries of his other books, skimmed reviews, special features including a master’s dissertation. *On love and alienation in the works of RT Remi*. She found an older

article written in connection with some sort of award for his work with The Cave. Several fellow authors praising Remi and his cultural hub, calling him generous, no-nonsense, high on art and culture, insanely talented. A man of our time.

The adulation made her feel sick.

When the day arrived, she changed her outfit so many times that she had to pedal like crazy in order not to be late and her shirt was covered in sweaty patches when she turned up at his publishers. A blonde, middle-aged woman with broad hips, a nervous smile and angry red blotches on her neck showed her the way to a small meeting room. On the walls were framed posters of old book covers.

He sat below one of them. In a dark blue armchair.

Remi,' he said, shaking her hand. Stressing the "i". Remi.

'Remi,' she echoed.

He nodded, but he barely noticed her. Ah well, she was probably too old for him. *He*, on the other hand, really did look old, his face was the colour of boiled milk, his hair was lank and sparse, the circles under his eyes looked like two craters. She scribbled it quickly on her notepad, pleased with *that* particular observation.

The staff member pointed to a Thermos flask and two cups on a low table, then left the room with a nervous smile. There was also a bouquet of flowers with a card on the table, Selna didn't dare trying to make out what it said.

It was just the two of them, the photographer would arrive later. She preferred it that way, being alone with her interviewee at first without anyone listening to her questions, it made her self-conscious. But as she placed her Dictaphone on the table between them and pressed record, she didn't trust her own scribbles, then it came over her, a reluctance to do what she was there to do: confront him.

He poured coffee with trembling hands, he reminded her of a startled squirrel. *But his gaze is dull, weary. He won the battle, but was something lost in the soul of RT Remi?* She wrote on her notepad. Too pompous?

'I barely leave the house these days,' he said, she presumed that to be a lie. The scruffy, unkempt appearance, was that just playing to the gallery for sympathy? *RT Remi, a victim of the MeToo mob, tells all about the dark days.*

He opened with an account of his early years, a story with which she was familiar, but it had to be included: He had grown up in Belgium, he knew only a few words of Norwegian – *brunost, gurimalla, utepils* – when he travelled to Norway in his late teens to track down his Norwegian relatives. She felt he

spoke excellent Norwegian seeing as he hadn't grown up here, but Remi assured her that he had taught himself Norwegian by reading Hamsun.

Without a dictionary. She had read that story too.

For a while he had indeed starved like the nameless first person narrator of *Hunger*, he said, before he had inherited a flat on the desirable west side of Oslo. He had started The Cave there, in one of the vast drawing rooms because he was missing a venue where he could discuss literature, a forum just like the literary salons of old. A place you could go in the evening and become learned, pure enlightenment, straight into the bloodstream. Personally he read on average three books a week and he yearned for discussions, to open up the space for what literature could be, what literature might mean, and blah blah blah.

Halfway through a self-congratulatory speech on the role of The Cave and the reading public, he broke off, looked at her and said: 'We want this to be the finest portrait ever written about me, don't we? Can we agree about that?'

Selna had nodded.

And then it was as if he just burst open, he leaned towards her Dictaphone as if to make sure it would catch his every word; there was no need for her to ask any of the questions she had written down and practised in the mirror, all she had to do was listen.

When the charges were brought, he had been in total shock. Rape? He couldn't believe it. Because he loved women, but not in *that* way, he said, repeating statements he had already made in court. He was innocent, he knew nothing. The press hunted as a pack, both mainstream and social media had turned him into a hate figure without a second thought, someone you could vilify over the water cooler. Norwegians needed a MeToo scandal, and he had been thrown to the wolves. *By you*, he had said, pointing at her. He had refused to believe anything but that he was the victim of a conspiracy. It was an act of revenge, but he wouldn't say by whom, she presumed it to be "*the girls*." 'You'll have to wait for my book,' he said because he was also trying to promote some book he was writing, of course he was, but he refused to be specific about that as well. She guessed it to be a no holds barred contemporary novel about the MeToo debate seen from the male perspective.

When she got her draft back with his comments, it was covered in notes, deletions and paraphrasing, he had elevated the language, made himself angrier, a bit more intelligent, more profound. He had also tweaked her observations, but left "the two craters under his eyes" alone. He had copy pasted entire sections into the text, in one passage he described himself as standing by the window, *his gaze is*

closed, introverted. But he hadn't been standing by the window. And yet she had clicked *accept all changes*. Because they did make her portrait better. They made it absolutely brilliant.

MeToo acquitted RT Remi: 'I feel sorry for the girls'

Her boss was delighted: 'This will be the making of you.'

The portrait went viral. Online newspapers sampled her text, Selna's name topped search engines, she trended on Twitter, she had got her foot in the door, would she finally be offered a permanent contract? The hateful messages in her inbox stung her, some were accusing her of being anti-MeToo, an antifeminist, *why are you giving a rapist a platform?* She deleted them. The praise and the wow emojis drowning out the hate.

And the message from RT Remi: That turned out well.

Even the newspaper's editor-in-chief, a man who never normally commented anything, popped up in her inbox: Bravo!

She was in the loo when the Twitter alert flashed up on her screen. Someone had tagged her, @selnawrites, and the newspaper.

#plagiarism #fakenews #journalismfail #metoo #wtf

This person had posted two images, one was an excerpt from her portrait. The other was an excerpt from a different text. She stared at the pictures, she kept staring, then her legs started to tremble uncontrollably.

He stands by the window, his gaze is closed, introverted...

He stands by the window, his gaze is closed, introverted...

Selna threw up in the sink.

Her boss called her five minutes later.

She collapsed on the lavatory floor.

It was taken from an article written by a pretentious arts journalist and had been published in an obscure journal she didn't read because it was printed in a tiny font and because all its content was written by Berlin-based, wannabe intellectuals who quoted Rilke left, right and centre.

An eagle-eyed reader had evidently read both that article and her portrait. And posted both excerpts on Twitter, indignant and outraged at her plagiarism.

Her career was blown to smithereens in a matter of minutes, one Facebook post after another. The pretentious arts journalist got a two-page spread in the intellectual weekly she had always dreamed of writing for – two furious pages on fraud, plagiarism, laziness and shortcuts, of the lack of respect for proper work, intellectual rigour. She turned off her mobile. Isolated herself in her flat.

Now, two months later, RT Remi is *dead*. And she gets to have the last word.

She enters the stairwell of the grey concrete housing block, taking in the smell of plastic, chipboard and detergent. If she can pull off writing that book, she is out of here. She will give Boris some outside space. Poor old Boris. During a health check, the vet had described him as an obese, geriatric cat, and raised his eyebrows when she said she didn't have pet insurance. But soon she will have 200,000 kroner in her bank account. And then she can afford some insurance for Boris and for herself. Forty-year-old eggs aren't fresh produce and she knows it, strictly speaking she is too old, but her gynaecologist thinks her eggs are fresh enough to freeze. Added to that she has a lot of them. The chance of life if – or ideally when – she meets a man with whom she would like to have a child, then she will have time to *make sure*, she thinks and walks down the corridor to her flat, passing several anonymous, dark grey doors. Her own door is at the far end to the left and as she approaches it, she notices that it is ajar. Did she forget to lock it? She never forgets to lock it.

Cautiously she nudges it open. She tries to breathe without making a noise, but her heart is pounding so loudly she is sure it can be heard down the whole corridor.

It is dark inside. There is no Boris padding along to meet her. She enters the kitchen cum living room as quietly as she can. The red coffee mug sits forlornly on the kitchen counter.

Then she sees him. He sits, motionless, on the sofa, staring at the door to the bathroom.

'Boris?' she whispers.

One ear twitches, but he doesn't look in her direction, his gaze remains fixed on the bathroom door. His smooth fur is rising and falling. The silence is deafening. She shifts her gaze to the door, what is he staring at?

Suddenly she becomes aware of a shadow on the wall. At that moment the bathroom door is opened. A dark figure comes towards her. Someone grabs her.

There is the sound of a scream and it is coming from her.

Water everywhere. It is dripping from her, she can't breathe, her eyes are smarting, her ears are whooshing.

Quick footsteps, a male figure appears in front of her. The contours of a face growing clearer in her field of vision. 'Hurry up,' he calls out. Someone enters from the right, with something shiny in their hand, she wants to get up, but her limbs are like jelly.

'Drink this,' a voice orders her, raising a glass to her mouth.

'She's awake!'

She stares at them, terrified. Who are they, where is she, why is her face wet?

And then she realises who they are. Rina and André. They are wearing party hats, they look at her anxiously. Then Rina breaks into a choppy, dolphin snort.

'You should have seen yourself, Selna, you fell flat on your face!'

André supports her back and helps her to sit upright, she takes a tentative sip of water. He strokes her cheek, then pulls an exaggerated sad face.

'I feel terrible. I'm ever so sorry' I didn't mean to frighten you. Or throw water all over you, but you were out for the count, all we could see were the whites of your eyes, it was so creepy!'

'What are you doing here?' Selna demands to know. 'Who let you in?'

She tries to hug herself, they are far too close.

'Eh, surprise?'

'I still have a spare key from when I fed Boris,' André says with a wink.

Rina rushes to the fridge, produces a bottle and pops the cork over the sink, the bang makes Selna jump.

'There's no escaping it,' André says. 'Heaven help us, you're forty, girl! I remember back when I turned forty, I was distraught!'

'That was three weeks ago, André,' Rina remarks dryly and hands Selna a glass of bubbly. She takes a sip and registers to her disappointment that it is only Prosecco. Why isn't anybody else here?

Slowly it dawns on her. These two are the only ones left. Her only friends without children.

André sizes her up with dismay. ‘Seriously, just look at yourself, you’re an absolute mess. You have tortured yourself long enough. Come here.’

He pulls her to standing and gives her a big hug, she lets herself lean into his broad chest. He is wearing a soft merino sweater and he smells of curl cream, she wants to run her fingers through his curls, but stops herself.

Then Rina joins in, wrapping her arms around them. Together they stand for a while, breathing. A trio. She feels warm all over.

‘We also brought cake,’ André whispers. ‘But first you need to take off those horrible leggings and have a shower. I’m sorry, but you stink.’

Her leggings are sticking to her buttocks and the back of her thighs. She runs her hand over her backside and shudders as she realises what has happened.

She has wet herself.

They are in an Uber on their way to a cocktail bar slash gay club in west Oslo. André holds her hand as if she were a child. He picked the venue, of course, a guy he has *a thing going on with* might be there. Typical André, why can't he devote one evening to her, just for once?

She swallows her irritation. And on the plus side she definitely won't know anyone there. She hardly recognises herself. André insisted on doing her hair and make-up, her hair is in a tight ponytail, eyes rimmed in heavy kohl and her lips pink, and she is already a bit tipsy.

The club slash bar is kitsch in an irritating west Oslo fashion. Peach walls, pink floor. A dance floor in the centre of the room, the DJ's playlist reminds her of the gym she has stopped frequenting. Right now all she wants to do is drink. And they can pick up the tab.

André goes to get drinks from the bar, 'pink champagne!' Selna calls out after him, but he pretends not to hear her. Rina and Selna flop onto a green velvet sofa from where they watch people on the dance floor.

'So how are you really?' Rita says after a pause. She has had her hair cut in a strange kind of bob that doesn't suit her, it makes her face even more angular. Her body, however, is just as fat-free and irritatingly muscular as always though Rina insists she never works out, *I've just got a crazy metabolism*. Bullshit. Selna saw the smug look in her eyes when she said no to birthday cake because she doesn't like cream. *But you two have some!* She wishes she had Rina's discipline, but if she is offered a slice of cake, then she will eat it. And ask for a second helping.

Rina looks at her with a mixture of compassion and pity, and Selna shrugs. If she tries to speak now, she will blubber from crying. Fortunately André returns with a bottle and three glasses, Prosecco, of course.

They toast, she drinks, André fixes his brown eyes on hers.

'How are you?'

Why can't they leave her alone? Why can't they just drink and have fun?

'I'm great,' she replies. 'Cheers.'

'But you're not, are you?' Rina says, still pushing, when will she give up?

'You've gone completely quiet. You don't reply to messages, you don't answer your phone.'

‘What’s this, an intervention?’ Selna says archly. ‘Because I’m not having *that*. Not on my birthday.’

They don’t take the hint, they continue to stare at her as if she were ill. André hesitates. ‘Selna, we’re just worried,’ he then says. ‘We haven’t seen you for absolutely ages.’

‘But I get it. If I had been you, I would just die,’ Rina says with a frown of her eyebrows that have been plucked to death and now look like insect legs. ‘But remember: people don’t care. Or rather they care a lot at the start, but then they get bored.’

‘And it helps that he’s dead,’ Selna mumbles.

‘Yes, let’s drink to that,’ Rina says, clinking her glass with hers.

‘Who?’ Andrew says, he looks confused.

‘RT Remi,’ Rina says.

‘Oh yes, the creepy guy,’ he says, turning to Selna. ‘So were you guilty of plagiarism then?’

A bubbling rage surges in her. ‘No, I didn’t plagiarise him, André, he plagiarised himself. Jesus Christ, keep up, how many times do I have to tell you?’

‘You haven’t told me,’ André sulks, slumping back in the sofa.

Oh, she really hasn’t got the energy for this.

‘Can you keep a secret,’ she says instead.

André and Rina nod in unison.

‘You must promise not to tell anyone.’

They lean towards her, they look like two eager border collies wanting to go for a walk. She has their full attention now.

She is snatched out of sleep by a burst of insistent sound. She fumbles for her mobile on the bedside table, but the noise is not coming from there.

Someone is ringing her doorbell.

She retrieves her dressing gown from the floor and staggers out of the room. Boris is sitting outside her bedroom, waiting for her, but she ignores him.

The doorbell is rung for the third time, why won't people just leave her alone?

She opens the door and there is her mother, dressed for a walk. She is holding a brown paper bag in one hand, in the other a bouquet of yellow tulips.

Seriously? Who let her into the building? What time is it?

'Happy birthday, baby girl,' her mother says, shoving the flowers into her face.

'Thank you,' Selna mumbles, holding the door open for her.

'This place could do with some fresh air,' her mother says as she marches into the kitchen.

Selna locks herself in the bathroom, she splashes cold water on her face. Avoids meeting her own gaze in the mirror. For pity's sake, it is only ten o'clock in the morning. Why is her mother doing this, why has she turned up without ringing first. Her mother has no boundaries, she thinks as she looks for some painkillers, she swallows two with tap water. Then she rubs Tiger Balm onto her forehead.

The coffee machine is gurgling away on the kitchen counter, her mother has decided to go ahead and make coffee without first asking if Selna minds, of course. And she has given Boris far too much food. Now she is going through her kitchen cupboards with knitted brows.

'Haven't you got any vases?'

Selna groans, finds a measuring jug in a kitchen drawer and hands it to her mother who looks at it with horror. She trims the tulip stems and clears her throat just loudly enough for Selna to hear.

'It'll have to do,' she sighs, placing the measuring jug with the tulips on the table. She has already arranged the contents of the paper bag – two custard pastries cut into fours – on a plate.

'Really, Selna,' her mother says, pointing to a dead plant on the kitchen sill 'They're supposed to be impossible to kill and yet you seem to have managed it.'

She chuckles.

'If you're just here to criticise me, you can leave right now,' Selna says icily.

Her mother comes up to her, caresses her cheek, Selna squirms and turns away. She finds two mugs – the red one for her, a Moomin one for her mother. They sit down at the table, her mother pours coffee into the mugs, studies the red one.

'Oh yes, that mug,' she says dreamily and looks around the tiny flat, spotting the bottle of Prosecco and the leftover sushi. 'Did you have a party?'

'Just a small one.'

'But that's nice, Selna,' her mother exclaims as if Selna was in primary school. 'So go on, tell me, who was there?'

'Nobody you know,' Selna says, taking a sip of her coffee and picking up a piece of pastry. 'Rina and André.'

'Oh, I've met André. He seems like a nice man?'

'He's gay, mum.'

'Ah, well,' her mother says. She falls silent, she looks across the room, then takes a deep breath, Selna knows what is coming next.

'So is there – anyone else?'

Selna chews on grimly, pressing her index fingers against her temples. 'Can you *please* stop asking me about that? As you know, I had a boyfriend, but he dumped me –'

'... completely out of the blue, yes I do know,' her mother says. 'And I have already put a curse on him. But you know the old saying: The best way to get over someone is to get under someone.'

'Mum!'

'I'm just asking because I care about my only daughter. You shouldn't leave it too late, you know.'

'Mhm,' Selna grunts and zones out, her mother has already told her how she managed to get a guy to go home with her. She actually boasted about it. Yuck.

She forces down the rest of the pastry, then looks towards the window. The light seeping through the blinds makes the dust sparkle in the air.

Her mother studies her with a look of concern.

'How are you really doing, Selna? You seem a little depressed to me.'

Selna chews the inside of her cheek, her mother is always determined to diagnose her with something.

'I'm about to write a book, actually,' she says.

'Aha?' her mother says, not sounding terribly impressed. 'Is there any money in it? It's just I only ever seem to read about how poor authors are.'

'It's a paid commission and I will get an advance,' Selna says, but her mother doesn't seem to be listening to her.

'This is for you, darling,' she says, handing her a soft, pink present. Selna takes it, squeezes it, then opens it. A long woollen scarf appears, one of those favoured by women with dangly earrings. In a colour that sucks all the life out of her.

'If you don't like it, I'll have it,' her mother says.

Selna forces her lips into a smile.

'Thank you so much, it's lovely.'

'I think they said the colour is called greige,' her mother says solemnly.

After her mother has left, Selna sits devoid of initiative at the kitchen table, staring at the hideous scarf. She thinks of her parting words to her mother: *Please would you just let me live my own life?*

The expression on her mother's face as if Selna had slapped her. She had quietly grabbed her bag, got up and left without a word.

I'm sorry, she texts her mother. I know you're trying. I love the scarf. She adds three red hearts.

Then she gets up, throws the rest of the pastries into the bin, pours the tepid coffee over the dead plant and pulls the blinds halfway up. She notices a stripe of blue sky over the square blocks. A young couple is walking along the path, both wearing trainers, sunglasses and leggings, they are holding hands.

Just how much did she drink yesterday? Did they do shots? Fragments from last night come back to her. They danced to the appalling DJ, they must have done because she was woken up in the early morning hours by her aching calf muscles.

Rina threw up and went home or rather, at some point she left. André left not long afterwards, did he go home with his latest squeeze? She can remember a champagne bar around the corner, a group of men wearing blazers. How did she get home? She doesn't remember.

Oh God, how much did she tell them yesterday?

She composes a message to them both:

Thank you, besties <3 Epic night! My twerking muscles are aching;)))) Please don't mention the book project, it's all a bit hush-hush ha-ha, love ya

Two yellow thumbs up from Rina. André sends a zipper-mouth face emoji. Then he texts: Great to have you back! Your book sounds super exciting! Keep us in the loop, hope she replies! Love <3 <3 <3

Hope she replies? Who is he talking about? And what did they talk about? She racks her brain, trying to remember what André told her.

She takes out her mobile, she can see her mother has replied, four purple hearts and a dolphin. She closes the message, opens Messenger. A hot wave of panic washes over her.

Oh, shit.

Heyyy! I'm writing a book about RT Remi and The Cave. I'm hoping we could have a quick chat? You can be anonymous. Just ask if you have any questions!;) BW Selma Bru

Sent 01:32. To a woman she doesn't know and has never met before. A woman whom André thinks had something bad happen to her in The Cave. But what does he know?

Oh no. No no no.

She re-reads the message. To make matters worse she has misspelt her own name. And added a winking face emoji.

He is standing at a bus stop, he lights a cigarette.

He closes his eyes against the sun, there is a hint of a potbelly under his grey jacket. He takes a drag.

Then he falls.

He collapses onto the tarmac with a thud, like a cartload of horse manure. He lies there in a heap without moving as if he is waiting for someone to turn up with a shovel, scoop him up and tip him into the gutter. A red-haired woman and a man wearing sunglasses come running, they shake him, the woman's hair framing her face like flames. The man with the sunglasses turns and calls out something, he looks confused. The woman with the flame red hair is on her mobile now, she is talking to someone, gesturing. More people come running, they press buttons on their mobiles, someone is filming. The man with the sunglasses starts doing CPR.

All in vain, she knows that. He is already dead.

She presses play again.

The video has gone viral across social media, it was also shared in her friends' chat group.

She knows it by heart now.

It is filmed from what must be the window seat in a café. She can hear murmuring voices in the background, the steady hum of a coffee machine, every now and then the screech of a milk frother.

'Shit,' says the man filming as Remi crashes onto the ground.

The man filming lets out a gasp, the footage is blurred for a few seconds before he zooms in on RT Remi on the tarmac. He zooms out when people come running.

'Did you see that? He fell,' are the last words spoken before the footage goes black.

Selna adjusts the luxury pillow and opens the document, the cursor is beating like a heart.

The clock radio on the bedside table shows seven thirty in the evening. Piles of paper lie scattered around her, along with two ring binders in different colours. Her plan is to organise everything into the ring binders, perhaps create a flipchart. For the time being she is working from her bed. She is reminded

of a true crime writer who preferred to work in bed. A book came out of it. And a TV series, but by then she had already died – in her bed. Ah, well.

Since getting drunk with André and Rina last week, she has barely left her flat, not that that in itself is anything new. The novelty is that now it feels necessary rather than terrible. The pain and the fear that had woken up her every day these last few months have been replaced by something else: a rush, an urge to work.

The research she did for her portrait of RT Remi has given her a head start, it wasn't time wasted.

She has printed out all the news articles she has been able to find, scrutinised legal documents, the initial verdict and the acquittal, she has not stopped reading, all the time with this physical sensation of her body tingling.

Whenever she needs a break or starts to have doubts, she watches the video. That brief second before he collapses, the expression in his eyes, it is pure art.

Sadly he didn't choke on his own vomit. The cause of death was reported in the online newspapers yesterday: RT Remi died, as do most men in their fifties, from a heart attack.

She can still remember the mood the autumn before he was charged. The autumn of MeToo when it was unseasonably hot and she wore sunglasses and a light jacket until late into October.

The air was still in the editorial office, and yet it quivered, everyone was on the alert, following the hashtag as it spread across social media, from industry to industry, how it chewed up important men like Pac-Man, *munch, munch, munch*. Film moguls, businessmen, directors, CEOs, politicians, actors and authors lost their jobs, reputations, wives, awards, sources of income, dignity. *Gobble-gobble*.

They were reported to the police and charged, she watched them on the screens at the news desk as they emerged from court rooms, some hurrying to waiting cars, sombre looking, wearing sunglasses and baseball caps, a protective hand shielding them from camera flashes, others would stop and wave as if they were at a first night party.

She loved to see them like that. Cut down to size.

Who would be the next to fall? How many of them had deleted their social media, how many of them were sitting at home behind closed curtains, biting their nails? How many jumped every time the phone rang?

Her female colleagues discussed the cases non-stop, their eyes wild, they refreshed Twitter constantly, created group chats and shared stories, Selna joined them, she felt strong, she was part of a community now, a sisterhood, something bigger than her, she watched male middle management walk down the corridors cowed, the deck shoe-wearing investigative journalist who had come on to her at the summer party no longer looked her in the eye, he just stayed in his window seat with his big headphones on, staring grimly at his computer screen.

At the morning meeting they debated if it was worth doing a Norwegian MeToo story. 'What's the state of our own arts scene, there's got to be some dirt there, surely,' her boss said. The investigative journalist with the deck shoes stared at the table. No one said anything.

Everyone was told to make a list of three names, the names were circulated within the group. Her male colleagues squirmed on their chairs in the glass cage.

She struggled with her list, then scribbled down the name of an author in his fifties she had interviewed when she was a summer temp some years ago. He wrote middling, middle-class books which people bought for some inexplicable reason and which had earned him enough money to buy a cottage in Sørlandet with a bath house, a jetty and mooring. That was where he welcomed her, on the jetty, barefoot, in airy linen clothes, offering her coffee and some stodgy wheat rolls, telling her he was *beside himself with worry* about the reviews of his latest book. He normally fled the country before the reviews came out, he said, while wolfing down a roll as if he was late for something. 'I'm scared to death,' he said, his mouth full of bread, and that ended up being the headline.

His text had arrived that same evening.

I want to drown between your legs.

And then a video. He was twanging his guitar, gazing at her with soulful eyes. I'm on fire, he sang, chewing his lip. When she wrote the interview, she felt like a fool.

She added one other name, which she put in brackets, it was that of a government minister, but it hadn't been that bad. She had attended a literature festival in a small town in the middle of Norway, she had let herself be talked into going with a group of people to a bar which everyone for some insane reason *had* to visit, even though it stank of piss and stale beer, and it was while queuing for drinks that she felt a hand on her bottom. The hand squeezed it. She jumped, turned her head and there the minister was, grinning, his hair tousled, he was wearing a stupid blazer, his hand was still on her bottom, the other was waving a key card as if it were a prize.

She wriggled out of his grip and slipped past him. She went back to her tiny hotel room. And anyway it was late. The next morning she woke up to a bruise on one buttock and an email from him.

I'm a nice guy really.

Her female colleagues nodded gravely when she told them, some of the men hummed nervously, others rolled their eyes. 'Seriously?' said a young guy wearing round glasses who was straight out of journalism school.

Boys will be boys, someone else mumbled. But hey, *not all men* and so on.

'Good, Selna,' her boss said.

Everyone laughed, relieved, and they moved onto the next man on the list.

RT Remi was charged just before Christmas.

Every news outlet covered the story. And they all used the same picture of him. The white shirt, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, the empty gaze. It was all people talked about at lunch. Some of the men wondered whether it was revenge, were the women ganging up on him? One of the editorial column writers, a middle-aged woman with a pussybow blouse and wild hair was outraged. That women had to *join forces* in order to report it, that it took *five* cases before the police could be bothered to investigate, what did that tell you about the legal status of women in this country?

The men fell silent.

André is lying in the tiny bath tub, singing, when she gets home. The flat reeks, he hasn't emptied the litter tray.

She opens the door to the bathroom a crack. 'Mind if I have a pee?'

'Sure,' André says. He has suds in his curls and is scrubbing his body thoroughly with her bath mitt. 'So tell me everything.'

Selna puts down the loo seat, unzips her trousers, pushes down her knickers and sits down. She notices a scattering of stubble on the sink.

'It didn't go very well. She had a total meltdown in the loo, she's a nervous wreck.'

'God, how awful!' André says. 'So what did you do?'

She shrugs.

He sits up in the bath tub, sloshing water over the edge. 'Selna Bru, you have to call her! Something like that can be completely re-traumatising, what if she kills herself as well!'

'I don't suppose it was that bad,' she mumbles, pulling up her trousers and washing her hands. 'But all right, I'll call her.'

She fishes out her mobile from her trouser pocket.

'Good,' he says, holding the bath mitt over his heart. 'By the way. I've invited some people round for a tiny lunch on 17 May. I hope that's all right?'

'17 May?' she says absentmindedly to the screen.

'Yes, hello? Constitution Day, remember? It's less than a week away, are you even listening to me?'

'Sure,' she mumbles, her heart is pounding now.

Filip has replied.

Selna is sitting in the far corner with her back to the fjord with a Pepsi Max and a glass of ice cubes. It is a quiet morning, classical music is coming from the speakers. Apart from three other people, the Opera Café is empty. She glances at her mobile, the woman she is supposed to be meeting is more than fifteen minutes late. Has she ghosted her?

She texts Beatrice.

You were right about the poet, she is one of them. Am waiting for her now.

Fab! Beatrice replies, adding a yellow thumbs up.

Selna looks towards the entrance. Where is she?

More minutes pass. She is about to return her notebook to her bag when she spots her. Malin Prytz comes rushing through the foyer, she is wearing a brown leather jacket, her hair is pulled up in her signature high ponytail, chandelier earrings dangle from her earlobes. Selna waves to her from her corner table. Malin Prytz doesn't wave back.

'Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,' Selna says when Malin reaches her table. She extends her hand. Malin Prytz just flops down onto the chair opposite Selna, her mouth a narrow line.

'I didn't agree. You refused to give up.'

Selna proffers a taut smile. 'Can I get you anything? My publishers are paying.'

Malin Prytz shakes her head almost imperceptibly, she doesn't take off her jacket.

'You can get me an apology.'

Ouch, Selna thinks. She wonders if you are allowed to be annoyed with a rape victim.

'I'm sorry,' she then says as sincerely as she can manage and shakes her head briefly as the waiter approaches their table.

'You're probably thinking I'm terribly pretentious for choosing this venue,' Malin Prytz says. 'But this place has become my safe space, most of the people here are tourists.'

Selna slides her mobile carefully across the table. 'Do you mind if I record our conversation? I won't mention your name, obviously.'

Malin glances at the mobile, then she says. 'I don't have very much to tell you.'

‘Perhaps you could tell me how you ended up in The Cave?’ Selna suggests. ‘Was that where you met Remi?’

‘Oh, that name,’ Malin says, folding her arms across her chest. ‘No, it was before that, in the bookshop where I worked part-time when I was at uni. He would come by often, sometimes he just asked for book recommendations. I was thrilled, I thought it was great fun. *Jesus wept,*’ she whispers to herself. ‘Not that he was attractive or anything, his hair, his style, total fail. But there was something about him. He was funny, so different from all the pretentious guys reading Literature who only ever talked about Foucault. I started getting excited about going to work.’

She shakes her head as if she is disappointed at herself.

‘At the time I had just started writing poetry, short pieces about my life. I knew about The Cave, of course I did, everyone reading Literature wanted to go there. One day when he stopped by, I plucked up the courage to ask if I could recite a long poem in The Cave. I’ve no idea what got into me, I’m not normally that bold. A few days later he came back and handed me an envelope. An invitation to a Nabokov evening. My name was in the programme! I totally panicked. I had only ever read *Lolita*, I borrowed at least four books at the library, including one about him, I could have passed an exam on Nabokov.’

Malin Prytz takes a deep breath in as if she is going to add something, but then she breaks off. Her eyes widen, she stares into space, at something beyond Selna, her pupils large and black.

‘I need to get out of here,’ she says.

The Opera's sloping roof is crowded with tourists wearing sunglasses. The sun bounces off the marble, the bright light hurts their eyes. Malin Prytz is walking towards the fjord, hugging herself tightly. Selna follows her, almost tripping over a kerb stone.

'What just happened?'

'I'm sorry,' Malin says. 'Piano music freaks me out. It reminds me of lying there. In that room.'

'There was music playing?'

Malin stares at the ground, then she shrugs. 'It sounded as if someone was playing the piano in the next room, the same tune over and over, but I don't know, I could have dreamt it.'

'You didn't mention that in court?'

'No, why would I?'

She raises her gaze, stares across the fjord. The sunshine warms their faces.

'I got really quite drunk that evening,' she says eventually. 'Drunk and emotional. One of the last things I remember is sitting on the sofa next to him. At one point I put my hand on his thigh and he gently pushed it away. I think I might even have tried to kiss him. It's awful to think about now.'

She buries her face in her hands. Selna doesn't say anything. She wants to pat her shoulder, but she just stands there with her arms hanging down impotently.

'I don't remember anything after that,' Malin continues, still with her hands covering her face. 'I woke up in a dark room and I felt sick, I didn't know where I was or why I was naked, I didn't realise I was still in the same flat until I opened a door that led to the kitchen. And there he was making coffee. I'll never forget the look on his face. It was one of what-are-you-doing-here.'

She lowers her hands and looks at Selna with despair in her eyes.

'He offered me *coffee*, do you get it? As if nothing had happened.'

'So what did you do?' Selna says.

'I didn't dare not drink it, I had no idea what to do with myself, I was ashamed that I had let myself get so drunk, what must he be thinking about me? He invites me to The Cave, and all I do is get wasted and throw myself at him. But the worst thing was that I don't know if we had sex. My body felt as if we had, but my memory was a total blank. Had I wanted to? I just felt incredibly awkward, I made my excuses,

I said I had to go. I remember running out into the street, that it was cold, it was snowing, I staggered as if I was still drunk, I don't remember how I got home, that's also a blur.'

'But when I went to the loo, I could feel stinging. There's not supposed to be pain between your legs. It doesn't usually hurt.'

She turns away from the fjord and walks slowly across the marble towards the bridge and the public library. Selna follows.

'Some days later he invited me back,' Malin continues. 'I got a red rash all over my body, but I still went there, of course.'

'Why?' Selna wants to know.

Malin glares at her with anger. 'Seriously? Now you sound like his barrister.'

She raises the pitch of her voice. 'Why didn't you say anything? Why did you go back there? Why did you carry on meeting with him? Why does anyone do anything?' she mumbles. 'It almost helps me to know that even if I hadn't gone back there, even if I had done all the right things, saved my underwear, not showered, gone straight to the hospital, contacted the police, then it probably wouldn't have made any difference. Because it's not *that* kind of rape. Because I had *feelings* for him. Everyone said so.'

Malin Prytz stops halfway across the bridge.

'The last time I went there, some pianist was giving a chamber concert, people were standing around the piano while she played as if they were bewitched, but I genuinely thought I was going to have a panic attack. Because it sounded like the music I heard that night.'

'So it wasn't a dream?' Selna says.

'I don't know, that's what I keep telling you! But I didn't go back after that, I was so scared of having some kind of reaction. I stopped taking his calls when he rang although it hurt. A part of me still wanted him in my life, I wanted it never to have happened. It came back to me years later when I was writing, in tiny little glimpses. And when I got Lisa's text, I realised there were more of us.'

She looks at Selna. 'Lisa is dead now, but I'm guessing you already know that?'