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Opening extract from **Minus Me**

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Chapter 1

The tram rattles along through the snowy streets. The window vibrates icily against Linda's forehead, stopping her from falling asleep. She tries pulling her woolly hat down between her face and the window, but it doesn't help. She sits up straight and looks out over the tram. It's almost empty. A teenage girl sits with her knees jammed up against the seat in front of her, purple tights showing through a rip in her jeans. She's using her scarf as a cushion to lean her head against the window. Linda doesn't have a scarf. But she's wearing a thick pair of orange mittens that her grandmother knitted for her. Extra big, so she'd have growing-room. Linda stretches her fingers. The middle one almost reaches the end now. She takes the mittens off, and is about to put them against the window, like the girl with the scarf, when a figure catches her eye. A boy, slightly older than Linda, is leaning against a lamp post. The whole of him, but especially his face, is softly but clearly lit. And he's gazing straight at her. It's as if he wants something. As if he's saying come here.

Just at that moment Linda feels a clamping sensation around her heart. She gasps for air, and just as the pain forces her to double up and close her eyes, she catches a last glimpse of the boy, running out into the road and towards the tram. There's a thud and the tram jolts on its way, and as it does the pain in her chest melts away as abruptly as it came. Her mittens tumble to the floor. One into a brownish pool of melted snow and grit. She's too weak to bend down for them. A scream rises inside her, but comes out like a silent breath. Her heart swells, then contracts, setting her blood in motion pounding round her ears.

What on earth happened? Linda looks around to see if anybody else has seen anything, but they obviously haven't. The girl nearer the front of the tram is still sitting as she was, knees tucked up, cheek resting against her scarf. The other passengers too are still rocking drowsily to the rhythm of the tram. Linda presses her face up to the window.

Where's the boy? What happened to the boy? Did he run into the side of the tram?

She gets up, grabs her sports bag and rushes to the back window to look. But there's nobody there, just the snow whirling up from the tramlines and the lights of a taxi following close behind. The taxi flashes to overtake, as the tram pulls up at a stop. Linda has to hold tight to prevent herself falling over. The doors open, sucking cold air into the tram. She feels a chill at the back of her neck. Turns. And there he is, standing right behind her. The boy. Eyes as blue as a husky's, frost on his long eyelashes melting and turning into pearls. The ceiling lights make tiny rainbows in the droplets.

She catches herself staring at him, looks down and bites her bottom lip.

‘Are these yours?’ asks the boy, holding out her orange mittens.

‘How . . . ?’

‘You’ll still need them.’

She takes them. Shakes the one that fell into the muddy water.

She wants to thank him, but the words won’t come out of her mouth. He answers her anyway:

‘No problem,’ he says.

He turns away from her to look out of the window and then presses the bell. Ducking to see under his arm, Linda realizes she’s almost home.

‘This is your stop,’ he says, stepping aside for her.

‘But how did you . . . ?’

‘Shhhh . . .’ he says, smiling with a finger to his lips. Again she feels the gust of cold wind from outside. She jumps out onto the pavement. She looks back to see if the boy is following her. But as the tram moves off, he’s still standing there behind the closed doors.

Why had he spoken to her as though he knew her? As though he’d only got on the tram for her sake? Linda racks her brain, but can’t recall ever having seen him before. Surely she would have remembered him; those intense eyes, the way he looked at her. Linda lifts her hand to wave to him. He shakes his head slowly but looks into her eyes, until the distance between them breaks their contact.

Linda breathes out. The white cloud that fills the air proves how cold it is. It’s been minus twenty in the mornings recently.

She breathes in. The frosty air feels like a metal rasp in her lungs. Her heart tightens again, before setting into action once more, pumping warm blood round her body. Linda rolls the collar of her knitted pullover up over her mouth. It helps against the cold, but not the aching sensation she's had in her joints recently. She'd been relieved that Maria had arranged to meet her mum in town today, and couldn't walk home with her. Then Linda could sneak on the tram. Maria never has the guts to get on without paying. She's frightened that God can see her. Linda doesn't think God bothers himself over such details.

Chapter 2

The rambling old house where Linda lives is on the outskirts of Trondheim but it's only a few hundred metres from the tram stop. Linda walks between the school and St Elizabeth's Hospital before she turns into her street. She's surprised to see that the ground-floor light is on. The flat, where her grandmother used to live, has stood empty since she died last year. As Linda approaches she sees two figures moving around inside. Mum and Dad.

Her parents stop in the doorway, looking into the front room, which Granny used to call the library. Linda's father is standing behind her mother. He puts his arms around her waist and rests his chin on her shoulder, and then her mother leans her head back, lifts one arm and places her hand on his neck. She sees her father stroke her mother's stomach, and then slip his hand under her jumper. Linda takes a look around; imagine if a stranger or someone came along and saw. Her cheeks burn.

She takes off one of her mittens to fish her keys out of her pocket, and walks to the front door. She puts her key in the

lock and gives it a tug; it's always extra stiff in the winter. Linda slips inside quickly and kicks the door to, giving it an extra shove with her shoulder to make sure it locks properly. Her mittens tumble to the floor in the hallway, and as she bends down to pick them up she can feel her heart distinctly. She remembers the boy, his gaze when he picked up her mittens, ice-cold, yet so intense and alive.

Was she feeling her heartbeat so clearly because she would soon be a teenager? Were boys beginning to give her weird feelings? They'd only ever irritated her before now. Axel, at least, only ever irritated her. He'd certainly never made her heart like this. But, then again, perhaps things would be different this summer. She'd be thirteen next time they saw each other. They'd both be teenagers. Perhaps Axel is online. It's a while since she heard from him. She almost misses his constant pestering. But why is she suddenly thinking about Axel? Linda looks at her watch, it's almost half past seven. She takes the stairs to the first floor in five long strides. Then she puts her key in the lock, only to find that the door is open.

The TV stands prattling to itself in one corner of the room, while the woodburner crackles in the other. Linda stretches out her fingers to get some warmth in them, then hurries to put her feet in the slippers that stand waiting for her by the woodburner. Looking down at her feet, she realizes her boots will never dry out there in the freezing cold hallway. Linda runs out into the hall, grabs them, and comes back in, shutting the door tight behind her. She goes over to woodburner and takes an old newspaper from the pile next to the log

basket. She spreads it on the floor to stop the snow and dirt from her boots going onto the carpet. A headline catches her eye: GIRL DROPS DEAD AFTER HER FIRST KISS. Wow, that's so romantic, in a kind of sad and dramatic way, thinks Linda. The article is about a couple of kids in America. Further down it says that after the kiss, the girl sat down on the sofa in his flat, and that was where she died. Not from the kiss, but from a rare heart condition. Well, it was almost perfect, thinks Linda, putting her boots on the paper. Imagine if the girl had died in the boy's arms? That would have been far more romantic, if you were going to die at all.

Linda gets up to throw some more wood into the burner. The log basket is almost empty, so she decides to be helpful and fill it up. But first she wants to check if Axel is online. She grabs the tatty carrier bag from behind the log basket, and goes into her room. She flips her laptop open. The screen immediately springs to life, and with just a glimpse at the right-hand side, she sees he isn't there. She feels irritated at him again now. What can he be so busy with? Mia is online, however, and messages her. Linda bends forward to look at Mia's new profile picture then slams down the lid. What is it with Mia? Does Mia really think she'd waste her time on a brainless Barbie girl? As if! They hadn't been friends in the summer and she wasn't about to change that now.

Taking the shortcut through the apartment, she opens the door onto the backstairs.

Linda slips some clogs on before opening the door out to the little wooden bridge that crosses over the backyard to the outhouse. She holds the rail, since both the bridge and her

clogs are slippery. On the other side of the bridge she lifts the latch on the outhouse door. A black cat streaks out from the darkness and runs down the steps into the backyard. It turns to look up at her, hissing quietly, before pissing on the corner of the house, and then leaping over the fence to disappear into the neighbour's backyard.

'What a nice guy,' mumbles Linda to herself, pressing the light switch just inside the door. She sniffs the air to see if the little beast has left its calling card in here too, but it hasn't. Linda fills the carrier bag with logs and hurries back into the flat. She hears her parents coming upstairs, and waits for the front door to open before tipping the logs into the basket.

'Ah, thank you, darling!' says her mother. 'That's wonderful.' Her voice is almost lost in the noise of the logs tumbling into the basket.

Linda tucks the bag back behind the woodburner. 'What were you doing in Granny's flat? I hope you're not thinking of having students down there too?'

'Not at all. We've got very different plans,' says her father grinning.

'Like what?'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

'Linda, have you been out with wet hair again?'

Linda's mother crosses the room and feels her hair. Linda pulls away.

'I've been wearing my woollen hat.'

'You must dry it properly before you go out in the snow, or you'll be ill,' says her mother in a worried voice, reaching out to touch her hair again. Linda dodges away.

‘There was a queue at the hairdryer. If I had my own – one of those mini ones that fit in your sports bag – it would have been dry.’

‘Are we off again? I want this and want that,’ says her father.

‘I didn’t say I wanted a hairdryer. I was simply stating a fact.’

‘Simply stating a fact, eh?’ says her father, laughing.

‘We’ll see. It’s your birthday soon. Thirteen!’ says her mother. ‘I remember when you were born. You lay in my arms, so pink and little. It was . . .’

‘. . . love at first sight,’ says her father, finishing her mother’s sentence and putting his arm around her.

‘Hmm . . . what is it with you two?’ Linda snaps.

‘What do you mean?’ asks her mother.

‘You’re always hugging each other lately.’

‘Isn’t it good that we love each other?’ asks her father.

‘I suppose. Just don’t carry on like that when my friends are round. It’s weird. Okay?’

Her father lets go of her mother, and stretches his arms out to Linda. She knows what’s next and lets out a squeal before he grabs her and swings her over his head.

‘Careful with your back, Erik.’

‘I’m as strong as an ox and it takes nothing to throw this little thing up to the ceiling,’ he answers.

Linda stretches and reaches out to touch the ceiling. As she does so, she sees a shadow out of the corner of her eye. There’s a figure in the window of St Elizabeth’s Hospital on the other side of the road. And like a flash, she knows it’s the boy from

the tram. She can feel his gaze and that weird sensation in her body again. Her fingers don't reach the ceiling, and instead she collapses onto her father's shoulder. Before she knows it, she's lying on the sofa by the woodburner.

'What did I say about that game, Erik? Linda's far too big for that now,' grumbles her mother.

'Are you alright, Linda?' says her father, stroking her cheek. 'You seem rather hot to me. You feel her, Ellen.'

Linda feels the touch of her mother's hand on her cheek, then her forehead, before hearing her worried voice saying Linda doesn't seem well. Her father lifts her up to take her into the bedroom.

'Do you want to lie in our bed?' he asks, hesitating at the doorway to her parents' room.

Linda shakes her head.

Her mother is a few steps ahead. She lifts the duvet to one side and tucks Linda in. Linda now has two pairs of worried eyes staring down at her. Whenever she's shown the least sign of getting ill, they've always wrapped her in cotton wool, taking time off work to make her warm milk and honey, or just to read aloud to her and stroke her hair. It's lovely, but you can have too much of a good thing. If Linda had siblings her parents would have had to share all this attention out between them. It's a bit much for one person to carry on their own. Linda sighs, and the lines on her parents' faces grow even deeper.

'I'm fine. I'm just a bit tired,' says Linda, smiling and trying to be reassuring.

Behind her parents, on the other side of the street, the shadow has moved to another window. Linda's smile freezes.

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She feels sure the shadow is going to lift its hand and wave at her now, and she doesn't want to see it, so she closes her eyes.

'Can you switch the light off, please? I think I need to sleep a bit,' says Linda, with eyes tight shut.

'Let me help you off with your clothes, sweetie,' says her mother. Linda lets her. Layer after layer. Mummy's precious little doll.

Chapter 3

Linda is taking a shower. She woke up before everyone else, feeling completely better after yesterday's events. She probably just needed a proper night's sleep. Linda laughs at herself for this thought, it's so boringly grown-up. Linda turns up the temperature of the water, and stands there enjoying the steam as it fills the shower cabinet. But she listens out carefully for her parents, in case they wake up; they get cross when she uses too much hot water. She closes her eyes and feels the gushing water drum against her skin, and the warmth creep down over her stomach. Scenes from the summer roll across her mind; she sees herself fighting with Axel in the lake, she sees him stopping suddenly, his face close to hers, his hand reaching up to her cheek to brush away a strand of hair. She brings her own hand up to her cheek.

'Linda!'

There's a bang on the bathroom door and Linda turns off the water hurriedly.

'Yes!' she shouts.

She opens the shower door, grabs her bathrobe from the

hook and wraps herself in it before unbolting the bathroom door, almost stumbling on the slippery floor. Her mum rushes in, but instead of shouting at Linda, she apologizes and immediately crouches down in front of the lavatory.

'Aren't you well?' asks Linda, winding a towel like a turban round her head.

'Don't worry. It'll pass,' her mum groans. 'How are you feeling, darling?'

'I'm fine. Shall I boil some eggs?' asks Linda.

'Yes . . . do.'

Her mother retches.

'But just for you and Dad. I don't want any,' she says, waving her hand behind her.

Linda takes the hint and goes out into the kitchen, closing the door after her. She's seen it all before, her mother throwing up, the nervous but hopeful glances between her parents. Glances that say: will there be a baby this time? A little brother or sister for Linda? Another little one to love? But it's gone wrong each time. Her mother has lost two babies. The last a couple of years ago. Linda gets a lump in her stomach just thinking about it. It was in the summer, and they were at the cottage down in the south of Norway. She and Axel had borrowed a boat, without permission, and crashed it on some rocks, so it got a hole in the bottom. Everything turned out okay, they'd been rescued by some local fishermen, but they'd got a terrible telling-off. And that night, it happened. Her mother had started bleeding and her parents rushed to the hospital. They'd stopped talking about having more children after that.

Is that why they haven't said anything, Linda wonders, as she boils the eggs and puts on the coffee. Surely her parents can't believe she hasn't guessed? When she was little, Linda longed for a little brother or sister. But now . . . does she still? A screaming baby for whom she'll be expected to babysit and change nappies? What is she going to say to all her friends when her mum starts getting big? After all, her parents are getting on a bit; they're well over forty.

The eggs are ready. Looking in the saucepan she realizes she's boiled three after all. She sighs, rinses them under cold water and puts them in the eggcups on the table. While she's waiting for her parents to come to breakfast, she makes packed lunches for all three of them. It's never a bad idea to make an extra effort when it's your birthday soon – or if your mother is pregnant again.

'So you made eggs for everyone, after all?' says her mother, coming in from the bathroom. She's dressed now and has put her make-up on, but she still looks rather pale.

'Sorry, I did it without thinking. But there is bread, ham and jam also, if you prefer that.'

'That's okay. I'm feeling better now, so I'll try to eat a bit,' she says, ruffling Linda's hair as she takes off her turban. 'Shall I comb your hair for you afterwards?'

'I can manage, thanks. Are you ill or something, Mum?'

'For wanting to comb your hair?'

'No. You were being sick.'

'Oh, that . . . that's nothing to worry about. It's probably something I ate.'

Her mum folds the towel and puts it on the edge of the kitchen bench. Linda follows her movements, but doesn't ask if she's pregnant. She'll have to wait to be told.

'Erik!' her mother calls out. 'Are you finished in the bathroom? Linda's made breakfast.'

Linda's father comes out of the bathroom, hair wet and lips pursed ready to plant a kiss on her mother's cheek.

'Good morning, Mrs Larsen!' he says, laughing. 'Aren't we lucky to have such a grown-up daughter?'

'Oh, pur-lease!' says Linda, rolling her eyes.

'Oh, pur-lease!' imitates Linda's father, laughing. He pulls her over and gives her a hug. 'Now, let's eat.'

The extra time they'd gained by Linda getting up early and making breakfast is soon lost to eating their eggs. Her father looks at the clock and starts putting the milk and juice back in the fridge.

'Are you two coming to the diving competition tomorrow?' asks Linda, putting the packed lunch she's made into her bag.

'Are you sure you're well enough? You seemed so poorly yesterday,' says her mother.

'You're the one who's throwing up,' says Linda, getting annoyed by her mother's anxiety.

'We'll be there, alright. We want to see you win the whole caboodle!' her father interrupts with a grin.

This is an obvious attempt to stop any argument – or discussion. They never argue in this family, they discuss things. But today Dad doesn't want to do either. He collects the rest of the food on the table to put it back into the fridge,

still with that ridiculous smile on his lips. Linda gets the urge to say something spiteful, but contents herself with being grouchy.

‘Hmm, so you’re thinking I’ll win, eh?’ she says, heading for the bathroom to brush her teeth.

‘It’s bound to be your turn some day!’ says her mother, smiling. She hasn’t touched her egg or even her coffee.

‘That’s not how it works. To win, you have to be the best,’ says Linda.

‘Hey! Look! We’ve got a visitor on the bridge.’

Dad takes Linda’s arm and pulls her gently over to the window that overlooks the backyard. It’s the cat from yesterday. Big and black, just sitting there and staring up at the window.

‘Perhaps it’s hoping to get a little titbit?’ says her mother, who has joined them at the window.

‘We’ll never get rid of it then,’ says Linda’s father.

‘I saw that cat yesterday too. It was in the outhouse when I went to get the logs.’

‘How did it get in there?’ her father says, surprised.

‘Oh, you know what cats are like,’ says her mother. ‘It can have the rest of my sandwich.’

‘Oh, Ellen, do you really want a cat hanging around just now?’

‘A little slice of bread is not going to do any harm. And it probably belongs to someone else anyway. It’s only visiting us.’

Linda’s mother leans forward to open the window. The cat instantly gets up, and arches its back.

‘Nice pussycat. Do you want some bread?’

The cat hisses back. Then just as it had the evening before, it walks down the steps into the backyard and stops to wee on the corner, before disappearing over the neighbour’s fence.

‘Seems like you’ll have to eat your breakfast yourself,’ says Linda’s father, laughing and closing the window. ‘Brrr, it’s cold. Isn’t spring ever going to come?’

‘February isn’t exactly spring,’ her mother replies.

‘Where I come from, spring begins in February,’ he says.

‘You’re over-romanticizing. And you should be used to Trondheim seasons by now. And we’re not going down to the south coast this Easter, Erik. We’re going up to the cabin in the mountains.’

‘When will you understand that Easter is the time for boat-mending and bonfires by the fjord?’

‘And when will you realize that all good Norwegians go skiing at Easter?’

‘Not us from the South.’

‘Oh, yes. Even you from the South. Think of all those people from the South who have won Olympic medals for skiing.’

‘But I want to go to the South too,’ says Linda.

‘We agreed to go every other year. Now, off you go and brush your teeth,’ says her mother.

Linda goes obediently into the bathroom. She squeezes a generous dollop of toothpaste onto her brush. She looks over at the shower. A warm tummy, burning cheeks. She brings her hand up to her face and tucks a lock of hair

behind her ear. Slowly and gently, just like Axel did in the summer. His breath felt so close. What an idiot he is. Linda ruffles her hair out again. It's wet. She'll have to blow-dry it before she goes.