

The Robbersons

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Chapter 1

In Which We Learn What a Robber Van is Like and What Pops into Crazy Kaarlo's Head

I was stolen during the second week of June. I'm glad I was, though. My summer was ruined anyway. We were supposed to go cycling, but instead we stayed home even though it was barely sprinkling outside. We were supposed to go camping, but Dad had to take care of some extra work, so we didn't. "We should do something fun as a family," he always said when he was planning, but he never asked us girls what we wanted to do. And his plans never worked out anyway. He'd broken so many summer promises that I never believed them any more.

It was a hot day, and all four of us were crammed in Dad's new car on the way to Grandma's house. That was the most boring way to spend the summer holidays, at least as far as Linnaea and I were concerned. We were both in a bad mood to start with and then we got to fighting over the sweets. As the older sister, Linnaea always claimed all the liquorice even though she knew that was all I wanted. And really just the liquorice cars. But she just had to taunt me like always. And then it happened:

"Knock it off back there, or one of you is walking!" Dad threatened.

Linnaea stuck her tongue out at me with a liquorice car on it.

"Listen to your father, girls," Mum added, even though no one ever listened to her. She didn't turn to look at us, since she had to watch the road to keep from getting motion sick.

"Vilja, don't steal. It's rude and ugly."

As always, I got all the blame. Linnaea always won.

"Thief," Linnaea said.

"Hypocrite," I said when no one came to my defence.

The attack took us completely off guard. We were just spending a summer day and fighting.

Then the robbers struck.

Afterwards, once I'd witnessed many such robberies, I could easily imagine what was happening in the robber van just then. The target vehicle, our car, had been spotted with binoculars and then allowed to round a bend in the road. Then the robber van accelerated to attack speed as the Jolly Roger was hoisted on a telescoping pole through the sunroof and began flapping in the wind. Hilda Robberson cut the corner without braking. Of all the reckless drivers in the world, Hilda was the most reckless. She usually drove in a bikini or a sleeveless top, since she really put her shoulders into turning the wheel, and that made her hot.

Inside the van, the other Robbersons were ready for action. The robber chief, Crazy Kaarlo, already hung from one of the boarding spars, his handsome bandit braids flying in the air. Gold Pete hung from the other spar, practicing his blood-curdling bandit face.

"I'm big enough to pillage now. I know I am," Kalle pestered. "I already sharpened this little knife."

"Oh, that's where the paring knife is," his mother Hilda said, keeping her eyes glued to the road.

"Yeah, yeah. Just wait until we pull up next to them. You'll probably start crying instead of telling them to stick their hands up," Heli said as she continued painting her toenails each a different colour, despite the speed. Heli was twelve and super talented at everything, which made her the family's most dangerous robber, so ferocious and wild that they didn't let her go on heists unless they needed to inspire true terror. Heli sat with her toes in the air on the back seat, keeping perfect balance even though the back tyres skidded as her mother poured on the speed.

"Listen to yer pop. He knows what's best," Gold Pete said. His golden front teeth glittered as he hung from the spar and gave what passed for a smile. To a stranger, it would have looked like the grimace of a tiger – a tiger with two gold teeth. "When yer pop says yer ready, then yer ready."

"Yeah, right," Kalle said. "You mean sometime after he retires."

Crazy Kaarlo swung himself on the spar right up to Kalle's nose.

“Listen here, boy: I. Will. Never. Retire. Say it back to me!”

Nine-year-old Kalle was frightened and laughing all at the same time.

“You. Will. Never. Ever. Retire. Not in a million gazillion years. I got it.”

“I’m ship-shape, feared far and wide, and sharp as a sword.”

Hilda, the mother, drove within sight of our BMW, swerved to block the road, and began the countdown. The countdown was important, so everyone could act in unison.

“Park – now. Contact – now. Five – four – three – two – boarding party ready – launch!”

This is what happened during the countdown: at the word “park” the brakes screeched, and the van came to a stop with a jerk. At “contact” the side doors were flung open. As Hilda counted down from five, Crazy Kaarlo and Gold Pete braced themselves and then used the boarding spars to launch themselves right in front of the target car at precisely the moment when the “launch” command came.

“Leave no witnesses,” Heli screamed as Crazy Kaarlo and Gold Pete swung themselves out of the van into the best possible attack position. Right in front of us.

It was over quickly. Linnaea thought it was reality TV, and when Crazy Kaarlo snatched the bag of sweets and me from the back seat, she was momentarily disappointed.

“Hey, don’t take Vilja! I’m a much better contestant!”

I only managed to do one thing. As the big, hairy hand reached for me, I grabbed the one thing that mattered to me: the pink diary that I never went anywhere without.

No one mounted any resistance during the robbery. Quick as a flash, the robbers stripped the car clean. Dad was only worried about the paint getting scratched. Maybe he’d lose his bonus. After the robber van sped away, it took a while before my family realized I wasn’t in the car any more.

“There we go!” Crazy Kaarlo said with satisfaction as he lurched back into the car with his loot.

Swinging on the boarding spar turned my stomach. I’ve never even liked amusement park rides.

“Boarding spars in – now!” Hilda ordered. “Doors – now!” Two bangs. “Throttle – now!”

Peeling out insanely, the robber van sped off. It wasn't until the van started moving that I realized I was in the wrong car on my way toward the unknown.

"Look, comrades, liquorice cars!" Gold Pete called out. "Someone has good taste in sweets."

"What's this?" Heli asked, her eyes burning as she looked at me. I tried to claw and scream when they moved me into the back seat. Someone who gets stolen is supposed to make at least a little noise about it. They paid no attention to my reaction. Everyone was too busy rummaging through the booty they'd made of my family's belongings. The plunder included my father's cargo shorts and a dog-eared copy of a guide to wild berries. My mum's favourite bikini, which Hilda held up to herself to model. Linnaea's glitter polish and nail bling, which Heli decided was worth keeping and shoved into her cubby. Mum's travel pharmacy, which had everything from hydrocortisone to eye cream. Poor Mum. Without that hydrocortisone, she would swell up terribly from any insect bites. I noticed they hadn't stolen anything from me. The only familiar item I saw was my grey fleece hoodie, which I'd brought along for cold nights. They decided it was a perfect fit for Kalle.

"Hey," I said, trying to get their attention.

Only the boy, who seemed about my age, stared at me with curiosity. He set the hoodie aside as if feeling guilty. I tried to look like it didn't matter.

"Hey, listen to me." My voice was a tiny squeak.

The van swerved more as Hilda tried to drive at maximum speed while looking backward instead of forward like she should.

"Kaarlo... what... is... that?" she asked in a voice that turned the inside of the van colder than an icebox.

"Huh, what?" Crazy Kaarlo asked, pretending he didn't know what she meant.

"That child. Explain! Now!"

There was only one person more ferocious than Heli, and that was Hilda when she was mad. And now she was getting close.

“You always say I can’t make fast decisions,” Crazy Kaarlo said sulkily. “That I’m not quick enough on my feet for this new world. That I should follow my instincts. Well, this time I did! For once I’m following my gut! I’m the leader, and I decided to act! And besides,” Crazy Kaarlo said, shooting Kalle a conspiratorial grin, “before retirement we should all get to nick a few things on the spur of the moment.”

The van still careened at its breakneck pace. For a moment we were still on the asphalt road I knew from trips to my grandmother’s house, but then the van executed a handbrake turn and launched down a dirt road I didn’t recognize. I knew that Dad would lose sight of the robber van now, even if he had tried to follow us. I was all alone with this fearsome band.

“Well done,” said Crazy Kaarlo.

At that point I gave up looking at the road behind us. Instead I gazed around. In the back of the van were two bench seats, facing each other. Between them was a small table, which was currently fastened flat against the wall. The van was full of hiding places, hanging storage bags and cubbies under the benches, fold-away tables and, behind the rear backrest, rolled-up mattresses. Everyone seemed to know where everything was.

I’d been thrown on the rearmost bench, next to the window. I looked at the strange window decorations, which included a whole row of Barbies hanging by their necks, each with its hair slicked back and a perfectly styled bandit look. Every detail in the van seemed to emphasize how ordinary I was and how strange and hostile the world into which I’d just been thrown was. I didn’t even dare to contemplate what danger I might be in.

“But shouldn’t we...” Hilda began cautiously. “We still have time to turn around...”

“AbsoLUTEly not,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “This is not a conversation. We aren’t turning back. All spring I’ve been listening to complaints about how lonely it is. Well, here’s a friend for you.”

“You can’t just steal a friend,” Kalle said. “It doesn’t work that way.”

I threw the boy a thankful look. Maybe he could get the robber chief to reconsider. If they dropped me off, I could find someone to help me.

“Well, right now it does work that way,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “Chief’s orders.”

To my confusion, everyone nodded, and that was the end of the conversation. A robber family followed the robber chain of command. This was my first lesson in Robberson life, and it made me give up all hope.

During the long drive that day, I had plenty of time to study this family of highway robbers. They hadn't tied me up or put a blindfold over my eyes like they always did in the movies. They didn't seem at all aware that they'd brought an observer into their midst. I watched Crazy Kaarlo's sweeping gestures, and Hilda, who always seemed to be one step ahead of her husband: when Crazy Kaarlo collapsed into his chair after lunch, it had just been set up a moment before. Gold Pete shuttled between everyone as if he was the string that tied everything together, a tall, thin, gold-toothed string who spoke in a way it took me ages to understand. Most of all I watched the children: Kalle, who kept casting secret glances at me, and his older sister Heli in her commando clothes, who seemed to be the only one in the family who realized I was observing them.

"Go ahead and look. It's free," Heli said matter-of-factly, not angrily. She was always blunt. "But if you make any notes, I'll read them."

She gave me a long, appraising look, the way a shark watches swimmers on the surface of the ocean.

Later that afternoon, Hilda parked the robber van in a peaceful stand of alder trees near a lake. Heli was hot and wanted to swim. So they did. We actually interrupted our getaway to have a swim, as if we were just any family out for a drive. No one thought to tie me up then either.

"Really, you should give me back. You'll get a good ransom," I said for what must have been the tenth time.

"We can't do that," Crazy Kaarlo said as he rummaged through an old kitbag looking for his swimming shorts. "Drat, these have shrunk since last summer. I'll have to steal some new ones."

The others seemed amused. Crazy Kaarlo was not a skinny man, and the shorts were at least two sizes too small.

“Yes, it’s time to steal new ones,” Hilda said, struggling to keep a straight face.

“Why not?” I asked. “Why can’t you give me back?”

Heli ran to the water and began a perfect, nearly noiseless crawl.

“That isn’t what we do. Robbery is our line of work. That’s what we know how to do,” said Crazy Kaarlo. Then he picked up a pair of scissors and cut the legs off an enormous pair of long johns. “There: swimming trunks! Of course, you couldn’t know,” he said solemnly, “but we have a name to uphold. And a reputation comes with responsibility.”

“It’ll cause quite the still at the summer rendezvous that we got us a prisoner. They’ll be knowin’ for sure they’ve done seen sumpin’ new,” said Gold Pete and then made a sound of satisfaction as he sat in his beach chair. “It puts a bitta sumpin’ back in this business, says I. We’s doin it by the book, old world style. Like the Great Pärnänen,” he said ardently.

“Like the Great Pärnänen,” Crazy Kaarlo agreed.

He was drying himself off thoroughly, even though he’d only put his toes in the water and declared it far too cold for someone of his rank.

“Prisoner is such a dreary word,” Hilda said as she handed me the bag of sweets. My and my sister Linnaea’s bag of sweets. Then she leaned toward me in a motherly sort of way. “It’s too bad all the liquorice cars are gone. You look to me like a liquorice car girl.”

“Hijacked individual,” Crazy Kaarlo said ceremoniously. Then he sat down and brushed his braids forward onto his chest. “It’s a huge advantage for us to have a hijacked individual in our camp.”

Apathetically I sucked on a fruit bomb as I carefully followed the conversation, because I wanted to collect every crumb of information that might help me to escape. Because I’d already decided to flee if this highway robber of a father wouldn’t agree to return me. *So, they have some sort of summer rendezvous*, I thought, making a mental note. *Good to know, even though I don’t intend to be with them then*. I decided that at the very latest, the hurly-burly of a big summer party would let me escape.

“Don’t you want a big pile of money?” I finally worked up the courage to ask.

But what would my stingy father really be willing to pay when it came right down to it? Probably not half as much as for that car of his. And they still had Linnaea.

“What was that?” asked Crazy Kaarlo. He was just chomping the last liquorice car loudly in his teeth, which irritated me.

Although not getting to eat my favourite sweets felt surprisingly homey.

Gold Pete burst out laughing. “Mouse farts, Kaarlo. She means mouse farts.”

The conversation had just take a very strange turn.

“Child, what would we do with mouse farts?” Crazy Kaarlo asked, waving the half-eaten liquorice car in his hand. At least Linnaea never did that. “What good are they?”

“Well, what do you steal, then?” I asked in confusion.

“Oh, do you want a list?” Heli asked lazily as she shook water from her ear. Then she threw herself into a free beach chair and began browsing through a music fan magazine she’d pilfered from Linnaea’s hands.

“Why not?” I asked defiantly.

Then I went to fetch my diary from the van, enduring Heli’s mocking laughter about the pink cover and flowers. I found a pen on the dashboard. Then I held the pen expectantly over the paper until the Robbersons realized that I intended to record what they said.

ROBBERSON FAMILY PREFERRED BOOTY

Collected and recorded by Vilja

1) *bulk sweets, especially raspberry boats (Hilda), chocolate (Kaarlo), liquorice (Kalle), extremely strong salt liquorice (Pete, Kaarlo, Heli)*

2) *biscuits, especially ones with sugar on top or jam inside*

3) *meat (for Kaarlo’s bandit roast)*

4) *mustard*

5) *other food, especially new potatoes, peas, strawberries and other berries, homemade bread and sandwiches, pizza and other prepared foods*

- 6) *Barbies (for Heli's collection)*
- 7) *reading material, magazines and books*
- 8) *complete card decks (two of spades missing from last deck)*
- 9) *a proper fishing pole*
- 10) *a small camping tent for dealing with disagreements about sleeping arrangements*

Currently on the lookout for:

Croquet set (Kalle), small travel refrigerator (Hilda), low power electric kettle, good-looking boyfriend (Heli)

"What the...?" Heli said. "Erase that last one. Kalle, you are sooo dead!"

Kalle cackled and ran away without looking where he was going, then tripped on a tree root and flew through the air. I didn't want to see what it was like when he and Heli really fought.

As soon as the list was ready, they took it out of my hands.

"This is good," Hilda said. "We can put a copy of this over on the co-pilot's side and look at it just before a heist."

"Sooo good," Gold Pete said. The adults were completely taken with the list.

"D'yall know it's been a whole year without that two o' spades. Gives me shivers just thinkin' about it. I didn't realize we'd been a sufferin' so long. We really got to get them cards."

I thought the list would convince them they should return me – that I wasn't any normal plunder and that they could get a big ransom for me. But it didn't go that way at all.

"One more thing," Crazy Kaarlo said.

"What, chief?" Gold Pete asked quickly.

"This is good news for us and bad for you, little girl," Crazy Kaarlo said and put his hands in his waistband the way he always did when he was very pleased. "Because now we really can't let you go. You're the best loot we've gotten in a long time. You're really smart."

Chapter 2

Which is Very Short but Not Too Short for Vilja to Escape

Evening began to turn to night. We were setting up camp in a secluded cove surrounded by forest. Everyone carried bundles from the van: sleeping bags, pads, ground tarps. Gold Pete was busy working on the fire, and Hilda moved Styrofoam coolers to a cold hollow by the water. Everyone walked past me with their heavy loads, avoiding me as if I were a piece of furniture.

They haven't thought this through, I realized. They don't know what to do with me. That was exactly the moment I decided to escape. I hadn't planned it out any more thoroughly than that. It didn't occur to me how stupid running off late at night in a strange place might be. I only got as far as thinking that I would wait until the others fell asleep and then slip out of camp. Then I would look for a big road, stop the nearest car, and say, "Can I have a ride to a police station? I've been stolen." For some reason, the idea of saying that last thing out loud felt very satisfying. So far, the most exciting things in my life had been scout overnight camping trips or trail riding on horseback, but nothing I'd experienced came close to the strange situation I was in right now.

But soon I discovered there was no point waiting for the robbers to fall asleep. The summer night began to dim, which told me it was nearly midnight, the short moment of darkness before it began to grow light again. Everyone seemed completely alert, and there hadn't been any talk of the children going to sleep. So I decided just to wait until everyone was busy with something. All I took from the loot was my diary, since I could move faster carrying less. Then I began edging toward the forest.

I walked toward the front of the van. First two steps past the front. Then to the next tree. And the next. Quickly I slipped behind the trunk. If someone at camp remembered to look for me, they wouldn't see me any more. I moved from tree to tree, always waiting until the beating of my heart calmed down. Finally, I left the glow of the fire behind. I realized how surprisingly dark the dirt road was with no light. I should have brought a pocket torch.

“Where are we going?” Heli asked.

Then she turned a torch on me. She was ten paces away and had obviously been following me all along. I don’t know how I didn’t hear anything. Instantly I comprehended that even if I ran, she would catch me. I’d seen her swim, so I knew I was no match for her.

“Is this going to be a long walk?”

“No, I was just looking for some smaller branches for the fire. It’s having a hard time,” I said quickly.

“Oh?” Heli said and strode over to me. “You lie pretty well. You’re getting better all the time, prisoner. The chief got us an interesting pet.”

She pointed the torch in my face, blinding me to the forest around us. I decided to stop pretending.

“Let me go,” I begged. “You already have our stuff. I’m not going to be any use to you. You can just say I escaped and you couldn’t catch me.”

“That’s a bad excuse,” Heli said and turned the light away from my face. “No one gets away from me. Everyone knows that.”

I knew I wasn’t going to convince her. Heli nodded toward camp, and I turned to go with her.

“And besides, you’re wrong,” she said and put the torch under her chin the way you do telling ghost stories. “You aren’t useless. You’re fun. Especially now that you’ve tried to escape, you’re even more fun. Let’s make a deal,” Heli said and came right up next to me, still moving noiselessly. “You don’t try anything stupid like this again, and I won’t remember to tell anyone about this little nocturnal adventure.”

“If I say yes, you already know I’ll be lying,” I said.

“Of course,” Heli said with a grin. “It looks like we both understand the plot to this story.”

Chapter 3

In Which We Learn the Basics of a Proper Robber Sandwich

I woke up to the smell of fried eggs. That told me instantly I wasn't at home. Mum only ever served boiled eggs, and I hated peeling shells. Gold Pete snored next to me – apparently Crazy Kaarlo had assigned him guard duty during the night. I wondered whether Heli had told about my escape attempt, but after thinking about it, I was sure she hadn't.

I crawled out of the tent, and rays of sunlight stung my sleepy eyes. I don't remember when I'd been outside so early.

"Good morning, prisoner," Heli said and then threw a knife at a paper target affixed to the trunk of a pine tree.

"I'm no prisoner," I snapped.

"Don't call names, Heli. It makes people feel bad," Hilda said and flipped the eggs just before they burned.

"You got a nasty mouth on you, just like yer dad," Gold Pete said as he crawled out of the tent after me.

"Sorry, prisoner," Heli said as she retrieved the knife from the tree and threw another bulls-eye without even aiming. It was clear I'd been lucky the previous night. Instead of talking to me, Heli could have pinned my sleeve to a tree trunk with a throwing knife.

"Girls, not so early," Hilda said soothingly.

My will to fight faded when I saw Hilda slide the pan of fried eggs onto a plate. A mountain of food waited on the picnic table. There were sandwiches, which looked astonishingly like my family's lunch from the previous day. There were meatballs and cucumber pickles. There were slices of fried sausage. There were mushrooms. There was a basket of meat pasties. There was a big stack of crispbread rounds, which the robber chief snapped a chunk from as big as the side of the van before beginning to heap on toppings. Apparently, you could even think of a pasty as a sandwich filling if you were hungry enough.

“Eat, girl. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Ain’t that right, Kalle,” Crazy Kaarlo said with a roguish grin and elbowed his son in the side. Kalle was biting into a mouthful of his own meat pasty, which he’d piled with almost as many toppings as his father. This caused Kalle to have a coughing fit, and Crazy Kaarlo pounded him on the back.

“Sausage warning!” Heli said and moved away. I also took a couple of steps back. For a moment the air was thick with bits of sausage from Kalle’s coughing.

“He does that every time we have sausage,” Heli said. “Greedy pig. Sticky to the kiddie food.”

“I’m not a pig,” Kalle said.

“Well, you certainly aren’t a robber,” Heli continued cruelly.

For a moment I remembered home and the silence around our breakfast table. I thought about my parents each reading part of the paper and Linnaea typing text messages as she jammed to her iPod while she ate. No one ever had anything to say to anyone else. It was so boring.

Once the argument quieted down, I saw that as my opportunity.

“That reminds me. When do you intend to take me home?” I inquired innocently.

“Would you like some eggs?” Hilda asked me. Without waiting for a reply, she piled a mountain of food onto a plate, which she dropped in front of me on the folding table.

“Did you hear me?” I repeated.

As if by accident, Gold Pete moved his arm and made me plop down into a camp chair.

“Eat now,” Pete said. “Don’t wanna be rude, says I. Mrs Hilda’s eggs is world famous.”

“Why the blazes won’t anyone listen to me here?”

At home I was used to being able to get my way if I argued my case well enough. Here everyone just kept gobbling down their breakfast as if they hadn’t heard me. As if I were nothing more than fly buzzing around.

“Because in this family we don’t make any decisions before breakfast,” growled Crazy Kaarlo. “That’s why. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

“Dad hasn’t...” Kalle began.

“What’s that?” Crazy Kaarlo bellowed.

“Sorry. The robber chief Crazy Kaarlo does nothing before he’s had his first mustard sandwich of the day.”

Crazy Kaarlo had a mouthful of bread, but he flexed the bicep of his free arm and then pounded it on his chest like Tarzan.

“It’s a sacred thing, that first piece of sandwich,” Hilda said and popped the top meatball from the mountain of meatballs into her mouth. “The only time we nearly got caught was the day we didn’t eat a proper breakfast.”

“Don’t speak of such things!” Heli screamed and spat over her shoulder.

Immediately the entire family stopped eating and spat over their shoulders. After which they all went back to their food as if nothing had happened. I just stared.

“Eat now,” Hilda said to me. “We’ll be leaving soon.”

“With my hands?” I exclaimed. “Yuck. Never.”

I was disgusted by the pickle dribbling from the corner of Kalle’s mouth and the smacking of Crazy Kaarlo’s enormous bites, but I was getting dizzy I was so hungry. I searched in vain for a roll of paper towel, napkins or even toilet paper. Then I saw Gold Pete drinking Mum’s stolen mineral water straight from the bottle and realized it was hopeless. With a sigh, I picked up one of the meat pasties with my fingertips and shoved two meatballs into it. Then, after a moment’s consideration, I squeezed a stripe of mustard onto it. I sat back in my chair, counted to three like I was diving underwater and took a bite.

“Life,” I said.

There was nothing for it. I grabbed the mustard tube and squeezed more on, took two more meatballs, and began to worry I was turning into a glutton too. Then I saw that Kalle had ten more meatballs on his sandwich and decided that I could go ahead and eat, at least today, like robbers eat. And I’d never eaten anything so good.

“She was hungry after all,” Hilda said to Crazy Kaarlo. “How is it?” she asked me.

I nodded, but I couldn’t reply because I was eating. Gold Pete, Kalle and Kaarlo gave conspiratorial nods.

“Yep,” Hilda said. “Of course it’s good. Steal it yourself, fix it yourself, eat it yourself, I always say.”

“And with your fingers!” Heli added. “What? You think we have time to steal utensils?”

We all laughed together, even me after a moment of embarrassment.

Chapter 4

Which is Full of Robberies

Over the next few days, I learned everything about highway robbery. I learned what a good target vehicle looks like, how to “get a smell” for what cargo it might be carrying, as Crazy Kaarlo put it. You could spot a car on the way to a summer cottage by how full it was loaded: sun hats, sleeping bags and badminton rackets in the back window were a dead giveaway. Those were the cars it really paid to ambush, because they had the most food: meat pasties and prepared dishes and crispbread for the cottage kitchen.

I learned the differences between a frontal attack, a chase and an ambush. The preferred tactic was the chase, where the robbers observed their quarry through binoculars first. If they liked what they saw, they could gradually sneak up on the target vehicle.

“It’s like hunting,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “Lions chase antelope, and robber vans chase cars. It’s the circle of life.”

“And it lets this old girl stretch her legs,” Hilda added and patted the dashboard.

They hung on the target’s tailpipe until they found a good stretch of road. At that point they would swing around the target vehicle and, after a quick acceleration ahead, swerve to block the road. That was an art in itself: the distance had to be just enough for the target to brake, but not too much. A beginner mistake was to leave an intersection with a side road between the roadblock and the target, which a daring victim might use to escape when she saw the Jolly Roger hoisted through the sunroof.

“The most important thing for a highway robber,” Crazy Kaarlo began with his eyes closed. Then he cracked one eye. “Well, where’s the pen and paper? I’m about to tell you.”

MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES FOR A HIGHWAY ROBBER

Recorded by Vilja

1) A good nose. Not everything is as it seems. No robber can succeed without a good nose. You choose targets with your nose, and that's also how you sense hidden goodies and police lurking in the outskirts of cities.

“Without my nose, we wouldn't be here,” Crazy Kaarlo said, pointing to his face. “Better bands than us have been caught just because their good old sense of smell was out of joint.”

“To help Kaarlo's nose, we have an atlas,” Hilda said. “We record everything from previous years that we might need later. I add things to it at almost every campsite.”

“Moving on,” Crazy Kaarlo harrumphed. Apparently, it bothered him when Hilda interrupted his dictation. But Hilda was driving, laying down ninety in a sixty zone, so she didn't have much attention to spare for arguing.

2) The look. A robber's credibility comes from his appearance. A president has to look like a president. A robber has to look like a robber. You can't leave any question in the mind of your quarry about whether you're putting on a fancy-dress party or a holdup. A feeling of fear increases the desire to cooperate, which speeds up the robbery transaction. Which reduces the chance of getting caught.

“Good teeth be most important,” said Crazy Kaarlo.

Heli and Kalle burst out laughing.

“Teeth?”

“The basic expression comes from a polite bearing, but sometimes you may have to grimace a bit for effect. And the teeth are the main thing then. Look at Gold Pete and you'll know what I mean.”

“A memorable grill,” Gold Pete said. “How you like this smile, eh?”

3) *Reputation. Creating and maintaining a reputation is of the utmost importance for a highway robber. A reputation should inspire respect and fear, which are prerequisites for success as a robber. Reputations are earned through daring robberies and outrunning the police if there are any. At the Robbers' Rendezvous, we compare reputations and remember the highlights of the previous year.*

"And fight," Hilda said.

"Yes, and fight," Crazy Kaarlo said in annoyance. "But we also compete for glory and renown."

"The fights are the best, though," Kalle said.

Prestige can also be acquired by developing a signature crime. A signature crime is a clever new kind of robbery that demonstrates special creativity and daring.

"The Great Pärnänen was in a class of his own," Crazy Kaarlo said with a sigh. "The Great Pärnänen took the entire profession to entirely new heights. Without Pärnänen, we would still be hiding in bushes with pistols or something."

"Pärnänen," Gold Pete said, also sighing. "There be a true robber. Learned us young'uns the rules of the game, says I."

"Aaargh," Heli exclaimed. "Boring! No one would want to be a robber based on that list. And being a robber is the best thing in the world," Heli said. "A nose, a reputation and looks? What do those have to do with any of this? That could just as easily describe a politician. Or any desk monkey."

"Any what?" I tried to ask, but the conversation had become too heated for me to get an answer.

"I was thinking about the order of importance," Crazy Kaarlo said. "Nose, look, reputation – that's the order! No changing the list!"

“Hello!” said Heli.

“Fine,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “At the fighter Heli Robberson’s request...”

4) Attack skills. Attack skills include intercepting targets, boarding, intimidation and quick, efficient exits from the scene following the robbery.

5) Fitness. Robbery is a demanding job that requires working quickly under pressure. This requires...

“Oh, so you’re fit now, are you?” Hilda laughed and looked at Crazy Kaarlo’s round midsection.

“For a man my age, I am in prime condition,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “And you also have to look after your nose, your look and your reputation, and mine are all first rate.”

Hilda didn’t say anything, but she gave Crazy Kaarlo a strangely sweet look.

“Okay, fine. We’ll add persistence, then,” Kaarlo proclaimed. “Write this...”

...this requires good fitness along with mental and emotional confidence in the robber even when conditions are unfavourable.

6) Acting skills. Frontal attacks require good acting skills. In these attacks, the robber van is parked on the opposite side of the road as the target vehicle to ask directions or something similar.

When the window or door of the target vehicle is opened, the robbery transaction begins. Despite item 2 (“the look”), acting skills allow the highway robber to appear like a perfectly normal vacationer. Approachable. And then comes the attack, once the other car is stopped.

“This is the reason we don’t do many frontal attacks,” Heli said. “Soooo boring! Why would anyone want to look like a civilian, even for a minute!”

7) *Persuasion. This includes all methods of convincing people to relinquish their belongings and cooperate during the loading process. Blackmail, threats, pressure, pointing out their personal interests, a little humour.*

What humour was there in stealing me? I wondered. Perhaps my mother's and father's astonished expressions when Crazy Kaarlo opened the back door and scooped me up under his arm as if I were a purse passed for funny. Then I remembered the confusion that had begun when I was brought into the robber van. They didn't know what to do. They'd never done anything like this, even if they were a famous robber family. For some reason that made me feel relieved.

8) *Risk assessment. There are no easy targets. There are only targets with their own unique risks, which require analysis. Where is the nearest police station? Any curious neighbours who could become eyewitnesses? How will the occupants of the vehicle behave? Will anyone try to fight back?*

"Do you remember that woman in March who waved that umbrella around?" Kalle said. "We were all floored, but thankfully Gold Pete handled her beautifully."

"He gave new meaning to giving someone the boot!" Heli said.

"Aye. Then we drove on up to the nearest shop and made it known there were an old lady stuck in her car," said Gold Pete. "Not many folks knows we's got such a good heart."

9) *Persistence. Robbery is mostly waiting, even though most people don't talk about it. We wait for the right car and the right place to pass. We wait for the worst of the mud to pass in the winter, so we can drive on the side roads again. Without persistence, a robber would only be a robber for a couple of weeks.*

“Winter,” Hilda said and seemed to shiver in her sleeveless top. “Sometime when we’re stopped at a good camp and we don’t have anything else to do, one of us can tell you horror stories about winter.”

10) Stubbornness and independence. Robbery is the transfer of excess property from a target to yourself. If a robber isn’t stubborn, this is impossible to accomplish.

“Chief, you just pulled a fast one,” Heli said. “That’s two traits in one. It should be ten and eleven.”

“Now, take Heli here,” Crazy Kaarlo said proudly. “No matter what I say, it never gets through to her. She’s going to be an excellent robber chief when she grows up.”

I saw Heli smile in her familiar shark-like way, but I also saw the way Kalle’s shoulders slumped. Hilda had to jab Crazy Kaarlo twice with her elbow before he had the sense to continue: “Yes, and Kalle. Kalle will become a gentleman robber any day now. Kalle has heart and panache.”

That made Kalle give a secret little smile.

After this lesson in theory came application. Over the next two days we took five cars by way of training, so I could understand what highway robbery meant in practice. I watched as a little Fiat was almost run into a ditch and then raided. The take was six freshly tenderized beef steaks, some strawberries and the latest *National Geographic* magazine for Crazy Kaarlo. I saw the threatening gestures required to get the back of a Toyota van open. That’s usually where the coolers were. Booty: two new camping pads, a pair of flippers, ice cream bars and a pack of cards, much to Gold Pete’s delight. I saw a new Nissan Primera nearly run off the road because the driver was so startled by us. Booty: two chocolate bars and the sunscreen Hilda had wanted. I saw an SUV holdup where the father of the family started losing his cool until Gold Pete jumped up and sat on the bonnet. Booty: two new Barbies and an

electronic game. I saw an example of a frontal attack, which required convincing the driver of a shiny new Citroën, an irritated middle-aged woman, to roll down her power window and say, “Well, what is it?” Pathetic booty: peas, cucumber, some fish. Diet food was no use to highway robbers.

After five cars I knew what to expect. I knew to hold on to my seat just before Hilda hit the throttle. I could recite the countdown with her too:

“Park – now. Contact – now. Five – four – three – two – spars ready – launch!

The van shook as Gold Pete and Crazy Kaarlo jumped out of either side of the vehicle. Another robber was underway.

Sometimes it occurred to me that Kaarlo Robberson had decided to train me so I would admire them. Between robberies we had long, heated discussions about the best makes and models of car for robbing. Everyone tried to pull me into their camp, which always led to arguments.

“I don’t have to have any opinion,” I said in exasperation. “I’m your prisoner.”

“Don’t start with that again,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “You’re also the first prisoner in the history of Finnish highway robbery. This is the biggest innovation since boarding spars. You – you’re a trailblazer,” Crazy Kaarlo said solemnly.

Whenever he talked about robbery, and often when he spoke in general, he liked to use big words which we kids in the back seat didn’t always understand. During this conversation, I noticed that something had changed. I didn’t pretend to agree with anyone any more. I wasn’t afraid that anything bad would happen to me. I’d started to wonder if they might have some sort of job for me.

“Catch them. Speed up,” Kalle shouted.

Metre by metre we were gaining on a late model Opel Meriva, not so much because we had a faster engine but because Hilda wasn’t afraid to drive top speed on a gravel road. The van rocked and shuddered, making it feel like we were in the cabin of an aeroplane.

“Less than two per cent try to run,” Heli said calmly as she tattooed the leg of a Barbie with a needle and ink. While the others swayed violently in their seats, she didn’t even bother hanging on. “And half of them give up as soon as they realize a little speed just makes us more excited.”

“This one can move. I’ll give them that,” Hilda said and rolled her window down. “But I’m not used to coming in second.”

Crazy Kaarlo let out an enormous battle cry, which made my toes go numb.

“Faster!” he howled.

“Usually we teach the ones who run a little extra lesson,” Heli said. “We take something they really don’t want to part with.”

“Like what?” I asked and tried not to watch how close we were to the ditch. Hilda cut the corners so close that sometimes it felt like the right-side wheels were spinning in the air.

“Give it up, you!” Gold Pete bellowed. “You can’t run forever even in an Opel.”

“What was the last one?” Kalle asked. “The fisherman?”

“Yeah,” Heli said. “Earlier this month we took this guy’s fishing lures. He bawled like a baby. Of all the junk. It’s a wonder the things people get attached to.”

Heli tossed various objects into my lap from the cubby under the seat. A diary. A company ledger. A leather Stetson. A bunch of figures you could attach to a car’s dashboard. Sunglasses. Linnaea’s sunglasses. My mother’s lemon-scented hand cream. For some reason there was also my little Hello Kitty rucksack, which contained my wallet, house keys, a sticking plaster Mum had put in there and two backup pens. Usually my phone was in there too, but I’d been playing on it just before the robbery. Seeing my bag gave me a strange feeling. Now I had my survival kit that Dad always wanted to see with me before I went out. It had been stolen too, because it was pink, and it might have had more Barbies in it. It had been thrown in with the junk, though, when it contained nothing of value to the robbers.

I sorted through the other objects for a long, silent moment, learning a lesson that the Robbersons might not have wanted to teach. *These things were all stolen from somewhere, I*

thought. *These all used to belong to somebody else. They were important treasures for someone, and now they're here. With the trash.*

Chapter 5

Which Includes a Kiosk Heist and a Discussion of Something Important Called Alien Puke

“I could eat a whole kilo of liquorice rope,” Kalle said dreamily. We were lying on the back bench with our legs pointing opposite directions. It was the last week of June, and the van was driving at breakneck speed again. The day was sunny, and Hilda held a coffee cup casually in one hand while she steered, wearing my mother’s old bikini and whistling.

“Or sour worms,” Heli replied just as dreamily.

Two days had passed since the sweets ran out.

“Or even a mix,” Gold Pete said from the seat next to the door. “I could eat all them fruity ones. Specially the reds and greens.”

“Would you trade half a kilo of sour bombs for half a kilo of liquorice rope?” Hilda asked from up front.

This was another of their games.

Kalle thought. “Yeah, but I’d have to be in the middle of a good book. You can’t chew sour bombs. The inside is the best.”

“Book!” Heli said with a snort. “Some robber you are.”

I sent Kalle a conspiratorial smile, but Heli noticed and pounced. “Why did the chief steal us another one like you? Why didn’t he steal someone like me?”

“Come now, Heli,” Hilda said soothingly. “Half a kilo of toffee lorries for half a kilo of liquorice worms?”

“No deal,” Heli said and flipped through a teen magazine that used to be Linnaea’s. “Those lorries melt into a mess in the summer. Don’t you remember last year? It took scissors to get them apart.”

“Heli never trades anything,” Kalle said bitterly. “She’s always sure she’s getting cheated in every swap.”

“Well,” Gold Pete said, looking sly. “Would you trade a kilo of them liquorice worms for two hundred grams of UFO puke?”

Heli sat up. “Don’t make me laugh!”

“Mark my word, she doesn’t trade,” Kalle said, laughing.

“Of course I’d trade!” Heli said. “Any robber in her right mind would trade anything to get UFO puke!”

“What’s that?” I asked Kalle.

“It’s a sweets mix,” he explained. “Tiny bits of all kinds of chews and candies, carefully chosen so they’re all different but the flavours fit together. I don’t think they make it any more.”

As the days rolled, my mind changed. I secretly began to enjoy travelling. “Beach!” we yelled when we saw a good swimming spot. Then Hilda would brake, sending up a cloud of dust on the gravel road. We would park the van at a pond or a scenic cove, and in five minutes camp was ready, with sunbathing chairs snapped out on the sunny side of the van, a board game set up on the folding table and Crazy Kaarlo pulling off his shirt as he bellowed what he always did: “Aah, now for some butter in the pan.” Then he would rub himself with sunscreen, crawl into the sturdiest chair and begin to snore.

Leaving was just as sudden. “Time to go!” someone would yell, and in five minutes we were all ready, with the table stowed, the magazines stacked under a seat and the inflatable crocodile rolled up flat. “Goodbye,” we would yell to the shore. I loved being on the road again. If the wheels didn’t spin, Heli would yell, “Give it more throttle!”

I started feeling the same way. That was what I’d been missing in my life: more throttle. But of course, I didn’t show that to the Robbersons. I wasn’t with them of my own free will. I was plunder, a prisoner, and so I tried to act as such and keep my face downcast. Whenever I remembered.

“Okay, okay,” Hilda said after watching Heli and Kalle squabbling yet again. “We need to pull a heist, or we’ll have a mutiny on our hands. Kaarlo?”

Crazy Kaarlo, who'd been snoring his booming, robber chief snore all through the whole sweets argument, woke up with a start.

"A heist?" he said, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Yes, a heist. What will it be? A car? A kiosk? A cottage?"

"Maybe we do be ripe for a good old-time kiosk stickup," Gold Pete said excitedly. "Proper thievery always be a good pick-me-up, says I. Not that it ain't been beautiful, but all we been doin' is swimming fer days. A little robbery'll do us good."

"You check the map, Heli," Hilda said. "K for kiosks."

Heli was reading a magazine, and, without breaking her concentration, rolled onto her back on the bench seat and shoved her hand into the compartment next to the window. She seemed to know without looking which storage pocket her fingers were in and where everything was.

The atlas Hilda had mentioned was a large notebook with a black cover, which had clippings of map pages pasted into it. Reluctantly Heli lifted her eyes from her magazine and licked her finger, which wasn't very clean. She began to flip through the notebook.

"Look at K," Hilda said as she executed a perfect passing manoeuvre on the narrow road. Kaarlo honked the horn ecstatically. The expensive family car tooted back and the father behind the wheel shook his fist.

"Let's rob them!" Kalle said. "To the boarding spars!"

"No time now," Hilda said. "We're in the middle of another heist."

"Doncha worry, boy, we be doing a kiosk heist," Gold Pete said comfortingly. "There's always a bit more shine to 'em. Sumpin' a bit more sophisticated-like."

Says I, I added in my mind.

"K as in kiosks. First you'll see K for keys," Hilda said patiently, turning the steering wheel to avoid an oncoming lorry. I didn't know anyone who drove so brazenly. She wasn't afraid of trucks or hairpin turns on dirt roads or anything.

Heli flipped to the appropriate page. She glanced up at a passing blue sign to see what the nearest large city was and then searched some more. I saw that every page had a map with a small picture pasted to it somewhere of a red kiosk with a top like a visor.

“Found one,” Heli said. “Two kilometres. It’s a rest stop with no buildings around. And I saw you,” Heli said, turning her eyes toward me. “You’re spying again, prisoner!”

“There will be NO more name-calling in this car. It ends now,” said Crazy Kaarlo, fully awake now. “Vilja is going to be useful to us yet. Repeat after me.”

“There will be NO more name calling,” Heli said, looking very bored, then she picked up her magazine again, reminding me almost perfectly of Linnaea in that moment. “I’m, like, really sorry,” she said, raising her eyebrows because she knew no one would see in the front seat. “SOOOO sorry.”

The van sped, if it was possible, even faster than before.

“Heli’s always like that,” Kalle said quietly when he saw that Heli was absorbed in her magazine again. “She wants everyone to be afraid of her. When she grows up she wants to be a punk rock singer and the captain of a van like this, and provoking fear is important in both of those professions.”

“What kind of car is this?” I asked Kalle, changing the subject, because I was afraid Heli would hear us and get even more angry. “At first I thought it was like the van my dad’s big-mouth brother has, but this one has these benches facing each other. It’s weird.”

“Our dad set it up like this,” Kalle said. “Dad knows everything about cars.”

An expression crossed his face that made me think he wasn’t telling me the whole story.

“Is this a police van?”

“No,” Kalle said, laughing. “That would be rich. A police car that robs people.”

“This be a crew transport vehicle,” Gold Pete said proudly. “Seven seats. Best possible gas mileage with a full load. Good acceleration. But maybe it ain’t good to brag,” he said and spat over his shoulder out the window. “But this be a perfect robber car.”

Hilda drove along a forest road and then turned onto a small detour where the rest stop and kiosk were. All around was pine forest, and the kiosk with its visor top was in the middle of a straight section of road. Signs advertising fresh strawberries and peas swung in the air as a young boy struggled with their hooks.

“Howdy, fella,” Gold Pete said as he climbed out of the van. “Need some help?”

He struck a relaxed pose. Pete admired gentleman bandits who could make anyone obey willingly and leave women swooning.

“If you could help me get this down,” the boy said. “This sign is surprisingly heavy.”

I watched through the open side door of the robber van as they took down the signs. Maybe all the strawberries had been sold. Heli slipped out after Pete to stretch her legs. A genteel robbery took too long when everyone was starved for sweets. Crazy Kaarlo casually undid his seatbelt, on his way to observe for himself that everything was going as it should.

“Well,” the boy said once he was back in the kiosk. “What can I get you? If you want coffee, you’ll have to wait a few minutes while I put on a new pot.”

“We’re more interested in your sweets,” said Crazy Kaarlo.

“And we ain’t be in the habit of payin’,” Gold Pete said, adding a threatening tone to his voice. “I be sure you understand.”

They all leaned on the counter, looking menacing, especially Heli, who picked at her teeth with the paring knife Kalle had sharpened. They definitely had the look.

“That’s fine with me,” said the boy.

“Good,” said Crazy Kaarlo contentedly. “You aren’t the only one who’s come to that conclusion.”

“Well, this kiosk is only open for another two hours. After that I’m locking up for the last time. No one comes this way any more, just people headed for their cottages. Everyone else is in too much of a hurry and takes the highway.”

“Hand over the sweets!” Heli growled.

“Come see for yourself what you want,” the boy said and opened the side door. “These aren’t going to be sold anyway, and most of them are old. We shouldn’t even be selling them. You’re just helping me clean up, so go ahead.”

He leaned on a metal rubbish bin while Gold Pete, Crazy Kaarlo and Heli busied themselves carrying bulk-sized boxes of liquorice and chocolate to the van.

“Ask if he has any mustard,” Hilda shouted, keeping the van running, even though the boy didn’t look like he would call the police. “If there’s any Kastell’s, grab it. We only have two tubes left.”

The boy shook his head. “There was a grill here too last year. At least then there was someone to talk to. But not any more. They lifted it onto the back of a lorry last year and took it away.”

The floor of the robber van was full of boxes, most of them half empty.

“Let’s go,” Heli said, making a cutting gesture across her throat. “Seriously, people. We’re being SOOOO lazy. We’ll lose our reputation.”

“This kid isn’t going to call anyone,” said Crazy Kaarlo. “He’s on our side.”

“No, I’m not calling anyone,” the boy said and shook his head. “There isn’t even a phone here, as you can see. And I can’t have a mobile while I’m working, or I get written up. Hey, do you want these lollies?” he yelled when everyone had already piled into the van. “They have fifteen different flavours.”

At a sign from Heli, Kalle got back out to grab the bucket of lollipops.

“Do you want a ride somewhere?” asked Crazy Kaarlo.

“No, thanks. I still have to be open for another hour. And I’ve got a bike out back.”

“Have a good day,” Crazy Kaarlo yelled as the van started and, in the surge of warm feelings, I waved too.

“What a pathetic heist,” Heli said while the van peeled out as if there was actually someone on our tail. “A few chocolate bars and some half empty boxes of sweets, mostly expired.”

She poured the sweets out of their boxes, and we quickly realized how small a heap they made on the floor of the van.

“But it were a gentlemanly heist, like they do out in the wide world,” Gold Pete said. “That were textbook for you, girl.”

“What it was was embarrassing,” Heli said and glanced at me. “It wasn’t even an actual robbery. It isn’t that easy.”

“We won’t survive on this for more than two days,” said Kalle.

I knew how fast the Robbersons went through sweets. There was no exaggeration in Kalle’s estimation.

I’d probably eaten too much chocolate. Or maybe the kiosk chocolate was old and turning in my stomach now. I nodded off for a moment and woke up in my own room. I was under my own blanket, and I saw my lamp with the pictures of roses and carnations on it. It felt like I’d slept all night. But I was home. The whole adventure had only been a dream.

“Vilja, did you steal my hairspray?” Linnaea said and snatched open the door. “The one with glitter. We’re having a party, and I need it RIGHT NOW.”

She rushed to my bed and began to shake me by the shoulders. Now I remembered what it was like at home. It was always this sort of thing.

“I... don’t... like... hairspray,” I said as my head bounced back and forth. “Stop... it!”

“THIEF! Give it back right now!”

At that point I realized that the voice wasn’t Linnaea’s, it was a more fearsome creature: it was Linnaea with Heli’s voice.

I opened my eyes and realized that the robber van had stopped. We’d parked somewhere, and no one had woken me up. The side door was open, and through it I heard Kalle and Heli quarrelling. I got up off the bench seat and blinked the sleep away. I realized how happy I was to wake up here, to this row, in the front yard of a summer cottage I didn’t recognize. To this exciting day, which was now my life.

“Steal your own knife,” Heli said and tackled Kalle to get the knife he was holding.
“Robbers don’t steal from other robbers!”

“Oh yes they do,” Gold Pete said with a chuckle and went to get a hammer from the tool bag in the box next to the door.

“Mornin’,” he said to me. “You must have had a nightmare. You was thrashing all round. There’s hot chocolate inside if you want.”

“You HAVE your own knife,” Heli said when she saw Kalle’s desolation after losing the fight.

“It’s a paring knife,” Kalle said quietly. “You can’t rob cars with a paring knife.”

“Let’s go look in the kitchen and see if there’s a better one,” Heli said. Kalle seemed pleased at this and they took off running toward the log cabin.

“Stop right there,” Gold Pete said. “This be a different kind of place. You ain’t taking nothin’ from here. Not so much as a spoon.”

I climbed out of the car, my legs still a little weak after sleeping.

“Quick now,” Crazy Kaarlo said and walked toward Pete. He was wearing a bath robe I didn’t recognize. “The water’s still so cold it’ll freeze your nuts. We have to get it on the first try.”

“Aye, but it’ll be a trick since it rocks the way it do,” Gold Pete said. “It could eat a man.”

How odd. I walked off to look for Hilda, who I assumed could explain.

“The boys are building a pontoon dock,” Hilda said before I could ask. She handed me a cup of hot chocolate, which was the perfect temperature, steaming but not so hot it could burn your mouth. “There’s that, and we have to fix the outhouse door, but then we can leave.”

She unconsciously tapped a list written on oilcloth in an older person’s ornate handwriting. The list continued as a letter on the other side of the paper. When Hilda noticed my glance, she folded the note and placed it in her shorts pocket.

“We’ll be able to leave soon.”

“So, this isn’t a cottage robbery?” I asked. “I hear those happen.”

“Nooo,” Hilda said, laughing. “Well, yes, they do happen. But this is just some maintenance work.”

“A squirrel made a nest in the ceiling,” Heli said. “We cleaned it out and nailed the loose board back in place. There’s a bunch of wood chips and insulation all over the place. I don’t know if that will affect the heat later.”

“Thanks, dear,” Hilda said and mussed Heli’s hair as she passed. Heli wriggled away, but I could see from her face how happy she was.

“It’s done,” Crazy Kaarlo said and came inside in his bathrobe with Gold Pete. “I swear that lake’s colder every year. It’s the rock at the bottom.”

“Gran must freeze when she tries to go swimming without a sauna,” Heli said.

“Every year I hope it won’t get cold enough that we have to come here,” Kalle said. “This is the coldest place we go. When I brush my teeth on the dock when its snowy outside, my teeth almost fall out of my mouth.”

“Well now, come have some cocoa, Kalle, then we can wash up and leave,” Hilda said in her best authoritative voice. Even though I stood in the middle of what was apparently someone’s grandmother’s kitchen, looking like a walking, breathing question mark, it seemed none of them wanted to tell me what was going on.

The hot chocolate was quickly drunk, and soon we were back on the highway. In the steady hum of the van, I made notes in my diary.

ROBBERSON MAINTENANCE WORK

Recorded by Vilja

- 1) *The Robberson family visited a cottage where a list of jobs is waiting.*
- 2) *So someone knew the Robbersons were coming. They must be friends (letter).*
- 3) *The jobs get the cottage ready for summer after the winter.*
- 4) *They’ve done the same jobs in previous years. (Kaarlo Robberson’s comment about the lake getting colder every year indicates this.)*

5) *The resident of the cottage is an older person, apparently a woman (Heli's comment about a grandmother).*

6) *Has this old woman really met the Robbersons or does the family just work for her?*

7) *Does the old woman know the Robbersons' real profession? Is she protecting the highway robbers?*

8) *Hilda Robberson called it maintenance work. Why would a family who lives by stealing do anything like this?*

9) *Kalle said the cottage is the coldest place they go. Are there other cottages they maintain, and if so, why?*

10) *Very strange: why did Kalle say that the Robbersons visited the cottage in the winter sometimes? For later consideration or investigation: where do the Robbersons generally spend their winters?*

I sucked on the end of the pencil. This was as far as I could get with the information I had.

"What are you writing?" Heli asked. Without me noticing, she'd edged over right next to me on the bench. She almost, almost saw what I'd written, before I slapped the cover shut.

"Just planning," I said.

"She's planning," Crazy Kaarlo said appreciatively and then turned to lecture the others. "You see, she's analysing. Making schemes. Improving our operation. Who knows what kind of signature crime might be brewing in that little head," Crazy Kaarlo said and touched his nose knowingly. "I think I'm starting to understand this girl. She's got mischief on her mind."

After this he grinned so widely that it felt as if the sun had begun shining in the van.

"They wrote about you in here," Crazy Kaarlo said and tossed me a stolen newspaper. It was the Midsummer edition of one of the tabloids. Two days had passed since the kiosk heist. Both Heli and Hilda seemed dissatisfied with the quality of that theft. The camp chairs

were set up for dinner once again, and Hilda was lighting a fire while Kalle opened packages of sausage and set out discs of crispbread. How lovely, I thought, that they didn't break the bread up into little pieces, and everyone ate it in giant slabs, at least the size of a pizza, so they had to hold it with two hands.

Heli walked by and grabbed the paper from Crazy Kaarlo's hands. Then she began to recite in a newsreader's voice: "*Vilja Vainisto, ten, still missing. Vilja Tuuli Vainisto, who disappeared one week ago, remains at the mercy of fate. Her mother misses her. To report information about her whereabouts, call...*"

"You poor thing," Heli said mockingly. "Does little Vilja Tuuli miss her mummy too? You must since it's printed in the newspaper."

"Missing," I huffed. "Missing! As if I'd gone out in the garden to play and was so stupid I didn't know how to get back home."

I picked a pocket knife up off the table and Heli's paper bullseye and went to practice throwing. I was so furious that the knife flew the full distance the first time, although it didn't come anywhere near the target or end up stuck in the tree like it did for Heli.

"It sure woulda been great if they'da said straight out that the girl been stolen. That's how it be in truth. Pinched in broad daylight," Gold Pete said dreamily. "Then at the summer rendezvous we coulda rolled up and acted all modest-like. Aye, that be us, we was the ones in the newspaper. That's just how it be with bein' famous. We just has us a knack for robbin', whether it be cars or kiosks or persons too."

"That would've even left the Pärnänen's mouths hanging open," Crazy Kaarlo said and then picked up his *National Geographic* again, which he was struggling through with a dictionary. "They're awful mouthy about their famous father's legacy these days. It's lucky any of the other robber families ever get a word in edgewise."

"It's high time someone shut that young Pärnänen's mouth for him," Hilda said as she dried the frying pan. "Maybe permanently."

"Well, you're at least getting it in the right direction now," Heli said behind me. She'd been watching me throw for a while. I was always surprised at how silent her steps were.

“They don’t even want me back,” I said in a rage. “They’re just embarrassed I was stolen. That’s why they didn’t put it in the newspaper!”

Then the knife flew from my hand in just the right way. I could feel it when it left. It launched at the tree with lightness and precision, sinking into the lower left corner of the paper. That was still a good distance from the black circle at the centre, but it was at least on the paper.

“There’s hope for you yet,” Heli said.

That was the most positive thing she’d ever said to me. She pulled the knife out of the tree and started throwing it over her shoulder with her back turned, as if to show how depressingly far I still had to be as skilled as her.

We played Yahtzee as we did every night. It’s a game you play with five dice. You complete different tasks, for example collecting as many threes as possible, trying to get the highest total, or trying to get two pairs. We played Yahtzee before bed so we could decide who slept where. The winner got the big bed in the van and choice of who slept with him. The losers got the dome tent. Now that Gold Pete wasn’t guarding me any more, he slept in his hammock again, strung between trees or from hooks on the ceiling of the van if it was raining. I’d slept with Kalle and Heli in the dome tent every night except for the first one when Pete had me under heightened surveillance.

“Full house!” Crazy Kaarlo yelled enthusiastically and rubbed his hands together the way he always did when he was happy.

“Full house, full house, who has a full house? I have a full house!”

He yelled this every night and danced his victory dance. On the previous nights I’d just been learning the rules, staring at the faded rulebook to understand what I should try next. A full house was three dice of the same number and two of another.

“Excuse me, but that isn’t a full house,” I said.

“Of course it is,” Gold Pete said quickly and stared at me, his eyes strangely wide.

“Yes, it is,” Hilda also said. “Really, look.” She cleared her throat significantly.

“No, it isn’t,” I continued, mystified. “That’s a three. It would have to be a two.”

“It’s a full house,” Heli said and tried to gather up the dice and the throwing cup, since it was her turn next to roll. “Some people are just lucky rollers.”

“But,” I said and flipped to the full house part of the rules.

Kalle took the rulebook out of my hand and gave me the same look as Gold Pete. Fast as lightning, despite his size, Crazy Kaarlo stopped Heli from collecting the dice and looked at his result.

“Vilja is right. It isn’t a full house. That’s a three.” He looked crestfallen.

“You all tricked me,” he said slowly. “You wanted to trick me into thinking I had a better throw. Everyone except Vilja.”

“Chief, in this light it looked like a two,” Kalle said slowly.

“The most important thing is that we finish the game now,” Hilda said to smooth things over. “It’s getting cold and we need to know where everyone’s sleeping tonight. Go ahead and roll, Heli.”

I imagined what it would feel like to lay my head on a soft pillow. Sleeping in the van also had the benefit that you could use sheets and a blanket there, while in the tent you had to sleep in a sleeping bag if only because of the temperature.

“You thought I couldn’t handle losing,” Crazy Kaarlo shouted and tore at one of his braids, which came undone in a mess of hair. “What kind of con are you running? And with your own chief!”

Heli rolled two pairs of terrible numbers and recorded her losing score. I thought her sigh of disappointment was exaggerated. What was going on here?

“It’s Vilja’s turn,” Heli said to Crazy Kaarlo. “She has to get Yahtzee to win, and rolling five of a kind isn’t easy. Looks like you’re going to win again. The kids just need to work on their wrist action. That’s what it’s all about. Right?”

“Yep, it’s all in the wrist, isn’t that right, Pete?” Crazy Kaarlo said.

Gold Pete agreed. I rolled and collected three fives. On my two additional rolls, I collected two more fives. *Yahtzee*, I recorded on my scorecard, *fifty points*. I'd completed all my scorecard lines, and my final score was better than Crazy Kaarlo's.

"Done," I said. "Looks like I won," I said happily.

"Oh," Crazy Kaarlo said and blinked. "So, Vilja won."

Everyone stared at me. It was as silent as the grave.

"Congratulations," Hilda said and pulled her cardigan tighter around her. The night really had grown colder since the sun went down. "Will it bother you sleeping on our old sheets? We have some others in that chest, but it would be nice to save them for the summer rendezvous."

"Not at all," I said. "It'll just be nice to sleep on sheets at all."

Kalle kicked me in the shin.

"Who are you going to sleep with?" Hilda asked gently.

With her head she seemed to indicate Crazy Kaarlo, who was collecting the small dice in his large hand to put the game away. "Some you win, some you lose," he seemed to be muttering as he closed the game box.

"I was thinking about Kalle."

Kalle kicked me again.

"And maybe Heli too. I think we'll all fit. The bed is pretty wide."

Heli poked me in the back.

"Actually, I wasn't planning to sleep tonight," Heli said quickly. "I've always thought I should see a sunrise. Yeah. I want to think about future heists and watch the sunrise. I'll just grab that quilt and sit in a chair."

"What about Pete?" I asked, turning toward him hopefully. Everyone seemed to be edging away from me.

"No thanks, kid," Gold Pete said. "My hammock and I done seen so many nights together. I don't think I could sleep stretched out straight."

He grabbed a grey cardboard box from the hat shelf and went outside with his rolled-up hammock.

“You won’t get him inside,” Kalle said. “He’s been building some things at night when no one is around to see.”

“What’s he building?” I asked.

Kalle shook his head. “It’s a secret for the summer rendezvous. And don’t peek in the box if you don’t want to die a painful death. Gold Pete is a gentle man about everything but this.”

“Well now,” Hilda said, slapping her hands together energetically. “Let’s get to sleep. Kalle and Vilja in the van and a quilt for Heli. Kaarlo, you grab that sleeping bag and we’ll head out to the tent.” Then she began to lead her husband to the dome tent. It was set up at the base of a birch tree, the same tree that still had Heli’s folding knife sticking out of it.

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to lose to him!” Kalle hissed at me once we were alone in the van.

“Why?” I whispered back, but Kalle was focused on arranging his pillows and avoided answering.

The van was awfully cosy at night. A slat base had been pulled out from under one of the bench seats and then spread between the two benches to create a space just the size of a double bed. Music played quietly from the car radio. And you could draw the curtains shut. In the dimming light, the shadows of hanged Barbies shone on the curtains.

“Guess what I think sometimes,” Kalle said once we’d been lying in bed for a while, staring at the ceiling and waiting to fall asleep. “I think I’d do anything to be you.”

“What?” I asked in astonishment and turned to Kalle. “What do you mean?”

“At some point you’re going to get to go home. To your own life.”

“There isn’t anything good about that,” I said. I thought about fighting with Linnaea every afternoon and night while Dad stared at his laptop and Mum made food while she talked on her phone. They always said the same thing: “Don’t bother me, I’m busy.” As if we didn’t exist.

“Do you have your own room?” Kalle asked.

“Yes,” I said. I thought about my room, which was organized down to the last detail. Even my dolls were lined up by height, even though I never really played with them any more. On my homework desk there was a can of lead pencils, all carefully sharpened, and another of coloured pencils. Then I thought of Linnaea, who was always stealing things from my room. Items she could never find in her pigsty under the layers of lip gloss, jeans and love tests torn from magazines. At that point I turned a little melancholy and thought that it might be nice to be back in my own room for a little while. But just for a little while.

“Awesome,” Kalle said with a sigh. “If I had my own room, I’d have a no trespassing sign on the door.”

He closed his eyes, and I thought it looked like he was imagining a menacing skull: *Beyond this door begins the kingdom of the Dread Pirate Kalle. Enter at your own risk.* What would Kalle have in his room? Skulls? Pirate ships? A nightstand shaped like a treasure chest? Pictures of famous robber princes?

“I think,” Kalle said, his eyes still closed, “that we’ll return you at the end of the summer. Things are cramped in the winter when we’re always sleeping in different places. And before then comes autumn, when you go to school.”

“Yes,” I said.

It felt silly talking about my own life when I wasn’t sure I’d ever get back to it. Thinking about my room made me realize that what I was living right now was a real adventure.

“I want to go to school too,” Kalle said, his eyes open now. “Heli always laughs when I try to read anything. I have a lot of books, but they all have holes in them from Heli’s knife.”

We were quiet for a long time, and I wiggled my toes under the blanket.

The van felt like a safe place to say anything.

“Why was I supposed to lose at Yahtzee?” I finally worked up the courage to ask. I sensed that it was the right moment to get some answers.

“It’s a long story,” Kalle said. “Dad’s back gets sore in the tent, and we all suffer for it the next day.”

Kalle slipped out from under the covers and peeked out of the window at the camp. Just to make sure neither of his parents were eavesdropping outside the door.

Kalle giggled. "Heli is asleep in her chair. So much for that sunrise."

"But then why do you have to play Yahtzee for sleeping spots every night?" I asked in confusion. "If your dad needs to win anyway?"

Kalle crawled back under the blanket next to me and sighed with pleasure as he sank into a pillow.

"What? Why do we play? Because Dad would never let us stop. That would be giving up!"

He looked at my astonished expression.

He started giggling again. "Dad's afraid that sleeping where he really wants to will make him a wimp. Robbers like us are always a little strange."

Then we giggled together.

"Just think about assigned sleeping spots. What is exciting and piratical about that?"

Kalle fell asleep quickly, curling up against a pillow and beginning to snore softly. I found myself thinking about the Robbersons and then, without warning, my own family too. Thoughts raced through my mind until I got up and wrote them down.

THE PERFECT CRIME

Recorded by Vilja

- 1) *No one has tried to get me back. That's embarrassing and infuriating.*
- 2) *Mum and Dad have to pay for me being stolen. That's the only way they'll realize I've really been taken.*
- 3) *The payment has to come in sweets or food, or otherwise it won't be any use to the Robbersons.*
- 4) *The payment has to be big enough for my parents to feel it.*
- 5) *The transaction has to be arranged so it doesn't put the Robbersons in danger.*

I felt wonderful all night, better than ever at home. The van blocked out Crazy Kaarlo's snoring completely. I dreamed in colour of robbing kiosks as I waved an old-fashioned flintlock pistol. I sailed in a pirate ship and climbed to the top of the mast. After three adventure dreams, I woke up to the solution for the perfect robbery. Kalle was still fast asleep, mumbling into his pillow. I really had a plan. A plan that would give the family that had forgotten me their just deserts.

Breakfast that morning was quiet.

"I can't eat meatballs," Crazy Kaarlo complained. He really did look a little pale. "I have to open my mouth too wide, and my back won't let me. To think, a morning without meatballs!"

"That doesn't mean breakfast is ruined," Hilda said cheerfully, cracking more eggs into the sizzling pan.

"Yes, it does," Crazy Kaarlo muttered, glaring at all of us. "And you slept on the soft side, the side where there was only grass and meadow flowers. I was sleeping on the tree roots."

His voice sounded mournful, and every time he moved in his chair, he grimaced.

"We traded places once, don't you remember?" Hilda said and added a little salt to the eggs. "You wanted to sleep on that side," she practically sang. Crazy Kaarlo barely ate anything and sulked about his empty stomach.

"Tell me now," he grumbled. "Who decided to set up the tent there?"

"You did," Kalle said quietly and started at his bread.

"Hey," I said once the robber van was packed and we were on our way to our next destination.

"What would you all say to a little bigger heist?"

"What, YOU'RE planning heists now?" Heli scoffed. But she also looked interested. She pretended to concentrate on cutting up her teen magazine, but she made sure she didn't miss a syllable of what anyone said.

“What kind of heist?” Hilda asked. “Where do I need to drive? We’re running a little low on supplies, so within the next day or two we need to stock up on sandwich stuff and other things.”

“Listen to this,” I said and began to explain.

By the time I was halfway through my explanation, Crazy Kaarlo had forgotten his back and began to chuckle.