



THE CIRCLE

Let the witch
hunt begin

Sara B. Elfgren
&
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About the Book

THE INTERNATIONAL SWEDISH BESTSELLER

One night, when a strange red moon fills the sky, six schoolgirls find themselves in an abandoned theme park, drawn there by a mysterious force. A student has just been found dead. Everyone suspects suicide. Everyone - except them.

In that derelict fairground an ancient prophecy is revealed. They are The Chosen Ones, a group of witches, bound together by a power, one which could destroy them all. But they soon learn that despite their differences they need each other in order to master the forces that have been awakened within them.

**High school is now a matter of life and death.
Because the killing has only just begun.**

About the Authors

Sara B. Elfgren and Mats Strandberg first met in 2008. They quickly realized that they shared a passion for stories with young adults in the lead roles, and soon the idea to write a book together was born. The story took shape and when the idea came up to make the main characters young girls who are also witches, everything fell into place. *The Circle*, the first part in *The Engelsfors Trilogy*, was released in April 2011. Part two and three, *Fire* and *The Key*, will be published in 2013 and 2014.

Sara B. Elfgren started her career in the film industry as a screenwriter. As a script doctor, she has been involved in several Swedish film and TV productions. She has a Master's Degree in Film Studies.

Mats Strandberg is an author and a journalist. He is a regular columnist for Sweden's biggest evening newspaper *Aftonbladet*, and in 2004 the organization *Sveriges Tidskrifter* (Sweden's Newspapers and Magazines) awarded him the title Columnist of the Year. Mats has previously released three books, of which the third one, *Half Lives* was awarded Book of the Year 2009 by QX.

THE CIRCLE

Sara B. Elfgren & Mats Strandberg

Translated from the Swedish by Per Carlsson



This book is dedicated to our teenage selves.

I

1

SHE'S WAITING FOR an answer but Elias doesn't know what to say. No answer would satisfy her. Instead he stares at his hands. They are so pale that he can see every vein in the harsh fluorescent lighting.

'Elias?'

How can she stand working in this pathetic little room with her binders, potted plants and that view over the school car park? How can she stand herself?

'Can you explain to me what's going on in your head?' she repeats.

Elias raises his head and looks at the principal. Of course she can stand herself. People like her have no problem fitting into this world. They always behave in a normal, predictable way. Above all, they're convinced that they have the solution to all problems. Solution number one: fit in and follow the rules. As principal, Adriana Lopez is queen of a world founded on that philosophy.

'I'm very concerned about this situation,' she says, but Elias notices that she's actually angry. That he can't just get a grip on himself. 'We're barely three weeks into the term, and you've already missed fifty per cent of your classes. I'm bringing this up with you now because I don't want you to lose your footing completely.'

Elias thinks about Linnéa. It usually helps, but now all he remembers is how they shouted at each other last night.

It hurts him to think of her tears. He couldn't comfort her, since he had caused them. Maybe she hates him now.

Linnéa is the one who keeps the darkness away. The one who stops him choosing other escape routes, the razor that gives him brief control of his anguish, the smoking that helps him forget it. But yesterday he couldn't cope, and Linnéa noticed, of course. And now maybe she hates him.

'Things are different in year ten,' the queen continues. 'You have more freedom, but with that freedom comes responsibility. No one is going to hold your hand. It's up to you what you do with the rest of your life. This is where it's all decided. Your entire future. Do you really want to throw it away?'

Elias almost bursts out laughing. Does she really believe that crap? He's not a person to her, just another student who's 'gone a little astray'. It's impossible that he could have problems that can't be explained away by 'puberty' or 'hormones' and resolved with 'firm rules' and 'clear boundaries'.

'There's the University Aptitude Test, isn't there?' It just slipped out.

The principal's mouth becomes a thin line. 'Even the University Aptitude Test requires good study habits.'

Elias sighs. This meeting had already gone on too long. 'I know,' he says without meeting her gaze. 'I really don't want to mess this up. I had intended year eleven to be a new start for me, but it was more difficult than I thought ... and I'm already so far behind the others. But I'll get through it.'

The principal looks surprised. Then a smile spreads across her face, the first natural smile of the whole meeting. Elias has said exactly what she wanted to hear.

'Good,' she says. 'You'll see that, once you decide to apply yourself, things will go smoothly.'

She leans forward, plucks a strand of hair from Elias's black shirt and twiddles it between her fingers. It glints in

the sun, which is shining through the windows, a little lighter at the root, where his natural hair colour has grown out by a centimetre. Adriana Lopez stares at it in fascination and Elias gets the crazy feeling that she's going to put it into her mouth and chew it.

She notices how he's looking at her and drops the hair into the wastepaper basket. 'Excuse me, I'm a bit pernickety,' she says.

Elias smiles noncommittally - he's not really sure how to respond.

'Well, I think we've finished for today,' the principal says.

Elias stands up and leaves. The door doesn't quite shut behind him. He turns to close it and glimpses the principal in her office.

She's bent over the wastepaper basket, fishing something out with her long, thin fingers. She drops it into a little envelope and seals it.

Elias remains standing there, uncertain of what he just saw. After the last few days he can no longer trust his senses. If it hadn't seemed so odd, he might have thought it was the strand of hair she'd just removed from his shirt.

The principal looks up. Her expression hardens. Before she manages a forced smile.

'Was there something else?' she asks.

'No,' Elias mumbles and shoves the door shut.

When it clicks securely behind him, he feels a disproportionate level of relief, as if he had just escaped with his life.

The school is empty and desolate. Only half an hour ago, when he went to the principal's office, it was bustling with students. It feels unnatural.

Elias dials Linnéa's number as his boots pound down the spiral staircase. She answers as he reaches the foot of the

stairs and throws open the door to the ground-floor corridor.

'Linnéa.'

'It's me,' he says. He's aching with anxiety.

'Yes, it is,' she answers at last, as she always does.

Elias relaxes slightly. 'I feel so fucking bad about yesterday,' he says quickly. 'I'm sorry.'

He'd wanted to say it this morning as soon as he saw her, but he'd never had a chance. Linnéa had kept out of sight all day. And she had disappeared before the last lesson.

'I see,' is her only response.

Her voice doesn't sound angry. Not even sad. It's empty and resigned - as if she'd *given up* - and that frightens Elias more than anything else. 'It's not ... I haven't gone back to it. I'm not going to start again. It was just one joint.'

'You said that yesterday.'

'You didn't seem to believe me.'

Elias walks along the rows of lockers, past the deserted group of hard wooden benches screwed to the floor, past the bulletin board, and still Linnéa hasn't said anything. Suddenly he becomes aware of another sound. Footsteps that aren't his.

He turns around. There's nobody there.

'You promised you'd quit,' Linnéa's voice says.

'I know. I'm sorry. I let you down—'

'No,' Linnéa interrupts. 'You're fucking letting yourself down! You can't be doing this for *my* sake. Then you'd never—'

'I know, I know,' he says. 'I know all that.' Elias reaches his locker and opens it, stuffs a few books into his black cloth bag and slams the thin metal door. He hears the other footsteps again before they go silent. He turns. Nothing there. Nobody at all. And yet he feels watched.

'Why did you do it?'

She'd asked the same question yesterday, repeated it several times. But he hadn't told her the truth. It was too scary. Too crazy. Even for a head case like him.

'I told you. I was freaking out,' he says, trying to keep his voice free of irritation, so as not to set things off again.

'I know there's something else.'

Elias hesitates. 'Okay,' he says softly. 'I'll tell you. Can I see you tonight?'

'Okay.'

'I'll sneak out as soon as my mum and dad have gone to sleep. Linnéa?'

'Yes?'

'Do you hate me?'

'I hate the fact that you're asking such a stupid question,' she hisses.

Finally. That's the Linnéa he knows. Elias hangs up. He smiles as he stands there in the corridor. There's hope. As long as she doesn't hate him there's hope. He has to tell Linnéa. She's his sister in all but blood. He doesn't have to go through this alone.

And at that moment the lights go out. Elias stiffens. A dim light filters its way through the windows at one end of the corridor. Somewhere close by a door shuts. Then silence settles in.

There's nothing to be afraid of, he tries to assure himself.

He starts walking towards the exit. Forces himself to keep to a slow, steady pace. Not to give way to the panic rising inside him. He rounds the row of lockers on the corner.

Someone is standing there.

The caretaker. Elias has only seen him a few times, but he's impossible to forget. It's those big ice-blue eyes. Eyes that stare at Elias as if they could see all his secrets.

Elias peers at the floor as he walks past. And still he can feel those eyes burning into the back of his neck. He

quickness his pace, nausea rising in his throat. It's as if his heart is throbbing so hard that it's triggering his gag reflex.

Everything's been getting better over the last six months. He's felt that things are happening inside him, that he's changing. The new psychologist at the CAP centre isn't an idiot like the last one, and it seems she actually understands him a little. Above all, he has Linnéa. She makes him feel alive, makes him want to leave the suffocating yet familiar darkness.

That's why it's so hard to understand why this is happening *now* - now when he can finally sleep at night, now that he can even feel happy.

Three days ago he had seen his face change in the mirror. He had seen it stretch and contort beyond recognition. And he had realised he was going mad. Hearing voices and seeing hallucinations. It had scared the shit out of him.

For three days he had held out against the razor blades and Jonte's merchandise. He had avoided mirrors. But yesterday he had caught sight of himself in a shop window, had seen his face quiver and pour away as if it were made of water.

That was when he called Jonte.

You're losing it.

A strange whisper in his head. Elias looks around and discovers he's climbed the spiral staircase again and is back in the corridor outside the principal's office. He doesn't know why. The lights flicker and go out.

The door to the stairwell slowly swings shut behind him. Just before it closes he hears it. The sound of a soft shoe sole on the stairs.

Hide.

Elias runs along the dark corridor. After each row of lockers he expects someone *or something* to suddenly appear. Just as he's rounded a corner he hears the door to

the stairwell open far behind him. The footsteps draw closer, slowly but surely.

He reaches the big stone steps that form the school's backbone.

Run up the stairs.

Elias's legs obey, clearing two at a time. Once he's reached the top floor, he continues running towards the little corridor where a locked door leads to the school's attic. It's a dead end, one of the school's forgotten places. There are a few toilets here that no one else uses. He and Linnéa usually meet here.

The footsteps draw closer.

Hide.

Elias opens the door to the toilets and slips inside. He closes the door carefully behind him and tries to breathe as quietly as possible. Listens. The only sound he can hear is a motorcycle accelerating in the distance.

Elias puts his ear to the door.

He can't hear anything. But he knows. Someone's standing there. On the other side.

Elias.

The whispering is louder now, but Elias is sure that it's only in his head.

It's finally happened: I've lost my mind, he thinks, and at once the voice responds: *Yes. You have.*

He looks out of the window towards the pale blue sky. The white tiles glisten. It's cold in here. He's filled with an immense loneliness.

Turn around.

Elias doesn't want to, but he turns just the same. It's as if he's no longer in control of his body. The voice is controlling it, as if he were a puppet of flesh and blood.

He's standing in front of the row of three sinks with mirrors mounted above them. When he catches sight of his pale face he wants to shut his eyes, but he can't.

Smash the mirror.

Elias's body obeys. His grip tightens around the strap of his book bag and he swings it through the air.

The sound echoes off the tiled walls when the mirror shatters. Big shards break off and crash into the sink where they splinter into smaller pieces with a tinkling noise.

Someone must have heard, Elias thinks. Please, let someone have heard.

But no one comes. He's alone with the voice.

Elias's body goes up to the sink and picks up the largest shard. He understands what's going to happen. He feels dizzy with fear.

You're broken. Impossible to fix.

Slowly he backs into one of the open cubicles.

It'll soon be over. Soon you'll never have to be afraid again.

The voice sounds almost comforting now.

Elias locks the door and sinks on to the toilet seat. He struggles to open his mouth, tries desperately to cry out. His grip on the glass shard tightens and the sharp edges cut into his palm.

No pain.

And he feels no pain. He sees the blood trickle from his hand and drip on to the grey-tiled floor but feels nothing. His body has gone numb. Only his thoughts remain. And the voice.

Life won't get better. Might as well end it now. Spare yourself the pain. Spare yourself the betrayals. It never gets any better anyway, Elias. Life is just a humiliating struggle. The dead are the lucky ones.

Elias doesn't try to resist as the glass shard cuts through the long sleeve of his shirt exposing the scarred skin beneath.

Mum, Dad, he thinks. They'll get through this. They have their faith. They believe we'll see each other again in Heaven.

I love you, he thinks, as the sharp edge starts to slice through his skin.

He hopes that Linnéa will understand that he didn't choose this. Everyone else is going to think he killed himself, and that doesn't matter. As long as she doesn't.

He cuts into his flesh differently from how he ever has before. Deeply and purposefully.

It'll soon be over, Elias. Just a little more. Then it'll be over. It'll be better like this. You've suffered so much.

The blood pumps from his arm. He sees it happening but feels nothing and now black spots dance before his eyes. They dance and grow until the whole world is pitch black. The last sound he hears is the footsteps out in the corridor. Whoever's out there isn't bothering to move quietly any more. There's no reason to now.

He tries to keep thinking about Linnéa. Like when he was little, and thought he could escape his nightmares if he could just hold on to one bright thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Forgive me.

He doesn't know whether those words came from him or the voice.

And that's when he feels the pain.

2

WHEN SHE REGAINS consciousness, she's lying huddled in the corner where they had left her.

It's pitch dark in the cell. Her whole body aches.

She sits up, pulls her legs under her smock and wraps her arms around her knees. She still can't hear anything from her right ear and there is a throbbing ache behind her eye, which is sealed shut with pus and coagulated blood.

Footsteps echo outside and the heavy door opens. Torchlight fills the room and she looks away when she sees her scarred feet bound together with a thick chain. Two guards wrench her up from the floor and tie her hands behind her back while the torchbearer looks on. The rope cuts into her wrists, but she refuses to let them see how much it hurts.

The man with the torch saunters forwards with an arrogant smirk. He has no teeth and his breath smells of rotten flesh. The heat from the torch sears her face as he brings it closer.

'Today you're going to die, harlot,' he says, and strokes her face with his free hand, letting it continue down towards her breasts.

Seething hatred fills her, makes her strong and hard.

'I curse you,' she hisses. 'Your prick shall fester and fall off! My lord Satan will come for you on your deathbed, and demons will torment you for all eternity.'

The man pulls away his hand as if burned.

'God spare us,' mumbles one of the guards.

It gives her a little consolation to see them so frightened.

Someone pulls a sack over her head, and she is dragged through the labyrinthine passageways.

A gate opens on creaking hinges.

Outside. There is the fresh smell of dew. She braces herself for the hateful baying of the mob, but all she hears is birdsong. The red light of dawn filters through the weave of the sackcloth over her head. A cuckoo caws to the south. It is a death knell. A deep, animal instinct takes over. She has to flee. Now.

Driven by panic, she rushes forward blindly. The iron shackles knock against her ankles as she runs. No one tries to stop her. They know there's no need. She doesn't get far before she falls headlong on to the damp ground. The guards laugh and call out behind her.

'Looks like she's in a hurry to get to her lord Satan,' she hears the toothless one shout.

Powerful hands lift her underneath her arms and someone else grabs hold of her feet. They toss her roughly through the air. She soars for a moment before slamming on something hard and getting the breath knocked out of her. A horse snorts and the world sways back and forth. She's lying in a cart, that much she can work out.

'Is anyone there?' she whispers.

Nobody answers.

Just as well, she thinks. We are all alone in death.

Minoo is woken by her shivering. She's freezing, as if she had slept with the window open all night. She's having trouble breathing - it feels as if something big and heavy is sitting on her chest.

She pulls the covers up to her chin and curls into a ball. She's had many nightmares, but never one that had such a physical effect on her. Never has she felt so relieved to see

the familiar yellow and white striped wallpaper of her room.

After a while she starts to breathe more easily and the warmth slowly returns.

She checks her mobile. Almost seven o'clock. Time to get up.

She climbs out of bed and opens the wardrobe. She wishes she had some kind of distinct style instead of the same lame jeans, tops and cardigans every day. She pulls down a navy blue long-sleeved shirt from a hanger and is disgusted with herself. She's so awfully ... harmless. She hasn't even changed her hairstyle. Ever. But what would people say if she suddenly came to school in something different? The alternative crowd at school, those whose style she secretly admires, would think her a wannabe.

Plus she hates buying clothes. She feels like an illiterate in a bookshop. On other people clothes look ugly or attractive; she can see whether or not they suit the person wearing them. But when she's flipping through a catalogue or standing in a shop, she only ever makes safe choices. Black. Dark blue. Long sweaters. Jeans that aren't too tight. Nothing too low-cut. No patterns. Clothes are a language she understands, but can't speak herself.

She takes her outfit with her as she steps out into the corridor. The door to her parents' bedroom is shut and in the bathroom, her father's razor is lying in a pool of water next to the sink. Minoo guesses he's already at work. Her mother's towel is damp so she must be up, too, even though it's her day off.

Minoo lays her clothes on a stool, climbs into the bath and pulls the shower curtain closed. Suddenly she catches a whiff of smoke. She holds a wisp of her long black hair up to her nose and sniffs it.

She has to shampoo her hair twice to get that inexplicable smell out. Afterwards she wraps it up in a towel turban and brushes her teeth. Her eyes wander to

the old framed map of Engelsfors that hangs beside the mirror. Last year she actually thought that her parents would let her go and stay with Aunt Bahar in Stockholm and go to high school there. She hates to see that map every morning and be reminded that she's still stuck here. In Engelsfors. Pretty name, shitty town. Out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by deep forests where people often lose their way and disappear. Thirteen thousand inhabitants and high unemployment. The steel works closed down twenty-five years ago. The shops in the town centre stand empty. Only the pizzerias survive.

The national road and the railway form a partition through the town. To the east lie Dammsjön Lake, petrol stations, workshops, the shuttered factory and a few depressing high-rise blocks of flats. To the west lie the town centre, the church and vicarage, streets of terraced houses, then the long-abandoned manor house and the fancy upmarket detached houses by the idyllic canal.

It is here that the Falk Karimi family lives in a light-grey functionalist two-storey house. The walls are covered with expensive wallpaper, and most of the furniture has been shipped in from designer boutiques in Stockholm.

Minoo's mother is sitting at the kitchen table when she comes down the stairs. The newspapers her father pores over in the morning are lying in a neat pile on the table. Her mother is immersed in a medical journal, with her usual breakfast – a cup of black coffee – next to her.

Minoo pours herself a bowl of strawberry yoghurt and sits down across the table from her mother.

'Is that all you're going to eat?' her mother asks.

'You're one to talk,' Minoo retorts, and gets a smile in response.

'Yogurt, porridge, sandwich, yogurt, porridge, sandwich. It gets pretty tedious after a while.'

'But coffee doesn't?'

‘One day you’ll understand.’ Her mother smiles. Then she suddenly gets that look in her eyes, the one that bores straight to the core. ‘Did you sleep badly?’

‘I had a nightmare,’ Minoo says. She tells her about the dream and how she had felt when she woke up. Her mother feels her forehead.

Minoo recoils. ‘I’m not ill. It wasn’t that kind of shivering.’

Minoo recognises her mother’s switch into ‘doctor mode’. Her voice becomes serious and professional, her body language more formal. The change had been evident even when Minoo was small. Her father had nursed her as a parent would when she was ill, spoiling her with sweets and comics, but her mother had been like a doctor on a home visit.

Once, that had made Minoo sad. Now she suspects it’s a defence mechanism. Perhaps without it her parental concern, combined with professional understanding of human ailments, would be impossible to handle.

‘Was your pulse rapid?’

‘Yes ... But it passed.’

‘Difficulty breathing?’

Minoo nods.

‘It might have been a panic attack.’

‘I don’t get panic attacks.’

‘It’s not unlikely that you would, Minoo. You’ve just started year eleven. It’s a big adjustment.’

‘It wasn’t a panic attack, Mum. It was connected to my dream.’

It sounds strange when she says it, but that was exactly how it felt.

‘It’s unhealthy to bottle up your feelings,’ her mother says. ‘They’re going to come out one way or another. The more you try to control them, the more uncontrolled their eventual release.’

'Have you switched from being a surgeon to a psychologist now?' Minoo teases.

'I once considered becoming a psychiatrist,' her mother answers a little pointedly. Then something shifts in her eyes. 'I know I haven't been a very good role model.'

'Stop it, Mother.'

'No. I'm a typical overachiever. I don't want to pass that on to you.'

'You haven't,' Minoo mumbles.

'Tell me if it happens again. Promise?'

Minoo nods. Even if her mother can be a little too intense at times, it's good to know that she cares. And for the most part, she understands Minoo.

God, how sad, Minoo thinks, swallowing the last spoonful of yogurt. My mother is my best friend.

Vanessa is woken up by the smell of smoke.

She throws off her duvet, runs to the door and yanks it open.

But the living room is still and quiet. No flames licking at the curtains. No noxious black clouds billowing from the kitchen. The coffee-table is still strewn with pizza boxes and beer cans from yesterday. Their German Shepherd, Frasse, is asleep, basking in a pool of sunlight on the floor. Her mother, Nicke and her little brother, Melvin, are already in the kitchen having breakfast. A perfectly ordinary morning at Törnrosvägen 17A, fifth floor, first door to the right of the lift.

Vanessa shakes her head, and that's when she realises that the smell is coming from her. Her hair stinks like it had when she was small, after she had stood staring at the stupid May Day bonfire on Olsson's Hill.

She crosses the living room, walks through the kitchen, where Melvin is playing with two spoons, tapping them on the table. Sometimes he's just so cute. It's unbelievable that he got half his genes from Nicke.

She tosses her nightshirt on to the bathroom floor and turns on the shower. The pipes cough and a stream of ice-cold water spurts out. The shower has been a nuisance ever since Nicke had insisted on replacing some of the pipes himself and putting in a new mixer tap. Her mother had objected, but she always gives in to Nicke in the end.

Vanessa steps into the shower cubicle and is almost scalded before she manages to find the right temperature. She washes her hair with her mother's coconut shampoo. The mysterious smoke smell is still there. She pours out another thick blob and lathers her hair a second time.

When she gets back to her room, wrapped in her dressing-gown, she switches on the radio. The commercials make everything sound a little more normal. She angles up the blinds and at once her mood improves. T-shirt weather! She wants to get out into the sun as quickly as possible.

'Turn that down!' Nicke hollers, from the kitchen, in his best cop voice.

Vanessa ignores him. It's not my problem if you're hung-over, she thinks, as she rolls deodorant under her arms.

Once dressed, she grabs her makeup bag and goes to the full-length mirror propped against the wall.

She's not there.

Vanessa stares into the empty mirror. She raises her hand and holds it in front of her. There it is, clear as day. She looks in the mirror again. Nothing.

It's a while before she realises she's still asleep.

Vanessa smiles. But if she's aware that this is a dream, she should be able to control it.

She puts down her makeup bag and goes into the kitchen.

'Hi,' she says.

No one reacts. She really is invisible. Nicke is sitting there, half asleep with his head in his hands. He reeks of stale beer. Her mother, who looks just as tired, is listlessly chewing on a ham sandwich while flipping through a

catalogue from a place called the Crystal Cave. Only Melvin turns his head as if he's heard something, but it's obvious he can't see her.

Vanessa stands next to Nicke. 'Hung over today?' she whispers in his ear. No reaction. Vanessa giggles. She feels oddly exhilarated.

'Do you know how much I hate you?' she says to Nicke. 'You're such a fucking loser that you don't even know what a fucking loser you are. That's probably the worst thing about you, that you *think* you're so incredibly perfect.'

Suddenly she feels something wet and rough against her hand. She looks down. Frasse is standing there, licking her hand.

'Wha' Fasse doing?' Melvin asks, in his perky voice.

Her mother looks at the dog, who is licking thin air. 'You never know what Frasse is doing,' she answers. 'He's probably chasing flies or something.'

'Don't make me come in there and smash that fucking radio,' Nicke shouts, at Vanessa's room.

Vanessa giggles and lets her gaze wander across the kitchen. Nicke's favourite mug is standing on the counter, a big blue one emblazoned with 'NYPD' in white lettering and the police logo. He probably thinks that being a policeman in Engelsfors is somehow similar to patrolling the streets of New York.

Vanessa knocks the mug on to the floor with a sweeping motion. It splits in two with a satisfying crack. Melvin jumps and starts crying. Immediately she feels a little guilty.

'What the hell?' shouts Nicke, and gets up so forcefully that his chair tips over.

'Shame you can't blame it on me,' Vanessa says triumphantly.

Nicke stares straight at her. Their eyes meet. The shock sends little jolts of electricity down her spine. He can see her.

'Who the hell else would I blame it on?' he hisses.

Melvin is bawling and Nicke lifts him up, stroking his tousled chocolate-brown hair. 'There there, buddy, it's all right,' he says comfortingly, while glaring at Vanessa.

'Vanessa, what are you doing?' her mother says, in her weariest voice.

Vanessa can't answer her. Is she still dreaming? If not, what's going on? 'Could you see me the whole time?' she asks.

All of a sudden her mother looks wide awake.

'Have you *taken* something?'

'You guys are such dicks!' Vanessa shouts, and rushes out into the hall.

She's scared now, scared to death, but she's not going to show it. Instead she steps into her trainers and grabs her bag.

'You're not going anywhere!' her mother shouts.

'So I should miss school?' Vanessa slams the front door behind her with a bang that echoes up the stairwell.

She hurtles down the stairs, out through the front door and across the street to the number-five stop where she just makes it on to the bus.

Thank God she doesn't know anybody on board. She sits at the very back.

There are only two possible explanations for this insane morning. One is that she's lost her mind. The second is that she's been sleepwalking again. When she was younger it happened quite often. Her mother loves to embarrass Vanessa by telling people that she once squatted on the hall carpet and peed. Vanessa still remembers how it felt to be in that state between sleep and waking. But deep down she knows this was something completely different.

I must have been sleepwalking, she decides. The other explanation is terrifying.

Vanessa looks out of the window, and when the bus heads into a tunnel, she catches sight of her reflection in

the glass. Two unmade-up eyes stare back at her.

'Oh, God.' She rummages in her bag.

All she finds is an old tube of lip-gloss. Her makeup bag is still lying on the floor at home. Vanessa hasn't gone to school without makeup since she was ten and has no desire to start now. One trauma is enough for this morning.

The bus continues through deserted industrial areas. Her mother often goes on about how the old steel works was the pride of the town when she was a child, that then you could feel proud to come from Engelsfors. Vanessa doesn't understand what there was to be so proud of. The town must have been just as ugly and boring then as it is now.

The bus drives across the railway lines and enters the western part of the town. Outside the window, the area her mother mockingly refers to as the 'Beverly Hills of Bergslagen' rolls into view: large houses in bright colours set among well-tended gardens. It's as if the sun shines a little more brightly on this side of town. This is where the people with money live. Doctors. The few successful retailers. The descendants of the mill proprietors. There's still a way to go to her school, which is oddly distant from the town centre.

Like a prison, isolated from the rest of civilisation.

3

ANNA-KARIN IS LONGING for the autumn.

She's standing by the gates looking out across the playground, where summer-clad students are milling around. Tanned arms, legs and cleavages everywhere. All she wants is to crawl into her scruffy old duffel coat, pull on a woollen hat and Grandpa's knitted mittens.

Today she's wearing a baggy tracksuit jacket, an extra-large T-shirt and jeans. It's already over twenty degrees, but she'd rather be hot than displaying skin. She doesn't want to get *too* hot, though. Now she's standing with her arms held a little out from her sides so she doesn't get sweat patches under her arms. In year seven somebody shoved her so she spilled water all over her shirt. Erik Forslund, who was standing next to her, immediately shouted that she had sweaty boobs. 'The BO Ho' was such a popular nickname that it had stuck until year ten. She has no intention of giving anyone the opportunity to use it now, too.

The playground is emptying. Anna-Karin joins the flow, head bowed, arms folded protectively across her breasts. She's started wearing a bra that's supposed to make them look smaller, but in the mirror you can't see any difference.

When she enters the building, she catches sight of Rebecka Mohlin, who's in her class, and Rebecka's boyfriend, Gustaf Åhlander. They're standing by the stairs with their arms around each other. Anna-Karin looks away

with a rush of pitch-black self-pity. No boy is ever going to look at her in the way Gustaf is looking at Rebecka.

'Hi,' Rebecka says to her, as she walks past.

'Hi,' Gustaf echoes.

Anna-Karin doesn't answer.

Only once she's in the classroom, at her desk in the front row closest to the wall, can she relax a little. She sticks her hand into her jacket pocket and feels Pepper's warm body and sharp little claws. His fur is silky soft. When she strokes his tiny head, he starts to purr so that her pocket vibrates. Self-pity melts away, replaced with love.

Anna-Karin knows she shouldn't bring the kitten to school, but she doesn't feel strong enough to go alone. Not yet. Maybe next week.

So far things have been quite good. She's already got through two weeks of school, and the third has just begun. No one has laughed at her or thrown her schoolbag out of the window. No one has tried to push her down the stairs. No one has pinched her breasts until she cries from the pain. Erik Forslund and Ida Holmström have passed her in the corridor several times without even looking at her.

She's dreamed of this moment for nine years and now it's happened.

She's finally become invisible.

*

Minoo hates being a teenager, mostly because it means being herded together with other teenagers. Coming to school is like being deported to an alien planet - every day. She has nothing to say to the inhabitants. She can't even pretend to be one of them because she doesn't know how.

Everything was supposed to be different in year eleven. That was her source of comfort all the way through secondary school. The others were supposed to have