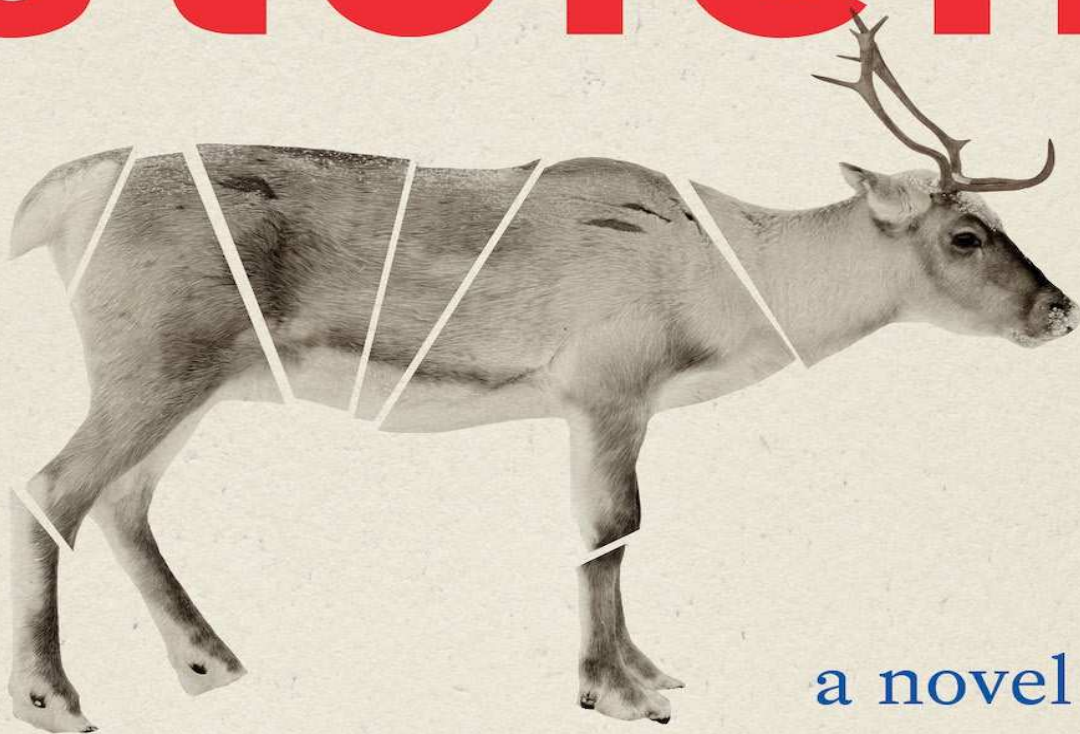


“Extraordinary . . . a coming-of-age-story you’ll get lost in, about youth and heritage and the never-ending struggle to be allowed to exist.” —**Fredrik Backman**, author of *A Man Called Ove*

#1 International Bestseller

stolen



a novel

Ann-Helén Laestadius

Translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[**CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP**](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

STOLEN

A Novel



ANN-HELÉN LAESTADIUS

**Translated from the Swedish by
Rachel Willson-Broyles**

SCRIBNER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



PART I



DÁLVI

WINTER 2008

CHAPTER ONE

Okta

Elsa didn't turn around. She straightened her spine and concentrated on finding her rhythm, but still she had to glance at her skis to make sure they stayed in the tracks. It was a little too dark to head out, but she was so eager.

Her cheeks were windburnt. From the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of her dark hair sticking out from beneath her hat and turning silvery gray with frost. Her eyelashes had changed color too, and she could feel the cold moisture when she blinked. It was like she was becoming a different person.

The lake was crisscrossed with snowmobile tracks leading home and away. To neighbors and cousins. To the reindeer corral. She followed the widest track. She'd found her rhythm, and her skis swished beneath her. She was nine years old. A big girl now. With skis of her own, not hand-me-downs from Mattias.

She poled onward, her arms strong and powerful, with each glide long. She knew the house would soon be a tiny dot behind her. The lake gave way to forest, but she wasn't afraid. She was never afraid, because she knew exactly where she was and could always find her way home. She didn't usually go beyond the lake. But now she was big.

It was early January, so the sun had found its way back, but it hardly rose over the horizon before dipping down again, leaving a pink

shimmer in the sky. Today the clouds absorbed the light faster than she'd expected, but it wouldn't be pitch-black for a while yet. She would make it there before dark. The snow weighed down the firs and birches. It looked like they were all bowing to her, welcoming her home. To think, that they recognized her even with her frosty silver hair and new skis.

She heard the reindeer and skied faster, though her thighs were stiff. Her breath came faster too, stinging her throat. She must not lick her dry lips or they would redden and crack. She didn't like the taste of blood.

No one was there now, she knew that. Mom, Dad, and Mattias were at home. It wasn't time to feed the reindeer yet, but she was going to surprise them. Get the pellets ready, haul out the bags, and maybe even go in and scatter some of the feed. Hold the reindeer lichen in her hand so the animals would flock around her, not the least bit afraid.

The sound of a snowmobile starting up halted her in her tracks. Such disappointment. She wasn't the first one here after all. The snowmobile was idling. She pushed off with her poles, almost silent, then grabbed the trunk of a pine and peered around it.

It was him.

She never said his name.

In his mouth, between taut lips, was something soft and downy. In his hand, a bloody knife. Elsa squeezed her poles so hard her cold knuckles ached inside her mittens.

He took the piece of ear from his mouth and stuffed it into the pocket of his grimy yellow pants, the kind road construction workers wore. The wide reflective strips flashed as he passed in front of the

snowmobile's headlights. The dead calf lay next to the fence, just outside the corral. He bent down—for what? To take it with him? Her throat betrayed her and he looked up. His eyes were searching, quick and deft, until he found her. Maybe he wouldn't recognize her with her silver hair?

It looked like he was swearing, stomping toward her in his boots. His tongue bulged behind his upper lip, pressing against the snus to release the nicotine.

Then he grinned and pointed at her, holding an index finger to his thin lips—shhh—before drawing his finger across his throat.

Death. She knew that meant death.

He went back to the snowmobile, took a pair of black gloves from his pocket, and swung his leg over the seat. He was unaware that he had pulled out more than just the gloves. The small, downy ear fluttered through the air and landed in the snow. It bore the mark that proved the calf belonged to their herd.

He revved the engine, releasing the stench of exhaust, but also something undefinable that made Elsa's nose crinkle.

She skied on shaky legs to where the man was last standing, removed her mitten, and picked up the ear. She wiped the snow away and got blood on her palm. It wasn't the whole ear; he'd cut off just the outermost part, where the marking was.

She glanced at the dead body by the fence.

It was Nástegallu—Elsa's reindeer. The white patch between her eyes, and her unusually long legs. Drops of blood covered her soft fur. Elsa's reindeer, without her earmark to show where she belonged. Elsa couldn't cry, couldn't scream. There was a frightening clamor in her head. The thought that one day she would kill the man who did this.

CHAPTER TWO

Guokte

Mom and Dad were whispering above her. She was tucked into the snowmobile sled, wrapped in a blanket. Her skis were under the reindeer pelt. No one was even thinking about how she'd skied all the way to the corral; no one said a word about it. Elsa closed her eyes. The snowflakes that brushed her face melted fast and the silvery frost in her hair was gone. She was herself again.

Her parents, her Enná and Isa, had found her sitting beside her reindeer. They asked what had happened, but she was mute. Inside her mitten she squeezed the little piece of ear. The blood had congealed but the fur was still soft. She didn't show it to them, even when they exclaimed, upset, that "that bastard" had taken the ears, all of one and half of the other. Sometimes you were required to show the ear markings to prove your ownership of a reindeer if it had been run over or killed by a predator. But she wouldn't let anyone have this ear. Her Nástegallu was dead.

Mom sat down beside Elsa and pulled her close. Enná was crying. Her mom always cried. She tried to stay calm, to wait until they were back home so she could shut herself in her bedroom where she thought no one could hear.

Dad and Mattias were taking gentle care of her reindeer. It had been dark for a long time, and Elsa couldn't see everything they were

doing, but she could hear them mumbling.

“She must have seen them, or else they would have taken the reindeer,” Mattias said.

“Oh no, they just want to kill and make sure we see it.”

Dad walked around, aiming his flashlight at the snowmobile tracks. Elsa could have pointed out which way he'd gone and which tracks were his, but she couldn't lift her hand. It was as if the ear kept her still, weighing down her arm. She had seen the man make the sign for death, so she knew this was serious.

The beam of light bounced over snowbanks, sagging trees, and snowmobile tracks. Dad bent down and took several pictures on his phone. They had photographed Nástegallu too, before they moved her. Elsa was sure they had called the police, but they all knew no one would come tonight.

“We have to go now, Nils Johan. She's freezing,” Mom said.

Elsa wasn't freezing, but she was trembling. Mom held her tighter and rubbed her whole body with a firm hand. It didn't help.

Dad hit the gas so fast they fell backwards on the sled. Mattias passed them on his snowmobile. He sped out into the drifted snow, his engine roaring through the forest. Elsa knew he was angry. You could always tell by the sound of his snowmobile. Soon his taillights were just two red points far across the lake.

Her hand fumbled under the reindeer pelt and found her skis. She felt their smooth surface. She would never ski to the corral again.

CHAPTER THREE

Golbma

Mattias found reasons to peek into Elsa's room all evening. She studied him, her big brother. Stuuraviellja. Seven years her elder, no longer a child but not grown either. In between—"gasku," as Áhkku liked to say. Her grandmother had a word for everything, but only in Sámi. In Swedish, Áhkku felt she had too few words, but sometimes she couldn't speak Sámi without having to mix in some Swedish.

The adults said Mattias was like Mom; he was tall like her, and they said he was so grown up. Elsa thought he had the face of a little boy. Mom and Mattias had the same dark hair and the same eyes, but Mattias's eyes were more watchful.

He dug through the wardrobe in the corner of Elsa's room but wouldn't say what he was looking for.

"Did you see him?" he asked without turning around. "Was it Robert Isaksson?"

She lay under the covers, the ear in her hand. She couldn't hold it too tightly, because then it got sweaty and wasn't as alive and as soft as it should be. But she didn't dare let it go.

"You have to talk, or they'll think you've gone crazy and need to go to the hospital," Mattias said, stomping around the room.

It was sweaty under the covers because Áhkku had turned up the heat in the room. She thought heat was the remedy for everything,

rather than snuggling and being close, because she had trouble lifting her arms when she gave a hug. It was unsettling to hug someone who didn't hug back, but if Elsa lifted her grandmother's arms for her, she could keep them there. And sometimes her fingers moved across Elsa's back, almost shyly.

No one had mentioned yet that it was Elsa's reindeer, the one she had marked herself with the little knife she always had on her belt. Her fingers stroked the cuts in the ear. She could draw the ear marking, cut it in her mind, the marking that was hers, theirs, the family's. She let her index finger slip across the small edge of the cut, remembering how difficult it had been to make. The larger, round cut had been simpler, as had the one that cleaved the very tip of the ear by just under half an inch.

She truly did want to tell Mattias everything, but he would do something stupid—she knew it. That's what always happened back when he was in school. It was in self-defense, but no one cared and he was always to blame. According to Áhkku, Mattias was just like Áddjá at that age. Grandpa used to get into fights at school too. But Mattias would never be able to beat up a grown man. And never *that man*. He was tall, taller than everyone else, with broad shoulders and huge hands.

Stalking back and forth, Mattias rubbed his scalp with the tips of his fingers.

“All you have to do is nod, unna oabba. Nod so I know it was him.”

Elsa lay perfectly still to keep herself from nodding by accident. To be on the safe side, she closed her eyes. But that made Mattias angry; she heard him snort. It was best to peek again.

Maybe she couldn't talk anymore. That's how it felt, as if the words would no longer allow themselves to be said. That scared her, because it was important to be able to talk at school. She cleared her throat, testing it out a little, and Mattias fixed his eyes on her. She didn't want to disappoint him, but she didn't want him to die either.

"Why did you have to go out there by yourself?" he snapped.

She swallowed hard, willing herself to think about something else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Njeallje

That evening, Dad cracked open the door to her room. Elsa shut her eyes and breathed calmly, as though she were sleeping. She knew it was him, had recognized his footsteps. He closed the door again, gingerly, but it still creaked.

When she could no longer hear anyone outside her door, she sat up in bed and let her eyes adjust to the dark. She pulled off her nightgown, which was stuck to her back. Goose bumps rose on her skin as she slipped silently out of bed and tiptoed to the window facing the lake. The wind blew hard, whining between the houses scattered around the lake. The streetlamp at the crown of the village had the hiccups. Its light flickered. The township had decided to stop lighting the lamps along the road that ran past their house. It was too expensive—that was the only explanation Elsa had heard—so only the more populated part of their village was well lit. At their house, which was farthest out and by the lake, Dad had installed lights that automatically turned on when someone entered the property. Now and then Elsa liked to sneak out onto the front steps when the darkness got to be too scary. The floodlight illuminated the whole yard so that no one could hide.

The house wasn't large. She and Mattias each had their own room, and Mom and Dad had their bedroom, although Dad mostly slept on

the living-room floor on a mattress he rolled up every morning. Elsa could hear him snoring out there, and if she woke up at night to no snores she grew frightened and had to get up. Sometimes it turned out Dad was standing by the stove, holding a cup of coffee even though it was the middle of the night. His face was gray; his stubble was turning gray. All of him was getting grayer.

Áhkku and Áddjá lived next door. If she pressed her nose to her window, she could see part of their house. It was small too. Áhkku said it had been built by the state sometime in the fifties when reindeer herders were allowed to have a domicile and own property. Elsa didn't know what "domicile" meant, and Áhkku spit the word out when she said it. Elsa wasn't supposed to hear this sort of thing, but she did.

Áddjá had painted the house a sunny yellow. He wanted to build additions, but the men in town who made decisions about houses said no, so he built an equally yellow storage shed and often slept there. When Elsa stopped to think about it, not many adults slept together. But then again, the dads were often away for long stretches, following the reindeer on their natural migration paths.

Between the houses was the wooden goahti where they smoked meat. The chunks of smoked meat were suspended in long rows to dry in the wind in a cage on top of the roof of the shed. Elsa's mouth watered when she thought about the finished product, goike biergu. In their yard sat four-wheelers, trailers, two cars, two snowmobiles, and, under a tarp next to the shed, another old snowmobile that they really ought to sell. Their closest neighbor besides Áhkku and Áddjá had complained that their yard "looked like shit." Elsa had heard them call it "the Lapps' place." The neighbors liked to mow their lawn and plant

flowers. They liked quiet, so when Gabo barked they got even grumpier. But dogs bark, everyone knows that. Elsa wished Gabo was in her room now so she could bury her nose in her fur. She should have brought her to the corral, sicced her on him.

Gabo was a mutt, but most of her was Australian shepherd. She was the best herding dog they'd ever had. She could smell danger a mile away.

Elsa leaned her head against the windowpane. She could feel the wind buffeting the walls of the house. Maybe it wanted to move them out of the way too, blow them somewhere else.

She heard mumbling from the kitchen and tiptoed over to the door, where she pressed her ear to its cool, white surface.

"We'll have to take shifts in the corral tonight." Dad's voice was sharp. He often sounded like that when he was on the phone.

"Every goddamn trace is blowing away as we speak, and of course the police say they don't have time to come." He paused for a moment. "I know it's Sunday, but since when did the police stop working on Sundays?"

There was silence, and then he spoke in a low voice. She could only hear the occasional snippet.

"It was Elsa's... found... Ears were gone... in shock."

Her cheeks felt hot. This was the first time someone had said it was her reindeer. It was like they'd been hoping she hadn't realized which one it was. But of course she knew. She was nine years old. She recognized her own reindeer.

Dad said his name: Robert Isaksson. Goose bumps covered her arms.

"No, Elsa didn't see him."

She threw herself under the covers and squeezed the rough duvet, which was new and uncomfortable. She hadn't lied. Not saying anything wasn't the same as lying. All she had to do was remain quiet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vihitta

It smelled like coffee and wet dog in the kitchen, but Gabo had been let back outside. Elsa stifled a yawn as she sat down at the kitchen table with Dad and Mattias. As usual, Mom couldn't sit down in the morning. She was too antsy to sit with them at supper too. But she wasn't as bad as Áhkku, who always stood at the stove, frying another round of suovas or testing the potatoes with a skewer.

"I'll be right there," Mom always said when Elsa asked her to come to the table.

But by the time she finally arrived everyone was finished eating.

Right now she was rummaging in the freezer, trying to find the bread she'd baked last week. The coffeepot was whistling on the stove. Dad hurried out of his seat with an open-faced sandwich hanging from the corner of his mouth, the slice of cheese almost falling off. He pulled the pot off the burner. Mom shot him a look of irritation. She was good at giving him nasty looks. There were a lot of glances flying across the table that morning. Dad shook his head, probably unaware of what he'd done wrong. Men were seldom aware, as Áhkku often told Elsa. Áhkku was even better at nasty looks. She did everything just a tiny bit better than Mom.

"You'll have to come along to the police station," Dad said gruffly.

Elsa froze, her glass of milk at her lips, and looked at him. There were dark circles under his eyes and the whites of his eyes were red, but his chin was smooth and almost shiny. He had shaved.

“Why?”

“You have to tell them where you found the reindeer.”

She glared at him.

“Right, your reindeer,” he clarified. “I just want them to understand what you’ve been through. Maybe you even saw someone? Or...?”

He ran out of air at that point. He couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eye.

“This time they killed the reindeer just to harass us. And the police won’t understand the difference. They’ll think this is only about the money, if they even believe it’s our reindeer.” Mattias’s voice trembled, but not because he was about to cry. He was angry, and Elsa didn’t dare look at him.

“Stop it!” Dad snapped. “Not now.” He nodded discreetly at Elsa.

“But it’s true!” Mattias was rocking back and forth on the pine chair, balancing his juice glass in his hand.

Mom cleared away the butter, wrapped the cheese in a plastic bag, and dropped the cheese slicer in the sink. She put away the milk and juice, wiped up the crumbs, and took out coffee cups for herself and Dad.

Elsa drank her milk very, very slowly. She wondered exactly how illegal it was to lie to a policeman. Prison-illegal, or just a little illegal? According to Mattias, the police always lied to them, so why couldn’t she do the same thing? She thought of the ear, which she’d hidden under the bed for the time being, buried beneath her clothes. She’d

held it for a while before falling asleep, but she didn't want to risk keeping it in bed since Mom always woke her up in the morning.

The wall clock ticked loudly. Mom sat down.

"I think we should say it was Mattias who found it. She's too little."

The legs of Mattias's chair hit the floor, and he slammed his juice glass on the table.

"Definitely! I'll do it."

Elsa gazed longingly out the window at the big road. If only she were standing there right now, waiting for the bus with Anna-Stina, with no reason to think about the police or how she'd lost what was hers.

Mom rubbed her temples, and Elsa looked at the gray strands that grizzled her dark hair with silver streaks. Maybe Mom was on her way to becoming someone else too, like Elsa in the forest, because she didn't quite recognize her anymore. She cried a lot, and shouted even more, mostly at Mattias, who hunched his shoulders and slunk away.

People sometimes called Mom "rivgu," a word spoken by malicious tongues, a word to describe women who weren't Sámi. Mom wasn't from the village—she was "Marika from town." Elsa didn't believe all this rivgu stuff; after all, Mom spoke Sámi, sewed gákti herself and wore them too, and she was a reindeer herder. But she'd said she had to learn all of this when Dad decided he wanted to marry her.

"He'd made up his mind, yes sir, and you know that when Dad makes up his mind no one can change it," she laughed.

It had been a long time since she reminded Elsa how they fell in love. Now there was mostly just tension in the air.

Once Mom married Dad, and Mattias was born, the rivgu talk diminished. Mom also started to wear a gákti. Áhkku had explained