

Surprising Development in Sandvik Case

Son of Drammen Mayor Exonerated by New Information

July 19 – Approximately a year after a group of masked intruders broke into the Sandvik pig breeding facility, new information has come to light. According to police statements, a video has surfaced that led to identification of three additional radical activists. The suspects are students of the University of Oslo, who came together to form a group called REDNING.

According to a press release issued by the police, Hendrik Berg (21), who was shot during the incident and was the son of Drammen mayor Jorgen Berg, did not attack the farm's security guard. The aspiring filmmaker had infiltrated the group undercover with the intention of using images filmed secretly to raise awareness of the deplorable conditions in largescale livestock farming in Norway. He also wanted to provide evidence of the group's increasing radicalization. A first brief statement has been issued by Mayor Jorgen Berg: "My son had good intentions. Unfortunately, he chose a path outside the law to pursue them. As a father I will always admire Hendrik for his big heart, even if as mayor of the city of Drammen I can't approve of the methods he chose."

Berg declined to address the question of what consequences this new information might have for his candidacy for the mayor of Oslo.

Chapter 1

Lene

I want to set that wretched article on fire. Or no, better yet, the whole sleazy paper.

The methods he chose.

Don't make me laugh.

Since I don't have a lighter nearby, I do the next best thing: I tear out the page and shred it into tiny little pieces. It looks like colorful confetti, only nothing about it is colorful. Hendrik is dead,

and Dad has nothing better to do than to give that tabloid a serious statement about him. For a few seconds I stare at the pool of paper bits on the table in front of me, then I scoop them up in my hand and throw them in the garbage. Mom shouldn't get upset because I've made a mess. Although... I actually doubt that she would react at all. Since I returned from New Zealand I've noticed that Emil wasn't exaggerating in his reports. Mom has been reduced to a wandering zombie. Still, I'd rather play it safe.

After I make myself a cup of coffee, I take it outside and sit in the garden. It's already past nine o'clock, but the house is still completely silent. Mom is still in bed, Dad is at work, and Emil... my brother probably spent the night at Freya's again.

Involuntarily I tighten my grip on the coffee cup. I should be glad that he's at her house and they aren't here at ours. At least this way I don't have to endure her happiness. Her blasted *joy*, which only exists because our other brother is dead. I just can't understand how they could get together less than a year after his death. Freya was going out with Hendrik before he died. The fact that she's with Emil now can only mean that she never really loved Hendrik. And dammit, he didn't deserve that.

God, I should stop thinking about it if I don't want to ruin my mood even more. I have to leave for the aerial adventure park in a few minutes, and I have no desire to take thoughts about Emil and Freya's relationship with me.

Silently I finish my coffee and stand up to let the chickens out of their coop. They hear me before they see me, and their clucking gets louder as I get approach. With the mug in one hand I open their exit, and one after the other they scurry past me. First Dagahilt, then Nanna. Then Iduna, Nertha and Gefjon. Urda follows those three. Only Eira sits in front of me and seems to be actually studying me. I know that's ridiculous, but her gaze is so penetrating that I can't help it.

"What?" I snap at her, and shoo her outside.

Eira ruffles her feathers, then rushes past me to follow the other hens. It isn't fair of me to take out my bad mood on her, but today I just can't help it. To read that article about Hendrik... that riled me up. Every time I think I've come to terms with his death, with the fact that he was shot because he broke into a pig farm, something happens to let me know that's not true, that I'm nowhere near as close to making peace with it as I'd like to be. And that's the starting point for spiraling thoughts that

always lead to Emil and Freya and the fact that they're a couple now, but that can only be because Hendrik is dead. And that's just wrong. It's wrong that he was shot, and it's at least as wrong that Freya has replaced Hendrik with Emil. From one brother to the other, and he's dumb enough to play along, because he always had the hots for her.

In frustration I exhale, then change the chickens' water, spread some chicken feed for them, and gather the eggs. Maybe Mom will make herself a fried egg later, when she sees that I've already collected the fresh ones. I've hardly finished the thought when I shake my own head. No, she won't. As devastated as she's been since Hendrik's death, she won't eat anything except her daily sleeping pills. Still, I decide I'll make her breakfast sometime soon. If the food is ready and waiting on the table and she doesn't have to go to any trouble... maybe then she'll manage to take a few bites, at least.

I walk back towards the house with the eggs and my coffee cup, and come to an abrupt stop on the patio.

"Hey." My brother stands in the doorway to the patio and greets me, a tentative smile on his lips. Freya is right next to him and doesn't say a word. She is holding Emil's hand tightly with both of hers. "I thought you had already left. Were you with the chickens?"

His question is absurd, because he can see from the eggs in my hand exactly where I was. So I spare myself an answer, walk past him into the house, set the eggs down, and put my cup in the sink with more force than necessary.

"Don't let me disturb you two," I snap. The sight of the two of them makes me angry, even angrier than I already am. I don't know what I expected when I returned from New Zealand, but definitely not that Freya had simply exchanged one of my brothers for the other. Even if she claims that it's not true, I don't believe her. The alternative would be that she had always liked Emil more than she should have as Hendrik's girlfriend. And that doesn't help things a bit. "I'm already gone."

I grab my keys from the table and want to head outside again, but Emil stands in my way.

"That's not at all what I meant," he says, and I can clearly hear that he's annoyed with me. With me and my *childish behavior*, as he never tires of repeating.

What do I care. If that's what he thinks, fine, that's what he'll get from me. I don't stop moving, but continue walking into the hallway and take my jacket from the hook.

“Lene!” he calls after me one more time. Not loud enough to wake Mom upstairs, but loud enough that I can’t pretend I didn’t hear him.

“Sorry,” I call back. Because I know how much he hates it when I act like this. Yeah, and it makes me sick that he thinks it’s okay to be going out with Hendrik’s girlfriend. “I have to go.”

“Lene, please. Let’s talk.” He tries one more time, but I just raise my hand and wave goodbye. Then I run out of the house, grab my old bike, and take off.

I know I can’t continue running away from them forever. But today I do it, because I definitely don’t feel up to a real confrontation with them. Not after that article stirred up everything that I’m trying to keep locked away. I miss Hendrik, and to read about him almost a year after his death is still unbearable, even if the newspaper’s tone has changed over time. They’re not insisting that he was a radical activist, which is good. Now they are more focused on Dad’s campaign and the impact his son’s death may have on that. As if that matters at all. It’s just a stupid campaign. Nothing at all, compared to losing Hendrik.

My heart is racing as I reach the aerial park in the middle of the forest. I don’t know if that’s from the short bike ride or because I’ve once again fled, but I’m glad to see the big sign with the name of the park in front of me. *Klatrepark Himmelssti Drammen*. The climbing park with heavenly paths. It’s surrounded by trees a little ways outside the city, and it’s beautiful. Every time I come here, all the things going wrong at home weigh less heavily on me.

I let my bike roll the last meters before I come to a stop, get off my bike, and push it into the employee area. There I lean it against Thomas’s and Alea’s bikes. They have already arrived and are getting the park in tip top shape in the last few minutes before we open.

“Hey.” I wave at Thomas and turn on the coffee machine in the shed that houses half an office. It probably makes me a cliché, but I can’t live without the black brew. Every attempt to reduce my coffee consumption just ends in a bad mood. So I’ve decided to accept things as they are. After all, there are worse things than to be addicted to caffeine. Double-crossing your dead brother, for example.

After I’ve poured myself a cup and added a dash of oat milk, I turn to Alea, who is looking through today’s reservations for larger groups. “Anything exciting in there?”

“Not really.” She shakes her head without looking up. “There’s a kid’s birthday party at 11. We should be sure to tell them about our end-of-summer camp.”

“Okay.” I nod and sip at my coffee. “Should I count out flyers for them?”

“That would be great, thanks.” She reaches for a pencil and makes a check behind that group. Then she looks up. “Otherwise it looks like today will be quiet, if half the city doesn’t spontaneously decide to come out here.” We both know that’s highly unlikely, even though schools are on summer holiday.

That’s when Thomas joins us. “Hey, Lene,” he greets me and gives my shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Everything okay?” He looks at the clipboard in Alea’s hand. “I’ve checked all the harnesses and helmets, they’re ready to go.”

“Great! Then we’re ready to get started.” Alea sets aside her list and looks first at Thomas, then at me. “Who wants to open the register?”

“I’ll do it.” I really enjoy having a slow start to my work day, and to drink at least the first cup of coffee while it’s still hot. This job allows me to do that. All of us know how to do everything, and we decide spontaneously each morning who feels like doing what.

“Good, then I’ll give the first group instructions.” Alea nods.

“And I’ll take the second one.” Thomas nods back at her.

And once again I’m amazed how easy it is to with these two to figure out who will do what. There are other coworkers, but no one is as much fun as Alea and Thomas. And he’s the boss! He runs the aerial park in summer, helps out at the indoor climbing center in Drammen in the wintertime, and is one of the coolest human beings I’ve ever worked with. At least, as long as you do a reasonable job for him.

As soon as I open the little ticket booth I can already hear the first group arriving. Although I’ve only been working here for a few weeks, I know these guys already. They are five sixteen-year-olds who visit us regularly. I don’t have to explain anything to them anymore, so I just scan their 10-visit tickets and wish them a good time. Behind them is a family that I wave through, and then a couple who have never visited an aerial park before in their lives. I fill them in on the basics and have them sign the waiver form before sending them to Alea for a more thorough orientation. Then I have a few minutes to myself and can turn my attention to my coffee again.

The longer I'm away from home, the more my mood improves. Here there is definitely no danger of running into Emil and Freya. They usually hang out at her house anyway, because they are keeping their relationship hidden from the public. For Dad's sake. The campaign for mayor of Oslo is difficult enough for him as it is, after the oldest of his triplets died. If the media got wind of this now, that his youngest is dating the former girlfriend of his deceased son... The shitstorm would be absolutely justified, in my opinion, but what I think isn't of any importance to my family. It doesn't matter to them that those two are doing a disservice to his memory. But that isn't the reason that I definitely will not witness any more of their lovey-dovey cooing than absolutely necessary. It just makes me livid and appalled to know that they're a couple. That they have what Hendrik will never have. I'll never understand how Emil can bear to betray him like that. Freya, of all people. Even if Hendrik is dead, it's simply not okay that his brother has hooked up with his girlfriend.

That thought gives me the shivers, and I turn to my coffee again, which without sugar is exactly as bitter as my feelings about my brother's wretched relationship.

A few minutes later the next visitors to the park arrive, and for the following few hours I have things to do. It only quiets down after lunchtime, when most of the early visitors have left. And the next wave typically arrives in the afternoon, which gives Alea, Thomas, me and also Melike the chance to eat a little bit ourselves. Melike brought a freshly baked pizza, and we sit together at one of the wooden tables scattered around the park. Since we're in the middle of the forest and climbing makes people hungry, Thomas not only had the perfect parcours in the trees installed, but also made sure there were enough places for picnics and grilling. It's a little paradise, and I'm so glad to be out here.

When I came home in late May after almost nine months abroad, it wasn't more than three days later that I came across the help-wanted ad, and I applied. Thomas nearly kissed my feet when he found out that I had completed a climbing certification in New Zealand.

You are exactly the woman I've been waiting for.

He meant it on a purely professional level, but his words still stuck in my head. I haven't regretted taking the job for a single moment so far. It's perfect for me; the work here is so fun. And above all, it's a reason to not have to be at home while simultaneously earning money. Until the next semester begins at the end of August – if I decide to continue studying business management – there are still almost six weeks. And I'm planning to spend every single one of them here. Happily, that's no problem since the park is open seven days a week in the summer. If I want to, I can work every day,

at least until someone tells me I have to take a break, or winds or storms make the ropes course too dangerous. Besides, I love hanging out with my team when there's not too much happening in the park and we can afford to take a break at the same time. Like today.

"To what do we owe the honor?" Alea asks before she bites into her slice of pizza with enthusiasm. She leans back against the wooden bench made of a halved tree trunk and turns her face towards the sun.

I can't blame her, I love the warmth of the past few days too much myself. Although the weather in Norway is often unpredictable, this year we have fantastic good luck. At least, that's my opinion. For the climate, this unusually hot July is a catastrophe.

Melike shrugs her shoulders. "Paula wanted pizza for breakfast, so we had pizza before she had to go to her grandparents."

"Let me guess." Thomas grins. "As usual, you made way too much."

"Of course." Melike nods and simultaneously rolls her eyes at herself. "And since I really don't want to eat pizza for three days straight, you have to help me out."

"We are very happy to do that." Alea leans back a little so she can look at me over Thomas's shoulder. "Isn't that right?"

"Of course." I meet her gaze and bite into my own slice. "But we have to talk about the pears. Who came up with that idea?"

"You'll have to talk to my daughter. She tried it at the house of a friend who comes from Sweden, and I absolutely had to make it myself." Melike sighs. "It takes a little getting used to, doesn't it?"

"I think it's delicious." As if to emphasize his words, Thomas reaches for another piece. "Tell Pauli she should have creative ideas like this more often."

"Tell her yourself the next time you see her."

"Oh, I will, you can count on it." Thomas grins mischievously.

Melike raises one eyebrow. "And depending on what it is, you have to eat all the leftovers."

"I'll do that, too, no problem."

While the two of them banter, I inhale my pizza, and with every bite the unusual combination tastes better. Maybe because Melike drizzled honey over the pears, too. It's a wild combination, but tastes fantastic.

"You know, we could do this more often." Alea props her elbows on the table. "One of us makes food and brings lunch for everyone."

"Okay. It's your turn tomorrow." I grin at her and stand up. New visitors are approaching from the left, and since I'm still responsible for the ticket booth, I hurry back to the little hut.

"Not fair," Alea calls behind me, but she can't mask the amusement in her voice.

For the next several minutes I'm busy with the newly arrived family. The two children are excited because it's their first visit to the park.

"Look how high the trees are, Lily." The younger of the two has her head tilted backwards and practically breaks her neck so she can look up at the treetops.

"Are we really going to climb up there?" Lily asks, looking at her parents with wide eyes.

I respond to her before her mom or dad have a chance. "Not unless you want to," I say and hand her one of the children's tickets. She accepts it almost reverently. "First my coworker will show you how everything works here, okay? You'll start on the super low course, and only move on to the next one after you've finished it. That one up there," I say pointing above us, "is for experts." That's not true, but I don't let the two kids know that. Children aren't even allowed on the most difficult elements but I want Lily and her sister to be proud of themselves at the end of the day. I hand the little one her ticket as well, take payment from the parents, and then Alea appears next to them and leads them away for their orientation.

And so begins the afternoon. Melike clears off the table and Thomas helps her. When they are finished, he takes care of the groups again and Melike relieves me at the cash register. I walk over to Alea, who is taking several empty crates out of the storage shed in preparation for a graphic design office coming soon for team-building activities. What that really means is that one employee after another builds a tower out of crates and has to climb to the top of it while their colleagues spot them. For some people, that's a surprisingly difficult challenge.

Before I started working here, I never gave much thought to what it means to be brave. To jump in the swimming pool from the five-meter diving board? No problem. To climb the highest mountains?

Count me in. To check whether the layer of ice on a lake is thick enough? I'll do that. But actually, all those things don't require courage as much as a healthy portion of recklessness.

True courage I'm seeing for the first time since working here at the aerial park. When children or even their parents overcome their fears through the various ropes courses and climb higher and higher. How their anxiety gradually fades during the time they spend with us, and by the end are so full of adrenaline that they swear they'll come again soon. That's the way it goes most of the time.

Except for the guy with the dark blonde hair. He is tall, has dazzling blue eyes, and rather fascinating cheekbones. The only thing that doesn't quite seem to suit him is the slight hook in his nose. It looks like he broke it sometime and it never really healed properly. But that doesn't take away from his good looks. Quite the contrary.

For three days now he's shown up at the same time, bringing his own helmet, harness and gloves, and buys a one-day ticket. But then he stands in front of the little practice course that every visitor has to complete before we allow them on the more difficult ones, and doesn't move. Yesterday and the day before Alea talked to him and gave him an extensive introduction to the basics. But he still didn't touch the mini ropes course. After a few hours he left without even trying the simplest thing.

Apparently he either didn't have enough energy or enough courage to climb. That can happen. Some people lose their confidence when they see the meter-high trees. There's no shame in that, and with enough encouragement, lots of them are able to convince themselves after all and end up having the time of their lives in our park.

Not him.

Nonetheless, he is here again today. I observe him out of the corner of my eye while Thomas explains to him and another newcomer how they need to wear the harness and helmet, then gives their gear a final check. He finds nothing amiss with our regular who doesn't climb. He gives an affirmative nod before he leads the small group to the right towards the practice ropes course. The blonde guy follows him as well. It's the third time he has listened to this orientation. And I'm genuinely curious whether he'll dare to take on the baby course, as I secretly call it.

While Thomas is taking care of the group, I clean up and check the number of gloves. Some of them are always missing, or fall apart over time. But I continue to keep an eye on Thomas and his group. Although... that's not quite true. I'm watching one person in particular, the blonde guy. He's standing

on the outskirts, a little apart from the group. His gaze is focused on Thomas, he doesn't let him out of his sight.

The introduction only lasts a few minutes, then each of them climbs the baby ropes course, one after the other, while Thomas observes them closely. He gives each individual visitor a thumbs up and sends them off to the higher obstacles.

And then there's only one person left. Him.

Thomas talks with him. I don't understand what he says, I'm too far away, but I see him pointing to the practice course, apparently explaining all the same things he just said to the group as a whole one more time. The man nods, but he doesn't move. He just stands there, his arms crossed in front of his chest, his gaze firmly focused on the short flight of wooden stairs leading to the first platform. Thomas talks with him for a few more minutes, maybe two or three, not longer. Then he moves away and leaves him alone.

I furrow my forehead, puzzled. What's wrong with that guy?