

The Hard Way

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Chapter 1

[Mira]

A forever home

On all fours, I crawled across my studio, sweeping dust from under the bed, picking chunks of dried hummus out of the mat. This was how a dog would explore my place, shamelessly sniffing around and gobbling up all the crumbs and leftovers.

I scrambled to my feet when the doorbell rang, looked through the window. Tom, my favourite colleague from the animal shelter, was standing on the doorstep. He was always a bit dishevelled, but I'd never seen him like that before: filthy clothes, bright-red face, looking really upset. Like a schoolteacher, he was wagging his finger at Turbo, who was whimpering and twisting and turning, tail between his legs, ears flat against his head, ready to dart out into the road, deaf and blind to the traffic.

I ran downstairs, grabbed Turbo's lead and threw my arms around him. He stank like hell. I could feel his shivering throughout my body. 'Calm down. I'm here. It's going to be okay.'

'I don't think so, Mira.' Tom pointed at his old Mini.

I peered through the open car door: the windows and dashboard were covered in drool, the seat covers were torn up, and the floor was a stinking mess of puke and piss and shit. A tornado had swept through Tom's little car. And I knew its name.

'What happened?' I said, struggling not to yell. 'You didn't leave Turbo on his own, did you?'

Tom shook his head. 'The order at the chemist's was ready to go, all paid for and everything. I dashed in and out. And within three minutes... I'm taking this dog back to the shelter with me, Mira. He's even more messed up than we thought.'

'Come inside. At least give us a chance. Even the most difficult dog deserves a warm home – you said that yourself.' I was squeezing Turbo's lead so hard that my knuckles turned white. I was going to fight for this dog.

Tom grabbed his sorry-looking backpack, slammed the car door and trudged after us.

I carried Turbo up the stairs. He was exhausted, still in shock. Carefully, I laid him down in the cardboard box, which I'd lined with old blankets. I pushed my chair up against the box and rubbed his filthy fur with a towel. 'You're safe with me. I won't leave you on your own for a second.'

Tom washed his hands. 'What I really need is a shower.'

I undid my ponytail and put my hair back up, so tightly that it hurt. 'Let's go through the list of questions first.'

'There's no point.' Tom sighed. 'Things settled down for a bit after that biting incident. But now this!'

I poured some water into a bowl, stroked Turbo's flanks while he drank. 'Turbo just wanted to warn that girl to stay away from his food. They shouldn't have tried him out with a family with little kids. There are never any children here, so we can cross that one off already.'

'The other adoption attempts failed too.' Tom filled a glass and downed it in one.

'I know what his problems are. I've made a hideout for him. That helps.' I didn't add that the den under my desk was my own hiding place. Or that I needed Turbo just as much as he needed me.

'When I report what happened today, Mira, then...'

I put my hand on his arm. 'When you let that damn cat escape, I didn't tell anyone.'

'Here's your questionnaire!' Tom dug a folder out of his backpack and threw it onto the table.

I smoothed out the sheets of paper. 'First question: how do you intend to satisfy your dog's need for exercise? Well, I'll take him for walks twice a day.' I tried to make it sound firm and decisive, but it was a bluff. The period when I'd crawled from my bed to my hiding place and back again was a while ago, but there were still days when I didn't even make it as far as the baker's. If Turbo lived here, I'd have to get out of bed, take him out, pull myself together so that I could look after him. I squeezed my pen. Could I handle this responsibility? Didn't I have enough on my hands with myself?

Turbo nudged my leg with his nose, whimpering quietly. I couldn't take no for an answer. I could make all the difference for Turbo. As he could for me.

'Next question: who'll take over when you're ill? My family's really small, and my mum's got a busy job. But if necessary, my neighbour can take Turbo out.' I knew the woman upstairs was called Elena and that she lived alone, but I had no idea if she liked dogs.

'Has the owner of the property given permission?' I ticked the box. 'Yes!' That lie rolled off my tongue too, even though the owner was a serious obstacle, and not the only one.

'I'm going to have to say no to the next one. I've never had a dog before, but you guys all thought I had years of experience.' In my dreams, there'd always been a dog, ever since I'd been tiny and saw a Saint Bernard dig a skier out of a mound of snow on TV. According to my mum, I'd banged on the screen with both hands. 'Come out of there. Come to me!'

I stroked Turbo's silky-soft ears. Finally he was starting to calm down a bit.

Tom frowned. 'When his lordship knows he's not on his own, everything's fine. What are you going to do when you find a job, Mira?'

'The world doesn't need an archaeologist without a degree.'

'You might finish your studies. And you could teach. There's such a shortage of teachers these days that you can teach even without qualifications.'

'Teaching's not for me.' I'd tried it, two weeks as a substitute history teacher, but I hadn't managed to keep a gang of teenagers under control.

'I'm looking for work from home, as a freelance journalist. And I've thought about this adoption for a long time. I'm well aware of what I'm taking on: a dog with serious issues.'

'I have to admit, I think it's pretty brave. Poor Turbo has so many scars, so much anxiety.'

I bit the inside of my cheek. Me, brave? The coward who couldn't even get her own life on track? Did I really think I could handle a severely traumatised dog?

Turbo licked my fingers. He was counting on me. This had to work out, no matter what it took. 'I want to give it a try, Tom. We both know what can happen to a dog who doesn't get adopted.'

Tom scratched between Turbo's eyes with one finger. 'Turbo's lucky he met you. You don't just look like each other. You're soulmates.'

I often heard that when I was out with Turbo, that we looked alike, with our rough, curly hair, the colour of milky coffee, our dark-brown eyes and long, slender legs. And even at our first meeting, I already realised we were kindred spirits.

Tom pulled the questionnaire towards him. 'What if you start a new relationship, start living with someone?'

'Then they'll have to accept Turbo too.'

'The biggest handful in the shelter!'

Kobe had said the same thing about me, 'You're sweet and you're pretty, Mira, but you're a handful!'

I tapped on the wooden table with crossed fingers. 'Admit it, Tom: a low-stimulus environment, an owner with time and patience, motivation. And the most important thing: Turbo likes being with me.'

'I give in.' Tom put his hands in the air. 'I can see that this dog might find his forever home here. I'm going to give you a chance, but at the first incident...'

'I'll call you. I promise.' I stood up to give Tom a hug, but he backed away.

'Sorry, I'm a complete state.'

Tom burst out laughing. 'You look fine, Mira. I'm the filthy one! Do you think I could maybe have a quick shower?'

I pointed towards the shower. 'You can borrow a tracksuit. In the meantime, I'll clean your car. And I'll get you some replacement seat covers, plus a new backpack.'

I tried not to think about my bank account. Turbo was saved. And so was I.

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Chapter 9

[Mira]

The puppy mill

Turbo and I were the only ones who got off at the bus stop in the middle of the fields. We followed the path, which led to a big farmhouse. It was nice weather for walking, but we weren't here to have fun. The barking that drifted across the fields to us sounded sad, desperate.

Turbo trudged along beside me, shaking his head as if he wanted to make sure I got the message: 'Way too dangerous!'

Tom had suggested the same: 'This could be risky, Mira. But there's a good article in it. And you can count on me. I'll come and help if needed.'

I felt in my pocket for the phone that Peter had given me. I'd been practising and could press the record button without looking and send the messages that were already waiting. I'd checked in the mirror, and it just looked like I was rummaging around for a tissue. I looked back at the bus shelter. I

could still turn around, write my article at home on the basis of online research. There was plenty of material on the internet, but a real interview, with photographs, with one of these puppy-mill owners getting seriously exposed – that was something else entirely.

Cautiously, we walked into the farmyard. It must have been an impressive farm once, with a house, four animal sheds and a large barn around the yard. Now the buildings looked neglected, and the stench took our breath away.

A bell rang. I'd triggered a sensor.

A man came walking towards us. I hadn't exactly been expecting to encounter a man in a smart suit in this setting.

'I'm Willy. You're right on time. I like that in a person.'

I rattled off what I'd already told him on the phone: 'I'm looking for kennels for my dog. I'm travelling for two weeks at the end of next month. I know it's short notice.' I bent over Turbo, who hid behind my legs. I gave him a reassuring pat on the back. My nerves were screaming, and I hoped my voice wouldn't give me away. Luckily, Tom had insisted that we practise this conversation in advance. 'Anyone who's going undercover needs to rehearse.'

'Nervous dog?'

I nodded. 'Turbo's only allowed on the plane with me if he's sedated. I'd rather not do that.'

Willy grinned. 'Don't panic.'

I held my breath. Was he already on to me? I knew it. I'd messed things up before I'd even got started.

'You can go on holiday and relax with complete peace of mind. I've got space for your dog. He'll have his own pen inside and a fenced outdoor run. I keep things on a small scale, so that I can look after them better. That does make it more expensive, of course.'

Turbo and I could hear dozens of dogs barking, howling, whining. The din coming from the big barn sounded anything but small scale.

Willy saw us looking. 'That barn isn't part of my kennels. It's sick animals in quarantine. Other people take care of them, so that they won't infect the boarders. I'll show you where Turbo will be staying. Follow me.'

Turbo didn't want to go. I couldn't blame him. That whining sounded so miserable, and the stink wasn't ordinary shit but misery.

'They used to breed pigs here. You can still smell it.' Willy walked into the smallest shed, the only one with an open door. There were four large pens in there, each with a door leading to a run outside. 'Not a bad hotel, eh?'

'Certainly not!' The pens were simple but clean. Too clean. I peered through the outside doors: the grass looked untrodden. Only one of the pens was inhabited. A golden retriever was sniffing at the floor and walls. Turbo looked at her anxiously. We both wanted to ask her the same question: 'Are we right in thinking that this show pen is nothing like the other ones?'

Willy held out his hand to Turbo, who shrank away. 'There's only one dog staying here at the moment, but there are more coming tomorrow.' He led us out of the shed. 'Your dog will like it here. How old is he?'

'The vet reckons he's three or four.'

'He looks older. That's going to cost you a lot of money. You'd be better off getting a new pup.'

I reached into my pocket and pressed the record button. 'That's maybe a good idea.'

Willy became enthusiastic. 'I've got a litter of labs, six beautiful puppies, five weeks old. Would you like to see them? It doesn't cost anything to look.' He opened the door of the next shed. There

were four pens in there too, all empty except one. The mother Labrador peered nervously at us, trying to hide her pups under her belly.

‘Come on, give us a look.’ Willy pushed the mother aside. The pups squealed in fright when he grabbed one of them. ‘Couldn’t you just eat them up?’ He pushed the trembling pup into my hands.

I stroked its silky body. ‘Their mother looks exhausted.’

‘She’ll perk up when her pups leave. There’s a lot of demand for them. Just for you, I’ll knock a bit off the price and you can take him away with you right now.’

‘But five weeks is too young, isn’t it?’

‘These pups are tougher than you think. If you’re too soft on them, you end up with a weak dog and it’ll be no use to you.’

How many people had been taken in by this smooth-talking puppy-mill owner? What I really wanted to do was to rescue those poor pups from his clutches, or at least one or two of them. But that wouldn’t solve anything. That Willy guy would just merrily go on running his puppy mill. And judging by his fancy car, business was going well.

‘Labradors get pretty big, and I only have a small place. Do you sell any other breeds?’

He spread his arms. ‘You name it! Chihuahuas, Pomeranians, Jack Russell terriers, toy poodles...’

I put my hand in my pocket and pressed ‘send’.

‘You breed that many different kinds?’

Willy nodded. ‘I can deliver them to your home. You can even choose them from a photo. I could email you a bunch of pictures today.’

Willy’s phone rang. He peered at the screen. ‘Give me a moment.’ He answered the call: ‘Yes, that’s me. Sure, I can sort out an Australian shepherd for you. Can you call back? Is it urgent? A birthday present? Day after tomorrow? That’s quick, but not impossible. They’re expensive dogs, though. Fifteen hundred, maybe more. Not a problem? Can you hold?’

Willy looked at me. ‘I’ll be back in a minute. Feel free to pick up the pups.’

Still talking, Willy walked to the house. Tom would keep him busy for a while with his questions about an expensive Aussie.

When Willy was inside, I snuck over to the big barn. Turbo pulled in the opposite direction. I whispered to him: ‘Calm down. I’m nervous too. Work with me, then we can leave sooner.’

The big door was closed, but there was a smaller one at the back of the barn that opened. Camera at the ready, I headed inside. Turbo whined and turned his head away.

It was even worse than I’d suspected, and I’d seen a thing or two during my research, in photos and videos. While I took pictures and filmed, I mumbled into the recorder: ‘At least sixty breeding dogs in filthy, cramped pens, all concrete and steel, drinking bottles on the wall. Sad-looking, exhausted mother dogs, one of them without any teeth, puppies that look lethargic, eyes full of pus, and here, a full medicine cabinet.’ I zoomed in. I recognised the names on the labels. I’d read that, with these hormone injections, bitches could produce litters up to three times a year and that they were then unceremoniously dumped as soon as their usefulness as breeding machines was over.

I heard Willy grumbling out in the yard: ‘Hey, where are you?’

I put my camera away, slipped my hand into my pocket and sent Tom the next text message. I had to keep up the act for just a bit longer.

Willy looked at me suspiciously as I walked out into the yard. ‘You can’t just go poking around. This is private property.’

‘I was looking for the loo, and I didn’t want to disturb you. You seemed so busy.’

He frowned. ‘You didn’t go into that barn, did you?’

I shook my head, but I could see he didn't believe me. He took a step towards me. 'If you've been in there, your dog should be quarantined immediately.' He raised his chin and jabbed his finger at me.

Turbo stood in front of me, his paws firmly on the ground, his head upright, his gaze fixed on Willy. He growled.

Willy smirked. 'That mutt doesn't think he can take me on, does he?'

I clutched the can of pepper spray that Tom had given me. 'This stuff is banned, Mira, so only use it if absolutely necessary, as a deterrent.' That moment was coming. It hurt to swallow, my neck was shaking, my legs joined in. My eyes darted to and fro. No escape route, nowhere to hide.

I managed to squeak, 'Do I need to sign something, for when Turbo comes to board at the kennels?'

An old Mini pulled into the yard. Tom climbed out. It was so hard to act as if I'd never seen him before. I wanted to run to him, to kiss his tough, sweet face.

Turbo wagged his tail and pulled as hard as he could to get to Tom.

Tom completely ignored us and walked up to Willy, holding out his hand. 'Hey, I just called you. I'm looking for an Aussie pup. I know we weren't going to meet until tonight, but I couldn't wait. I live nearby, and I thought: I'll just jump into the car. I've got a few questions, and I've brought the down payment with me, in cash.'

Now he had Willy's attention. His grumpy, suspicious face switched to friendly, too friendly, slimy, and his voice was sickly sweet.

I tried to swallow the foul taste in my mouth. 'Thanks for the tour. I'll phone you about the kennels.'

Willy protested. 'Hey, hang on a moment.'

I did my best not to run, but Turbo was dragging me along. Behind me, I could hear Tom firing off his questions.

When we got to the bus stop, I mumbled, 'Phew, safe.' But I knew better: I had crossed a line. No way back. Willy wouldn't be the only breeder who'd go berserk. I could already hear the chorus of gruff male voices erupting. I was terrified but also proud. I'd taken on a really nasty piece of work. And I was going to finish the bastard. The photos would speak even more powerfully than the words.

One bolt could be removed from the heavy gate.

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Chapter 10

[Stan the hunter]

The shot

I'm standing out of the wind, hidden behind the old pine tree in the dense undergrowth, deep in the woods of the Rosse Beek valley. I've rubbed rabbit droppings over my cap and hunting jacket. Stan's no stranger to dirt. Shampoo and soap, now *that* stinks – it'll give you away in a second in the forest.

The nights are already getting shorter. I've got seven hours to bag my trophy and get it to my Jeep. The long, thick rope I need to drag my prize is rolled up in my bag. I've left my heavy-duty shotgun at home. You can hear the banging halfway to the moon. I take my poaching gun out of my deep jacket pocket and open it up. They're banned in this stupid country, and with a silencer and night sights, they're banned three times over. But that won't

stop Stan. The bullets are small, but they're razor sharp and accurate and above all: you can't hear the slight thud they make as they hit two hundred metres away through the trees.

I can see the decoy clearly through the scope. Now the waiting begins. Hunting means waiting and watching, for hours and hours. And thinking ahead, anticipating what might happen. What if wild boars are the first to pick up the whining, the scent of fear and blood? What if one of those huge males tears it apart with its sharp tusks? I don't want to scare off the real trophy with a flash of light and gunpowder. And if those stinking wild boars attack in a pack, I won't be able to take them all on with my gun, and I'll have to slink away.

After an hour or two, I see, through my scope, a fox warily stepping into the clearing. It's a big male, long legs, head tilted, sniffing up the scent of his arch enemy. The fox shuffles backwards. Some distance away, half hidden behind a bush, he stands motionless, watching the decoy. Foxes and dogs are always at each other's throats. It's not difficult to get even small hunting dogs so fired up that they'll attack much larger foxes, biting them in the snout, chasing them out of their dens so that they run straight in front of our barrels. Which is also illegal, of course.

I hear a low growling and turn the night scope on the prey. It's standing tall in the greenish light, mouth half-open, teeth bared. I can't believe my eyes. Have I misjudged the mutt? Does it have hidden virtues?

I move my scope back to the fox. He's restless, his head shoots up abruptly, snout in the air. He turns his head from left to right and back again, faster and faster. His thick bushy tail dips, and then he spins around and runs away. He's fleeing from something far more threatening than a chained-up dog. Could it be?

For a moment, the forest is bathed in pale moonlight, but then clouds slip in front of the almost-full moon. Howls echo in the distance. I'm covered in gooseflesh from head to toe. My dream trophy is coming. It wants to frighten off the intruder, and if that doesn't work: kill it. Every fibre of my old body is pounding with anticipation.

A scent rises that drowns out all other odours. This animal smells more brutal and powerful. Its scent screams: 'Flight or fight!'

The decoy can't do either, doesn't even have enough room to throw itself into a submissive position, to beg with its entire body: 'I submit, just spare my life!' It knows it doesn't stand a chance, that this predator is much stronger, so powerful and so ancient. It lowers its tail so that the predator won't smell its fear. Its tail is plastered to its crack now, but it can't hold it in anymore. It empties out, in pure unadulterated terror.

Two bright points of light pierce my scope. My hands are shaking. My legs have turned to mush. I pull myself together. 'This is it, Stan. This is the moment!' Slowly, the predator comes closer, emerging from the undergrowth by a small sandy mound. I see him, no, I see her. I hadn't expected that. I wanted her mate, but now that it's turned out differently...

I struggle not to let out a whoop. That creature is full of young. It's the pregnant she-wolf that everyone's been talking about. That not only means that her den is nearby, but also her mate, who's feeding her towards the end of her pregnancy, carrying meat to the lair. I can't help but admire this wolf. She's magnificent, majestic! That powerful broad head, the strong neck and chest, the thick fur, the proud stance. The forest belongs to her and to the cubs she is carrying. She is holding her head low, her eyes fixed on the dog, which is

cowering and whimpering, with nowhere to go. She will not tolerate any competitors in her territory. Any creature that doesn't run like lightning is dead.

Slowly, she stalks closer. Should I wait for her mate? No, this chance will never come again. I am glowing. This is my moment, something that happens once in a lifetime. I'm going to take a life, and what a life! More than one! I've outsmarted the fiercest hunter in the animal kingdom! My trophy still has no idea. She is thinking only about her territory, her cubs, her offspring. Her jaws are opening. There is nothing between her and the intruder now. Her powerful body is ready to grab it by the throat. But Stan, finger on the trigger, knows better: he's going to smash her dream with his own.

Now the free wolf and the defenceless dog are standing eye to eye, nose to nose. The wolf growls, making it clear that this is not only her territory, but the very heart of her domain. The decoy shrinks, showing that it would retreat immediately if it could. I aim, focusing between the bright eyes, my finger curling around the trigger. I shoot. The wolf looks up and, at the same moment, her legs give way. She falls to the ground, trembles and lies there motionless.

I fire a second shot, from close quarters. A wolf's bite is not the same as a dog's. I shoot through the shoulder blade straight into her heart. It's done! I nudge the body, still warm, with my boot. 'Who says I'm too old? I'm the best! Always have been!' I stamp on the ground, holding in a roar of triumph.

Later I'll shout and drink, but I can't waste a second now. The male won't show up here again. This place is filled with the scent of his dead mate. The wild boars will make short work of the prey, which is whimpering by the tree, half-dead.

I tie the rope around my she-wolf's hind legs. She weighs at least fifty kilos, so it's going to be tough. I see the bulging belly moving. There's kicking, scratching going on inside. That'll soon be over.

I shiver. What was that? This isn't the first time I've finished off a mother, and young life along with her. And these aren't the only offspring to have suffered a harsh fate in the womb! I bite my lip until I taste blood. I know what I need to do at moments of weakness: pull and drag, onwards, without stopping, without looking back.
