

MEL WALLIS  
DE VRIES

# TRAPPED

Four friends

# IN THE

One by one they disappear

# WOODS

Who can you trust?

Mel Wallis de Vries

Trapped  
in the Woods

# Prologue

*Everything is white. Luminous white. I blink my eyes a few times. The white remains. What has happened? Am I dead? I don't know. But I am not afraid. The white is so beautiful. I can even feel it. It is soft, like eiderdown.*

*Behind me is even more white. But it looks different. Duller. With grey cracks. It looks like something is waiting for me there. Something I must first let go of. Images flash through my mind. A car. Laughing girls. An argument. A dark corridor. The barrel of a gun. I can't place it. It is like staring at a film I have dropped in on halfway through.*

*Suddenly, I hear whispers.*

*'I've been waiting for you.'*

*The words sound distant.*

*'The others are gone.'*

*The sound has moved. The voice is now at ear level.*

*'You are all alone.'*

*Something warm brushes my forehead. Skin on skin. Someone screams. It sounds horrendous. Is it me?*

*The white cracks open, becomes fainter. Suddenly, I am overwhelmed with sadness. My hands try to catch the white. Air slips between my fingers, blows out from*

*under my legs. I fall, faster and faster. The ground rushes up towards me. I land with a crash. I gasp for breath and start to cough.*

*My eyes pop open. Everything is still white. Maybe I really am dead. My head rolls a little to the side. I am alive; dead people can't move their heads. I don't know whether this realization is a relief or a disappointment. Something tickles my cheek. It's snow. Lots of snow-white snow. I am lying on my back in a bed of snow. Strangely, I am not cold.*

*'Mummy,' I want to shout, but the words are stuck in my head.*

*Desperately, I try to conjure my mother's face before me. But I can't remember what she looks like. I can't remember anything. I don't know what has happened. I don't know why I am lying here. I don't even know who I am anymore.*

*The wind blows across my cheeks. I'm crying. Very slowly, the nerves in my body awaken. I start to feel things. Cold. Pain. My head is flooded with pain.*

*Somewhere behind me, something is moving. Snapping twigs. Rustling. I'm scared, but I don't know why.*

*Suddenly, from another side, I hear a high-pitched girl's voice. 'Where are you?' she calls out.*

*Is she looking for me? I am crying again.*

*I'm here, I want to say, but I can't.*

*'Why don't you answer?' she says, panicked.*

*I know the girl. I am sure. But I have forgotten her name. The sound behind me comes closer. Now I can*

also hear a gentle panting. And shoes stomping in the snow.

*'I'm going to look for you,' the girl shouts.*

*She mustn't come here. It is not safe. Go away. Go away. Go away. With my mind I send the message to her. Please, run while you still can.*

*But the girl is not listening. I hear her footsteps in the snow. Light and hesitant. Very different from the heavy, cumbersome movements behind me.*

*'Hello?' she calls out. 'Are you there? Can you say something? Please?'*

*Her words drift away into the freezing air. Suddenly, it is dead quiet. The panting behind me has stopped. The girl is silent.*

*'No.' Am I saying this? It is so soft and hoarse that I can barely understand it myself.*

*Yet it has an effect.*

*The panting behind me starts again, even faster and more eager than before.*

*The girl says, 'Thank God, I'm coming.'*

*No. No. No. Stay there. But the words are locked inside my head.*

*'A-are you there? Please say something. I-it's so dark here,' says the girl.*

*Her voice sounds louder. Closer.*

*I have to warn her. Cautiously, I move my right leg. It works. My left leg cooperates, too. I turn onto my side and get onto my knees. Pain explodes in my head, creeps down my back to my arms, legs, feet. I gag and throw*

*up. I remain motionless for a few seconds, staring at my vomit.*

*My muscles tighten. I crawl on all fours through the snow. All the strength I have left is concentrated in this movement. The snow stretches before me like a giant, immaculate sea. In the middle a car rises, like some kind of warship. My fingers are numb from the cold and my jeans are soaked. But I must not give up, I have to keep going. Little by little, I make progress. My head is slumped between my arms and strings of saliva drip from my mouth.*

*'W-who's there? I'm not afraid of you. N-no way.'*

*Her voice. I look up and see the girl's form just a few metres away. Her face is hidden in the darkness of the night.*

*'No,' I mutter panting from exhaustion and pain.*

*The girl moves.*

*'Nooooo!' she screams. 'Nooooo!'*

*She runs in my direction. Three metres. Two metres. One metre. She gets closer with every step. Her outline becomes clearer and clearer. It is only now that she is in front of me that I can see her face. Tracks of black mascara wind across her cheeks. She has been crying, it cannot be anything else.*

*'Oh, sweetie.' She crouches and grabs my face. 'I didn't know where you were. I was so scared, so scared.'*

*Her fingers caress my cheek.*

*'It will be okay. I'm going to get help,' she says. I want to believe the girl so badly.*

*Suddenly, I see her expression change. Relief gives way to surprise, followed by fear. Her eyes stare at a point behind me. She scrambles to her feet and stands up. I turn my head. Even before I see who is behind me, I remember everything. It is too late to flee.*

KIM



# 1

‘Kim?’ My mother knocks on my bedroom door. ‘Are you ready? It’s a quarter to eleven. Your friends will be here in fifteen minutes. And you haven’t even had breakfast yet.’

‘Yes,’ I mutter. ‘I’m coming. Just a few more minutes.’

That is a lie, because I still have to pack my bag. But my mother is getting on my nerves.

‘Shall I make you a sandwich already?’

‘You don’t have to, mum. I’m not hungry.’

‘Kim, you really need to eat something. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.’ Mum sounds like a school teacher. ‘What do you want on your sandwich?’

I sigh. There’s no point in refusing, I know. ‘Apple jam.’

‘Shall I make two?’

‘Go ahead.’

She walks away, happy. I open my wardrobe. Where have my tight jeans gone? I search the shelves. All the clothes are neatly sorted by colour. One of my mother’s projects. At the very bottom of the wardrobe, I see a bit of blue fabric sticking out from under a pile of trousers. I pull the fabric. All the trousers fall onto the floor, but I have found my tight jeans. As neatly as possible, I put the other trousers back. I can already hear Mum grumbling if I don’t.

What else do I need? A thick jumper, underpants, socks, a hat, trainers, boots, gloves. One by one, I put the items in my travel bag. Finally, I pack a black dress. Just in case we go out. The idea makes me laugh. We probably won't leave the cottage. According to Abby, the nearest neighbourhood pub is six kilometres away.

In the bathroom, I check the contents of my toilet bag: toothbrush, toothpaste, brush, shampoo, conditioner, make-up.

'Kim, where are you?' my mother calls at the bottom of the stairs.

'I'm coming, I'm coming,' I call back, running to my bedroom. I stuff the last things into my bag. Have I got everything? I grab Abby's mail from the desk.

From: Abby Laakman <abbylovelaakman@hotmail.com>

To: Pippa van Dam <pippaatje@planet.nl>; Kim Bos

<kim1234bos@hotmail.com>; Faye de Gelder

<Fayedegelder@cs.com>

Subject: Ardennes

Received: 17 December

Hey sweeties,

Three more sleeps! I made a list of the things you need to bring. I have divided up the shopping. *Please* read this mail carefully, because there are no shops nearby. Don't forget anything!

- clothing (it can get mega-cold there, so bring lots of warm clothes: hat, scarf, gloves, jumpers, etc.)
- duvet cover, pillowcase, fitted sheet

Oops, I did forget something. I walk to the linen cupboard on the landing and grab a neatly folded pile of bed linen. It fits into my travel bag perfectly. I read on.

- food (we're staying in the cottage for four nights, so buy plenty!):
  - Pippa: wine, beer, soda, etc.
  - Faye: breakfast/lunch (including milk)
  - Kim: snacks, sweets and nibbles
  - Abby: dinner

Pippa and I will go to the supermarket with the car on Saturday, to get the booze.

I think that's everything.

Almost forgot, the address to give to your parents:

House La Campagne  
Rue de Moha  
Monceau-en-Ardenne (Semois Valley) Belgium  
Phone number (for emergencies): 0032 33 25 48489

The mobile network is often down, so your mum and dad shouldn't worry if we don't call back right away, ha, ha. Yes,

ladies, we really will be in the middle of nowhere... We drive back to Amsterdam on 24 December, during the day.

Until 11 o'clock Sunday morning (and at school tomorrow, of course, thank God only one more day and then it's Christmas break).

Big hugs, A.

Oh, I so hope it will be fun. We planned this trip months ago. Back when the sun was still shining and Abby's suggestion of a few days in the Ardennes seemed like a fantastic idea. But now, honestly, I am having a few doubts. Our exams start the day after the Christmas holidays. And I still have so much to study. I stare at my schoolbooks scattered across the desk. Maths, Dutch, biology. They seem to be calling to me: Take us with you, take us with you, otherwise you'll get a bad grade. With a deep sigh, I put the books in my bag.

I hear honking outside. Quickly, I walk to the window. In front of our house is a large, grey SUV. Pippa is in the driver's seat. Next to her is Abby. I wave to the girls. Pippa taps her watch. Her mouth is moving. I think she is saying, 'Are you hurrying up?' I nod and raise two fingers. Two minutes.

'Are they here?' My mother pokes her head around the door.

'Yes.' I hang my bag over my shoulder and check whether my mobile phone is in it.

‘See, now you don’t have time for breakfast.’

‘Hmm,’ I mumble.

Mum crosses her arms. ‘Are you wearing that?’

Surprised, I look at my jeans and grey cardigan. ‘Yes, why?’

‘It’s far too cold. It’s going to snow in the Ardennes this weekend. Don’t you have something warmer?’

‘Hey, come on, mum. I have a thick jumper in my bag.’

‘Have you got clean pants and socks with you?’

‘Yes, mum.’

‘And a scarf?’

‘Ye-es.’ I walk along the landing to a room door with a DO NOT DISTURB ⚡ 220 VOLT sign. Without knocking, I throw open the door.

‘I’m going, bye.’

My little brother is sitting in his bathrobe at the computer. He doesn’t look up.

‘Floris, say goodbye. Kim won’t be back until Thursday.’

‘Nice and quiet,’ Floris murmurs. ‘Can you shut the door? It’s draughty.’

I stick out my tongue.

Mum gently pulls the door shut. ‘Who’s driving?’ she asks.

‘Pippa.’

‘Pippa?’ A worried frown appears between her eyebrows.

‘Yes, mum. Pippa is the only one with a driving licence. Abby and Faye are only 17, and besides, it’s Pippa’s mother’s car. You shouldn’t make such a big deal out of

everything. Pippa's a good driver.'

I don't mention that she has already had three speeding tickets in the past month.

'Will you be home on time on Thursday? We're celebrating Christmas Eve at grandma's in Den Bosch. I want to be there around five o'clock. Okay?'

'Okay.' I lift my bag down the stairs. My father walks out of the kitchen.

'Princess, there you are at last. Give me that heavy bag. Are you excited?'

'What do you think?' I say, smiling.

Mum slips into the kitchen. Over her shoulder she calls, 'Are you taking that red down jacket? The other jacket is too thin.'

My father grins.

I roll my eyes. 'Yes, mum.'

'Gee, what's in here?' Dad feels my travel bag. 'Concrete? Bricks? A suit of armour?'

'Clothes.'

'Clothes, of course.' He bursts out laughing. 'How stupid of me. Why didn't I think of that myself?'

'And, um, some textbooks too,' I admit, reluctantly.

Dad gives my nose a little tap. 'You enjoy yourself, princess. There's more to life than school.'

My mother hurries up to me and pushes a plastic bag into my hands. I look at the contents. Two sandwiches. The apple jam sticks to the crust in thick blobs.

'Eat up, eh?' she says.

I nod.

There is more honking, this time longer.

‘It’s Sunday morning, the neighbours!’ There is a seriously exasperated tone in my mother’s voice. ‘Come on, you have to go. Have you got everything?’ She walks to the front door and lifts the shopping bag that has been there since yesterday afternoon. ‘I’ll bring the groceries.’

I grab my red jacket from the coat rack. Mum is busy with the front door lock. Quickly, I put the sandwich bag in my pocket. There’s bound to be somewhere along the way where I can throw the package away.

It is cold outside. I wave to the girls. Pippa’s window goes down a bit. ‘Hey, hey, there you are at last. We’ve been waiting for hours. Throw your bag in the back.’

I want to say that they have only been there for five minutes, but the window closes. I shrug and walk across the frozen grass to the car. With a click, the boot door opens. The boot is full of stuff: a white suitcase, two weekend bags, crates of booze and soft drinks, shopping bags, CDs, a sleeping bag. Dad puts my travel bag on top.

‘So, you won’t be going hungry.’ Dad grins and takes the shopping bag from Mum. ‘Lucky that you bought some goodies too.’ He slams the boot shut.

I open the rear door and climb in next to Faye.

‘Hey, Kimmie. What’s up?’ She slides over, across the beige leather seat.

‘Good.’ I look at her face, pasty with dark circles. ‘But you look like you had a party last night.’

‘If only.’ Faye sighs. ‘I’m full of cold. I’ve been coughing all night.’

‘Good morning girls.’ My father pokes his head through the open door.

Abby turns around in the passenger seat. ‘Hi, Mr Bos.’ Pippa and Faye nod at my father.

‘Have fun in the Ardennes,’ he says. ‘Whatever you guys are going to do, enjoy it.’

‘We certainly will.’ Abby giggles.

Mum knocks on the side window. ‘Will you text me when you get there?’

‘No, of course she won’t,’ my father says. ‘These girls have other things on their minds than texting their worried parents. They’re not going to get into trouble.’ He slams the door. ‘Come on, get out of here.’ His words sound muffled now through the closed door.

‘What a good idea,’ murmurs Pippa. She starts the car. We reverse across the driveway, through the gate and into the street. Dad blows me a kiss. Mum waves. And then we’re off.



## 2

I open the window. Cold air blows in my face. I see our opposite neighbour cycling down the street. The tree decorated with lights in the front garden of number 95. Everything in my head feels fresh and clear. Suddenly, I know for sure. This is going to be a great minibreak. My best friends are here. We'll be in Abby's parents' super-deluxe cottage. So there's no need to fret so much, and certainly not about school and my final exams. We drive via Diepenbrockstraat and Europaplein onto the ring road heading south. Pippa accelerates. My hair flutters in the wind.

'Bloody hell, Kim, can you please close that window?' says Pippa. 'It's minus two outside, I'm freezing.' I can see in the rear-view mirror that she looks irritated.

I breathe deeply and decide not to let her bother me. 'No problem.' I push the button in my door and the window glides shut.

Abby sits backwards on her chair. She pretends to have a microphone in her hand and says in a high-pitched voice, 'Welcome aboard everyone. I am your hostess today. For any questions, you can come to me. The expected arrival time at our destination is,' she looks at the built-in

navigation system in the dashboard, 'eight minutes past three. Before we cross the border, we'll make a quick stop for a bathroom break. I hope you have a pleasant journey. And for those interested, on the left we can see the Rembrandt Tower, the tallest apartment building in Amsterdam.'

Pippa nearly chokes with laughter. 'Where did you learn that? You really sound like one of those holiday bimbos. The only thing missing is the suit.'

'Why, thank you.' Abby winks and grabs a silver iPod from her bag. 'This overzealous hostess downloaded all these songs last night.' She plugs the cord of her iPod into the cigarette lighter and presses PLAY. 'November Rain' by Guns N' Roses comes out of the speakers.

'Wooooo,' squeals Pippa. 'Our favourite song, Abby. I love you.'

*'I know.'* She turns up the volume.

*When I look into your eyes.*

*I can see a love restrained.*

*But darlin' when I hold you...*

Pippa sings along loudly. 'Can you turn it up?'

'Probably.' Abby bends over her iPod. 'It's connected to your mother's speakers. Knowing her, she had the most expensive of the expensive fitted in this car. Girls, here comes *November Rain* at maximum volume, for the fans.'

A rock-hard bass thumps through the car. The windows shake and Pippa shakes her long, blonde hair to the beat of the music. Abby drums on the centre armrest with the palm of her hand.

I feel a little left out and look the other way, at Faye. She stares out of the window. She hasn't said a word since we drove off. A lock of shiny, dark brown hair falls across her cheek. She sits bundled up in her black, woollen coat. Even with a cold, Faye still looks great. Faye could easily live in France, with her petite and elegant appearance.

'Faye, are you okay?' I ask.

No response.

I tap her shoulder.

Her head slowly turns in my direction. She gives me a look of incomprehension.

'How are you?' I shout above the music.

'Crappy.' She rubs her throat.

'What a bummer for you. Just don't talk too much,' I shout back.

She nods.

Our car jerks to the right, across two lanes, narrowly missing a truck. Pippa brakes hard and takes the exit. I have to hold on to the door. According to the blue motorway sign it is still 25 kilometres to Utrecht. Pippa steers into the left-hand lane and presses the accelerator. On the speedometer I see a hundred and twenty. One hundred and thirty. One hundred and forty. I don't dare ask her to slow down, but I am really not feeling at ease.

The last sounds of 'November Rain' die away. There is silence for a few seconds and then Katy Perry's 'Hot N Cold' blasts out of the speakers.

Abby turns down the volume and puts on her hostess face. 'Dear ladies, you have booked a fully catered,

all-inclusive trip. Who would like a delicious refreshment from the minibar?’ She bends down and grabs a bag by her feet. ‘I have on offer: liquorice, KitKat Chunky, pink cakes, cans of Diet Coke and M&Ms.’

‘Yes!’ exclaims Pippa. ‘I want a KitKat Chunky. Did we buy this at the supermarket yesterday?’

‘No, course not.’ Abby chuckles and sounds like herself again. ‘This is what my mother gave me.’ She tears the wrapper off the KitKat and hands it to Pippa. ‘What do you want, Kimmie?’

‘A coke, nice.’

‘Catch.’ She throws a can at me. ‘What about you, Faye?’ Faye doesn’t answer.

‘Hello?’ shouts Abby, ‘Yoo-hoo? Can you hear me?’ Faye keeps staring out of the window.

Abby whistles on her fingers.

‘Huh, what?’ Faye looks up startled.

‘I asked if you wanted something.’

‘Oh, sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.’

‘Snack?’

‘Um, do you happen to have liquorice? I have a bit of a sore throat.’

‘You’re in luck. My mother bought a kilo of liquorice allsorts. Here, share with Kim.’

A phone beeps. Abby grabs her mobile from her jacket pocket.

‘Ah, a message from Casper.’ She smiles.

‘What does he say?’ asks Pippa with a mouthful of KitKat.

‘He’s so cute.’

‘Yes, yes, we know,’ murmurs Pippa. ‘But are we going to hear that romantic text message? Come on, tell!’

‘Okay, he writes: *Without you, it’s cold and boring in Amsterdam. I miss you and love you. Always. Casper,*’ Abby quotes.

‘How incredibly sweet,’ I say.

Pippa sticks a finger down her throat and pretends to throw up. ‘Sweet? Gooney, you mean.’

‘You’re just jealous,’ Abby says, ‘Let me think. What shall I send back?’

‘I know,’ Pippa calls out. ‘*Just keep my side of the bed warm. Then I’ll dive in next to you on Thursday.* Or wait, this is even better: *Then I’ll dive on top of you on Thursday.*’

Abby giggles. ‘Watch it. Casper has style. I’m not going to send him vulgar text messages. Does anyone have another suggestion?’

‘Why don’t you write: *It might be cold outside but there’s always someone in here who loves you.*’ Faye looks at Abby inquiringly.

‘Which antiquated friendship books did you get that text from? It couldn’t be more prissy,’ says Pippa. ‘I know another one like that. *Oh prince charming on your white horse, between your legs hangs a throbbing sword. Take me passionately in the dungeon, just don’t forget to bring a condom.*’ Grinning, she looks over her shoulder.

A car next to us honks its horn and flashes its headlights. Pippa’s head jerks back and she pulls on the steering wheel.

‘Can’t you just pay attention to the road?’ Faye snaps. ‘You were almost in the other lane because of that prince-on-the-white-horse thing.’

‘You always exaggerate so much,’ says Pippa. ‘I saw that car alright.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Faye snorts and goes back to staring out of the window. ‘I would text Casper that you miss him too and that you love him,’ I say. ‘That’s what it’s about, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, exactly, you’re right.’ Abby’s fingers fly over the keys. ‘Sent. Oh, I miss him so much.’

‘Long live being single,’ says Pippa. ‘All that whining about missing boyfriends. You’ll be back on Thursday, you know.’

Abby is the only one with a boyfriend. She met Casper last year at her dad’s company’s Christmas party. All business contacts had been invited, and Casper’s father is the owner of the advertising agency that Abby’s father works with. This was the first time he had brought his son. According to Abby, it was love at first sight. I can imagine that, because Casper is a really cute guy. He studies business administration in Amsterdam and looks like a fashion model with his dark hair and bright blue eyes. If Abby wasn’t my best friend, I would definitely have been jealous of her.

‘Can we stop?’ asks Faye. ‘I need to go to the toilet.’

‘Can you hold on for a bit?’ Abby looks at the sat nav. ‘We’ll be at the border in fifty minutes. Then we’ll get some sandwiches at the petrol station right away, okay?’

‘Hmm.’ Faye sinks back into the leather seat and looks miserable.

‘DJ Abby, do you have any more bangers we can sing along to?’ asks Pippa.

‘I certainly do, ma’am. How about Ed Sheeran?’

‘That nerdy guy?’

‘Yep.’

‘Oh well, he’s pretty cute, why not. Turn up the volume. Ardennes, *here we come!*’

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