



Translated by Hanna Elfner & Marjolein Meinderts

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HarperCollins is an imprint of Uitgeverij HarperCollins Holland, Amsterdam.

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Original title: *Monsterstationen: kvart över dimman*

Copyright English translation: © 2026 HarperCollins Holland

Translated by: Hanna Elfner & Marjolein Meinderts

Cover design and illustration: Alexander Jansson

Cover adjustment: Pinta Grafische Producties

Illustration map: Sandra Fröjd

Illustration interior: Katarina Elfner

Author photo: © Renée Frinking

Typesetting: Mat-Zet B.V.

Printing: ScandBook UAB, Lithuania, using 100% green power

ISBN 978 94 027 1954 3

NUR 282 & 283

First edition September 2026

The original edition is published by Ordalaget Bokförlag, Bromma, Sweden.

HarperCollins Holland is a division of Harlequin Enterprises ULC.

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Prologue

The first time I died, my lungs filled with ice-cold water. I was afraid my teeth would crack. I had just turned four.

“I promise to not go on the ice,” I’d said earlier that morning.

“That’s a good girl, Katinka,” Hally said as he pulled my beanie down over my ears. “Do not go on the ice; that’s dangerous.”

“Not on the ice,” I repeated.

Because Hally had been going on and on about the ice all morning, it was the first thing I had to explore.

“I just don’t want you to go to the lake.” He buttoned up my coat, helped me put on my mittens and tied my scarf around my neck.

“I promise not to go to the lake,” I repeated for the third time.

Down by the lake, I gazed over the frozen water. On the other side of the lake, I could see the black church tower. I walked over to the low wooden dock and sat down on the edge. My feet could just touch the glassy ice. I let my boots slide back and forth over the smooth surface.

“Do not go on the ice,” I repeated to myself. And then, I stepped onto the ice.

With one hand, I held onto the dock while I carefully stomped with my right foot. The ice was thick and solid. I backed up against the dock and pushed myself forward. This was great. I leaned forward with my hands behind my back, fast and elegant like an ice skater. The next moment, the ice cracked.

A freezing shock pulsated through my body as I fell into the dark water. A cold current pulled me under the ice, away from the dock. My mittens fell off, and my fingers turned pale and blue. After a while, the current calmed down, and all that was left was silence. Through the ice, I saw the sky turn pink. I

wondered how long I would have to stay here. And I wondered where all the fish were. I looked around me, but there was not a single fish in sight. Maybe it was too cold, even for them? Birds fly south in winter, but where do fish swim when it gets too cold? It's funny, the thoughts that cross your mind as you die.

The second time I died was when I accidentally burned down the garden shed.



PART ONE

WEDNESDAY





Chapter 1

Eight Years Later: On Top of the World

Katinka

The roof hatch fell with a bang. Hally would not have approved of this idea, but then again, people did not approve of Marco Polo's ideas either. Sometimes one just simply must explore and discover things.

Katinka pulled herself up and started climbing towards the chimney. The roof was steeper than she had thought, and she concentrated on getting her footing between the roof tiles. When she had made her way to the top, she rested, holding on to the chim-

ney. She had never been this high up before. She was on top of the world.

No building in the village was as tall as the railway station, or the “Monster Station,” as she called it. Because that’s what it was: a station for monsters or, rather, a hotel for monsters. You see, monsters also need a place to stay when travelling. Hally and Katinka were the only ones who knew this. And her dad, of course, but he wasn’t here.

On the other side of the railway track, the empty school building stood silent and still in the late summer afternoon. Even the bike rack stood empty. That was where Jackson had once punctured her tyres. Why could he not leave her alone? When the summer holiday was over, she would go to secondary school, and she hoped that Jackson would go to a different school.

Katinka looked the other way to the old farm. It was a pity that the farmer had closed the farm. A lone tractor without tyres stood abandoned on the gravel in front of the barn. She and her father used to go there on Sundays to buy eggs and potatoes, but that was ages ago. Her eyes followed the track to the east. There, far away, was Monsteria. That’s where her father was. Somewhere. Hally often travelled there to look for her dad, and each time he returned, she

hoped he would bring her father with him. And each time she would be equally disappointed. The last time, she had locked herself in her room for two whole days, refusing to go to school.

“Come on, Katinka,” Hally had pleaded through her door. “One day, I will find Charlie.”

“You will never find him!”

“Sure, I will.”

“Next time, I’m coming with you!”

“It will be okay. Maybe one day.”

Hally always said it would be okay, but it never was.

Letting go of the chimney, she balanced her way along the roof ridge. From here, she could see almost the entire village. Next to the shoemaker was Walter’s store; he sold bicycles and candy. Across the street from Walter was the butcher, but she couldn’t see the store from here. Neither could she see the bakery, but she thought she could smell freshly baked apple pie. At the fringe of the woods, across the street from the police station, was the dog kennel.

She stretched out her arms and continued. At the edge, she looked down at the street below. Her stomach churned. If she fell down from here, she would surely die. She turned around to walk back. And then she saw him. By the railway track stood Jackson with

his catapult, aiming right at her. Their eyes met for a second before something hard hit her between the eyes. Katinka fell over and tumbled down the slanting roof. She tried to stop herself from sliding, but her fingers couldn't get a grip around the slippery tiles. A tile fell loose and slid past her. It went over the edge, as did she.

At the last moment she managed to grab hold of the gutter. She gasped while her body dangled over the edge. But she was not strong enough to pull herself back up, and her grip on the smooth metal was beginning to slip. Darn it, Jackson! Now she would die, and Hally would be furious.

She looked down and felt a knot in her stomach. The fallen roof tile had smashed into a thousand pieces, and now Walter was coming around the corner. *Oh no, on top of everything*, she thought. Walter would start snooping around immediately. She looked the other way, to the track, and saw Jackson. Their eyes met again. This time, his eyes were wide with fear. He stumbled backwards, and his catapult slipped through his fingers and fell to the ground. When she could no longer hold onto the roof, Jackson ran away towards the school. The coward didn't even have the courage to stay.