



**TINE DREYER**  
**MORDEN IN DER MENOPAUSE /**  
**MURDER IN MENOPAUSE**

A Crime Novel, 304 pages

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Full English translation

Translated with AI

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Oestrogen is the most female of hormones.

It ensures that we take care of and provide for everyone, that we  
please men and want to start a family.

When oestrogen levels dip, so too does our mood – and with it our  
sense of well-being, which, until now, has been such a marvellous  
benefit to everyone around us.

## Prologue

*I don't know what you know about the menopause. In my case, not much to begin with. It was always some way off, and the older generation – my mother and aunts – never said a word about it. Mood swings and hot flushes, okay, sure, I'd heard about them. But the fact that my first hot flush was accompanied by my first murder came as a surprise. Not least to the beefy bloke whose head I unfortunately smashed in during a sudden low mood.*

*When my periods stopped for the first time, I was ankle deep in the blood of a dead man.*

*Unfortunately, it wasn't just one corpse; regrettable circumstances led to other regrettable situations. But it meant I finally got the correct information about my damn hormone balance.*

*Because of the change in hormone levels, the drop in them, to compare menopause to a kind of middle-aged puberty is not such a big stretch. I remember only too well the happy times we had when I was going through puberty and my mum was going through the change. You wouldn't think it was possible to cry and scream as much as we did back then.*

*I was certain that nothing like that would ever happen to me. After all, I was completely different from my mother, closer to my children and much more relaxed. And if there was one thing I knew about, it was hormones – after all, I had three pubescent teenagers at home. So what could surprise me? I knew what hormones could do to a person. Where hormones were concerned, I was unshockable.*

*So much for the theory.*

*Since then, I have become something of an expert on the menopause. Inevitably. And I also now know a thing or two about disposing of dead bodies. Again, inevitably.*

*I know murder is not okay, I'm well aware of that, believe me. But the menopause isn't much better, and I'm not sure which has given me more sleepless nights, murder or menopause.*

*I was forty-eight: menopause wasn't yet on my radar. I felt more like I was in my thirties, and I hadn't had time to give it any thought. My work as a kitchen planner was all-consuming – no, that's not actually true, because of course I only did the job part-time, so I could look after my lovely, severely pubescent children. And my husband, of course. And my parents-in-law, who were no longer coping well on their own. I had already accompanied my own parents to their last breath, two years apart. Thanks to a healthy oestrogen level, I didn't mind that my day had sixteen hours, which I spent primarily trying to please others.*

*Until the Friday that changed everything.*

Hormones play an important role in the transmission of information in the brain. If oestrogen levels fall, memory function deteriorates. At some point, fortunately, this returns to normal – but first there is a lovely episode of menopausal brain fog.

I had been awake since four o'clock in the morning and had turned from left to right and back again so often I was almost dizzy. I hadn't been able to sleep for days. Maybe because there was a full moon or I was incubating something, I don't know. In any case, I woke up every night, sometimes drenched in sweat, other times with cramp in my calves or a headache, and I could never get back to sleep. I was exhausted.

Jörn lay next to me, fast asleep and snoring, and my anger grew with each of his loud whistling breaths.

Why could he sleep and I couldn't? Why for the past two hours had I been going through each family member's daily schedule, writing a mental shopping list for the weekend, formulating an email to a difficult customer and preparing for the conversation about the carers we wanted to hire for *his* parents?

It's my own fault, I thought. Nobody is forcing you to think about all this all night long. You could just go to sleep like the rest of the family.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do that, so I got up. By now it was half past five and it seemed pointless to keep moving back and forth on the mattress. Only six months ago we had bought a high-end, box-spring bed so comfortable that Jörn fell asleep on it when he tried it out in the bed shop. We were sure it was worth every cent of the six thousand euros we were spending on it and that I would definitely sleep better in future.

I still wasn't sleeping any better and we had six thousand euros less in our account – no, ten, actually, because when we bought the bed we also replaced the bedside tables, updated the old wardrobe and repainted everything. Just the thought of it made me crazy and wide awake. The whole enterprise had basically been for my sake, and with three growing children we weren't paying for it out of petty cash.

I slipped into the bathroom, marvelled briefly at the bags under my eyes, pulled on Jörn's bathrobe because it was bigger and cosier than mine, and decided to write the email in question, which I'd already composed in my head. Mrs Wugner, an extremely difficult customer, would be able to read it over breakfast and would be impressed by my suggestions.

I went downstairs, made myself a coffee, stacked the dishwasher and wondered why no one in my much-loved family was able to put a dirty plate into the machine when everyone else could do it with ease. Then I picked up my phone and sat on the sofa with a coffee to read the news. Although I had begun with an article on the state of German politics, after a few minutes I found myself alternating between funny dog videos and equally funny hair tutorials. I had no idea how I could be distracted so quickly. If we still had the newspaper in printed form, this would never have happened. How could it?

I yawned and realised how tired I was. Why the hell had I got up so early?

So, back to the bathroom and into the shower. While I was washing my hair, I flinched in shock when I caught sight of an

unidentifiable movement out of the corner of my eye. It took me a moment to realise that it was my upper arms. If I scrubbed my scalp too hard, there was no hiding the bingo arm effect. So I massaged the shampoo in very gently and immediately felt a complete idiot. Nobody could see my wobbly arms in the shower! Was I ashamed of myself?

As I began to hate my upper arms, I remembered why I had got up so early. The email! I would do it as soon I was out of the bathroom.

But clothes on first. The new blouse I had bought two days ago. Light blue with wide sleeves in the trendy oversized look, as the saleswoman had assured me. An expensive piece, pure silk, that went perfectly with my tight jeans and light blue pumps, which I could wear for a maximum of half an hour a day before my feet fell off. And my back hadn't been able to cope with footwear like that for a long while. So, slippers for now.

By this point it was half past six. Time for the rest of the family to get up.

On the door of Hannes's childhood room, which no longer had anything childish about it, there was a NO ENTRY sign. As always, I ignored this request and entered the dark room, only to stumble on the clothes that Hannes always kept on the floor. If he had undressed the night before, that is.

"Get out of here!" he greeted me after I had fought my way to his bed and woken him. Sure, getting up early isn't a thing at seventeen, but he'd been getting worse and worse lately. His day-night rhythm seemed to be completely out of sync.



“You have to get up, Mu—”

“Don’t call me Muckel!” he said with venom.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. The things you accuse me of! Get up now!”

I switched on the bedside lamp and turned it so the beam of light fell directly on his face. Like all teenagers his age, he wore his dark hair short on the sides and long at the top so it almost covered his eyes.

“You’re so annoying!” He pulled the blanket over his face, which had survived the worst of the acne stage but was still a dotted minefield.

“It’s my goddamn duty. I’m responsible for making sure you get to school on time!”

“Sheep!”

I was about to fire back at him, but then I remembered I was the adult and he was the child, albeit a big one, and I pulled myself together.

As I left the room, I stepped on something hard, saw that it was a lighter and thought wistfully of the times when I used to step only on Lego bricks. I quickly discarded the thought. Nothing had been more painful than that. You really didn’t have to mourn everything.

On the very short walk to Sophie’s room, I attempted a smile. I had read that even a forced smile has a positive effect on your mood, so I pulled the corners of my mouth upwards.

BITCH PALACE was written in big letters on her door, and I hadn’t even questioned the wording when Sofie first put it up. Maybe bitch meant something different these days, or maybe palace had changed its meaning. I didn’t know and didn’t want to know. And for the record, I do take an

interest in my daughter's life, but you have to let certain things go when you're living with three pubescent teenagers.

Although Sofie was only two minutes older than Hannes, she seemed to have finished puberty much earlier than her twin brother. Outwardly, at least. You could look with a magnifying glass for spots and other marks of puberty: from her appearance you would have taken her for twenty-two. From her mental maturity, maybe not.

I turned on the light and was amazed to see that my daughter had plaited her shoulder-length, platinum-blond hair into two braids. When she opened her eyes, she had the shock of her life. "Mama! You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"Because I'm waking you up?"

"Because you're standing at my bedside grinning like some kind of evil clown!"

Oh yes. My therapeutic smile. I let the corners of my mouth drop again.

"Besides, I've got the first lesson free!"

Annoyed, Sofie fell back onto her pillows.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know."

"Are you losing your marbles? I told you ten times yesterday!"

"Set your own alarm clock," I retaliated, "then I won't have to do it anymore. You're plenty old enough!"

"You know perfectly well I can't hear the alarm clock!"

"And that's my problem?"

“You’re horrible, Mama!”

Retreat, I thought. Off to my little one, who at fifteen was taller than everyone else. There was an FC Köln poster on his door, which I didn’t have to question in any way. Paul was the only one who had inherited Jörn’s curls. Sofie had my straight blonde hair, which she was lightening dramatically at the moment, and Hannes had Jörn’s hair colour and my hair texture, which was definitely the most boring combination of all. Only on Paul’s head was the dark, thick hair curled in perfect waves.

He also flinched, startled, when I gently shook him by the shoulder.

“Mama!”

“Sleep well?”

“Yes . . . But you look awful. Are you ill?” Paul asked with concern.

I had long since given up my deranged smile.

“I haven’t put on my makeup yet,” I said weakly. I hadn’t realised my dark circles were such a big deal.

“Oh, thank God, I thought it was something.” Paul sank back in relief. “Luca’s mum looked like that during her chemo. I was really worried.”

Instinctively, I pulled up the corners of my mouth again. *Smiling makes you happier*, I repeated to myself. I didn’t care whether I looked like a deranged evil clown or not.

*I don’t want you to get the wrong impression of me. I’ve never been one of those mothers who put up with all kinds of nonsense from their children. On the contrary. Good*

*parenting was and still is important to me. But that morning I was so upset that I frantically bit back every retort, otherwise I might well have hit the ceiling and started shouting at the top of my lungs. As we all know, that's not helpful; nor does it promote family harmony.*

“Morning, Livi!” Jörn looked fabulous as always when he came into the kitchen half an hour later, dark curls perfectly slicked back, a slim-fitting suit with no tie, and the wonderful waft of a new aftershave. The few grey hairs at his temples completed the George Clooney look.

Men blossom with the years, women wither. That’s what my father-in-law had said to me just two days before. I only had to take a quick look around me on the street to know that this saying bore no relation to reality, but it definitely applied to Jörn. He had always been attractive, and in his younger years had had a boyish quality that he’d now lost. Outwardly at least. But he had retained his boyish humour and the serenity that went with it.

“Hey, you haven’t worn that blouse for ages!” Jörn gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Isn’t that from when you were pregnant with Paul?”

“It’s new,” I choked out.

“Oh! It looks really . . . comfy!”

*There’s no saying what might have happened if at this point I had already had a hammer to hand.*

As it was, I made three crosses when everyone was finally out of the house.

One after the other, the children slammed the front door behind them and mumbled something that was probably meant to be a goodbye. Jörn at least gave me a kiss on the lips.

“Have a nice day, love,” he said cheerfully.

“Hmm, not that easy,” I muttered.

“Oh, come on! A housewife’s day is great! What I wouldn’t give to do a bit of laundry today, and read the newspaper and drink coffee in between. Not that I begrudge you your day off, of course.”

He winked at me and left the house.

*I don’t need to explain to you that my housewife day bore no relation to what my husband imagined it to be. Yes, it was true that I didn’t work in the kitchen studio on Fridays, but to describe it as a day off was at best a bad joke. Logically, only someone who avoids all housework could suggest that being a housewife means having a free day.*

*In reality, of course, every day was a housewife’s day, one that started after work and went on into the evening. Jörn was undoubtedly a modern husband (at least to my generation; Generation Z would probably kill such types immediately), but the bottom line was that he only cooked when we had friends over, when they praised his cooking to the sky. He had no idea about the day-to-day stuff, which with three pubescent children is not to be underestimated – at least, not if you don’t want cockroaches to take over the house.*

*I know what some of you are thinking now: that it was my own fault. You’re right about that. But my oestrogen had been at an above-average level until that point, so it hadn’t much bothered me that I was stuck with the drudgery known as care work. After all, Jörn had an extremely challenging job as a management consultant and*

*generally got home very late.*

*Yes, it's true, I had voluntarily put myself in this position. But I had been manipulated by hormones that had turned me into a family-friendly puppet. If this gives the impression that I believe women are completely hormone-driven and more or less brainless, I would strongly disagree. Of course we are not helplessly at the mercy of hormones, nor do they preclude our ability to think. A smoker is not helplessly at the mercy of his cigarettes either. Do you understand what I mean?*

*And now, unfortunately, the hormones, or, to stay with the metaphor, the strings on which the puppet was hanging, had been cut and it was much harder for me to fulfil my obligations. I was as stressed as an ex-smoker going through withdrawal. At the time, however, I didn't realise that my hormones were largely to blame – and that's exactly why I'm so keen to alert you to this issue. Because if, like me, you have no idea why you are losing control of yourself, you slowly but surely start to go crazy.*

*But one thing at a time.*

The first thing I did on this all-important day was the bulk shopping that we have to do once a week. Anyone who has adolescent children at home knows what they munch on, and boys are even worse than girls. It wasn't really possible to feed Hannes and Paul. I brought tons of low-fat quark into the house, since, like all boys of that age, mine went regularly to the gym – a term I would never use in their presence, lest I be accused of using boomer vocabulary again. And yes, my children didn't care at all that I had nothing to do with the boomer generation and was a classic pill-popping child.

Having picked up the low-fat quark and some other staples, I

wandered around the supermarket a little disoriented. The night before, everything had been crystal clear; I knew exactly what we were missing and what I needed to buy. Miraculously, this information had been erased from my brain. When I put the various items on the checkout conveyor belt, I found four tubes of tomato paste and wondered what I had planned to cook with them. Tomato soup? Not out of the question.

After lugging two large Ikea bags full of groceries into the house, I ignored my aching back and set about cleaning the house. I stripped the children's beds and swore I would never put black bed linen on the boys' beds again, vacuumed, did a quick sweep of the house, then packed up my things to head off to my in-laws.

Marlies and Werner were actually a very charming, very old couple. Jörn was an afterthought; his two brothers had long since retired and his parents were approaching ninety. Werner had spent his professional life as a textile engineer for a large manufacturer of women's clothing, providing his wife with quantities of clothes for decades.

In the 1980s, Marlies had had a second career at Tenetdor, a cosmetics manufacturer primarily known for its nail varnishes, which sold its products on the Tupperware principle. Marlies organised cosmetics parties where she gave makeup tips and painted customers' nails over a glass of M&M champagne. In essence, she was a beauty influencer in the analogue era. She had retained her passion for cosmetics and clothing, even though her failing eyesight meant that she could no longer apply eyeliner and lipstick with any accuracy. Fortunately, her bright red hair had grown back well after the serious bout of breast cancer she had had to endure

fifteen years earlier. She was never quite the same after the illness, however. Chemotherapy and medication had weakened her bones, and she was nowhere near as steady on her feet as she used to be. But she was usually in good spirits. As a result of her limited mobility, she had put on a few kilos and become somewhat heavy-footed. She was supposed to measure her blood pressure every day, but having bought a blood pressure cuff from Tchibo, she had only used it twice. “It’s annoying to have your arm constricted like that.” That was the end of the matter, for Marlies, at least, but not for her blood pressure, which regularly hit the two hundred mark and threatened her with a heart attack or stroke.

Although I had a key, I rang the bell as usual.

“Did you remember the tomato paste?” Werner said by way of greeting as he opened the door to me. The little hair he still had lay stringy on his bald head and his shirt was covered in stains.

“Yes.” I suppressed a sigh. “But I left it at home.”

“Well,” Werner said with a shrug, “you’re always saying we need to eat healthier. If you don’t bring the right ingredients, I can’t do anything about that.”

“A tube of tomato paste does not a healthy diet make.”

“But it’s a start.”

Werner’s health had also taken a few knocks. Since he was a committed bon viveur, his late-onset diabetes came as no surprise, but was no less troublesome. He kept forgetting to inject his insulin on time, which is why he was more and more confused and had begun to deteriorate physically, too. Of course, he didn’t stick to his diet. Who



could eat so many vegetables and salads? After all, he wasn't a rabbit, was his credo.

Werner wasn't hugely overweight, but he was twenty kilos more than he should have been, and he carried those kilos on his stomach like a swallowed ball. He didn't have a problem with that; if his diabetes did, then we would just have to see how it coped with it.

"Did you do your exercises today?" I said, hanging my jacket in the overcrowded cloakroom.

"No." He turned towards the stairwell. "Marlies?" he called up loudly. "She's forgotten the tomato paste!"

"Not getting any younger!" shouted my mother-in-law from upstairs.

"Can't we forget the diet?" Werner grinned, and looked at me ruefully. "The exercises won't help either in that case."

Werner rejected sport just as much as a diet. What was the point? He was convinced he was getting enough exercise. He walked to the bus stop several times a week to go to the racecourse in Cologne-Weidenpesch – and to bet. What Jörn and I had initially dismissed as a small passion for betting had grown into a serious problem over time. Not for Werner, nor for his diabetes, but for us, since we increasingly had to pay off his betting debts. We had long since reached the five-figure mark, and as both of Jörn's brothers had only a small pension, it had been clear from the start that we would have to pay Werner's gambling debts – my parents-in-law couldn't take care of them themselves. And Jörn never got round to having a serious word with his father, perhaps because he was afraid that it would

deprive him of the last bit of fun in his life. Maybe that was indeed the case. So long as it didn't much bother us financially, Werner would just carry on betting.

If he wasn't very careful with his insulin dose before he set off for Weidenpesch, his journey home could be quite adventurous. To put it mildly. The emergency doctor had been called out more and more often recently.

My mother-in-law clomped her way downstairs. She too wasn't getting any younger, although she was convinced that she looked younger. Such was the beauty of age-related sight loss: the wrinkles became invisible.

"How are you looking?" she said by way of greeting. "Either that blouse is unflattering or you're piling on the pounds."

"I'm happy to see you too," I said and took a deep breath.

"Your breasts! What's happened to your breasts?" Marlies scrutinised my chest as if she were examining a chicken.

"What's wrong with her breasts?"

Werner shuffled back out of the living room into the hallway and stared curiously at my cleavage.

"They've got bigger," Marlies noted expertly.

"That often happens in old age."

In old age? I couldn't believe it. My eighty-seven-year-old mother-in-law was old! Not me!

Although she was right about my breasts. For some reason, my old

bras hardly fitted me anymore. Maybe I really had put on weight?

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” I did my best to keep my voice upbeat.

“We don’t want carers.”

As confused as they sometimes were, their instinct for sensitive topics was as sharp as ever.

My parents-in-law were convinced they could manage very well on their own. The only things left in the fridge were out-of-date food; they cut the mouldy edges from the bread, and similarly the cheese. The smell in the bathroom took some getting used to, shall we say. And my nose told me they weren’t washing very often.

It had been clear for some time that we needed to act. Jörn and I were increasingly worried that they might fall in the bath or would forget to turn off the cooker and set the house on fire. Everyone realised that something had to change. Everyone except Marlies and Werner.

Before, I had always spoken gently and walked on eggshells, but today was different.

“This isn’t about what you want, for God’s sake!” I was suddenly furious. “You need help, you must realise that!”

“We manage very well on our own.” Marlies sounded put out. She smoothed her pink blouse, which had a large coffee stain in the centre.

“You just don’t get it! You’re slowly but surely going downhill.” I went over to the window and pulled it open. “When was the last time this place was aired?”

“After my accident on the sofa.” Werner gave a wry smile. “But

you can hardly smell it now.”

“Maybe *you* can’t smell it.” I tried to calm down. “I’ll make us a coffee and then we’ll discuss everything, okay?”

Half an hour later, thoroughly pissed off, I left the house and got back in the car. There was no one more stubborn than my mother-in-law. Werner had left all the talking to his wife, and as soon as I made a highly sensible suggestion about carers, I was met with poisonous comments about my appearance (“*We’re* neglecting ourselves? Have *you* looked in the mirror lately?”) or my mental state (“I think *you’re* the one who needs help!”) or my marriage (“*I* help Werner with everything, that’s what married couples do. It may seem strange to *you* . . .”). And although Marlies had delivered it all in a friendly way, every point had struck home and taken root in fertile, unstable ground.

Why was I having to deal with the two of them? Why didn’t Jörn take over?

Somehow I had slipped into looking after the parents-in-law. Marlies had just recovered from cancer, I was on parental leave and Jörn was busier than ever, thanks to a career change. With a pair of crawling twins and a nursing newborn, I was grateful for any help I could get. And Marlies and Werner were happy not to have to deal with serious illness anymore, and to look after their grandchildren instead. Every Friday I took the children to their house, and could go in peace to shop, or to the hairdresser, or to bed, while they looked after them. As the children grew up, Friday was a regular fixture. It would have felt like a betrayal if I had abandoned the two of them, especially now, when they really needed

support.

I was trying to concentrate on the traffic when my mobile rang. It was Eva, my best friend. I put her on speakerphone.

“Hi. Don’t be mad at me, but I’m not in the mood for a chat.”

To anyone else, a greeting like that would have been an affront, but not to Eva. For one thing, I’d known her longer than Jörn, and, for another, everyone including Eva knew that she only ever called to chat. She almost never had a real reason for a phone call.

Surprisingly, it didn’t get a rise from her. All I could hear was breathing at the other end.

“It is you, Eva, isn’t it? Or is it your turn, Konrad? Oskar?” Her two sons were a little younger than mine, eleven and thirteen, and it was easy for them to slip away while playing with their mum’s mobile phone.

“No . . . it’s me . . .” A sob could be heard.

“Holy shit, Eva, are you crying? Wait.” I cut up a Porsche, whose driver made furious hand gestures in my direction, pulled over to the side of the road, turned on the hazard lights and switched off the engine. “Now you have my full attention. What’s happened? Is something wrong with Torge?”

Eva and Torge had been together since school and had what I would describe as an exemplary marriage.

“No . . .”

“What about the children?”

“ . . .”

My heart plummeted. An accident? A serious illness? I had to clear my throat. “Oh God, Evchen, what’s happened? How are you all?”

“They’re fine . . . Oskar, Konrad, Torge . . . everything’s great.”

So it was Eva herself. “You know you can tell me anything. What’s up, my love?”

“I . . .” She sobbed audibly again. “I haven’t had my period for a while,” she said finally. “I’ll be fifty in a few months, so that’s not that unusual. I didn’t think anything of it. It must be the menopause . . .”

“It’s not so bad,” I tried to comfort her, unsuspecting. Eva was a little older than me, so had always been a bit ahead of me with the various physical changes.

“But then I kept feeling sick in the morning . . .” She sobbed again, and slowly a dark premonition rose up in me. This couldn’t really be happening, could it? My pulse quickened as shock and surprise swept through me.

“You’re not . . . you’re not . . . are you pregnant?”

A loud sobbing from the other end of the line. Several gasps of *yes*.

Taking deep breaths to regulate my pulse, I said: “You’re seriously pregnant?”

Again an affirmative sob.

My shock gave way to amazement. “That’s quite a thing. Weren’t you using contraception?”

“I had such difficulty conceiving Konrad and Oskar. What was I

supposed to be preventing? I've got almost half a century under my belt! And then I go and get pregnant! At an age when other people are becoming grandmothers!"

I had to smile. "There aren't that many grannies our age."

"Nevertheless. You know what I mean. The subject of babies and nappy changes is as far away as it can be! I don't want to go back to sleepless nights and big breasts again!"

Welcome to my life, I thought, but opted for something reassuring and uplifting, something along the lines that she would cope with it all.

"How far along are you?"

"Twenty-one weeks . . ."

I was speechless for a moment. "You were five months pregnant without realising it?" This was the kind of story you tended to find in the tabloids, and the women were usually still in their teens. "But . . . your belly?"

"It's got bigger and bigger, of course. But isn't that the same for all of us? At our age?" She gave another sob.

I couldn't disagree with that.

"I'll come round as soon as I can, okay?"

"We're taking the children to my parents' today."

"Then we'll meet next week and talk about everything in peace. Does Torge know?"

"Yes. The idiot is happy."

"I think that's the right attitude. Cheer up, sweetie."

*Of course, “cheer up” is not the normal response when someone tells you they’re expecting a child. But if you’re in the same age bracket as Eva and me, then you’ll understand. There’s a reason why nature has limited us hormonally: pregnancies can be enormously stressful. And even if you’re lucky enough to sail through pregnancy, the baby years are challenging, to say the least.*

*When you’re young and childless, you have at best an inkling of this and are mostly in a state of tense and joyful anticipation. Eva knew full well what was in store, however, and was in shock, to put it mildly. While my hormones were on the decline, my best friend’s were revving up again. Is that what I would have wanted? Definitely not. That was the reason we always had condoms in the bedside drawer. Even though one pack was enough for a year, I insisted on using them just in case, as few things were less negotiable for me than family planning.*

With Eva in my thoughts, I drove home, cooked a kilo and a half of pasta, threw a couple of chicken breasts in the pan, chopped some salad, which I would doubtless be the only one to eat, and waited for the hungry adolescents to arrive.

The good thing about teenagers is that they usually only speak when you ask them something. If I don’t reel off the normal “How was school?” suite of questions, no one says a word and everyone just shovels in their food. That suited me just fine that day.

“Put it away immediately!” I said sternly as Hannes pulled his beeping mobile out of his trouser pocket. When it came to phones while eating, I couldn’t take a joke.



My tone of voice must have been unusually forceful, because Hannes dropped the phone in shock. I immediately took it and put it on the worktop.

“What’s with the aggro,” muttered Hannes.

“Sorry. I’ve just found out . . . well, Eva’s having a baby.”

“Which Eva?” Paul asked with his mouth full.

“Sophie’s godmother, of course.”

My daughter almost dropped her fork. “She’s really old!”

“She’s not even fifty yet!”

“I told you: ancient.” Sofie shuddered. “That they’re still having sex at all. Ugh . . .”

“Please!” I looked sternly at Sofie. “I don’t want you talking about Eva like that!”

“Sorry, but the idea is disgusting. At that age . . .” She shuddered theatrically again and her brothers laughed.

“That’s rich from the one no guy wants to touch,” Hannes said, chuckling.

Sophie’s face darkened. “Just shut your mouth.”

“I wonder where the myth that twins get on so well comes from,” Paul said half seriously. “It can’t be based on the two of you.”

“It’s true of identical twins,” I said.

“And perhaps of people who don’t have to grow up with two moronic siblings,” Sofie scoffed.

“Oh, then I’ve got it really tough,” Paul countered cheerfully.

“At least *I* didn’t get a five in German.” Sofie was grinning all over her face. She was clearly enjoying watching Paul panic.

I looked at my youngest in amazement.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, Mama . . .”

“You’ve been at work these last three days,” Sofie continued to tease. “There hasn’t been a chance.”

“You got an F?” I asked in disbelief. Paul had never had any problems at school.

“Poetry analysis. Nobody needs that! Iambics, metre – why should I learn that?”

I could see Paul’s point of view and to some extent shared it, but this wasn’t the time to admit that.

“I don’t care whether you like the subject or not,” I said. “What I do care about is that you kept a five from me for days.”

“I wanted to tell you . . .”

“But you didn’t.”

“Because the bitch beat me to it!” Paul got upset.

“Don’t call your sister a bitch!”

“Why? I stand by being a bitch!” Sofie tossed her long hair, wavy from her night-time plaits, over her shoulder, and for a moment I didn’t know what to say.

“This family is so crazy. . .” Hannes mumbled as he helped himself to more pasta.

“Nobody here is crazy at all!” Now I was getting loud. “A five isn’t

nice, but it's not the end of the world.”

Paul stood up and hugged me. “Thank you, Mama. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.”

I saw him give his sister a triumphant look.

“Snitching isn’t nice either, but it too is not the end of the world,” I said in Sophie’s direction. “Please refrain from both in future.”

Paul nodded, while Sofie inclined her head very slightly. I wondered when my shy little daughter had become so cool. Sometimes, when she stood in front of the mirror and thought she was unobserved, I could see how many insecurities still lingered in this seventeen-year-old, but most of the time she hid them almost perfectly.

“We have to help Eva now,” I said firmly. “She’s practically part of the family and it’s clear we have to support her.”

“How?” Hannes raised his hands helplessly. “Am I supposed to be babysitting?”

“For example.”

“Poor baby!” Sofie couldn’t help it.

While I was clearing the table, the children got into an argument about the next inanity. Listening with half an ear, I gathered it was about the use of the PlayStation, which Sofie suddenly wanted to use even though she didn’t really play. But she had the right to play, she emphasised again and again, driving her brothers up the wall. The topic obviously lent itself to shouting at one another, which is why Hannes didn’t hear his mobile beep again. The message popped up on the display, and I couldn’t help but see it. It was from someone called Freddy.

*Ten o'clock Sommerwind, last one on the right. 10 for you is 100 for me.*

Sommerwind – that was the name of the allotments on the edge of our neighbourhood. The well-kept allotment site formed a kind of city boundary, or at least it suddenly became more rural behind it. A farm bordered the allotments, and there was another one five hundred metres on. Huge rapeseed fields spread out in between and, at certain times of year, there was a distinct whiff of the slurry that was sprayed on the fields.

So Hannes had arranged to meet someone at the allotments. And who was this Freddy? I'd never heard of a mate with that name. But I probably didn't know all my son's friends.

"I need more pocket money," Sofie said, pulling me away from my thoughts. "Everyone else gets a lot more than me."

"We've had this discussion a thousand times. You get exactly the official recommendation."

"Whose recommendation? The federal centre for stuffy parents?"

"That's enough with the cheeky comments," I said sharply.

"I guess you'll have to cut down on the fags and the booze."

Hannes grinned broadly.

"At least I'm not spending my money on weed!"

I immediately pricked up my ears again.

*10 for you is 100 for me.*

"I don't smoke weed!" Now Hannes's voice was also raised.

"Your crowd all smoke weed!" Sofie snapped.

I looked worriedly at Hannes. "Is that true?"

“Sofie’s full of shit.” Hannes was upset now. “Like always.”

“Do you smoke weed?” I asked.

Hannes rolled his eyes. “Mum, please!”

“Please not *Mum!*” I hated it when he called me that.

“All right, *Mama*, I’m not smoking pot. Okay?”

“Whoever believes that . . .” Sofie said quietly, whereupon Hannes smacked her round the back of the head.

I had a bad feeling. I didn’t find my son’s statement credible. I was just about to read the message from this Freddy again when Hannes grabbed his mobile and disappeared from the kitchen, swearing loudly.

*10 for you* – did that mean ten grams? For a hundred euros? Possibly. And if so, of what? I could answer the question myself. If ten grams cost a hundred euros, it could only be drugs. I didn’t know what the going rate for marijuana was, but ten grams for a hundred euros seemed realistic to me.

Did Hannes really have a date with a drug dealer? I didn’t want to believe it, but it certainly looked like it.

My heart was beating faster and panic spread through me. This crazy tiredness that meant he hardly got out of bed in the morning. The aggressive behaviour he exhibited more and more frequently. Was it not puberty after all? Was it down to his drug use? And what kind of drug use was it? A bit of weed, a bit of pot? But I couldn’t even sugar-coat that. After all, the marijuana of today had nothing to do with the marijuana of my youth, and the psychiatric wards were full of patients who had developed psychoses or other serious mental illnesses as a result of their

cannabis use. There were constant reports on the news of this.

Was Hannes about to go off the rails? A junkie with a needle in his arm? A crack pipe between his lips?

Maybe I was getting carried away, but one thing was crystal clear to me:

I couldn't let that happen. And I wouldn't, either. Never.

Progesterone ensures that we are calm and sleep well. Progesterone deficiency, on the other hand, keeps us awake all night, makes us thin-skinned and nervy, and causes headaches. Suddenly Mum turns into a Fury.

I was fired up the whole afternoon. I tried to let on as little as possible, but it was almost impossible. I kept an ear out to the first floor to make sure Hannes was still there and hadn't secretly left the house.

I tried to reach Jörn: voicemail. I thought about calling Eva but decided against it. She had other things to worry about and was probably with her parents, telling them the news.

While I was staring at the display and wondering whether I could bother anyone else with my suspicions, my mobile rang.

Pablo, my boss. "Do you have time for a video conference? Crisis meeting."

"You're not actually allowed to contact me on Fridays!"

"But I have now."

"What if I'm in the Maldives?"

A brief silence.

"I wouldn't call you if it wasn't really urgent. You know that."

"Fine." I always replied with *fine* when I didn't know what to say.

"Can you switch on the camera?"

I sighed. "Fine."

Pablo was lovely, I liked him a lot and found it hard to refuse him favours. He was much younger than me and had taken over the studio



many years before as an interior designer specialising in kitchen design, working with his partner from whom he had since separated. Or at least, there was no more talk of him. Some time ago, Pablo had told us, his voice full of emotion, that Tobi was now *out*, and that was that. None of us had dared to ask what exactly had happened. At the end of the day, it was none of our business.

In any case, so far as we knew, Pablo had been single ever since and worked practically round the clock for his company.

I sat down at my laptop and joined the video conference. Everyone other than me was there in person.

“Hello Mick!”

My colleague raised his hand towards the camera in greeting. Mick was an old hand; he had worked for the previous owners of the studio and could assemble a kitchen cabinet in seconds.

“Hi Liv!” Franzi leaned over Mick’s shoulder and waved at the camera. She was just thirty and, when she wasn’t busy with the kitchen business, was fully occupied with her own family planning or, rather, with the eternal weighing up of now or later. When I got the chance, I would have to tell her about Eva and that certain things in life simply couldn’t be planned.

“Why an emergency meeting?” I asked.

“We have a problem. The Wugners . . .” Pablo began in a theatrical voice. I could see that my colleagues were sitting in one of the show kitchens with mugs of coffee in their hands.

“More special requests?” I asked.

The Wugners were the most complicated customers I'd had in years. Mrs Wugner, that is. I hadn't spoken to Mr Wugner yet. She was extremely volatile, changed her mind from one day to the next, wanted everything to be the best and was proving completely resistant to practical advice. I was thinking about the last time I had replied to her special requests by email when Pablo snapped me out of my thoughts. "New hand-blown glass tiles from Costa Rica aren't a problem, we can easily manage that." He sighed. "It's much worse. Pest infestation."

"In the villa?" I said pointlessly. Pablo nodded.

"Cockroaches?" asked Mick.

"Mice."

"That's almost worse," Mick said. "They cause more damage."

Pablo nodded worriedly. "They're everywhere. The new pipes in the kitchen have been gnawed, electrical cables have been bitten through and they've even discovered a nest in the ventilation shafts."

"Isn't that the architect's job?" I said.

"The Wugners have asked all the main trades to rectify the problem," Pablo said. "Unfortunately, the biggest nests and therefore the most damage seems to be in the kitchen. That's why we can't stand back from the situation."

"And where do the critters come from?" Franzi said.

"We'd really like to know. The building is near the Rhine, so it's possible that the beasts live in that neighbourhood." Pablo ran his hand over his shiny bald head.

A lively discussion ensued about the migration patterns of mice,

which led to everyone sharing their personal experiences of them.

“It doesn’t matter where they come from,” Pablo interrupted the not particularly productive conversation. “The important thing is that they disappear and don’t reappear.”

“Isn’t that the job of the exterminator?” I asked.

“Yes, maybe. But first let’s see which entry points we can close off in the kitchen. Shafts? Drains? What can we do? After all, the whole thing is a new build. There must be a reason why the vermin feel so at home there. You need to drive by there today, Liv.”

I kneaded my hands and kept quiet.

“Any questions, or is everything clear?” Pablo asked.

I hesitated. “Can’t Mick or Franzi take over?”

“They’re your customers,” Pablo said. “You planned the kitchen.”

“But I really don’t have time.”

“Sorry. I’d fill in,” Mick said, “but I’ve got another appointment myself at a building site in Junkersdorf.”

“I have appointments too. Sorry, Liv,” said Franzi.

I looked at Pablo’s questioning face on the screen. “So?”

I dithered. I wasn’t the type of person to say no. I never could, either at work or with my family. I usually split myself into several pieces to please everyone. But this time something amazing happened.

“No.” Had I really said that? “I can’t go round to the Wugners’ today, I’m sorry.”

“I know it’s your day off, but it’s really important, Liv!”

“It’s not possible. I’ll go there first thing tomorrow morning. I promise. Even though it’s the weekend.” My hand moved towards the laptop screen, which didn’t go unnoticed by Pablo.

“Liv!”

“Sorry, urgent family commitments!” That wasn’t a lie.

Pablo sighed loudly and theatrically and shouted: “No later than tomorrow!” I had already closed the laptop by then.

“What kind of family commitments do you have? That was a complete lie.” Sofie had come into the living room. She was wearing heels so high she had to duck her head in the doorway, skintight leatherette trousers and a crop top.

“You’re not going out like that!”

My daughter rolled her eyes. “You’re always so bourgeois!”

“I’m not being bourgeois, I’m looking out for your health. With these temperatures, you’ll have pyelonephritis by tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sofie pulled out a pocket mirror and put on some lipstick. Then she examined her made-up face from all sides. Her gaze was critical – the opposite of benevolent. At least she looked at herself the same way she looked at me.

“I’m serious. Put something on! It’s November!” She picked up her short thin denim jacket from the chair with a superficial, sugary smile and stomped towards the front door.

“If you get sick, I won’t look after you!” I called after her.

“And nor will I, when you’re old!” she shouted back. “*Even* older,”

she added venomously and pulled the door shut behind her.

*Children give you so much. You've heard that said countless times, haven't you? And yes, it's true, of course. But as we all know, it's not always true by any stretch of the imagination. If you want unconditional love, you're better off in the long run with a dog from a shelter. Just a side note for all those who, like my colleague Franzj, are still thinking about it. Everyone who's in a similar phase of life to me knows what I'm talking about. And to those in Eva's position: cheer up.*

The front door opened and Jörn came in, gave me a kiss on the lips as he passed and raced upstairs.

“Today is the derby.”

“So?”

“FC v Leverkusen.” With these words, he disappeared into the bedroom.

I heard the toilet flush and Paul came out of the guest toilet. “I'm with Max.”

“You're still standing in front of me.”

“We're having a LAN party.”

“Fine.” I didn't really think so, but there was no point discussing it now. “When will you be back?”

“Twelve?”

“You're fifteen!”

“Max lives round the corner. Twelve?”

I sighed and nodded.

Paul had just gone out of the door when Jörn came back downstairs. He had swapped his suit for an FC jersey and, of course, put on his FC scarf.

“Don’t wait up for me, I’ll be late.”

“Where are you watching?”

“At Walther’s. The boys are coming too.”

The “boys” were his three best friends from university: Thomas, Enno and Suky. All hardcore FC fans.

“Bye!” I shouted, but Jörn was already gone.

I listened upstairs. Hannes seemed to be in the bathroom, also getting ready for the evening. I remembered the saying “Little children, little worries, big children, big worries”. Even if I didn’t think it was entirely true – there was no forgetting the winter fourteen years ago when all the children had the norovirus at the same time – the dangers that lay in wait for teenagers were frightening. The idea of having both young children’s and older children’s worries at the same time, like Eva, was a horror film.

*How did your parents react?* I typed into my mobile and pressed send.

The answer came within seconds.

*Everyone’s going crazy. Except me.*

I was about to send another *Cheer up, it’ll be fine* reply, but then deleted it. Nobody needed phrases like that.

*Do you already know what it is?*

A thumbs down emoji. Shortly afterwards came:

*Ultrasound next week.*

I heard Hannes on the stairs, sent Eva another kiss emoji and made a show of nonchalantly tidying the dresser. Hannes grabbed his shoulder bag, a style that had once been a classic men's bag favoured by embarrassing holidaymakers, checked his hair in the mirror and put on his jacket.

"I'm off then." It seemed to me he was saying this in a deliberately casual manner.

"What are you up to?" I asked, just as casually.

"Meet the others, hang out a bit, nothing special. And then down the club."

"Down *to* the club."

"What?"

"It's okay."

And he was gone. I immediately put on my jacket. Through the window, I saw Hannes get on his bike and ride down the road.

I dashed outside, grabbed my own bike, put on my helmet and set off. Without lights, of course, so he wouldn't immediately see me if he turned around. It felt almost illegal: I had spent years telling my children never to ride in the dark without lights. But what was the saying? Special circumstances call for special measures. I suspected there was still room for improvement here, but quickly suppressed the thought.

We lived in a fairly middle-class neighbourhood –detached houses

with gardens – on the outskirts of Cologne. There were allotments on the edge of our neighbourhood for all those city dwellers who wanted to get out at the weekend. The profile of allotment owners had changed completely in recent years, from stuffy pensioners to hip web designers. While the classic allotment gardener used to be ridiculed for his tireless gardening, today he has become part of the self-sufficient “urban gardening” culture, and Gen Y is vying for the few coveted plots. I recently read in the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* that they now even had Wi-Fi in the allotments. Apart from that, everything was unchanged, with the same green pruning rules and regulations on crop cultivation that had been in place for decades. But you could surf the net while squatting on the camping loo.

Hannes was pedalling hard and I was struggling not to lose sight of him. It was pitch black, there were no more streetlights now we were away from the houses and I had no idea whether there were potholes or branches on the road ahead. Frankly, I was weaving around like a drunk and kept hitting potholes. Several times I almost went over the handlebars.

Doubt filled me. Hannes was seventeen. Was it really so bad if he smoked a bit of weed?

“That’s not the point!” I hissed to myself. Hannes obviously didn’t just want to smoke a joint; he was on a shopping spree, ten grams was no small thing. Maybe he wanted to sell the stuff on himself? That would clearly be the first step towards a career in crime. And if not, there was still the danger that he would heartlessly overdose. No, waiting at home and hoping that he would get home safely tonight was definitely not an option.



I focused on my son's back and only slammed on the brakes when he stopped in front of the allotments. I quickly hid behind an advertising pillar and watched Hannes push his bike through the gate and up the path. The site was on a slight slope, and since riding in the dark was such an effort, I locked up my bike and followed him on foot.

The gardens were deserted. No wonder: who would go to their allotment on a dark November evening? I was surprised that the gate wasn't locked. Had this Freddy left it open for Hannes? Was he already at the meeting point? And if so, was that better for me than if he arrived after my son?

I had no idea. My experience of criminal investigations consisted at that point of watching *Aktenzeichen XY*, and everything I'd seen in the last few years had been so creepy that just the thought of it sent a shiver down my spine.

Hannes seemed to know exactly where he was going. Taking long purposeful strides, he ran along the main path and turned right at the end. I hurried after him as quickly and as quietly as I could on gravel. Hannes leaned his bike against a fence and entered the furthest plot, in front of which was a sign that said: NEW OWNERS WANTED.

The thick clouds cleared and the moon could now be seen. This allowed some light to fall on the plot. It was eerie. Suddenly there were shadows everywhere, shadows that kept changing thanks to the passing clouds. Sitting on a bench in front of the allotment hut was a guy who wasn't particularly tall but was pretty thickset. His legs were wide, as if he had a cowbell dangling from his crotch, and he was grinning at my son

with a fag in his mouth. Next to him was a sports bag.

I crept closer to hear what the guy was saying to Hannes.

“First the coal,” I heard him say in the local dialect.

“How do I know you’re not ripping me off?”

Hannes’s voice was a little shaky and nowhere near as relaxed as the other guy’s.

Thank goodness, I thought to myself. Maybe it was a sign that he hadn’t done something like this umpteen times before. Or maybe it was just his youth. Very few seventeen-year-olds were likely to be that cool in the presence of serious criminals.

The beefy guy got up and stood in front of my son. He was smaller than Hannes, but his bulk gave the impression of power.

“Watch out, kid. We’re doing this according to *my* rules, all right? I want to see if you’ve got the money, otherwise I’m not giving you anything. Then you can go back home to your mama.”

“No need. Mama’s already here.”

I don’t know what had possessed me, but I had stepped out of my hiding place and crept up to the two of them. I was now standing next to Hannes with my hands on my hips.

“What are you doing here?” My son’s features slipped.

“Shut up, Muckel.”

The beefy bloke immediately burst into a spiteful laugh. “Muckel? Seriously? How horny is that old woman? And why is she wearing a helmet?”

I ignored the guy, but nevertheless took off my helmet and looked at Hannes with narrowed eyes. “What. Are. You. Doing. Here.”

“Mum . . .”

“Don’t call me Mum!”

“My God, Mama, it’s not what you think,” Hannes stuttered. “We wanted to party a bit in the club later . . .”

“You’re going home right now!” My voice was so cold that my breath almost froze, even though it was still quite warm for a November evening at ten degrees.

“You’re not still letting Mummy tell you what to do, are you?” the guy said with a sneer and a broad grin.

“And don’t call me Mummy, mate.”

“I’m not your friend,” he spat back.

“Wanker.”

“Cunt.”

“Excuse me?” If there was one thing I hated, it was that word. I took a deep breath and turned back to Hannes. “You’re going home now, right now.”

“Mum . . .”

“I’m sorry?”

“Mama, it’s Friday . . .”

“NOW!” I hadn’t shouted that loudly at my son for a very long time.

Lips pursed, Hannes swung himself onto his bike and disappeared

into the darkness.

The beefy bloke looked at me in disgust. “You don’t let your son have any fun, do you?”

My heart was pounding in my throat. I had no idea how to talk to a criminal. Since he was less than ten years older than Hannes, I decided not to change my tone.

“This has nothing to do with fun,” I said in a stern pedagogical voice.

“It’s everything to do with fun. But a wrinkled old cunt like you probably can’t understand that.”

He uttered the hated word with relish. He could obviously see how it drove me up the wall. He grinned arrogantly at me and spat on the ground just short of my feet.

I felt my heartbeat change. It had become uncontrollable, as if I was boiling inside. Which I definitely was. The fear I had experienced at the beginning had given way to an excess of pure rage. I felt hot and realised I was losing control of myself and my emotions.

“If I hear that word one more time, then—”

“Then what, Mummikins? What are you going to do then?” His voice was full of mockery. “Give me a good spanking?”

I pulled my mobile out of my pocket. “I’m calling the police,” I said in a trembling voice.

My reactions weren’t fast enough to stop him knocking my phone out of my hand. It flew up in a high arc and landed in the long grass.

“And you think I’ll wait like a good girl until the cops get here?” He leaned towards me, close enough for me to smell his foul breath. “Not only are you an *old* cunt, you’re also a *stupid* one,” he hissed at me. “Why don’t you go to the old people’s home? Maybe you’ll find some fun there instead of ruining your son’s party.” He grinned spitefully and turned to the bench to pick up the bag of drugs. “Now piss off. I’ve got some other kids to supply with stuff.”

*You know the feeling, I’m sure. I bet there’s something that triggers you too, that makes you go into a rage and snap. Admittedly, I used to have a better grip on myself when my hormones were still on track. But that evening I was as thin-skinned as a pubescent teenager. Loss of control at its best.*

*I don’t know what it was that made me do what I did next. Maybe that swear word, which I hated like the plague and had strictly forbidden my children to use, or the ageist tropes that this disgusting guy had uttered with such enthusiasm. Or the fact that he now wanted to sell his damn drugs to other children.*

*Or simply the old hammer that was lying next to me on the rusty workbench.*

Without thinking twice, I grabbed the hammer and instinctively hit the guy on the back of the head. The result surprised me. His skull cracked and the front part of the hammer went in pretty deep. As if the plug had been pulled, Freddy instantly collapsed at my feet and hit the deck. In a matter of seconds, a large pool of blood spread out beneath him. I couldn’t jump out of the way fast enough, and my trousers were spattered with blood. I looked in shock at the red liquid and, surprisingly, only one question came

to mind at first: when was the last time I had had my period?

I quickly suppressed the thought. I undoubtedly had other problems now.

“Shit,” I mumbled tonelessly.

I went to bend down to check his breathing. But then I noticed his wide open eyes, staring lifelessly into nothingness.

“Hello?” I said cautiously and prodded him in the side with a toe. Nothing.

Had I killed the guy? Me?! In my entire life, I had never once smacked my children. If I saw a snail on the path in front of me, I always lifted it carefully by its shell and carried it to the safety of the grass so it wouldn't be trampled flat. With the exception of midges, I caught every insect within our four walls with a glass and took it into the garden. I even broke up a fight between two drunks on the Domplatte by buying them both a coffee to go. I may not have been a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, but I was the absolute opposite of a violent person.

And now something like this.

I tried to collect myself. I could nudge Freddy ten more times, but that wouldn't change his condition. Now it was a matter of damage limitation, even if the damage was admittedly enormous. What should I do? Fingerprints, I thought, the hammer would be full of them, I had learned that much from television.

I hesitated briefly. It took a certain amount of strength to do what I had to do now. Shut your eyes and get on with it, I thought to myself, and pulled the hammer out of the dead man's skull with a jerky movement.

What I hadn't realised was that it was a carpenter's hammer with a curved tip, unfortunately. Of course, I hadn't known that when I impulsively grabbed it. In pulling it out with such vigour, I had ripped off a piece of skull about the size of my hand and something gooey splashed onto my face. I wiped it off my forehead and looked at my finger, which now had a white piece of . . .

*I don't want to go into details. You will have guessed anyway that it was a piece of brain from that brainless idiot. I could at least forget about trying to resuscitate him.*

*If you're wondering why I didn't call the police and an ambulance straight away, then you've obviously never been in a situation like this yourself. Which is definitely a good thing for you, please don't get me wrong!*

*But in that situation and at that time, I was incapable of a sensible thought. The key words here are progesterone deficiency, which of course I had no idea about at the time. Even with a normal hormone balance, though, I would probably have been out of my depth had a piece of someone's brain attached itself to my face. I couldn't believe what I had done. My only thought was that I had to keep my son out of this whole disaster and that he would be dragged into it, for sure, if the police found the guy.*

*And anyway, what would become of my children if their mother had to spend years in prison? They would be severely traumatised, possibly go off the rails even more, become a laughing stock at school and with their friends – I couldn't do that to them. And poor Jörn would lose his wife and soulmate. No, the police and paramedics would be no help to me or dead Freddy in this situation. I had to solve the problem differently.*

I took a deep breath and tried to weigh up my options as I cleaned the

hammer of fingerprints, blood and brain.

A burial or cremation was out of the question. Something like that needed careful preparation; I couldn't do it spontaneously. Burial at sea? I had gone there by bike, so to take him away and throw him in the Rhine wasn't possible, either.

No matter what form of funeral I chose for Freddy, I couldn't do any of it that evening. Everything required a lead time. I needed a shovel or a spade, a means of transport and petrol. But all that was incompatible with the bloody corpse at my feet, which didn't allow for protracted arrangements. It wouldn't lie here unnoticed until I had planned everything meticulously.

My eyes fell on the large compost heap behind the allotment shed, then the sign on the gate. The plot was going to be sold – and nobody buys an allotment in November. So I would deal with it first thing the next day and hide the damn dealer under the compost heap until then. Once the garden was mine, I would have time to think about how to get rid of the body for good. Yes, that was the only sensible thing to do. I had to buy time, and this was the way to do it.

“Let's go then,” I muttered and grabbed Freddy's feet.

It was quite an ordeal to drag the heavy guy to the compost heap. I tugged and pulled and must have taken half an hour to cover the few metres. The compost heap was quite big and made up largely of leaves, so it should be easy to dig a grave in it. Fortunately, I found a shovel and didn't have to use my bare hands to create space for Freddy. Nevertheless, it was well past midnight by the time I had finished digging the hole. I



laboriously pulled the body into the rotting eco-waste that it would eventually become and carefully covered it with soil. My back made me acutely aware that it was not cut out for such work. I ignored its groans and moans. What else could I do?

When there was no sign left of Freddy, I picked up a watering can, filled it from the rain barrel and poured the contents over the pool of blood I had caused in front of the hut. I repeated this twenty times, until almost all the blood had seeped into the flower beds.

Before I buried the bag with the drugs in the compost too, I took a look inside. There were countless plastic bags, some clearly containing weed, others a white powder, others tablets with a blueish tinge. I closed the bag and dug it in. The only thing I kept was the guy's mobile so it wouldn't start ringing at some point and startle visitors to the allotments the next day. My own phone I found quite quickly in the long grass.

Now every bone ached. Still, better than none, I thought, took one last look at Freddy's grave and cycled home with a guilty conscience.

The term "guilty conscience" is quite a euphemism. I used to have a guilty conscience when I ordered a sundae with maple syrup and cream, and that feeling really couldn't be compared to what I felt now after killing a person. I was upset and confused – although that's what I've been all the time recently. No, I was completely out of my mind.

What had I done? I had snuffed out a life. It was terrible and there was no excuse for it, and I had no idea how I was ever going to get over it.

On the other hand . . . How many lives did the damn dealer have

on *his* conscience? I had no idea, but I did know that drugs were a growing problem in our society. Hannes wasn't even of age yet! The very last thing you should do is get your hands on adolescents and sell them drugs. Perhaps his customers were much younger children?

When I arrived home, a pale Hannes was waiting for me in the hallway. He was sitting on the steps, a picture of misery.

"Where have you been all this time? I've been waiting for you for hours!" he said in a shaky voice.

"Why? Do you have something else to tell me?" I tried to make my voice as stern as possible.

"Can you please keep all this from Dad?" His eyes swam with tears. "I'm really sorry, Mama. It was a one-off, honestly, I've never done it before."

Of course that was a lie. Hannes had done it at least once before – he'd gone to the allotment with such certainty and determination.

"Perhaps we'd better go to a drug counselling centre."

"I don't have a drug problem, Mama. I really don't. We just wanted to make the party a bit more . . ." He fell silent.

"A bit more what?"

Hannes ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know. Just make it a bit more fun. It was a crap idea."

I saw the tears run down his cheeks and was about to take him in my arms. But from an educational point of view, that didn't seem sensible right then.

“If I catch you with drugs again,” I said quietly and threateningly, “I’ll report you to the police.”

“What?” Hannes turned even paler. “You would turn me in?”

“Turn you in? I would protect you from yourself!”

“I’ll never do that again, Mama, I promise. You can trust me.”

“I should hope so. Not a word to anyone!” I gave him another stern look, and when he nodded, I said: “Now, off to your room!”

“Yes.” Hannes threw an anxious glance at my dirty clothes. “What’s happened? Has Freddy done something to you?” His voice was now very quiet and worried.

“No. There was an argument and then your Freddy made a cowardly escape. I want you to delete his number and all the messages you’ve written to each other. Got it? This guy no longer exists, do you understand?”

“Yes.” Hannes jumped to his feet and ran upstairs, no doubt glad to have got off relatively lightly.

Luckily, Jörn wasn’t home yet. Paul and Sofie were also still out, so I had time to remove all trace of Freddy from my body. Once in the bathroom, I threw my dirty clothes into the laundry basket and myself into a hot shower. I scrubbed my scalp and my body, and I didn’t care whether my upper arms wobbled or not. What little things you can get upset about when life is still good.

As I came out of the bathroom, I heard someone throwing up in the guest toilet. By now, I was quite familiar with my children’s vomiting noises; the sounds had hardly changed since their first bout of stomach flu

as toddlers.

“Sofie?” I called down the stairwell. “Are you all right?” I heard her choke. “Yes, everything’s great. But I think the red wine was off . . .”

“Sure.” I couldn’t get upset now that my daughter, who was almost of age, had had one too many.

“Do you need help?”

“No.”

The familiar noises again. I heard the front door.

“Ewww!” So Paul was now back. “Sofie’s throwing up!”

“I know,” I called down. “The red wine was bad.”

“Sure!” My youngest laughed like a hyena.

“And you’re late!”

“But not much! And I’m sober!” he said triumphantly.

“You’re fifteen . . .” I heard Sofie say between bouts of vomiting.

I decided to take a quick look at her after all. She came out of the guest toilet pale as a corpse and slammed the door weakly behind her.

“Did you take something?” I asked suspiciously. I was definitely sensitised to the subject.

“Nope. But I didn’t eat anything, and after the third glass of red wine . . .”

“Three glasses of red wine on an empty stomach?!”

“I know, Mama, believe me, I know . . .”

Sofie dragged herself upstairs. Giggling, Paul followed her and disappeared into his room after some banter with his sister about the vomit

stains on her shirt. All I wanted to do now was go to bed.

When I finally lay down and switched off the light, I couldn't close my eyes for even a minute. But that was nothing new. I stared at the ceiling and hoped that tiredness would overtake me at some point. It didn't. Instead, my thoughts revolved constantly around the terrible events of that evening.

Two hours later, Jörn came home and I was still awake. He made an audible effort to be as quiet as possible, but I suddenly heard him exclaim from the bathroom.

I sat bolt upright in bed. Damn. I had thrown my bloodstained jeans into the laundry basket. And left them there instead of putting them in the washing machine.

I heard footsteps and quickly lay down again. Jörn came into the bedroom with a concerned expression.

“Liv?”

I breathed loudly and evenly. My husband didn't seem that interested.

“Liv!”

“Hmm?” I pretended to wake from a deep sleep. “What?”

“Is everything all right?”

I faked a loud yawn. “Why not?”

“Well . . .” He hesitated. “Your trousers . . .”

I hoped it was dark enough that he couldn't see the panic on my face.

“What about them?” I asked wearily.

“They’re covered in blood.”

“I know.”

That was true, but it was certainly not the answer he had expected.

“What . . . what happened?”

I faked a yawn again, to play for time and think up a good excuse.

“I’m having a particularly heavy period at the moment.”

Top excuse. The last time it worked was in a seventh grade PE class.

Despite the darkness, I could literally see the amazement on Jörn’s face.

“But . . .”

I sat up with a jolt. “What, you have a problem with me having my period?” I asked in a completely exaggerated, aggressive way that made no sense at all.

“Why should I have a problem with your period?” Jörn was understandably confused. “Of course I don’t. I was just wondering because your trousers are so dirty.”

“Only a man can be surprised by something like that!” I got upset. “Sometimes a period can be pretty heavy, in case you don’t know!”

He hesitated. “But . . . the blood is on the ankles.”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. After all, there was no explanation, at least, not one that I could share with him. So I decided to do the only thing that seemed to make sense in the situation. Attack.

“What do you know about periods?” I shouted even more aggressively and angrily. Then I fell back onto my pillows and curled up. “Men really have no idea.”

I heard Jörn suppress a sigh. “Sorry, of course you’re right.” He lay down next to me and pressed a kiss to my forehead. He was probably trying to cheer me up about my period, which made me furious again. “Sleep well, Livi.”

I made a grunting sound and pretended to be asleep, although I was staring into the darkness with my eyes wide open.

Jörn started snoring after two minutes as usual, and I stayed awake as usual.

I had done something terrible, something I never thought I could do. But I had also protected my son, and that thought was the only thing that kept me from total despair about myself and my mental state.

What was wrong with me? Had I really killed someone?

**FROM HERE ON:  
NO EDIT!**



The sleep hormone progesterone drops,  
the harmony hormone oestrogendrops,  
and as if all this wasn't bad enough, testosterone -  
and therefore our libido - also dwindles Great prospects.

## 3

The next morning, I was even more the opposite of well-rested than usual. When I looked in the mirror, I winced. While I used to have dark circles around my eyes after a sleepless night, strange bulges had now formed underneath them. Thick swellings, as if I had been out partying with a lot of alcohol, which was definitely not the case.

I was suddenly overcome by the realisation that I was looking into the swollen eyes of a manslayer. Or had it all just been a bad dream? I didn't have to think for long before I could unfortunately rule out the dream theory.

I grabbed Jörn's haemorrhoid ointment, one of the few indications that he was also getting older, and put it under my eyes. Years ago, I had read that Kate Moss used to do this when she had spent the night on nothing but vodka and cocaine and had to be in front of the camera the next day. And in fact, the decongestant in the ointment didn't care where it worked. It simply decongested everything it was rubbed on, so that at least I didn't look quite so puffy after half an hour.

But inside I still was. Probably only very few people took it well when they smashed someone's head in, but I certainly didn't. But there were things in life that you couldn't undo, and the thing with Freddy was definitely one of them.

I tried to convince myself that guys like him weren't family men, devoted husbands or caring sons, that his death wouldn't break anyone's heart but had saved a lot of people from worse, and that he himself must have had a lot of souls on his conscience.

*I know what you're thinking now, and you're absolutely right: I wanted to sugarcoat it. Well, glossing over is perhaps not the right word, because in fact there was absolutely nothing I could gloss over. But at a time like that, your brain simply frantically searches for an exit strategy so that your guilty conscience doesn't kill you - or make you run to the police and confess everything. Which wouldn't help anyone either. Quite the opposite.*

Instead of going to the next station, I wanted to cycle to the allotment site before breakfast to buy the small plot and then take care of everything else in peace.

"I'm going to get some bread rolls," I said to Jörn, who was having a coffee in the kitchen.

"We still have toast, that's enough for me," said my husband.

"It's the weekend." I grabbed my keys.

"But the children are still asleep anyway," said Jörn. "I can make us French toast. If you show me how."

"If you show me how to do it" was nothing more than a synonym for "I'll watch you do it". I didn't even let my children get away with that.

I gave Jörn a chastising look and shook my head decisively. "I'll get some bread rolls. I have to get a few things anyway."

For example, an allotment plot with a corpse, I added in my mind and disappeared from the house.

*Buying an allotment is not normally something you do while you're out getting bread rolls. In our house, it was also customary to discuss investments with each other, especially if they were in the four-figure range. However, for understandable reasons, I didn't do this in this case. And as money was fortunately not one of our problems, I*

*thought it was responsible.*

I cycled the same route that I had cycled last night. At that point, my world had still been more or less in order. It had already been slightly cracked because I was worried that Hannes might have something to do with drugs. But I had never reckoned that small cracks could become such huge fissures within a few moments. Now I had to do everything I could to prevent the crust from breaking apart.

I sucked the fresh air deep into my lungs. It wouldn't be long now before I could deal with everything I'd done, I tried to reassure myself. Then the allotment would be mine and I would have enough time to retrieve the dead dealer from the compost heap and dispose of him somewhere he would never be found again. Wherever that might be. Perhaps I would then find a therapist to help me come to terms with what had happened. I could claim that the murder was a recurring nightmare that plagued me and then listen to his clever tips to help me forget everything.

But it wasn't that far yet.

And so far I haven't had the slightest idea of how I could really get rid of Freddy for good. The therapeutic treatment would definitely have to wait. But once the plot was mine, I would have a lot less pressure. And with less pressure, it was easier to think - or was it the other way round? Hadn't I always told my children that you needed a bit of pressure to be driven to perform at your best? Was it the same for classwork as it was for disposing of corpses?

To cut a long story short: Yes.

And so my heart rate skyrocketed when I saw the young family standing in *my* allotment with the allotment manager. Mum, dad, a boy of maybe seven and a girl of no more than five. And an obviously incredibly curious Labrador, who was sniffing around the compost heap the whole time, while the children were playing in the meadow and their parents were talking to the manager.

I was sure it was the caretaker, even though I had never seen him before. He was wearing brown corduroy trousers and a checked flannel shirt, with a practical waistcoat over it, which had extra breast pockets for tools and was accordingly equipped with screwdrivers and the like. In one hand he held some kind of documents, in the other a thick bunch of keys. He had carefully combed his white hair over his bald head.

Clearly the manager - who was obviously talking to prospective buyers!

To be honest, the first peak performance that my brain was driven to in this unexpected stressful situation was not yet worthy of a Nobel Prize. Suddenly and loudly, it made me shout "Stop! I'm buying this allotment!", whereupon all the two- and four-legged friends on the plot turned to me with astonished expressions.

"Who's that?" the young man asked the caretaker, who shrugged his shoulders.

"You can ask me yourself," I said breathlessly after I came running at an exaggeratedly fast pace. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Labrador begin to carefully dig in the compost with one paw. "I've been on the waiting list for the garden for years, and you, Mr ..." I pointed my

finger at the caretaker, who I had no idea what his name was.

"Kriemer."

"Exactly, Mr Kriemer. I registered my interest in buying from you a long time ago."

"So, dear," began Mr Kriemer in the deepest Kölsch and with a somewhat too jovial voice that made him seem a bit smarmy. "You can't buy a plot of land, you can only lease it."

"Of course I know that," I claimed.

"So." He scrutinised me and then clicked his tongue for some unknown reason. "But I don't know anything about your interest in the property. What's your name?"

"Liv Steinhammer," I replied. "But that probably doesn't mean anything to you."

"I thought it was supposed to?"

"I'm an acquaintance of your wife." I don't know what had possessed me at that moment, but at least the man was wearing a wedding ring, as I realised with a look of relief. "I've discussed everything with her."

"My wife has been dead for a year." Mr Kriemer looked at me, frowning.

"I know. I *was* an acquaintance of your wife. She promised me back then that we would get the plot. Your wife had such a big heart."

"Above all, a sick one," muttered Mr Kriemer. "Otherwise she'd still be with us now."

"I know," I repeated to myself and looked sympathetically at Mr

Kriemer, at least I hoped I did.

The young woman now joined in the conversation, visibly annoyed. "There was no mention of another interested party. We're prepared to pay the instalment of five thousand euros, even though it's really steep."

The Labrador barked excitedly.

"You know that you're well above the market price," said the young man. "And we're still prepared to pay that."

"So that our children have the opportunity to play in the fresh air for at least a few hours a week," said his wife with a good dose of pathos.

"That's why we should sign the contract now, just as we discussed," her husband added emphatically.

"I'll pay you ten thousand," I blurted out. "And you should call your dog, there are birds nesting here!"

The man looked round for his dog in irritation. "On the compost heap? In November?"

"Yes, climate change is unfortunately omnipresent," I replied, to which the woman gave me a look that you would normally only give a lunatic.

I turned back to Mr Kriemer while the man whistled for his dog, who didn't have the slightest desire to respond.

"Ten thousand, then. I promised your wife that I would be generous to you."

"But the instalment isn't going to me," said Kriemer, whose

forehead was now a single wrinkle, "but to the previous owner."

"I know that too, of course," I said under my breath. "Five for the previous owner, five for you."

The dog barked more and more excitedly, attracting the interest of the two children. Slowly they got closer to the compost heap, luckily they had to keep pushing and teasing each other, which is why their pace slowed from step to step. The dog barked louder and louder.

"Shut up, Leo!" shouted his master, which, as expected, didn't interest the animal. "Did I just get that right?" The man now looked quite angry. "You want to bribe Mr Kriemer?"

"I don't know what makes you think that."

"You've just offered him a five thousand euro bribe!" the woman got upset.

"We live in Cologne."

"It's still bribery!"

'No, it's not,' I replied. "I'm just honouring a promise I made to a dying woman. I visited her at her bedside for months and we discussed everything in detail. Mrs Kriemer wanted something good to happen to her husband after her death. Surely you don't want to disregard the last wish of a dying woman?"

Mr Kriemer looked at me with his mouth open. Then he closed it and nodded. "Okay." He held out his hand to me. "It's a deal."

I grabbed it and shook it while giving the young father of the family an apologetic look. "A deathbed promise. I'm sorry."



The man froze for a moment, while his wife's face turned red.

"Now say something!" she nagged and poked him in the side. "We can't put up with this! She can't just do it like that!"

"I don't think we can talk about just like that in this case," I replied kindly.

"Let's go, it's no use," the man muttered resignedly.

"But the garden is ideal for us!"

"We'll find something else."

His wife just shook her head grumpily and trudged towards the exit, while her husband scolded his dog again, who was still digging in the compost.

"Stop it now, Leo! Here! Hiiiiier!"

But Leo didn't stop. He seemed to have discovered something. That wasn't good, not good at all, and it made me damn nervous.

"The birds are a protected species!" I shouted. "If your dog kills them, you could get into real trouble!"

"Yes, yes. Leo!" Now the man's voice was so threatening that it had an effect. With a shoe in his mouth, Leo came wagging his tail towards his master.

"Off! What have you found there? Off!" The man put the dog on a lead and insisted that he drop the shoe, which he eventually did. "Species conservation, breeding birds in November, what a load of rubbish. There's rubbish there, nothing but rubbish. You're totally disturbed," he grumbled at me.

"There's no need to be rude."

"Yes, but it doesn't matter now." With a wave of his hand, he signalled his children to leave. The family left the property in a bad mood.

I tried to smile at Mr Kriemer as winningly as I could while he looked me up and down again. "So you knew my Bea," he said thoughtfully.

"A wonderful woman."

"Yes. That was her." He twisted the wedding ring back and forth on his finger. "I don't remember her ever talking about you."

"She wasn't doing so well when we first became friends," I claimed. "We met in the doctor's waiting room. Unfortunately, she already had her diagnosis."

He looked at me with raised eyebrows. "My wife died in a road accident. She had a heart attack."

I cleared my throat nervously. "I'm sorry," I said in a brittle voice, avoiding his gaze.

He looked at me silently for what felt like an eternity. "I could really do with the five thousand," he said, grinning wryly. "Can you bring it to me today? In cash?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem at all."

"Walter-Flex-Straße 98." Without another word, he turned round and left the allotment.

"Yes, thank you, great, I'm looking forward to it!" I called after him, but by then he had already disappeared round the next corner.

I was gasping for air like a fish that had been washed up on the shore. After all the tension, my body seemed to be in desperate need of oxygen to somehow get back to normal. I had the feeling that I had sailed a hair's breadth away from disaster, which was nonsense because the disaster had happened last night and I was in the middle of the worst imaginable misery. But I hadn't blown my cover, I was still here and Freddy was still under the compost. I had to calm down.

"Okay, okay, okay. Everything is going according to plan," I tried to convince myself. "You're almost there."

Once my heart rate had stabilised, I grabbed the shoe that the dog had dug out of the compost heap, ignored the bloodstains on it and returned it to its dead owner.

Freddy's foot peeked out a little from the pile and the first thing I noticed was the hole in his sock.

You need to get rid of these mum attitudes, I scolded myself. Anyone who could bash other people's heads in should have no problem with holey socks.

Freddy's big toe was clearly visible through the hole. It had already turned a bluish colour and I didn't want to imagine what the rest of him looked like.

For a moment, I thought that compost might actually be an option. There had to be worms and beetles swarming among the eco-waste, and they would be a thousand times quicker to eat a corpse here than in a conventional grave. Maybe I didn't have to take Freddy somewhere else? Couldn't nature take care of it just as well here?

A fat crow ignored me and landed on the compost at about the same height as Freddy's head. It had obviously scented something, because it started pecking lively with its beak.

Freddy seemed to be popular with all the animals, which I could only attribute to his scent, which the animals could probably already recognise very well. It was therefore only a matter of time before he would also become recognisable to the human nose.

The crow had caught something of Freddy's and flew away with it. Was that an eye it had had in its beak? I didn't really want to know. The main thing was that she ate it and didn't drop it anywhere. A single eye on the pavement might worry one or two passers-by.

In any case, the little episode with the crow made one thing very clear to me: Freddy couldn't stay here in the compost permanently under any circumstances.

I carefully put the shoe back over his foot and covered everything with a large amount of leaves. Then I took the old, holey plastic tarpaulin lying crumpled in the corner and pulled it over the pile. I weighted down the ends with thick bricks that had been lying under the tarpaulin. That way, Freddy's final resting place was at least a little more protected. At least as long as the weather held out. If an autumn storm came, the situation here would change abruptly.

I looked at my watch. Damn. The savings bank was closing in half an hour. If I wanted to get the five thousand euros to Mr Kriemer today, I would have to hurry.

*You find it reprehensible that I bribed Mr Kriemer? Because I stole a piece of*

*nature from the young urban family? That's a nice accusation, certainly not entirely unjustified, but what do you think I should have done? Exactly.*

*But if you've got the impression that I'm one of those typical affluent mums who drive their SUV to the organic bakery and think they can buy anything with money, then I can reassure you. I'm not one of those mums. I am firmly against SUVs. Environment and all that, you know.*

"You bought an allotment instead of bread rolls?" Jörn looked at me in disbelief.

"Well, *instead of* is certainly not the right word here. But it was a good opportunity, so I grabbed it on the spur of the moment."

"A good opportunity?" Jörn's eyes grew bigger and bigger. "Our garden is five hundred square metres. What do we need an allotment for?"

"Fruit, vegetables, we should grow a lot more ourselves." I avoided his gaze.

"I had no idea you wanted to join the vegetable farmers."

"It's so important to be self-sufficient these days," I tried to say as convincingly as possible. "Times are becoming increasingly uncertain."

Jörn sighed, "I don't know. Ten thousand euros. That really is a lot of money. Our reserves have shrunk quite a bit due to my father's escapades."

"You need to talk to him."

"I know. I've already tried. But it's not that easy. And we promised them we wouldn't let them down financially."

"Neither do we." I stroked his shoulder soothingly. "Of course

we'll continue to support them, that's for sure. No problem. Your bonus is coming soon too. It's not as if we're on the verge of insolvency."

He nodded. "Good, all right. You're right, of course. And as for building it yourself, that's not a bad idea. It would be a nice hobby for my parents, then maybe dad won't go to the racetrack so often. They can tinker around in an allotment like this and have something to do."

They shouldn't be doing too much at the moment, I thought, but said: "I'm glad you think so too."

"But in future, please discuss all important decisions beforehand, yes? That's how we've always done it."

There hadn't been any *other* deaths. "Yes, of course, I'm sorry. We'll do that, of course."

"Good." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Then I'll see what else we have for breakfast."

My mobile phone was buzzing. Cathy Wugner, the demanding nouveau riche customer to whom I had sent the email yesterday with the processing of her special requests ... not. My heart rate was already back up to one hundred and eighty. I had forgotten about that stupid email! How could this have happened to me? I had formulated it dozens of times in my head the night before, had dealt with every problem and had come up with great solutions for everything. How could I have forgotten to send it to that stupid chick?

When I took the call, I realised that Pablo had tried to reach me four times and I suspected that I had forgotten something else.

"Mrs Wugner, I hope you have a wonderful day!" Some people

flute into the phone when they want to make good weather. I was playing the panpipe at the moment.

"You wanted to send me an email yesterday morning!" The woman was angry, there was no mistaking it. "Do I get the pink marble now?"

*A cooking block made of pink marble. Can anyone reading this imagine anything uglier for their kitchen?*

"Of course, Mrs Wugner. And of course I sent you the confirmation by e-mail," I lied. "It's probably disappeared into the vastness of the world wide web again."

"Where is it supposed to be? Well, I don't care either. Besides, I was told yesterday that you wanted to be at the construction site at nine o'clock this morning to take care of the mice problem. Have you looked at your watch?"

Of course. My brain had also deleted the on-site appointment. That's probably why Pablo called.

"Oh, nine o'clock must have been a misunderstanding." I hadn't given Pablo a specific time, I was quite sure of that. "Tomorrow morning" could mean anything.

"We're about to have lunch." Cathy Wugner's voice had turned icy. "And the dirty mice are partying here. When will you be here?"

"I'm on my way. According to the sat nav, I should be with you in twenty minutes."

"I hope you have a solution to all the problems then! I don't want to see another mouse in my new home - ever again!"

"Fine," I said nonsensically, hung up and grabbed my jacket, from which the envelope from the savings bank containing the five thousand euros I had withdrawn fell out at that moment. Lots of hundred-euro notes slowly sailed to the ground. I ignored Jörn's look and quickly collected the money again. "I have to go again."

"To get bread rolls? For a few thousand euros?"

I laughed artificially. "I'll bring it too. But the money is for the allotment. I'll have to bring it round when I get back from my appointment."

Sofie had come down the stairs unnoticed by me. Her hair looked as if she had put her fingers in the socket and there were dark circles under her eyes, just like I used to have before they turned into puffiness.

"We have an allotment now?" She massaged her temples with two fingers.

"Yes. Mum grabbed it on the spur of the moment."

"Can we have a party there tonight?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Asks the woman who was hanging over the bowl last night?"

"I'm feeling quite well again."

"You can see. But to answer your question: no, you can't," I said. "You'd better stay at home tonight anyway."

"Dream on. What's the point of having an allotment if we're not allowed to use it?" Sofie took a bottle of water from the fridge and drank it almost empty.



"You can use it sometime, but not today. I still have a few things to ... sort out first."

"Mum hasn't even paid for the garden yet." Jörn pointed to the envelope with the banknotes that I was still holding.

"That's what you pay in cash these days?" Sofie was visibly surprised.

Hannes came sleepily down the stairs. "What do you pay in cash?"

"Mum has bought an allotment." Sofie grimaced mockingly. "But WE aren't allowed in, of course. Mum probably wants to fulfil herself there. Midlife crisis or something."

"Er - yes. Now I have to see my customer. A little compassion, please."

I had no interest in continuing this conversation and walked briskly to the door. Hannes hurried after me.

"Are you going to buy up all the locations where I've fucked up?" he whispered to me.

"Maybe. If it makes you stop this crap, why not?"

I rarely saw my son speechless, but this time it worked.

As I sat in the car, I needed a moment to collect myself. What was I actually doing? I had five thousand euros *in cash in my pocket to pay off* a man who wanted to sell me an allotment in return for a dead man I had killed. I broke out in a sweat, and this time I thought it was a completely normal reaction from my body, entirely appropriate to the circumstances. Who wouldn't have broken out in a sweat in that situation?

My mobile phone beeped, and looking at the display I saw that it was a text message from Mrs Wugner.

20 minutes are up.

I pressed on the accelerator.

*Have you ever noticed that all wealthy people build more or less the same house? A blown-up version of the old Bauhaus style. Two or three white squares, tapering towards the top, stacked on top of each other. You wouldn't believe how many blocks of this type I've built kitchens into in recent years.*

*However, this has never bothered me before, let alone annoyed me. Why has that changed now? It can't be envy, after all, we built our house thirteen years ago in exactly the same style, just not as huge. Is that what gets on my nerves? That we're just as unimaginative as everyone else? Just unfortunately a lot less wealthy? I don't know. In any case, there's an awful lot that annoys me, much more than before, and I wonder where my composure has gone. Probably where my deep sleep and my libido are. In an unreachable space.*

I parked my car in front of Cathy Wugner and her husband's huge stacked squares. The house was practically finished, the workmen were only busy with the interior work. *Only*. I had the impression that the interior work was even more complex than the construction of the villa. The show staircase in the entrance hall was being fitted with white marble and a handful of electricians were working on the security system that would turn the villa into a high-security wing. However, many of the cables had to be re-routed as they had been destroyed by the mice. This had probably also delayed other skilled workers who wanted to install the various lighting installations. Two interior designers approached me with

a pile of fabric samples, all of which had been nibbled on and were presumably intended for the curtains or upholstery. Both women looked as if they had suffered an acute attack of hay fever. The weekend didn't seem to stop anyone from working here, and I guessed what the reason was.

A mouse almost ran over my feet and disappeared into the next corner. I ignored my impulse to point out the small rodent to one of the workers and instead focussed my attention on my customer, who was suddenly standing in front of me.

Cathy Wugner looked at me in a bad mood, but seemed to think that was the appropriate way to greet me.

"Finally."

"Good afternoon, Mrs Wugner. It looks marvellous here already!"

"You mean the bloody rats?"

"No. Besides, they're mice. Tiny little field mice. Cute, actually."

"You're full of shit."

She was right about that. "Sorry, I didn't mean to trivialise the problem."

"I wouldn't advise you to do that either. Come on."

She strutted through the entrance hall towards the kitchen in her high-heeled shoes. The mini skirt, which only just covered her very tight bum, slipped up a little so that she had to keep pulling it down. Her tight top, the huge amount of make-up and her flowing blonde mane, combined with her provocative gait, should have attracted all the eyes of the tradesmen. But to my surprise, none of the men looked at her. Either they

were already used to the provocative sight, or they had already witnessed one of Cathy Wugner's outbursts of anger and wanted to avoid any eye contact with the spirited woman. I guessed the latter and surmised that the hay fever-like appearance of the interior designers was also due to Cathy Wugner's moods. I remembered her last tirade all too well, in which she had loudly belittled me just because I had suggested an alternative to pink marble. And she had actually been in a good mood that day, at least no mice had crossed her path. Today was obviously different.

"Bloody bastards!" Cathy Wugner jumped to the side as a little mouse rushed past her. "It's like a ghetto here!"

She shrieked as the animal made a rash hook and sought a way out from between her legs. Cathy Wugner frantically tried to murder the poor mouse with several kicks and the targeted use of her high heels. And even though I should certainly be the last person to condemn such leaping acts, I found it morally highly reprehensible that the stupid goat tried to kill this innocent and harmless little animal so brutally. The poor mouse was in a panic and made itself very small on the skirting board. When Mrs Wugner tried to kick it again, and this time quite deliberately, I pushed it aside with a swing so that it landed on its crunchy backside.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she shouted.

The mouse raced away and made it to safety.

"Excuse me." I helped Cathy Wugner to her feet again, which wasn't so easy in those high heels. "I felt dizzy for a moment and lost my balance. I hope you didn't hurt yourself?"

"Got dizzy? You pushed me full Lotte away!"

"Sorry, my circulation."

At that moment, Pablo came running up with a worried look on his face. "Are you okay? I heard you shouting?"

"Yeah yeah, I'm fine." Cathy Wugner patted the dust off her skimpy clothes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked my boss.

"Well, you're a bit overdue," Pablo began. "It's also difficult to reach by phone and Mrs Wugner *needed to talk* a lot."

"I am so annoyed!" Cathy Wugner's voice was tinnitus-inducing. "Nothing is going the way it should!"

"We're just a little behind schedule," said Pablo in a sonorous voice.

"Eight weeks already! That's not a bit! And I still don't see any end in sight!" Cathy Wugner replied angrily. "What do you intend to do about the plague of mice?"

Pablo remained surprisingly calm, downright relaxed. "I've looked at all the critical areas and will speak to the workmen straight away. We can probably work on something straight away, i.e. seal it up. However, some pipes and cables will probably have to be relaid, but before that we'll try to chase the animals out of the house by any means necessary."

"Then don't just stand here looking so stupid! Now do something!"

Despite Mrs Wugner's impertinent tone, Pablo still remained very friendly, almost charming. How did he do that? I knew that he hated the Wugners at least as much as I did, but he had a much better grip on

himself. He was just like I used to be.

"I'll get everything organised straight away," he said in an emphatically friendly manner, nodded to her with a smile and walked smoothly out of the room. It was great how convincingly Pablo kept up the façade.

"What a poo day!" Cathy Wugner's loud voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Yes. It happens," I endeavoured to adopt a sympathetic tone, following my boss's example.

Cathy Wugner raised an eyebrow. "You're not entirely innocent of this!"

I had feared something like this, although I was of the opinion that the mice were actually the main cause of my customer's temporary upset.

She energetically entered the empty kitchen, in the centre of which she turned in a somewhat listless circle. "This is where the kitchen unit should be."

A completely daft idea. The kitchen unit would be in the middle of the room, which is a good fifty square metres in size, metres away from the fridge, sink and all the other important appliances. Even someone who had no sense of space would never make such a stupid suggestion. But once again, I endeavoured to answer as diplomatically as possible. "Isn't that a bit far away from the worktops?"

"I don't care. I'm not cooking anyway." Cathy Wugner put her arm on her hip and looked at me with a feigned bedroom expression that she was clearly trying to provoke me with. "But do you know what I'm going

to do in this kitchen?"

"No. Feel free to tell me."

"I'm going to let my husband fuck me really hard."

The abrupt change of subject came as a surprise. What was the woman trying to tell me? I thought it was appropriate to take her remark as a joke and tried to laugh in amusement, whereupon Cathy Wugner immediately gave me a dirty look.

"OK, I see," I said quickly. Mrs Wugner seemed to take the remark seriously. Even though she was probably twenty-five years younger than me and should therefore have a functioning libido, I was worried about her testosterone levels at that moment. Could she be suffering from a pathological overproduction? "Are you all right?" I asked, slightly concerned.

"I would feel better if my day had started differently."

"Sure," I said without making a face and wondered whether the comment referred to my late arrival or perhaps to her not coming at all. After all, she didn't have a kitchen block at the moment and therefore perhaps no opportunity to perform the sexual act?

"Anyway, the kitchen block should be in the centre. My husband loves it when I lean over the kitchen unit and he leans over me ..."

I faked a very loud coughing fit. Why did this woman think I would be interested?

"And he's persistent, very persistent, if you understand."

Even though the whole thing had a certain humour to it, it was clearly going too far for me, whether it was provocation or serious

nonsense. I coughed even louder, which only meant that Cathy Wugner had to wait for my coughing fit before she continued.

"I would like you to take our preferences into account when planning."

"No problem," I gasped, having no idea how to take such information into account. "Should I have certain grab rails fitted to the kitchen unit?"

Cathy Wugner grimaced. "Of course not. This isn't going to be a swingers' club. What would our guests think then? No, but the kitchen block has to be solid, because ..."

"Okay." I really didn't want to hear any more details. "I'll have it cast out of concrete. Then you can jump on it with ten people."

She looked at me, annoyed. "I just said we're not swingers."

"Sure. It was just an example of mine." How could I end this sex topic? "Have you thought about where the seating area should be?"

"It would be nice if we could get large kitchen sofas so that ..."

"That's no problem at all," I interrupted her and made a note.

"I hope the mice will soon no longer be a problem either."

"I assume so. I'll discuss everything with my boss in a minute."

Fortunately, Mrs Wugner got a call and our appointment was cancelled at short notice.

Her appearance left me irritated. I almost felt sorry for the young woman. It couldn't end well if you defined yourself by your sexuality like that. What would a woman like her do if her libido weakened one day? Or



her husband's?

Even for someone like me, who had spent her life doing other things in the kitchen than Cathy Wugner, the weakening libido was sometimes disturbing. I didn't enjoy constantly rejecting Jörn either, but I didn't enjoy getting over myself for his sake either. Then there were the changes to my body, which I couldn't really accept either. It was a mystery to me how Mrs Wugner was going to cope with her tiny arms and hanging breasts.

Fortunately, these weren't really my problems. It wasn't as if I didn't have any of my own.

*This libido topic is still taboo, am I right? Or do you talk openly with your husband at home about why you have less desire than when you were twenty? I thought so.*

*If you ask me, our society is completely oversexualised. On every corner, whether in the analogue or digital world, half-naked or completely naked people in sexy poses are lurking. Fifty-year-old women like Heidi Klum want us to believe that they have a similar kitchen routine to Mrs Wugner, which seems very unlikely to me, if only because of Mrs Klum's workload. Nevertheless, like almost every celebrity, she obviously feels compelled to share her insanely good sex life with the public. Sex is simply everywhere.*

*Is that why we have such problems talking about a lack of desire? I don't know exactly. Or is it not rather the case that the person who loses their libido has no problem with it in principle? Along the lines of: What's not on my mind doesn't bother me? Does the problem perhaps only arise with a partner who is determined to continue where they started as a teenager?*

*Thank you, I also realise that it's absurd to worry about this while a dead*

*dealer is decomposing under your compost. But I've already mentioned that I found it difficult to keep my thoughts focussed.*

When I got home, I still hadn't eaten anything, even though it was now afternoon. Jörn greeted me at the front door, pulled me close and kissed me like a Cathy Wugner would have done.

"The children are all on their way ..." he whispered in my ear.

I freed myself from his embrace. "Fine. I need a coffee and a roll now." I had forgotten the bread rolls again. "Or a slice of dry bread," I added wearily.

It beeped in my pocket.

Jörn didn't give up that easily. He followed me into the kitchen like a dog to its mistress and shortly afterwards wrapped his arms around my hips.

"How about we have a short ..."

"Here in the kitchen?" I realised immediately that my voice sounded a little too upset. "What is it with everyone having kitchen sex?"

"What?" Jörn's face was a single question mark. "I can't remember the last time we had sex in the kitchen."

"It's total rubbish that everyone always has to shag in the kitchen!"

Jörn lowered his arms. "Always, everyone ... if that's not an exaggeration, I don't know what is. We can also go into the bedroom?"

"Thank you. But I'm really not in the mood for sex right now." I pressed the button on our Jura machine and managed to put a cup underneath at the last second before the coffee splashed out.

It beeped in my pocket again.

"Same as always," muttered Jörn disappointedly. But then he nodded understandingly. "Sorry, I'd forgotten that you're on your period."

"What makes you think that?" I said a little too quickly. Then I remembered the bloodstained trousers. "Oh, that's right."

"How can you forget that?"

"You're a man, you don't understand." I smiled apologetically at him. "That was just a joke. I've just got something else on my mind at the moment."

"Like what?"

"The thing with ..." I almost told Freddy, "... Eva just won't let me go."

"They're definitely still having sex," Jörn said in an envious voice. It beeped again. "Why is your mobile phone beeping all the time?"

"I have no idea. Someone is obviously sending me messages. What do I know?"

"Any ... *lover*?"

"Are you crazy?"

Jörn shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe that's the reason why you don't want to sleep with me anymore."

"What are you talking about?" Did everything today revolve around sex all the time?

"It's okay." He patted my cheek somewhat paternally. "I'm going for a run."

"It's better."

Jörn disappeared upstairs to get changed. I dug my mobile phone out of my pocket and was amazed to see that I hadn't received a single message. At the same moment, it beeped again.

Freddy ... went through my head, and I realised that I was already calling the dead dealer by his name in my mind as if he was actually my lover. I rummaged in my bag and finally found the dealer's mobile phone at the bottom among chewing gum and old receipts.

Twelve new messages. That was all I could read on the display. The mobile phone wanted Freddy's fingerprint for more information.

I thought about it. Was it important for me to know the content of the messages? Well, it could be important. It could have something to do with Hannes, in which case it was extremely important.

My heart beat faster. Of course there was a way to get Freddy's fingerprint on the display. But it wasn't particularly nice.

Okay, I thought to myself and took a deep breath. I still had to bring Mr Kriemer the money anyway.

"I have to go again!" I shouted into the stairwell.

"To get bread rolls?" Jörn's voice clearly had a mocking undertone.

"No, something delicious for dinner!" I shouted back, hoping very much that I wouldn't forget this time.

To be on the safe side, I went to the supermarket first, bought some bratwurst and potato salad from the fresh food buffet and cycled on to the allotment site.

Mr Kriemer's flat was right next to the plant. I smiled a little uncertainly as I handed him the envelope with the five thousand euros.

"For you. As promised."

Mr Kriemer gave me a meaningful look, but said nothing, took the envelope and handed me the keys.

"Here's to being good garden neighbours then," he mumbled and set about counting the notes.

"You won't regret your decision." I beamed at him demonstratively and hoped that I was right with this statement. With a corpse in the compost, a good neighbourhood could fall apart pretty quickly.

"You'll have to transfer the other five to the previous owners." He handed me a piece of paper with the contact details.

"I will." If I don't forget. "Thank you."

I hurried to my newly acquired property, paused briefly and used the good WiFi to make the online transfer for the previous owners, took a deep breath and then bravely pulled the tarpaulin off the compost to dig in it with my bare hands.

"Bah," I said unfairly when I had Freddy's hand in mine. It felt disgusting, so cold and damp and somehow fake. Just dead.

I took his thumb and pressed it on the display. It immediately unlocked the mobile phone.

In the meantime, more messages had arrived. A certain Hugo seemed rather bad-tempered and wanted to know where his money from selling drugs was. Each time his messages read more aggressively. The

others were from an Iza who was worried and asked why Freddy hadn't contacted her. They all ended with a little heart emoji. She was obviously his girlfriend.

I had to take another deep breath. My guilty conscience in view of the fact that I had smashed Freddy's head in was already pretty strong. But the fact that, contrary to my assumption, there was obviously someone who loved this guy was the last straw.

I slumped down next to the half-buried Freddy and howled like a castle dog. Maybe this woman was pregnant? Or maybe she already had a bunch of kids from that bastard? Or both, like Eva? Maybe this was supposed to be his last deal with Hannes, and after that he wanted to look after his loved ones as a devoted family man? Rescue animals in need? Children in Africa?

Another beeping noise snapped me out of my thoughts.  
the crackies at neumarkt are also waiting.

The message was from Hugo. And it reassured me a little. Freddy didn't seem to have been such an incredibly good person after all.

It beeped again. Iza.

as always tomorrow in game over? 10 o'clock?

Was that a café? Or a pub? Probably, I thought, and quickly typed:  
yes.

Oestrogen is also responsible for the infamous mare biting. Scientists suspect an evolutionary strategy in the battle for the most attractive partners or potential fathers behind this behavioural pattern, which is caused by hormonal fluctuations. If the oestrogen disappears, the biting mare also disappears.

At least a little.

The night had once again been rather sleep-deprived, which didn't surprise me given the circumstances I was currently in. In addition, I had unfortunately dozed off in front of the TV with sausages and potato salad in the evening, and this power nap, which didn't really deserve its name, had finally deprived me of a good night's sleep.

After finding the bar *game over* on the internet, I wanted to steal out of the house in the morning as inconspicuously as possible. This turned out to be more difficult than expected, as Jörn had secretly prepared a sumptuous Sunday breakfast.

"I got some bread rolls," he greeted me and added with a grin: "It's not that difficult."

"Oh, that's sweet. Unfortunately, I don't have much time ..."

"It's Sunday, Livi, you'll probably have time for a quick breakfast." He put a freshly brewed coffee down for me and sat down.

"I still have to see this demanding customer ..."

My guilty conscience. Jörn tried so hard to be a real model husband and I behaved as if I was on the run from him.

Accordingly, he looked up reproachfully. "Then maybe she'll have to wait a few minutes. I have a feeling we're only seeing each other in passing. We need to have a chat sometimes!"

"Sure." I glanced furtively at the kitchen clock. I still had an hour if I wanted to be in this bar on time at ten. Even if it was a world's journey from the south of Cologne to Eigelstein, I could make it, even if I had breakfast with my husband for fifteen minutes. On Sundays, the traffic



was generally harmless, even in a city like Cologne, which was completely lost in terms of transport.

So I sat down and took a sip of my coffee, went "Mmmm" a little too loudly, as if it was the first latte of my life, and praised the roasted flavours, which was kind of absurd. Jörn looked at me in silence and I got the feeling that he was trying to tell me something.

"You wanted to have a chat?" It was more of a statement than a question from me. "Did something happen? Any problems?"

"What do you mean, problems?" Jörn cut open a bread roll and smeared butter all over it. He kept running the knife back and forth as if he wanted to spread it over every last crumb.

"More butter?" I asked jokingly.

He grinned briefly. Then he put the knife aside and sighed. "I have a feeling we're in for a few challenges."

Any more challenges? In my case, I had the feeling that I was working to capacity.

"What do you mean? Something about the kids that I don't know about?" Like you about Hannes' drug escapades? "Are there any blue letters?"

Jörn shook his head. "I'm afraid it's more complicated than that. I've had a look at our bank statements. Unfortunately, we're currently in the red ..."

Werner. Of course he did. Now I realised what he wanted to talk about. There were horse races at the weekend. My father-in-law had probably gone all out again yesterday - and lost everything. And Jörn had

paid off his father's gambling debts, as he always did - instead of talking to him about this problem, which was obviously getting bigger.

"If you want to maintain a certain standard of living, you have to be able to afford it," I began to concretise the sensitive topic as carefully as possible. I knew how difficult it was for my husband to talk about it. Which I could certainly understand. On the one hand, he had a good relationship with his parents, but on the other, he found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they were getting older. And he simply ignored the fact that they were now as old as the hills, just like Werner's passion for betting, which got more and more out of hand as he got older.

Jörn made a sad face. "Yes, I know. You have to be able to afford your life."

Cautiously, I kept trying. "And when there's no more money coming in, you just have to change your lifestyle. Then you can't do everything."

"Many people feel the same way."

"Absolutely. Nobody is alone with this problem at the moment, it affects a lot of people. I also understand that it's not easy to let go of cherished habits and realise that certain things are a thing of the past ..."

"No, it's certainly not that."

"And you certainly shouldn't forget the health aspect either."

Jörn furrowed his brow in irritation. "What kind of health aspect?"

"Well, it's basically an addiction, a disease, just like any other addiction." I thought it was time to finally talk straight. If something didn't happen soon, Werner would gamble away his house and farm, including

ours.

"What do you mean by addiction?"

Now Jörn seemed a bit stupid to me for a moment. He might already know what all fell under a gambling addiction.

"Betting! Horse betting, sports betting, that's nothing more than gambling. And gambling can be addictive," I explained to him. "Just like alcohol or drugs. With the same addictive pressure and the same withdrawal symptoms."

"Ah!" Jörn had understood. "You mean my father?"

What kind of question was that? "Yes, of course. That's what we talk about all the time. But it doesn't help if we're the only ones talking about it. You have to tell him everything, urgently! Werner has to understand that things can't go on like this."

Jörn chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. I suppressed a sigh. Apparently he still couldn't bring himself to broach this problematic subject with his father.

I put a hand on his arm. "I know this is difficult for you. But there's no other way. You have to tell him that we can no longer pay for all his debts. How much did he gamble away yesterday?"

Jörn shrugged his shoulders dejectedly.

"And today he's going back to the racetrack?"

Another shrug of the shoulders.

"Sort it out, okay?"

He nodded hesitantly and looked like a heap of misery. For a

moment, I thought about simply forgetting about this Iza and looking after my depressed husband. But unfortunately that wasn't an option. This woman was looking for Freddy, and if she found him, I wouldn't be able to look after my husband at all for the next fifteen years, only my cell.

"We'll talk again later, okay?" I said and stood up.

"Hm. Sure," he replied, lost in thought.

"See you later," I said, hoping that he wouldn't ask why I had to see a customer on a Sunday. Fortunately, he seemed to be thinking about his father so much that he didn't say anything more.

Perhaps it wasn't a bad thing if he could think about the problem in peace for a while without me having to constantly point it out to him. I've always found these women who felt compelled to constantly tell their husbands what to do and what not to do unpleasant.

*Ah, you feel addressed? Are you already adopting a defensive stance? I understand that very well. Of course your husband only understands certain things if you point them out to him. All women around the world believe that. However, I personally now assume that it's not a question of understanding, but of not caring. Because now think about how well pointing it out works. Exactly.*

*Nevertheless, elementary things must of course be addressed, which I would include the uncontrolled outflow of money from our account. Yes, that's right, even if it's used to pay for allotments. My mistake. And no, I don't want to discuss other elementary things like dead dealers or the like right now. Thank you.*

The Eigelstein has always been the neighbourhood in Cologne where the red light was at home. In the seventies, it was one of the most disreputable corners of the city, perhaps even the whole of Germany,

where pimps like Schäfers Nas had made a dubious name for themselves. Although gentrification had also taken hold here in recent years, and formerly run-down attic flats had been turned into exclusive maisonettes, this had not, by any stretch of the imagination, driven away all those working in the horizontal trade.

On this Sunday morning, most of the cafés and breakfast bars were well filled with their hip clientele. *Game Over* was not one of them. The space and guests were the exact opposite of hip, and the name of the bar seemed to have been aptly chosen. While the other bars scored with a mixture of upcycled furniture and vintage chic, fair trade coffee and spelt muffins, *game over* had remained true to its worn, decades-old wooden chairs that you couldn't even sell at a flea market. The black tables were battered and scratched, and the whole musty place smelled of beer and body odour. A long bar ran along the right-hand wall through the room, at the end of which a figure sat on a bar stool with his head resting on the counter. In the area in front of it, there were mostly women sitting at the tables, drinking coffee or Kölsch and eating breakfast. From their outward appearance, I deduced that they had worked through the night. Most of them were wearing tight, short skirts and high heels, their bright make-up was smudged and their tousled hair was slowly falling apart. They looked exactly as costume designers would dress up members of the horizontal trade in an early evening series. Clichés were no accident.

I felt a little uncomfortable as I walked through the dining room, almost like a foreign body, which I somehow was. A few women looked up and scrutinised me. One of them obviously thought I was a street

worker, at least she made a remark in that direction to her neighbour at the table. But on the whole, fortunately, I was hardly noticed. I didn't need too much attention now, as nervous as I was.

There was only one woman, sitting alone at a table, who kept looking at her mobile phone. She looked young, probably under twenty-five, very slender, almost fragile. Her lips were unnaturally thick and her artificial eyelashes covered her eyes like a curtain as soon as she closed her eyelids. Her pink-painted fingernails were so long that she had difficulty typing on her mobile phone and had to spread her fingers strangely.

Even though I didn't know for sure, I was pretty sure it had to be Freddy's girlfriend. None of the other women seemed to be waiting for anyone.

"Iza?"

Surprised, she looked up from her mobile phone and tossed her long black hair back. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Liv. Can I sit down for a minute?"

Iza shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever." She immediately looked at her mobile phone again.

"Freddy sent me," I said, not knowing exactly where this conversation starter would lead me. It would have been smarter if I'd made a plan beforehand, but a structured, well thought-out approach just wasn't my cup of tea at the moment. When was I supposed to do that? When I dozed off in front of the telly? Yes, maybe. Well, it was too late now. But at least I had Iza's attention.

"Ah! You're Freddy's older sister?"

At least she didn't think I was his mum. Still, it stung me that he had a sister. One more person who would grieve and be sad because of me.

"I thought you had a falling out?" Iza looked at me questioningly. What was that accent? Eastern Europe?

I nodded. "Yes. I haven't had any contact with him for a while, but now he's asked me to speak to you."

"And why?"

I looked round as if to make sure no one could hear us. "He's gone underground." That was kind of true.

Iza's eyes widened. "He wants to get out?"

"Yes, of course it won't be easy, but if we support him, he can do it."

"I give him more than half of my salary. How can I support him any more?"

So that's the kind of friend Freddy had been. A fucking pimp friend.

"At the moment, the best support is to leave him alone for a while so that he can build his new life."

"Does that mean I can keep the money from last night?"

"Definitely yes. You deserve it too. It's a stupid idea to give him so much of it anyway."

Iza didn't think so. "That's just the way it is. It's not as if he doesn't do anything for it."

"Oh yeah? What?"

"If I have problems with a client, he takes care of it. It doesn't happen that often, but if it did, he would be there."

"Because he's always by your side when you're working?" I asked doubtfully.

Iza remained silent. "Procuring isn't your thing, is it?" she said, smiling cautiously.

I returned her smile. "Yes, that's true. It's not my world."

"I never thought I'd do this either." Iza sighed.

"Did you get into it through drugs?" After what I had experienced, that seemed like an obvious thought.

"I don't do drugs." That sounded surprisingly credible. "I was approached on the street back when I was still living in Romania. They asked me if I would like to work as an au pair in Germany. Well, and then it all went in a different direction, and now that's what I'm doing."

"Freddy's making you do this?" I was genuinely horrified. Forced prostitution and human trafficking were a completely different dimension to being a voluntary sex worker.

"No, no, don't worry, your brother has always been good to me." Iza smiled at me almost comfortingly. "He's definitely one of the nice ones. Otherwise he wouldn't be my husband."

"Your husband?" I could only shake my head.

"Well, that's my friend."

"I understood that. But what kind of relationship is that?"



She shrugged her shoulders, disillusioned. "At least he doesn't hit me."

"Others already?" I had a bad feeling.

All cheerfulness suddenly disappeared from Iza's face. "Freddy's boss is pretty strict."

"Hugo?"

"You know him too?" Iza looked surprised. "I didn't realise Freddy had filled you in like that."

"Just a little," I said evasively. "How often does Hugo hit you?"

"Not often." She brushed her long, dark hair to one side, revealing a bruise on her lower right jaw. "Yesterday. He wanted to know where Freddy was, and when I couldn't tell him, he tried to beat it out of me. He's a real wanker. All the girls hate him."

I could see that Iza was trying to keep a tough expression on her face. But her injected lower lip was trembling, at least as much as all the hyaluronic acid or whatever was in there would allow.

I was overcome by a wave of compassion. This young woman had probably grown up in poor circumstances, had been lured to Germany with false promises of a better life and had been mercilessly exploited here by unscrupulous people.

"Hugo said that if Freddy doesn't turn up at his place today and bring the money, I'll have to pay his debt." Iza's voice had become brittle. She looked at me with moist eyes. "Maybe you can tell Freddy to at least bring Hugo the money before he fucks off for good? Otherwise I'll have to pay for it all again."

I nodded, lost in thought. I didn't care about the money for the damn pimp boss. But I had quickly realised one thing: I had to help this woman. After all, it was primarily my fault that she was in this acute emergency situation. If Freddy was still alive, Iza wouldn't have been beaten yesterday and wouldn't have to fear any more violent attacks.

"Freddy wants you to go underground too," I said. "He's organised an allotment for you, with a little house on it." That wasn't actually a complete lie. Without Freddy, I would never have got the allotment.

"Freddy wants me to get out too?"

"Yes. He's prepared everything really well for you. I'd better show you right away."

Iza hesitated. "Right now?"

"Is there anything against it?" Apart from the body, of course, I added in my mind, but I would deal with that next. For now, I had to get Iza away from her brutal pimp boss. "Do you have a child or a cat to look after?"

"No. But why do we have to leave immediately?"

"Because Freddy won't give Hugo the money," I said truthfully. "And because Hugo will beat the living daylights out of you."

Iza had gone pale despite her thick make-up. "Is Freddy in trouble?"

"No, he's got it behind him. Come on, my car is just round the corner."

Iza stood up anxiously and I was amazed at how tall she was. She towered over me by two heads, which was also due to her enormous heels.

"Can we pop round to my place for a minute? I need something else to wear."

Iza had a small one-bedroom flat in a house where only her colleagues lived. It wasn't a brothel though, she explained to me, even though some of the women worked almost permanently from home and the house belonged to Hugo.

"Does he live here too?"

"No, but he's there a lot. Sometimes he spends the night with one, sometimes with the other."

"I see. A boss who *cares*." My voice was dripping with irony.

That didn't seem to go down well with Iza.

"I don't know if I would say that. He himself calls it a quality check."

"For heaven's sake, that's terrible!"

Iza shrugged her shoulders. "Everyday life."

That's all I wanted to hear about it. "Hurry up, will you? I don't want him to see us here anymore."

While I waited in the car, I watched the women coming out of the house or going in. How many wrong turns did you have to take in life to end up here? Or had all the women come here under duress? I had read that ninety per cent of all sex workers did not do their job voluntarily. The article didn't say whether it was necessity or a pimp who forced them to work, but either way I thought it was terrible that these women saw no other alternative for themselves. Most of them had had a difficult start in life, a lot of violence, little education, but a body that men wanted. And at

home, a family that was dependent on the financial support of the procuring daughter. A vicious circle.

I saw it as my moral duty to get Iza out of this life. Because Freddy hadn't turned up at his boss's on time, she had been beaten. If Freddy didn't turn up soon, she would be beaten again and her hard-earned money would be taken from her. And nobody knew better than me that he definitely wouldn't turn up.

I rummaged through my handbag and pulled out his mobile phone. They would keep looking for Freddy. There was obviously far too much money involved for Hugo to simply forget about him. It was only a matter of time before he would locate his mobile phone if he hadn't already tried.

Without further ado, I rolled down my window and threw the pimp's mobile phone unerringly into the drain.

If someone were to locate the mobile phone now, the position of this house inhabited by prostitutes would be displayed. A very obvious location for a pimp, and I hoped that the searcher would then think that everything was fine with Freddy.

*You probably know what it's like when you get into situations that you never wanted to get into and then there's no way out. You just have to get through it. In the past, when the children were small, this kind of thing used to happen a lot. From toilet experiences in supermarkets to spelt biscuit conversations in the playground - all situations I never wanted to get into.*

*And although the thing with Iza and Freddy was clearly in a different category to the arguments with some crazy mums, I was reacting very similarly to how I used to.*

*I couldn't find my way out, I was trapped in a film that I couldn't get out of and that I now had to finish.*

*Unfortunately, I hadn't read the script to the end and therefore had no idea what was still to come.*

Iza stood somewhat perplexed in the allotment shed. The smell of old, damp clothes hung in the small room. The walls and ceiling were panelled with wood and a red and white chequered curtain with dark stains hung in front of the window. The previous owners had left an old couch and a table covered in a thick layer of dust. At the back of the room there was a kind of kitchenette with a hob that ran from the socket. Glasses and some crockery had been left in the cupboard. Dead insects lay on the floor and cobwebs hung in the corners. At least there was running water and electricity.

I could see from Iza's expression that she was thinking about what exactly Freddy had prepared for her.

"It's all a disguise," I tried to explain. "No one would ever think you were hiding here. It was very important to Freddy that everything looked as authentic as possible."

"Authentic means shit?"

I looked at her apologetically. "I know it's a change. But it's only for the transition, just for a short time."

"Why are you so sure about that?"

"Because Freddy is looking for a flat for the two of you. Somewhere abroad. And if I know Freddy, he'll have found it soon - if you still want to move in with him."

"Where else am I supposed to go?"

"There are always alternatives," I said, without having one ready.

"What about your family in Romania?"

"Definitely not an alternative."

"Why?"

"Because it is." Iza pressed her lips together and avoided my gaze.

I had the feeling that further questions about her family were definitely not welcome.

"Have you packed something warm to wear?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I only have things that Freddy likes now. He's coming soon, isn't he?"

"We didn't talk about times." Not a lie either. "I'll bring you a radiant heater."

Iza looked round with a sigh. "All right. I'll be fine for a few days. Is there a bath?"

"A camping toilet. Behind the hut."

"Great."

"And stay away from the compost heap, there's a lot of vermin there that you don't want to have anything to do with."

"This is getting better and better." Iza took a deep breath.

"At least you're safe here. And you don't have to serve men either," I tried to say something encouraging.

"Yes, that's right. It would just be nice if Freddy was here."

He is, I almost said, but nodded instead. "It's best if you don't leave

the hut for a while, then nobody will realise you're here. I'll bring you some bedding and something to eat. You'll see, you can make yourself at home here for a few days. Oh yes, and the WLAN works pretty well."

Iza nodded with a smile. "Thank you, Liv."

"Not for that."

"Yes, exactly for that. Even if this isn't a five-star hotel, I really appreciate what you do for me."

"That's nothing." I felt a blush rise to my face.

"That's a lot," Iza replied seriously. "I've never dared to run away before, and I never would have done it without you."

But that was true. If I hadn't killed her pimp boyfriend, she would still be standing by the road.

And then my conscience came to me again, loudly and even more demanding than it had been knocking on my inner door the whole time, combined with a fair amount of shame. At the same time, almost maternal feelings spread through me that I had never felt before towards a young woman who was actually a complete stranger to me.

"Why don't you think about what your life could look like in the future," I said to her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what else could you do to make a living? Didn't you dream about something when you were a girl?"

Iza thought about it. "I used to want to be an actress. Maybe I could do porn ...?"

"No," I interrupted her, "why don't you think about something where you don't have to sell your body?"

Iza thought for a few minutes again. "Does Freddy already have something in mind for me?"

"Jeez, Iza!" I got upset. "It's about you, your wishes and your ideas! Not those of others! You absolutely have to break away from this guy! It's about your life!"

She looked at me uncomprehendingly. "But he prepared my entire escape."

"Yes, yes. But still." She wasn't hoping for a happy ending with a wedding and all that, was she? "Do you actually love him?"

Iza sighed. "What does it mean to love?"

"Loving means that you can't imagine life without him. Can you?"

Iza's brow furrowed. "I don't know. He always told me what to do. And that's what I did ..."

"Out of love or because he put you under pressure?"

She seemed to be thinking again. "Does it make a difference?"

I had to think about that now. "Perhaps. But I'm not sure. Maybe the only thing that matters is the bottom line."

I could see from the look on Iza's face that she didn't recognise the phrase. "Hm. Anyway, it was always like that. Somehow I thought it was normal, it hadn't been any different in the past, even though there weren't many men in our family. We women took care of everything, worked, did the housework and brought up the children."



"And the men?"

"My grandfather and my uncle are dead. My father was mostly unemployed, and when he did have a job, he got drunk after work. We women did everything else."

"Why?" I really asked myself that. It couldn't all be down to hormones. I myself had the feeling that I had spent years wearing myself out for others, but not because some men had demanded it of me. Or had I subconsciously succumbed to patriarchal social pressure? "Did the men tell you to do everything, or did you just do it?"

Iza shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. It's just always been like this. I came to Germany to lead a different life, a better one. Unfortunately, it didn't really work out that way."

"Then it's high time that changed," I said resolutely.

Apart from humans, there are only four mammal species that go through the menopause - all of them cetaceans. In terms of evolutionary biology, the menopause is therefore a puzzle: why continue to live if fertility dries up? After all, offspring are the goal of all earthly existence - at least that's how the theory of evolution can be interpreted. One hypothesis: the so-called grandmother effect. By supporting their families, grandmothers contribute to the survival of their grandchildren and thus ensure the spread of their genetic heritage.

And what about the survival of daughters-in-law?!

I had prepared myself for a bad mood when I arrived at the kitchen studio on Monday morning. She hadn't been particularly good at home, which she never was on Mondays anyway. Without exception, the children had some kind of jet lag because they had been up far too late at the weekend and had slept in accordingly, and even my husband, who was always in a good mood, had been extremely reluctant to go to the office.

After what I had experienced on the construction site on Saturday, I wouldn't have been surprised if Pablo's mood had been at the same level as my family members. But it wasn't.

"Good morning, Liv. Guess who sent me four voice messages yesterday?"

"Mrs Wugner?"

"Yep. She was on the building site with her husband and he spotted a family of mice. Mum, dad and two dozen kids." Pablo couldn't help but grin.

"I'm glad you can still laugh about it."

"What am I supposed to do?" He grimaced theatrically. "I can't spend the whole day crying about it. And to be honest, the way she got upset was really funny. Here, listen."

He played the voice message and I actually had to laugh now. Cathy Wugner's voice almost broke, she was shouting, screaming and then had a coughing fit that was not far removed from Sophie's vomiting noises.

"Mice are simply annoying," said Pablo and switched his mobile phone off again. "Once you've got them in the insulation, it's hard to get them out again. They breed like rabbits."

"I think worse."

"Yes, that's just nature. I can't hand out any rodent-safe contraceptives right now."

"We should still find out whether they can do anything for us legally," I suggested.

"I already have." Mick had joined him. "The faults can't have been caused during the interior work. The mice are coming in from outside. So there's a leak somewhere. And we shouldn't have anything to do with that."

"They're probably coming over the lowered roof by the wellness area," surmised Franzi, who had been listening from her desk. "I've had something similar before. The mice ran over a climbing rose onto the low roof and up from there. One open window and they were inside."

"The windows were open for days. Dry airing," said Pablo.

"Exactly. It must be a mice neighbourhood, and now the critters have unfortunately got in," Franzi continued. "That's annoying, but it's not our fault."

"Maybe the Wugners see it that way too," said Mick. "Even though they're so upset. Anyway, they paid the first bill today."

My boss breathed a sigh of relief. "Phew. I'm glad about that. Did you send the bill to him or her?"

"To her, just like you said," Mick replied.

"Why is that important?" I wanted to know.

"I've only dealt with Mr Wugner once," explained Pablo. "But I can tell you: he's really difficult."

"Even more difficult than his lovely wife?" I could hardly imagine that. "How does that work?"

"Difficult in a different way," said Pablo. "Mrs Wugner obviously has no connection to money, but her husband does. That's why all the bills go to her, so we don't have to have any more unnecessary discussions. It's enough, after all, with all the other chatter we have with her."

"You're right about that, though." I looked round worriedly. "Do you think we could be stuck with the costs?"

Mick shrugged his shoulders, Franzi made a deliberate face and Pablo nodded slowly.

"I hope not," he said. "But I can't rule it out completely. That's why I'd like you to go there now and see what's going on."

I hesitated. "I actually have another appointment before that." Two, in fact. I preferred not to tell my boss that they weren't work-related. I had promised Iza that I would bring her some things, and then I urgently needed to see my parents-in-law, to whom I had appointed an expert from the health insurance company to categorise their care level. Apart from the fact that my parents-in-law needed care for health reasons, I also hoped that Werner's passion for betting could perhaps be controlled somewhat if a carer looked after him regularly - whom I naturally wanted to familiarise with the problem.

"Liv, the Wugners are our most important customers," Pablo said

urgently. "Please look after them!"

"That's what I do."

"But not hours later again! Let's be honest, scatterbrained employees don't exactly make the situation on site any better!"

That was spot on. And hit my sore spot. I hadn't been myself for a while, forgot everything and got even more confused. Of course, this couldn't go unnoticed by my colleagues in the long run. Did Pablo perhaps think I was not entirely innocent in this mess? Was that just a silent reproach, or perhaps not so silent? Could I have prevented the escalation of the mice if I had intervened more quickly?

I claimed that I only had to stop off at a supplier's and then take care of everything. I drove to the allotment garden colony with a bad feeling. I had bedding and food in the boot, and I had to be very careful that Mr Kriemer didn't see me, otherwise he would have asked stupid questions about why I wanted to make the hut cosy in November of all months. I had also brought Iza a few books.

"I've never read a book all the way through." Curious, she pulled one of the novels out of the box I had packed for her.

"Then it's high time."

"What's it about?" She looked intently at the blurb.

"You'll like this one. It's about a woman who leaves her husband and wants to stand on her own two feet."

"I see." Iza certainly looked interested.

"And you can't do that much here," I continued, "so I thought a bit of reading might be a good change of pace. After all, you can't just stare

at your mobile phone all day." I knew from my children that you could do that.

Iza didn't answer me again, but sat down on the old couch with the book. I didn't have time for any more literary conversations anyway, I had to get to my parents-in-law urgently, where the surveyor was due to turn up in half an hour, and then get back to my job. I texted Mrs Wugner to say that I would be at the building site in an hour and a half and set off.

As I stood outside Marlies and Werner's front door and waited for someone to open it for me, I immediately realised that something was different. That smell ... I couldn't remember the last time it had smelled like that. Was that chlorine cleaner?

"Oh, dear, you didn't have to come all the way," Marlies greeted me. My jaw almost dropped when I saw my mother-in-law. Her hair was dyed a fresh shade of red, perfectly cut and blow-dried, her face was made up with matting make-up, eye shadow and artificial eyelashes! It almost looked like this.

"Marlies, you see - Werner!"

My father-in-law came rushing to us, beaming. Even though he wasn't wearing any make-up, he looked remarkably good. His hair washed and neatly combed to one side, freshly shaved and perfumed, in clean and ironed clothes.

"We've long since finished tidying up," he said, looking astonished at Zack. "You can go ahead and drive again."

Now I noticed it too. The whole flat had been cleaned to a high shine. The floor was spotlessly clean, everything tidy, not a speck of dust

to be seen. Everywhere smelled of fresh detergent and old people's perfume.

Marlies and Werner were excited and in high spirits. And I was slowly but surely becoming suspicious. I suspected what the two of them were up to. They wanted to prevent them from getting a care level!

How had they managed to spruce up the flat so much? And why were they suddenly so excited and agile?

"Hannes helped us," my mother-in-law explained, beaming, after I asked them how they had achieved this miracle. "Werner called him and asked for help and he came straight away."

"And speaking of miracles," Werner added, no less beaming, "Hannes also had something for us."

Marlies nodded enthusiastically. "It really is a miracle cure! No medicine in the world has ever made me so fit! I feel like I'm seventy again!"

"Wait, wait, one thing at a time. Hannes was here?" And not at school?, I added in my mind.

"Yes. A wonderful boy." Marlies spoke at an unusually fast pace. "Takes after his father."

"He helped us clean up and provided us with these great medicines," Werner added. "I could pull up trees! Maybe we'll go round the houses tonight and really let it rip."

"Good idea!" Marlies giggled, and Werner joined in with her giggling.

"Can I see that?"



The two immediately fell silent. The quick glance they exchanged clearly told me that there was no way they were going to show me the stuff.

"You want to take that away from us."

"I would never do that!"

"Yes, I do." My mother-in-law crossed her arms in front of her chest, "You won't."

"Never." My father-in-law also seemed very determined.

"Were those drugs?"

Marlies made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Pff. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Anyone who takes drugs at eighteen is insane, anyone who doesn't at eighty is too!" said Werner and laughed out loud.

Drugs, it went through my head. Hannes had promised me he'd keep his hands off it! And now he had pumped his grandparents full of it? That couldn't be true!

"You can't just swallow any stuff your teenage grandson brings you!" I scolded. "You could have a heart attack! You could have a stroke! Faint and break all your bones! Die, do you understand? Death! Something like that can kill you!"

Marlies rolled her eyes. "What you've got again. You've been flying off the handle so quickly lately!"

"Your nerves have really worn thin," Werner agreed with his wife. "Unlike you."

I gasped for air. "Excuse me?"

"You're probably going through the menopause," Marlies said succinctly. "You're falling apart and you're no longer resilient."

"Menopause? What makes you think that?" I said indignantly, without realising why this assumption actually upset me so much. The menopause wasn't a stigma, a brand or a despicable condition. Or was it?

"Well, you're starting to look like a whale, that's the first unmistakable sign," said my mother-in-law, shrugging her shoulders regretfully. "Well, you'll have to get through it. All women get fatter during the menopause. There's nothing you can do."

I wanted to say something nasty, but to my regret I couldn't think of anything. Besides, the doorbell rang at that moment, and when I saw how quickly and cheerfully the two of them hurried to the entrance, I realised that no care service in the world was going to do any work for me in the near future.

What had Hannes given them? And why? And while I was on the subject of why, why did he help them tidy up and clean? And - even more mysterious - why could he do that?

My mood had hit rock bottom when my mother-in-law carried coffee and biscuits into the living room, emphasised that she had baked everything herself and then told the health insurance company employee about the yoga exercises she supposedly did with Werner every morning. We all knew that was rubbish - except for the expert.

The appointment went exactly as my parents-in-law had obviously planned. In good shape, no care level, the two of them manage perfectly

well on their own - that was the expert's opinion.

"Keep it up," he said, beaming as he said goodbye and shook hands with Marlies and Werner, while giving me a scathing look, as if I were the evil daughter-in-law who wanted to get rid of her parents-in-law.

"Don't worry about us, Liv. Everything will be much easier with Hannes' miracle cure!" Marlies looked downright happy.

"And your extra kilos look good on you too," Werner added conciliatory, staring unabashedly at my stomach and breasts.

"Makes the wrinkles less," Marlies agreed with him. "Besides, there's nothing worse than *lyceum from behind and museum from the front*. You'll be spared that, it's nice too!"

*I'm pretty sure that every one of you has had to deal with the issue of weight gain. And of course, I too have had my pregnancies fall apart and never got my old weight back - but believe it or not, I've always been relatively indifferent. I'm not one of those women who define themselves particularly by their weight; I've never been particularly interested in five kilos more or less. My wardrobe contains trousers in sizes 38, 40 and 42, and depending on my mood, I sometimes wear this size and sometimes that size. Admittedly less so recently.*

*But the way my body reacted when my hormones didn't want to do what they used to do irritated me to be honest - visually as well. Not only were my breasts exploding, but a strange area had also formed around my stomach. It wasn't a classic paunch, more like a kind of life belt around my waist, which hadn't been one for a long time. A little dream.*

Although I had to go to the Wugners' building site urgently, I didn't drive past until I got home.

"Hannes?" I shouted through the stairwell.

Apparently my voice was threatening enough that my son immediately appeared on the top landing.

"I'm off, English and maths have been cancelled, I swear!" he gushed.

"What did you give Grandma and Grandad?" I thundered back and stomped up the stairs, grabbed my son by the collar and looked at him angrily. "You promised me you'd keep your hands off drugs!"

"Mum, I did too, honestly, relax." Hannes removed my hand from his sweatshirt and gave it a gentle squeeze, as if he was trying to calm me down. "I haven't touched that stuff again. I really haven't."

"But you gave it to your grandparents?"

Hannes bit his lower lip. "I still had a little left over. Not much, really."

"Remainder? What rest?"

He sighed. "I gave them an ecstasy pill. And left two more."

"Excuse me?" I was on the verge of forgetting my non-violent upbringing.

"This stuff isn't strong, it's really only very light," Hannes stammered. "Grandad rang me and asked me to help them because you want to send them to a home."

"What?!"

"Yes. If they don't tidy up and clean everything by the time this guy arrives, he'll take them right away."

"What a load of bollocks! It was only about a care service, not a home!"

"But they told me that. So I went to help them," said Hannes. "And then Grandma literally begged me to give her something to cheer her up. If there's one thing ecstasy can do, it's that. It's really quite harmless!"

"Ecstasy! Harmless? Tell me, are you still completely clean?" I could feel the heat rising in my face with anger, this time definitely not hormonal. "Your grandparents aren't some silver surfers who can try out a little something! They're very old, oh my, very old people. One of them has survived a serious cancer, the other has diabetes to the power of ten! Even a cold can send them to their grave!"

"But they seemed quite lively earlier." Hannes grinned, and at that moment my hand actually slipped. The slap may not have been particularly resounding, but it was strong enough to leave a mark on his cheek.

Startled, Hannes stared at me and rubbed his sore cheek.

"Never, you understand, you will NEVER touch that stuff again," I choked out. "Neither to put it in your mouth, nor to give it to anyone else. And certainly not a ninety-year-old senior citizen! Do we understand each other?"

Hannes was visibly in shock. "Yes. Sure. Sorry, mum."

"House arrest and pocket money withdrawal!"

"But mum!"

"For a month!"

"What?"

"Two! Now get out of my sight!"

Sighing, Hannes turned round and went back to his room. My pulse was at two hundred, maybe even higher. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so upset in my life.

The idea that he could have killed my parents-in-law with the stuff wouldn't let me go. The fact that they would have been dead was one thing. The other was the immense guilt that my son would have had to live with. If anyone knew how difficult that was, it was me, and I was almost certain that Hannes wouldn't have been able to deal with it. And Jörn? How was he ever supposed to cope with his own son killing his parents? Was there perhaps some kind of killer gene in our family that first broke through in me and now in Hannes?

I racked my brains as to how Hannes could have done such a thing and, above all, blamed myself. Perhaps we hadn't taught him enough about drugs, hadn't warned him enough about the dangers. We had talked a lot about smoking weed because it could destroy young people's brains. But with everything else, I didn't think it was possible that Hannes could ever come into contact with it.

How naive I had been.

Ecstasy. I had no idea how the drug worked and what consequences it could have. Of course, I had smoked pot once in my youth, but that was all I had to offer in terms of drug experience. That's probably why I couldn't imagine my son trying something like that.

I nervously paced back and forth in the kitchen while I googled the drug on my mobile phone. I read that the effects could last between

three and twelve hours, followed by a state of physical exhaustion that could be accompanied by sleep and concentration problems, depression and anxiety. And that, above all, consumers had to be careful not to become dehydrated.

That's great. My parents-in-law didn't drink enough anyway!

Then I read that an ecstasy pill cost ten euros.

*10 for you is 100 for me.*

I had always assumed that Hannes had wanted to buy some weed that evening. I'd only had a quick look in Freddy's bag, but I remembered pills packed in small plastic bags. Obviously ecstasy, which was probably lying under the compost heap by the hundred. No wonder Hugo didn't want to give it up just like that.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure at the window and flinched in horror. And then a second time when I realised that it was my own reflection.

*Like a whale*, Marlies had said to me. And even if the old lady had been high on drugs at the time, she wasn't entirely wrong in her assessment. It was high time I faced up to the problem. The weight gain was one thing. But if the menopause was causing me to kill people, beat my son and become overwhelmed by my elderly parents-in-law's drug use, then I needed to take action. Okay, the latter would have overwhelmed me at any stage of my life, but it wasn't just the ecstasy that was stressing me out, there were much more mundane reasons.

Without further ado, I contacted my gynaecologist.

"Complaints or prevention?", Mrs Schubert, the receptionist,

asked me when I wanted to make an appointment.

"Kind of both. It could be that I'm going through the menopause."

"Oh," she just said and seemed to be looking for a suitable date on her computer.

Oh? In the sense of: *Oh, you poor thing has got it too?* Or *Oh, your metabolism has hit the age button?* Or was this Mrs Schubert perhaps going through the menopause herself and wanted to express her solidarity with the Oh?

"May I ask how old you are?" I asked into the receiver, trying to remember the receptionist's face.

"Thirty-three. Why?"

So no menopause. But maybe she knew about another of my problems. "Can you tell me the quickest way to stop an ecstasy high?"

Silence on the line. Didn't the woman know, or didn't she want to tell me?

"Do you have experience with ecstasy? Can you help me with that?" I insisted.

I heard a clearing of the throat. "Drugs are not the solution," said Mrs Schubert in an empathetic voice. "The menopause is certainly annoying, but it's no reason to numb yourself with drugs."

"No, no, that's a misunderstanding ..."

"Can you come round first thing tomorrow?" There was an undertone of urgency in Mrs Schubert's voice. She obviously thought I was an emergency now.



"Yes, the sooner the better."

"Good." She suggested a time and we ended the call.

That's great. How was I supposed to go to the surgery tomorrow if all the staff now thought I was a junkie?

I got a phone call. Pablo.

"Have you finished with the Wugners yet?"

"Erm - almost. I'm still in the middle of a conversation, I'll call you back." I quickly pressed out the mobile phone and hurried out of the house.

I wasn't a fan of hectic and time pressure. By now, I was much more stressed than I was a few years ago. The traffic situation in Cologne was notoriously precarious, and a nervous and abusive female driver did the rest. In the meantime, I had developed a distinct case of car Tourette's. Behind the wheel, I was swearing and grumbling with expressions and rants that I would never normally use. Words crossed my lips that I not only didn't normally use, but that I also despised and punished my children for saying. But under time pressure in a traffic jam in the city centre, all the stress valves opened and let out everything ordinary.

When I finally reached the construction site, Cathy Wugner had just left, as the workers told me.

"She was pretty angry," said one of the electricians. "Probably doesn't feel properly sorry for herself."

"And what's the situation on the rodent front?" I asked.

"Modestly. Let me show you something."

I followed the man into the kitchen. He stopped in front of the recesses for the built-in cupboards. The cover of a pipe was visible in the bottom right-hand corner; he carefully removed it and shone his light inside.

"Have a look."

I bent down and took a look into the pipe. At least a dozen pairs of frightened eyes stared at me, and their little furry owners pushed themselves further and further back to escape the beam of light.

"We only installed the cable duct a few days ago and always sealed it professionally. Since we found out about the rodents, we've been paying even more attention to making sure everything is really tight," the workman explained to me.

"Well, it can't have been that dense, otherwise the beasts wouldn't be where they are."

The man shook his head sceptically. "Nah, we've really been paying attention. Do you know what I believe now?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me."

He looked around as if to make sure no one heard him. "That the Wugner himself had something to do with it."

"Cathy Wugner?"

He nodded with a meaningful expression.

"You mean she planted the mice on the construction site herself?"

An astonishing suspicion.

"Think about it," said the man in a conspiratorial tone. "This

woman only has extra wishes. She always wants something different or new. She causes enormous costs. Wouldn't it be nice if you could say afterwards that the costs were incurred during the sloppy construction? Then you could also refuse to pay for everything in the end."

"She has already paid one bill."

"One! That's nothing. A reassurance bill, the big end is yet to come. Just google it. There are enough reports about people who have sabotaged their own construction site."

"And who got away with it?" I asked.

"Well, yes. Of course, only those who were exposed were reported. Otherwise it wouldn't have come out."

"That's right." The man got me thinking. Pablo had also expressed the concern that they could end up with a lot of expenses. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed to me that Cathy Wugner had something to do with it. I could at least believe her behaviour. She was at the building site every day and was always in a bad mood. Actually, most of the time she was just upset - which could also fit in with the man's theory. "Okay, if you're right, we'll have to stop the woman somehow," I thought aloud. "Should the interiors also be under video surveillance?"

"No, just the outside area."

"When will the camera at the entrance be operational?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "If the cables weren't constantly being snapped, the system could have been running long ago. But it's difficult to make a forecast like this."

"What about a dummy?"

"What about it?"

"I meant to say, would it be an idea to hang a dummy on the front door for the time being?" I specified my question. "If Mrs Wugner thinks the surveillance is already working, she wouldn't carry out any more manipulations. The risk of her being found out would be far too great."

The man nodded with a smile. "That's a pretty good idea."

"Thank you."

"I'll discuss it with my colleagues straight away ..."

I held him back by the arm. "No, no. This has to stay between us. If everyone on the construction site knows about it, word will get back to Mrs Wugner."

"All right. But I have to at least tell the colleague who's installing the surveillance system. Otherwise he'll notice."

"But apart from that, not a word to anyone!"

He held up his thumb and disappeared.

Perhaps it was an idea to deter Mrs Wugner from further attempts at sabotage, but it was by no means a solution to the mouse problem. The little rodents would hardly get ready to leave at the sight of the dummy camera, so someone else had to do it. And even though I really didn't want to be responsible for the end of another life, I had no other choice and pressed the contact number for the exterminator, who promised to come round quickly.

I looked at my watch. It was high time I paid another visit to my drug-loving parents-in-law.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I parked my car in front of their house a good half hour later. The music, I think Elvis, was blaring outside and I could see them dancing through the living room window. They looked fit and in a great mood. For a moment, I wondered if Hannes had been right. Was it acceptable to take drugs at a certain age?

When nobody opened the door after ringing several times, I went in with my spare key. Even though I felt like the biggest spoilsport, the first thing I did was turn down the music so that they would even notice me.

"Don't overdo it," I said admonishingly.

"Don't be such a party pooper!" Werner turned the music up again. "We're doing great!"

He tried to get down on his knees in best rock 'n' roll style, swayed and landed laughing on the seat of his trousers. Marlies was also laughing her head off. She had thrown herself into one of her old fifties dresses, which she had heaps of in the wardrobes but could no longer fasten at the back.

I turned the music down again and helped Werner to his feet. "Have you injected yourself yet?"

"Heroin?" The two of them snorted.

"Enormously funny," I said seriously. "Did you take your insulin, yes or no?"

"I don't know exactly," Werner chuckled and continued to prance around the room with Marlies.

After checking Werner's blood sugar, I made sure they both drank

a large glass of water and gave them something to eat.

"Sweet, how worried you are!" Marlies spun round, almost losing her balance. "We're better off than we've been for years and you're treating us like the end is near."

"Firstly, the end is approaching automatically at almost ninety," I said, "and secondly..."

"Rubbish! We'll do another twenty years!" Werner interrupted me, chuckling.

"... And secondly, you took drugs, you know? Drugs."

"I used to smoke weed in the sixties!" Marlies giggled.

"You never told me anything about that!" Werner got artificially upset. Dancing, he gripped his wife's hips. "Maybe we should catch up on all this free love stuff ..."

Werner nibbled on Marlies' wrinkled neck, which looked like he was trying to stretch the skin. Marlies couldn't stop giggling.

Rarely has the time to say goodbye been clearer. "Can I leave you alone too?"

"Do you want to watch?" Marlies snorted.

"All right. I'm out." I quickly grabbed my jacket.

"Say hello to Hannes!" Werner called after me. "He's the best grandchild in the world."

"And he should come and visit us again soon," added Marlies cheerfully.

"Oops, your dress is open..." I heard Werner whisper at that

moment.

I had never left my parents-in-law's house so quickly.

But when I sat in the car and steered it onto the road, I had to laugh out loud. They were crazy, they always had been, even twenty years ago when I met Jörn. I still took their drug abuse seriously, but my biggest worry had largely disappeared. Yes, they were old and not particularly healthy by any stretch of the imagination, but at the moment they seemed to be doing great. I hadn't seen them this fit and agile for years, and I hoped that their condition wouldn't change.

I wisely ignored the voice inside me telling me that this wouldn't work.

Until not so long ago the menopause and its symptoms were the poor relation of gynaecology many women used to be widowed by the time they reached the menopause, which is why all problems relating to sexuality were often no longer an issue

Secondly in earlier times a woman only survive the menopause by a few years anyway before passing away thanks to the low life expectancy Rigor mortis instead of hot flushes. Sometimes not an entirely unattractive thought.



I had spent half the night thinking about how I could get rid of Freddy for good. After all, I couldn't wait until he had become one with the compost heap and had completely decomposed. But where to put him? And even if I could find a suitable place for him, how would I get him out of the allotment without anyone noticing? I hadn't found a solution yet, and unfortunately I also had a few other things to tick off my problem agenda today.

I had told Pablo that I would be coming to the kitchen studio later because of a doctor's appointment. But before I went to my gynaecologist, I naturally dropped in on Marlies and Werner again. I couldn't help worrying that the two of them might not have survived their drug binge quite as unscathed as the users, who were otherwise a good seventy years younger, might have done. I realised that it was not unjustified as soon as I unlocked the front door. No question, the party was over and drugs were clearly not the recommended way to get through old age in a stable way. What a surprise.

My parents-in-law were lying on the sofa in their clothes from the day before, the TV was on and they were asleep, even though it was already nine o'clock. The smell in the living room reminded me of a cougar cage, and for a moment I wasn't sure if they were still alive. Until I was relieved to hear the steady snoring.

"Marlies? Werner! Hey, hello, wake up!"

I switched off the TV, pulled up the shutters and threw open the

windows so that no one else died of carbon dioxide poisoning.

"What's going on?" My mother-in-law was the first to come back to life. She struggled to get up. She looked completely deranged. Her make-up was smudged, a pair of false eyelashes was stuck to her chin and chocolate was stuck in her hair, which had been so elaborately styled yesterday. Her fifties dress had slipped halfway down, exposing her skin-coloured underwear. "I'm exhausted ..." Marlies groaned and rested her head on the back of the sofa.

Werner didn't even sit up. His face contorted with pain, he grabbed his temples. "My head feels like I've been drinking all night ... and I haven't had a drop to drink!"

"That's probably the problem," I said, picking up a bottle of mineral water and pouring them both a large glass. "Drink it. Right now."

For once, they didn't object and drank the water thirstily.

"Stroke? Heart attack?" I asked the two other possible causes of her condition. They both looked at me, perplexed.

"Both smile once and raise your arms."

"Excuse me?"

"Grin, both of you, and arms up, go!"

They both lifted the corners of their mouths and arms somewhat listlessly.

"No stroke. Good. Do you have pain in your left arm, Werner?"

"No. I'm not having a heart attack."

"You?" I turned to Marlies. "Stomach ache or shortness of

breath?" My mother-in-law shook her head. "Well, the heart attack seems to have passed you by. Which is not to be taken for granted! Were you even in bed?" I spoke to them in the same tone of voice I usually used with my children.

"No." Marlies sounded pained. "These tablets were so good for us, we took some more in the evening ..."

"Which one? How much is which?"

Werner shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "I don't know any more. But only Hannes'. Nothing else."

Should I now be glad that they hadn't thrown some medication at me? I decided to give them a telling off appropriate to the circumstances.

"Are you insane? I told you to keep your hands off the drugs!" Now it was not only the same tone of voice as with my children, but also the same words. "And what are you doing? You're adding another load!"

"But we were doing so well with it." Marlies grimaced sorrowfully. "And then Werner said that we weren't getting any younger either ..."

"Exactly!"

"... and celebrate the festivals as they fall. Don't you, Werner?"

He nodded. "And then we were wide awake the whole time." Werner rubbed his temples. "We didn't get tired at all."

"Stayed up all night. And must have fallen asleep on the sofa at some point." Marlies groaned. "I feel like I've been put through a meat grinder."

"You look like that too." I thought they deserved a bit of spite.

"You do realise that this could send you to your grave? So even quicker than before?"

"But..."

"Nah, Marlies, no buts. Ecstasy is not without its problems. And then mercilessly overdosing on it comes close to suicide."

My mother-in-law pulled the sleeves of her dress back over her shoulders and stroked her hair, causing the chocolate to fall to the floor. "We don't do this all the time..." she mumbled.

"You'll never do that again, all right?"

They both nodded with a grimace. My eyes fell on a piece of red paper peeking out of Werner's breast pocket. It had probably slipped up a bit due to the stroke test. When I saw the horse's head on the card, I knew immediately what it was.

"Drugs activate the same area of the brain that is stimulated by gambling addiction. That's why you have to be especially careful!" I looked at my father-in-law urgently, but he avoided my gaze.

Marlies looked increasingly irritated. "Then why should Werner take extra care?"

"It doesn't matter now ..." he said quickly.

"Nah, it doesn't matter at all," I got upset, pulled the betting slip out of his breast pocket with a flourish and held it in front of his nose. "Your addiction centre has obviously been activated for a while now. And just as you're losing control with betting, you've now lost it with drugs too."

"What kind of bets?" Marlies seemed completely clueless, which

couldn't really be the case. Where did she think Werner was going all the time? And where had all her money gone? And why did Jörn constantly have to balance her account? "What are you even talking about, Liv?"

"From Werner's horse bets." I didn't have the slightest desire to spare anyone. "This is a betting slip, Marlies," I added meaningfully.

To my surprise, Marlies laughed. "Oh my goodness, Liv! He puts a maximum of five euros on a horse! You can hardly call that an addiction!"

I couldn't believe it. I could understand that Werner hadn't told his wife the full truth about his betting problem, but I couldn't accept it.

"I know you don't care about your finances," I said in an endeavouring neutral voice, "but it can't have escaped your notice that we've been regularly topping up your account for months."

"Huh?"

"Okay, you missed it." I looked piercingly at my father-in-law and waved the betting slip again. "Werner? Would you like me to show it to Marlies, or would you rather explain everything to her yourself?"

I decided to take a closer look at the ticket myself first. But to my surprise, my father-in-law's hand shot forward at that moment, grabbed the betting slip and stuffed it in his mouth.

"Werner?!" Marlies and I shouted at the same time.

My mother-in-law shook her head in bewilderment. "This elixir really isn't for him."

"Ecstasy. Werner! What the hell ...?"

But he had already swallowed the paper. Then he massaged his temples vigorously again, as if the whole action had made him feel terribly stressed. Which was probably the case. "Can we talk about this another time, please? Please?"

I nodded. In this state, a conversation like this was probably really not very useful. "Come on, I'll get you to bed. But when you've slept it off, you tell Marlies everything!"

Werner didn't react and Marlies seemed completely confused. "I don't understand any of this ..." she moaned quietly and let me pull her up from the sofa with a lot of moaning. I hooked them both up and took them into the bedroom, helped them undress and put them to bed.

"Now we're going to sleep and then you'll talk to each other," I said sternly. "I'll find out if you've told Marlies everything, Werner. You can't sneak away any more, can you?"

He made a sound of agreement.

"And drugs, no matter who offers them to you, are taboo from now on. Forever and ever, right?"

"Back when I had breast cancer, I was given opiates ..." Marlies' voice was already very sleepy. "What will I do if the cancer comes back?"

"Firstly, he's not coming back, and secondly, we'll discuss it then. Good night." Annoyed, I pulled the bedroom door shut, but then stood in front of it and listened. Shortly afterwards, I heard them both snoring loudly. I would check on them again in the afternoon, a life check seemed appropriate. After all, it would take a while for the drugs to disappear from their bodies.

When I left the house, I thought about calling the expert from the health insurance company and asking him to come over. He would definitely award them both the highest level of care. But I didn't need to make the call. We had needed six weeks' notice for yesterday's appointment and it was highly unlikely that the man's diary would suddenly allow spontaneous visits.

So I rang the kitchen studio and called in sick for the day. Because that's exactly how I felt.

*There are quite a few challenges in life, as you are of course aware. By now you've got to know me a bit and know that I'm not one of the mimimi faction. I rarely moan or complain, as you probably do too. As a working mum, there's no time for that. But sometimes it does get a bit too much, doesn't it? Hormonally contaminated children at home, where you have to be careful that they don't turn to drugs. Hormonally liberated elderly people who suddenly turn to drugs. And somewhere in between, there's me, asking myself whether hormones aren't the real drug that causes us the real problems. For me, above all, the withdrawal from this substance, including all the withdrawal symptoms.*

When I entered the surgery of Dr Rieker, my gynaecologist, I wished for the first time in my life that masks were compulsory again. It would have been nice if no one had recognised me, but you can't have everything. As I had been going to Dr Rieker and her partner Dr Henner's joint practice for over twenty years, I knew every face here.

"Mrs Steinhammer!", the receptionist Mrs Ritter greeted me in a friendly manner from the counter and at the same moment elbowed her colleague Mrs Schubert in the side.

"Are you all right?" Mrs Schubert added anxiously. "We spoke on the phone yesterday. Are you OK?" She looked at me meaningfully.

"Oh, you mean because of ...? That was a misunderstanding." I tried to speak as lightly as possible, but I realised how pressed I sounded.

"Are you sure? It sounded very ..." she seemed to be searching for the right word, "... concrete to me. Almost worrying."

"Now you're exaggerating, Mrs Schubert. You can imagine that I would never take drugs ... at my age! Please! Who takes ecstasy at my age? That's absurd! Okay, if I was a bit older, maybe the tide would turn again ..." I was running amok. "But now I'm in that in-between phase, too old for shots, too young for eggnog - that's what they say, isn't it?" I laughed hysterically, but quickly fell silent when I noticed the faces of Mrs Ellert and Mrs Wiese, the other two receptionists who had appeared behind Mrs Schubert and Mrs Ritter in irritation. "Sorry, that might have been a bit confusing," I mumbled.

Mrs Ellert stared at me wide-eyed, while Mrs Wiese cleared her throat demonstratively.

"You can still discuss it with the doctor," suggested Mrs Schubert. Then she leant over the counter and added conspiratorially: "My mum started drinking during the menopause. Believe me, that really isn't a solution."

"I know that. The eggnog thing was just - oh, never mind." I waved it off. Any more words were probably one too many. "I practically don't drink alcohol," I still felt compelled to say.

"Then you can go straight through."



*Then* why? Would she not have let me through if I thought drinking was a solution? Do they not treat alcoholic women in this practice? I spared myself another comment.

As I walked towards the consulting room, I thought I heard Mrs Ellert whisper: "She doesn't look like a junkie at all." But what else could I say? They would probably have taken it the wrong way anyway.

I used the few metres to take a deep breath, tried to forget the doctor's assistants' passion for gossip and concentrate only on my hormonal complaints.

"Hello, Mrs Steinhammer." Dr Rieker looked at me scrutinisingly and gestured to the empty chair in front of her desk. I sat down. "How are you?"

"Well. That's about it."

She nodded knowingly. "I've already heard about your desperate act."

My heart slipped into my trousers. Freddy?

"Mrs Steinhammer, drugs are not ..."

I see! "No, really, that's not my problem at all," I interrupted her forcefully. "It's nothing more than a misunderstanding."

That scrutinising look again. "All right. What can I do for you? Why are you here today?"

"My last period ... well, to be honest, I can't remember when I had it," I began and immediately had the feeling that I had expressed myself incorrectly. "Not now, because I couldn't remember for some other reason. I don't drink! And I don't do drugs either!" Then I remembered

Eva. "I'm not pregnant either. Well, I'm pretty sure you are, because you have to have sex if you want a baby. And even if you don't want one but get pregnant anyway, you still need to have sex. But who am I telling! Ha ha!" I was talking like a lunatic again. "No, what I actually wanted to say: My last period was just so long ago that I can't remember exactly when it was."

I must have sounded pretty panicked, anyway, Dr Rieker said reassuringly "good, good", like you do to a crying child who despairs of the justice of the world because of a cracked knee.

"I'm really sober," I said, a little taken aback. "I'm just somehow not myself anymore."

Fortunately, Dr Rieker smiled at me sympathetically. "Don't worry about it. How many women do you think I've had sitting here in this condition?" She glanced at my index card. "In terms of age, the menopause could well have knocked on your door. Do you have trouble sleeping?"

"I've more or less stopped sleeping."

"Weight gain?"

I nodded. Just as I did when asked about sweating, palpitations and dizziness, mood swings, vaginal dryness and bladder weakness. I suddenly felt thirty years older.

"Hot flushes?"

For the first time, no definite nod from my side.

"Is there a difference to normal sweats?"

"But hello."

"Hm. Well, I sometimes sweat like crazy at night, but real hot flushes ... I don't think so." A glimmer of hope. Maybe everything wasn't so bad after all?

"If you'd had any, you'd know, believe me. They can still come, but they can also stay away. The menopause is different for every woman."

I exhaled audibly. "That's great. But I'm in, yeah?"

Dr Rieker nodded with a sympathetic expression.

Even though I had suspected it and should have been relieved that there was now an explanation for my strange behaviour, the diagnosis hit me hard. I would definitely have preferred a virus or even a nasty fungus. They could have been eliminated with the right medication. But the menopause? You couldn't get rid of it that easily. As if a corpse in the compost heap wasn't enough to disturb my general well-being, no, of course, with my luck there had to be hormonal chaos on top of that! Come to think of it, the whole mess was actually the other way round! While other women were struggling with low moods, the lack of hormones turned me into a murderess!

For a moment, I threatened to sink into self-pity and tears welled up in my eyes.

"Mrs Steinhammer." My doctor's voice was now compassionate and cautionary. "Fortunately, the menopause is not a serious illness. Yes, it can be accompanied by very troublesome symptoms, and women used to go through some tough times. However, this was also due to the fact that medicine practically ignored the menopause for many years. I basically learnt nothing about it during my studies."

"How reassuring," I groaned.

"If you had told your gynaecologist twenty or thirty years ago that you were suffering from vaginal dryness and had pain during intercourse, he would have advised you to drink two glasses of wine first." Dr Rieker laughed, but I didn't feel like laughing at all.

"I'm really sober," came out of me quietly.

I must have sounded very depressed, because Dr Rieker leaned over the desk and patted my arm.

"Once you've gone through the menopause, the best time of your life begins."

I looked at her, irritated. "Why?"

"There are no more hormonal fluctuations and therefore no more PMS or other mood swings. Headaches and period pains, migraines, food cravings, all gone. You will be much more balanced and no longer feel responsible for everything, no longer so torn between family, job and whatever else is going on in your life." Dr Rieker nodded and seemed absolutely convinced of what she was saying. "You yourself will become much more at the centre of your consciousness. That's great, it's a real opportunity to give your life a new turn. Why do you think so many women get divorced in their early fifties?"

"Because they no longer see their lives through hormone glasses?" I asked doubtfully, wondering whether my gynaecologist had already gone through the menopause.

"Exactly!" Dr Rieker banged his fist on the table. "Because they've finally realised what they really want from life! And that's great!"

"I don't want to get divorced."

"That was just an example. In any case, your life will change for the better! That's what I wanted to say!" Dr Rieker beamed at me.

I had to let that sink in first. I had never heard anyone talk so euphorically about midlife. By now I was sure that Dr Rieker had already gone through the menopause. In terms of age, it could fit, she could have passed fifty. She obviously already appreciated the benefits of losing hormones.

"Growing old as an opportunity? Are you serious?" I asked, still doubting.

"Absolutely! The hormones ensure that we women make ourselves beautiful - to get the best genes for our offspring, of course. Once we have found the man of our dreams, they make sure that we want and usually have children, they trigger the nest-building instinct in us and are also responsible for us working our butts off with family, nest and job. And where does that leave us women? Hidden behind the wall of hormones, sometimes even buried." Dr Rieker clenched his hands into fists and held them up in the air jubilantly. "And that's all over then! Then it's your turn, your needs, your life! Look forward to it!"

The pronounced optimism of my gynaecologist made me a little tired. "I'm glad you see it all like that. All I can see at the moment is: sleep and concentration problems, extreme forgetfulness, weight gain ..."

"Yes, I know, I've written everything down. Don't panic. If you're suffering too much from the symptoms, we can of course do something about it. No woman has to suffer anymore."

"That's what you say. And the risk of cancer?" My mother-in-law's words were still ringing in my ears.

Dr Rieker explained to me about hormone therapy, which today has nothing to do with what it used to be. Back in the 1990s, women were given equine oestrogens, which actually increased the risk of cancer.

"What do you mean horse oestrogens?" I couldn't imagine that women had actually been given hormones from four-legged friends a few years ago.

But that's how it was.

"Mares were artificially impregnated and the oestrogens were then extracted from their urine."

"They gave the women horse pee?" I couldn't believe it.

Dr Rieker laughed. "If you like - but no. That wouldn't be right. Substances from urine were used to make medicines. That would probably be a better way of putting it. And these oestrogens actually increased the risk of cancer."

"And what do you do today?"

"Today, bioidentical  $\beta$ -oestradiol is administered via the skin."

"And that's completely safe?" I asked, hoping to get *carte blanche* to solve all my problems.

Unfortunately, Dr Rieker shook his head. "You can't say that. There are no conclusive long-term studies yet. But we do know that they are no longer as dangerous as the mare hormones from the nineties."

"I was hoping you would tell me that I can take this without

hesitation."

"Then I'd have to lie to you. But first we have to see whether you are even eligible for such a therapy. After all, it doesn't make much sense to prescribe you hormones if I don't know your hormone levels. We'll take a blood sample now and then see what the lab says."

"How long will it take?"

"Probably two weeks."

*Do you sometimes have such paradoxical thoughts, or am I the only one who has such a thought pattern? You go to the doctor and hope for a diagnosis - which in itself is crazy, because normally everyone is happy when they have nothing. And then when you get a diagnosis that doesn't suit you, you get in a really bad mood. The same applies to medication. Nobody wants to take any pharmaceutical products every day, but you secretly hope that your doctor will prescribe something that helps. But of course only if the stuff is well tolerated and has no side effects, and certainly no cancer. It is the hope of a cure that drives us to this paradoxical way of thinking and the fear of suffering that cannot be controlled. This is perfectly understandable in the case of illnesses. But my illness was called ageing. Did I just have to go through it? Like my mother-in-law had already told me? Or was there still a way out?*

*Sorry, of course you're right. Of course there is no escape from ageing. And that's a good thing. This youth mania in our society is really annoying as hell.*

*But maybe you can age reasonably normally. Normal in the sense of not completely losing your nerve and killing people. I would very much welcome that.*

When I left Dr Rieker's consulting room, I almost bumped into Eva in the corridor. We had both decided to go to the gynaecologist's surgery back then, except that she had ended up with Dr Henner and I

had ended up with my doctor.

I hugged Eva tightly. "How are you doing? You look marvellous." She really did. She was beaming all over her face, which I found amazing considering her phone call a few days ago.

"It's going to be a girl," she said with a chuckle.

I hugged her to me again. "That's great!"

"I wouldn't have put up with another wiener!" Eva giggled and I grinned broadly at her. We both knew that was a lie. Eva loved Konrad and Oskar dearly and had never been interested in the sex of her children. It had been extremely difficult for her to get pregnant back then, and it had only worked out after a long period of suffering from miscarriages and hormone treatments. After she had become pregnant, nothing had mattered more than the sex of the babies.

"And what's even more important: the little one is chirpy. No abnormalities, everything as it should be." Eva exhaled audibly and looked visibly relieved. "After all, at my age, that's not to be taken for granted."

We left the practice with our heads down.

"I'm very pleased about that. So you've got over your shock to some extent now?"

Eva shook her head, giggling. "Not at all. But I'm like on a drug."

"The hormones," I said with a smile.

"Indeed. I'd already forgotten what it's like. Do you remember how you used to laugh your head off with Paul?"

I nodded. "One fit of laughter followed the next. I had the same



with the twins, only I always had to throw up in between." God, I was glad I wasn't pregnant again. But of course I didn't make the comment.

"Dr Henner was very satisfied. He didn't reproach me either. I thought that was amazing."

"Well, he's a gynaecologist. What kind of mums do you think he's had in his chair?"

Eva stopped and looked at me in irritation. "What are you trying to say?"

"Well you're certainly not the crassest thing he's ever had in front of him."

"You think I'm crass?" Eva's voice had taken on a cool undertone.

"Of course not. But the fact that you're pregnant again at forty-nine is pretty crazy, isn't it?" I patted her on the shoulder with a laugh. "Don't worry, Dr Henner is used to grief. He's probably already had junkie pregnant women and alcoholic mums sitting with him. Nothing shocks him anymore."

Cursed. Hormones. It wasn't just my children and I who struggled with them, my best friend did too, of course. And I had totally underestimated the effect of pregnancy hormones.

Eva's lower lip began to tremble and her eyes became moist. "So that's how you see it?" she pressed out. "That's interesting. And I thought you'd be happy."

"As if you were so happy from the start!" I added, rolling my eyes and realising it was too late again. Now the tears rolled out of Eva's eyes. "I'm sorry, please. I didn't mean it like that." I put my arm round her

shoulder. "Honestly, I didn't."

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "So you think it's good that I'm pregnant?" she asked tearfully.

What was I supposed to say to that? I cleared my throat and tried to keep a positive expression on my face, which probably looked more like a cramped smile.

"I'm really pleased that you'll soon have a daughter. Mother-daughter relationships are simply something very special," I said gently.

Fortunately, Eva was able to grin again. "Nice and diplomatic. Stupid cow."

I was relieved. We hugged each other goodbye and agreed to go out for coffee the next few days.

When I got home, the rollercoaster of emotions continued. I had just driven the car into the garage and hadn't even got my things out of the boot when someone went to the front door and rang the bell. A giant of a man was standing there, not exactly the type of guidance counsellor, more like a doorman from Hohenzollernring. Huge, broad-shouldered, tattoos peeking out of the collar of his tight-fitting leather jacket, his face was red and puffy. I didn't know the guy, but the way he looked, he didn't bode well.

"Can I help you?" I asked in a slightly strained voice.

"Funny," he said scornfully, pronouncing it *wittily*.

"Who are you?" I had a dark suspicion that the guy had something to do with Freddy's professional background.

"One of my employees' last customers was someone who must

live here," said the man who had apparently tracked Freddy's mobile phone while it was still in my pocket. "And I want to speak to him now."

"Are you Hugo?" Why the hell did I ask him that? What was I supposed to do if he said yes now? Offer him a coffee?

He nodded, which wasn't much better, and eyed me coldly. "How do you know who I am." His voice was toneless.

The source of all evil, I thought. If it hadn't been for that red-faced giant, then Freddy would never have sold drugs to Hannes, then my parents-in-law wouldn't have ended up intoxicated and Freddy in the compost heap, then my life would still be the same, at least almost. Because I couldn't blame Hugo for the loss of hormones after all.

I could feel the anger growing inside me towards this guy. Unscrupulous and stupid guys like him made the world a worse place. I should have called the police immediately, but unfortunately that was impossible.

Thoughts raced through my head. What could I do? How could I protect my family on my own?

"So?" Hugo's voice had taken on an even more threatening undertone and interrupted my carousel of thoughts.

"So what? Sorry, I lost the thread. What were we just talking about?" My absent-mindedness was really driving me crazy.

"Why do you know my name?" Hugo's eyes had narrowed to slits.

"Because Freddy told me." I tried not to show any facial expressions and hoped to get some kind of poker face. Any doctor would probably have admitted me to hospital with suspected facial paralysis.

"You know where he is?"

I nodded. "And, above all, where the drugs are." That was without question very rash of me.

Hugo was still looking at me with narrowed eyes, as if he was having an allergic reaction.

"We're going to him. Now." His voice was so cold that it brooked no argument.

"My children are about to come home from school, I have to make lunch..." Hugo looked at me as if I was out of my depth. "Yeah, sure, lunch can wait, no problem," I said quickly. "They can have a sandwich too."

"I don't give a shit."

"Fine."

I went through my options at lightning speed. There was really only one: I had to give Hugo the drug bag, hope that he wouldn't notice Freddy, then disappear and leave me and my family alone in future. Somehow I had to distract him at the allotment, otherwise I wouldn't be able to dig out the bag. And I couldn't let him see Iza, otherwise it could be dangerous for her. So I had to warn her in advance so that she could hide.

"I'll just let my children know that I'll be late." I went to take my mobile phone out of my pocket, but Hugo grabbed my hand and just shook his head silently. "Okay. Then don't. No problem."

I suppressed a sigh and went to my car, which was parked in the garage. A blink of an eye later, Hugo grabbed me by the shoulder.

"We're driving my car. It makes sense," he hissed at me.

I realised that I was becoming more and more agitated and confused. I had no plan, I couldn't warn Iza in advance, it wouldn't be long before everything would blow up. And once Hugo found out that I had to kill Freddy, he certainly wouldn't be thrilled. Oh boy. I could already see myself lying next to Freddy in the compost.

"Yes, of course, we'll drive your car. No problem. But there's my bag in the boot. And in it are the keys to Freddy's hiding place. I won't be long." Maybe that's how I got my mobile phone again?

No. Because Hugo didn't want to take his eyes off me for even a second. He followed me into the garage and watched me incessantly.

"If you think you can secretly call the cops, you're dumber than I thought."

"That would be the last thing I would do," I replied truthfully.

I was in a state of pure emotional chaos. Anger at this bastard, fear of what was to come, confusion about what was happening - I couldn't think straight.

One thing at a time, I tried to calm myself down. So first I opened the boot, took out my bag, put it on the roof of the car and looked for the key. It was simply unbelievable how much stuff I always carried around with me. Tissues, new and used, chewing gum, new and used, lipsticks, new and used, this bag was a drugstore and rubbish dump in one.

I put a tampon between my fingers and for a second I felt something like nostalgia. What were those times when I still needed something like that? When I was young, happy, fertile ... what rubbish. I quickly pushed the thought aside and let the tampon fall back into the

depths of my handbag. Menstrual melancholy really was rubbish. And to be honest, I had other problems now too.

"Where's that damn key..." I muttered as I continued to rummage in my bag. Panic was rising inexorably inside me and I realised that my hands were shaking. If I'd lost the damn key, I couldn't lure the guy away from our house. And it wouldn't be long before the kids came home from school - and then what?

"Ah!" I finally found the leather key fob and sighed with relief. "I've got it. We can get going." Without looking round for Hugo, I threw the boot lid shut with a flourish. At the same moment, Hugo made an almost animal-like sound.

His upper body lay limply in the boot, covered by the lid, while his feet were still on the floor of our garage. Hugo had obviously been looking around in the boot and had been knocked out by the lid being slammed down. What was he snooping around for? It was his own fault! My sympathy was clearly limited.

I opened the boot lid and saw that Hugo had a bleeding laceration on the back of his head. I carefully touched his neck with two fingers. Well, he was alive. At least I didn't have another dead man on my cheek. But an unconscious and rather injured criminal, which didn't necessarily make things any better. If Hugo woke up again, he'd certainly be very angry with me, if it were me, that is.

Damn! Now I was in a really difficult situation again because of some idiot. These criminals were slowly but surely getting on my nerves. Couldn't they just stay out of my life? That had worked well for the last

forty-eight years! What should I do now?

Outside, I heard the voices of Sofie and Hannes. They had come from school and were arguing loudly. To be honest, they were hurling the worst swear words at each other.

No matter. Presumably age-appropriate behaviour, which you couldn't exactly say about me.

Concentrate, I admonished myself. My children were coming home and I had to make sure that this impotent criminal disappeared from my garage!

As Hugo was already halfway in the boot, I quickly threw his legs in, closed the lid, made sure it was securely closed, jumped into the car and drove out of the garage.

"Mum?" Sofie called out questioningly as I drove past them, smiling and waving, probably a little madly.

"Normally I wouldn't even be here!" I shouted through the lowered window.

"But you are! Is there food?" I heard Hannes shout behind me, but by then I had already disappeared round the next street corner.

Okay. That was the first step. The guy was from my property. And now? Where to take him? I couldn't drive around for hours with the unconscious Hugo. That wouldn't make my problem any better, on the contrary. At some point, the bastard would wake up and make a loud noise.

Maybe I took the route because I had promised Hugo that I would take him to Freddy. Or maybe it was already in my DNA that criminals

and allotments simply belonged together. I didn't know and was no longer in a position to think about it. I just drove on.

Iza was standing in the garden, raking leaves. She had thrown on an old parka that was still hanging in the hut over her skintight miniskirt and low-cut top and had slipped into the wellies she had also left behind, which were probably five sizes too big. She now looked a bit like an employee from some freaky fetish area. She waved cheerfully to me as I parked the car in front of my plot.

"Hello, Liv! What nice thing are you bringing me today?"

Of course. Iza assumed that I was bringing her something nice for her current home.

I got out and looked around. No Mr Kriemer, no other allotment garden owners. November-like emptiness. At least something.

"Are you OK?" asked Iza anxiously, who hadn't missed my hesitant behaviour.

How was I supposed to explain to her who was in the boot and why? But there was no other way out. I had to come clean with her, at least as far as the matter with Hugo was concerned.

"Iza, there's a problem." That would remain the only thing that was true about the pure wine story. Because I told her that Hugo had turned up at my place because he was looking for Iza. I continued to fantasise that I had knocked him out to protect Iza - of course, that's why I was bringing him to her now. I could only hope that she didn't notice these little logical errors.

"What do we do with him now?" I asked Iza.



"He's going to kill us," she said tonelessly, staring at the closed boot. She was visibly in shock. "Both of us. And Freddy afterwards."

Well, probably not him, I thought, but nodded seriously. "Maybe you can talk to him?" I suggested cautiously.

"You can't talk to Hugo." Iza cleared her throat and visibly tried to catch herself. "I don't know anyone as brutal as him. He once knocked out all a girl's teeth because they interfered with his blow job."

I grimaced in shock and felt the anger rising inside me. How could someone do something like that? "And you think he'll do the same to us if we try to sort things out with him?"

"And then it would still go well for us," said Iza bitterly.

We were both silent for a moment and looked at the boot, from which there was still no sound.

Iza took a deep breath. "There's only one way," she said curtly and grabbed the hammer that was lying on the old workbench, and yes, it was exactly the hammer. I thought I'd put it away! Iza opened the boot, briefly checked that Hugo was still unconscious, took a swing and hit him with the carpenter's hammer directly on the forehead, or rather: in the forehead.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the sound seemed familiar, but I knew immediately that the blow had had an effect. Hugo was dead, that much was certain.

"Sorry. I had no other choice." Iza seemed surprisingly unshaken, and I wondered if Hugo was the first guy she'd punched in the forehead. "Asshole," she hissed venomously.

"Yes. Definitely." That was all I could manage. Silently, I pointed

to all the blood running out of Hugo's head and messing up my boot.

Iza nodded, took off her parka and placed it under Hugo's head. "We'll get the rest clean," she said in a reassuring voice. "Chlorine cleaner is a miracle cure."

"Yes." What had got my parents-in-law's flat clean would also be able to destroy Hugo's pool of blood, that sounded convincing to me.

As if it wasn't enough that a brutal wife-beater was bleeding out in my boot, I now saw Mr Kriemer walking through the grounds in the background. He didn't seem to have seen us yet, but it was probably only a matter of time, at least he had headed in our direction. Iza had also seen the caretaker. She immediately slammed the boot lid shut.

"We have to wait until it's dark. Then we'll take care of getting rid of Hugo," she said quietly.

I nodded. What else could I do? Nod and dispose of a corpse in the dark. It wasn't the first time.

"Hello, Mrs Steinhammer." Mr Kriemer was now standing next to us. "You know that you're only allowed to drive onto the site in exceptional circumstances?"

I endeavoured to smile in a friendly manner. "Of course. It was an exception."

"So you're driving him away now?"

"Right now?" For heaven's sake! I had already been worried about driving through the streets with an unconscious Hugo, and the situation hadn't improved with a dead one!

Iza took a step forwards and put on her best bedroom look. The

combination of wellies, mini skirt and breasts together with this look did not fail to have an effect.

"Can we leave the car here until tonight for a change?" she said, no, actually she breathed it. "We have so much to do today, that would be really lovely."

Mr Kriemer looked at Iza with interest, or rather at her cleavage: "Well, actually, that's against the rules."

Iza ran her index finger over Mr Kriemer's tie and playfully wrapped it around her finger.

"Oh, please. We're just two weak women who have a lot to carry around here. We're not bothering anyone. And when everything is ready, we'll show our appreciation." She pursed her lips.

Time to intervene. "You are cordially invited to a barbecue."

"In November?" Mr Kriemer made a disappointed face.

"Winter barbecue. With mulled wine. It could be very cosy," I said.

Iza nodded and smoothed Kriemer's tie. "I'll make us comfortable," she breathed, and even though I disapproved of this man-pleasing behaviour, I had to admit that it was very effective. In any case, Mr Kriemer's whole face was beaming as he said goodbye to us and went on his way again.

Iza's smile faded immediately. "He can get cosy on his own," she murmured, "but crickets..." She gazed thoughtfully into the distance.

"It was just an idea."

"There's a barbecue behind the hut."

"So, you're not hungry now, are you?"

"No. But maybe Hugo?" She looked at me questioningly.

It took me a moment before I realised. "Absolutely not! Iza! How do you imagine that?"

Iza shrugged her shoulders. "No idea. Burning corpses isn't that unusual now."

"But the smell! Then we'll have Kriemer sitting here after five minutes because he thinks we're serving ribs." A shiver ran down my spine. "No, that's out of the question. We have to find another way to get rid of Hugo. We still have a few hours before it gets dark."

Iza nodded. "All right. Let's have a look around."

Up to 85 per cent of all menopausal women  
regularly experience hot flushes, a third for five years or longer

The episodes can last for several minutes

All of a sudden, without prior exertion, an unusual heat spreads over the  
face, neck and upper body The heartbeat increases and there is  
sometimes a profuse outbreak of sweating. This is followed by nice  
shivering or freezing, and then you feel really  
drained and exhausted.

Yeah!

By now it was dark. The drizzle that had accompanied us for the last two hours had fortunately cleared. Iza and I heaved the body out of the boot. We had thought carefully about where best to dispose of Hugo - oh, that wasn't a nice word, lay him to rest? Also somehow inappropriate - well, where we could best bury him.

Iza had initially suggested the compost heap, but luckily I had managed to talk her out of it. We then walked through the whole colony and looked at each plot, at least from the outside, in the hope of finding a suitable place for Hugo's grave. The overgrown area behind my allotment seemed the most suitable for our plans.

The allotment garden colony was located in the shadow of a so-called rubble mountain, of which there are quite a few in Cologne. The city was completely destroyed in the Second World War, and after the war the people of Cologne piled up all the rubble into small mountains, which are now overgrown with grass and used by children for sledging in winter. In case it ever snows in Cologne.

In any case, my plot was the last one on the hill, which was overgrown with lots of rhododendrons on this side. There were probably two dozen dense bushes that almost formed something like a small forest and framed an area of perhaps three square metres at the top, reminiscent of a clearing. Perfect.

It took us some effort to drag Hugo's massive body to the bushes. The walk was much longer than the few metres I had had to cover with

Freddy. What's more, although Hugo had Freddy's stature and was massive and muscular, he was also half a metre taller. In my opinion, he was well over the hundred-kilo mark.

"The jacket!" The old parka on which he had bled was still in the boot.

"I'm not wearing these any more." Iza grimaced in disgust. "It's hardly raining any more."

"You shouldn't wear them either. But it has to go. If anyone finds it ..." Without further ado, I tried to put Hugo's parka on. Iza sighed and finally helped me until the tattooed thug had the dark green wax jacket on.

"Suits him." Iza grinned, but I didn't feel like joking.

"Come on. Let's get this over with."

Each of us took an arm. We pulled Hugo behind us like two draught horses. We only made slow progress, partly because we constantly had to stop and take a deep breath.

"We have to think about the tracks," said Iza, panting, "the grass is soaked."

I looked round. Behind us, it looked like a bad crime film in which the audience was supposed to be pointed to a body that had been taken away by the sledgehammer method. Hugo's heels had dug into the muddy ground and left clearly visible furrows.

"How are we supposed to get rid of them?" asked Iza. "The floor is ruined."

"We need to scarify the lawn," I suggested.

"What does that mean?"

"That's what you call it when you aerate the lawn."

"Aerate the lawn?" Iza looked at me like I was out of my depth.

"Did you take something?"

Was I always under suspicion of taking drugs?

"No. You loosen the grass with a rake so that more air can get in. It doesn't matter. The main thing is that you can no longer see Hugo's footprints."

"Aerate the lawn ..." Iza shook her head. "That's what they do here?"

I nodded. "All garden owners do it."

"Seems like a classic first-world problem to me."

"I'm sure they do the same in Romania."

Iza shook her head vigorously. "Because of tracks like that, okay, maybe. But not to let a bit of air onto the lawn. Besides, are we supposed to do that tonight as well?"

That was a legitimate question. After all, we needed equipment that we didn't have. Thoughtfully, we moved Hugo on.

"How about concealment traces?" suggested Iza.

"You have to explain that to me now."

"Well, we just trample and chop up more grass so that the tracks are no longer noticeable. Once I've danced through the garden a few times in my high heels, everything here is a mess."

"Not a bad idea."



We had reached the rhododendron bushes. They stood on the edge of a slope, at the end of which bordered a farm. At the bottom of the slope was an area fenced off with barbed wire where sheep grazed in the summer. When the children were small, Jörn and I used to take them here at the weekend so that the city dwellers could at least get an idea of something similar to country life. That's how I knew that the farmer himself was very old, at least as old as my parents-in-law. The farm was now just a hobby for him, he no longer kept more than a handful of sheep and a few chickens. But even they seemed to be in the barn in this weather and at this time of day.

On the other side, less than fifty metres from the sheepfold, there was a barn with a mountain of chopped wood in front of it, and I wondered whether the old farmer had actually chopped it himself. Wasn't he seriously ill with a heart condition? I thought I remembered him telling me about a pacemaker years ago. Was there someone who helped him on the farm? And if so, was this someone possibly quite awake and alert at the moment?

"Do you see anyone?" I whispered.

Iza let her gaze glide across the courtyard just as I did.

"No. I think we're ready to go."

Iza hurried back to the allotment hut and returned shortly afterwards with a shovel and a spade. We chose a spot under the rhododendron, a kind of clearing, shielded by many bushes, quite close to the slope.

Before we started digging, we wanted to pull Hugo behind the

bushes in case someone did turn up.

"My back..." I mumbled as we pulled on Hugo again.

Then, all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere, it happened. Well, it wouldn't have come out of nowhere for Dr Rieker, but for me it was a surprise. Within milliseconds, I had the feeling that all the blood in my body was rushing to my face. Just a blink of an eye later, everything about me seemed to be on fire and the heat was almost unbearable. As a result, all my pores opened at a speed they had never done before in a sauna. In short: I was drenched in sweat and I was running out of soup. And that is to be understood literally. The water ran down my body in rivulets.

So there it was, the first real hot flush of my life, and no, it had nothing to do with a normal outbreak of sweat. I would never have thought that they could be so intense. Unfortunately, my hands also got soaking wet straight away and I couldn't hold Hugo any longer. He slipped out of my sweaty fingers just as we were standing on the edge of the slope. He rolled down the slope at an astonishing speed and headed straight for an open pit behind the farm's barn. We couldn't react as quickly as Hugo disappeared into the pit.

"Bloody hell." At that moment, the heat left me just as abruptly as it had assaulted me, and I stood soaked in sweat in the cool November night. Of course, I immediately started to freeze mercilessly. My teeth were chattering and my whole body was shaking.

Iza was visibly irritated by the spectacle. She looked at me with raised eyebrows. "What was that?"

"It slipped away from me."

"Slipped away?"

"I suddenly broke out in a sweat. And now I'm arse cold," I said, shivering. "Can I have your jacket?"

"Whatever." Iza took off her cardigan and handed it to me. She was wearing her low-cut shirt underneath.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, sure, get dressed. I'm hardened by the road." She scrutinised me from top to bottom. "You looked like you were about to explode. All of a sudden you were bright red and kind of ... watery."

"I'm afraid that was a hot flush."

A word that Iza obviously knew just as little as scarifying. "Are you on Turkey?"

I sighed. "If you like ... Yes. In principle, yes."

Iza's eyes widened even more. "I never thought you'd take drugs."

"For heaven's sake, no, I don't do that either! Something to do with hormones." I made a dismissive gesture with my hand. "More importantly, where's Hugo?"

"He fell into the septic tank," said Iza. "I saw it being emptied this afternoon." She pointed to a spot next to the barn. "You see there? The cover is next to the pit. They haven't closed it again yet."

I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to rub myself warm. "The farmer must be tired of life. Someone could fall in there."

"It is." Iza grinned. "He probably wanted to hose out the shaft. That's how most of us do it."

"Damn." My mind raced. "What are we going to do now?"

"Why?"

"How are we supposed to get Hugo out of there?"

"The question is not how," Iza replied, "but why. Why should we get him out of there again? I don't think Hugo is in a bad place. At least the stench isn't noticeable. It all suits him perfectly."

"All well and good, but a septic tank like that has to be emptied again at some point. And that's when a guy like that will be noticed."

"Hugo will have decomposed by then. Let's see if we can find some calcium oxide."

"What?" Iza spoke in riddles for me.

"Wait." She picked up her mobile phone and typed in the term. "Unslaked lime. Does that mean more to you? Every good farmer here has it," Iza said tidily. "And if this one is one of the old favourites, he probably has it too."

"And what do you do with this lime?"

"If you put it in hard soil and it comes into contact with water, the soil will loosen up very quickly," Iza replied. "Then you don't need to aerate it."

"Scarify."

"Whatever."

"And why should that help us with Hugo?"

"Well, because it doesn't just loosen hard soils. If you pour it over slaughterhouse waste or carcasses, they dissolve. That's what all butchers

in Romania do."

Now I'd got it. "And human corpses dissolve too."

"Yes, of course. That's what I'm assuming," said Iza. "Let's have a look in the stable, he's bound to have something."

Iza trudged down the slope and I followed her. I was glad to have her by my side and I realised that Iza was much stronger than I had initially thought.

The terrain was steep, muddy and slippery, and I landed on the bottom of my trousers more than once, while Iza was surprisingly sure-footed in her too-big wellies.

"We have to be quiet," she admonished me in a whisper as I slipped again.

"I'm not doing this on purpose. How did you get down here so easily?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "If you strut around in high heels all day, you've had a bit of practice when it comes to balance."

Once downstairs, we waited for a moment behind the chopped wood to make sure no one had heard us. The courtyard lay there in absolute silence.

"The coast is clear," Iza whispered. "Let's look in the barn."

"What if the chickens are in there?" I whispered back. "When they wake up, they'll make a pagan theatre."

"Chicken coops look different," said Iza. "At least with us."

I could only hope that she was right.

Iza opened the stable door with a slight squeak. It smelled of chicken manure and straw, but there were actually no animals here, as we quickly discovered when we turned on the light with our mobile phones. Lots of tools were leaning against the walls, shovels, axes, rakes, ploughs, all rusty and covered in cobwebs. Sacks of feed and fertiliser stood around, covered in a thick layer of dust. Obviously no one had been here for a long time. A few pigeons that had been roosting on the roof beams woke up and fluttered to another spot, where they settled down again and continued to roost.

"I've got something!" Iza called out quietly. She was standing in front of a shelf at the back of the warped building. There were several still-welded rolls of rubbish bags, holey and scuffed work gloves, screws and nails, and several bags of quicklime next to them.

"How much of it do we need for Hugo to dissolve?" I asked. "Do you have any experience?" Even though we could certainly use it, I was hoping for a no.

Fortunately, Iza shook her head. "I've never done anything like this before."

I found that reassuring. "Let's take a sack," I suggested. "We don't want to block up the pit."

Together we dragged a sack outside and took it to the pit. Even though it wasn't as heavy as Hugo, carrying it was a pain. My back was on the verge of going on long-term strike with a slipped disc.

As we lowered the bag to the ground next to the pit, Iza pulled out a penknife. "Take a step back. Don't get any of it in your eye," she

whispered, "or you'll lose your sight."

"Are you serious?"

"Do you want to take your chances?"

Iza cut the sack open and I jumped a metre to the side, turning my head away to prevent even the smallest speck of dust from flying into my eyes. Then we tipped the sack into the pit together. We had to be quick and jumped backwards together as a cloud of dust rose from the pit. When it had dissipated, I shone my mobile phone into it. Hugo was covered in a thick layer of lime.

"You might not even recognise him at first glance," I hoped.

"Let's put the lid on," said Iza. "Then nobody will be looking in there any time soon."

I thought this was a sensible suggestion, my back less so, but once again I ignored his objections. In a few simple steps, we had placed the heavy metal flap on the pit. Iza pulled out a handkerchief and wiped it clean. She seemed to have had some experience with fingerprints, but I didn't want to judge her for it.

"That's how it should work," she said.

For a moment, we remained listening in the darkness. Had someone heard us now? But it remained quiet on the farm. We nodded to each other and climbed back up the slope.

"You mustn't talk to anyone about this," I said.

"I was just about to post it in my WhatsApp group," Iza replied mockingly.

"I'm just saying." Shivering, I looked down at my sweat-soaked blouse. Even the cardigan I had borrowed from Iza was anything but dry. "I really need to put something else on right away."

"Do you often have something like this?"

"I hope not."

"That means you don't know?" Iza seemed irritated by the answer.

"I'm going through the menopause, most probably anyway. It could be that I've had these attacks for years now, it could be that it's over again in a few days. Nobody knows," I quoted Dr Rieker. "You do know what the menopause is, don't you?"

Iza looked at me indignantly. "Of course they do. Believe it or not, the women in Romania have that too!"

"I know."

We had climbed the slope again and fought our way back through the rhododendron bushes to my plot.

"Be happy," Iza then said.

"About what? About Hugo's passing?"

"No. About the menopause. It's great when you're no longer attractive to men."

My breath stopped for a moment. Then a wave of indignation rolled over me. "Tell me, don't you think that's a bit impertinent?"

"Not at all." Iza sounded completely honest. "I'd be happy if I stopped attracting men's attention."

I scrutinised her from top to bottom. The mini skirt, the tight, low-



cut top, the long black mane.

"Then why the look if it bothers you so much? I mean, you're not working after all. You don't have to walk around like that in private. You saw how Kriemer reacted to you."

Iza hesitated. "I don't have anything else." She looked embarrassed.

"But we drove past your house especially! That's where you picked up a few things, I thought?"

"Yes, I have too. But only what Freddy likes. And in his private life, he likes the same clothes that the suitors like."

I had to make sure she got into more inconspicuous clothes as quickly as possible. It was enough that Mr Kriemer had seen her like that. If there was one thing we couldn't afford now, it was to stand out, so Iza definitely caught everyone's eye. Especially on an allotment site.

"I'll bring you something else to wear tomorrow. I promise."

"Thank you."

We had reached the allotment cottage again. Iza shone her mobile phone over the tracks Freddy had left in the lawn. With shovels and spades, we quickly chopped up the entire lawn.

A good half hour later, the once at least reasonably well-tended lawn looked like a ploughed-up field and I wondered what Mr Kriemer would say when he saw it. I would have to tell him something about scarifying and hope that he knew as little about it as Iza did.

Exhausted, we stood next to the compost heap.

"So, I think that's it," I said.

Iza wrinkled her nose. "It stinks in here. Is that from your sweating?"

Now I smelled it too. The stench was clearly coming from the compost heap.

"My deodorant has never failed before." Freddy's obviously has.

Iza sniffed the air again. "Something smells strange here. Maybe the compost?"

"Well, I don't smell anything," I lied.

"Yes, it's very clear. Kind of foul." She stretched and yawned. "I can take a closer look tomorrow. Maybe there's a dead rat rotting somewhere."

It was a bit like that. At that moment I realised that there was no way Iza could stay in the allotment hut. It was only a matter of time before she discovered the source of the stench. She had to get out of here as quickly as possible. But where should I put her? I couldn't possibly put her up in our guest room. How would I explain this to my family? If the children were younger, I could sell them as au pairs, but like this? If Jörn and I were older, she would pass as a housekeeper ...

"Tell me, could you imagine looking after a lovely old couple for a while?" I asked her without further ado.

Iza looked around and scratched her head thoughtfully. "Here? In the allotment?"

"No, of course not. You'd live with them and look after them a bit. In return, you could live there for free."

A smile crossed Iza's face. "You mean in a real flat?"

"In a real house, actually. You'd have your own room, but you'd have to share the kitchen, bathroom and living room with them. But it would be rent-free."

"With warm water?"

I smiled. "Yeah, sure."

"And real heating?"

"Even underfloor heating."

"Wow."

Iza looked at me as if I were an angel on earth. And she hadn't asked about Freddy once. Maybe she could imagine a life without him after all. One that was better.

Even the best relationships not unaffected the  
menopause. This is because menopausal symptoms also have an effect  
on the social environment. Logical. An uncontrollable emotional chaos  
naturally also felt by your partner.

Oh well.

And sometimes you suddenly have a marital crisis  
for quite banal reasons

The next morning I could have slapped myself in the bathroom again.

Jörn stood in front of the laundry basket and held up my mud-smearred jeans with pointed fingers.

"Your days?" The ironic undertone was unmistakable.

Why had I forgotten to throw my dirty clothes in the washing machine again?

"That's earth," I said as casually as possible.

"And will you tell me where you were last night and why you came home *like that?*" He dropped the jeans back into the laundry basket with a disgusted look on his face.

"I was looking for a carer for your parents."

Jörn pulled his upper lip up in irritation. "Mud wrestling?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't think so. I slipped and fell on the way back. It doesn't really matter. What's more important is that I hired a carer."

"What do you mean by that? I thought the health insurance didn't authorise a care level?"

"That's why you can still hire a private carer."

Jörn sat down on the edge of the bathtub and looked at me, shaking his head. He suddenly looked very small, his shoulders slumped, his forehead wrinkled with dachshund eyes.

"A private carer?" he said through his teeth. "How are we supposed to pay them?"

"Now don't worry about that. I've taken care of that too, of course. The young woman is a student and lives with your parents for free."

Jörn took a deep breath. "Okay. So she's living for free. That's her wage?"

"That's what it looks like." I nodded with satisfaction. "Free board and lodging, and in return she takes care of the household and, of course, Marlies and Werner."

"Good, that sounds better." Relieved, he stroked his hair, "But I'd like to get to know her first before she moves in with my parents."

"Why?"

"Well, they're my parents. I'd like to know who's around them day and night."

"You've never been interested in anything else," I replied.

"That's not true! If I'd had more time, I would have looked after my parents more, of course!" Jörn got upset. "And it's different when you're with them or a complete stranger! Besides, we always wanted to discuss things like this in advance!"

"Yeah, sorry, you're right. You'll get to know Iza as soon as possible, all right?"

"Where did you even find them?"

"I'll explain that to you another time." I pushed Jörn out of the bathroom. "I really need to get ready now."

Iza was waiting for me in the allotment with her packed belongings. She was wearing her old work outfit and when I saw her I remembered that I had forgotten to bring her some normal clothes. This menopausal dementia was really annoying as hell!

"It doesn't matter. Werner will love it," I mumbled after unsuccessfully trying to pull the mini skirt up her thighs a little.

"Should I talk to your father-in-law too...?" Iza looked at me ambiguously and sighed, slightly annoyed. She obviously didn't fancy her old job any more.

"For heaven's sake! Under no circumstances! Marlies wouldn't survive that! And Werner certainly wouldn't!" I started to panic - just imagining it. "God, I'll never get rid of those pictures ..."

Iza seemed relieved. "So it's primarily about them not being alone so much?"

I nodded. "A little help with washing and getting dressed, cooking something healthy regularly and maybe doing a few errands with them. And you could also help with the housework. They're not bedridden or completely helpless. But it's getting more and more difficult for them on their own." And for me.

"I know that from my grandparents, I also looked after them when I was still in Romania."

"Do you think you can manage that?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes!"

That was enough for me.

"Good morning, ladies." Mr Kriemer had appeared next to us at

the garden fence. He looked different somehow, smart, with washed hair and a clean shirt. The flirtatious look on his face that he had just had, at least towards Iza, disappeared instantly when he saw the lawn behind us. Admittedly, the lawn looked even worse in daylight than in the dark, but at least the marks of Hugo's heels were no longer visible. "What's happened here?"

"Preparations for our barbecue," Iza said flirtatiously, and for a moment I was glad that I had forgotten my normal clothes for her. "Fresh lamb cooked in a hole in the ground over a gentle heat for hours - a treat!" She kissed her fingertips.

Mr Kriemer glanced over the ruined lawn. "Hole in the ground? Do you want to cook a whole flock of sheep?"

Iza laughed artificially and tapped Mr Kriemer teasingly on the tip of his nose. "You're in for a surprise!" With these words, she strutted past him.

"Don't worry, Mr Kriemer. In spring, the lawn will look like turf. You can count on that." I quickly hurried after Iza.

On the way to my parents-in-law, she was having a great time with Mr Kriemer's facial expression, imitating his Cologne pronunciation and laughing her head off. But I couldn't listen to her, my thoughts were with Marlies and Werner.

What would I do if they refused to take Iza in? I was convinced that Werner wouldn't cause any problems, Iza was just far too attractive and nice for that. What's more, she could definitely lend a hand, as I had seen last night, and that was a quality that Marlies in particular appreciated.



Besides, Iza wasn't stupid, that was obvious by now. She could certainly have become something completely different if she hadn't been lied to, pressurised and exploited by unscrupulous men.

Maybe this could all turn into a kind of second chance for Iza, and her life could take a whole new turn, I thought, and that thought made me feel good.

*I know exactly what some of you are thinking now: my commitment to Iza was not as selfless as I wanted to tell myself at the time. Yes, it was. It was also for my own benefit. Because suddenly I felt a bit better again, my guilty conscience about being a ruthless murderer was somewhat eclipsed, and the danger of being found out about Freddy and going to prison had also diminished.*

*I don't want to pretend that it was purely an act of selflessness to look after Iza. But I wanted to support her in leaving the scene, that's no lie. It would certainly be an exaggeration to say that I had already grown fond of her after we had only known each other for a few days. But haven't you also met people where you immediately realised that there was a connection between you and the person you were talking to? A connection that you can't explain at first? God yes, I know that sounds weird. I kill your partner and then feel oh so connected to you. But it wasn't just the unplanned killing of her pimp boyfriend that made me want to help Iza. I liked this young woman and I wanted her to live a different life than she had before. A better one.*

*At the time, however, I wasn't quite sure whether Marlies and Werner would be the same.*

"Who have you brought with you?" Smiling, Werner scrutinised Iza from top to bottom, pausing for quite a long time in her artificial

cleavage. His smile froze the next moment. "She's not from the nursing service, is she?"

Only in porn films did nurses look like Iza, which is why I briefly wondered what my elderly father-in-law's internet usage was like.

"No. This is Iza. Iza, this is Werner."

The two shook hands, although Werner still looked very sceptical.

"Nice to meet you." Iza smiled disarmingly at him.

"Iza is an exchange student, she comes from Romania."

"And what are you studying?" Werner asked suspiciously.

"Er..." Iza looked at me helplessly.

"Your subject is psychology," I said quickly. "It's called psychological communication management."

"The things there are these days ..." He turned to the stairs.

"Marlies? Here's a psychology student from Romania!"

"Then give her some money," my mother-in-law called from upstairs.

Werner looked at Iza questioningly. "Do you want money?"

"No."

"Iza should live here," I said.

Werner raised an eyebrow, but then turned back to the stairwell.

"She wants to live here!" he called upstairs. "Will you come here?"

Shortly afterwards, my mother-in-law dragged herself down the stairs. I could see from a distance that she had mixed up the lip liner with the eyeliner, giving her a "Thea Gottschalk with severe eye inflammation"

look.

"We're not a hotel," said Marlies, panting, when she arrived downstairs. She also scrutinised Iza from top to bottom. I hurried to explain the situation to both of them before Marlies could make any negative comments about Iza.

"As I said, Iza is studying here and you know how catastrophic the housing market situation is." My parents-in-law nodded in synchronisation without taking their eyes off Iza. "And as an exchange student from Romania, she's not on a bed of roses either," I continued. "That's why there's only one option left for her: to continue her studies in Germany: She could help you around the house and support you where you want support." I deliberately avoided the word *needs*. "That would all be completely free of charge for you, you would just let her live here in return. How does that sound to you?"

Marlies furrowed her brow and I feared that she was about to protest. But before she could say anything, Iza boldly grabbed Marlies' hand and held it up so that she had her red-painted fingernails right in front of her eyes.

"They're beautiful," Iza said almost reverently. "That's the crimson colour of Tenetdor, isn't it?"

A smile appeared on Marlies' face. "You know Tenetdor?" My mother-in-law looked at me in surprise. "Nobody knows Tenetdor anymore."

I shrugged my shoulders unsuspectingly. Iza hadn't got this information from me.

"My mum used to get the nail polishes from an aunt in the West." Beaming and very carefully, Iza stroked one of Marlies' painted nails with her fingertip. "She kept them all, even after the Soviet Union collapsed. They last forever."

"A very special quality." Marlies nodded with a smile.

"Yes. I've been using them secretly since I was a child. These intense colours, the hardness of the paint ... unique. Only Tenetdor has that." Iza held up her own painted fingers. "In comparison, this one is completely rubbish."

"Tenetdor was extraordinary. I was sales manager there, by the way!" Marlies was almost bursting with pride.

"Great! No paint lasts better than Tenetdor's."

"That's what we were known for. For the durability and the shine."

Iza stroked Marlies' painted nails again. "You can really tell. I didn't realise you could still buy these things."

"You can't either," I intervened in the cosmetics discussion. "The shop has been closed for years."

"But I still have all the colours," said Marlies. "Do you want to ...?"

Iza could hardly believe her luck. "I'd love to!"

Marlies hooked herself up to Iza and pulled her along the corridor. Werner looked after the two of them, shaking his head.

"They seem to have come to an agreement already," he muttered. "I hope I'm not completely forgotten now."

I gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry. It's

impossible to forget you. So Iza can stay with you?"

"That's fine by me. She seems nice."

"She really is."

"But you'll just have to help me tidy up the guest room. It's a bit messy."

*A little untidy was a huge understatement.* The room was by no means something that could be quickly spruced up. Marlies and Werner had obviously only been using the room as a kind of storeroom for years, which I hadn't realised as I hadn't set foot in it for years either. But why should I? Fresh air must have been kept out of here for just as long, it stank like an old wardrobe and there were dark mould stains in the corners.

"A painter absolutely has to come through here," I said to Werner after I had opened the windows and air and light flooded into the room.

To my surprise, he saw it the same way. "If you're going to call in workmen anyway, maybe they can build us a walk-in shower in the bathroom. It's getting quite tedious for Marlies to climb into the bath all the time."

"And probably for you too," I said thoughtlessly.

"For me?" Werner's voice immediately became sharper. "No, I don't have any problems with that at all. But for the young lady ..."

"Iza."

"Exactly. It would probably be more pleasant for them too."

"No problem. If I'm going to call someone in anyway, he can also install a disabled bathroom for you."

I should have known that the word *disability-friendly* was a trigger for Werner like holy water for the devil - or *menopausal symptoms* for me.

"Handicapped accessible?" His face turned red. "What's that supposed to mean? Do you think we can no longer manage in our house?"

I suppressed a sigh. If I lost one more millimetre of my diplomatic skills, I could take Iza back home with me.

"Sorry. But that's what they call it these days. All this gender madness gets too much for me sometimes." I was talking confused, that much was certain.

Werner seemed to take a similar view. "I thought gendering was something with genders ..."

"Yeah, too. I told you, I get mixed up with it!" I laughed slightly maniacally. "Be that as it may. I'll see to it that you get a *modern* bathroom where Marlies won't have any more problems. Okay, Werner?"

At that moment, Marlies and Iza came into the guest room.

"Look how slim I used to be!" my mother-in-law exclaimed enthusiastically, pointing with a sweeping hand gesture at Iza, who strutted into the room behind her like a model. She was wearing an old petticoat dress from Marlies that looked really hip and trendy on her.

"Marlies has kept all the clothes from before!" she said, beaming.

"Not all of them. But the nicest ones. The cupboards here in the guest room are still full. You're welcome to help yourself. The clothes look amazing on you." Marlies looked at Iza with motherly admiration and added with a sideways glance at me: "Unfortunately, you don't have the figure for it."

"It's not really my style either," I said quietly.

"Mine is!" Iza looked very cheerful and in a good mood.

"You can take anything you want out of the wardrobes. I'm so happy when the clothes get another airing! Let's go and see what else we can find." Marlies opened the wardrobe and Iza let out a delighted sound.

"These things are from the sixties, aren't they?"

Marlies beamed. "An outstanding vintage!"

So I could drive to work with peace of mind. It was a great relief that both Iza and my parents-in-law were now taken care of in one fell swoop. Hugo had also found a good place at the bottom of the slurry pit, now I just had to take care of Freddy and then I could close this chapter.

I took a deep breath. My problems seemed to be slowly disappearing.

"You're late," Pablo greeted me as I hurried into the kitchen studio.

"I was still on the building site." That wasn't quite a lie. Both the allotment and my parents-in-law's house were building sites in a way.

"I thought so," said Pablo. "I know you can be relied on. What's the situation?"

"Unchanged." That was to be expected. "I'll clarify a few things now, then hopefully we'll make progress." This sentence had proved its worth in my professional career and was universally applicable.

In my office, I first phoned the architect, who also had no explanation for the mice infestation and assured me that he had searched

the whole house for possible loopholes.

"Funnily enough, critters keep turning up in the kitchen." He sounded highly annoyed. "I don't want to pass the buck to you, Mrs Steinhammer, but maybe something has gone wrong on the part of your tradesmen?"

I already knew the game. "We only work in interior design, you know that. So the problem can't have been caused by mistakes on our part. But be that as it may, the important thing is that we get the matter under control. And we should work hand in hand."

Working in a solution-orientated way has always been my strength. After all, blaming each other didn't help anyone.

We discussed it on the phone for a while until we got to the point where he would pay for the pest control, which he was obliged to do anyway. But the main thing was that the matter had been chewed over again.

I spent the rest of my working day dealing with the latest special requests from Mrs Wugner, who now also wanted pink marble on the kitchen walls.

When I got home in the late afternoon, no one was there, the children were playing sport or with their friends and Jörn was at work. I enjoyed the peace and quiet, made myself a coffee and texted Eva first, almost as if my life was normal.

Sorry again for being so tactless the other day.

As always, Eva's reply was prompt. She had grown attached to her mobile phone. For the time being. Because that would change when the



baby was born at the latest. Among many other things.

There's nothing to apologise for. Are you coming to pick out the baby's room?

I replied with a thumbs-up and we arranged to meet the next afternoon. Then I called our house and yard handyman, with whom I also had a lot to do professionally.

"If Cathy Wugner has any special requests, I'll reject the order retroactively," he said with a groan in greeting. "Honestly, Mrs Steinhammer, that's the worst customer you've ever put on my plate."

I had to laugh. "I know that. But luckily you don't have to work for nothing."

"This is nothing more than compensation for pain and suffering. Is it about the mice again? I've already spoken to the architect ..."

"No, no," I interrupted him and explained the building work that had become necessary at my parents-in-law's house. "Do you have any spare capacity for this?"

"I'll have to check my diary, but I reckon we can manage that."

"What do you estimate the rough cost will be?"

"You can have someone from the health insurance company come if your parents-in-law have a care level ..."

"No, we'll have to leave that out," I interrupted him.

"Okay. It's a bit difficult to estimate over the phone. If I only have to change the bathtub ... but while I'm at it, it would certainly also make sense to raise the toilet, install handles, maybe non-slip tiles ..."

"And the guest room needs to be painted."

"Hm. That will be the least of it."

"Any number?"

"So it will be difficult under ten thousand."

I had expected that. "All right. Please get started as soon as possible."

*That's right. I normally discuss investments of this size with my husband. I know I've failed to do that before. And unlike the allotment garden purchase, there was no reason not to tell Jörn about the bathroom renovation beforehand. I can't tell you exactly why I simply gave the order to the workmen without calling the family council first. Maybe because Jörn and I had already talked so often about the fact that his parents urgently needed a new bathroom and I was organising everything that concerned them anyway. Or maybe I just hadn't thought to discuss the matter with him.*

*It didn't really matter. There was no question that the renovation work was necessary, and fortunately money was not one of our problems at the time.*

*Please imagine me laughing hysterically at this point ...*

I almost had a heart attack when Jörn suddenly stood in the living room.

"What are you doing here? So early?" I clutched my pounding heart. "You scared the life out of me."

"I'm sorry. I've been here for a while." He looked at me scrutinisingly. "Who were you talking to on the phone?"

"Pilinski Bau, why?"

"Ah, I thought I heard something like that."

I became suspicious. "Are you secretly eavesdropping on my phone calls?"

"No, you can't talk about secretly, as loud as you always speak."

"But why didn't you come in?"

"I didn't want to disturb you," said Jörn. "Sounded like you gave him an assignment?" He laughed in an artificial way. "But that can't be because you would have discussed something like that with me first. At least that's what you said after spending a few thousand on an allotment."

Jörn seemed unusually indignant.

"There's absolutely no need to get so upset," I said in the most reassuring voice possible. "Your parents are getting a new bathroom, we've discussed it umpteen times and now I've commissioned it."

"But something like that costs at least five thousand euros!"

"More like ten." I cleared my throat. That couldn't be a problem! Jörn was now earning really well and my part-time salary was also impressive.

"Tell me, are you crazy?" Surprisingly, Jörn got loud. I couldn't remember when he had ever got loud with me. "First the allotment and then a conversion? You're destroying all our savings!"

"Don't get so upset. Your bonus is coming in January and it's at least twice as high as the remodelling costs."

"Oh yeah, and you already know that, do you?"

Oh my goodness, the man was suddenly thin-skinned! If he was a woman, I would have guessed menopause, but that didn't apply.

"You always got a good bonus," I said carefully.

"Christmas is just around the corner too!"

"I know. But that was never a problem ..."

"The children want to go on a skiing holiday!"

"Jörn, we are double earners ..."

"Oh yeah?" Now he was almost shouting. Then he turned away and rubbed his temples as if he had just had a bad migraine.

I got an uneasy feeling in my stomach. "What's going on?" I asked in a husky voice. "Is there a problem?"

Jörn was visibly struggling for words. He was sweating, even though it wasn't particularly warm in the house. He paced nervously and kept touching his head.

Slowly, I began to feel anxious. "Are you ill? Do you have a brain tumour? Am I really only surrounded by death?"

He stopped abruptly and looked at me in irritation. "No. What makes you think that? Did someone die?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, never mind. Now tell me what's going on." As long as there were no more deaths, nothing could shock me. I thought.

Jörn cleared his throat. "They fired me."

"What?" Concerned, I rushed to him and took him in my arms. "That's terrible. You poor thing. Why is that? Just like that?"

"Due to operational reasons. The shop is simply no longer running."

"And they suddenly think of that? You come into the office today completely clueless and they just put your notice on the table?" I couldn't believe it.

Jörn fumbled around a bit before continuing. "You ... cancelled my contract six weeks ago."

It took a while for the words to reach me. "I don't understand ... did you tell me anything about it?" Even though I couldn't imagine it, it wasn't completely impossible that I had forgotten this information. After all, I was forgetting everything at the moment.

Jörn now let his whole upper body hang down and ran his hands over his face. "I'm sorry, Liv. I didn't have the courage to tell you. And I've still got my salary, so I thought I'd tell you everything later, when I might already have something new ..."

"Did you?"

Jörn shook his head sadly.

"But ... you went to the office every morning ...?"

"To the café."

Now I was really flabbergasted. "You ... spent every day in the café for six weeks?" And left me alone with your parents, the kids, the household and all that shit?

But I could no longer utter this sentence. I was stunned - and now I was also short of money.

In African or Asian cultures,  
women who do not menstruate are  
considered wise and worthy of adoration. In our  
Western culture, on the other hand, such women are often characterised  
by the phrase: "Now she's getting a bit weird."  
And what about the men?

Jörn and I had a veritable crisis, and I couldn't for the life of me attribute it to a lack of hormones. It could happen that Jörn had been fired. But I found it hard to forgive him for not telling me. Was that the end of our marriage? So many relationships broke up at our age, half of our circle of friends had just divorced, Eva and Torge were clearly among the exceptions in terms of family status. Could we soon be among the separated?

My first reaction to Jörn's surprising confession of silence was: silence. As soon as he entered the room, I left him, went to bed either an hour before or after him and tried to be around him as little as possible. If we'd had a spare room, I would have moved in there. But we didn't, so his nightly snoring was the only thing I heard from him at the moment.

Jörn's strategy seemed to be similar to mine, at least I didn't get the feeling that he was looking for me to be close to him. He tried to be with his parents as much as possible. Perhaps out of a guilty conscience, because he had spent the last few weeks sitting in the café instead of looking after them, but perhaps also to get to know Iza better. Fortunately, the two of them seemed to get on well, at least that's what Iza had told me. I didn't talk to Jörn.

*Oh, before any of you think there might be something going on between Jörn and Iza - nope. I can take the wind out of the sails of such speculation right away. Despite my chaotic life situation at the time, I was absolutely convinced of two things:*

*that Jörn loved me and that I could rely on Iza. The latter was just a gut feeling, but normally it never let me down.*

I was deeply offended, that was probably the best way to put it. Hurt that he hadn't trusted me, but offended that he had simply left me alone with everything out of cowardice instead of helping me. If he had been here on that Friday that had changed everything, maybe none of this would have happened? Maybe he would have found Hannes' mobile phone and confronted him immediately instead of beating Freddy to death in the allotment? But he had preferred to devote himself to his latte and a slice of cream cake instead of helping me with my pubescent offspring. And that was just to keep up the facade of the successful man for a few more weeks, although it would have collapsed at some point anyway. After all, such a construct of lies couldn't be maintained for all eternity, and I would have realised it at the latest when the salary payments were stopped. Or had he really believed that I would overlook it? That offended me even more.

However, our daily interactions quickly became very weird. I found myself saying *say-your-dad phrases* to our children while Jörn was standing just two metres away from me. And even though the children initially attributed this to my clumsiness, it was only a matter of time before they realised something. After a few days, it was clear that they had checked out the situation. As they were all three at an age when the whole cosmos revolved around them, it was amazing that they realised something about our crisis. And a clear sign of how serious it was. I was obviously behaving more conspicuously than I had done after Freddy and Hugo's



death.

At first I noticed their worried looks. This brief, quick glance over to me when I pointedly ignored Jörn again. Then a quick eye contact with the siblings, who you would otherwise never look in the face.

All my alarm bells went off when Sofie came into my living room with a cup of hot chocolate in her hand, where I was checking my emails on my laptop. She gave me the cocoa and sat down with me.

I used to do the same thing when the children were small. I would start a problem discussion with a hot chocolate, usually about trouble at school or something equally serious. I was touched that my daughter picked up on this ritual. Tears immediately welled up in my eyes.

"Are you getting divorced?" Sofie asked in such a delicate little girl's voice that I almost got a trembling lower lip. I could see from my daughter's face that she felt the same way. At that moment, she wasn't at all as serene and grown-up as she usually tried to pretend. She was my little girl who was terribly worried about her parents.

I spontaneously took her in my arms and hugged her to me, something I hadn't done for far too long. "What makes you think that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You behave like that, Dad behaves like that. Besides, Dad is suddenly at Grandma and Grandad's all the time."

"Is Dad depressed?" Paul had joined us unnoticed. He had a bag of jelly babies in his hand and placed them on the table in front of me. Sweets and problems seemed to be inextricably linked in my children's brains and I briefly wondered if that was a good thing. "When Luca's mum had chemo..."

"Dad's not depressed," I interrupted Paul and put my other arm around him. Our youngest looked really upset and I was immediately overcome with a guilty conscience. How could I put my children through such worries?

"But isn't something going on?" Hannes had now joined us and I was shocked to realise that he seemed to be suffering the most from the situation. In any case, my cool son, who had bought drugs without restraint and even passed them on to his grandparents, had tears in his eyes and was pale as a sheet. "It's me, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

"Honey, no!" I got up and rushed to him, took him in my arms and hugged him close to me. "It's not you. Please believe me."

"Why should it be you of all people?" Sofie asked, and despite her concern, there was a slightly mocking undertone in her voice. "Because you're the centre of the world, aren't you?"

I looked up. "It's not down to any of you. None of this has anything to do with you."

"Then why don't you tell me what's going on?" Paul asked in a shaky voice.

My three children looked at me with worried, almost distraught expressions. I couldn't remember the last time that had happened. Probably never before. They were seriously worried, and the only reason was that Jörn and I had been silent for a few days. Silence was worse than arguing, I should have known that.

It was only at that moment that I realised that I had ultimately behaved towards my children in the same way as Jörn had in the months

before. Out of cowardice, because I didn't know how to explain it to them, I had preferred to remain silent. Yet the only ones who had a right to behave like that were my pubescent children. Their silence, occasionally interrupted by hysterical fits of crying, was age-appropriate. Jörn's silence, on the other hand, had simply been cowardly and mine just stupid. It was time to end it.

"Dad has lost his job."

My children's jaws dropped in synchronisation.

"Are we Hartz four now?" asked Paul, startled.

"No. After all, I earn something too."

"But not like Dad," said Sofie.

"And you no longer speak to him because he's out of work?"

Hannes didn't seem to be able to believe it. "How nasty are you!"

It's remarkable how quickly he was able to switch from dismay mode to accusation mode.

"Of course I'm still talking to him!" Who did they think I was?

"There was just a lot to organise now, so I was often on the road."

"Do you want to leave him?" Sofie gnawed nervously at her cuticles.

"No!" I shouted, and it came from the bottom of my heart.

No, I didn't want to leave Jörn, I didn't want to destroy our family and I wasn't interested in a completely new start, which Dr Rieker was such a big fan of. I still loved Jörn, even if I thought he was really stupid.

However, something had to change, definitely. Because nothing

would change by keeping quiet and avoiding each other. We had to work on our problems and do it in the best possible way so that our children learnt that it was possible, that we didn't have to split up immediately if there was a problem. Even if our snag was pretty big at the time.

"Can you please make it like it used to be?" Paul looked at me so heartbreakingly with his big eyes that I could do nothing but nod.

"Dad's upstairs," said Hannes encouragingly.

I took a deep breath and stood up resolutely. "All right."

Jörn was lying on the bed, his iPad in his hand. He only looked up briefly when I entered the bedroom and then returned to the internet.

Hesitantly, I sat down on the edge of the bed. "We need to talk."

He breathed a sigh of relief and put his iPad to one side "Yes. I think so too." He sat up and cleared his throat. "May I begin?"

I felt like I was in an educational film about couples therapy. "Please."

"First of all, I would like to apologise to you."

"All right."

"It was a big mistake not to tell you about my cancellation."

"You could say that. How could it have come to this?"

"The company has not been doing well for a long time ..."

"That's not what I mean," I interrupted him. "How could you keep something so important from me? I always thought we told each other everything?"

I almost choked on my last words, they seemed so wrong the

moment I said them. After all, there were two pretty important things that I hadn't told my husband. One was called Freddy and the other Hugo. But you don't have to share everything in a marriage. What was the saying?

*Little secrets are the perfect spice mix for a tasty marriage.*

I wasn't sure whether this saying really existed or whether I had just made it up.

Jörn sighed: "It hasn't been easy for me. You know, none of the younger people in the company have been made redundant yet, only us old farts have had to go. At the same time, I'm losing more and more hair ..."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, here, look." He stroked his head. His curls had indeed become a little thinner in a few places.

"Maybe that's true. But I still don't see the connection between job loss and hair loss."

"Well. I'm just realising that I'm really not one of the boys anymore."

"Okay, I see," I said thoughtfully. "But surely none of this has anything to do with us?"

"In a way, yes. Things don't always go the way I want them to down there either." He sighed and added quietly: "I have erectile dysfunction more and more often."

That really surprised me. "I haven't noticed that yet."

Jörn rolled his eyes: "You never want to!" He let out another deep sigh. "You probably don't find me as attractive as you used to." He gripped

his barely visible belly in frustration. "It's no wonder."

There was no question that if anyone here was going through the menopause, it was Jörn. I recognised all the symptoms, from the depressive mood to the change in behaviour, weight gain, hair loss and loss of libido.

"Welcome to the club." I smiled at him.

"What do you mean?" Jörn looked up in astonishment.

"Well, do you think I'm behaving normally? I forget everything, have mood swings and insomnia. And I also struggle with my appearance."

"You look great! As always!" It actually sounded honest.

"I'm definitely getting older. My connective tissue no longer deserves its name and you probably don't even want to know what other menopausal symptoms I'm suffering from." I listed them to him anyway.

Jörn was completely surprised. "You and in the menopause? But you still have your period!"

"Not for a long time."

He raised an eyebrow with a mocking smile. "You really are a bit forgetful, aren't you? How long has it been since your last period? A week or two?"

"Aaaah!" I burst out a little too loudly as I suddenly remembered my bloodstained trousers and the period excuse I had used after Freddy's demise. "Yeah, but the way it went down, it wasn't normal. Well, I'll spare you the details. Anyway, I've already seen Dr Rieker and it looks like I'm fully menopausal."

Jörn looked at me, shaking his head lovingly. "I had no idea. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I don't know. I probably had to come to terms with it myself first."

Jörn nodded. "I felt the same way." He kneaded his hands uncertainly. "Can we fix this?"

"With the youth? No, I'm afraid that's over." I grinned wryly.

Jörn took me in his arms. "But with us? Can we manage to grow old together?"

I hugged him to me. "Of course we'll manage. We've already grown half old together, so we'll manage the rest."

We kissed and it was a very nice feeling. Intimate, full of love, but with little passion, but that didn't matter.

"No more secrets from now on, I promise?" said Jörn.

"We need to take care of our finances," I tried the abrupt change of subject.

"Maybe the first thing we should do is get rid of the allotment," suggested Jörn.

"I don't know..." I knew very well that I didn't want to. As long as Freddy was under the compost, I wouldn't give up the garden under any circumstances. Of course, the compost wasn't a permanent solution, I couldn't put it off much longer until Jörn and the children wanted to see the allotment, and then at the latest, things could get tricky with Freddy and, above all, his odour. He had been lying there for almost two weeks now - I urgently needed a burial solution.

"But we have to get money somehow," said Jörn. "I don't know how quickly I'll find a new job. It's not that easy at my age. And there was an unscheduled horse race the day before yesterday ..."

"But you were with your parents!" I broke free from his embrace. "I hope you've stopped your father from betting again, haven't you?"

Jörn pressed his lips together and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"But why not?"

"I don't know ... it was a father-son thing, the two of us alone on Jück ..."

"You bet money too?"

"Only very little, honestly."

I decided not to enquire any further. The next bank statement would show me how much money my dear husband had spent - and how much his father had spent. I was overcome by the strange feeling that I would have to take care of our finances in the near future. All by myself. Perhaps it was a kind of poetic justice. After all, most of the unplanned expenses of the last few days were my fault.

"Maybe I can stock up in the kitchen studio," I thought aloud.

"It would be good if we could get money as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, we're already well over our overdraft."

"Great ..." I thought feverishly. I was sure that Pablo would welcome me with open arms if I asked for a full-time position. But it would definitely take until the beginning of next month before I got more money. A short-term solution had to look different. I could ask



Pablo for an advance, but I had a guilty conscience because it was also difficult for the kitchen studio at the moment. There were so few tradespeople that it was not uncommon for an order to be turned down while at the same time asking for the invoices that should have been paid long ago to be settled.

I thought about Iza for a moment, but immediately wondered about myself. Iza really wasn't one of those high-class escort ladies who paid five hundred euros or more an hour. She had worked her legs to the bone at the Eigelstein and then gone out with some guy for maybe fifty euros. There was no way I could ask her for money. Then I would almost have felt like Freddy.

Freddy ... it went through my head. He wasn't lying there alone. One ecstasy tablet was worth ten euros, and if that damn sports bag lying next to him under the compost was even half full of the stuff, I could easily pay for the remodelling work at my parents-in-law's house.

Should I really sell the drugs?

When oestrogen levels fall,  
women react more sensitively to the stress hormones adrenaline and  
noradrenaline. Apart from the fact that these  
two stress hormones are responsible for further hot flushes,  
they originally have the function of preparing ourbody fully for flight or  
attack. And what was true for encounters with mammoths is certainly  
true for those with drug dealers. I'll give you three guesses as to what  
my body has decided favour of, flight or attack.

I assume you guessed it.

Our debts were bigger than I thought, as I realised when I finally checked the bank statements. Not only were we way overdrawn, we had almost reached the overdraft limit. I wouldn't be able to pay for the next bulk purchase with my EC card. If Hannes went to the hairdresser and asked for *pages on his account balance*, he would have to come home with a bloody scalp.

Thanks to our new bedroom, the allotment and my father-in-law's passion for betting, our savings had shrunk enormously, or rather, were no longer there. So I thought it was a really worthwhile idea to at least consider selling Freddy's drugs. After all, they had a certain value, and I couldn't do anything with them myself; after all, I could hardly hand them over to Pilinski Bau as payment.

I racked my brains as to what other options I had to get some money in the short term to tide me over for a few weeks at least. I could talk to my best friend about anything, there were no taboos between us. Was money supposed to be one of them now?

I had arranged to meet Eva in the city to look for children's furniture. Eva had suggested a café on Mittelstraße, which I found a bit unfortunate as Cologne's two Ikea branches were just outside the city centre.

"We're not going to Ikea." Eva seemed in an exceptionally good mood. "We've saved as much as we can with the boys. Now we want something really good for the little one."

I imitated a buzzer sound. "That's a mistake! You would have been better off investing in the boys' children's furniture, then your little one would still be getting something out of it. But now that the worm is definitely going to be your last child, there's no point in spending money on long-lasting nappy-changing units."

Eva just laughed and raved to me about the chic children's boutiques in the expensive Mittelstraße. It was remarkable how quickly she had gone from shock to exuberance in just a few days.

*No, we humans are not exclusively hormone-driven beings, neither the tail-driven men nor the nest-building women. Of course, we still have our brains, which we could use at any time. I write "could" and not "can" because both sexes simply behave rationally far too rarely when intoxicated by hormones. I think intoxication is the right word for this state. After all, when we drink too much alcohol - or have taken other drugs, for that matter - our minds no longer work reliably. Eva was clearly hormone-drunk at the time. I, on the other hand, had more of a hangover.*

"We want to do everything differently this time." Eva was beaming all over her face. "I'm going to stop working and Torge is also going part-time for a while. We just want to spend as much time together as we can."

"All the more important to keep the money together," I said weakly. I had long since realised that there was no way I could ask Eva to lend me anything.

"We can bridge the gap for a while with our savings." Eva stroked her stomach. "But I don't want the little one to suffer."

"You mean she suffers when her cot didn't cost five hundred euros, but only one hundred?"

Eva laughed again, even though I didn't think I'd said anything funny.

Over the next three hours, we spent a whopping five thousand seven hundred euros on prams, changing units, cots, playpens, wall tattoos, rugs and various onesies. I was glad that today was my *housewife day* and that at the end of this shopping marathon, I was able to tweet myself a glass of Prosecco, or two, while Eva sipped her water with complete satisfaction.

*If my gynaecologist happens to be reading this, please allow me to make a brief comment: I normally never drink during the day, and only rarely in the evening. And I am absolutely aware that alcohol is never a solution. But when you realise that you really have to get into the drug business, mineral water doesn't seem like a solution either.*

So I would have to try to sell the ecstasy. But how was I supposed to sell the stuff? Under no circumstances did I want to sell it to young people my children's age, that was out of the question. What about Marlies and Werner's age group? Hadn't my father-in-law said that anyone who takes drugs at eighteen is insane, and anyone who doesn't take drugs at eighty is insane?

I shook my head at myself. The idea of walking through the corridors of an old people's home and selling ecstasy to the elderly residents was simply absurd. And irresponsible! I had seen the state my parents-in-law had been in after the intoxicating effects had worn off. How many people of that age had a weak heart and wouldn't survive such an intoxication! And I really didn't want to become a mass murderer, even

if a certain foundation for such a career had possibly already been laid.

It would have been nice if I had been able to acquire some basic knowledge for this job. In desperation, I typed "how to sell drugs" into Google and the search engine did indeed spit out various results. I skimmed through the articles, most of which had some dealer ranting about his business, and realised pretty quickly that they weren't going to help me - then I thought of someone who might be able to.

When I turned up at my in-laws' in the late afternoon, I had a travelling bag with me containing a sweatshirt, jeans and jogging bottoms. Sofie had generously donated some of her endless stock of clothes and I was happy to finally be able to bring Iza some normal clothes.

She opened the door for me in a chic sixties costume and I was stunned for a moment. Iza looked like Audrey Hepburn. The grey tweed had a figure-hugging cut, narrow at the waist, with a peplum and half-length sleeves. She wore a skirt made of the same fabric, knee-length and slit at the back. Her long black mane was tied back in a ponytail and, apart from her extreme fingernails, she looked very Sixties.

"This vintage look suits you perfectly," I said appreciatively.

"Marlies thinks so too!" Iza was beaming all over her face. "I really like it too."

"I've brought you a few more things. Maybe you could use them."

Iza took a look in her bag. "To the gym! That's great! Thank you."

There were actually still people who only wore jogging clothes for sport. They didn't live in my family.

Marlies and Werner were sitting in front of the television, each

with a plate of sandwiches in front of them. They were neatly dressed and looked happy, the flat was tidy and had obviously been freshly vacuumed. I waved into the room in greeting.

"Shh!" hissed Marlies. "That's interesting right now."

I glanced at the television, which was showing an animal documentary.

Werner winked at me. "It's about insect-eating fish. Marlies hates insects. Just like Jörn. Did you bring him along? He has more time now that he's reorganising his career."

So, *professional reorientation* was the official parent-friendly version, I thought, but shook my head regretfully and turned back to Iza. "You seem to have everything under control?"

"Absolutely. We haven't had any problems so far. Your in-laws are totally lovely."

"Some say this, others say that."

Iza laughed. "I know. They said the same thing about you!"

I suppressed the feeling of indignation that wanted to spread through me and pulled Iza out of the room by the arm. "I need to ask you something."

"So secret?"

"Yes. I don't want them to hear it."

Iza grinned broadly at me as we walked out of the room. "Practices?"

"Excuse me?"

"You have questions about a few sex practices. Let me guess: BDSM?"

I only had the vaguest idea of exactly what it was. "No, nothing to do with sex." I cleared my throat. For a moment, it seemed almost strange to ask Iza something like that. After all, she was so at home in the bourgeois world of my parents-in-law that it was as if her past had never existed. But who else could I ask? "What do I do when I have a not inconsiderable supply of ecstasy tablets?"

"I didn't even know you took drugs."

"I'm not doing that either. I want to sell them. Young people and old people are out. I only want customers who know what they're doing, have enough money and whose lives I won't ruin."

Iza grinned broadly. "I know a bunch of them."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. Can you put me in touch with them?"

"If you want, you can get the whole thing over with tonight." She turned round again briefly, as if to make sure that Marlies and Werner really couldn't hear her, and continued: "There's a party at Shania White tonight."

"Shania?"

"An illegal brothel, a bit out of town, near Hürth."

"Okay. White party - so everyone in white dresses?"

Iza looked at me as if I'd said something completely stupid. "No. Piles of coke everywhere, of course."



"Of course." I could have guessed. "I'm not sure if I have any coke."

I had seen white powder in Freddy's suitcase, but theoretically it could also be heroin or something else. And what would happen then? If someone took a line of heroin through their nose? Would their brain burst? I didn't have the faintest idea.

"Believe me, they don't care at all. The main thing is that it bangs."

"As far as I know, it does." I had seen that ecstasy worked with Marlies and Werner. "But if there's already loads of coke there, why would they buy ecstasy from me?"

Iza tapped her nose. "Nasal septum. Every second person there has problems with that. They're happy if they can pop a pill every now and then."

"Okay. I've really had enough of this now."

"Then you've come to the right place." Iza smiled knowingly at me. "You haven't done this too often, have you?"

I sighed. "I suppose you could say that."

"Did your brother ask you to do this?"

"I'm an only child."

"Oh ... I almost thought so ..."

"Can you tell me the exact address of the shop?"

Iza seemed to be looking through me, her mind was obviously elsewhere.

"Iza? The address?"

"Sorry." She looked me up and down. "You're going there like that? In jeans and a sweatshirt?"

"You said I don't have to wear anything white."

"It doesn't have to be white. But you'll stand out like a nun in a strip club in that outfit."

I looked down at myself. "Nun?"

"Metaphysically meant."

"Metaphorical?"

"It doesn't matter. There's no way you can go like this. I'll see what else I've got."

Shortly afterwards, Iza laid out a few pieces from her work collection in front of me. The clothes had already been tight and fitted on her. What was it going to be like on me? My body had absolutely nothing to do with hers and was much fuller and shorter-legged.

"I'll never fit in there," I said as she held a low-cut rag out to me.

"The tighter, the better. Believe me. Your titties will bulge out of it fantastically."

"My what's going to be what?" I must have made a pretty stupid face, because Iza laughed out loud.

"Slip into it!" She gave me a matching mini skirt to go with it.

Slip into it. The last time my mum had said that to me was when I was fourteen. And even then, the procedure in the changing room hadn't had much to do with *slipping in*, but now it was miles away from that. Pulling in my stomach and holding my breath were the basic prerequisites

for being able to fasten even a single button on the top. I could completely forget about that with the skirt, but it fit like a second skin even with the button undone.

While Iza looked like a style icon in Marlies' vintage clothes, I was transformed into a buxom madam for whom style was the end of the broom. Skin-tight mini skirt, skimpy top with buttons that almost popped open, high heels that made me feel dizzy - I wouldn't even walk around like this at carnival.

*A little side note to all female readers beyond the carnival strongholds: there are loads of people who walk around like this at carnival, regardless of gender. The sluttier, the more popular. Believe me.*

I trudged along the corridor as quietly as possible and hoped fervently that Marlies and Werner wouldn't see me in this outfit. The animal documentary had obviously finished, some early evening series was playing on the telly. Just as I thought I had made it to the front door unnoticed, I heard my mother-in-law's horrified scream as she stepped into the hallway behind me.

"Liv!"

Slowly, I turned round. "I'm ... going to a meeting." Carnival seemed to be the closest excuse for my appearance.

"It's only the ninth eleventh!"

"They're just quite early."

"There's no carnival anywhere before the eleventh of eleventh - neither in Cologne nor anywhere else on the planet!" Marlies was visibly nervous, her lower lip was moving up and down and she couldn't stop

scrutinising me. "Do you know what you look like?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But ... you didn't ...?" She turned round excitedly. "Werner! Liv is having an affair!"

"I didn't!" I exclaimed and thought: It would be nice. With an affair, I'd have some classic normal-people problems. With two deaths and an impending drug deal, my problems were clearly in a different league.

Now Werner came trundling into the corridor. He looked at me seriously. "A marriage has ups and downs. But if you cheat during a low, it just drags you down even further. Believe me, I've been there."

Marlies looked up in astonishment. "Oh yeah, and where from?"

"From stories," Werner replied as a matter of course. It sounded surprisingly credible.

"Anyway, I'm not having an affair," I said again emphatically. "It really has something to do with carnival."

Werner shook his head resolutely. "There's no carnival anywhere two days before the eleventh."

"I've already told her that."

"Maybe it used to be like that," I replied and approached the front door. "In the past, strawberries were only available in summer. It's different today." I quickly opened the door. I could still hear Werner asking Marlies what my outfit had to do with strawberries, but I was already out of the house.

My nervousness grew on the way to the allotment. I had to get the

drugs, take them to the brothel and sell them there. What if I was stopped by the police on the way? What if the brothel partygoers realised that they were dealing with a layman? Would they rip me off? And if so, what should I do? And anyway, how should I approach my potential customers? Hey, I've got something that might be of interest to you?

"No," I said out loud to myself. I would take the direct approach to the sales pitch, I decided as I parked the car in front of the allotment. *Do you want to buy ecstasy?* - that would be my opening line. Anything else would make things unnecessarily complicated.

I trudged to my allotment, taking care not to twist my high heels. Luckily, as expected, the site was deserted, not a soul in sight. Except for one.

"Mrs Steinhammer?" Mr Kriemer had appeared out of nowhere in front of me. He had obviously come from a side path, pushing a bicycle trailer in front of him. He looked at me in amazement. "Is it the barbecue tonight?"

I laughed briefly, but slightly hysterically. "What ideas you have!"

"I just thought because of..." He pointed at my outfit.

"After work, I like to slip into my feel-good clothes, that's all, Mr Kriemer."

I walked on quickly, not wanting to get another line from the old, drooling bloke.

When I entered my plot, I could already smell Freddy from the garden gate. Why was it still so warm? It was November, for crying out loud. A little frost would have been perfectly seasonable! But at twelve

degrees and drizzling rain, storing a corpse was unfortunately accompanied by a not insignificant odour nuisance. And this made me realise once again that I needed a different solution for Freddy.

I pulled the tarpaulin off the compost in two easy steps and quickly dug out the bag. One of Freddy's hands stood in my way, and it was surprisingly grey. Or rather green-blue. I couldn't see it that clearly in the dark. In any case, the colour matched the smell. I quickly buried it again.

First the drugs, then Freddy, I told myself. One thing at a time.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I sat back in the car, my bag next to me on the passenger seat. Mr Kriemer had obviously left the plant, at least I hadn't seen him again.

I unzipped the sports bag and took a look at the contents. Back then - how long ago was that? Just two weeks, I realised with a shock. It felt as if it had been in another life. In fact, it had at least been the end of another life. In any case, I had only had a quick look in the bag at the time, so I didn't know anything specific about the quantity and diversity of the material.

After rummaging through the countless little plastic bags, I was sure that most of the drugs were ecstasy. Or at least tablets, which, for all I knew, could only be ecstasy. The white powder - whether cocaine, heroin or sugar - made up only a fraction of the sachets. Not even twenty, if I was right. It was similar with the weed. So coke and marijuana were not part of Freddy's core competences, perhaps they were something like the quenching goods at the till that were quickly pushed onto annoying customers when their greed was particularly great.

When I thought that all this could have ended up in Hannes' blood, lungs and brain, I became unspeakably angry. The fact that drug dealers were making a pass at young people was really the last straw, and at that moment the tiny remnant of concern I still had about selling drugs melted away. I was convinced that only Freddy-type guys would be at the party.

Half an hour later, I had reached the address Iza had given me. It was a joke that *Shania* was an illegal brothel. How could such a conspicuous building in the middle of nowhere be illegal? Any passing patrolman would immediately notice what was going on in the three-storey building. Either the authorities were turning a blind eye or all parties had somehow come to an arrangement, which I couldn't rule out. After all, arrangements were always being made in Cologne.

The *Shania* must have been some kind of open-plan disco in the past, otherwise you would only plan a brothel in such a rural and lonely location - and I didn't want to believe that it had all been planned like this from the outset. The area here was rural, there were few normal houses, and when my sat nav told me I *had reached my destination, there were* only meadows to the left and right of the road. The *Shania stood on* the banks of a small river that meandered picturesquely around the building. Three floors, all lit up in red, heart-shaped lamps in the windows, a beefy doorman in front of the entrance. The car park was full of fat show-off cars, Lamborghinis, Porsches, lowered BMWs of all sizes. The guys with gold chains, the ladies dressed like me. No cliché was left out here. If it had been a fancy dress party with the theme of *hookers and pimps, I would*

*have* believed it too.

I'm sure I would never have got past the bouncer in my normal clothes. But now he just gave me a quick nod and waved me through as I came stumbling towards him, smiling wickedly.

But then his eyes fell on my sports bag. "Open it!"

"There's nothing special in it."

"Open up!"

The guy wasn't just a fan of one-word sentences, he also left no doubt with his facial expressions that he would get a look in my pocket whether I wanted to co-operate or not.

I tried to control my racing heart with some deep breathing and smiled at him as disarmingly as I could.

"I'll open the bag," I began in a sugar-sweet voice. "I just want you to know beforehand that I don't want to compete with anyone here."

He scrutinised me demonstratively from top to bottom and grimaced mockingly. "Oh no."

Impudent bastard, I thought. But I had no choice but to unzip the bag a little.

He expertly took a look inside and ran his hand through the collection of bags. For a millisecond, a hint of a smile crossed his face.

"From Benji?"

Who the hell was Benji? "What makes you think that?" I asked as irrelevantly as possible.

"The colour. Benji's colour. Good stuff."



I looked at the tablets, which had a slight blue tinge. Okay. So that was Benji's colour. Good to know.

"Do you want to?" I endeavoured to speak as firmly as possible.

He nodded. "How much?"

What did he mean now? How many pills I had with me? How much all that shit was worth? Or was it about the unit price?

"Ten euros each," I replied, hoping that I had answered his question.

He pulled a pink note out of his trouser pocket. "I'll take fifty."

"All right." So the guy just had a five hundred euro note in his pocket. If the party guests were like that, I'd be through here in no time.

With a pounding heart, I counted out the goods and handed them to him in exchange for the pink note. It wasn't often that I got my hands on something like this. Like a Smartie, he popped a tablet into his mouth and signalled to me with a wave of his hand that I could go on my way.

A slight feeling of happiness rose up inside me. I hadn't even entered the party yet and had already collected five hundred euros. Did I have a guilty conscience? Not any more than I had in the last two weeks. The bouncer certainly didn't give the impression that he had been introduced to drugs by me. On the contrary. I had obviously been dealing with a complete professional.

In the entrance area of this friendly party location, I realised that the motto *White Party* was taken very seriously. In my imagination, someone would have retreated to the washrooms every now and then with a bit of coke, just like you see in American films. Fiddlesticks. It felt like

there were bowls of white powder on every corner, and someone was constantly bending over them and inhaling the stuff through their nose without restraint.

I had no idea whether it was really all cocaine or whether someone had perhaps had a joke and sprinkled sherbet powder in the bowls, but the party guests invariably looked as if the best stuff was at the start. The people were excited and exalted, dancing like lunatics and making out with each other at random. It was Sodom and Gomorrah.

"Ari says you have E with you?" An enormously slim woman with grotesquely enlarged lips and breasts stood in front of me. "I can't take the fucking coke. Had two nosebleeds already."

"I'm sorry about that." I wasn't. "Ten per tablet."

"Tablet!" She giggled stupidly. "Are you from the health insurance company?"

"No."

"I'll take twenty."

I picked out the stuff and considered making it more expensive, but rejected the idea again. If there was one thing I didn't want, it was discussions and trouble. I'd rather get everything out to the people as quickly as possible.

It was actually much easier than I thought to sell the bluish pills and it went surprisingly smoothly. There were the grateful nose bleeders who couldn't take any more coke and the disinhibited cokeheads who wanted to enhance the stimulating effect of the white powder with my blue pill. They were selling like hot cakes. Absurdly, the problem was that

I no longer knew where to put all the notes, as my tight outfit naturally had few pockets.

I was stuffing another hundred into my bra when a man of perhaps forty checked out my goods. He didn't look quite as arse as the rest of the guests - or let's put it *another way: arse*. He was wearing a slim-fitting, almost tight suit that was visibly expensive. Underneath, he was wearing a form-fitting T-shirt with a deep V-neck that really showed off his extreme chest muscles.

"Where did you get the stuff?" he asked tonelessly.

"From Benji," I said. An answer that had worked all evening without a hitch. Obviously, this Benji was a guarantee of quality.

"I'm Benji."

That came as a surprise.

"Fine," I said with a smile, feeling a little insane. But I had almost got used to this state by now.

"I think so too. Come with me."

He grabbed me by the arm, quite firmly, but still didn't seem really unfriendly. But it was immediately clear that he wouldn't tolerate any resistance. I had to go with him now, wherever Benji wanted to go with me. If I refused or even resisted, he would do something to me, beatings, spankings or worse, I had no doubt about that.

He took me to a mirrored lift in front of which a couple were copulating and pushed them aside so that they fell to the floor, which didn't seem to bother them much as they just carried on doing what they were doing. Benji pushed me into the lift and pressed the top button.

He didn't say a word during the short journey, but still held me by the arm. Was he afraid I might suddenly knock him down? Or was he just trying to intimidate me? To be honest, that was no longer necessary. Even though I tried not to let on, I was trembling with fear inside. How was I going to get out of here safely? I couldn't escape from the lift, that was clear. I explored my options. A courageous kick in the crown jewels as soon as we left the lift? Poke my fingers in the eyes? A blow to the larynx? I had never done any of that. Why would it work the first time? In a close combat situation with a well-trained drug dealer of all people?

Once we reached the third floor, we walked along the corridor on a plush carpet, at the end of which he pushed open a door.

In the centre of the large room stood an oversized desk. To the right of it was a bar trolley on which there must have been a hundred bottles of spirits. There was also a glass bowl with a block of ice containing an ice pick. To the left of the table was a sofa with cushions you could probably have sunk into. The thick, plush carpet was also laid out everywhere, and in combination with the equally thick curtains, the whole room looked like a cliché of a brothel owner's office. Especially as everything was in dark red.

Behind the desk sat a man who must be about the same age as Benji. He was drawing a line through a golden tube. Unfortunately, he had opened the window behind him, so a large part of the white powder was swept off the table by the gust of wind we caused. The man remained in a kind of state of shock for a moment, then jumped up in annoyance.

"Why do you think I always say: Knock? Close the door, but

quickly!"

"Sorry, Klemens."

*Klemens? Can you imagine how surprised I was by this name? When I was a child, criminals were called Toni or Al. More recently also Freddy or Benji. But Klemens?*

*I once read an article about how children with certain first names are disadvantaged - I'm sure you're familiar with the discussion. Kevins and Chantals have a much harder time than all the Konrads and Luises in this country. And for me, Klemens clearly belongs in the Konrad-Luise faction and not in this sleazy brothel with a pile of coke under his nose.*

*I don't know what prejudices I was guided by in this situation, but somehow I had the feeling that a criminal with the name Klemens must be particularly bad. Maybe because I believed that he hadn't slipped into it like perhaps a Kevin. He had chosen this path of his own free will - it couldn't be any worse.*

"What's wrong?" Klemens leaned casually against the windowsill and stared at the bag in my hand. "What's that?"

"The old lady sells stuff I make."

*The old lady?* In all the films I've ever seen in my life, criminal women who had been groomed as prostitutes were always called *the little one!* At most, madams who were really old, i.e. seventy plus or more, were called *the old woman!*

"And how does the bitch get the stuff?"

So! I preferred slut to old lady after all. After all, slut was the attribute of my outfit, so I couldn't complain.

What kind of crazy thoughts were going through my head? After

all, I was in a potentially life-threatening situation, shouldn't I be concentrating on something other than misogynistic comments?

Benji and Klemens looked at me challengingly.

"Oh, you're talking to me? I didn't realise. What was the question again?"

"Are you kidding me?" Klemens' voice had taken on a threatening undertone.

"No."

"Then please answer properly. Do you realise what kind of shit you're in right now?" The look on Klemens' face left no doubt that he was in some serious shit.

Now both my body and my brain had recognised the danger level of this situation. My heart was racing and the adrenaline was rushing through my veins in huge quantities. I could feel the heat hitting my face, worse than ever before.

Please don't have a hot flush, not now, I thought as I broke out in a sweat that I had never experienced before. I would never have thought that there could be an increase on what I had experienced during Hugo's grave search. But there was. I could hardly breathe, fanning myself, wagging my tight top, which had nothing to wag. Sweat was pouring down my breasts and I looked like I'd had a milk shot.

Benji watched the scenario with irritation. "Are you on Turkey?"

Why did everyone always think I was in withdrawal?

"I have nothing to do with drugs," I said.

Benji grinned broadly. "Nah, that's clear. Hence all the stuff in your bag."

Okay, he had a point. But I had no strength left to explain the exact circumstances to him or, rather, to come up with a good excuse. I was on the verge of burning out.

Only once before in my life had my body felt like it does now: when I was in a sauna that was a hundred degrees and a crazy sauna master was waving his arms and making an infusion. I ran out in a hurry because I would probably have suffocated otherwise. And that's exactly how I felt now.

"I need air, I urgently need fresh air!" I groaned and stormed towards Klemens, who was still leaning against the windowsill. The next moment, however, he was no longer.

I can't remember exactly how it happened. Just before I reached the window, my sweaty feet slipped in my high heels and I toppled forwards. With an enormous amount of momentum - yes, I really needed to lose some weight - I fell against Klemens and he fell backwards out of the window.

Not again, I thought, savouring for a tiny moment the cool breeze that blew into the room from Klemens' death plunge.

"You're dead, bitch!" Benji roared at that moment. Like a bull gone wild, he raced towards me with a bright red head. It was nothing more than a reflex that I reached for the ice pick lying on the bar trolley.

*I swear to you that I didn't ram it into Benji's stomach. Rather, the guy literally ran into the ice pick. All in all, it really was a chain of unfortunate*

*circumstances. But of course that didn't change the facts. Two dead again.*

While Benji bled to death surprisingly quickly, I thought about the fact that I urgently needed to get my hormone balance in order, otherwise I would get into serious trouble at some point. Although I did wonder how it could have got any worse. But, as we all know, problems were there to be solved. And I had no choice but to clear the air first.

I leant out of the window as far as I could, but couldn't see Klemens' body anywhere. He must have fallen into the stream that ran so picturesquely next to the house. Good. If it was deep enough, no one would find him so quickly. Perhaps the current would carry him far enough and he would only reappear in Holland. After all, anyone who fell off the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne was only seen again in Düsseldorf. This little river wasn't the Rhine, but it wasn't a trickle either.

Klemens seemed to be reasonably well looked after. But what about Benji? How was I supposed to bring the body down from the third floor all by myself and dispose of it - without the dozens of party guests noticing? No matter how coked up they were, they would probably still notice a bloody corpse. What if I threw it out of the window too? But could I manage that? Benji was a big guy and the opposite of slender. How was I going to get him over the windowsill?

I thought feverishly while my body began to freeze. As hot as I had been a moment ago, I was now cold. My sweaty, tight outfit didn't make the situation any better.

Freezing, I walked up and down, rubbing my arms against my body. Every time I passed the bar trolley, I looked at the countless bottles



of schnapps and wondered whether I should treat myself to a sip. Vodka, tequila, rum - in all different flavours, there must have been fifty bottles there. I wouldn't drink any of it voluntarily.

I stopped abruptly and grabbed a bottle of vodka.

"Forty-eight revolutions. That's pretty good ..."

The rum next to it was similarly high-calibre, as were all the other spirits. There was even eighty per cent absinthe, several bottles from different manufacturers. In total, I must have been dealing with fifty litres of highly flammable booze. The plush carpet, the red curtains, all that had to burn like tinder.

My eyes fell on the corpse. At the ice pick sticking out of Benji's stomach. At the tight-fitting and probably very expensive suit that was stained with blood. At the huge pool that had formed under the body.

What else was I supposed to do?

I hadn't expected the fire to take off so quickly. After I had poured the contents of all the bottles of schnapps over Benji, the carpet and the sofa, I dropped a lit match in the classic way, as if I were in a Tarantino film. Then I really had to put my feet up. Klemens' office was burning extremely quickly and I had trouble getting out fast enough. After running downstairs through the stairwell, I realised that the fuck party was still in full swing.

I hesitantly stood between the drugged up and copulating people. They hadn't done anything to me, it was my moral duty to warn them about the inferno of flames.

I turned to a young man who was leaning against the wall next to

me with his eyes half-closed.

"Excuse me? Do you smell that? I think I smell fire."

"Aha ... Aaaaah ...", the guy said, and only now did I realise that a red-haired person was sucking on his penis. Apart from me, practically everyone in the room had some kind of sexual organ in their hand, mouth or other orifice. None of them would listen to me today.

Okay, there was no point. I had to get out. Just before the exit, I turned round again and shouted: "There's a fire!" But even then, I only got astonished looks. If at all.

*I can reassure you. As I understand it, none of the party guests were harmed. No, of course I don't know this one hundred per cent, but the next day the newspaper said that only one body was found in the ruins of the Shania. The others all made it out, so please calm down. I'm still not a mass murderer. But I admit that my hot flush was out of control. And it was huge.*

My adrenalin levels were still extremely high as I jumped into the car and drove away from the brothel. In the rear-view mirror, I saw the partygoers running out of the building, screaming, with thick clouds of smoke billowing out of it. The *Shania* was burning like a torch from top to bottom. I heard the sirens in the distance.

I pressed down on the accelerator and tried to calm myself as I sped down the street. Benji and the whole office had been on fire like a chimney starter. I had seen that. With the best will in the world, I couldn't imagine that any usable traces could be found there. They kept saying that the fire specialists could find out whether it was an accident or arson. So they might be able to reconstruct what happened to the bottles. And

would the drugs burn completely? I'd left the bag in Klemens' office, so there wasn't likely to be much left of it. What about possible clues about me? Fingerprints? DNA traces? No, I couldn't imagine that. And if they found anything, it wouldn't be the end of the world. After all, there were no traces of me to compare.

I took a deep breath and grabbed my chest. My bra still felt stuffed, just like when Eva and I had stuffed paper handkerchiefs into our much too big bras as young girls. Only this time it wasn't Tempos, but lots of hundred, two hundred and five hundred euro notes.

Even though the evening was certainly rather mixed overall, from a financial point of view it was a complete success.

The menopause is not a disease. Whether with or without medication, at some point they are over. Every woman should talk to her doctor and weigh up whether she wants to alleviate her symptoms with hormone therapy and thus take certain risks or not.

However, if several bodies already paving your path at the start of the menopause, then grasp at every straw.

I came home in the middle of the night. Jörn was sitting on the shoe bench in the hallway, his mobile phone in his hand. We had been sitting here together when Hannes had gone out for the first time and lost track of time. We hadn't been able to reach him by phone and he hadn't responded to messages, so we'd spent half the night sitting in the hallway, worried sick and staring at our mobile phones in the hope of getting a sign of life from him.

Jörn was sitting there just like that when I entered the house shortly after midnight. The sight of him moved me. I hadn't expected him to be worried and for a moment I forgot what had happened in the last few hours.

"You were waiting for me? But darling ..."

I wanted to hug him, hold him close and tell him how sweet I thought it was. But I didn't get the chance because Jörn immediately jumped up.

"You're having an affair?" he asked, stunned, and scrutinised me from top to bottom.

I rolled my eyes. That was all I needed. "Your mum called you?"

"Indeed. Where have you been?" He sniffed the air. "And why do you smell so funny?"

Now I realised it too. I stank like a damp chimney fire. "It's a long story."

Jörn put his hands on his hips. "No secrets! We promised each

other that!" He slumped back onto the shoe bench and hung his head in despair. "You were with someone else. Fireside, bearskin, that sort of thing, right?"

"Who still has a bearskin today ..."

"Never mind." He looked up with moist eyes. "Is there someone else, Liv?"

I shook my head vigorously and looked at him seriously. "I'm not having an affair. Please believe me. There is no other man in my life." At least not a living one, I thought, searching my brain for an excuse. "There was a car on fire on the military ring road and I helped put it out. The driver was completely distraught and couldn't manage the fire extinguisher, so I couldn't just drive on. So I did it for her."

Jörn was silent for a while, as if he needed to let the information sink in. I wasn't quite sure whether he believed me.

"And where have you been?"

"As I said, I helped this woman."

"I understood that already. But you weren't driven to the accident by my parents. In those clothes." Jörn's brow furrowed.

"I was at a dress rehearsal."

"What?"

I urgently needed to come up with something better, Jörn would never believe this rubbish. But unfortunately I couldn't think of anything. So I decided to change tactics and smiled meaningfully at him.

"Unfortunately, I can't tell you any more yet. It's a surprise."

I leant down to him and kissed him, quite passionately, at least that's what I tried to do. It was the oldest and cheapest trick in the world to take a man's mind off things. And it worked this time too. I sat down on his lap and started to unbutton his shirt while he fiddled with my top. Suddenly he stopped.

"Your bra rustles."

Damn. The money! "Yes, it's from the fire."

"Excuse me?"

I thanked the heavens that the front door opened at that moment. Sofie and Hannes stared at us in horror.

"Are you making out here?" Hannes was visibly shocked.

"Oh God! I'll never get that out of my head!" Sofie imitated a vomiting fit.

"Where did you get here so late anyway?" I reflexively went into attack mode as I tried to zip my top back up. Wasn't Hannes grounded?

"Vofi party," Jörn explained to me, who knew nothing about the house arrest. "And it's not that late yet. Not for the two of them, anyway."

I just nodded. I had completely forgotten about the pre-financing party for the Abiball, or Vofi for short.

"Come on, get out of here," Sofie said to her brother with unusual affection. "I'm traumatised."

"Has mum put on fuck clothes?" I heard Hannes whisper as the two of them ran up the stairs. "For Dad?!"

"It's just sick."

Then Sofie slammed the door shut, followed by Hannes.

I looked at Jörn with a shrug and grinned wryly.

"Paul's staying over at a mate's," he said, with that insinuating tone in his voice again. "He's not coming back." He was just about to tug at my top again when I grabbed his hand.

I sniffed my arm demonstratively. "I smell really bad. How about I take a shower and you wait for me in bed?"

*Are you wondering how I was still able to have sex after the evening? Did I not have other things on my mind? You're quite right to ask. But this sex was important. Not only to take Jörn's mind off things, but also for me. After all the abysses I had seen that evening, a little human closeness simply did me good. Yes, sure, my head wasn't really in the game - but haven't you experienced that yourself?*

*I am convinced that you are familiar with this nocturnal mental cinema. At least if you're a woman, as this kind of mental carousel seems to be much less common in men. Even when Jörn was hiding his unemployment from me and pretending to go to the office in the morning, he still wanted to have sex. And his ability to fall asleep and stay asleep had not suffered from the stress of the last few weeks. Unlike us, men have the wonderful ability to switch off their thinking - and I really mean that in the way I say it. I actually find this wonderful, absolutely helpful and a thousand times better than spending hours worrying. Men are blessed that they can simply stop thinking.*

*Do you think that's a bold thesis? I don't. Jörn was really into it that night, you could only be so passionate and technically adept if your brain was in sex mode.*

*So while my husband was pulling out all the stops in his sexual repertoire, I was thinking about what might be left of a corpse after a fire, whether bones or teeth or something else. Typical woman.*



*Okay, there probably aren't that many women who have such thoughts during lovemaking. But I bet that each of you has gone through a shopping list or a Power Point presentation while he was spoiling you with his pointer.*

*Please forgive this pun.*

I then spent the rest of the night sleepless once again. I couldn't let go of the thoughts of what had happened. While Jörn snored through the night next to me, I kept seeing the images of the burning brothel office in front of me, Klemens falling out of the window, Benji's unfortunate stumble into the ice axe. It seemed to me as if they were from another life, as if it hadn't happened to me, as if I had only watched it from a distance or as if it had been a film and I had been the uninvolved spectator. But it wasn't like that, and this undeniable fact kept me wide awake.

I had spent the rest of the weekend in bed with a migraine and no sleep. Accordingly, I turned up at my gynaecologist's on Monday during my lunch break, who was also concerned about my visible sleeplessness.

"And you haven't slept at all?"

I shook my head. "Hardly at all at the weekend. Otherwise it's not quite as bad." I just slept worse after a body. "Are my lab results in?"

"Yes." Dr Rieker pulled a piece of paper out of my patient file. "Your hormone levels show a clear drop. Your progesterone is far too low, which definitely explains your insomnia."

"Apart from all the dead bodies."

"What do you mean?" Dr Rieker's eyebrows rose two centimetres.

And mine too. I was firmly convinced that I had only thought this sentence and not said it.

"I'm so confused all the time," I said quickly. "I'm always forgetting something, I can't remember why I went into the room, where my keys or my glasses are, I even mix up my children's names all the time. And then sometimes I say something completely out of context. Maybe I'm going crazy!"

My doctor smiled. "No, don't worry, that's all quite typical. And to be expected with your values."

Dr Rieker was of the opinion that I was suffering from relatively severe menopausal symptoms. I felt the same way. She explained all the pros and cons of customised hormone therapy to me in detail.

"Do I understand correctly," I asked at the end, "that the main argument against these new hormone therapies is the lack of long-term studies?"

"For the new bioidentical hormones, yes. We simply don't know what long-term effects they could have in twenty years' time, as they haven't been around that long."

It was worth the risk to me.

Dr Rieker prescribed me a hormone cream, which I was to smear on my arm once a day, as well as a vaginal ointment with the corresponding suppositories. I was to come back in three months for a check-up.

"But you'll feel better much sooner," my doctor reassured me. "The insomnia in particular should disappear quickly thanks to the progesterone."

"So I'm getting my old life back?" There was a little too much

pathos in my voice, at least for those who didn't know about my erratic behaviour over the last few days.

"Well, what does the old life mean?" Dr Rieker smiled at me encouragingly. "The hormones will alleviate your menopausal symptoms, but they can't turn back time. I want to be open with you. We can't stop the decline. We can't. We can only delay the body's ageing processes a little. Sport will become a whole new topic for you. Most young women who come to my practice do sport to keep their figure in shape. From the menopause onwards at the latest, women do sport so that they can continue to live a reasonably normal life."

I waited for a sign on her face that she had made a joke. But there was nothing.

"Between the ages of thirty and sixty, you lose thirty per cent of your muscle mass as a result of the normal ageing process," continued Dr Rieker unperturbed. "In women, the hormone deficiency also increases the risk of osteoporosis at some point, even though we are now tackling this with bioidentical hormones. Sport is still extremely important."

"I wanted to lose a bit of weight anyway," I said.

"Don't focus too much on the scales," advised Dr Rieker. "Building muscle is the only thing that counts, and muscle weighs more than fat. Small lifebuoys shouldn't bother you. On average, women gain five kilos during the menopause."

"Oh please..." That was the last thing I wanted to hear.

"Mrs Steinhammer," said my doctor admonishingly, "don't you remember what I said? Soon a whole load of ballast will fall off you. When

your hormones are no longer controlling you, you'll be free! Free!"

"Unless I go to prison..." I mumbled, probably again assuming I was just thinking the words.

Dr Rieker burst out laughing. "Great, you certainly haven't lost your sense of humour. Wait and see, the hormone ointments work quickly. You'll feel better in no time."

I actually felt better on the way out of the practice. Just the prospect that my condition would soon change thanks to the hormone ointments lifted my spirits. It also gave me hope that the murderous episode in my life was finally coming to an end.

Now everything would be fine again, I could feel that very clearly.

I grabbed my mobile phone and called Eva, who was also going through a challenging hormonal phase.

"We're struggling with the change in the weather," she replied when I asked how she was feeling. So she was already in the us phase. "It's turning into really nasty November weather, it's supposed to rain and storm for the next few days."

"And the embryo notices that?"

"Lena."

"Excuse me?"

"Her name will be Lena. Embryo is no longer said in that month."

"Nice name. And Lena notices when it's supposed to rain outside?"

"I don't know. Anyway, I feel like I'm exhausted."

I didn't need a November low for that.

"Have you thought about giving birth yet?" I had to grin at the question myself. Back then, when we had our children, there was a lot of hype surrounding the birth of a baby. Delivery rooms had been transformed into feel-good oases, with starry skies on the ceiling and calming colours on the walls. I had no idea what the number one birth trend was today, but back then it was a birthing bed in which the partner could lie together with the expectant mother, which I have never seen anyone do. Childbirth was far too little of a cosy affair for that.

"I don't know exactly yet. I'm a total high-risk birth at my age. Maybe it will be a caesarean section, we'll see."

"Is that okay for you?" I remembered how I had been pitied by other mums back then when the twins were born by caesarean section.

Eva let out a snort. "Are you serious? About a missed birth experience and all that?"

Now I had to laugh too. "Could have been."

"Honestly, no!"

"Right."

In a good mood, we made an appointment for the weekend to go baby shopping again.

Unfortunately, my positive mood didn't last long. It was abruptly destroyed when I drove past the allotment garden on my way home.

At first, the scenery, which I could only see from a distance from the car, looked very picturesque. Iza and my parents-in-law worked amicably among the plants and shrubs, preparing the garden for winter.

Werner raked the leaves and kept taking them to the compost heap, where he worked them into the rest of the compost with a rake.

I slammed on the brakes. Why the hell ... A blink of an eye later, I was out of the car and sprinting off. I reached my plot in a matter of seconds and jumped over the garden fence like a tennis player over the net. When I reached Werner, he was lifting Freddy's arm with a puzzled look on his face. As I ran, I grabbed a load of leaves and threw them onto the dead arm, while I pushed my father-in-law off the compost so that we both fell to the ground.

"Not so stormy, not so stormy," Werner said with a laugh.

"Did you hurt yourself?" I pulled him back to his feet.

"No. I'm well padded. But why are you just throwing me in the mud like that?"

"The leaves. You shouldn't bend down so much, Werner."

"And out of consideration for my bones, you're throwing me over." My father-in-law walked straight back to the compost. "My back can take it."

"You'd better get away from there." I held him by the arm.

"Nah, I saw something. I think there's a dead body there."

He said it in such a normal voice that under other circumstances I would have laughed out loud. But I didn't now.

"What did you say, darling?" Marlies had come to us.

"I think there's a body in the compost."

Iza had now also approached us. She stared at me with wide eyes.

Soundlessly, she formed the following words with her lips: "Hugo?"

How was Hugo supposed to get out of the slurry pit and into the compost? At first I wanted to shake my head, but then it seemed wiser to signal to Iza with facial expressions and gestures that it was quite conceivable and that we'd better get my parents-in-law out of here. Fortunately, Iza quickly understood.

"Come on, Wernerchen." She put her arm around his shoulders and manoeuvred him towards the gate. "It's getting pretty cold. We're going home."

"But the body?"

"It's already cold. We don't have to worry about that." Iza winked at Marlies, who just nodded.

"I'm sure there was something there," Werner insisted. "It smelled funny, too."

"The compost has been stinking for a while now. Besides, you're always driving one!" said Iza, and Werner had to laugh.

"You're right, girl." Amused, he let her lead him out of the allotment. "What are you cooking today?"

"What you want, Werner, what you want."

Satisfied, my father-in-law hooked up with Iza. Before she left the property with him, she gave me a meaningful look, which I didn't quite know how to interpret.

"I think he's getting really demented now," Marlies whispered to me.

"Growing old really isn't for sissies," I said, and Marlies nodded with a sigh.

"That goes for that one too." I pointed my head towards Mr Kriemer, who was slowly walking towards us.

"I'm off then." Marlies knocked the dirt off her hands and left the allotment, nodded briefly to Mr Kriemer and hurried after Werner and Iza.

Mr Kriemer greeted us taciturnly and then looked curiously over the fence. "You've already got help with the gardening?"

"My parents-in-law," I explained. "You've already met my girlfriend. Everything has to be winterised."

"Cologne's winter won't be that frosty. Think about having a barbecue."

I just nodded.

Mr Kriemer pointed to the compost heap. "You'd better protect it from the rain. It's supposed to pour like crazy over the next few days. A real November storm seems to be on its way."

"Yes, I'll take care of it." I cleared my throat and hoped that Mr Kriemer didn't notice anything unusual about the compost.

"Why don't you ask Stallkamp," Kriemer suggested. "I'm sure he can help you out with some tarpaulins."

"Stallkamp? Is that the farmer? The one with the slurry pit?"

Kriemer realised. "Do you have a problem with that? Odour nuisance? We've had a few complaints about it in the past. We can collect signatures and ..."



"Absolutely not," I intervened. "The pit doesn't bother me at all. And just think what that would entail in terms of construction work, all the noise - nope, nope. Everything is in the green zone. I don't smell anything."

"All right, then." Kriemer sniffed the air. "It smells a bit funny in here, though."

"That's the compost. As I said, I'll take care of it."

"Yes, Stallkamp can certainly help out with tarpaulins." Kriemer prepared to move on. "But you'll have to do it quickly, the storm is just around the corner and Stallkamp has to go to hospital. New pacemaker. He'll be out in a few days. And you know how long that takes."

"Honestly, no."

"Quite a long time. And at that age, you don't know whether he'll come back."

"All right. Thanks for the tip."

"There's a bike trailer in the booth at the entrance. You are welcome to borrow it for the tarpaulins. To be honest, I don't want to see you travelling around here by car again. The paths can't cope with the rain now."

"Sure. Thanks."

"Good. Bye." And he was gone.

Relieved, I looked round again. The next moment I flinched in horror as my eyes fell on Freddy's elbow, for which my leaf throw had not been enough and which was still peeking out of the compost. I reached him with one leap and quickly packed a few more loads of leaves on top.

"That was close," I muttered. It really was. If Kriemer or my parents-in-law had had slightly better eyesight, they would have been able to recognise the damn elbow as such. Okay, my father-in-law had noticed it, but luckily everyone had blamed it on his incipient dementia, including himself. Had Iza seen him? And if so, was it possible to deduce the person from the elbow?

The ringing of my mobile phone diverted my attention from the most annoying dead person in my life to the most annoying living one.

"Mrs Wugner. What can I do for you?" I could no longer motivate myself to use a fluting customer service voice.

"The foundation for the kitchen block was poured today!" Cathy Wugner, on the other hand, had managed to muster up her usual customer voice. She sounded as indignant as ever.

"That's great, then we're on schedule."

"We are not! It won't be firm at all! It's the purest wobble!"

I once read that you should count to ten in your head, then the impulse to shout out loud would take care of itself.

"Concrete takes a few days to harden completely," I said as calmly as I could.

"I'm not stupid!" Cathy Wugner exclaimed loudly. "I realise that too, of course. But what do we do if the mice run over it in time? Maybe one of them gets stuck?"

"According to my information, the exterminator was already there ..."

"And how do I know he got them all?"

I thought back to my conversation with the craftsman and the suspicions he had expressed about Cathy Wugner.

"The exterminator got it all out." I surprised myself at how dangerous my voice suddenly sounded. "If animals start turning up again now, then we can assume it's sabotage. And then we'd have the culprit on video."

"But the monitoring system isn't even ..."

"Yes," I interrupted her sternly again. "The camera in the entrance area works. It's not the final model yet, but it would record a possible culprit in any case."

There was dead silence on the line for a moment. "All right then," Mrs Wugner finally said and hung up.

I had never got them off my cheek so quickly. And there were only two explanations for that: Either you couldn't put up with everything from this person and simply had to deal with her more harshly, or she was the damn saboteur.

Sighing, I looked at the covered Freddy. It would be too good if I could finally get him off my cheek. But the guy was just persistent.

Thin-skinnedness is widespread when  
the hormones say goodbye. This feeling of no longer being able to cope  
with everyday life and quickly losing your nerve seems to be one of the  
hallmarks of the menopause.

It can go so far that a woman bursts into tears just because she can't  
find a parking space.

Or chopping up a corpse into countless pieces  
because the smell of decomposition  
really gets on her.

That night I lay sleepless next to Jörn again, even though I had smeared the hormone ointment everywhere I was supposed to. But of course the stuff didn't have an immediate effect. However, that suited me that evening because I didn't want to sleep at all. I urgently needed a plan and thought back and forth about what I could do with Freddy. And before I couldn't think of a solution, I forbade myself any sign of tiredness.

After thinking about the problem for a good two hours, I realised that every approach to solving it boiled down to the same thing: the slurry pit in which Hugo was happily decomposing. It also seemed to me to be the only safe place for Freddy, the only feasible method of disposal. All the alternatives - burning, burying, dissolving in acid - failed due to lack of funds or the fact that I couldn't do it alone. And I could hardly ask Iza for help in this case. It also seemed unwise to wait any longer to rebury Freddy. The predicted storm was breathing down my neck. What's more, I didn't know what Iza had seen in the afternoon and whether she might want to check the compost heap herself.

That's why I had rung the bell at farmer Stallkamp's house the night before. The man was much older and frailer than I remembered him. I wasn't at all surprised that he hadn't heard Iza and me the other day. He could hardly hear me even now.

After I had asked him a few times about the tarpaulins, I enquired about his state of health. He had already packed his things, he told me, and he wanted to check into hospital that evening. Tomorrow he would

have lots of preliminary examinations, the day after tomorrow the operation and then relatively quickly straight into rehab. He would be away for at least four weeks, estimated Farmer Stallkamp, who seemed to be in a pretty good mood despite his state of health. I wished him all the best, said goodbye and covered my compost with his tarpaulins.

So the farm was completely deserted. Surely someone would check on the farm, but certainly not on the first day.

There was no longer any reason to wait, but plenty of reasons not to.

I silently climbed out of bed. I even held my breath, very slowly putting one foot in front of the other to sneak out of the room as silently as possible. Luckily, Jörn snored so loudly that he drowned out all other noises.

To avoid waking Jörn or one of the children, I decided to cycle to the allotment. It was quite windy by now, the leaves were flying around my ears and the air smelled of rain.

I pedalled and thought about how I had cycled after Hannes not so long ago, how it had all started, this new, absolutely unpleasant chapter in my life that was hopefully now coming to an end. Despite all the nervousness I was feeling, despite all the doubts as to whether I could really get Freddy into the pit on my own, I was looking forward to reaching my destination soon.

Freddy was the last problem I had to solve, apart from our money problems, Jörn's unemployment, Werner's passion for betting, Hannes' affinity for drugs - but in view of the imminent transport of the body, it

all seemed like a pipe dream.

In a few hours, I would only have the problems that other people had. Then I would finally have my old life back.

*Please don't give me that again! I also realise that I couldn't just throw my guilt into the pit with Freddy and forget about it. I had no intention of doing that! And when I talk about disposal, I don't mean it in a disrespectful way, even if it might sound like that to some people. But what do you expect from me? Should I organise an official funeral service for this bastard and then report to the police station? Who would that help?*

*Oh man, my nerves. Please excuse me. I'm still pretty damn thin-skinned, although unlike that night back then, I've long been on hormones. But as much as this bioidentical stuff still helps me today, it's unfortunately not a miracle cure for a guilty conscience.*

The weather was getting worse and worse. The wind had developed into a light gale, which spread the light drizzle all over my body, even under my clothes. The tarpaulin that I had put over the compost heap just a few hours ago had already come loose from its anchoring in some places, which admittedly hadn't been bombproof either. I had known that I would have to do it again.

In any case, Mr Kriemer had been right in his warning that the compost had to be winterised as quickly as possible, otherwise everything would turn into a medium-sized mudslide.

The first thing I had to do was to bring Freddy back into the daylight or nightlight.

Don't think so much about it, I admonished myself and

energetically drove the shovel into the compost. The second time I hit a resistance and heard a loud crack. Great. I'd obviously broken one of Freddy's bones as well.

I swallowed down the nausea that was spreading through me and proceeded more carefully. It took a little longer, but eventually Freddy was lying in front of me.

"You look like shit," I mumbled as I looked at the green-grey discoloured face. Something was moving in his nostrils and I didn't want to know what it was. There was a deep wound on his neck that looked quite fresh.

Oh boy. I'd obviously just smashed his larynx, almost chopped his head off. Sorry, I thought briefly. Then I grabbed Freddy by the feet and pulled him with great effort onto the meadow, which wasn't really a meadow any more.

By now it was pouring with rain and within seconds I was soaked through to my underwear. With each step, I found it harder to drag my slippery, wet body behind me.

How much had the guy weighed in his lifetime? Ninety? A hundred? Definitely.

I felt my back begin to groan under the unaccustomed strain. As he couldn't do this out loud, he expressed his displeasure with a sharp pain that travelled down my legs. I felt like I couldn't move Freddy an inch. But I had no choice. We were now standing in the centre of the meadow, there was no way he could stay here.

So go on.



The worst part was still ahead of me. I had to drag Freddy up the slope and try to get him from there towards the slurry pit. The latter should be relatively easy, it was certainly easier to pull someone down the slope than up.

I mobilised all my strength and continued to tug at him, trying not to look him in the face. But no matter how hard I tried, the maggots in his nose and mouth were impossible to miss.

No, you could say what you wanted, decomposition itself was not a beautiful process. At least not visually, otherwise nature had thought it up quite sensibly.

I tried to concentrate on my work. By now my back was hurting so badly that I could hardly stand it. As I struggled to pull the body behind me, I wanted to stop the whole thing. But I couldn't! I had to finish this! How was I supposed to do it all? All by myself and without any help?

I fought back tears and a wave of self-pity swept over me. Why had I ended up in such a terrible situation? Why me? Why always me?

*I realise that self-pity is one of the most stupid and pointless feelings of all. It doesn't get you any further than the bottom, where you end up crying and feeling sorry for yourself. I don't know why nature has endowed us with this feeling, but the menopause doesn't exactly make it any better, I can tell you that.*

*Looking back, I think I felt incredibly lonely at the time, squatting next to the corpse in the mud in the pouring rain. Alone and overwhelmed, as I had perhaps been for a while before, without consciously realising it.*

I had finally climbed the slope and looked down at the farm below me. Now I'd done the worst of it, all I had to do was let the guy roll down

here in a relaxed manner. I had seen with Hugo how quickly and unerringly he could do it.

I stretched my back and then tried to get Freddy into a suitable starting position. I laid him down so that he could roll down sideways. This would be quicker and leave fewer marks than if I pulled him down by his feet. Determined, I gave him a vigorous push.

"Oh." Freddy picked up quite a bit of speed, more than I had expected. And now he was also turning slightly to the left. "Stay in the lane!", I said nonsensically, but of course Freddy didn't listen to me. Could I catch up with him and steer him in the right direction again? I had to try.

On the wet and not at all steep slope, both the rolling corpse and I picked up speed. Like a small child who couldn't slow down when running downhill, I also got faster and faster. My back was declaring me insane and sending distress signals right down to the tips of my toes. But it didn't help. I got faster and faster. And so did Freddy.

Then I saw the barbed wire.

It demarcated the small area behind which the sheep used to graze. I remembered how I had once run into a barbed wire as a child. A scar still adorned my thigh today. No, I didn't want to experience that again.

I had no choice but to throw myself onto my backside and grab frantically with my hands at the undergrowth I was sliding over. My back gave me the outstretched middle finger and a flood of adrenaline flooded my body. The barbed wire came closer and closer and I stifled a panicked scream. A few metres from the fence, I finally got stuck in the mud.

Unlike Freddy. His decomposing body slipped under the fence -

unfortunately not completely. His neck, already strained by the shovel, got caught in the wire so unhappily that it acted like a guillotine and cut through the already desolate flesh with ease. Freddy's head rolled to the right, the body to the left, and a few unsightly shreds of something were hanging in the barbed wire. And while the headless corpse had finally come to a standstill, the damn skull had disappeared.

For a moment, I just lay there in the mud and let the raindrops pelt down on me. How could an initial situation, which was actually unbeatable in terms of crappiness, be taken to such an extreme? What was that now? The shittiest of all possible shitty situations?

I needed a few minutes to get my head together. There was only one option: I had to proceed pragmatically. Firstly, find the head before it was found by any animals. Then pull the body out of the sheep pen and take it to the slurry pit. Put the head and body in, pick the meat off the fence and put it in the pit too. Close the lid and you're done.

I pulled myself up, switched on the light on my mobile phone and carefully shone the light on the floor. Luckily, my children had convinced me to buy a waterproof mobile phone. They had thought that I might drop it down the loo instead of using it on a skull hunt in the pouring rain, but that didn't matter now.

I flinched in horror when I found him after a while. His head was lying in the middle of a large puddle, his face was reflected in the water and it almost looked as if Freddy was about to surface and lift the rest of his massive body upwards.

It's just a head, I told myself. Just a stinky skull, nothing bad.

I grabbed him by the hair, held him far away from me by his outstretched arm and took him to the pit. Then I hurried back to the sheepfold, carefully climbed through the barbed wire fence and dragged the body towards the pit as well. Although my back was about to give up the ghost for good, I summoned up the last of my strength and tried to open the solid metal cover. The flap was stuck, I pulled even harder, I shook it, kicked it, pulled again. Nothing happened.

The pit was closed. Old Stallkamp must have sealed it off before his hospitalisation.

I stood there in shock. Why hadn't I checked? I could have saved myself all the hassle if I had checked beforehand whether the pit was still open!

Now I couldn't hold back the tears any longer and started crying like a castle dog.

Why did I always have to be so unlucky? Why couldn't the damn dealer learn a decent trade, why did he have to sell drugs to schoolchildren and send young women on the streets?

I had lost all sense of time and had no idea how long I had been standing there crying in the rain. But at some point I felt my self-pity change. At first, the anger only made itself felt very quietly. Then it got louder and louder until I hated Freddy so much that I lost my nerve. "You bloody bastard! You got me into all this!" I screamed at the headless corpse at my feet. The rain pattered so loudly that my screams were drowned out. But not my anger.

My eyes fell on the axe lying next to the chopped wood. I was

completely beside myself as I grabbed it and quickly dismantled the body into its individual parts.

*I'll spare you the details now, even though I suspect that some of you will want to know more. But I can assure you of one thing: it was a terrible mess.*

As my adrenaline-fuelled rage wore off, I lowered the axe, exhausted, and gripped my aching back. Then I looked at the many small pieces of Freddy lying in front of me. What exactly had this action achieved for me? I hadn't solved the disposal problem by shredding it. That stuff had to disappear just like Freddy in one piece before, that much was certain.

I don't know how long I stared at the mixed chop and whether I was perhaps hoping the body parts would vaporise or otherwise dematerialise, which of course they didn't. But at least I remembered the rubbish bags I'd seen when I took the quicklime out of the barn with Iza.

It was a strange feeling going back into those old walls to find something I needed to dispose of a body. I no longer had to search, I now knew exactly where to find the necessary parts and felt strangely professional, even if I was the opposite (see corpse massacre).

I carefully packed Freddy in the rubbish bags, picked the small pieces of meat from the fence, put them on the head and tied everything up.

Now, a dismembered corpse is not automatically better than a whole one. But as the slurry pit was definitely ruled out as a burial place for Freddy, I had to get him back up the damn slope somehow. And at least that should be a lot easier now.

Nevertheless, it was a hard piece of work.

Bag by bag, I carried Freddy back to the allotment. When I finally had him completely on my plot, I hurried back again to clean up all the bloody tracks that the rain hadn't yet washed away. I then scrambled back up the slope for what must have been the twentieth time, the fitness app on my mobile phone probably going into overdrive with joy. I, on the other hand, was slowly but surely getting really exhausted. At least with me. I still had a little way to go with Freddy.

I stared at the compost heap and realised that the guy wasn't allowed back in there, no matter how small he was now. I recalled all the mafia films I'd ever seen and fast-forwarded to the places where bodies were dumped.

And suddenly I had an idea.

I fetched Mr Kriemer's bike trailer from the cubbyhole at the entrance and attached it to my bike. Now I wasn't using it to transport tarpaulins, but body parts, so the thing couldn't care less. Luckily it was an old trailer that I simply had to attach to the luggage rack with a wire loop - there was no way I was going to get caught in a traffic check with this contraption. Haha. With a proper towbar, of course, everything would have been toft otherwise.

I nervously made sure that all of Freddy's parts were in the trailer and that nothing of him was left behind. The idea of leaving a foot or arm behind thanks to my menopausal laziness made my heart race. I must have checked everything five times before I locked the trailer and got on my bike. Then I started pedalling.

Unfortunately, splitting up the bags didn't change Freddy's total weight, so I had a lot of trampling to do. But at least I was warm again and I was able to take short cuts that would have been impassable by car. Nevertheless, it took me almost an hour to finally arrive at the building site of Cathy Wugner and her husband's villa.

I took one look to make sure that the dummy camera was still hanging on the front door. Luckily, the elaborate video surveillance system was still waiting, so I was able to carry Freddy into the villa bit by bit without being noticed.

"You're going to have a lot of fun here," I said quietly as I put the first bag in the base of the kitchen unit. "There'll be lots of sex here, I'm sure you'll love it."

The concrete was still soft. Nevertheless, Freddy's body parts were of course displacing a considerable amount of the building material, and I had to be extremely careful not to let the stuff spill onto the floor. It was extremely tedious - take out a bucket of concrete, put a foot in, take out another bucket, put the next foot in - and by now it wasn't just my back that was asking me, exhausted, whether I still had all the cups in the cupboard.

It was already half past five in the morning when I smoothed the concrete over the last bag containing Freddy's head. His nose was still protruding slightly, I pressed it down and smoothed the surface again, waiting, afraid that the nose might reappear like a balloon pushed under water. But nothing happened. Freddy was completely encased in concrete.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Everything looked great, no one would

ever notice a difference. If I ever write a guide to disposing of corpses, this method would definitely have a place in it.

I suppressed all distasteful thoughts and just stood there calmly.

That was it. I was finished. I could finally put an end to this crap. For good. If I could find a way to come to terms with everything, no one would ever know what was in the kitchen block and how it got there. Fortunately, it was all finally over and I felt a tremendous sense of relief and liberation.

"Liv?"

*You can imagine how close I came to having a heart attack at that moment. The shock triggered a physical reaction in me, not only did I suddenly flinch, my stomach tightened at the same time as my back, making my whole upper body one sharp pain. I also had thousands of thoughts racing through my head and, amazingly, I even thought for a millisecond that it could have been Freddy's voice. You can see from that alone what kind of state my nerves were in.*

"Pablo! What are you doing here?" I tried to look at my boss disarmingly.

"The question is rather what *you're* doing here." He scrutinised me from top to bottom. In his hands he held a square container covered with a towel.

"I've only just arrived, less than two minutes here."

"You're soaking wet. And it stopped raining over an hour ago."

"Hot flushes," I said, rolling my eyes. "Be glad you're a man. This is no fun."

He approached me with concern. "You're going through the



menopause?"

"You say that like it's a nasty venereal disease!"

Pablo shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it kind of is."

"Very funny."

Once again, he let his eyes wander over my soaked body. "And because you're having hot flushes, you're soaking wet?"

I nodded.

"And the heat has melted the concrete, which is why you're completely soaked in it, or how am I supposed to understand that?" Pablo pointed at my clothes with a reproachful gesture that I only knew from my mum. He was still holding the container with the other.

"Erm..." I couldn't think of anything else.

"What the hell have you been up to here, Liv?"

How should I answer him? I decided in favour of the truth, albeit not the whole truth. I told him about Jörn's lack of character at work and Cathy Wugner's lack of character, about the time pressure I was under when realising the kitchen, about a night shift I had to put in - I didn't tell him what it was - about my fear of losing everything and soon becoming an old hand, and about my aching back.

"You don't understand, Pablo. You're young and unattached, that's different from being responsible for a family at my age!" I realised a tear was running down my cheek.

My boss's mouth tightened. "Firstly, I'm only two years younger than you ..."

"What?" That really surprised me. I had estimated Pablo to be thirty-five at the most.

"Botox and filler." He raised his eyebrows, which was only possible to a limited extent. "And secondly, I'm not unattached at all. I've been with my husband for twelve years."

That came as a surprise. "I thought you had broken up? Three years ago," I thought, "... three years ago?"

"No."

"Four?"

"We're still together."

"But he's out of the company?"

"Yes."

Okay, someone really had something pulled out of their nose here. "And why didn't you ever bring him along after that? Christmas party? Summer party?"

"He's not the type for that."

"But you never told me about him!" If you asked Pablo about his holiday, you always got to hear the report of a single person. He always said "I'm going to" or "I had a great hotel in". None of the vocabulary he used suggested that he was in a relationship. "Did you deliberately keep your husband away from us?" I asked in amazement.

"No."

"But you hushed him up!"

I saw how Pablo had to swallow. Then he nodded hesitantly. At

the same moment, I heard a strange beeping noise but ignored it.

"Why did you do that?" I didn't understand. "We live in the twenty-first century! And in Cologne too! There's no reason not to live a gay relationship openly!"

"This has nothing at all to do with gay or straight," he mumbled.

"With what then?"

"Well, with him." He hesitated again. "Tobi's been in prison for three years."

I laughed with relief. "I see!"

Pablo tightened his mouth. "Strange reaction."

That was true. I quickly endeavoured to put a more serious expression on my face. I heard that whimper again. "What has he done?"

"He's innocent. And I'm not just saying that. He got caught up in something, one thing led to another ..."

I nodded in understanding. "How many dead?"

Everything fell out of Pablo's face. "What? No! Credit fraud - allegedly! But they were actually just misunderstandings."

"I see, I see." God, one day I was still talking my head off.

"Well, that's why I'm here anyway."

Now I was completely stumped and couldn't understand a word. Pablo came to a building site at the crack of dawn because his partner was in prison for credit fraud?

I suddenly realised where the beeping was coming from. "Why is that making such a strange noise?" I pointed to the covered container in

Pablo's hands.

He grinned wryly and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess they're a bit scared."

"Who?"

I guessed what the answer would be and pulled the cloth down with a jerky movement. A standard cage was revealed, the kind you would buy in a pet shop for a hamster or guinea pig. Or for mice. At least two dozen of the small rodents were romping around in the litter.

"You? But...?"

He shrugged apologetically. "The electrician asked me if your idea with the dummy camera was really okay. So I knew I could still get in here unnoticed."

"Maybe that explains why you're here today," I said. "But this isn't the first batch of mice you've delivered here."

Pablo made a deliberate face. "More like load five or six." He grinned again.

It wasn't often that I was speechless, but now was definitely the time.

"Why?" I asked after a moment. "The little beasts have caused us so many problems! We had to deal with an almost hysterical customer for weeks because of them! Everything was delayed and dragged on - what's wrong with you? Do you have a drinking problem? Drugs? Delusions? Schizophrenic paranoia?" At the moment, these seemed to me to be the most likely explanations for his behaviour.

"No. Mr Wugner was Tobi's *business and tax consultant*." He said the

word as if it made him gag. But that didn't explain his rodent-like behaviour.

"My tax advisor gets on my nerves sometimes too," I replied. "Is that why I put a hundred rats out in her front garden? No!"

"They're not rats."

"Pablo!"

"All right, I'll explain everything to you." He placed the cage on the floor and stroked a mouse with his finger as it curiously poked its head through the bars. "Tobi thought he could rely on Wugner. But he actually dragged him into the abyss with some dubious financial schemes. We almost lost the company."

"Dubious financial models means ...?"

"Criminal money laundering that only Wugner had anything to do with."

"Why didn't you report him?" I asked, remembering that I hadn't done that either when I found out about Freddy's dealing.

"Tobi was in too deep for that." Pablo suddenly looked very sad. "Wugner is a clever fox. He twisted everything so that Tobi looked like the main culprit."

We were silent for a moment and I let this new information sink in. I still didn't quite understand why Pablo had sabotaged the building site.

He looked at me for a few endless seconds when I asked him about it.

"I can trust you, can't I, Liv?"

"Totally." I tried to put things into perspective. "Back then, only your husband had anything to do with Wugner, the couple didn't know you. You artificially prolonged the building work and drove up the costs enormously."

Pablo nodded. "At least to recoup the money we lost through Wugner."

I still didn't realise it. "But wasn't that totally risky? Wugner could have cancelled the contract with you and used another kitchen builder."

Now my boss shook his head and grinned broadly. "Not if you're a criminal asshole like Wugner. He gave me eighty thousand euros in cash up front."

"Money laundering ..."

"Whatever. In any case, we had verbally agreed that everything was paid for."

"I see. And of course he can't tell anyone about the cash now."

Pablo's grin grew wider and wider. "Correct. And I've sent official invoices to his company address for the *unexpected* new expenses."

"And they just paid for it like that?"

"His wife officially runs the office, even though she probably never turns up there. I've had all the invoices addressed to her."

I slowly put the pieces of the puzzle together in my head. "But don't you still think it's all pretty risky? A guy like that can easily sic a few thugs on you."

"Of course I was worried too, but so far nothing has happened. I assume that Mrs Wugner thinks she has caused the high costs with her extra requests, and she has kept this from her husband. In addition, she apparently knows nothing about the previous cash payment. In any case, she has transferred a good hundred thousand euros so far."

I whistled appreciatively. "Not bad ... amazing that she can keep such sums secret from her husband." When I thought about what was going on at home after I had secretly bought an allotment.

"Wugner himself is probably on a cure or something, maybe he doesn't even know about it yet."

"Then it's only a matter of time before you get into trouble."

Pablo made a confident face. "Things are looking pretty good at the moment. Tobi's case was reopened a while ago and our lawyer has been able to gather some good evidence. Maybe it's just a matter of time before the fucking Wugner finally gets into trouble. In any case, a letter from the public prosecutor's office will be waiting for him when he comes back from his cure."

I looked around the half-finished kitchen. "At least they get their money's worth."

Of course, everything here would eventually be of the very finest quality, the most expensive tiles, the most exclusive appliances, customised furniture. But for just under two hundred thousand euros, the Wugners could have had all the fun painted with gold leaf.

On the other hand, they probably didn't care much about the loss of the money, maybe they didn't even realise it. Anyone who handled so

much cash probably lost track of it quickly.

Pablo looked at me seriously. "Can you keep that to yourself, Liv?"

"Yes. I can do that."

"Good, then I won't ask you what you were really doing here at this time of night."

We looked at each other in silence for a moment and nodded in silent agreement.

And even though everything I had done was much, much worse than what Pablo had done, I felt that we had something in common and I knew I could trust him. And he knew the same in return.

Together we crouched down next to the mouse cage.

"Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, the real surveillance system will arrive," I said. "Then the dummy will be a thing of the past."

"I know."

It was an unspoken promise that we made to each other when we opened the side flap together and let the little four-legged friends into their freedom.

"I hope the exterminator doesn't get them," I said as I watched the animals sniffing around curiously.

"They've been bred as snake food," said Pablo. "Every day is a plus on their life account. I think they appreciate that."

"Definitely." Even though I wasn't entirely sure, I really hoped that the little ones would come through and find a nice home in the nouveau riche villa. The idea that the Wugners would also have little furry lodgers



in the future appealed to me, in an admittedly somewhat spiteful way.

Some women generally experience the menopause as a time of upheaval. Whether you see this phase as a crisis or as an opportunity naturally also depends on your personal circumstances.

Many women do see advantages in the changes. They expect greater personal freedom and make changes in their career or partnership.

And menstruation - let's be honest, everyone can do without it.

Three weeks had passed since that rainy night. Three weeks in which Pablo and I had pretended that we had never met on the building site. We hadn't said another word about it, had installed Cathy Wugner's luxury kitchen, had honoured all the lady's extra requests and, of course, invoiced her. I couldn't understand why her husband didn't prevent her from making the transfers - but there were so many things about this couple that were beyond my mental grasp.

But something else happened during those three weeks. I was now working full-time and had even been given the title of 'studio manager' by Pablo. I wasn't quite sure whether this promotion was part of our confidentiality agreement, but if it was, I could rest easy. Because then my boss assumed that *I* was the one who was supposed to keep quiet about *his* criminal activities. Which in turn meant that he had no idea what made the kitchen plinth so massive.

Jörn wanted to take care of the house, children and his parents first and think about how he could start his own business as a consultant. My full-time salary at the kitchen studio wasn't bad, but it didn't come close to his previous salary as a consultant. But that didn't matter to us at the moment. We were both glad that we had survived this marriage crisis.

And we had reorganised our lives. Jörn actually seemed to enjoy spending so much time with his parents. Of course, he was sometimes annoyed, but I could tell that he actually liked having mum and dad all to himself again. Iza left the three of them alone more and more often and

retreated to her room to read. She had mutated into the biggest bookworm I had ever met. She had soon got through half of Marlies' huge book collection.

Jörn had also managed to dissuade Werner from his passion for betting. Any addiction counsellor would probably throw up their hands in disbelief, but since Jörn regularly played poker with his parents, Werner no longer went to the racetrack. Of course they played poker for money, but the sums were much smaller than those involved in horse betting and were in the pocket money range. Werner obviously didn't care how much he gambled. The main thing was that he could gamble.

In addition to work, I now went to Pilates twice a week to get my back problems under control. It actually worked quite well, even though I couldn't believe how immobile I was.

And something else had changed: I was able to sleep again. This meant a huge improvement in my overall health. I was no longer so thin-skinned, my scatterbrained nature was slowly diminishing and even the hot flushes had noticeably subsided. The hormone ointments were working and my age-related puberty was slowly leaving me.

"The most I can do is stay for a coffee," I said to Jörn as we drove up to his parents' house together. Marlies and Werner had invited us to view their new bathroom. "I have to be with the customers by two."

"Can't it wait?"

"Final acceptance. This is important so that I can finally get this project off my plate. I'm sorry, darling."

He smiled. "You don't have to. I know how demanding customers

are. You don't need to apologise for that."

He was right about that. It was a typical female move, as Sofie would call it, to constantly apologise for things that men took for granted. I really had to get out of the habit, especially as I should know by now what you should really apologise for. But of course I didn't apologise.

Iza opened the door for us in a black and white chequered mini dress that I dated to the mid-sixties.

"That's you! The champagne is already open!"

Not only was the bottle already open, it was also half empty and my parents-in-law were in high spirits.

"You absolutely have to try sitting on the loo! This booster seat is awesome!" Marlies was beaming all over her face. She pulled me into the bathroom and immediately sat down on the closed toilet. Then she stood up with a smile, sat down again, stood up again and gave me a meaningful look. "Well?"

"Like you've never done anything else." I nodded appreciatively and looked around the bathroom. "It turned out really well."

There were new non-slip tiles on the floor, the walls had been stripped of their sixties pink and now shone in a fresh white. The bathtub had disappeared and made way for a level-access shower. And the toilet was now so high that a first-grader would probably not be able to reach it alone.

We hadn't received the bill for the renovation work yet, but it no longer made me particularly nervous. I had negotiated an instalment payment with Pilinski Bau, and the sale of Freddy's drugs would cover the

first instalment in any case. Jörn didn't know anything about it, but I would be able to explain it to him somehow.

Iza came into the bathroom, handed me a champagne glass and clinked glasses with me, while Marlies went back to the men.

"That was a really nice move of you to treat them to the renovation. They love the bathroom."

"We could never have done this without your help."

Iza gave me an ambiguous look. "The drugs?"

I nodded. "They contributed well to the funding."

Iza turned the champagne glass in her hand thoughtfully. "The Shania burnt down completely during the night."

My heart dropped into my trousers. Of course she had heard about it. It would have been a shame if she hadn't.

"So?" I said unsuspectingly. "I didn't realise anything about that."

"Hm, hm." Iza was still staring at her champagne glass. "What was under the compost heap anyway?"

Oh dear, was this the moment of truth? I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. "What could have happened? You don't seriously believe that Hugo was thrown from the pit into the compost - Iza, no. Werner is just getting really old. I don't know what he thought he saw."

"Hm."

"You still have to show me your room," I added quickly, hoping to have put an end to the subject.

As expected, the renovation of Iza's room had made a huge

improvement. The mould stains had disappeared, the walls were painted a soft light yellow and a new carpet in a similar colour rounded off the impression of a sunny room. Iza had painted the old brown wooden furniture white, giving it a modern vintage look, even if that was something of a paradox. Almost nothing in the room reminded her of how it had looked before. And there were books everywhere.

"That turned out great!" I held my glass out to Iza so that she could clink glasses with me again. Our eyes met and for a moment someone seemed to have pressed the stop button.

"Thank you." Although she was smiling, Iza had become serious.

"I have to thank you," I replied. "It's great how you're helping my parents-in-law. Renovating your room is the least of it."

"That's not what I mean. I mean everything else. That you got me out of there."

I suddenly remembered what I had told Iza when we first met, that Freddy had gone abroad and was organising everything there for a new start together. That one day she would come and live with him.

My spontaneity let me down. I didn't know what to say. On the one hand, I could certainly have confided in Iza. After all, she had been the one who had killed Hugo, so she was as guilty as I was. On the other hand, she had an emotional bond with Freddy, at least that's what I thought, and that was reason enough for me not to tell her about my guilt.

"Are you happy ...?" The question immediately struck me as saudoof. "I mean, are you OK with the way you're living now?"

Iza nodded. "And I don't mind that Freddy is no longer part of

my life. On the contrary. You were so right, Liv. He was no more my friend than your brother was."

My breath caught for a moment. "Why? Well, I don't know what you mean ...?"

"I had realised for some time that the whole story wasn't true. And after talking to Marlies and Werner a bit about the family, I finally realised that there was never a Freddy in your life. Especially not as a brother."

I searched desperately for the right words. How much did she know? And what were the consequences?

Iza seemed to notice the worries rushing through my head. "Don't worry about it. I don't know how you managed the compost, but I'm really happy with it. And even though I have no idea why you did all this for me, I'm okay with it. I know you're not a bad person and that's enough for me. You can always count on me, Liv." Then she took me in her arms and gave me a hug.

*Well, what do you think that was now? The one between me and Iza? Were we on the way to becoming something like friends? Almost twenty-five years separated us - is that really an obstacle to a female friendship? Probably no more of an obstacle than a corpse disposed of together.*

*I can't tell you yet whether Iza and I will become friends for life. But I can tell you that a friendship with someone whose life has so far taken place on a completely different planet is always enriching. You leave your own bubble, broaden your horizons and get a completely new perspective on things. I didn't have the capacity for something like this before, but fortunately that's different now. I am just as free from my hormonal fluctuations as I am from my prejudices. With everything that has happened, I see this*



*as a gift.*

I parked my car in front of the Wugners' huge villa. Pablo had asked me to take care of the inspection of the luxury kitchen on my own, as Mr Wugner would also be there today and my boss didn't want to meet him in person for obvious reasons.

Cathy Wugner greeted me in an outfit reminiscent of Iza's former work clothes. But she was in a great mood - I hadn't seen her like this during the entire construction phase.

"The mice have disappeared too! I think it's down to Berti and Lavina that they've run off." She pointed to two naked cats sitting on a scratching post and staring somewhat diabolically into space. "They haven't dragged in any dead mice, but you know they disappear as soon as there's a cat smell in the room."

"Nice." I really thought so. The little mice had gone from being snake food to a short-term existence as building site saboteurs to a life of freedom.

Cathy Wugner stomped across the marble on high heels and chattered incessantly until we were in the kitchen.

"I actually really like everything, I'm absolutely delighted," she whispered.

"No extras after the fact?"

"No, no." She laughed artificially. "Absolutely not!"

"There were enough extras," I suddenly heard a deep, somewhat indistinct voice say behind me. And before I turned to Mr Wugner, I realised why his wife was suddenly so pleased with everything. Her

husband had got behind the payments and thought they were additional costs due to her extravagant wishes. So he hadn't even realised that Pablo had ripped him off.

Smiling, I turned to Mr Wugner - and suddenly I felt roaring hot. Had my hot flushes returned? That couldn't be true, I was usually doing so well with the hormone ointments! Then the penny dropped and I realised that the reason for my sweating was something else.

"There weren't that many extras, Klemens." Cathy Wugner patted her husband's bandaged head.

Klemens Wugner was sitting in a wheelchair, his left leg in a plaster cast, his right leg stretched out in a fixator, one arm in a sling, the other bandaged. The left side of his face shimmered in all colours, and overall the man looked as if he had been steamrollered. But he wasn't. He had just fallen from the third floor into a stream.

He stared at me with his mouth open. Did he remember me? I didn't know, and of course I couldn't ask him. So I put on my professional kitchen-studio smile and approached him with my hand outstretched.

"I'm pleased that we're getting to know each other, Mr Wugner."

Irritated, he looked at my hand, which he couldn't take. I quickly pulled it back.

"My husband had an accident," explained Cathy Wugner. "He was very lucky."

"It certainly is," I said. "Well, I mean, you can see that. I hope the worst is behind you?"

"Yes, it's all uphill now," his wife answered for him.

"Do I know you?" Klemens Wugner still looked highly irritated. He had his brow furrowed like Hannes when he was learning maths.

"Weren't you there when the tiles were selected? Maybe we've met before?"

"Definitely not." He was difficult to understand.

"In any case, they fit beautifully in the room." I nodded appreciatively at Cathy Wugner: "You've done a great job choosing them."

"Thank you!" She actually seemed pleased with the praise, while her husband was still staring at me, lost in thought.

"Do you like it too, Mr Wugner?" He didn't answer. "Shall we go through everything again?"

"I'd love to!" Cathy Wugner walked towards the kitchen block, beaming. "It's exactly how we imagined it, isn't it, Klemi?"

Klemi only made an approving noise.

"I hope it will fulfil its purpose," I said and winked at Mrs Wugner.

Her smile faded and I feared I had overdone it with my confidential, chummy manner. Cathy Wugner pulled me a little away from her husband.

"I wanted to show you this!" she said loudly so that her Klemi wouldn't get suspicious. Then she continued in a hushed voice. "Do you really think I want to just do it randomly on every corner every day?"

"No?"

"No. After all, we have staff too, so I'm making a mockery of myself. I'm glad that's over for now."

I had an uneasy feeling. "But the kitchen block is staying, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure. Maybe Klemens will recover. But at the moment it's dead in the water, at least for the next six months. Things aren't going so well up there either, by the way." She tapped her forehead inconspicuously with her index finger.

"I'm sorry about that."

"It doesn't have to be. Klemens has always danced at so many weddings at the same time, you can't imagine what he's done professionally."

Yes, I was quite good at it, and I was surprised that Cathy Wugner probably knew less about it than I did. I could have sworn he'd met her on the job, but obviously all the sexiness had just been an act. Perhaps in anticipatory obedience to her husband? Perhaps. How one could be deceived. Obviously there were some prejudices in me after all.

"Klemens is more than twenty years older than me." Now she was whispering. "To be honest, I'm quite happy to do what I want for a while."

"We no longer live in the Middle Ages," I whispered back. "You can always do what you want. Keyword: divorce."

Cathy Wugner raised an eyebrow. "And what am I supposed to do then? I left school at sixteen and have been with him ever since."

I just nodded and decided it was better to stay out of the subject. If the wife got divorced, the house would probably be sold and the kitchen unit replaced. I really didn't want that to happen.

"Maybe I'll be lucky and he'll stay a nursing case," Cathy Wugner whispered, before turning round and praising the expensive ceiling

lighting, which she had had replaced three times, in a loud voice.

I almost felt a little sorry for her at that moment. This woman put up with a whole lot of crap just to be able to live in absurd luxury. I had put up with a lot of crap to save my son. Okay, my bullshit had definitely escalated a bit, but at that moment I felt like I could look in the mirror better than she could.

Klemens Wugner scratched his temple. "I've seen you before ..."  
he mumbled again.

I left his field of vision and pretended to inspect the fixtures behind him. What should I do if he recognised me after all? If he remembered tonight or tomorrow morning where he had last seen me? At the window of the brothel where I had accidentally pushed him out? Maybe no one would believe him because he had definitely lost some of his cognitive abilities. And if he did? What if he sent one of his goons after me or my family?

My eyes fell on the kitchen block in which Freddy was preserved for eternity. I was sure that I could easily convince Cathy Wugner that the block needed an extension.

*No, I won't let a pimp-drug-tax cheat-Klemens get me down. I promise you that.*

End