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Berlin Heat

Thriller

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*It's not a party,
It is a fight.*

Anonymous inscription in the
backroom at *Erika und Hilde*

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Arena, the betting shop at the corner of Potsdamer and Pohlstraße, is nearly empty at midday. Dmitri the Puncher sits in the back and pushes holes into the discarded betting slips with a ballpoint pen. Yesterday's soccer matches play on TV screens, along with ads for online betting and instant loans at good rates. It's 32 degrees outside. I've been on my feet since 7 AM, after three hours of sleep. It's one of those Ritalin days, 180 beats a minute—one of those days when something's always on. And in this heat. My paisley shirt clings to my skin. I'm standing at the cash register, waiting for my 320-Euro payout from Camila Giorgi's win in the last sixteen.

This is when Rudi comes in with a plastic bag. Rudi is one of those gamblers who turn up here every day to place a few bets. You've got to spend money to make it. Rudi doesn't look like a gambler. Summer jacket over his arm, shirt open, leather shoes. He's actually always in a good mood, says hi to everybody, always with a smile at the ready. A winner.

“Hey, Rudi,” I say. “How’s it going? Got a tip for me?”

Today, Rudi doesn’t have a tip. Today, he doesn’t say hi. He looks exhausted, his face pale. He gets in line behind me and breathes heavily, his mouth open, as though he’s just been jogging. It still makes me nervous when someone without a mask breathes down my neck. At the register, Attila takes his time paying out the cash, as he always does when he has to fork over money. Parting with his notes causes him physical pain.

“You could really spring for a few fans,” I say. “You can get them for thirty Euro at any hardware store. It’s baking in here.”

“Tell it to the boss, Tom,” says Attila, still scrutinizing my betting slip for some mistake. “He won’t listen to us. Maybe he’ll listen to you. Go ahead and tell him. Actually, he wants to talk to you anyway—something about paying back your loan.”

“The slip is fine, Attila. Giorgi won, and the odds are right,” I say.

That’s just what I need, my debts falling due—now, of all times, when business is just starting to pick up again. Tourists are slowly returning to Berlin. They need holiday rentals and apartments, and I’m the man for that: Tom Lohoff.

Better stick to the weather. “I’m just saying. It’s thirty-two degrees outside. In here, it’s more like forty. The sun beats down on this building all day long.”

“I know,” says Attila, putting my money into the tray. “I work here. Three hundred and twenty Euro. Not bad. Nice shirt. Where do you always get these shirts?”

Rudi shoves me aside and pushes ahead of me. He reaches into his plastic bag and takes out an axe: a sturdy hatchet with a shiny blade.

“Easy, easy,” I say. My mouth is dry. I’m cold now. Rudi ignores me, lifting the axe.

“I want my money back,” he says to Attila. “Now. Everything you’ve got.”

“Allahu Akbar, my friend,” says Attila from behind the Plexiglas pane, lifting his hands to calm Rudi down. He smiles his teller’s smile. “Do you want to decapitate somebody here? You think this is funny? I’m telling you, this isn’t funny. We’re not in France. I’ll ban you from here if you don’t put away that axe—ban you starting now, for life. You can go gamble somewhere else.”

The chair next to Attila is empty. His coworker Ufuk is out somewhere, smoking or getting coffee. Attila knows he’s alone. He knows: when gamblers snap and go berserk, nothing can stop them. And this summer everyone’s nerves are raw.

“I want my fucking money back,” says Rudi, as he lifts the axe over his head. His carotids bulge as he yells, and he’s got red splotches on his neck. “I’ve had it! This has to stop once and for all!”

“You’ll get your money,” says Attila, “but first it’s Tom’s turn. He was before you. We’ve got to keep order here.” He slides the 320 Euro over to me. Rudi pockets the notes before I can reach them.

“Wait,” I say. “That’s my money. Giorgi against Halep in the last sixteen. Three short sets.”

Rudi turns around and goes over to his machine, the second from the left. Each of us gamblers has a special machine where we prefer to place our bets. Call it superstition or whatever. They all look the same, but you develop a feeling for your personal favorite, if it got you 5,000 Euro that one time, or 15,000 that other time, for that brilliant multiple combination bet three years ago. That one night, when everything went right, when your streak of luck just wouldn’t quit, when the combination bet won: a goal in overtime in the Polish league, and Conor McGregor beat his opponent in the Octagon inside of forty seconds—and you bet on both. Just a hunch.

We’ve all had a night like that. 20,000 Euro for the win, all your debt wiped out in one stroke. Land is in sight again. You feel ground under your feet. Each and every one of us chases that night. And so, you stick with your betting machine, develop a bond with the thing. Mine is in the middle. Rudi always takes the one on the left. He’s fed it tens,

twenties, and fifties for years. Now, he hauls off with all his strength, with all his rage and frustration and the pressure of his debt load, and smashes the machine with his axe. Right in the middle of its screened face. I get it. I've imagined doing the same thing a thousand times before, smashing the metal box in the gob because it just takes and takes, gobbles and gobbles, but never gives anything back but loss, the worthless betting slips that Dmitri punches holes into.

A hideous sound, the squealing of hard plastic, as the blade breaks through. Dmitri, in his corner at the back, lifts his head, not yet understanding what's going on, and then turns his attention back to the old, crumpled-up betting slips. Rudi lunges forward and smashes the machine again. The monitor splits open, showing the black emptiness behind the touchscreen.

"I want my money back," says Rudi to Attila. "Let's go!"

"I need your betting slip, *götveren*, you understand?" says Attila. I know he's cursing his co-worker who hasn't returned from break yet, who would rather be on the phone with Azra for hours on end. "I can't pay out anything without a slip. You know this. I need your betting slip."

Rudi says nothing, returns to the counter, swings, and hits the Plexiglas with his axe. It rips open, splinters, and falls apart on the second, third, and fourth swipe. Just in time, I pull my hands off the counter as the blade hacks into the Formica. A new set of fingers is expensive; I don't have that kind of money. Rudi is nowhere near done. He swings the axe with both hands, his face twisted with the effort, the heavy air giving him trouble. Attila backs up into his booth.

"Ok," he says. "Ok. Understood. You want your money. Just hold on. I'll give you your money, *tamam*."

Rudi lowers his axe for a moment and watches as Attila rips notes from their compartments.

"Hurry up!" he says, raising the axe again. "Why didn't you do this right away? We could have been done ages ago. I don't have all day."

I never worried about Rudi. There are a lot of men who come to this betting shop who

are strapped for cash. We all are, actually. I myself owe at least 12,000 Euro to Krasniqi, who owns Golden Dolls and also runs this branch. On top of that, I've got a bank loan I haven't paid in months. I don't open the letters anymore. I owe money to my flatmate David, to my father (of course), and to a few friends. The way some people last winter read the most recent infection numbers—12, 473 on Monday, 17, 377 on Tuesday, 18,874 on Wednesday—I wake up every day and run through my debts. Standard procedure. Every day I think to myself: new day, new luck. The mantra of any freelancer.

But Rudi is a teacher, one of those career jumpers the government lured into education a few years ago, when there was still funding. Eighteen months of preparatory service, then teacher training, then a permanent contract, and ever since then a good salary. He can actually gamble as much as he wants. The money will always grow back. At least that's what everyone thought. I did, too. Rudi is always talking about how he just won 700 Euro. Net profit. Indiana Pacers versus Chicago Bulls, you just have to know who's fit and who's not, and invest accordingly, he says. 800 Euro for a match in the Slovakian Fortuna Liga. At least 500 Euro clear profit at a backroom boxing match in Berlin. Rudi always leaves the arena a winner. "I don't gamble, I win," is his motto. "Congratulations," I always say. "You deserve it." The things people say.

In the betting shop we all talk about our victories. No one wastes words on the losses—those constant fucking shit losses—that slice into your heart and just won't let up. The losses that kill you. Like everybody, I've had evenings when I win 700 Euro, and then the same evening I lose 3,000 because in the 93rd minute the ref just had to give a penalty kick, and the video ref didn't intervene, ruining my entire combination bet. Even though the penalty kick is weak and the goalie grazes it with his fingertips, he still steers the ball to the inside of the post, and from there it rolls into the goal. That hurts. A heart attack is nothing compared to that. Then I just sit there. The 700 Euro I had in the bag are gone again, just gone. This really gets to you. You always try to be cool about it, take losses in stride with a smile. But the pressure that builds up during weeks of bad luck can be unbearable. From what I've heard, Rudi hasn't won anything since April or May. He's only lost. He's broke. With a family. So he's got to take a stand and hack away with his axe.

We're all exhausted anyway from the endless waiting that came with the second wave in winter. We'd all blown our corona benefits online, when the betting shops and gambling halls were closed. Olaf Schloz could have freed up billions and billions for us, but we would have stuffed it all into betting machines by this summer at the latest, and up the chimney it would have gone. There are no loans to be had anywhere except from Krasniqi. We've all got our names in his books, and sometimes I wonder how I'm ever going to pay him back the 12,000 Euro I owe. Honestly, I've no idea. I've got to recoup it. That's why I gamble. But Rudi? With his teacher's salary?

Rudi pulls apart the Plexiglas sheet as Attila slaps money on the counter.

"Here," says Attila, reluctantly plunking down everything he has in the till. "You're making a mistake, that's for sure. You'll get your money, but put the axe down. It won't do any good." He tosses note after note down at Rudi: twenties, fifties, hundreds.

"Don't take it personally," says Rudi, as he hacks like a madman at the counter, the Formica top cracking open, the Plexiglas splintering apart. "I just want my fucking money back! Understand? My share. Everything I've been dumping into this place, for years. All those piles and piles of cash I've been shoving up your asses—you want me to add it up for you?"

Breathing heavily, Rudi pauses to take another pile of notes from the counter. I try to rip the axe out of his hand. He's taken my winnings, my 320 Euro that I won on Giorgi in the last sixteen. This just won't do. The axe is solid, the kind you'd use in a garden. Maybe it's from the toolshed at his plot next to the new city motorway in Treptow. The handle is wet from his sweaty hands. He won't let go, and we stumble against one of the betting machines. His panting breath is on my face, and I can smell his panic. He's lain awake all night, going through his byzantine system of borrowing and repayment over and over again, trying to find a loophole somewhere. But there is no one left to hit up, no one to wheedle even ten Euro out of. It's obvious he's considered and scrapped every way to make money, from collecting deposit bottles to holding up a bank, from embezzlement to larceny. You consider anything. The headaches don't stop, neither do the sweats. And the desire to keep gambling definitely doesn't let up. I know how it is. Rudi is now just a trembling animal, chased into a corner, terrified, panicked. His air supply has been cut off, he can't breathe. Maybe his wife has left him, taken the children. These are the nights when God himself turns his back on you without mercy.

“Take the money and get out,” I tell Rudi, even though the notes are making me horny, too. Just one quick move for the counter and I’d once again have a fistful of cash. “Come on. Give me the axe.”

Rudi won’t listen. He’s exhausted, hollowed-out, close to tears, but finally his hand goes limp, and he lets go of the axe. Just then, Attila’s co-worker Ufuk returns from the toilet, or from flirting with Azra. Ufuk, a huge man, 150 kilos, is back in the house. Attila gives him a sign. Ufuk understands right away, sprints past the betting machines and toward the till. All Rudi sees are the bank notes, as he gathers them up, crumples them, stuffs them into his trouser pockets.

Ufuk tackles Rudi and at the same time punches him in the nose. With a hard crack, it breaks straight away, bright blood shooting out as Rudi falls. Ufuk is already kneeling over him.

“Loser!” Ufuk says, slapping him in the face, now left, now right. The fat golden rings on his fingers are doing swift work. Rudi’s head whips back and forth, his face is wet, smeared with blood. He says nothing, doesn’t even whimper. Maybe he passed out.

“You know what he wants from us with that axe?” asks Attila from behind the counter. “His share. He wants his money back. Are we a bank that people pay into? I’ll call Krasniqi and see if he wants to give him his money back. But before I do that, I get to kick him in the balls.”

Ufuk keeps beating Rudi. He’s enjoying himself.

I drop the axe, wipe my hands on my trousers and go out to the street. I call the police and hope they come before Krasniqi’s men take Rudi away. My heart is pounding, as though I myself had smashed the shop to pieces. 180 beats per minute. That’s enough for today. I’ve got to conserve my energy.

Here is my day so far: three hours of sleep, awake since seven in the morning, swallowed a Ritalin with my first coffee, and drove my BMW E39, which has just started to rattle, around town. Early in the morning temperatures are still bearable.

I worked through my agenda: tidied the flat in Hellersdorf, stripped the bedding and took it to the launderette, telephoned the cleaners. Original *Plattenbau*, 12th floor. The

elevator never works. Brown laminate on the walls. It's got the old square buttons for the floors. *VEB Berliner Aufzug und Fahrtreppenbau*: "Do not enter the elevator car backwards. Enter only when lit. Persons must assume a safe standing position. Carrying capacity: Six persons." This sort of thing impresses hipsters from all over the world so much they take photos and post them on Facebook. They love this elevator, its accordion door, the buttons. The apartment is actually always rented. People line up for it.

After Hellersdorf, I move on to the apartment in Kreuzberg—Ratiborstraße on Görlitzer Park, a typical party flat that comes with the corresponding trouble. The neighbors have complained furiously about the three Spaniards who apparently partied there non-stop for two weeks. I've got two Pakistani cleaning women who take care of the place, but lately even they have been complaining about the extra work. They don't want to deal with this situation anymore, either. Broken glass, filthy sofa, puke all over the carpets, the little kitchen a pigsty, crapper clogged, red wine stains on the walls in the hallway.

Right after Kreuzberg, on to Fennpfuhl, my favorite neighborhood. It's still in Lichtenberg, but almost in Friedrichshain. My father lives there, too. The day before yesterday, a persnickety couple from Boston moved into the place on the 13th floor.

My BMW guzzles an inconceivable amount of petrol and rattles along Landsberger Allee so much that I break out in a sweat. If I get this thing repaired, it will be expensive, and if I tinker with it myself it'll be even more expensive. And at some point Krasniqi will be standing at the door demanding repayment of his loan, but at the moment I've got nothing to give—nothing, let alone 12,000 Euro. You can't pick the pockets of a naked man. But Krasniqi will never understand that. If I don't pay, he'll pass the problem on to his debt management team, Zef and Gezim, his Albanian guard dogs, otherwise known as Tirana Collection.

I've really earned a break. I retreat to an arcade to gamble the rest of the day away, and to forget Rudi's shattered face.

The next day, I'm at the betting shop at the corner of Potsdamer and Pohstraße again. I just can't quit this place. They've already replaced Rudi's chopped-up betting machine. There's no sign of yesterday's meltdown. The carpeted floor in front of the till has no bloodstains anymore. A paste of baking powder and water helps. Let it sit for a good hour, wash with cold water. My father always recommended this method. He learned it as police commissioner.

The Plexiglas panel has been replaced, too. Everything's spiffy. These boys are on the ball. Today Konan and Ömer are at the till. Otherwise the shop is as good as empty. Dmitri is punching holes in the discarded slips. Today, I'm carrying a plastic bag, and after Rudi's attack yesterday this makes everybody nervous.

"Buddy, what's in the bag?" says Konan. "Give us a look."

"Nice and slow," says Ömer standing next to Konan. He stands and feels for the expandable baton in his pocket. Ömer is not one to telephone his girlfriend for hours on end when there's an emergency. Ömer is all action.

I remove the two table tennis paddles I bought earlier in Lichtenberg. "Two paddles," I say. "One for Marla, one for me. I'm asking her out today."

"Cool," says Konan. "The Marla from the coffee shop over there? You know her? Are you going out with her?"

"That's the one," I say. "I'm asking her if she wants to go the park today and play at a table. It's a start."

Konan and Ömer look at one another and laugh, either because they're relieved about the bag or envious of my asking Marla out. I let them laugh and go to my machine. Still this high summer heat, still no fan. It's the end of August, and it hasn't rained a single drop in four months.

The door to Arena is open. Outside, Potsdamer Straße roars with a strong pulse. It pumps midday traffic in heavy streams from Leipziger Straße and Potsdamer Platz down into Schöneberg. Everyone has to pass through here. There are cement mixers and container trailers with the Barnimer logo. Over at Park am Gleisdreieck, building has just started again. Six cranes rise into the sky. Over the past year, trucks have been hauling away excavated material from construction pits for weeks at a time. Columns of them stood in line starting all the way down at Potsdamer. Also, there are delivery vans, handymen and superintendents, an electrician wearing the slogan “Life is for Sharing,” a glazier’s panel truck, a boxy furniture truck passes by—*Ich soll dich schön grüßen...*— three taxis, the 85 bus from the main railway station to Lichterfelde, behind that the 48 from Mitte out to Zehlendorf, and on their narrow path cyclists hiss past the pedestrians.

Potsdamer Straße: fatigued, short of breath, impatient, broad, and dusty. I love it. A mangy street, but awake. Always awake. My stomping grounds for years now. Sometimes I just look out the door for half an hour instead of focusing on betting, on the next tip, the next stake. A deliveryman stops his vehicle in a bus lane and rummages around in his packages. A cyclist screams at him, and a bus driver honks. Flocks of pedestrians on the sidewalks are without their FFP2 masks. Just a few retirees still tuck their FFP2s under their chins, the last of their kind, still feeling at risk despite the vaccine. A lot of them haven’t been vaccinated yet, and some don’t want to be. Election posters for parties running in the federal election hang from lampposts: photoshopped images of men with strained smiles, white teeth, smooth skin. The election is in five or six weeks. According to polls, the CDU and Greens are out front. The FDP and AfD are taking a beating. During the coronavirus they didn’t get a foot in the door. Berliners are also voting in their own parliament, the new bosses. Aside from the media, no one’s interested.

It’s a perversely hot summer. The bars have finally opened again, but the beer is unbelievably expensive because everybody wants to recover lost money. Restaurants and clubs are open, too. People push up to the counters, crowd around the tables of taprooms, jam into the back rooms. They’re vaccinated, after all. Still, it’s weird. You’re always wary when somebody gets in your way, comes in from the side and chats you up. Even if you’ve been vaccinated three times.

Sparrows dive deep between parked cars. Young tourists on electric rollers, coffee cups in one hand, smartphone in the other, sunglasses around their necks. What an endless summer. Every morning, storms are predicted, but they only bring, if they arrive at all, not coolness, just more of this heavy heat. By midday Friday, people are getting ready for the weekend.

This strange neighborhood of mine. A few buildings along, at Staroske's, office employees and managers stand over plates of solyanka, carrot stew, barley soup. Despite the relentlessly beating sun they have sunken, extinguished faces. They're snatching some fresh air after five hours in front of their screens, proofreading, cold calling. A half-hour break, every day the same selection of meals. One orders liver loaf, eats it quickly, the sweat running over his temples. Everyone is quiet, scrolling on phones. Only the shop assistants gossip amongst themselves. Two buildings farther at Puschel's, drinkers are already sitting in front of their third beer. At last, to be able to sit in a bar again. They've waited months, a whole year, for this. The owner says some of the regulars had Covid-19, landed in an ICU where they were intubated for days. They don't come around anymore, and nobody knows what's happened to them. Can they still smoke? Climb stairs? I'm in my early thirties, also not so young anymore. When I run up to the second floor, my heart pounds near to exploding (cigarettes, coffee, Ritalin).

At the corner of Pohlstraße in a café called Deli, there's a line: art dealers, gallery owners, young mothers, Italians who have gotten lost. Marla is at the register, Marla and her smile. This is my favorite café, my favorite lady. Today I am going to ask her to play table tennis with me. To go out with me. Everybody's acting as though life has started again; we're jumping in and trying things out—and I am, too, maybe with Marla.

But first I need to earn some money. Krasniqi wants his 12,000 Euro. I've just put 200 Euro on Daddy Chill in the third race, and 35 Euro on an away win with the Bolnisi soccer club of the Erovnuli Liga in Georgia, when two men sit next to me and ask if I have an apartment to rent for an acquaintance of theirs for a few days.

"We've heard you've got a few apartments to rent," one of them says, the one with the Iriedaily cap. It's the kind they wear at SO36. "We need an apartment for one of our

friends.” On the screen, I can see greyhounds in Australia being led to the starting boxes. Daddy Chill seems fit but sleepy. I hope that’s just the arrogance of the imminent victor. I bet on him only because of his name.

“I am sure I can,” I say. “What’s your friend looking for? An apartment in a party area?”

“No,” says the other, a wiry guy with cold eyes. He’s wearing glasses with steel frames and a green Adidas tracksuit. He’s looking in his pocket for tobacco and rolling papers. “No party zone. He wants his quiet, understand?” His voice is distant, washed-out. I have to lean forward to understand him. I don’t like these two freaks, barely in their mid-twenties, their feverish, crooked grins. Anyone who visits a betting shop and chats you up about an apartment can’t be kosher. On the other hand, I need the money.

“No problem,” I say. “I’ve got something in Pankow, a family neighborhood. Or on Seestraße in Wedding, in the second courtyard from the street, very quiet. Or Fennpfuhl. I’ve also got a place in Hellersdorf, but it’s going to be occupied for a while.”

The mumblor in the green tracksuit asks, “Do they all belong to you? Or are you only the custodian.”

“I’m a facilitator,” I say. This word impresses most people more than a calling card. Right away the boys nod, as though they’ve understood. But they don’t. I explain: “I have five apartments to offer. Whoever visits Berlin to party should get to know me. My customers are American, French, British, Spanish, Swedish, and they’ve all been satisfied with my services because not only do I offer apartments at the right price, I also get them whatever they need for their weekends: grass, coke, speed, whippets, ketamine, magic mushrooms. But that’s between us.”

The two nod greedily, “cool, cool,” and cackle like teenagers. But I sense they’re not done. What do they really want? Daddy Chill pants and is still waiting in his box for the start signal. Three boxes away is Mockingbird. I’m not too familiar with dog racing, but I saw Daddy Chill in the winner’s list and wanted to get away from the insane combination bets on the Armenian soccer league, away from binging on slot machines.

Yesterday evening, as I tried to get Rudi out of my head, I lost 180 Euro. Pointless. I want to turn things around. Do some serious betting, win (or at least be in the running), collect my earnings from Ömer and Konan, hunker down, and then at some point pay off my debts.

“Fennpfuhl would be good,” says Iriedaily Cap. “My grandmother lives there. They’ve got high-rises like the old days, genuine slabs. Nobody builds like that anymore. And I’m telling you: those buildings, even now, are in tip-top condition.”

I want to watch the race. Daddy Chill prances nervously in his box.

“You’re absolutely right,” I say. “Fennpfuhl is an insider tip. Not even Berliners know how cool it is. The apartment isn’t especially cheap, but for the money you get a jewel. I’ve lived there myself. 13th floor, sweeping views over Friedrichshain and Alexanderplatz.

“Sounds good,” Iriedaily Cap says. “We need it for at least a week. How much is that?”

“500 a week,” I say. Maybe I should ask for more, I think immediately. “Final clean-up is another 70.”

Both nod. “Sounds really good. It works for us.”

“Also, the area is well connected,” I add, trying to make their decision easier. “If your friend wants to get into town, he can take a streetcar and is at the Alex in ten minutes. He can just about walk to Friedrichshain. And if he wants a quick beer, there’s also a bar at the old village square. €2.30 a bottle. Ur-Berliners drink there, totally authentic.”

“He doesn’t go out much anymore,” says the other one. “I said he’s more the quiet type. He likes sitting in front of the TV. You’ve got a TV at your pad, right?”

“Yeah, of course there’s a TV. What do you think?” I say. “Hell, you can check the place out first if you want.”

The dogs are still in their start boxes. Daddy Chill is in the fourth one, his coat wet from pre-training. He's trembling with adrenalin. Mockingbird is in box 7 and causing trouble, so they've had to delay the start. I wipe sweat from my forehead.

"Are you even listening to us?" Green Tracksuit asks. He's finished rolling his cigarette and lights it, blowing smoke in my face. Finally, the start signal. Daddy Chill gets out of the box okay, runs ahead. After just a few meters, the dogs are spread out on the track. Mockingbird is hanging in there. Green Tracksuit nudges me.

"Yeah, I am," I say. "As far as I'm concerned, it's fine. Your friend can come in three days."

"No good," says Iriedaily Cap. "We were thinking today. Special circumstances."

"Today won't work," I say. "Can't do it. There's a couple from Boston at the apartment. They've paid until the day after tomorrow. After that, there'll be a deep clean, the place disinfected down to the last crumb. That's important to me. Don't give corona a chance."

"Awesome. That's great. I like your attitude," says the other. "But we need the apartment this evening. It's just that it's a bit urgent. We'll pay extra. It won't be to your disadvantage. We'd be really grateful if you helped us out. It'd be a huge favor."

These two morons are ruining my dog race, blurry on the flickering screen. Where is Daddy Chill? These mutts all look the same. I can't concentrate. And I've got 200 Euro riding on this.

"I told you, that's not going to work," I said. "It's nice that you want to make it worth my while. I appreciate it. But I don't owe you any favors."

"Not us," says the one with the dead eyes. Maybe he's hooked on the wrong pills, or something deep inside him has gone out. "But you do owe others. You owe them quite a bit. People talk about you. And we can help. We'll pay in advance."

I heard the quiet threat there. Maybe Krasniqi sent these two to me. I play along, nodding with interest. Iriedaily Cap removes an envelope from the inside pocket of his Humana jacket, gives me a quick look, and then puts it away again. I'm impressed.

"We really can help you," he says. "By the way, I'm Henne. That's Ronny. It'd be really convenient if we could have that apartment starting today. We were told you can make things happen. That's the reason we came to you. Sorry about the dog race. We'll get out of your way soon."

"I can't just throw those two out," I say, though my voice has an uncertainty in it now. Inside the envelope was round about 2,000 Euro. "They're booked until Saturday and have paid already."

"But you can," says Henne, pulling up closer to me and putting his hand on my shoulder. "It's your apartment. Just say you need it for your own reasons. The party's over for those Yanks. They'll have to take it somewhere else."

2,000 cash is just what I need: a money injection, a handbreadth of water beneath my keel. Dmitri the Puncher sits in the back and does what he needs to do. Konan and Ömer watch us talk from the booth, and they know I need money, too. Maybe they referred these two to me. They probably also know I'm going to lose the dog race. Daddy Chill is giving it everything he's got, using every last bit of strength. I can see that. Still, the other dogs are catching up, no matter how hot his lungs burn. The others look relaxed by comparison. I think of Rudi and his axe, and a wave of rage swells up inside me, the zombie rage of the loser. These TV screens look like they need to be ripped apart joint by joint. The commentator's voice tumbles over itself as the hounds close in on the home stretch, their sinewy bodies in desperate ecstasy. My dog will come in fifth, best-case scenario. My 200 Euro are gone.

"So what do you say," asks Iriedaily Cap. Henne. "Are we good to go with the apartment? Can you manage it?"

"I'll deal with it," I say. "Wait a second. Move. You're blocking my view."

In the final meters of the race, Daddy Chill falls definitively behind, his eyes torn wide

open, his teeth bared, overtaken by all the others, but he keeps going, ceremoniously fighting his way to the Dead last. Konan gives me a snarky nod and gestures to Dmitri, who will take my betting slip. Konan grins and gives me the thumbs up. Asshole. The cashiers at the counter always know in advance.

“It’s a deal,” says Ronny and pokes a finger in my chest. “This is how it’s going to go: we will travel up there together. You’re coming with us. It’s best that we meet here, at the corner. This evening at 10. No, 10:30.”

“Couldn’t you go yourselves, and we meet there in front of the building?” I ask.

“You’ll be here at 10:30,” Henne says, and shows me the envelope. “And then we’ll drive together with our friend up to Fennpfuhl. You let us into the apartment, and then you’ll get your money.”

I nod, annoyed. I feel like they’ve just ripped me off. The two leave and disappear into the crowds on Potsdamer Straße. Two Bosnian gamblers with coffee cups in hand enter, say hi to Ömer, grab the printed daily schedule and sit down by the screen that shows the Turkish league games. In Australia, ten new greyhounds slip into their start boxes, without me. I go over to Dmitri and give him my betting slip. He’s glad. The two Bosnians talk, laugh—they’re finally together, away from their families, their wives. They’ve put their combination bets on half-time scores and various rest-of-match bets. I can see it from here, but I don’t care. I want to see Marla. My good mood is returning. Everything will be fine with that 2,000 Euro.