



Helena Falke

Five More Days

Thriller

(Original German title: Noch fünf Tage. Thriller)

303 pages, Paperback

Publication date: 21 April 2026

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2026

Sample translation by the author

pp. 7–36

Day 1

04:38

I've always been interested in dying. Not death. Dying. That moment between receiving a mortal injury and leaving this world, the peculiar process of bleeding out when the time you've got left is not measured in seconds anymore but in millilitres. No matter how quickly your death occurs, there is a gap between cause and effect. Heart and brain rarely give up at the same time. And I've always wondered what would happen to you in the in-

between. Do you know what's about to come? And how do you deal with that? So yes, I've always been interested in dying. As a topic, that is. Like most people, I've never been particularly keen on dying myself. And yet here I lie on my stretcher doing precisely that.

As the magnitude of the fact that I'll be gone soon starts to sink in, fear floods my entire body. This has nothing to do with the fears you encounter when you still have the comfort of knowing you'll be alive in the foreseeable future, of knowing that you can fix things or at least try. It is the absence of any possibility at all that instills you with sheer terror. Too early, I tell myself, it's too early. I've still got so much to do. The blonde man and the only marginally less blonde woman riding with me in the ambulance agree.

"How old is she?"

"Forty-five."

"That's rough."

"Yeah. Rough."

They must think I'm unconscious. I play along so I can keep track of my train of thought. The reason why I've always been obsessed with dying is probably that I'm pretty good at killing. It's only natural that you want to know what's going on in the creature whose throat you just slit. When I was still in London, working under Quirin Taylor – *the* Quirin Taylor – I often offered to help out when colleagues refused to kill live ingredients. It wasn't part of my job description as a sous-chef, but people can get flustered when faced with killing, and flustered people make mistakes. There's nothing worse than killing that's not done properly, nothing worse than wondering whether the lobster slowly steaming in the oven could maybe maybe still be alive. Don't get me wrong. I don't exactly find joy in severing a crustacean's central nervous system either, but at least I know that it's done properly when I'm the executor.

It's tragic, really, how the very thing that protects the lobster out there in the wilderness – its impenetrable shell – becomes its undoing as soon as it enters that other wilderness, the human-made one, where laws are arbitrary and don't make sense to a

humble sea-dweller. A bit like what happens to humans when they enter the wild world of dying. The layers of armour you wrapped around yourself to soften life's blows, your relationships, all the stuff you accumulated, the *I love yous* and *I hate yous* you never uttered, that dress you never got to wear because you waited for a special occasion which – you now know – will never come, it all holds you back from getting on with it. “It” being dying. My undoing, the thing that makes dying even harder than it already was, is my daughter, Cosima. I will leave her all alone. She's twelve, and I'll leave her on her own. I force my thoughts to return to the animals because their suffering is easier to bear than Cosima's. Easier to bear than my own.

Out of all the animals we eat, I feel most sorry for crustaceans. There's just no way to kill them that doesn't involve some cruelty. Maybe that's why I never liked seafood. My favourite dish is Quirin's Cave Honey Chicken. I would give anything to taste it just one more time. But that's not going to happen. It takes a week to marinate, and they're only giving me five more days. That's what the two blondes said anyway.

“How many days?”

“Five max.”

“That's rough.”

“Yeah. Rough.”

Once it gets personal, dying stops being interesting, I admit to myself. Then it just really, really sucks. And it doesn't get more personal than being the one who dies.

I must've stirred a bit.

“Look, she's awake.”

“Let's get her under. Give her some rest.”

Yeah? That's rou...

08:08

Zero ... eight ... zero ... eight ... As one of the eights becomes a nine, I understand that I'm awake again. It takes another minute – we're at 08:10 now – for me to realise that the red numbers show the time. An old-school digital clock is mounted on the wall in front of me. Other than that, chalky sterility. The one window that lets the room breathe offers no relief: the Swiss Alps are suffocated by a steel-woollen January sky. Only the clock is alive. The dots between hours and minutes pump like ferocious little hearts. Watching them disappear and reappear, second by second, puts me in a hypnotic state. I'm about to fall asleep when I hear somebody knocking, four times. Someone opens the door. A nurse comes in.

“Good. You're awake.” She examines my body. Although she's careful, it hurts where she touches me. “My name is Esmeralda. You can call me Esme.”

Even though she's wearing a mask, I can divine Esme's velvet smile, it reaches her eyes and puts me at ease, but then I remember another name, the only one that counts.

“Cosima?” My voice cracks.

“Your daughter is outside. With your husband.”

“Ex!” This time, my voice doesn't crack. It's loud.

“I'll let your family know that you're awake and that they can see you. But first, I have to finish this examination.”

I nod and count the dark dots on the fingers causing me pain. Flecks of nail polish are showing through the gloves. It doesn't take me long to count them – six, most of them on the right thumb - and I refocus on the other numbers in the room. When the clock jumps to 08:15, I start to get impatient. What's the point? I won't survive this anyway – the doctor who examined me before I was loaded into the ambulance made that very clear. Esme is wasting time, *my* time, time I could be spending with my daughter.

“Cosima!” I demand at 08:16.

“Almost done.” Esme continues working on my body as if it had a future. I don’t want that.

“Stop it! Stop!!!”

Esme takes her hands off me. “Please calm down. It’ll be over in a minute.”

“Leave me alone, damn it. I want my daughter!”

“Don’t talk to me like that! I’m just doing my job!”

Esme puts her hand on my arm, and I try to push it away; she tries to stop me. That’s when I bite her like the cornered, wounded beast I now am. We look at each other in shock. Then the door opens again. It isn’t Cosima, though. Two men enter the room. I let go of Esme’s hand, and she hides it behind her back.

“Schmidt,” says one of the visitors, “Detective Tschugg,” says the other.

They are not of the same height and weight; Schmidt has dark hair, Tschugg none at all. Still, they somehow look similar. Two Swiss twins.

It will be the first time they get to interview a murder victim. I am the only witness. I am also a victim of the crime they have to solve. Like the family I worked for. The Harmans.

“Liselotte Castrop?” Tschugg reads my name from a note in his hand, and I nod.

I am relieved that the police officers are here. It means I don’t have to deal with Esme anymore. Her hands are still crossed behind her back, and I suppress my budding shame. I can deal with that later.

Tschugg puts his note back in one of his coat pockets and retrieves something from the other: a pen attached to a small notebook. Probably a promotional gift. *Always work together, never* is printed on fluorescent plastic. The last word is missing.

“We need to ask you some questions. About the murder of the Harman family.”

I’m more interested in Tschugg’s answers than his questions.

“The children?”

“Dead.” Tschugg’s voice is lukewarm, his eyes closed. “The whole family. No one survived.”

I knew that. When you’ve seen life draining out of a being as many times as I have, you know, you just know. Still, hearing it makes my stomach shrivel and expand at the same time, and the tension between the two movements is agony. But Schmidt doesn’t give me time to mourn the people I spent the last seven years with.

“Everyone’s dead,” he repeats in case it wasn’t brutal enough the first time. “Everyone apart from you. Can you explain that to us?”

“What do you mean?”

Tschugg’s pen scratches with every letter. Uncomfortably.

“I’m collateral damage,” I dictate in case he didn’t get it yet.

I am by-catch, a sea creature that shouldn’t have been caught but ended up in a net anyway. In the fishing industry, by-catch is viewed as waste. Most of it is thrown overboard, and many animals don’t survive it, just like I won’t survive it. That’s why Quirin always paid his suppliers for by-catch as well. Quirin used it for his *By-Catch Broth*, a fish *consommé double* with saffron. It was one of the biggest coups of his career.

“The murderer must have administered poison to the Harmans,” I say. “When and how? I don’t know. During dinner, I noticed the initial symptoms and called an ambulance immediately. While we were waiting, I checked on the children. That’s when – somehow – I must have been exposed to the poison. Maybe it was on their clothes, maybe in the sweat on their skin. I already explained all of this to your colleagues at the crime scene, who were called by the paramedics.”

Tschugg raises one eyebrow, Schmidt tries and fails. Then Tschugg points at me with his pen.

“Maybe you really are collateral damage ...”

“... or maybe you wanted it to look that way.” Schmidt sounds as if he wanted to make up for his lack of eyebrow movement.

“You can’t be serious! Why would I willingly poison myself?”

“To make sure no one suspects you. Victim and perpetrator are usually not the same person.” Tschugg isn’t wearing glasses, but he’s still peering at me over some rim.

“Perpetrator? The people who have been murdered paid my bills!”

Again, Tschugg raises a brow. Schmidt doesn’t even try. Instead, he says:

“We found the Polonium-210 in the food you prepared.”

“What?” Evidently I can still produce something akin to a yell.

Yesterday’s New Year’s Eve dinner menu appears in front of my eyes as if the sophisticated dishes wanted to defend themselves against the accusations being levelled at them by someone with a name as common as Schmidt:

Cauliflower hummus with Alba truffles, served with poppyseed cassava flatbread and a watercress salad, sweet potato glass noodles with fermented Nero di Toscana in a soy-free sesame miso broth, paired with a choice of Balik salmon or marinated hemp tofu, both smoked, with millet risotto topped with a lion’s mane foam, warm torta caprese with unsweetened yuzu semifreddo, raw milk Jersey cheese with whipped butter sourced from the Fürstenhof in Austria’s *Salzburger Land* accompanied by golden linseed crackers and a plum and cinnamon chutney. The pictures of my creations are joined by their smell; candlelight refracts in glassware by Helle Mardahl. I chose the glasses specifically for this occasion, it was supposed to be a big one for me, and I’m back in the great hall of the Harman’s chalet, feeling the warmth of the open fire every time I pass it with the next course. I’m serving myself because everyone else has the evening off. The heat on my skin, however, is met by another, by a heat in my stomach, by emotions replacing my joy over the perfect menu telling me that the evening was already ruined before the Harmans began to feel sick, at least for me.

“The radioactive poison was in the food that you prepared.” Tschugg’s words push New Year’s Eve into the past again. “And we think that you, Ms. Castrop, chose this

method of getting rid of the Harmans because it allows you to say what you are saying now: that it's too obvious, especially because you ate from the poisoned dish yourself."

"Which, surely, I wouldn't have done, had I known that it was poisoned." I still can't believe what they are accusing me of. Is this their interrogation tactic: bad cop, bad cop?

"It could've been an accident." Tschugg puts his notebook away as if he didn't need to write down anything I had to say. He's already made up his mind.

"You miscalculated and ingested slightly too much." Schmidt shrugs.

"Don't you think I would be careful to get the measurements right if my life depended on it?"

"You are a member of the kitchen staff, aren't you?" Now that they've started punching below the belt, Tschugg takes over. His voice is as scratchy as his pen.

"I'm a Michelin-starred chef!" That's a lie. I *worked for* a Michelin-starred chef, but Tschugg's demeanour calls for a demonstration of gravitas, and since I can't muster any of my own right now, I need to borrow Quirin's. I try to sit upright, lean against my cushions, but I'm too weak. So I lift my chin instead. "In my line of work, one errant cumin seed can be the difference between another star and a career-ending review in *The Times*."

"Whatever. Being a cook doesn't exactly qualify you to handle nuclear substances." I secretly agree with Tschugg, but my chin stays up. "And if you were working together with someone, there's another possibility: that you didn't know what kind of poison you were handling. Maybe the second murderer wanted to silence his accessory - you! That wouldn't change the fact, though, that you would be complicit in the murder."

I sink back into the cushions, swallow and swallow, but the lump in my throat doesn't budge. Tears run down my face, not desperate tears, angry ones.

“Okay, that’s enough!” I almost forgot about Esme. Her hands are on her hips. “My patient needs rest. I’m going to have to ask you the leave now.”

“I suggest you stay out of it, honey.” Schmidt flinches as if Tschugg’s venom was directed his way.

“I’m not your honey. Ms. Castrop is under my care, and you are placing her under stress, which is detrimental to her ... well-being.”

Esme doesn’t say “recovery”, not even “health”, and even though I knew what the situation was, it still takes my breath away for a second. *Ha! Preview!* I snort. Tschugg doesn’t interpret it as a desperate effort to make sense of a senseless situation but as an act of defiance.

“If you don’t cooperate, we will have to speak to your superior.” I’m not sure whether he is talking to me or to Esme or to both of us, and who my new superior would be, given that the Harmans are dead, and that I will soon follow them. The devil? God?

“Be my guest,” Esme answers, and I’m glad that I don’t have to. “I’ve been working in this hospital for over two decades. Doctor Andersen joined us one and a half years ago. She relies on my experience, my insight, my contacts. If the lab work she requests is urgent, she gets it in half the usual turnaround because for the last thirteen years, I’ve given Rosi from the lab a Christmas card and a box of the Earl Grey chocolates she adores. Doctor Andersen will be none too pleased if I tell her that you disrespected her right hand woman - that would be me – and by extension, the doctor herself.”

Schmidt and Tschugg stare at her. So do I. Esme holds our glare, then she says,

“You can come back later when Ms. Castrop has seen her daughter.”

“She’s got a daughter?” Tschugg asks.

“Yes,” Esme and I say in unison.

“Good to know.” With that, Tschugg leaves the room. Schmidt trots after him, smiling and nodding vaguely in our direction – a compromise between not pissing his

superior off by saying goodbye to us and still being a decent human being behind Tschugg's back. At least a hint of good cop.

Seconds are my days now, and with every second that Schmidt and Tschugg are gone from the room, their performance fades further into the background. As shocking as it was, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter what they think. Their investigation will surely get to the truth, maybe while I'm still alive, maybe not. You would think that I'd be keen to help solve the crime that led to my condition, but I don't hold the murderer responsible for it. It was my proximity to the Harmans; it's their fault. Besides, it wouldn't improve my situation if they caught the murderer and – more importantly – it wouldn't improve Cosima's. Her future is all that matters now. I refuse to think about the investigation anymore. I'm glad the police officers are gone. And that I owe to Esme.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome, but I would have done that for anyone in my care.” She continues my examination. This time, I comply. When she's done, I say:

“You sure don't take any shit. Not from me. Not from them.”

“Well, I'm sick of being ignored,” Esme answers, and then goes quiet. For a minute, I think I went too far and insulted her again, but at 08:41, she continues, “I'm sick of being invisible. I'm sick of being betrayed. By the whole damn world.” Esme exhales for so long that I wonder where all the air she blows in the face of *the whole damn world* comes from.

“To be honest, I had a terrible morning,” Esme squeezes out before inhaling again.

“To be equally honest, I've had better mornings, too.”

Esme chuckles. I don't.

“Do you know why I called you out on your rudeness earlier - despite your condition?” Esme asks.

“Because besides being sick of being ignored, invisible, and betrayed, you're also sick of taking care of cases like mine?”

“No. Because not calling you out would be disrespectful.”

“If you had just let it pass, you’d be disrespecting yourself?”

“I wouldn’t be showing *you* respect if I stopped treating you like a human being. That’s what the police officers did when they talked over your head. That’s what annoyed me. Because for the moment at least, you are still here.” I have a feeling Esme is talking to herself more than to me.

“Hm,” I reply.

“In fact, judging from your bite, you will still be here for some time.”

Esme isn’t going to hold that bite against me. Good. I’m dependent on her, and the last thing I need is to alienate the one person who can make my life – or what’s left of it – slightly more bearable. Maybe I can convince Esme to let Cosima stay after visiting hours. But first, I need to check something:

“Esme, if the police officers are right and I was poisoned with a radioactive substance, would any contact with me be dangerous?”

“No. Polonium-210 emits alpha radiation, not gamma radiation. It doesn’t penetrate the skin.”

“So my daughter won’t be harmed when she visits me?”

“No, all good. We just need to be careful with bodily fluids. Your blood, for example, shouldn’t be swallowed or get into an open wound. That’s the reason why we’re wearing masks and gloves – to be on the safe side.”

Makes sense. Schmidt and Tschugg wore masks like Esme, but no gloves, because they didn’t touch me. Esme snaps the latex against her wrists. She looks less confident, however, than the gesture suggests. I try to lighten the mood.

“At least you seem to have a really nice boss, Esme.” I think about my boss again. “Nice” is not a word one would use to describe John Harman. Apparently, you wouldn’t use it to describe Esme’s boss either.

“Andersen is horrible.” Esme helps me bend over and fluffs the cushions up. “A brilliant physician, but she looks down on the rest of the team. But the police officers don’t know that.”

Esme lets me slide back into the cushions and winks at me. I laugh softly as she leaves the room. I’m dying, and I’m laughing. I’m in pain, and I’m enjoying some banter with a stranger. And that shows me that Esme is right. I’m still here. And as long as I’m here, I will spend every second of every minute of every hour of every day I have left with Cosima.

Esme must have fetched her by now. They should be here any minute. If only I weren’t so tired. I can’t fall asleep. What if Cosima comes in and I miss her? Surely, Esme would wake me up, though. A massive yawn makes my mouth hurt. I’ll sleep when I’m dead, of course. And just a little bit right now ...

10:38

Pain! The machines I'm connected to must have alerted Esme. She darts into the room and changes the plastic bag above my head. It reminds me of the see-through floating toy animal Cosima loved so much until she left it in the sun at Lake Garda. A pufferfish filled with air from my lungs and glitter. We called it Mr. Plastic-Fantastic.

The drugs work fast. As soon as the pain subsides, I grab Esme's hand.

"Cosima?"

"She's gone."

"Gone?" The pain that hits me now is worse than the one before. Esme's drugs can't touch it. "You said she was waiting outside!"

"Your husband, sorry, ex-husband, took her away."

"What? Why? I want my daughter!"

This time, Esme grabs my hand.

"Look, I shouldn't be the one telling you this, but I've overheard the police officers talking about your case."

Panic sets in.

"They weren't impressed with your lack of cooperation and said that your involvement in the whole thing is still unclear." Esme lets go of my hand to stop Mr. Plastic-Fantastic from happily swinging back and forth. "They've named you as their prime suspect. As such, you're not allowed to have any visitors for now. Risk of collusion."

"Can they do that? Just like that?"

I look past Esme and out the window. It's easier to hold back tears if you're not facing a human being. The mountains have disappeared behind a grey wall.

"The Harmans were somebodies in Davos," Esme says.

"The Harmans were somebodies everywhere." I manage to look at Esme.

“Right. But here, they were especially ... special.” Esme’s eyes light up for a moment.

I wouldn’t have thought that she’d be interested in the Harmans. Does she check out John’s investment advice in the online version of *Forbes* after a long day at the hospital? Did an Instagram picture of his daughter, Calliope, inspire Esme to wear that nail polish? Esme taps on the computer I’m hooked up to; the device beeps compliantly. Then Esme pulls her phone from the pocket of her white coat, and the beeping continues.

Which makes me wonder ... where is *my* phone? Quirin didn’t allow any devices in the kitchen. Even Cosima’s babysitter had to call the landline in emergencies. I still obeyed this rule during important events, and this New Year’s Eve was arguably the most important event of my life. My phone is still sitting on the sideboard in the room next to the kitchen, on silent. Or maybe Schmidt and Tschugg took it with them and are scanning it for incriminating evidence right now.

Should I ask Esme if I can borrow hers? It wouldn’t help me, though, without my ex’s phone number. I curse the momfluencers whose online advice prevented me from allowing Cosima a phone of her own. In two months, for her thirteenth birthday, I wanted to buy her a refurbished iPhone as a gift. Cosima’s number I would’ve known by heart.

Apparently, Esme found the video she wants to show me. Her phone lingers before my face. A reporter holding his microphone like a torch stands in front of the Davos Congress Center next to a lady in a skirt suit.

In a couple of weeks, the World Economic Forum will take place. The preparations are underway; typically, it’s a fixed routine. This year, however, everything is different. This year, investigating a crime is part of the preparations. And not just any crime: the well-known entrepreneur, billionaire, and philanthropist John Harman, along with his wife, Reeta, and his two children, have been murdered in cold blood at their home in Davos.

Like every year, John Harman was supposed to speak at the World Economic Forum. Experts expected him to take up a more active role after Klaus Schwab's resignation. I am standing here in front of the Davos Congress Center with my colleague Carla Ganghofer, who usually covers murder cases for Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Ms. Ganghofer, what is your take on the situation?

Ganghofer coils her pearl necklace and lets it go before she answers. The pearls crunch into the microphone, and the reporter frowns.

Solving the murders is of the highest priority. They must complete the investigation before the Forum starts - the earlier, the better. And that might just be possible. When the stakes are that high, when so much money is involved, and such important people ... the public prosecutor's office will approve applications without question. The investigators have near unlimited possibilities.

The two journalists continue talking about the urgency of the investigation. Then they move on to speculating about John's potential successor as a speaker. After a couple more minutes, the video comes to an end, and Esme puts her phone away. Her hands are interlocked. She has changed her gloves, but the bruise I bit into her hand is still there. *Near unlimited possibilities.* I feel sick, and I don't think Esme's painkillers are responsible for it.

"Besides ..." she starts.

"What?" I ask feebly.

"Well, you would be the perfect suspect, because ..."

"... because I won't be here anymore to submit any appeals, to make any complaints, to do anything at all. And because I am more or less broke and have no family

to support me. My twelve-year-old daughter is hardly going to question the police work, and there is no one else who will speak up for me.”

“I’m sorry.”

What is Esme sorry for? For the way that things tend to go for people like me, or for my lack of allies? The new year took pretty much all my agency away, but for some reason, I haven’t once felt helpless. Maybe because there is a second life I can fight for, one that won’t be ending for a long time. When I still thought I could prepare Cosima for what would happen in five days, I had a purpose. Now I don’t. Tschugg and Schmidt are taking that away from me, away from Cosima.

“I’m so sorry,” Esme repeats. I wonder whether she, too, thinks that I killed four people, whether her empathy is a professional habit, like how public defenders still provide representation to the guilty. The dying are entitled to compassion, no matter how many people they take with them. Esme squeezes my hand in a way that doesn’t hurt before she leaves me alone.

As soon as she’s gone, I fall apart. I don’t hear the noise that comes out of me; I feel it. Every cell is involved, they scream in unison, all of them, emptying themselves until nothing is left, no energy, no feeling.

When I’m done, I’m exhausted, broken into a million pieces, and ... my mind is clear. It’s 10:54 now. Time to remember that I’m a problem-solver, I always have been. The Harmans trusted me to find a solution, and I always found one if there was one to be found. Even in these last days of mine, I can draw upon a lifetime of overcoming obstacles.

My goal: to spend as much time with my daughter as possible, tell her all the things I should have heard but didn’t when I was young. To get there, I need to give Schmidt and Tschugg one simple yet complicated thing: a reason to rule me out as a suspect.

12:30

“Lunch!” Esme exclaims far too chirpily.

Fell asleep again! It must have been the painkillers; they made me drowsy. 12:31! I lost one and a half hours. And I have another problem: I need to keep my body going as best as I can, my brain needs carbs, but the thought of having to ingest food, anything really, makes me nauseous.

“Can’t you hook me up to one of those IV drips?” I point to Mr Plastic-Fantastic. “Wouldn’t that be more efficient?”

As of today, I am an even bigger fan of efficiency than before. 12:32.

“I could, but I encourage my patients to eat. It’s good to keep a sense of normalcy. Remember, you are...”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m still here,” I repeat Esme’s mantra, although looking at the tray that comes my way, I wish I weren’t here. When Esme lifts the plastic lid, the scent pushes me into my cushion.

“Our kitchen prepares everything freshly on site.” Esme is clearly pleased that the microwave that reheats the food is in the same room as the stove that fried it to death earlier.

I can’t stand reheated food! I’m the person who takes multiple containers and bags onto the plane – unless it’s the Harman’s private one, of course, where I prepare the food myself. Doing so is always a challenge. You have to cook differently on a plane. Cabin pressure and low humidity alter our sense of taste. That’s why so many passengers order tomato juice. Ten thousand metres above ground, it tastes better, sweeter, fruitier.

On the side of my bed, Esme unfolds a table. I didn’t know it was there and wish it wasn’t. Click. Locked in place. No escape. The smell intensifies when Esme sets down her tray. Just a few centimetres away, the plate hovers in front of my face. Everything is off: the colour, the texture. And the presentation ... let’s not even go there. They could

have at least bothered to sprinkle some dried parsley on top. Dried parsley cheapens every dish. Except this one; here, it would be an upgrade. I suppress the urge to duck under my duvet when Esme, misinterpreting my hesitation for exhaustion, heaves food on a spoon, carefully selecting a bit of meat, far too dark, a bit of mashed potatoes, and a bit of whatever vegetable it used to be before they cooked every last ounce of freshness out of it. This way, I can sample the whole miserable array.

Esme playfully steers the spoon toward me. All that's missing is her imitating the noise of an aeroplane. I can still see the bruise on her hand and my bad conscience makes me open my mouth. Still, my taste buds revolt when hit with a mushy substance that somehow manages to be way too salty and totally bland at the same time, with – if you can say that about a dish lacking in even the most rudimentary principles of composition – an aftertaste of – of all things! – *green banana*. I spit it right back onto the plate.

“I’m sorry, Esme, I can’t.” I expect Esme to be mad at me, but she just puts the tray away and looks at me with interest.

“You are a chef, aren’t you?”

“Was.”

“Are!”

“Yes, I am a chef.” I can’t bring it over myself to swallow Esme’s lunch, but I can swallow her kindness.

“What exactly was your job?”

“At the Harmans?”

“Yes. If you don’t mind talking about the departed.”

I don’t mind, even if it’s difficult, and I nod. As long as I’m speaking, I don’t have to eat anything.

“It must have been great to work for such a distinguished – not to mention rich - family.”

“It was okay.”

“Oh, come on, wasn’t it incredibly glamorous? What were they like, the Harmans?”

Well, what *were* they like? The Harmans were such an integral part of my life that it is difficult for me to see them as people rather than as entities whose decisions and moods determined every aspect of my existence. Even now, in death, they are meddling with my affairs because I am forced to spend *my* last days dealing with *their* last day. Also, without them, I wouldn’t even be in this situation. Anger suddenly blooms in my stomach, and it takes some effort to rip the plant out without getting pricked.

The Harmans were ... different, I guess, different from the rest of the world, but also from each other. John was easy to please. He approached food like he approached life: with immense appetite. John liked hearty dishes, big portions, rare ingredients. He was an adventurous eater, and I loved to introduce him to new flavours, coaxing out a “Marvellous!”

John’s wife, Reeta, was mainly concerned with avoiding faux pas. Was it pretentious to eat those little flatbread bites with goat’s cheese, radicchio, and honey with cutlery, or was it uncouth to eat them with your hands in front of guests? Was it still okay to like avocados, knowing that the mafia controlled the trade of the fruit? (Yes, avocados are fruit; Reeta was very pleased that she knew trivia like that.) And which brand of champagne should she serve? Ruinart? Cristal? I explained to her that all commercial products – no matter how cheap or expensive – are overpriced and introduced her to Leclerc Briant, the champagne made from biodynamically cultivated grapes growing right next to the luxury brand Roederer’s vineyards.

“You see,” she told her friends, “with the big names, you pay for ... well, the names. For marketing. For the effort that goes into big batch production. And what do you want to pay for? For the quality of the champagne! Really,” Reeta laughed her mermaid laugh, “you have to be a little daft to still be buying household names. And insecure. Sure, everyone knows how expensive a bottle of Cristal is, but the people you

can still impress with that kind of thing are generally not people whose opinions you should care about.” From that point on, Leclerc Briant got served at every function in Reeta’s circles.

Although Reeta was a handful, she wasn’t the most neurotic family member when it came to food. That would be her seventeen-year-old stepdaughter, Calliope. In her early teens, she just practiced good old-fashioned calorie counting, but once her parents granted her internet access, she became obsessed with whatever the newest eating trend was. Atkin’s, Paleo – she’s done them all. Calliope went vegan after discovering *The Vegan Blonde* and swore off it when the blogger, now known as *The Balanced Blonde*, announced she would return to eating meat for health reasons. For a while, Calliope followed “the French girl’s diet”, having one bite of *pain au chocolat* for breakfast and making me cook *tartiflette* and *coq au vin*, which she then consumed in minuscule portions. (John was more than happy to eat the leftovers. So was I.)

After Calliope discovered that it was harder to taste fantastic food without being allowed to really have it than not having it at all, she fell back into clean eating, just changing what she considered “clean” with every social media post she read. One day, I had to fry everything in coconut oil; the next day, coconut oil was the devil. Oh, and her relationship with coffee! It ranged from being in love to dumping it for a concoction made of adaptogenic mushrooms and a fling with a de-cafeinated cold-brew version to giving it up for good because:

“I’m a highly sensitive person, you know, Lis, and my system just can’t handle caffeine.”

To keep track of Calliope’s ever-changing preferences was exhausting and impossible. At some point, Calliope worried she was orthorexic. She probably was. That’s when she got into intuitive eating, the last fad she followed before her death, but her intuition, buried under years of regulating every morsel of edible, drinkable, somehow absorbable substance allowed to enter her body, failed her.

“You do it, Lis! Your intuition can tell you what my intuition would want me to eat. And that’s what you prepare.”

“I can’t be your intuition, Cal. Intuition is personal.”

“But you know my preferences better than anyone else. Better than I do.”

That’s the Harmans for you, they are used to having someone else sort everything out for them – even their feelings, even their values, even their taste. I’ll never understand that. If I have the whole wide world at my disposal, why would I not reach for it?

My favourite by far was the youngest Harman, eight-year-old Percy. Reeta was paranoid about him getting all the nutrients he needed to grow into the dashing, at least 185-centimetres-tall, nevertheless brainy, privileged but empathetic young man she envisioned. I, however, secretly fed Percy my childhood delights: creamy semolina pudding with cinnamon, vanilla, cloves and brown sugar crystals that made a clickety sound when you bit on them, apple strudel constructed from layers and layers of see-through dough I had stretched over the massive kitchen table right until breaking-point, and, of course, Percy’s favourite dish, a chocolate flan that didn’t just melt in his mouth, it evaporated, leaving behind nothing but bliss.

The whole thing started when Percy, in search of a snack, surprised Cosima, who was eating a late lunch in the kitchen. She let him have half of her *Kaiserschmarrn*. From that day on, Percy always visited the kitchen when Cosima had her lunch. I didn’t have the heart to send him away. In time, Cosima became more of a big sister to Percy than Calliope ever could have been. Now, Percy will never use his finger again to scrape the last bit of flan from the bowl. The thought brings my anger back with a vengeance. This time, its roots dig deep through my insides - no chance of removing them. And I don’t want to, either. I need my rage.

“Ms. Castrop?”

“I mainly prepared their private meals and sometimes small dinners with friends or business partners,” I finally answer Esme’s question. “Lately, I advised the Harmans on their image.”

“Wow! They must have really liked you.”

Not me, there was no liking, maybe respect. They recognised what I knew and all the things I could do with it. But that is not something Esme needs to be privy to, and I have other things to worry about. My stomach agrees, it rumbles. When your day revolves around fine dining, you sometimes forget about the foremost purpose of eating: nourishment.

Like every good chef, I know that circumstances are crucial. You always work with what you’ve got. If you want to surprise your date with your famous mushroom risotto and the chanterelles at the market have a greenish tinge, you should cook your second-best dish; otherwise, the surprise might be food poisoning. If you are in culinary no man’s land, you are better off with a fresh apple than sampling whatever the greasy menu at the restaurant down the road has to offer. And when you order in, you order the one dish that’s never reheated, the dish that was made for delivery, the one that was first described by Vergil in his *Aeneid* a couple of decades before Christ. In Vergil’s epic, his starving heroes ate the wheat plates they used to hold the last of their supplies, thus fulfilling the prophecy promising good tidings once they would “eat their tables”. I could do with good tidings right now.

“Any chance we can order a pizza, Esme?”

13:18

Lunch was delicious, the sauce had fresh oregano and just the right amount of garlic, albeit powdered. And! Mozzarella! Not some stretchy, yellow-dyed oily paste. There might even have been traces of buffalo milk in there. The cardboard box in front of me features a smiling cartoon chef whose look – big moustache, big belly, big grin – couldn't be further from that of the real-life chefs I encountered. Quirin, for example ... designer stubble out of fear he could come across as stuffy, hardly any body fat out of fear of body fat. And out of fear that people might think that he doesn't take his craft, no, his art, seriously enough, he only laughs when guests are not around, which is a pity. Quirin has an infectious laugh.

I toss a piece of crust into the box and close the lid. Esmé wants to bin it.

“Don't you dare!” I grab the box and put it on my bedside table. It doesn't leave much space for anything else. I don't mind.

I've always had a thing for cold pizza, the layer of hardened cheese you have to crack to get through to the sauce. I firmly believe that cold liquid tomatoes not only taste better at ten thousand metres above ground. Certain situations call for them: Moving house. Playing board games. And hospital stays. I'll keep the pizza for later, I still have a later.

I was impressed with my body, how – even in its current condition – it savoured every bite, longed for the next, produced enough saliva and energy for chewing. It gives me hope, although I'm careful not to slide into the fantasy of thinking I will survive all of this. I'll say goodbye to my daughter in the best way possible. And then ... I'll let go ... I want to let go ... but there's enough pizza energy left to fight this thought. I don't want to go; I want to hold on to pistachio gelato, the scent of Cosima's freshly washed hair, a ray of sunshine breaking through between umbrella and hat, heating a spot on my neck without burning it.

My breath is getting flatter, quicker, and I force myself to inhale for six counts and exhale for ten, inhale, then exhale for a longer time – a trick I learned from Calliope and her manifestation coach. Esme takes my hand and breathes with me, no words needed. Thinking about Calliope calms me down. Even though I never had any power myself, I've been close to it for years. I cooked for consultants whose daily rate is on par with Tschugg's monthly salary, absorbed bits of their conversations, studied John's head posture, the few centimetres that made the difference between "Don't waste my time!" and "I'm listening ...". No Harman would have allowed the police to treat them like this. I wasn't one of them, but I lived in their homes, breathed the same multi-filtered air. And now I share their fate, just with a few days' delay.

Inhale for six counts, exhale for ten. I even took part in the training session held by the Harmans' chief security officer, Hiram. He demonstrated his most impressive lesson with me. If someone attacks you with a knife and you manage to stop his arm, even keep it in place, your best-case scenario is a deadlock. It's force against force. The stronger person will win, the one with more stamina. If you hit the attacker's hand, however, if you meet his movement with your own, preferably as a surprise, he doesn't stand a chance – even if you are weaker than him. You take his strength and redirect it. You turn it against him. The knife Hiram was supposed to "stab" me with flew out of his hand and past John's ear – also a matter of centimetres.

Inhale, Lis! One, two, three, I will thwart Schmidt and Tschugg, four, five, will convince them that I'm not involved in the murder case, six, and then I'll see Cosima again, and everything is going to be alright, well, as alright as it still can be. But how? Exhale, one, two, three, four, alibi's out, I was at the scene of the crime, and everyone else who was there is dead, five, six. Even worse, seven, I prepared the dish containing the poison. How and when did it get in there? Was it in one of the ingredients? Eight, whatever, I need to find a different method of showing them that I'm innocent, nine, I need to weave my way through proof and statements like the ray of sun at the beach. At

the end, it can only illuminate one solution, a solution that has nothing to do with me.
Ten.

“Better?” Esme let go of my hand like she already knew the answer.

“Yes. Thank you.”

It’s 13:22. I’m not sure when the police officers will reappear, probably later this afternoon, but I will make sure that they won’t leave without the promise to let my daughter visit me.

“Wasn’t there another family member?” Esme doesn’t look at me; she smooths out the bedsheet as if it were all that mattered. Her effort to take my mind off things is obvious, yet so well-intentioned, that I’m touched.

“That’s right.”

I forgot about Damon. Everyone always forgets about Damon. John’s older brother came to Switzerland with us but decided to spend New Year’s Eve in town.

Damon is the only Harman who never sought my guidance; he never asked for a special dish. Like a freeloading chameleon, he ate whatever was on the other family members’ plates. He lived in their house, lived off their money, so it was only natural that he mimicked their behaviour. I suspect that Reeta bought his clothes, too. More than once, he turned up in the same cashmere sweater as John – just in a different colour, John’s dark blue or crimson, Damon’s beige or grey. There was no doubt who was king in this house and who was tolerated by his decree.

“John Harman’s brother, right?” Esme asks. “Dorian?”

“Damon,” I correct her, although Dorian would have been just as fitting. Damon’s curls have been grey for a long time, but he looks ageless.

“Lucky him!”

“Lucky? His whole family has been murdered.”

“Sorry, that was insensitive. It’s just ...”

“What?”

“Well, he did survive. And ... won't he inherit the Harman fortune? All of it?”

Yes, he will. Damon will be one of the wealthiest people in Switzerland and the US, no, in the world. And suddenly I realise how I can convince Schmidt and Tschugg. Hiram would be proud of me. Schmidt and Tschugg are under pressure, they need a lead, and I will not meet this pressure with resistance. I will use it and turn it against them. I have something much better than an alibi for Schmidt and Tschugg, something bigger: another, more high-profile suspect. Another, far more significant story.