

**Arno Strobel**

## ***Sharing***

**translated by Anne Stokes**

**© S. Fischer Verlage GmbH**

### **Chapter 1**

‘As I said before, please take the vehicle to the address on the emergency card in the glove compartment. They’ll give you another car there.’

Markus Kern ended the conversation, and glanced at his watch. Just after nine thirty. He looked out the window. The carpark in front of the company building was dark and empty, apart from the Audi A3 from their own car fleet, which Markus was currently using. His gaze fell on the imposing sign next to the entrance, which was illuminated by a spotlight. The light was directed at the street, so he wasn’t able to read what it said from where he was sitting. But he didn’t need to anyway. He knew what was signposted in large blue letters: *Kern & Kern Car Sharing*. And underneath, in somewhat smaller black print, was their slogan: *Sharing Is Caring*.

Five years earlier, when he and Bettina were starting the company, they had discussed long and hard with their marketing advisor whether it was wise to use an English slogan. In the end, though, they had bought the argument that car sharing would appeal primarily to young people, and English slogans were totally natural for them. Additionally, the statement was completely in line with their conviction that it was more important than ever to look after the environment and the climate, and to use existing resources sensibly and efficiently.

His wife Bettina, like Markus himself, considered it obscene for possessions such as cars to be used only by a single person instead of being shared among several. The cars from their fleet were dotted all over town, and could be hired for however long they were needed, even if only for a few minutes. In this way, optimal use was made of the vehicles.

The sound of his smart phone brought this short rumination to an end. Markus glanced at the screen before pressing the phone to his ear. It was Bettina.

‘Hi, sweetie,’ he began, and before she could answer, he added, ‘Are you home already?’

‘No, I’m still at the gym. Just wanted to let you know I’ll be a bit later than usual. Klara’s just closing up, and we’re having a little drink together.’

‘Oh, alright. I’m still at the office, but just about to head home.’

‘Is everything okay?’

‘Yes, sure. I’ve just finished the offer for Oppmann. He called, and needs it tomorrow.’

‘I see. I’ll be back in an hour at the latest.’

‘Great. Catch up with you then.’

Markus switched off his computer, got up and stuck his smart phone into his jeans’ pocket. Then he turned off the light, and left the office.

It took him just under twenty minutes to drive the circa six-mile stretch between his office in Frankfurt Bornheim and their house in Bad Vilbel. While driving he remembered it was actually one of his training days, but however much benefit he derived from his marathon training, which he did three times a week, he definitely wouldn’t be going out running this late.

When he opened the door of the house, he was surprised to see that the ground floor was in complete darkness. Leonie had obviously gone off to bed already.

Markus put his key in the bowl on the table in the hallway, padded quietly up to the first floor and gently opened the door to his daughter’s bedroom. She hated sleeping in pitch darkness, which is why she never lowered the blinds. In the light of a street lamp he could make out she was in bed. Intent on not making any noise, he entered the room and looked at her face, whose contours he could only guess at rather than see. Her steady, calm breathing indicated she was fast asleep.

Satisfied that all was well, he pulled the duvet up over her shoulders, tiptoed out of the room and went back downstairs.

After fetching a beer from the kitchen, he put the bottle down on the living-room table and switched on the TV. He then channel-hopped until he came across a documentary on climate change that had just started. The

programme ended shortly after eleven, and Bettina still wasn't back. Hadn't she said she'd be home in an hour at the latest?

Slightly disconcerted, but not yet concerned, Markus got up and fetched another bottle of beer from the fridge. Clearly, Bettina and the fitness studio owner were having an interesting conversation.

Another half hour went by before Markus, after zapping through the channels, turned the TV off in exasperation and reached for his smart phone. He went to his favourites, selected Bettina's name and listened to it ring out until her voicemail came on.

'Hello, it's me,' he said, irritated because she hadn't pick up. 'I just wanted to see if it was worthwhile waiting up for you. I'm pretty tired. Give me a quick call, and let me know, okay?'

He kept the phone in his hand, and stared at the screen, wondering if he ought to try the studio. He wasn't in the habit of calling around after his wife, but the fact that she was so late and hadn't been in touch, and that he hadn't been able to reach her just now, was very unusual.

Finally, he searched for the fitness studio's website in his browser, and typed in the phone number. But after only one ring, a female voice announced that he was calling outside of business hours.

Cursing quietly, Markus hung up, and began surfing through the online platforms of various newspapers and magazines. After a short time, though, he gave up. Every site featured the exact same news. He put the phone on the table, and reached for the biography of the former American President Barack Obama, which was lying on the side-table next to the couch. He hadn't got back around to reading it for days, and a few minutes later he was completely absorbed in the story.

Just after midnight, he put the book aside, because his eyelids were growing increasingly heavy. He glanced at his smart phone, and saw that Bettina hadn't left a message or tried to call. He rang her number again, and waited for the voicemail.

'Hi, it's me again. It's now after midnight, and I'm starting to get worried. If you want to carry on chatting for longer, that's totally fine, but get in touch so I know everything's okay.'

Preoccupied, he put the phone down on the table, and switched the TV back on. Although he was pretty tired, a rapidly increasing sense of disquiet kept him from going to bed. It simply wasn't like Bettina to be this unreliable.

He gazed at the TV, but wasn't really listening to the talk show guests' altercations.

Bettina always went to the small fitness studio late in the evening, because only a few members were there at that time, so she could access all the equipment without having to wait. Yes, she had occasionally chewed the fat with the gym owner afterwards, and lost track of time. But even then, she had always been back around eleven.

Markus thought about calling Bettina's friend Sarah, and asking if Bettina was with her, but that was extremely unlikely at this hour. Besides, he didn't want to give the impression he was checking up on Bettina. But, on the other hand, Sarah ... was single, and he wouldn't put it past her to have called Bettina late in the evening to meet up with her.

And what if something really wasn't okay?

He reached for his smart phone, looked for Sarah's landline in his address book, and hesitated for a moment before finally tapping it. Two seconds later, Sarah's voice answered from her voicemail. Markus ended the call, and selected her mobile number. If she had in fact met up with Bettina late in the evening, and they were both now sitting in some pub or other, then he would only reach her on her mobile.

It was a while before Sarah answered in a croaky voice.

'It's Markus here,' he explained, feeling uneasy, since he'd clearly woken her up.

'Sorry for disturbing you this late, but Bettina didn't come home after the gym, and I'm gradually starting to get worried.'

'What? But why ... what time is it then?'

'Just after midnight.'

Markus heard the rustling of bedclothes. 'I didn't see her today. After working out, she usually goes straight home. Strange ...'

'Yep, that's why I'm worried.'

'Maybe she went for a drink with someone? With the owner, for instance, that Klara woman. Tina told me she liked talking with her.'

'She was planning to stay and have a drink with her in the studio, and then come home. If they decided to move on somewhere, she'd have called, you know how she is. At the very least, she'd answer her phone.'

'That's true. Hmm ...'

'Can you think of anyone else she might be with, another woman or a man?'

'A *man*? You surely don't think Tina ...'

'No!' Markus interjected. 'I don't think that at all. I'm just trying to run through all possibilities. Nothing like this has ever happened in the sixteen years we've been married.'

'I know,' Sarah agreed. 'But I'm sure she's okay. And there'll be a plausible explanation.'

'Yes,' Markus said quietly, 'I hope so.'

'For sure. Look, don't be mad at me, but I've got an early start tomorrow and need to get some sleep. But if anything comes up, please call, okay?'

'Yes, sure. Sleep well.'

Markus lowered his phone. Sarah was almost certainly right. He was worrying too much. Bettina had probably gone off to a pub with Klara for another drink, and one drink had led to another. Maybe she'd simply lost track of the time. It had happened to him on more than one occasion that he'd been deep in conversation with someone and then glanced at his watch and been shocked to see it was much later than he'd thought.

The same thing must have ... A noise made him turn around. Greatly relieved, he was just about to call out Bettina's name when Leonie, still half-asleep, came around the corner into the living room and stopped. She had her long, dark hair pinned up in a dishevelled bun.

'I'm thirsty,' she explained, looking around the room. 'Is mum in bed already?'

'No, she isn't home yet, but she'll definitely be back soon. A certain fifteen-year-old, though, should be in bed right now. So, get a drink, then back in the sack.'

His daughter mumbled something he couldn't make out, went into the kitchen just off the living room and fetched a carton of milk from the fridge. Shortly after that she disappeared.

Markus had just dropped back onto the couch when his smart phone pinged, announcing a WhatsApp message. He leaned forward with a start, reached for the device and breathed a sigh of relief. The message was from Bettina. Finally! He tapped on the WhatsApp icon, and frowned a moment later. Instead of an explanation of where she was, the message contained a

strange-looking web address – a long row of letters and numbers followed by a dot and the file extension *onion*.

Markus, admittedly, hadn't surfed the so-called dark web, but he had read a report on it once and knew that the address he had in front of him was precisely from this clandestine section of the internet. And in a WhatsApp message from his wife.

'What the hell ...,' he exclaimed as he switched to the call logs and tapped on Bettina's number. Either someone was fooling around on his wife's mobile, or Bettina had in fact had more than one drink and thought it would be funny to send him a web address that would probably lead him to some fake web page or other. Which raised the question, though, of how his wife, whose computer skills he would describe as fairly marginal, knew an address from the dark web. Either way, Markus felt the mixture of concern and anger he was feeling increase as he listened to the electronic beeping.

After the third beep, someone picked up, and before Markus could open his mouth, a man with a coldness to his voice that took Markus's breath away said: 'Go to the website. And hurry, the Bettina Show has already started.' Then he hung up.

Markus held his phone in his hand a while longer, trying to work out what had just happened. Who was that guy? And why did he have Bettina's mobile? Suddenly, any twinge of irritation disappeared, and was replaced by a rapidly growing sense of fear. The hand he had the smart phone in was shaking.

This was no prank, he was sure of that. Something had happened to Bettina, and if he wanted to find out what it was, he would have to do what the man had demanded.

With his heart pounding heavily, he opened the message with the web address, and tapped it just as he would any other link. But nothing happened. So he copied the address and pasted it into his browser. But he simply received a notification that the page could not be opened.

Cursing, he sprang to his feet and strode quickly out of the living room. When he reached the office he and Bettina shared, he sat down at his desk, turned on the computer and opened the browser. But after frantically typing the address from the message and then confirming it, he got the same notification he'd received on his smart phone. The page could not be opened.

With an unpleasant tingling, tiny drops of sweat formed on his brow as he concentrated on comparing the address he had entered character by character with the one in the message. But he hadn't mistyped. So that guy, then, must have slipped up.

Markus sank into the back of his office chair, and stared at the message in the browser, as though this might make it disappear.

His thoughts raced. *And hurry*, the guy had said on the phone. *The Bettina Show has already started.*

The Bettina Show ... What kind of a show was that, then? Was he worrying unnecessarily? Was his wife just playing a joke on him? Was it perhaps a surprise she had planned long beforehand? But for what?

Markus thought hard about whether he might have forgotten an important date. But their anniversary had been two months earlier. Bettina's birthday wasn't for another four months, and his was two weeks before that. Why else might Bettina have staged a show that he was to watch on the dark web? No, it must be another ... the address caught Markus's eye. The extension after the dot. *Onion* ... there had been something in that article about the dark web, something about this sort of address, and that they couldn't be traced, not even by police investigators. Because ... because you needed a special browser which obliterated all traces on the net!

With a start, Markus leaned forward and let his fingers flit across the keyboard. In less than a minute, he found a relevant article, and started downloading the anonymising TOR browser, which was vital for surfing the extensive unofficial networks on the internet.

Three minutes later, the software was installed and set up with a couple of clicks.

Markus typed in the web address from the message, and confirmed it by pressing Enter. For a while, nothing happened, and Markus expected to receive the same notification as before, when the website finally opened. In the next breath, Markus let out a silent scream, and stared with terror-stricken eyes at the image in front of him. Then an iron fist rammed into his stomach, almost rendering him unconscious.