



Are you ready for the next challenge from Arno Strobel?

It sounds almost too good to be true. The best neighbourhood, a house with Smart-Home, everything controllable through an App, at all times and from anywhere. And also completely secure. Hendrik and Linda are over the moon when they move in. This is the home they had always imagined sharing together.

But then one night Linda disappears. There's no message, no clues, not the slightest trace of her. The police are at a loss. Hendrik is about to crack up. Could someone have got into the house that night? And if they did, why did the App not trigger the alarm straightaway?

Hendrik feels increasingly under scrutiny. And rightly so, because it's not just the App that knows where he lives ...

'You don't need a book mark when you're reading one of Arno Strobel's thrillers, since you can't put them down. Thrilling and nerve-racking!'

Sebastian Fitzek

translated by Anne Stokes

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PROLOGUE

When he wakes up he feels as though he's having to struggle to open his eyes.

While his sluggish brain tries to figure out what's going on, he makes out some blurred, shapeless blotches. He blinks once, twice, but the image doesn't get any clearer. He wonders if he drank too much the night before, but weirdly enough he can't remember.

He'd like to raise his hand to clear the streaks from his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, but his arm does not obey him. In fact, he can no longer feel it.

In a panic, he tries to raise his other arm, but to no avail.

Within a few beats, his heart rate accelerates from a casual resting rate to a speedy one. Is he chained up? What an absurd idea. At least he'd be able to feel his limbs if he were. But what the hell is going on?

Did he maybe lie in an awkward position and his arm fell asleep? That had happened often enough, but always only to one arm or leg. He was still able to move his other limbs.

His reason screams at him that he should pull himself together right away, that he cannot possibly be paralyzed. Using the full strength of his will, he tries again to alter the position of his arms, his legs, his feet, to lift a finger at least... Nothing. He can't even turn his head half an inch. His eye muscles are working, though, so at least he can blink to make the streaks disappear.

He stares at the ceiling, which is covered with matt-silver aluminum panels. Not his bedroom, then.

As his panic grows, his breathing becomes increasingly frantic.

Concentrate, he orders himself. You have to concentrate, damn it. Look around you.

On the ceiling diagonally across from him is a flat, square light fixture, and through the frosted glass the cold light of fluorescent tubes squeezes through.

He looks to the left, shifting his attention to another fixture, somewhat smaller than the one overhead. At the lower edge of his field of vision, something dark shimmers, changing position. But in order to be able to see it more clearly and make it out, he would have to turn his head at least slightly to the side, which he cannot do no matter how hard he tries.

He is afraid that fear will very soon overcome him completely, paralyzing his thoughts as well as everything else. He must not let this happen. He must force himself to think in a structured way.

Maybe it's all just a dream? His subconscious mind has led him to believe the craziest things in sleep. That he has fallen into a fathomless darkness, or can fly.

But this is no dream, for however clear the previous dream sequences may have seemed, they never felt as real as the situation he's in right now. On top of that, fragments of memories suddenly surface, and are enough to send his pulse racing off again.

He returned home from a business dinner. And, yes, he had polished off a few glasses of wine, but he wasn't drunk. His wife was on night shift. He went into the kitchen, got some juice from the fridge, and took a few swigs. After that he turned the lights off in the living room and made his way over to the couch, but ... he can't remember getting there. Between these few seconds and waking up just now there was a gaping hole.

A noise next to him draws his attention back to the room with the silver ceiling. A ... rattling sound.

He'd like to call out 'Hello!' and 'Help', but his vocal cords are as unresponsive as his limbs. Once again, the cold claws of panic grip him, and he feels he cannot fight it off much longer.

Stay calm, he implores himself. Think. There must be some explanation for all of this.

Again, he hears noises next to him. There's someone else in the room. He's now quite certain of it. Is it the person who got him into this situation? It has to be him. Who else would carry on with some sort of activity while someone lay paralyzed beside him?

He wonders if he might be naked, and asks himself right away whether there isn't something more important he should be thinking about. For instance, what led to him being apparently unable to move, but still able to breathe and move his eyes?

Perhaps he's lying in a hospital? After a stroke? But, in that case, wouldn't his wife be at his bedside, holding his hand? Talking to him and explaining what happened?

It must be something else, then. Something she knows nothing about, because if ...

The head edges into his field of vision so unexpectedly that he fears his heart will stop.

The man's mouth and nose are covered with a green cloth mask, and a cap of the same color conceals his hair, so that only his eyes are visible.

A doctor. A surgeon. A hospital then, after all?

The man leans over him a little further, his eyes clearly fixed on a spot on his chest. Then a hand appears, taking his breath away. The fingers in the rubber glove are holding a scalpel, the blade of which shimmers like silver in the diffused light, and sinks slowly down onto his chest.

No! he screams to himself. Don't do it! I'm not anesthetized. Can't you see that my eyes are open and moving?

As if the man has heard his inner voice, he lifts his hand and it disappears from his field of vision. His eyes fill up with tears of relief, and all he can make out now is a blurred head. But a further realization, which finally threatens to drive him over the edge, pushes aside his sense of relief.

Although he can't even move his little finger, there's obviously something that hasn't shut down: his sensations. He clearly felt the tears run down his face, so he will also be able to feel something else: Pain. His eyes search frantically for the hand with the scalpel, are arrested by the upper body of the man, who is still hanging over him, and bring home the next, cruel realization: This is not a hospital, and the man is not a doctor.

A hospital doctor would not be wearing a white rubber apron smeared all over with blood.

This is the garb of a butcher.

“Thanks for the fantastic meal.” Linda raised her wine glass to Hendrik, as they looked deeply into each other’s eyes. “And for the wonderful evening.”

“Yes, it *was* wonderful,” Hendrik replied, raising his glass to her. “And it’s not over yet.”

As they drank, he caught sight of the ring gleaming on her finger. And, like every time the thought crossed his mind that they would be getting married in just a few days, it seemed that his heart would burst.

They put their glasses down on the solid wood dining table. “Are you excited?”

A soft smile played on her lips. “About the trip to Namibia?” He grinned. “I was thinking more of the reason for the trip.”

“Yes, I’m excited.” Linda took his hands in hers and held them. “And I’m very happy. Even though we’ve been living here together for a year ... it’ll be different.”

For a moment, he contemplated her face, which was framed by long black hair, clearly revealing the Italian ancestry of her father’s side of the family. Then their lips came together in a tender kiss.

After they had moved apart again, he swept his hand through the air in an exaggerated gesture and looked up at the ceiling, transfixed. “Namibia ... At night we’ll lie in the rooftop tent of our jeep, naked, surrounded by total silence, with an unbelievable starry sky above us. Millions of stars, so that it looks as if they have all come together to form a scintillating ceiling. I just know you’ll be thrilled.”

“Yes, most definitely.” Linda grinned. Then, a moment later, she let out a surprising sound when, as though on a secret command, all of the lights dimmed simultaneously, so much so that for a brief moment it seemed dark, just a few seconds. Then the spooky episode was over.

“What on earth was that?”

Hendrik shrugged, looking up at the overhead light. “No idea. Maybe a power surge. That happened a lot in my old room in the shared apartment.”

“Hmm ...,” Linda mumbled, looking around her. “The wiring there was probably rotten. But in a new house? Here, in Winterhude?”

“Who knows ... maybe *Adam* was having a bit of fun.”

Adam was the name of the smart home system that had been installed the previous year, when the house was being built.

You can control all of the tech in your home with an app, the salesman had assured them at the time. *Lighting, heating, the refrigerator and TV, even the robotic vacuum cleaner works reliably and exactly as you’d like it to, all digitally controlled.* Then, with a wink, he had added: *Just like in paradise*, which explained the name.

Up till now, the system had indeed worked perfectly. Whether it was the lighting, which *Adam* turned on when they entered rarely used rooms, and turned off again after they left them, or the blinds, which descended either at the onset of darkness or on command – everything had worked faultlessly. Even the washing machine texted their smart phones or displayed a message at the bottom of their TV screen when the wash cycle was over.

Linda nodded. “It wouldn’t surprise me. The more complicated the technology, the more fallible it is.”

“Who knows what happened just then.” Hendrik leaned across the table. “I think you should kiss me, that would most certainly help.”

She smiled. But before their lips touched, Hendrik’s phone began to vibrate on the dresser next to them, and the chorus of the song ‘Doctor! Doctor!’ by the Thompson Twins rang out.

“Oh, no,” Linda exclaimed, because she knew from the ringtone that it was a call from the hospital. “Not now.”

Hendrik let go of her hands, got up, and reached for the phone.

“Zemmer,” he answered curtly.

“It’s Beate,” his boss’s assistant said. “He needs you. A bad car accident. An emergency op.”

“Okay, I’ll get goin’ right away.”

Hendrik hung up, put his cell phone in his pants pocket, and looked over at Linda. Linda stood up and made her way around the table towards him. He contemplated her delicate frame and, as always when he looked at her, he felt the need to enclose her in his arms, to protect her from everything and everyone.

“Sorry.”

Linda shrugged. “No worries. It’s your job. I’ll wait for you and keep the bed warm.”

Less than five minutes later, he said goodbye and left the house.

In the morning rush hour, it took him about twenty minutes to drive the two and a bit miles to the university clinic. Now, shortly before midnight, there was hardly any traffic, and he calculated that he’d get there in half that time.

As he steered his car out of the garage and turned onto the street toward Eppendorf, he considered what might await him in surgery this time. He wasn’t called out as often now as when he had been a resident physician, but it was still routine after accidents. As a surgeon, Hendrik had specialized in complicated joint and bone operations and had meanwhile gained a national reputation. Patients from all over Germany came to Hamburg for shoulder operations involving a gentle procedure he had developed. In the hospital, as senior physician, he had been Professor Paul Gerdes’ right hand man and deputy for a good year now. The price he paid, among other things, was being called in outside of normal working hours. He pushed these thoughts aside and thought of Linda.

Getting married. In less than a week.

And less than a year ago he had been totally convinced that the institution of marriage was off the cards after his first unsuccessful attempt at it, and that people could not only live together just as well, but probably even better, without a marriage certificate.

He was twenty-six when he married Nicole. Both of them believed it was the real thing, a love that would last a lifetime. It turned out to be only thirteen years, the latter part of which had very little to do with love. Maybe he was just too young back then? Or she was? Nicole had been three years younger than him after all. And she had a constant need for action, as she called it. Hendrik had not been able to fulfil this constant craving for diversion. His job was simply too demanding. For that reason, she often went out on her own or with

girlfriends, while he recovered at home from a heavy shift. In time, she thus built up her own social circle, which he had no connection to.

Anyhow, it hadn't worked out, and what started out as heaven on earth ended in a War of the Roses and with lawyers, who fanned the flames, because they earned a pile of money that way.

Now at forty-two, he was going to risk it again. No longer as starry-eyed as he was back then, he was nevertheless convinced that in Linda he had found the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

He parked his car in his designated parking spot in the underground garage and walked across to the elevator.

Paul Gerdes looked up only briefly when Hendrik entered the scrub room from the changing room, and gave him a nod. "Good you're here." Then he concentrated on disinfecting his hands and forearms. "Sorry I had to tear you away from some well-deserved time at home yet again, but I need you. The patient's been prepared. Polytrauma. Ruptured spleen and pelvic fracture, the sacrum and pelvic ring, and a major hemorrhage, according to the FAST scan. There may also be some surprises when we open him up."

Shortly afterwards, when they entered the operating theater, the anesthesiologist, nurses and the two young resident physicians, who had only been working at the University Medical Center in Hamburg-Eppendorf for a few weeks, were already waiting for them.

The patient, who was around thirty, had no injuries other than those revealed by X-ray and ultrasound, but stabilizing and screwing together the multiple pelvic fractures proved particularly complicated.

More than three hours later, when they were removing their surgical masks and caps in the adjacent room, Gerdes raked his fingers through his graying hair, which was dripping with sweat, and placed a hand on Hendrik's shoulder. "That wasn't half bad. Thanks again. Now you get home, the others will finish up. It'll be fine if you're back here at nine. I'll stay and get some sleep in one of the beds in the on-call room. Say Hi to Linda, and tell her I'll make it up to her."

"Will do. See you" – Hendrik glanced at the clock – "later on."

Gerdes, who had been divorced for three years, hadn't gotten involved with anyone in the meantime. Every so often, he turned up with a woman at his side, mostly considerably younger than himself, but Hendrik couldn't recall ever having seen any of these women with his boss more than once. When he had broached the subject with him, Gerdes had just smiled and said, "Once burned, ..."

Half an hour later, Hendrik closed his car door gently and locked it with his remote. To avoid waking Linda, he hadn't put the car in the garage, and, in any case, he was only going to be home for four hours.

As he took the few steps to the door, he breathed deeply, savoring the pleasantly mild dawn air. If he didn't have so little time for sleep, he'd plan to get up an hour earlier to go for a jog before work. He needed that three times a week to stay on an even keel. And to remain as slim as he was. He decided he would do it tomorrow.

Hendrik swiped his finger over the smart door panel, entered the house, and closed the door quietly behind him. When he turned around and took a step into the foyer, the ceiling lights blazed. "Light off," he said softly, and it immediately turned dark again. He just had to blink two or three times to adjust his eyes to the feeble morning light, which penetrated the hallway through the glass panels in the door, and he was able to make out the contours of his surroundings again.

Carefully, he removed his shoes and headed over to the stairs. When he placed his foot on the first step, *Adam* activated the night lighting, little LED dots, which lit up two steps ahead of him, so he could see where he was going. The lights then went off behind him as soon as he lifted his foot.

Having arrived upstairs, he stopped in amazement when the night lighting went on briefly in the hallway, because he noticed that the bedroom door was open. This was most unusual. Whenever Linda was in bed, the door was always closed. She was a very light sleeper, and even the night light in the hallway woke her up. Still trying to make as little noise as possible, he entered the room.

As in the hallway, here, too, the light from outside, which shone through two windows, enabled him to make out his surroundings. Including the bed, which was empty.

“Adam, light!” Hendrik said in a restrained voice, looking around confused. The bedspread lay unruffled on the bed. The sliding door to the adjacent walk-in wardrobe was wide open. The room was in darkness.

“Strange,” Hendrik muttered, turning around. Back in the hallway, he stopped for a moment and listened. Nothing. The entire house was almost oppressively silent.

As he went back downstairs, a strange feeling took hold of him, as if a vacuum pump were slowly but relentlessly causing his internal organs to contract.

“Linda?” he said much too quietly, before calling out more loudly, “Sweetie? Are you there?”

A totally nonsensical question. Where else could she be at four thirty in the morning? But still there was no answer.

Once downstairs, he headed to the living room, although he feared that he wouldn’t find her there either. He turned on the light and looked around briefly. She had cleared the table, and the open-plan kitchen was also spic and span.

Hendrik went back out into the hallway, called for her again, and listened ... Nothing. With a growing sense of anxiety, he searched for her in room after room before ending up back in the living room a few minutes later, completely baffled.

There was no doubt about it – Linda was not in the house. But where could she have gone at this hour? And without leaving him a note?

Worried and upset, Hendrik fished his cell phone out of his pocket and selected Linda’s name from his favorites. Just two seconds later, he got her voice mail, in which she explained in a friendly tone that she wasn’t available at the moment and that he could leave a message after the beep. So, either she had switched off her phone, or there was no network wherever she was right now.

He waited impatiently for the beep. “Linda, where are you? I’ve just gotten home and I’m worried. Call me as soon as you get this.”

He hung up and thought for a moment about whether he ought to call her parents, but rejected the idea immediately. They lived in Hannover, but had a second home on the island of Langeoog, where they spent most of the summer. Linda had most certainly not set off to visit them in the middle of the night, especially since there was no ferry from Bensersiel to

the small island until the morning. The only thing that calling them would achieve would be to cause them to panic.

Also, there were more obvious explanations. Maybe she had just gone out for a short walk because she couldn't sleep? But the fact that the bed looked completely unslept in didn't bear this out. And she hadn't left him a note either. No, there had to be another reason for Linda's disappearance.