

Anna Schneider

Border Case

The Depths of Guilt

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“Let yourself be carried away to the dark side of the Alps with the Grenzfall series. The very best in crime entertainment!” Romy Fölck

Volume 4 of the gripping crime series that takes place in the border region between Germany and Austria



Chief inspector Bernhard Krammer stands shocked in his colleague Roza Szabo's apartment in Innsbruck. In her living room lies a male corpse with a diving mask, but there is no trace of Roza herself. What happened? Why didn't she alert her colleagues instead of just disappearing off the face of the earth? When it is clear that Roza was last seen at Walchensee, Krammer asks Chief Inspector Alexa Jahn from Weilheim's investigative team for help. But Roza's trail is lost at the lake. As the investigation quickly stalls, one thing becomes clear: someone is after Roza. And if Alexa and Krammer can't track her down in time, she'll pay with her life.

“Highly suspenseful ... all the pieces fit together brilliantly, like a puzzle.”
Süddeutsche Zeitung

From childhood, **Anna Schneider** loved tales that stirred excitement, leading to her interest in criminal cases. After failing the exam to join the police force, she turned to writing, drawing inspiration from everyday life for her thrillers. Her Grenzfall series, set in Germany and Austria, was inspired by a newspaper report about a missing hiker near the Austrian border. The series revolves around two investigators with contrasting methods who learn to work together. Schneider lives near Munich with her family.

Summary

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In search of his missing colleague Roza Szabo, Chief Inspector Bernhard Krammer goes to her flat in Innsbruck, where he comes across a male corpse dressed in a diving suit and goggles. There is no trace of Roza, although her personal belongings and mobile phone have been left behind. The only clue is the address in the diving goggles of the unknown corpse, which takes the investigation to Lake Walchensee in Germany. Krammer asks Alexa Jahn and her team of the Weilheim police force for help, as there have been several attacks on Roza in recent weeks and time is of the essence. Roza was actually seen the previous evening on the northern shore of the lake, where she had a loud argument with a man. The man was a lawyer from Düsseldorf who owns a holiday home on the lake and had refused to take Roza to the other shore in his boat due to the dangerous weather conditions. Krammer doesn't want to believe the man and gets into an argument with Alexa because she doesn't want to arrest him. As a result, Krammer is removed from the case due to bias and is told to work in Innsbruck.

Instead, however, he continues the investigation on his own and travels to Burgenland on the Austro-Hungarian border where Roza used to work some years ago. Here he wants to enquire about the name Krisztina, which was written on the diving goggles. As all the files on Roza's old cases in the trafficking milieu are under lock and key, Krammer talks to Roza's former landlady, who doesn't know why Roza asked to be transferred to Innsbruck ten years ago, but knows Krisztina's name and even has a photo of her and Roza. The woman was an old friend of Roza's. Krammer goes to Dános Varga, Krisztina's husband, where he meets a woman who introduces herself as Krisztina but looks nothing like the woman in the photo.

Krammer also learns from a colleague that the man in Roza's flat died of natural causes and had already been taken care of by an undertaker. This

suggests that the body had been removed from a coffin and placed in Roza's flat as a warning.

Meanwhile, the investigators are called to a car accident at Lake Walchensee because the driver, Paul Hartmann, had been deliberately forced off the road by another car. As the second car has disappeared and Hartmann is in a coma, Alexa goes to the house of the car's owner, Anja Nickl, with whom Hartmann lives as a lodger. However, she does not find Anja Nickl and learns from her neighbour that he saw Anja Nickl getting into a taxi with her nine-year-old daughter Emily earlier that morning. After looking at the photo Alexa shows the neighbour, he confirms that the stranger is definitely Roza.

In flashbacks, it becomes clear that Roza has known Krisztina since her youth, but that they had lost sight of each other and only met again ten years ago during an investigation into a trafficking gang. Krisztina was Vargas' lover at the time and was pregnant by him. When she realised that Vargas was part of the trafficking gang that Roza was investigating, she asked her childhood friend for help. She wanted to get away from Varga and his criminal activities, and Roza eventually gave her a new identity as Anja Nickl. But instead of helping Roza and testifying against Varga, Krisztina faked her death and fled to Germany under her new name. Alexa and Krammer eventually reconcile and find out together that Varga had learnt that Anja / Krisztina was still alive and was trying to kill Roza and track down his girlfriend and their child out of revenge. Roza has gone into hiding to help Krisztina and her daughter, and the three of them hide out together in a vacant holiday home near Krisztina's home. The fact that Roza wanted to be ferried to the other side of Lake Walchensee by the lawyer was merely intended as a distraction. As Emily knows nothing of her mother's past, the nine-year-old climbs out of the window of the holiday home where the two women hide with her to meet her best friend. Roza immediately sets off in search of the child, but has no idea that Krisztina has contacted her ex-boyfriend to protect her daughter. At the last minute, she manages to save them both from Varga.

Sample Translation

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Chapter 1-8

1.

"Get on with it!" Bernhard Krammer ordered the officer, who was struggling to open the lock on Roza Szabo's flat. His colleague had disappeared without a trace the previous evening and he still had no idea where she was.

Finally, the door burst open. Without a word, Krammer pushed the officer aside. He had never been here before and realised how strange it was that he had been working with Roza for years but had never once been to her house. If he had, he would have recognised in a minute whether something seemed different or missing.

He was deeply ashamed of what that said about himself. It was high time he changed his attitude towards his fellow human beings. Because ever since he had stood outside in the corridor in front of her door and the fear of what they would find here had almost taken the air out of him, his nature had been purified.

He just hoped it wasn't already too late.

Everything seemed quiet in the flat, nothing moved. Still, he sensed that something was wrong.

The officer wanted to hold him back, but Krammer didn't take the time for the usual routines, for photos or for covering his street shoes.

"Roza?" he called out.

"Roza, are you here?"

He didn't get any answer and hurried into the narrow corridor. There were two doors on either side, all of which were closed. It was unusually stuffy and warm, as if the heating was running at full power. He stopped abruptly. It was only a subtle nuance, but something was now hitting his nose, a hint of perfume. But Roza never wore any.

"You're ruining everything here, Bernhard. Take the protective clothing!" the man warned, holding him tightly.

"Leave me alone!" rumbled Krammer. "Everyone stay outside, you hear me!"

He didn't recognise himself. He didn't normally treat colleagues like this. But there had been two attempts on Roza Szabo's life in the last few days. Nevertheless, he had let her push him away, had neither insisted nor asked for explanations. Although he should have known that something would happen again. That the person who had forced his way into her life would not give in. And that that person clearly wanted to kill her.

Krammer pushed back the hand of his colleague, who was now reluctantly moving away, but put on gloves for good measure before opening the first door.

The kitchen. Patterned tiles with blue squiggles on them, a hob with wall units, a narrow table in front of the window. There were two champagne goblets on it.

Krammer stepped closer and held them up to the light. Just as unused as the champagne bottle that stood open next to it. Dom Pérignon. He put his hand on the glass. It was room temperature. Of course it was. Szabo had been here the night before.

He immediately remembered the message in the letter bomb that had arrived at the department a few days ago and had been addressed to Roza. Do you still think about me often? it had said.

Had the sender paid her a visit here? There had been no mess in the flat so far, the door had been firmly locked. She must have let him in herself, or he must have had a key. Krammer looked at the glasses and thought of the smell of perfume. A date?

He shook his head. She had left all her personal belongings in the office, hadn't even taken her coat with her. She had simply run off head over heels. That didn't speak in favour of a romantic date. Nor did it suggest that she had gone out with someone. But something must have happened last night.

He took a deep breath and stepped back into the corridor. With a quick glance, Krammer passed a picture from Hungary, her homeland. The Puszta, he surmised. In the foreground, two horsemen with blue skirts, painted in a kitschy style, in a gilded frame. Next to it a shoe cupboard.

Three coat hooks with scarves and a bag on them and a hat that he had never seen on Roza.

He walked on, sucking the strange odour deep into his lungs. Wiped the sweat from his face. Then he headed for the nearest door, ignoring the urgent questions from his colleagues, perceiving them only as background noise.

If the flat was cut like most with this layout, the living room was there. Opposite it had to be her bedroom. And last was the bathroom.

His hand trembled as he pressed the handle. The odour grew stronger as he pushed the door open a little. He tried to open it further, but it wouldn't budge. Something was behind it. Something heavy. His heart began to race.

Please don't, he thought. Not her.

All the curtains were closed and Krammer fumbled for the light switch.

The bright ceiling light flared up, blinding him for a moment. He quickly scrutinised the dark, heavy furniture, far too dignified for Szabo, as well as the rest of the flat, the thick green velvet curtains. There were wilted petals on a crocheted blanket on the coffee table, which must have come from the roses in the vase. But there was no mess or signs of fighting here either. Nothing that would have indicated an unauthorised intrusion.

Only the sweet scent, which was now biting his nose.

Krammer braced himself, pushed through the narrow gap into the room and looked behind the door.

Someone was lying there, in the middle of the living room. Judging by his stature, it was definitely a man. He quickly bent down and checked his pulse. The smell of perfume from the body almost took his breath away. But it was too late to help.

The image that presented itself to him was disturbing. Not only because the man's face was completely covered by a black diving mask that made him look like a character from Star Wars. A camera was attached to it, with a light flashing red.

But what irritated Krammer the most was that something was written across the glass visor in pink lipstick: Love, Krisztina.

The dead man's head rested on a velvet cushion, also in pink. White lilies were draped around his body, adding to the pungent odour in the room.

Flowers of the dead, Krammer thought.

The man was dressed in a dark suit, his hands clasped over it. Like at a funeral.

He couldn't take his eyes off the scene. As relieved as he was that Roza wasn't lying here, this had to be the reason for her disappearance. And he had no idea what it all meant. Or what he should do next. Never in his life had he felt so upset and helpless at the same time.

"What on earth...?" asked a colleague who had followed him, while the rest of the officers were already checking the other rooms, judging by the noises.

"Roza?" Krammer simply enquired.

The man shook his head. She had disappeared.

Krammer slowly stood up, trying to regain his professional demeanour. "A body, obviously male," he reported back in a guttural voice. "Request the entire team, the forensics team and the coroner are to set off immediately. But only the psychic, you hear me! Tell him it's about Roza. And I don't want anyone to come in here until he gets here."

"Do they know who it is yet?" the officer asked.

Krammer shook his head. He couldn't even tell whether the dead man was young or old. "No," he mumbled. "I can only say one thing with certainty: after he put the thing on, someone else must have been here."

His colleague nodded, shoed the others out of the corridor and was already on the phone. Krammer slowly left the room and carefully closed the door before taking off his gloves. He silently prayed that it was an accident and not murder.

"What have you got yourself into, Roza?" Krammer whispered quietly.

2.

Alexa Jahn made her way between the officers, who meticulously searched the entire flat of their Austrian colleague for fibres and other traces. Her

colleague Florian Huber followed closely behind. Although they had no authority on this side of the border, there had been no question that they would come here after they had learnt at the LKA Innsbruck that the criminal inspector who was working with Krammer had disappeared. They didn't know Roza Szabo personally, but Alexa hoped that the case would distract her from her feelings, as the reunion with her former partner from Aschaffenburg the week before had left her emotionally shaken.

The team on site was highly focussed, and although there were a lot of people in a confined space, nobody said a word. When it came to someone from their own ranks, they worked even more thoroughly. Alexa and Huber had been given protective suits. Nobody asked why two German officers were there. Elly Schmiedinger, Krammer's secretary, had probably informed the team of their arrival beforehand. Alexa looked around curiously.

At last they came across Bernhard Krammer in the living room at the end of the corridor, standing in the middle of the room with a blank stare. A body had just been taken away outside and Alexa feared the worst.

"Elly told us where we could find you," she began, refraining from asking how he was. She didn't know any more details, nor did she know her father, Bernhard Krammer, particularly well, as she had only learnt of his existence a few weeks earlier. But his condition was clearly recognisable: His cheeks were sunken, his grey hair, which he always wore with an accurate side parting, was dishevelled, and his arms hung down as if he had lost all strength. He had always seemed energetic and vital to her, but today his sixty years were clearly visible.

"Alexa, Florian," he said simply. Then he wiped his face as if he could chase away the images in his head. "Sorry, I'd completely forgotten about you. But I had no way of knowing..."

He broke off and pressed his lips together.

Without thinking, Alexa walked up to him and placed her hand on his upper arm. It was the first time she had touched him. Although she usually kept her physical distance from people, she felt the need to do so at that moment. Nevertheless, it felt strange. As if she was crossing a boundary. But this gesture of closeness was necessary. Krammer was completely exhausted.

He sought her gaze, immediately straightened his shoulders and managed a tight smile.

"Is there anything we can do?" she asked, stepping aside a little to free them both from the unusually intense situation. They were at a crime scene and had to remain professional.

"If you can tell me who the dead man we found here is, that would help me." Krammer snorted and shook his head. "Sorry about that. That wasn't fair. I shouldn't take my frustration out on you. But I just can't make sense of what happened here."

Huber stood a little way away from them and looked at the inside of a solid wooden shelf containing old books, photos and vases behind glass doors.

At least it wasn't Roza Szabo who had been taken away, Alexa realised with relief. "What's happened? The dead man here ... You don't think your colleague ..." She broke off.

But instead of an angry outburst, this time Krammer just shrugged his shoulders and slumped down. "I don't know what to think any more, Alexa. I really don't. We realised early this morning that Roza was gone, even though the computer was running. She left the office head over heels last night. Literally: her coat, bag, ID papers and even her mobile phone are still there. A video from the gate shows that she ran out of the building yesterday afternoon, not long before we got there ourselves. The man on guard duty didn't think anything of it because I left in such a hurry myself shortly before ..."

He fell silent and scrutinised Alexa. But he didn't have to say it. She knew exactly what he meant: Krammer had once again come to her rescue. That had been the reason why he hadn't noticed Roza's absence. She took a deep breath and crossed her arms in front of her body.

But Krammer continued with his story: "I spent a long time working on the report that evening and then went straight home." He paused again and looked out of the window, as if hoping to find his colleague there. "Roza must have cancelled another appointment she had scheduled for this morning. It seems that she already knew yesterday that she wouldn't be coming back. As soon as we realised she was missing, I drove here with a team. The door was closed but not locked, which surprised me. She's

usually very meticulous, Roza. Then we found the two glasses and the champagne in the kitchen - and the dead body here. There, just behind the door ..." Krammer pointed to the area. "Today of all days, Rudi Hellinger, our forensic pathologist, is out of town for a conference, so I had the body transferred directly to the institute. To make matters worse, the duty officer there has fallen ill, and you know how thin staffing levels have become everywhere. Especially at the weekend. So I'm afraid we'll have to wait until Monday for his return. They're trying to do it quicker, of course ..." He sighed. "But Hellinger is the best we've got anyway. He's known Roza for years and will deal with the case immediately, I'm sure of that. Still, we're losing valuable time ..."

Alexa circled the sofa to see where the man had been lying. In the pink cushion, next to which was a crime scene number, the indentation where the dead man's head had rested was still clearly visible. A large, labelled evidence bag contained white lilies. There were no traces of blood or struggle.

"The deceased was a man?" Florian Huber said from the other side of the room. "From the smell in here, I would have guessed a woman."

"Those are the flowers." Alexa pointed to the bag. "Lilies smell very intense."

But there was something else. A sweet mixture of odours hung heavy in the room.

"He was wearing a full face mask, the kind you use for diving," Krammer said now, "so I couldn't make out his features very well. But it was definitely a man."

"A diving mask? Could it have been an accident? Maybe during a sex game?" asked Huber.

"I don't know what to think, Florian. Anything is possible. But why here? And he hardly draped the flowers around himself beforehand. That doesn't rule out unintentional death, of course, but there was definitely someone else present."

And all this has something to do with Roza, Alexa added silently.

Krammer showed them photos of the body. "We're completely in the dark as to the cause of death. However, there is nothing to suggest any violence. There were no signs of defence or injuries on the surface, and we

didn't find any signs of a struggle here in the rooms either. Of course, the forensics have not yet been completed. But no matter how I look at it: Someone is lying dead in this flat and there's no sign of Roza. Why didn't she just call our colleagues here? Or the paramedics ...?" He stopped abruptly and turned his back on them.

He didn't have to say what was bothering him. He wasn't just hurt because his colleague hadn't involved him. Rather, Roza would probably only refrain from doing so if she herself had something to do with the man's death. Alexa could well understand her father. It had to be terrible when the person you worked with day in, day out was suddenly suspected of being involved in a crime.

"But if Roza disappeared last night, someone could have brought the body to her flat without her even knowing about it. During the night, for example," Alexa interjected.

"So why did she run like hell out of the office if she had nothing to do with it?" Krammer wheeled around, but immediately seemed to regret his angry tone and moderated his behaviour. "Without her personal belongings?"

"Maybe we shouldn't speculate about why she's gone for now, but rather find out who she could have been running from. Maybe we'll get somewhere that way. Has there been a case recently where someone had a score to settle with her?"

Krammer looked at Alexa for a long time and seemed to be weighing things up. "There's something else I need to tell you," he began. "There have already been two strange incidents in the last few days: first, a letter bomb arrived at the LKA. It was addressed directly to Roza, but fortunately she didn't open it and had it checked by the colleagues responsible. And then she had an accident yesterday morning. Someone loosened all the wheel nuts, she lost control of the car, but was extremely lucky and was again uninjured. She just shrugged it off, but the mechanic who towed the car away said it couldn't be a coincidence. She reacted dismissively to every question I asked about these incidents and made me look like an idiot. Of course I should have looked into it further, I realise that now. But I was in the middle of a strange case in Gnadewald and my mind was elsewhere." He

put his head back. "Then Florian called and we went to the mountain pasture to look for you. And now..."

"Now we have to keep our nerve and look for her," Alexa interrupted him in a firm voice and nodded at Huber. He seemed just as determined as she was to support Krammer. Alexa felt obliged to him both as a colleague and as a daughter. Especially as he had already helped her out of a tricky situation more than once. Ludwig Brandl, her boss, had lifted her suspension the previous evening with mild conditions, as her last assignment had clearly shown that she was fully fit for work again. However, he had probably done this primarily to nip any questions in the bud as to why she had been involved in an investigation at all during this time - especially on the other side of the border. Besides, there was no important case on her desk at the inspection centre in Weilheim at the moment. And it was Friday, the weekend was coming up, so the old cases could well wait a little longer.

"There's no point," Krammer argued. "I haven't the faintest idea where to even start! We can't locate her, her car is in the garage. Nevertheless, she could be anywhere by now ... By the way, her mobile phone has been flooded with hundreds of messages from a bot, but they are completely empty. Not a single word that gives any clue as to where she might be or what this is all about. I don't have the slightest clue! Literally nothing! I don't want to drag you into this. Because you can see for yourselves ... And with every passing hour ..." He pointed again to the place where the body had been lying.

But Alexa was not to be deterred. "Come on," she said resolutely. "We're just in the way here. We'll start as we always do. First we'll ask the neighbours in the house. Maybe they've noticed something: a noise, a car, a strange person. Someone who has been watching the building. And they might be able to tell us whether Roza was here again last night. If there was a light on in her room or if you met her in the corridor. Then we'll look at all the records from the last few cases and go through each of your conversations in detail. Maybe she just had an accident and isn't able to get in touch. Or Roza simply didn't want you involved and misjudged the extent of the threat. There's a reason for all of this. And we're going to find out together, Bernhard. By joining forces. After all, we're professionals."

3.

Two hours later, the three of them were sitting in Krammer's office without having made any progress. Most of the neighbours hadn't been home and, for better or worse, they would have to go round all the floors and neighbouring houses again in the evening. They had had no success with cameras either. There was no shop in the neighbourhood with a monitored entrance, nor any other source of images that they could have tapped into.

The SD card from the GoPro attached to the diving mask also got them nowhere. All they heard was a door slam, then some muffled noises. The light flared up briefly, but otherwise there was nothing to see but darkness. What the camera could have been used for remained a mystery to Alexa. It was possible that what the perpetrator was after had long since been overwritten by the recording, which was running on a continuous loop.

Alexa restarted the video of Roza Szabo leaving the LKA building the previous evening. She ran as if the devil himself was after her. However, the expression on her face left no doubt as to how serious the matter was: eyes wide, mouth slightly open, she kept turning her head. She was clearly scared. But why? And of whom?

She glanced briefly at her father. Although she had calmed him down before, Roza's behaviour naturally raised questions. Why hadn't she taken him into her confidence when she was threatened? After all, they had been working closely together for years.

Krammer went through the list of incoming and outgoing calls in the office with Huber.

"I don't notice anything on my end. She almost only made internal calls. But why don't you check this number here, Bernhard?" Huber read it out.

"It's from a pizzeria. Just round the corner."

"Did she order there often?" Alexa asked, although it didn't seem surprising to her that a single woman would pick up an order. Hardly anyone who worked the same hours as people in the police force cooked

in the evenings. Florian Huber probably couldn't imagine that: His wife and children were waiting for him at home, and there was probably a meal ready for him every evening. Pure luxury. She herself could hardly have survived without delivery services and a microwave.

"I don't know," Krammer replied, running his fingers through his hair. He had said this sentence over and over again in the last few hours when they wanted to know something from him. What had happened was obviously really upsetting him and he was completely overwrought. However, Alexa feared that he was losing important strength and concentration, which they really needed for this investigation. After all, Krammer was the only person who could tell them anything about Roza Szabo.

"The Napoli is only a ten-minute walk away and is on Roza's way home. So it's quite possible," Krammer finally added after a moment's thought.

"But they called here," Huber remarked.

"Probably just a query about the order. Or there was a delay," surmised Alexa.

Huber nodded and went through the numbers one by one with his finger.

Alexa now turned her attention to the report from the colleagues who had investigated the letter bomb that had arrived at the office a few days earlier. The envelope was fitted with a simple mechanical trigger and had a tactile metal frame. It wasn't particularly difficult to build. But it contained enough explosives to trigger a detonation that could have dangerously injured the person opening it. The sender's intention was therefore clear. The only unusual thing was that the letter came from Hungary. From Budapest.

But perhaps the sender had deliberately wanted to throw them off the scent and make them believe that the attack had something to do with Roza's past. Or he was signalling that he was long gone and there was little point in searching for him.

The note inside was more interesting for Alexa. The message "Do you still think about me often?" clearly indicated a personal relationship with the sender. But why hadn't he written these lines in the local language? Roza

would have understood the wording. Something was bothering Alexa, but she couldn't quite grasp it yet.

"Roza is from Hungary, isn't she?" she asked.

Krammer nodded. "The fact that the letter came from her home country immediately caught my eye."

"Did you ask Roza about that?"

"Not about the origin," he admitted. "But she played it all down completely anyway. She said it was some lunatic who wanted to express his disapproval of the police."

"It's not that far-fetched," Huber objected. "Attacks on firefighters, rescue workers and paramedics have become more frequent recently. The police are no exception - and some people react aggressively to our mere existence."

Krammer shrugged his shoulders. Although Huber was right in what he said, it didn't explain why there was a dead man in Szabo's flat, nor where she herself had gone. And it certainly didn't explain the wording of the note.

"And what about Perski?" Alexa finally dared to ask, bringing up the sore point in Krammer's life. When she was being treated in hospital for a gunshot wound a few weeks ago, her father had told her a lot about his adversary, who had recently instrumentalised a group of young men in Jachenau for his own purposes and who Krammer was sure would turn up again at some point to destroy his life and career once and for all.

"After all, he was the only one who got away the other day."

Krammer's facial muscles twitched nervously when she mentioned the name. But he shook his head vehemently. "Even Perski needs time to prepare the next blow. And he would definitely have prepared the thing in such a way that nobody would have realised what it was. Roza wouldn't be with us now."

He slumped down and quickly averted his eyes.

He had obviously realised the ambiguity of his statement himself. But despite his objection, Alexa wasn't prepared to ignore the trail so easily. Perski never left any traces either. And as much as they had searched in the aftermath of the missing persons case: No one was able to determine

how and where he had escaped to. He was like a phantom. And the men he had hired were either dead or claimed never to have met him in person. "Has the origin of the ink from the pen used to write the message in the letter bomb been analysed yet?"

Krammer looked up. "Not so far. Nothing happened to Roza, so it hasn't even been analysed. But that's a good thought. After all, the situation has changed fundamentally in the meantime."

Krammer immediately dialled the number of a colleague and asked her to arrange the appropriate investigation.

Alexa pushed the report to one side, stood up and looked again at the photos of the body found in Roza's living room on the notice board.

"Could there be a connection to the gay or queer scene?" she asked the room.

"Because of the pink cushion?" Huber followed up.

"And because the dead man was covered in perfume, and also because of the writing on the mask. Love, Krisztina, with pink lipstick ... Perhaps our victim is someone who moves in this scene or has even changed gender? Trans-hostile violence is on the rise. The camera was then perhaps intended as a symbol of voyeurism." She hesitated. "Or the victim could be a violent punter."

Krammer looked up and scrutinised her face as if she were a being from another planet. But Alexa remembered the headlines from a few years ago when Hungary had abolished the recognition of trans and intersex people. If the letter bomb and the dead man had anything to do with each other, her thought was by no means far-fetched in this context. Now Krammer stood up, stepped next to Alexa and pointed to the photo of the corpse. "But why this diving mask? As a symbol? That something has taken his breath away? But why is he wearing it in Roza's flat of all places?" Krammer breathed heavily and stared at the ceiling.

Alexa gave him some time. But after a while, she broke the silence. "I keep stumbling over the timeline. After all, it hasn't been proven that she even knew about the body. What if Roza had nothing to do with the man's death? And he was just dumped in her flat like some kind of voodoo doll?" Krammer stumbled. "You mean so we can find him there? And she comes under suspicion?"

"For example. Maybe someone wanted to cause her trouble, take her into custody and get her out of the way." To then have a clear path. The only question was what for, she added silently.

Alexa looked at her father in profile. He stood there, staring unblinkingly at the photo of his colleague. Regardless of whether Roza Szabo had been involved in something through no fault of her own or had committed a crime herself, she must have realised that she was in danger.

Krammer was obviously still finding it difficult to understand why Szabo had not taken him into his confidence. And although he probably wasn't to blame for what had happened, he blamed himself. Unfortunately, this blocked his thinking. He was neither open to new approaches nor did he seem to be able to handle things as he usually did. It would do him good to take a walk around the block and get some fresh air to get some distance. But she knew that this suggestion would backfire on Krammer. Every second counted for him right now, and yet he seemed paralysed. Perhaps this was her chance to finally return the favour.

"We should divide our investigation into two areas," she said firmly. "Firstly, we need to find out who the dead man is. That will certainly take us a step further. But for that we have to wait for the results of forensics and forensic medicine, although you said that the latter is not expected for the time being. But we should go through the list of all the missing middle-aged men again. Maybe there's a Hungarian or a water sportsman among them. In the meantime, we should develop hypotheses as to what could have caused Roza to leave the office. You've looked through the list of callers and her mobile phone is also being investigated."

Alexa was almost certain that there was nothing on it. Of course, it was possible that she had simply left it lying around in her hectic rush. On the other hand, Roza was a professional and had hidden every detail from Krammer so far - and so she would hardly have left it behind if there had been any clues to the case or her whereabouts.

"Then we should go through all the old cases: Is there anyone Roza was involved in convicting who has just walked free? Perhaps one of them was a person called Krisztina. Or someone is married to a woman with that name. Or it could be a daughter or other relative. Or a witness."

Krammer nodded. "Elly's already started. She's pulled all the files from the archive from the last few years. She obviously hasn't noticed anything yet, otherwise we'd know. But it's going to take a few days to go through everything."

"I can help her with that," Huber offered.

But Krammer waved him off. "I'm grateful that you two want to support me, but I can't ask you to do that. You need to go back to Weilheim and take care of your own cases."

Alexa and Huber exchanged a look and understood each other immediately. "Nobody misses us today, and tomorrow is the weekend," she replied. "And if you hadn't left the office yesterday afternoon because of me ..."

Krammer wanted to say something back, but she shook her head resolutely. Leaving him here alone was out of the question.

"The ten lilies." Alexa pointed to the arrangement draped around the dead man and stopped any further objections. "We should call all the florists. I'm sure they don't sell this number every day."

"Then I'll do that," said Huber. "I can research the shops on the Internet."

"And we could both try to find out the brand of the perfume."

Krammer looked at her, puzzled.

"You said that Roza never uses any. We'll ask an employee from a perfumery to accompany us to Roza's flat. The dead body has been taken away - what have we got to lose? Maybe it's a rare fragrance. Or she can tell us what components the odour has."

"You're right," Krammer said. "It's worth a try."

Perhaps the movement eased Krammer's tension a little. And it was certainly better than sitting here waiting for the forensic results, Alexa added in her mind.

On the way, she would ask Krammer to look back over the past week. Perhaps she would notice a detail that her father had overlooked so far. And she needed to find out more about Roza Szabo to get a clearer picture of her.

After all, someone had tried to kill her twice. And certainly not without reason.

4.

He's watching me.

At first I hoped it was just my imagination. That I was so scared of being found out that I was already seeing ghosts.

But earlier, when I came out of the toilet, he couldn't take his eyes off my computer fast enough. He adjusted the papers on the table and tried to look completely casual and inconspicuous. But his tic gave him away: the way he ran his hand through his hair and then blinked briefly. Just once. He uses this tiny moment to get his emotions, breathing and facial expressions under control.

A little later, he appears completely calm again. As if nothing could upset him.

He has been practising this for decades. And the training has paid off. No one could guess what is really going on inside him. His face is like a mask.

That's part of his success.

Only he can't fool me. I know him exactly, I know when I have cause for concern.

And I no longer have any doubt about that. He suspects that something is up. Suddenly everything makes sense: his questions. His sideways glances. His interest.

The amount of time he wants to spend with me.

He's looking for something.

And I have to do everything I can to make sure he doesn't find anything.

Because if he succeeds, it can only lead to one thing: I will die.

5.

Quicker than expected, Alexa had persuaded an employee of the Weigand perfumery to accompany her into the flat to find out something about the

perfume, the pungent odour of which had been greatly reduced compared to the morning. Of course, the door had been open for hours because the colleagues were still looking for relevant clues.

Krammer was glad that his daughter had brought up this idea, because in this case, too, it was obviously important to act quickly before the odour dissipated completely. He had suspected when he first entered that the various, particularly intense scents in the flat had the sole purpose of masking the odour of decay that would sooner or later arise. Even though he still didn't really believe that what they were doing here made any sense, he wanted to leave no stone unturned.

Hesitantly, the employee came into the room. She moved awkwardly in her protective clothing. Her gaze was unsteady, and despite her perfectly made-up face, Krammer had the feeling that she had become a touch paler. But perhaps it was also due to the dark, drawn-on eyebrows that towered over her eyes like thick beams. The whole situation was unusual for the woman and unsettled her. He couldn't blame her, but these were not good conditions for helping them.

"There really was a body there?" she asked hoarsely.

"Please try to forget what happened here. With your knowledge, you may be able to provide us with an important clue that will help our investigation."

The woman nodded, but couldn't take her eyes off the floor behind the door, where yellow numbered plaques marked the locations of the evidence.

"Just close your eyes," Alexa said, touching her gently on the arm. "Just concentrate on what you smell, Mrs Pollinger. On your expertise."

Krammer was fascinated to see how sensitively Alexa dealt with the nervous woman and reassured her. Just as she had done with him before. It was so simple, and yet he wouldn't have been able to do it on his own today. He had many years of experience ahead of Alexa. But since Szabo's disappearance, he was completely out of his depth. Without Alexa and Huber, he would probably still have been hanging around uselessly in the flat, bossing his colleagues around, and nothing would have got done.

He swallowed and struggled to process this realisation. It was not the first time he had questioned his own nature. But now he was no longer sure whether he was in danger of failing as a criminalist in the same way.

"Was there anything else in the room?" Mrs Pollinger asked with a furrowed brow. She actually kept her eyelids closed and focussed entirely on the smells. Her nostrils moved discreetly to the rhythm of her breathing.

Alexa gave him a questioning look.

"Flowers," he replied quickly and was curious to see what the woman would say in response.

She opened her eyes and smiled. "I see. I was confused for a moment because the scent of lilies didn't match what I usually perceived."

Krammer raised his eyebrows. That was a surprise. The woman really seemed to know what she was talking about. He immediately felt hopeful.

"So you've found out what perfume it is?", he asked.

But she shook her head. "I'm not quite sure yet."

"But you have a hunch?" Alexa followed up and gave Krammer a look that signalled that she would like to lead the conversation.

"Every perfume consists of three fragrance notes, which are known as the head, heart and base. I smell something floral, but this impression can also be intensified by the flowers. Then there is a citrus note, perhaps mandarin or orange blossom, I would say. But there's definitely vanilla in the base."

She closed her eyes again and took a step further into the room.

"Unfortunately, vanilla is used for a whole range of women's perfumes because the scent has an attractive effect on men. They associate it with both sensuality and femininity, you know?"

"But you're sure it's not a men's fragrance," Alexa concluded.

"Absolutely," replied the saleswoman. "But there's also something else that I can detect. A woody note. Cedar or cashmere wood. The latter is a synthetic scent, not a natural one. It goes in the direction of Black Opium or some fragrances from Roja Parfums. But it's probably not them. Despite the fruity component, it smells warm and silky-intense to me. More like a winter perfume ..."

The woman closed her eyes again. Her protective suit rustled as she continued to walk through the room.

Krammer didn't know what to make of her. She seemed to him like some kind of clairvoyant. She could basically tell them anything. He ran his hand over his right arm, which tingled unpleasantly and gave him the feeling once again that he was just wasting his time here.

At that moment, Mrs Pollinger shook her head. "I can't say for sure. I'd have to go back through the shelves in our shop and take a few samples to compare."

Alexa smiled and nodded in agreement. "All right. The colleague will be happy to take you back." She then held out a business card and, with a glance, told Krammer to do the same.

He sullenly followed her request. He realised what Alexa was trying to do. As an employee of the Weilheim criminal investigation department, she had no authorisation in Austria.

"Will you get in touch with us when you can be more specific? But please don't say anything about what you saw here. Also towards your colleagues and the family."

The last remark brought Mrs Pollinger back to reality and made her realise once again that she was at a crime scene, which was clearly evident from her unsteady gaze. But she quickly composed herself and promised to get in touch later that day.

When she had disappeared into the stairwell with a man in uniform, Krammer turned to Alexa: "And now?"

"I think it's helped us," said Alexa. "After all, there's an indication that the perpetrator could also be a woman. At the very least, we should consider the possibility that a woman is involved. The flowers, the women's perfume, but above all this note written in pink lipstick. You really have no idea who this Krisztina could be?"

Krammer tilted his head. "It doesn't seem very plausible to me that a woman overpowered the guy here without a trace. Without anyone in the house noticing."

Alexa raised her hands. "But maybe the man was drugged before he died. That would also fit in with the tidy impression of the flat. Besides, a woman could have given the order. This staging, the colours ... I don't think it's a man's handwriting."

Krammer sighed. That didn't help him one bit, because unfortunately it didn't disprove that Roza was involved in the man's death. On the contrary. And that remained his biggest concern. For him, everything so far indicated that the man had not died in this flat. But he couldn't argue with Alexa's assumption at the moment. A woman would probably have been less conspicuous in the house. Especially not Roza as a resident. Nevertheless, it was true that most crimes were committed by men. And perhaps the strange laying out was merely intended to distract her from this fact.

"Bernhard, can I disturb you for a moment?" A colleague poked his head into the room.

"Of course," he replied. "This is Chief Superintendent Alexa Jahn from Germany, so no need to hold back. Go ahead and shoot."

"Roza's private laptop," he enquired, "did she take it into the office?"

Krammer shook his head. "Not that I know of. I would have noticed it. Why?"

"Because there's none on the desk. There's just the printer and the connection cable. Nothing else."

He exchanged a glance with Alexa. The investigation was finally picking up speed. Only in a direction he didn't like at all.

6.

Back in the office, Alexa and Krammer met Huber, who was able to report a success regarding the lilies. He had actually managed to track down the flower shop where ten of them had been sold the day before. White. Just like the flowers from Roza's flat.

"But it was a teenager who picked up the flowers and paid cash. Very tall, skinny, wearing a baseball cap, a college jacket and jeans."

"Is it worth pursuing this lead?" asked Krammer.

Alexa shook her head. "If the perpetrator didn't leave any traces in the flat, then he's not stupid enough to call there and leave his number. He must have given money to some boy on the street to get it - and remain unrecognised himself."

She refrained from commenting on the fact that this detail again seemed like Perski's handwriting. He had also recently turned a few young men into henchmen.

"At best, we could try to find the boy. Maybe he can describe the person who hired him," she continued. Huber also seemed to think that was a good approach.

But Krammer shook his head. "As long as we don't know what Roza's role in this story is, I'm ruling out a public manhunt." His tone brooked no argument. "I've involved as few colleagues as possible in this matter."

"And what did you find out about the perfume?" asked Huber, who did not comment on Krammer's approach. After all, he was in charge of the investigation.

"Nothing," Krammer snorted and shrugged his shoulders.

Alexa's head whipped round. So far, she had been quite understanding of her father's frustration. But God knows his destructive behaviour wasn't making it any better and was beginning to bother her. After all, most investigations were painstakingly detailed work. He should know that better than she did. It meant being patient, keeping calm, putting the facts together in different ways again and again and then illuminating the new picture that emerged. Until the common thread finally emerged that could be followed to find the solution.

So she told Huber what they had learnt in the last few hours. "The smell in the flat had faded considerably, but the perfumery employee was at least able to tell us that it was a women's fragrance. She already had an idea of what it might be, but she wanted to be absolutely sure before she told us the specific product."

Huber nodded. "Can the forensic scientists estimate when they will be ready?"

"In the course of the evening," Krammer said, looking out of the window with his back to them. "But then they still have to analyse the fibres and traces in the lab. That will take some time again. And Roza will be long gone by then."

Alexa crossed her arms in front of her chest and reminded herself to stay calm. It took her some effort to control herself. After all, everyone was

doing what they could. She herself hadn't hesitated for a second to help. The only one who stood around grumbling forever was Krammer.

Nevertheless, she tried not to be provoked or discouraged by his behaviour. After all, there was already one fact that could be important.

"They've only told us one thing," she said, "Roza's private computer has disappeared from the flat. Bernhard had it checked straight away, but it's not here either."

"So we have proof that a stranger was in the flat," Huber mused aloud. "That fits: then maybe your colleague had nothing to do with the dead man."

"Or she took him herself," Krammer countered. "Because she didn't want us to find anything on it."

Alexa dropped into a chair. She was surprised that Krammer was so quick to question Roza's innocence. Although she had only known Huber for a few weeks, she would already have put her hand in the fire for him. Without hesitation.

"What makes you think that?" she asked bluntly.

"My colleague receives hundreds of strange messages on her mobile phone every minute without any content, then runs out of the office like crazy, and I'm supposed to think that a complete stranger is putting a dead body in her flat for no reason and without her doing anything? Only a very naive person would fail to see the connection," growled Krammer. Alexa winced. That was clear. She pressed her lips tightly together so as not to give a snotty answer.

"She left before anyone could find the body. Maybe the messages were a signal that she'd been found out and should get out as quickly as possible. I don't know," Krammer continued and turned round again. He raised his arms briefly and breathed heavily.

But Alexa wasn't deterred. They had already had a completely different opinion on a case once before. Back then, Krammer had been right from the start. But that didn't mean he was always right. So for them, this bot that was flooding Roza's mobile phone with wordless messages was a clear demonstration of power. The creator wanted Szabo to notice his presence by paralysing her communication. She had not allowed

herself to be unsettled by the first two attacks. This time she would no longer be able to ignore him, but be reminded of him. Every single minute.

"I don't see it that way," she replied calmly. "Have you watched the video very carefully? How she runs out of the building? I did that earlier. Several times. And I'm telling you, she was scared. Of whom and why, of course, I don't know, but the fact can't be overlooked. And you yourself told me that there were attempts on her life. That doesn't fit with the fact that she became a perpetrator. I think she's a victim."

"Who doesn't turn to the police when she has the backing of the entire team here?" Krammer objected. "Come on, come on. You only do that if you're knee-deep in some kind of mess. There are also black sheep in our ranks. I just didn't think that she, of all people..."

Alexa shook her head vehemently. "The fact that she's gone without her mobile phone, coat and papers means to me that she doesn't want to be found. Presumably because of the person who has already tried to kill her twice. The fact that this makes it so much harder for us to find her just shows that she's done a damn good job."

"Of course. Szabo knows exactly how to avoid tracks. It could just as well have been her goal that we don't locate her. Because she wants to go into hiding. And I'm sure we'll find absolutely nothing on the mobile phone that will lead us to her. Look at it from another angle: she clearly recognised the bomb. The envelope came from Hungary, where she has relatives. And she was so slow in the accident that she only caused a fender bender. She may also have wanted it to look like someone was after her. Maybe we don't know her true colours."

Alexa was stunned. "And you really believe that? After working with her for so long?"

He looked up. "I wouldn't have thought that until yesterday. But now..." "Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty," Huber intervened. "There's still one possibility: maybe she didn't want a stranger to get hold of the mobile phone. After all, it's safe here. Because if her laptop has disappeared, someone is probably looking for something on it: data, documents or photos."

Alexa Huber would have liked to agree, but decided not to. It seemed better for her to remain silent. Krammer wasn't listening anyway. But she

couldn't help but realise that she had already reacted in the same way. In the very first case they had investigated together, she hadn't wanted to accept his view either. The more he had argued, the more she had clung to her opinion, always looking for new arguments to back it up. She had also believed that her theory was based on real facts. On an alibi. Which in retrospect turned out to be false.

Confronting Krammer further now was useless. She had to do something to help him regain his inner calm and composure.

"Do you perhaps want to go home, eat something and rest for an hour before we have to go back? We can continue to look over the old cases and hold the fort here."

He turned his pale face towards her, but shook his head. His anger had faded as quickly as it had arisen. Now he looked pale and tired again. Powerless. Which again suggested that stress and frustration were the reason he was behaving so strangely.

"I can ask Elly to get us something," he then said. "You haven't eaten for hours."

He was just about to get up when his phone rang and Alexa's mobile vibrated briefly at the same time. While he answered the call with a curt "Yes?", she quickly read the message that had arrived.

It was from Mrs Pollinger from the perfumery, who was now sure which product it was. She had sent a photo as there were different versions of the Dolce & Gabbana fragrance. The simple black bottle of the Eau de Parfum Intense was labelled in gold: The Only One.

Alexa showed it to Huber. She didn't know what she had actually expected from it. But something made it resonate in her again: What if this was all about a relationship? Something very personal?

She put her mobile phone away again and waited patiently until Krammer had finished his call. She couldn't read anything from his facial expression, but he made a note of something.

"All right," he then said. "See you tomorrow."

Krammer hung up and looked at the receiver for a long time, shaking his head again and again.

"There are fingerprints from Roza on the diving goggles and on the glasses in the kitchen. So much for your presumption of innocence." He

breathed heavily and paused briefly. "And on the inside rim of the goggles, they found the address of a diving school on Lake Walchensee."

"In Bavaria?" asked Huber in astonishment.

Krammer nodded. It was just a straw, but they had no choice but to clutch at it.

7.

He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

It wasn't just his face that had perfect proportions. His hair was thick, his brown eyes soft, his tall stature slim and muscular in an understated way. He wore his fingernails short, he was always well shaved and even in a polo shirt and jeans he radiated elegance.

He moved with a naturalness that attracted everyone's attention. He had this aura that you couldn't miss. And when he spoke, which he rarely did, his sentences were as if chiselled in stone. Clear, without any embellishment.

I had gone completely silent when I met him for the first time at that party. I couldn't take my eyes off him and withdrew completely into the background so that I could stare at him unashamedly.

I knew how to remain inconspicuous. It had become second nature to me. As the eldest, a lot was always demanded of me. But as the other man's child, I had to do this quietly. Without grumbling, without making demands. I shouldn't dare to annoy my stepfather. If I talked back, he would hit me. My mum would just bow her head and hold her hand protectively over my younger siblings.

I didn't fight back and swallowed my cries. I kept my reproachful eyes fixed on my mum, who allowed what was happening.

It wasn't the only situation that made it difficult for me. My home wasn't a nest. It was hell.

I learnt to be careful there.

When I came home from school, I first had to know what the atmosphere was like. Whether I was in danger. My body was always on alert. Even at night, any noise would startle me. I knew early on what men

were capable of. That's why I wanted to be prepared and always remained vigilant.

Since then, I've kept a close eye on everyone around me. To this day, I try to recognise their habits, their motives, their stories. I study people's behaviour like others watch a TV series.

It would definitely be suitable for prime time. A real blockbuster.

At some point I had to go to the toilet. I pushed my way along the wall, past the backs of the others, anxious to find the shortest route to get back to my post quickly.

There was a queue - as always in the ladies' toilets. I briefly considered just darting into the garden. But it was cold outside and I didn't know whether the large villa where the party was taking place was secured with cameras outside.

So I waited, watching the narrow section of the hall that I could see from the corridor, hoping he would still be there when I was finished.

When I was finally back in the main hall, I hurriedly searched the crowd. But he was nowhere to be seen.

I had guessed it. He had disappeared. And I had no idea who he was or whether I would ever see him again.

I only had this invitation to thank for a great coincidence and an extremely noble gesture from a colleague. She was ill and had sent me instead of her.

I didn't belong in those circles.

Frustrated, I headed for the bar, ordered a vodka and drained it in one go. What did I expect? That he would notice me? I ordered another glass, which I also poured down my throat.

The alcohol numbed my feelings. But my senses remained wide awake. And I knew he was gone.

Then I went to the cloakroom and had my coat handed to me. I couldn't miss the little lumps of wool that had formed on the underside of the sleeves and the chipped edges. The garment was cheap and shabby. Just like me.

It all made no sense. I should never have come here.

What I didn't realise was that I would regret that night for years to come.

8.

It was already late afternoon when Alexa and Florian reached Walchensee. They had set off early because Krammer hadn't missed the opportunity to pack a few things for an overnight stay. Just in case. It was only about an hour to Innsbruck, but he wanted to be prepared so that he could stay on site. Or it had been an excuse to drive alone.

On the way, Alexa had nevertheless wondered whether Krammer would expect her to offer him a place to stay for the night. After all, he was her father and their flat in Lenggries was not far away. In a normal family, that would probably have been the norm. But they weren't really colleagues, nor was their relationship so close that she could imagine taking him in. Not even Jan, her former colleague from Aschaffenburg, had offered to spend the night with her last week. And she had known him for years. She was certainly particular about these things. But she and her mother had always managed on their own. And so privacy had always been important to her. Most people would probably handle it differently, but she couldn't get out of her skin about this. She needed a retreat, a place just for herself. That was sacred to her.

Nevertheless, she wished she could talk about it with her friend Line from Munich, who, as a psychologist, would certainly have known what to do. But calling her now in the presence of Florian Huber was out of the question. She quickly wrote a WhatsApp and asked Line when she could get in touch with her in the evening.

The forest rushed past them on one side, while on the other the shimmering surface of the lake, where they hoped to find a trace of Szabo, kept appearing between the trees.

Alexa continued to dwell on her thoughts until Huber put the indicator on and steered the car into a car park.

They had driven straight to Urfeld, which lay at the northern tip of the water. However, the diving centre was no longer occupied late on Friday afternoon. They had already suspected it, as only Deep Dive's answering machine could be reached from the road.

Lake Walchensee, one of the largest mountain lakes in Bavaria at around sixteen square kilometres, offered a whole range of different water sports, from stand-up paddling to sailing, but was also a popular destination for divers. Alexa wasn't surprised, because when she crossed the road, she could even see the stones on the bottom of the clear, turquoise-coloured water below the promenade.

She texted Krammer to say that she would wait for him at the café by the lake with Huber to discuss the next steps.

The café's furnishings were simple and a little dated, but both the dining room and the terrace, which was located right next to a jetty with its own hire shop, offered a unique view over the entire lake with the silhouette of the Karwendel mountains in the background. The surface of the water was only slightly rippling, but dense grey masses of cloud had already swallowed up part of the Alpine panorama.

"There's a thunderstorm coming up over there. Strange weather this year. It can never quite decide what it wants to be," Huber remarked and ordered a cup of coffee and warm meatloaf with sweet mustard.

It was only now that Alexa realised how hungry she was. No wonder: they hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. The meal that Krammer had promised had been cancelled because of the news from the forensics department. That's why she ordered two pairs of wieners with mustard and bread and a large Coke and then headed for a table right by the window. She had never been to the lake before and was impressed by the play of colours in the different shades of blue that changed with the weather. This place already looked beautiful, but it had to be breathtaking when the sun was shining.

"Walchensee is a popular excursion destination," explained Huber, who had probably noticed that the view had completely mesmerised them. "Both for water sports and for hikes in the surrounding mountains. You can hardly get through at the weekend because the people of Munich flock here in droves. We're lucky because it's quieter in this weather."

"I can understand people," said Alexa, sinking back against the back of her chair without looking away.

But then she remembered the diving mask that the dead man had been wearing and under which he might have suffocated. This quickly

brought her back to her professional reality, which was anything but romantic. She stared at the surface of the water, which was already becoming more turbulent with the first gusts of wind.

How did it feel to be down there in the depths and not reach the surface in time? When the air slowly became scarce ...

She clutched her neck and felt goose bumps running down her spine. She quickly sat down on her hands to warm them.

When the drinks were brought, she took a big sip of the cola, tasting the sweetness and already feeling a surge of energy flood through her.

"What do you think of the whole thing?" Alexa asked her partner. "You were pretty quiet at the LKA in Innsbruck earlier."

Huber hadn't spoken in the car either, but she already knew that about him. He liked to keep quiet and always took a while to share his thoughts. She had given him this time during the journey, but now she wanted to hear his assessment of the case.

"To be honest, I find it strange that we found this address in the diving mask," he said. "I understand that Krammer is really doing everything he can to find Roza. But why would the perpetrator give us a clue when he hasn't left the slightest trace in the flat? This can only be a diversionary manoeuvre."

Alexa had never thought of this before. In police work, she was used to following up every conceivable lead and checking its plausibility. And when Krammer mentioned the address on Lake Walchensee, she immediately had a feeling ... That's why she hadn't questioned the procedure. After all, the lake was not far from Innsbruck.

Nevertheless, Huber's assessment could not be dismissed out of hand. Especially now that Roza's fingerprints were on the mask. Were she and her father so similar that they were blindly falling into the same trap? "And anyway," Huber interrupted her thoughts, "what was all this arrangement about? The expensive champagne with the two unused glasses. I googled it earlier, this brand isn't bottled every year, so it's particularly expensive. Why this fine wine of all things? Was there something to celebrate? An anniversary, for example? And then the corpse. The way he was laid out, it wasn't an accident. Even less a coincidence. It had been planned for a long time." He paused briefly. "Krammer's

colleague, on the other hand, ran off in a hurry. Without a coat. Without papers. Without a mobile phone. Maybe Roza wasn't even in her flat that evening. The fingerprints could have got there a long time ago. Maybe she just put the glasses in the cupboard, and if the mask belongs to her..."

Alexa suddenly realised. "Do we actually know whether she had her service weapon with her?"

Huber shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think so, Krammer didn't mention it anyway, and I didn't see a holster on the footage from the entrance camera. But you understand what I mean, don't you? The way Krammer described it, Roza Szabo always acted very cool, despite the attacks on her last week. She continued to go to work, investigated with him and wiped away Krammer's concerns. She basically didn't take the attacks seriously. So something must have happened in the meantime. Something that completely rattled her. I don't know her, but that immediately raised questions in my mind."

So Huber also believed that she was afraid of something. Without her own weapon, she wouldn't be able to defend herself, Alexa thought. Then another thought suddenly occurred to her: Germany was outside Krammer's sphere of influence. Roza had verbally distanced herself from her colleague and had not let him in on the matter. He had emphasised that himself again and again. Perhaps even to protect him?

"But what could that have been?" she continued Huber's thoughts. "The letter bomb addressed to Szabo and the manipulated car were very clear attacks on her life. What could be worse?"

Huber nodded, but remained silent.

That was what they had to find out: what had panicked Roza so much that she had literally fled the police station? What was the story behind the name Krisztina? And was there any connection at all between the dead man and the lake to which the address in the diving mask had led them? Alexa looked outside. Or were they literally fishing in the dark here?

This sample was generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence.