

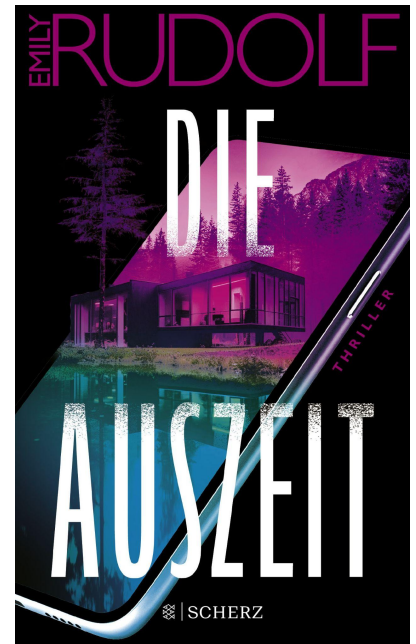
Emily Rudolf

# The Retreat

Thriller

March 2024 . 480 Pages

**The next generation of thriller authors is taking the stage**



In her first novel 24 year old Emily Rudolf dissects the super-stars of our time: influencers.

Viktoria Kaplan has nearly reached a million followers on Instagram and plans on celebrating the milestone at an exclusive private retreat with her team and some friends. But the shiny, glamorous world that her fans see online clashes with the reality of lies, betrayal and jealousy that dominate the group dynamic – in spite of the fact that everyone is willing to play along with the best-buddies narrative.

When the facilities are cut off from the outside world and Victoria is found stabbed to death a race against time begins to find the killer. Everyone seems to have a motive. But is there also a stranger spying on the group who might have an own vendetta to wage against Viktoria and all she represents?

This astonishing debut uses all the best elements of a locked room thriller and combines it with a youthful language and a contemporary topic. For readers of Romy Hausman and Lucy Foley.

## **Sample Translation**

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## **Half a year before the crime**

### **Prologue**

#### **Viktoria**

[Advertisement] TEAM WORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK 🤝😊

You are the best proof of that! 900k people now follow me here on Instagram, and it's getting more every day. 🦋

Another 100k and we'll be a million. 🔥

That's why I'm whisking my favourite people and my team (#shoutout to @justkarla.rb, who drove all the way to the Hanseviertel today to get me and @maximilian.kaplan smoothie bowls from @db.bowls) away on an absolutely deserved weekend trip this summer.

According to Max's initial projections, we could crack the million mark this weekend.

That's why we're going to a luxurious retreat (@glowingforestretreatandlodges) in the south of Germany. Hours of massages, yoga, good food and countless cocktails by the infinity pool await us. 🥥🧘🧘‍♀️

Unlike other spa hotels or retreats, Glowing Forest Retreat & Lodges can only be booked by whole groups! So perfect for milestone and New Year's Eve parties, hen parties and family holidays.

Even though I'm celebrating this event in my inner circle, I'll of course take you along with me in my stories as usual. Because after all, without you there wouldn't be any party! #cantwait #hugsandkisses

What trip are you looking forward to? 💭

**Now**

**Chapter 1**

**Karla**

That morning, the air tastes of regret.

Even before I open my eyes, I register a dull throbbing somewhere in my skull and a sharp pain pulsing behind my forehead like a second heartbeat.

Carefully, I massage my temples with my fingertips. But the pain remains. Constant and intense.

*I need a pill.*

Slowly I slide a hand towards the bedside cabinet and feel around on the smooth, cool surface. I get hold of a piece of cloth – probably a used handkerchief. Otherwise the shelf is empty. Frowning, I run my hand along the edges and look for the handle to pull open the small drawer. Nothing.

Then I suddenly remember that I am not at home. Abruptly I open my eyes and stare into the attic. Shadows dance between the dark wooden beams and seem to sway in the steady murmur of the rain.

Hastily I sit up and immediately regret it as the pain behind my forehead explodes. I sink back into the soft pillows and groan loudly.

"Shit ..." Rigidly, I lie there and take mental stock of my body.

My limbs feel heavy and sluggish. My stomach clenches uncomfortably. My mouth is dry. I feel a furry coating on my teeth.

My last hangover was about three years ago. Max and I had decided over a pizza Margherita and a glass of red wine that it was time to make a baby. So I had decided to get really drunk one last time before I would live abstinent for the next few months.

My heart skips a beat at the thought of that evening and my stomach turns. As I feel my tongue getting heavy, I jump out of bed and rush to the bathroom with my hand pressed in front of my mouth.

At the last second I make it to the toilet bowl and throw up. While I hold my hair out of my face with one hand, I clutch the toilet seat with the other to keep my balance. After my stomach has calmed down, I spit out once more, flush and let myself sink onto the cool bathroom floor. My body shivers from exertion and cold.

With my eyes closed, I grope for the clothes on the floor that I saw out of the corner of my eye when I ran in and clumsily put them on. When it's done, I lay my head back exhausted and remain motionless for a while.

There is a rumble of thunder that makes me wince. Confused, I open my eyes, blink and look around. It's still raining, but the outlines of the clouds can now be made out and the first rays of light fall through the floor-to-ceiling windows into the bathroom.

*Was it that bright just now? Or did I fall asleep again?*

I am listening to the loud pattering of the rain when I notice some strange stains on the tiles. Irritated, I squint my eyes.

*What -*

There are dark, circular stains all over the pale stone floor. Frowning, I run my index finger over one of them, but it doesn't come off. I moisten the tip of my finger with my tongue, run it over again and apply a little more pressure. The stain disappears.

I squat down heavily and look around for a cause – a broken bottle, a tipped-over glass of wine ... But I see nothing of the sort.

With difficulty I straighten up against the wall. My skull is still throbbing, and the stabbing pain joins the pulsing of my heart as my gaze falls on the sink. Dark streaks run along the marbling of the basin. I carefully open the tap, but only when I try to wipe them away do they loosen and disappear down the drain.

Involuntarily, I have to think back to when I was 15 and secretly dyed my hair black. I had forgotten to put on the thin plastic gloves, and when I finally washed my hands after half an hour, our sink looked exactly the same.

Except this isn't hair dye.

My breath hisses in my ears as I turn to the light switch. I flick it on, but it remains dark. Even after I press it a second time. As if by way of explanation, there is a loud bang, as if lightning has struck somewhere in the distance.

I flinch, turn back to the sink and cringe at my own reflection. My eyes stare back at me small and empty, dark circles stand out beneath them, and my lips are dry and chapped.

But that is not the worst. The worst are the stains all over my skin and clothes.

Dark.

Red.

Stains.

Involuntarily I take a step back and stare down at myself. They are everywhere. On my white top. My arms. My trousers. As the subtle smell of iron hits my nose, I realise what the stains are made of.

Blood.

## **37 hours before the crime**

### **Chapter 2**

#### **Pierre**

The arrival of the guests was imminent.

A nervous shiver ran through me at the thought of it, and my scalp tingled uncomfortably. For it was not just any guests who would be arriving today, but *the* guests.

With Viktoria Kaplan and her friends staying, there was a lot at stake for me and the retreat. If they liked it here, we wouldn't be able to save ourselves from bookings. If they didn't like it – well, I didn't want to think about that now.

All previous guests staying with us now seemed like a huge trial run to me. And this time ... This time, every little detail mattered.

However, it seemed to be one of those immutable laws that nothing went according to plan when it mattered. Instead of going over and checking off all the items on my mental to-do list again over a cup of green tea as I usually did, I drove up the forest road up the mountain with a cramped stomach and tried to calm my angry chef on the phone.

"I'll be right there," I said as I bounced up and down in my seat, passing the spot where the wide path narrowed and the rain of the last few days had left deep potholes.

"What do you mean right there? Three minutes? Ten minutes? Twenty minutes?" Thomas' voice grew louder with each word, and I couldn't blame him. The guests would be arriving in a few hours and it was my fault that he was standing in the kitchen unable to cook anything except coffee.

Yet this was exactly what he had warned me about.

"It won't do to buy the groceries on Friday," he had said, taking a deep drag from his cigarette. "We don't usually have such a tight schedule. How am I supposed to handle all the preparations on my own at such short notice?"

He had a point there. But this weekend I wanted to be one hundred percent sure that nothing like what happened the week before would happen again, when a guest had upset his stomach with bad milk and had to cut short his stay.

So I had left early this morning to be the first at the wholesale market. But I had not taken the weather conditions of the last few days into account. The non-stop rain had made the ground soft and muddy. Therefore, the ride



down into the valley over unpaved roads along steep slopes could be an arduous affair. When I finally made it down with a delay of about half an hour, to my horror I was caught up in a traffic jam. Several trucks with foreign licence plates had pulled off the motorway because – as I learned later on the radio – a drunk driver had gone off the road and caused a pile-up with subsequent full closure.

Thomas loudly exhaled at the other end of the line, and I saw him figuratively in front of me. The cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his gaze fixed grimly in the distance, while he continually shook his head like one of those bobblehead figures.

"By the time you've finished smoking, I'll be there."

*Very optimistic, Pierre.*

"And pigs might fly!" He laughed mockingly, which, however, turned into a throaty cough. "Oh, and the peck from the village. You know, the dairy farmer's son, he's not here yet either. I know I said I didn't need kitchen help. Normally that's true, but if you don't show up here until Friday morning with all the stuff, well ... Then I won't guarantee for anything. After all I only have two hands."

"If the boy doesn't show up, I'll get a replacement or cut the vegetables myself. But I'm sure he'll be there in a minute. His father was very eager to get him a job here."

After the incident with the milk, I had gone straight to our farmer on Wednesday to place the order for this weekend in person and ask him to be careful to sell us only absolutely fresh milk.

He had nodded and, instead of apologising or justifying himself, had waved his lanky son Paul over with his pimply face and bored look. I hadn't been particularly surprised when he asked me if I had a job for the boy. It had surprised me even less that he phrased his request more like a statement than a question.

"Maybe he's lost," I mused aloud.

"Oh, nonsense. The village people all know where the retreat is ... used to all come up here to party in the hut."

"The boy is sixteen at the most. And that was ages ago with the hut. When I bought the property, it had already been closed for several years."

"So what? But as far as I know, the kids still came up to sneak a smoke or a snog. And even if the kid hasn't been here yet, his old man will have shown him the way."

I turned around a steep bend hidden behind the trees and was about to step on the gas to take the incline when something, or rather someone, appeared on the path. Immediately I slammed on the brakes.

"Putain de merde!", I cursed.

A loud thump came from the boot – probably the potatoes.

"What's going on?"

"Just nearly knocked the kid down. I'll bring him along. See you in a minute."

I disconnected before Thomas could say anything back and jumped out of the car. The boy had got off his bike and was pushing it up the muddy path with obvious effort. He walked on, unmoved, and when I spotted the oversized headphones on his ears, I knew why. I ran to him and grabbed him by the shoulder.

His eyes widened in shock as he wheeled around to face me.

"Sorry!" I raised both hands.

It took him a moment, then he laughed nervously. Sweat stood on his forehead and he pushed his headphones off his ears, from which loud bass was echoing.

It was a wonder he could hear at all, as loud as these things were.

"Hi, Mr Karthee. I'm a bit late. Didn't think the ground was that shitty. You can hardly make any headway."

"That's alright. Hop in, I'm in a hurry."

We hoisted his bike into the boot of the Land Rover, got in, and I pressed the accelerator.

A good ten minutes later we reached the retreat. By now the sun had driven all the clouds out of the sky and was reflected in the countless glass surfaces of the building and the adjacent lake.

With screeching tyres, I brought the car to a halt and looked over at Paul, who was gazing open-mouthed at the modern building with its floor-to-ceiling windows, natural stone and linear architecture.

I followed his gaze and spotted Thomas hurrying towards the car. He looked quite funny storming out of the building, sweaty, wearing a dark apron and an oversized black chef's hat. When he lifted his head, he looked at us in the car with a grim expression and a deeply furrowed brow. His whole body was tense, signaling that he was ready to make the impossible possible.

"Finally!", I heard his voice muffled through the windows. Before I had even switched off the engine, he had walked around the car and ripped open the boot lid. I helped unload it, then left him alone with the boy – knowing full well that Thomas was an expert in his field – and gave the car a quick hose-down while I ran through the to-dos in my head. Now I just had to check all the rooms, including the guest houses, and then go through the already assigned tasks for the next couple of days.

Magdalena, our team assistant and good soul of the retreat, was permanently employed, just like Thomas. At the beginning, I had booked additional service staff through an external agency, because I had assumed that it would look more professional if there were more staff and that we would be able to react quicker to our guests' needs. However, I soon realised that this was not necessary at all – on the one hand ten guests – that was the maximum occupancy – did not need such intensive support, and on the other hand it did not create the personal atmosphere I

wanted. For my guests, the retreat was supposed to be a feel-good place that promised them maximum privacy and relaxation. With fewer staff, a stay felt more intimate, and the close contact made it easier to read the guests' every wish from their eyes without them having the feeling of being permanently surrounded by impatient staff who were just waiting for someone to empty their glass.

Since then, Magdalena and I took care of the hospitality of our guests alone, and it worked out wonderfully. I chose the staff for massages or for the meditation and yoga practice from a pool of freelancers, depending on availability.

As I now entered the lobby of the retreat, the intense smell of sage rose to my nose.

"Hi, boss!" Magdalena came up the wide spiral staircase from the spa area. She had her curly copper-red hair tied back into a tight bun and was wearing her dark green uniform. She swung her right hand gracefully through the air, spreading the intense scent of a bundle of incense around the lobby.

I smiled. "Hi, Magdalena. Everything alright?"

"Of course. And you? A bit stressed out? Somehow, I've been feeling it all morning. I don't like it at all." She came over to me and started waving the bundle of incense in front of me as if she was trying to rid me of a demon.

We had known each other for five years now. Working together in some of the chalets on the Zugspitze, we had got to know each other and had had enough time to become quite familiar with each other.

"So far, a few things haven't quite gone according to plan, but I'm sure now that the food is here, everything will work out. If you've done your job well – and I'm assuming you have – these vibes should dissipate any minute."

Magdalena stepped into the ray of sunlight that fell through the window, and all at once her hair glowed golden. At that moment she looked very young, although at 30 she was only two years younger than me.

"Well, then. Let's go. What do you want to start with? The lodges?" she asked.

"Are you done with them yet?"

"Yes. The beds are made and everything is ready. You were right, by the way, the bed linen smells much fresher if you wash it a day before you put it on ..." She went outside in front of me through the open patio door. "The minibars are stocked with soft drinks, the towels folded and draped. I also turned on the air conditioners so it was a comfortable twenty-four degrees. I couldn't find any dirt or vermin, the cleaning crew did a good job yesterday. And I have lit the incense sticks. They should have burnt down completely by the time the guests arrive."

"Great, let's have a quick check then so I can cross it off the list."

She nodded and we set off. As we passed the kitchen, I heard Thomas barking some kind of orders and hoped fervently that the boy didn't run screaming.

We crossed the back terrace and followed the stone path downhill to the lodges. These were about 300 metres away from the main house. With their dark green wooden façades and floor-to-ceiling windows, they blended in perfectly with the surroundings, captivating with their simplicity and minimalism.

Magdalena pulled out a key and disposable overshoes and I followed her into the first of the five lodges on the edge of the lake.

As expected, Magdalena had done an excellent job. The rooms were perfect, and I could devote myself to the remaining items on my to-do list.

For a few hours there was almost something like peace, but shortly before one o'clock the retreat vibrated again with tension – or it just seemed that way because I was about to lose my nerve for good. The phone had rung.

"Manuel, you are the only one who knows the route. If I call a taxi company, I can't give them an address they can find with their sat navs. And the road is in such a state that you can't send a local up here."

"I know, but I can't make it today. I've got a forty degree fever and can barely move. I was really hoping it would get better by the afternoon, but I can't drive anyone like this. I'll end up infecting someone."

Before I could answer him, the landline rang again.

"Hold on a second, there's another call coming in," I said. "Glowing Forest Retreat and Lodges. You are speaking to Pierre Karthee. Hello?"

"Hello, this is Josefine Fiebig. I'm with Viktoria Kaplan's tour group, and I was told to call you an hour before we arrived."

*That can't be true.*

"Ah, Mrs Fiebig, hello, that's right. When exactly are you arriving?"

"If everything goes according to plan, at two o'clock."

"All right. How many other people are traveling with you?"

"I'm alone. Viktoria and the others are coming from Innsbruck, so ..."

"I see. Thank you for the information. I'll be there to pick you up. Just watch out for the black Land Rover."

"All right, thank you. See you in a bit."

I ended the call and took a few deep breaths before switching back to Manuel, wishing him well, saying goodbye and trying to gain control of my thoughts.

*Everything is fine.*

*Everything will be fine.*

*You're going to make it.*



*You're not like your father.*

*You are ready.*

I had been chanting these affirmations for days. Each of my meditations had begun with them and ended with them.

Whenever an obstacle threatened to upset me, I would take a deep breath and calm myself with these words. In a way, I had drilled them into my head as if they were the access data to a safe full of happiness, and in a way, that was indeed the case. For it was no exaggeration when I said that my entire future depended on this weekend. In the next two days, everything I had created for myself would have to prove itself. The preparatory work of the last few years would either pay off or be in vain. It would be my baptism of fire, and I had no intention of bursting into flames.

So I would drive myself. I grabbed the keys to the Land Rover, told Magdalena and headed for the station.

*Showtime.*

## **36 hours before the crime**

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Josefine**

My reflection stared back at me, expressionless. Dark circles were visible under my eyes. The foundation I had carefully applied at the crack of dawn today had settled around my nose and the corners of my mouth. And as I breathed into my hand and smelled my breath, I screwed up my face. "Ugh."

I turned to the small Love Moschino handbag I'd bought especially for this weekend trip and pulled out first a mint gum and then a cosmetic bag. As I turned back to the mirror, I bumped my elbow on the cubicle wall. A sharp stabbing pain shot up my upper arm. "Crap."

A train toilet is definitely not particularly large, let alone comfortable. I reached for my concealer and dabbed some under my eyes, around my nose and mouth.

Just one more stop and I would finally be there. The journey from Hamburg had taken eight long hours. I not only looked like a ghost, I felt like one, too. Nevertheless, I was as excited as ever. For weeks I had been grinning every time I thought about this trip.

When Max had asked me if I would like to accompany him, his sister and some of their mutual friends to a luxury retreat in the mountains, I had first thought he was joking. My second thought had been that I had no clue how to finance it. Although I had a well-paid job, well-paid wasn't enough to take a holiday at Glowing Forest Retreat & Lodges. After all, three nights cost as much as I earned in a month – before-tax.

But before I could even think about it, Max had stroked my cheek and said, as if he could read my mind: "Don't worry. The trip is a cooperation with the owner. We will pay for our stay with the pictures and videos Viktoria will take and post there. So, are you up for it?"

Instead of an answer, I had fallen around his neck and thanked him profusely for it later that day.

Well, and here I was. Tired. Happy. And nervous as hell.

Max and I had been together for about three months, and so far I only knew his sister Viktoria and her boyfriend Julian – two of the most successful, beautiful and warm people I had ever met. Despite the short time I had been part of Max's life, we had all been out to dinner together a few times now and I got on really well with them.

Although I was excited to meet the rest of his friends today, there was this knot in my stomach. Because the whole thing – like all good things in life – had a catch. Karla.

"Dear passengers, we will be arriving at our next stop, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, in a few minutes."

*From now on, there was no turning back.*

I quickly mattified my face with translucent powder, then threw all the utensils back into the cosmetic bag and stuffed it into my bag. I then left the toilet cubicle and headed for the luggage rack.

Please still be there. Please still be there. Please still be there.

When the pink suitcase caught my eye, I sighed with relief before reaching for it, hoisting it down and pulling it behind me into the doorway.

As the train slowed its pace, I held onto one of the metal bars and tried not to grin like a Cheshire cat.

*Ah, fuck it!*

There was no reason for me to hold back. We humans were almost never really happy, and this weekend I would allow myself to enjoy every second. I put on my €400 lamé hat from Gucci – another purchase I had treated myself to before the trip to protect myself from the sun – and smiled to myself.

Somewhere next to me, a phone rang. A man – tall, trained, with blond hair, about my age and a face that looked like something out of one of those fashion magazines – pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and answered the call.

I discreetly turned away from him, reached for my own. My eyes fell on the time. We would arrive on time.

I wondered if the driver has arrived yet.

A voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

"No, that's not what I meant to say with the message. It was really very nice. I just don't think it's going to be anything longterm with us."

Involuntarily, my gaze darted back towards the magazine man, and as I looked at him, I was sure that this was certainly not the first woman he had dismissed like that.

He was wearing a white linen shirt, an expensive-looking watch and boat shoes. A leather weekender hung over his shoulder. Everything about him was positively brimming with money, and for my taste, asshole, the latter probably coming from the smug smile on his lips.

Our eyes met. I held his for a moment – he might as well know that I was aware of how he was dealing with this poor person on the other end of the line, as if he were trying to get rid of a customer advisor from the savings bank – then I turned back to my own mobile phone display. At that moment, fortunately, the train stopped.

The magazine man pressed the button to open the sliding doors, and fresh, warm air poured in. He hurried outside – didn't even make an effort to give me the right of way – and immediately lit a cigarette, even though he was nowhere near a smoking island.

I grabbed my suitcase, got off the train and dragged it behind me across the platform. The station was not large, and there was something surreal about the way the mountains rose majestically into the air before me.

For a solemn moment I stopped and took in the sight, then I walked on.

I had no idea where exactly to go, so I simply followed the magazine man and the white cloud he continuously blew into the air. He seemed to know where he was heading, this was not his first time here.

"I certainly didn't promise you that. Listen – " He lowered his voice as if he knew full well that it was better if his next words went unheard by any bystanders.

"It was really nice with you, sincerely. But I'm not looking for a relationship, and I think you deserve more than what I can give you." He started assuring her how great and special she was and that it wasn't her, it was him.

I exhaled the anger that rose in me at his words. You had to be quite a bastard to dump someone so casually over the phone.

I followed him through an underpass where his voice echoed even louder off the walls.

"That's enough. This is not something we need to discuss. What happened with us was a one-night stand. Nothing more," he hissed into the receiver.

With my head down, I walked on, trying to put a little more distance between us. We reached the stairway to the station building and I exhaled in relief as we reached the top.

The magazine man turned and followed the penetrating smell of frying grease towards the Burger King, while I continued my way out.

As soon as I left the station building behind me, hot, oppressive air enveloped me. The sun was banging down from the sky as if we were somewhere Mediterranean and not in a place where the mountain tops were still covered in snow.

I squinted my eyes and didn't have to look long for the black SUV. It was clearly bigger than the other cars here.

With sweaty palms and my heart pounding with anticipation, I approached the Land Rover while the wheels of my suitcase rattled across the floor behind me. Dirt clung to the car's paintwork and rims – not quite what I expected when visiting a luxury retreat. But who was I to judge?

When I was only a few metres away from the car, a tall man with short black afro curls, trimmed beard and harem pants got out. For a moment I thought he was a mirage. He looked so much like Mahershala Ali that I seriously wondered if he had starred as Wayne Hays in True Detective – Max's absolute favourite show. Shortly after we met, Max had compelled me to watch all the episodes with him.

"It's like Pulp Fiction," he had said. "You just have to see it." Of course, I refrained from confessing to him that I hadn't seen Pulp Fiction either.

"Hello, my name is Pierre Karthee. Are you Josefine Fiebig?" His deep, calm voice snapped me out of my memories.

My brows shot up. I hadn't expected to be met by the owner of the retreat himself.

"Yes, that's right!"

He extended his hand to me and I forced myself to shake it.

*Hopefully he wouldn't be disgusted now because I was so sweaty.*

"Come on, I'll take that one off your hands." Without waiting for my reaction, he grabbed my suitcase and walked around the car.

Not a minute later we were in and the engine was howling softly as the owner started it.

There was an intense smell of strawberries and mint in the car. Involuntarily, I leaned forward and let my gaze glide over the passenger seat, expecting to discover a bag of groceries there. Sweaty as I was, I had preferred to sit in the back.

Pierre manoeuvred the car out of the parking space and drove off. Somehow I had imagined the great Pierre Karthee differently. More business-like, with a shirt and chinos and one of those rectangular smartwatches Max wore.

The harem pants and the beige linen shirt, on the other hand, made him look more like a hippie and not at all like the man I had already read so much about. The crystals dangling from the rear-view mirror, tinkling softly against each other, did not fit my image of him either. On the other hand, a retreat was a place of rest and relaxation. Yoga and meditation were a natural part of it. And didn't they somehow go hand in hand with spirituality?

"Is this your first time in Garmisch-Partenkirchen?"

I met his gaze in the rearview mirror and smiled. "Yes. I can't ski or anything. I guess that's usually why you come here." At least that was what I'd found out about Garmisch-Partenkirchen from Wikipedia.



"Oh, yeah, definitely. There's a lot going on here in winter. But that doesn't really matter to us, because the retreat is far away from any hustle and bustle." He gave me a friendly smile and steered the car onto a narrow, asphalted forest path.

"How long does it take to drive to the retreat?" Although I had looked at the website before coming here, the exact location, as it said, was only given on request. Privacy and discretion seemed to be part of the company's policy.

"Around 40 minutes. The last part, where the road is no longer asphalted, is a bit difficult to drive on at the moment because it has rained heavily in the past few days. It gets muddy there really quickly."

I let out a short laugh. "Then construction wasn't particularly easy, I guess."

Googling the retreat I had come across all sorts of articles and blogposts on architect websites. That's how I had learned that Pierre was not only the owner but also the architect of the retreat. Together with an engineer and structural engineer friend, he had fulfilled a dream by building it. The potential of his idea to combine masterful architecture, luxury and exclusivity with the picturesque backdrop of the mountains had excited some investors so much that they had been willing to finance the project despite seven-figure costs. When the construction was completed, Pierre had even won two architectural awards for it.

*If the trophies will be on display at the retreat?*

"For God's sake, don't remind me." He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "The retreat is still relatively far down the mountain, but since there are no paved roads leading up to it, we couldn't use normal trucks. Let's just say it was a challenge, but worth taking on."

"So how did you come up with this location?"

"I wanted to build my retreat somewhere where the energy was right. When I was up there for the first time, after just a few minutes I felt this insane power inside me, almost as if the place had charged me up. That's when I knew I had to build right there."

I asked him a few more questions, which he answered patiently before the forest cleared and we reached a gorgeous lake. Framed by trees, the sun's rays reflected in it. Not far from the lake were inconspicuous buildings that from a distance looked almost like simple huts – clean lines, no frills. On closer inspection, however, I recognised large window fronts and wooden terraces with cosy-looking lounge furniture.

We circled the lake, and when I looked ahead again, my mouth almost dropped open.

On top of a hill rose an impressive building. Although it broke all the rules of harmony with its square columns made of natural stone, the walls that were practically made of glass and the dark wooden elements, everything still harmonised with each other. It looked modern and at the same time original. Adapted to nature by its colouring and at the same time hidden in it by the many glass elements.

I opened the car door and slid off the seat. One hand pressed on the oversized hat, I looked around in amazement.

"Wow."

A floating granite stone staircase led through a front garden of meticulously trimmed shrubs, bonsai trees and Buddha sculptures to a huge solid wooden door behind which I suspected nothing less than paradise.

The smell of freshly cut grass and clear air tickled my nose and I inhaled deeply. I wasn't sure I had ever breathed such pure air. It was as if it consisted entirely of oxygen. I wondered if this was the energy Pierre had spoken of earlier. Either way, this place was simply magical.

Wide-eyed, I followed Pierre up the stairs. Inside, dark colours created elegance and lush green plants gave the impression that nature was taking over and merging with the house. I let my gaze wander through the lobby and got stuck at the other end of the room. There, a gigantic glass front gave a view over the lake and the mountain behind it.

When a red-haired, friendly smiling woman thrust a glass of green juice into my hand, I was sure I had landed in a place of absolute relaxation. The nervousness in my stomach fizzled out and all that was left was unconditional joy.

*This was going to be the best weekend of my life for sure.*

**Now**

## **Chapter 4**

**Karla**

Stiff with shock, I stand there looking at the woman in the mirror. In the light of dawn, I look at the bloody clothes on her body.

On my body.

*What the hell happened?*

My stomach rumbles violently and before I can form another thought, I hear a dull thud as my knees hit the hard stone floor and I vomit again.

When my stomach is completely empty and I'm just retching, I run the back of my hand over my mouth, flush and straighten up with a groan.

Watch!," a voice shouts in my ear, although no one is standing next to me.

*Watch very closely!*

Through a veil of tears, I watch in the mirror as my hands push up the hem of my top, exposing the skin of my belly.

I force myself to have a closer look and touch my skin. But apart from the blood that has seeped through the top, I can neither see nor feel anything on me.

I immediately turn around, frantically search my back in the mirror, then the rest of my body with my hands, as if I feared that I had missed someone hurting me....

But there is nothing.

No clotted blood. Not a scratch. Let alone a wound the size it would take to soak my clothes with blood like this.

The significance of this realisation seeps through to me only slowly. Eventually a question forms in my mind:

*If it's not my blood, whose is it?*

I swallow and step back from the mirror. With shaky legs I try to keep my balance as I slowly open the bathroom door. Surely there must be some clue as to what has happened?

I stop in the doorway and claw my fingers into the sturdy wood, struggling with dizziness and weakness that make me sway with unexpected intensity.

I look around the room, not knowing what I hope to find. My gaze lingers on the living room area. In the floating fireplace, flames flicker wildly in all directions. Behind it, the patio door is wide open and a sharp wind blows into the room. Pressing cold and wet alike through the closed sliding wooden shutters, water drips down and collects in little puddles.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I get goose bumps all over my body.

As if in a trance, I walk towards the terrace, the cold of the wooden floorboards nipping at the soles of my feet and travelling up my calves. I reach for my summer coat as I pass, slip it on and tie it tightly, but the goosebumps remain.

I reach the sofa, sink down on it and stare towards the flames. Confused thoughts race through my head as I notice small dark holes in the floor. I lean forward and run my fingers over the wooden floor.

Burn holes.

*Why the hell is the fireplace on anyway? In June? Did I turn it on?*

But no matter how hard I think about what my drunken self might have done to get me into such a life-threatening situation, my memory still has no answer. There is nothing in my skull but this pulsating pain and an all-encompassing darkness that envelops the past night like a cocoon.

*Fucking hell. How much have I had to drink?*

I close my eyes and search for the last tangible memory. I see the others in front of me. We sit in a circle around the fire bowl, the flames illuminating our faces. Viktoria's soft laughter echoes through the forest. The moon is high in the sky with a few stars. Crickets chirp near the lake and darkness slowly descends over us. From then on, there are only fragments of memories. Josefine, wearing a black jersey dress in which she looks so impossibly good that my heart involuntarily tightens every time I look at her. A hand with blood-red fingernails holding a shot glass under my nose. After that, there is nothing left in my brain but darkness.

But ... Can't I rule out that something bad has happened? Surely the others wouldn't have left me here if one of us had been injured or -

A scream snaps me out of my thoughts. It shrills through the break of dawn. Tearing through the steady patter of the rain, it hits me like an arrow to the heart.

*No.*

Within the blink of an eye, I leap up from the sofa, push aside the shutter and rush outside.

The rain is cold and hard. It relentlessly lashes down on me, soaking me to the bone within seconds.

Panicking, I look around, trying to spot anyone who might have screamed. I struggle to make out anything, the clouds hang low and hide my surroundings under their white-grey veil. Only when my gaze sweeps the shore of the lake do I notice something that doesn't belong there. A black shadow.

Immediately my heart beats faster and my body starts to move as if by itself. I notice how I hold my breath.

There, in the pouring rain, stands a figure. It looks hunched, seems to have turned away from something.

From something lying on the ground.

From something that is not moving.

From something that looks as if it could be a body.

*No. No. No.*

The blood rushes in my ears as my bare feet sink into the sodden earth. With each step I take towards the lakeside, with each step that makes the contours clearer, my mind seems to move further away from my body.

A woman looks at me from eyes widened in terror. The face pale with horror.

"I just found her there, I -"

Her words melt into the patter of the rain, becoming a continuous murmur somewhere far away from me.

I sink to my knees, feeling hard grains of sand pressing into my skin. On autopilot I push up the dress of the waxy pale body in front of me until a black bra is visible, bend over and press the heels of my hands to her chest. I shift my weight forward and push.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

I don't stop, keep going until my arms ache and I think I feel a gentle heave. Only then do I let go of her, bend forward further and place my thumb and forefinger around her nose, squeezing it shut and pressing my lips to hers, breathing into her as if I want to blow her up like a balloon.



*One.*

*Two.*

I speed up, place my hands on her chest again. And squeeze. Over and over again.

*Why isn't she breathing?*

Tears well up inside me as I try again to share my air with her, to bring her back to life.

Suddenly there are loud voices, ringing in my ears. They form words, sounding high and shrill. But I have no time to understand their meaning.

*I. Must. Save. Her*

But by then hands are grabbing my arms and dragging me away from her.

I scream, lash out, cry, but try as I might to resist, the hands do not loosen their grip. Instead, I feel warm breath on my ear, hear whispered words that take quite a while to make sense in my head.

"She's dead."

"No," I whimper and try to break free one last time, pressing against the arm holding me.

Something snaps, and at last I break free of the grasp, wriggle out and stagger back to her.

"Please, no," I beg. For it not to be true. That I am not the one who did it.

Someone grabs me by the wrists and pulls me up and away from her. My legs give way. Again I slump into the sand, feeling each grain like pinpricks on my skin.

*She is dead.*

I bury my hands in the sand, trying to find support where there is none. Close my eyes so as not to see what will haunt me from now on.

Wet hair. Tangled and dull.

Skin pale as candle wax.

Bloodless cuts, wide-open. In her chest. Her belly. Her neck.

Everywhere.

**This sample was generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence.**