

Anna Schneider

Blood for Blood

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"A gripping page-turner from SPIEGEL bestselling author Anna Schneider—psychologically intense and rich in atmosphere."

A murder destroyed her family. But now someone wants revenge.

After escaping a manipulative relationship, Sophie Roth gets by doing odd jobs as a photographer. Until she receives a lucrative assignment to take analogue portraits of the wealthy Grafinger family. Delighted and relieved, she accepts, but soon she feels as if she is being followed and watched. Is she in danger? Has someone found out who she is? When Sophie develops the first photos, she sees a face she has never been able to forget. And she realises that the night twenty years ago when her father was murdered is relentlessly catching up with her again.

Vita Anna Schneider

Ever since she was a child, Anna Schneider has loved stories. In her grandmother's inn, she listened spellbound to the tales told by the guests, especially when they were full of suspense. This fascination was later reflected in her career choices. As a personnel consultant and coach, she experienced on a daily basis what makes people tick, what drives them, and where their inner conflicts lie. As an author, she is interested in perfidious crimes, subtle nuances, and what remains hidden. Her stories begin where the façade crumbles. All volumes of her Across Borders series about the unlikely investigative duo Alexa Jahn and Bernhard Krammer are SPIEGEL bestsellers, and "Blood for Blood" is her first psychological standalone. Anna Schneider lives with her family near Munich.



"The greatest sources of our suffering are the lies
we tell ourselves."

Bessel A. van der Kolk

Prologue

I learnt early on what it meant to be different. I was not different in appearance, build or character. In that respect, I was just like many others. Some people thought I was 'distinctive', whatever that might mean. So for a long time, I didn't even know what exactly was different about me.

Until the night that changed everything.

The night when everything came crashing down.

Ever since that night, I've been stumbling through life, always teetering on the edge of an abyss, terrified of falling into it, of being pulled into the darkness.

That night mercilessly split my life into a 'before' and an 'after'. Into a good time and a bad time, into one that was far too short and one that seemed never-ending.

Everyone in the village knew my family. My parents had lived here, in my home town, ever since they got married. My brother and I were born in the hospital in the neighbouring town.

We weren't particularly well-liked, although everyone would have a quick chat with my father when they visited our kiosk. We were the sort of people you'd pop in to buy some chewing gum, the newspaper or a packet of cigarettes, but we remained insignificant. Perhaps because we lived in a shabby house that had long been in need of a fresh coat of paint. Perhaps

because my father was friendly, but generally gave evasive answers when asked for his opinion. Perhaps because my mother never went out to gossip with the neighbours, preferring instead to entrench herself within her own four walls or tend to the garden. Or perhaps because my brother would sometimes go ballistic if anyone said anything against our family.

Still, looking back, I'd say we were happy. Or to put it another way: we were content. We were doing well, even if some things could have been better.

We owned our own house, and my father ran the newspaper kiosk. We had to watch our spending, but we weren't poor either. We didn't go on as many trips as other families, but we made the best of it, given the circumstances.

My parents, my brother and I lived right at the far end of the village, on the only road that wasn't tarmacked. Directly behind it lay the woods, where we siblings spent half our childhood – the perfect place for adventures and games. We'd roam around there, often until late in the evening, only returning just before darkness fell and my mother had prepared dinner.

My home was so close to the edge of the forest that, when the wind blew, the branches of the fir trees would scrape against the window pane. As a child, I thought it was the Devil, scraping at it with his sharp claws, waiting for an opportunity to come in and carry me off, unnoticed, protected by the darkness. Overcome with fear, I would then cower under my blanket, my heart pounding, hardly daring to move, simply hoping it would go away if I kept still.

But evil didn't come through locked windows. We let it in ourselves. By the time we realised our mistake, it was too late.

There was no escape.

We could no longer flee from it.

It began so innocently that none of us was prepared for what would happen later.

Neither hiding under the duvet nor the darkness helped. On the contrary.

We had to fight back – and so, overnight, we became different.

From that night on, everyone knew exactly why it was best to avoid us. They'd always suspected it, they'd say. That we were different.

From that night on, we were just one thing: the murderer's family.



Part I

Loss, in a social context, describes the act or process by which a connection to someone is broken. Whether the end of the relationship comes abruptly or gradually, whether through death, an accident or the deliberate choice of one of the partners: the end of a close bond triggers a wide range of sometimes conflicting emotions: longing, pain, loneliness, hopelessness, fear. The body, too, reacts with sweating, chills, trembling and fainting.

If the person affected finds it difficult to accept what has happened, the mind protects itself and allows reality to seep into their consciousness only very slowly.

Some people withdraw emotionally, shut themselves off, and cannot bear the presence of others. Some talk incessantly about the person who is suddenly missing, searching for memories as if they could thereby hold on to the other person.

In the worst-case scenario, the mind refuses entirely to accept the finality of the separation. Then the bereaved person simply continues to live in the past, clinging to what once was, feeding on the hope that everything will be all right again if only they remain patient. No matter how unlikely that may be.

However, the bereaved may also react aggressively. Such people may even try to turn the tide of fate once more. By any means at their disposal. If necessary, by force.



1

Mid-May, in the evening

Sophie leaned forward and wiped the fogged up windscreen with the sleeve of her sweater so she could see better. But it was as if it were jinxed: no sooner had she removed the damp film than it formed again. The air was hazy; with every kilometer, the visibility worsened. Even the windscreen wipers were of very little help. She crept along the country road in her old Polo; the headlight beam seemed to vanish into thin air just before it reached the hood of her car.

'The end of the world,' she thought, praying only that she would still be able to see the white kerb strip, her only clue as to where the road lay ahead.

She'd been driving through this fog, which was swallowing up everything around her, for a good thirty minutes now. Without the sat-nav on her mobile, she'd be completely lost. It was a good thing she'd filled up the tank beforehand, because breaking down here in the middle of nowhere would be an absolute nightmare.

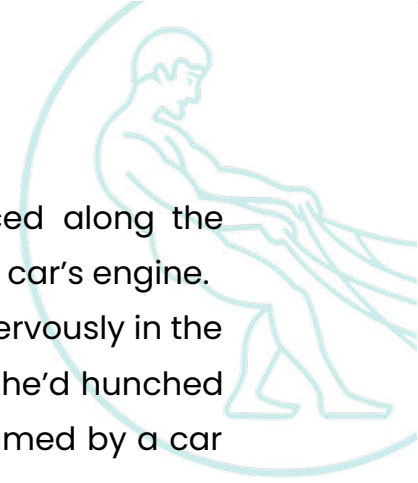
This night could hardly be more dreadful.

To be on the safe side, she turned off the music, which was actually meant to distract her, so that she could now fully concentrate on the road. The grey fog was getting worse and worse. At some point there would be a side road that she mustn't miss. It wasn't an official road, but she knew it existed. She couldn't be far from it now. She dreaded taking it in these conditions. Right through the middle of the forest ...

But she had no choice; she was far too exhausted and just wanted to reach her destination.

Wasn't it called a 'dead-of-night operation' anyway, when you carried something out secretly and without planning? One could hardly have described this journey more aptly.

Fortunately, her pulse had already calmed down somewhat before the thick banks of fog rolled in. In the first hour, she'd taken several detours to be



absolutely certain that no one was following her; she'd raced along the motorway and squeezed every last bit of power out of her small car's engine. At some point she'd slowed down, but had still kept glancing nervously in the rear-view mirror. Every time a pair of headlights approached, she'd hunched her shoulders, expecting to be blinded by a flash of lights, rammed by a car or forced off the road by a reckless manoeuvre.

But they'd all simply overtaken her because they were in a hurry and travelling far faster than the speed limit. Who would expect a police check at this time of night?

Once she'd turned onto the country road, her anxiety eased with every kilometer she put between herself and her apartment. Gradually, Sophie began to relax. She was all alone out here. No more cause for worry, she told herself. The night owls were long in bed, and no one seemed to have to be at work this early.

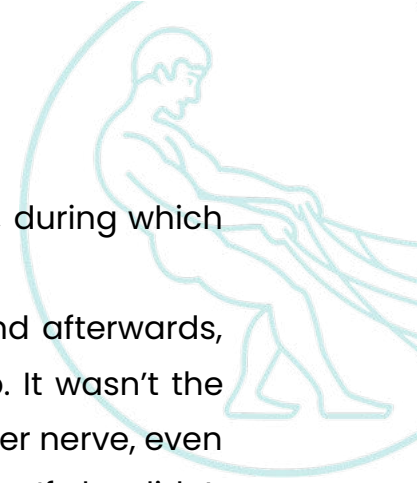
The witching hour. The thought sent a shiver down her spine.

Sophie reached out, feeling for the rough fabric of the travel bag she'd packed at short notice that afternoon – the only thing she'd been able to take with her apart from her camera and laptop. She had hidden her things in the wardrobe, gone to bed in a T-shirt, sweatpants and socks and pretended to be asleep when he came home drunk. She prayed that he wouldn't come near her, but when she was on her period, he usually left her alone. He found it disgusting. That was why she'd left the tampon box in plain sight in the bathroom . And it had worked. He'd collapsed into bed without touching her and fallen asleep straight away.

She switched the windscreen wipers on again and checked whether she might be able to see more clearly with the full-beam headlights. But they just dazzled her.

Thick, impenetrable grey surrounded her, and it felt like a cage of air in which she couldn't make out what was lurking in her immediate surroundings.

She felt uneasy. Sophie glanced anxiously at her mobile. According to Google Maps, she had to turn off soon. But the signal kept cutting out. Nevertheless, she dared to drive a little faster, as by now she was freezing miserably. It



wasn't just the cold; the lack of sleep over the last two nights, during which she hadn't slept a wink, was also taking its toll.

The day before yesterday she'd finally made up her mind, and afterwards, overcome by nervous excitement, she'd been unable to sleep. It wasn't the first time she'd wanted to leave. But time and again she'd lost her nerve, even though she'd known for a long time that it was the only way out. If she didn't do it now, she might never escape this relationship, which wasn't merely going through a difficult phase, as she'd initially assumed. It was a dead end. This night might be her last chance.

And she'd gone through with it.

She stared once more at the map, on which the narrow road wound its way through vast expanses of greenery. It was astonishing that it was already so rural so close to the city limits. The 'exurbs', as they were called. Yet this suburb, wedged between the motorway and the railway tracks, was by no means wealthy. It was only a few kilometers further on that things became more expensive and upmarket, where the scenery was more beautiful. This was where all those lived, who made the luxury of the rich and famous possible: the cleaners and service staff, hairdressers and shopkeepers.

Sophie yawned and lost her concentration for a moment, when suddenly a light pierced through the fog and blinded her. She was startled, jerked the steering wheel round instinctively, and prayed that the oncoming car wouldn't hit her. But just as quickly as the car had appeared, it vanished again, as if it had never been there.

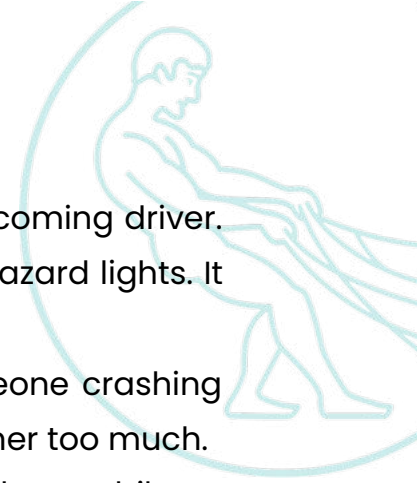
"Shit," she muttered.

That had been a bloody close call. Her heartbeat echoed loudly in her ears. She tried to calm herself, consciously taking deep breaths.

"Concentrate," she told herself. If there were an accident, he'd be alerted. She'd forgotten to delete him as her emergency contact. Then she'd be screwed.

Sophie hesitated before daring to glance briefly at her mobile.

Of course, because of this incident, she'd missed the turn-off. Damn it!



"Idiot!" she cursed, meaning it more for herself than for the oncoming driver. She pulled over to the side of the road and switched on her hazard lights. It was no use. She had only two options left: turn round or reverse.

Turning round on the road was too risky. The thought of someone crashing into her side at full speed whilst she was manoeuvring terrified her too much.

So she marked the dirt track on the map, turned the volume on her mobile up and put the car into reverse. She set off at a snail's pace, resting her right arm on the passenger seat and turning her head as far as she could. Her neck was still aching from the impact of having slammed into a cupboard two days earlier.

She carefully steered the car as it rolled back, taking care not to end up in the guardrail. She prayed that no one would come racing up behind her.

'Turn right now,' came the announcement.

Now she dared to breathe again, switched off her hazard warning lights and reversed a little further before turning right. She'd almost made it. Just a few more minutes through the woods, then the clearing, and she'd finally reach her destination.

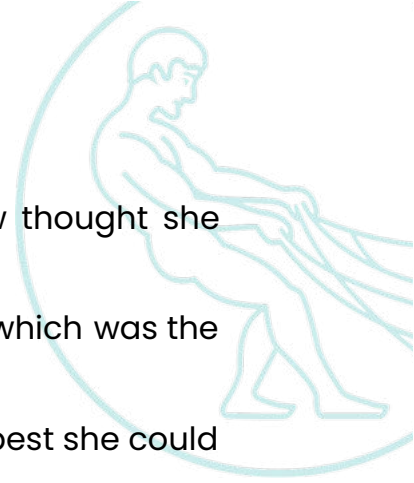
Sophie turned onto the dirt track, which was used only by forestry vehicles. At least no one was coming towards her now.

She flicked the windscreen wipers one last time as a short figure emerged from the fog right in front of her and ran onto the road. She braked so abruptly that the bags on the passenger seat crashed into the footwell, and her seatbelt dug harshly into her chest.

She gasped.

She'd nearly collided with a huge wild boar. The boar paused briefly – she recognised the curved tusks on its snout – then vanished again. She honked loudly, as she'd once read that the animals often roamed in packs at night, and wanted to scare off others. But even after that, she didn't dare drive on; instead, she rolled the window down a little and listened to the silence, in which, however, she could hear nothing but the sound of her car's engine.

Ever since she was a child, she had avoided going into the woods alone in the dark. The mere thought of it filled her with panic. She stared into the



mist-shrouded thicket that surrounded her, in which she now thought she could make out silhouettes time and again.

She quickly closed the window. Sometimes you had to decide which was the lesser of two evils.

She carried on driving, keeping an eye on her surroundings as best she could in the weather.

She was jolted about roughly as she drove over the potholes the rain had carved into the dirt track. Suddenly, the fog lifted a little, and she could see more clearly.

She must have left the wooded area behind her. At last! Then her destination couldn't be far off.

Soon the headlights illuminated what she had been heading for: a dark green construction trailer covered in graffiti.

With her heart pounding, she switched off the engine, gathered her things and got out. She stood there for a moment, listening to see if she could hear any unusual sounds. There was nothing but the sound of the wind. No one had followed her. Everything around her remained silent.

She slung her bag over her shoulder, climbed the three steps of the trailer and placed her hand on the door handle.

She just hoped there wouldn't be any nasty surprises waiting for her inside.

2

Everyone thought I'd get over it. Time heals all wounds, they said, patting my arm and nodding at me as if that would give me strength.

But they were all hypocrites.

What did they really know about how deep that relationship had been? They had no idea what it felt like to be all alone after all that time. Lonely. What it meant when the most important person in your life was simply gone. How empty I'd felt ever since. And no matter how much time passed – I realised that this void wouldn't be easy to fill again.

Nevertheless, I didn't let on, went about my daily life with my head held high, carried out my duties reliably, and acted as though I'd got over what had happened. My inner strength had always impressed them, and it was no different now.

But I had no other choice. I was, after all, forced to carry on.

But the question of why it had come to this remained. The question of who was to blame.

No one had seen it coming. No one except me. It had been brewing for a long time. Her intention had been clear. And yet I had repressed it, pushed the suspicion aside. I was sure it was just a phase, that she'd never find the courage to put her thoughts into action. Because haven't we all felt that way at some point? The feeling that it would be easier to end something than to keep going? Some days are just like that. It'll pass.

At least, that's what I had assumed back then.

Until it was too late. Inevitable.

And maybe I could have still prevented it. If I had reacted differently. That's why I would not just forget it. I didn't let it show. Of course not. But no matter how much time passed, it kept gnawing at me. Because I'm sure we'd still be inseparable today if only I had looked closer sooner, if I had really tried everything to cushion her mood.

That thought made me furious.

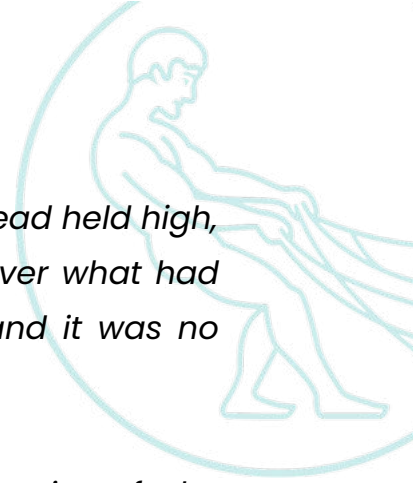
But not helpless.

I might not be able to undo what happened, but there was still a score to settle.

Someone had to pay for it.

Only one person was eligible.

And I was going to find them.





Sophie opened the fridge door and surveyed the empty shelves. Although she knew full well that she'd find nothing in there apart from a pitiful dreg of milk and a half-empty jar of horseradish cream, she simply couldn't break this morning ritual. Sighing, she closed the door again, filled the espresso pot with water, added powder to the funnel insert, screwed the top onto it and placed the souvenir from her first holiday in Italy on the two-burner camping hob. Lost in thought, she stared at the silver metal whilst waiting for the coffee to be ready.

She sighed.

Something in her life had to change. And quickly. Otherwise, she might soon not even be able to make herself a cup of coffee. The tin was already half empty. She needed money.

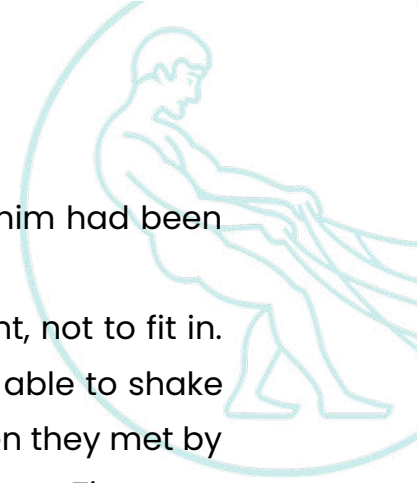
She briefly considered checking her emails. Perhaps a job offer had come in overnight after all. But she couldn't really believe that. It was probably better to wait until she'd had something to eat before checking.

She'd imagined it all quite differently.

At first, she'd been proud of having finally managed to leave Philip. A new chapter lay ahead of her. She could go her own way and was enjoying her freedom. It was a fresh start. A chance. And this time, she would get everything right.

How often had she thought about taking this step? But the fear of not being able to cope on her own had held her back every single time. This fear had driven her back into his arms, arms that hadn't held her for a long time, that no longer did her any good.

Slipping away in the middle of the night without a word had been the only way for her to draw a line. She knew it wasn't fair. But Philip had got into the habit of humiliating her at every opportunity and belittling everything she did.



To make her submissive. Small. A single word or glance from him had been enough to nip any of her plans in the bud.

Even as a child, Sophie had learnt what it felt like not to be right, not to fit in. That had made her distrustful. And insecure. She'd never been able to shake it off in all her adult years. He'd recognised it straight away when they met by chance; he'd sensed just how much she lacked self-confidence. That was why he wanted to take her under his wing. To wake her from her slumber, as he liked to put it. He was her prince, her saviour. That was how he saw himself. Even though, to her, it usually felt completely different.

Over the years, Philip had never really tried to pull her out of the hole she spent most of her time in. Quite the opposite: he let her know more and more often how little he thought of her. And he controlled her.

A vicious circle.

And so, at every opportunity, she fled from reality into a world deep inside herself, where no one could reach her. Even back in school, people had called her a daydreamer. She could completely disconnect from the outside world; the silence in her head would envelop her like a bell jar, shielding her from everything happening around her. It was her sanctuary, her refuge.

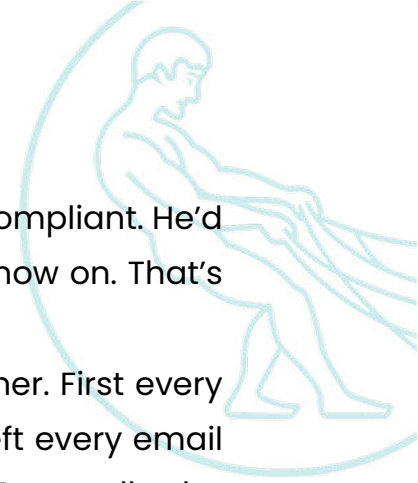
Yet Sophie knew that this wall had long since become fragile and would soon be unable to withstand a violent shock. Nevertheless, she remained in there, hoping she could get away unscathed one last time. Completely detached from everything. In there she was far away, able to watch herself from a distance, no longer part of the action.

Philip could not bear it when she was in this state. He provoked it. As soon as she became quieter, he reacted first with coldness and later, when she remained unresponsive, with aggression.

Because in doing so, she was slipping out of his control.

And he wanted to keep that control at any cost.

One evening, he was so angry that he grabbed her, shook her violently and threatened to lock her up until she stopped this nonsense. It was the first time she'd been afraid of him. He meant it. And she sensed that she would be in danger if she didn't do what he wanted. Or if she dared to defy him. And from that moment on, she sensed – even though she'd done or said nothing – that



at some point he would no longer need a reason to make her compliant. He'd crossed the line once and would do so again and again from now on. That's what her instinct told her. It had been the trigger for her escape.

During the first few days, he had tried over and over to reach her. First every few minutes, then every hour. But she didn't answer his calls, left every email unanswered, showed no reaction. He threatened. He begged. Eventually, the intervals between the messages grew longer, until he finally gave up after nearly four weeks.

As much as she appreciated her newfound independence, she now had to admit to herself that she hadn't thought things through properly. It was also something Philip constantly held against her: that she failed to consider the consequences of her actions. She was the one who was always caught off guard by something, like an animal dazzled by headlights, which would either freeze in place or flee blindly in the wrong direction until the hard impact struck it unexpectedly.

It happened to her time and time again.

Just in ever-changing ways.

Sophie opened the wall cupboard containing the mismatched crockery she'd found at the charity shop and took out a turquoise cup. When the espresso began to gurgle in the pot, she switched off the hob. She poured the liquid into the cup, which had a notch in the rim, added half a spoonful of brown sugar, wrapped herself in a colourful woollen shawl and sat down on the steps of the trailer.

Lost in thought, she gazed out over the field where wildflowers grew: yellow dandelions, daisies and St John's wort. She particularly loved the blue blossoms of the cornflowers, which swayed in the wind alongside the woolly honey grass.

At least the rain of the last few days had stopped, even though the damp still hung heavily in the air and the sun had brought back the sticky heat.

But neither the better weather nor the sweet espresso could distract her from what was weighing on her: she was broke. Philip had always provided for her well—which, by extension, meant that she was financially dependent on him.

Lately, she had felt like his employee: cleaner, cook, and prostitute all in one. She hadn't needed to worry about money, because he was bankrolling her. Sophie felt her chest tighten. Now she was living like a hobo in an old construction trailer she'd found somewhere on the edge of a field. It stood in a meadow not far from an industrial estate. Nobody ever strayed this far. A perfect hideaway.

She had stumbled upon it a few months ago when she had fled her own four walls for a few hours. In search of 'lost places': old houses, abandoned factories, or other deserted buildings, which she photographed with passion. These places told their stories in a whisper, and Sophie loved capturing the tiny details that hinted at who had last been there—the echo of times gone by

She'd been taking photos of an abandoned furniture shop nearby, in front of which an old carousel still stood. The paint had long since flaked off, and a few figures had been removed, but it was precisely that morbid charm that had fascinated her; it looked as if it belonged to another era. But as she zoomed in on the details, she thought she could hear the carefree laughter of children at play. She could no longer bear the sight, so she simply ran off, cross-country, through a car park where grass and slender shoots were growing through the cracked concrete and people were dumping their rubbish and debris.

Then she reached the edge of the woods and suddenly saw the construction trailer in the distance, behind a fence.

Out of curiosity, she'd approached it and peered inside. There was a folding table with two chairs, a camp bed, wall cupboards and a shelf. Behind a curtain, even a portable toilet. But apart from that, the trailer was empty and dusty; surely no one had lived there for quite some time.

When she'd parked in front of it in the middle of the night six weeks ago, she'd fervently hoped that it would still be open and hadn't long since been towed away or had the owner moved back in.

But to her relief, her fears had been unfounded.

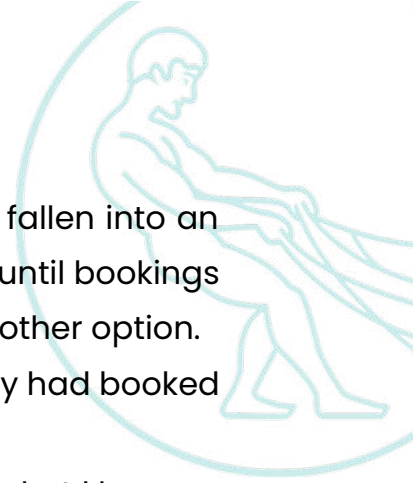
She'd unrolled her sleeping bag on the narrow bench and had fallen into an exhausted sleep. She'd only intended to stay for a few nights – until bookings started coming in via her new website and she could look for another option. But nothing had happened since then. She was still here. Nobody had booked her. Or even asked about her rates or her availability.

And there was no alternative in sight. If things stayed that way, she'd have to find a temporary job. In a café or a shop. Then her dream would be shattered. And Philip would have been right all along.

Resolutely, she emptied her cup and took out her laptop. First, she checked her bank balance. Just enough money for a tank of petrol.

Sophie breathed heavily and opened her email inbox. There was one message in it. She held her breath and clicked on it. It wasn't spam.

She hurriedly scanned it and froze.





‘An exclusive assignment requiring confidentiality,’ read the subject line of the email. Sophie immediately put her guard up. The wording sounded dubious. Yet she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the message, for this was no mere email. It was laid out like a letter, with a coat of arms adorning the address line and a sweeping signature at the end. Marlene Grafinger van Dorn was the sender’s aristocratic name, which seemed to fit perfectly with the sophisticated language in which the enquiry was written.

When Sophie also discovered the astronomical sum proposed as a fee, she was completely convinced that it must be a fake message.

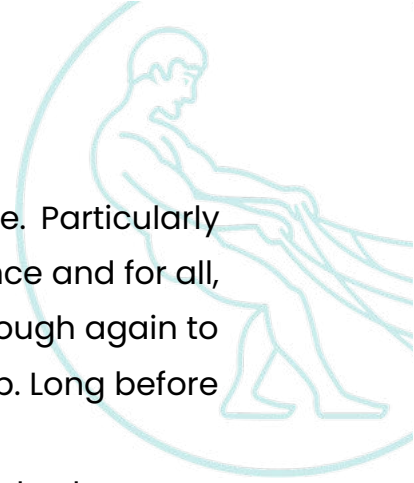
It was too good to be true.

She read through everything thoroughly once more, checking whether the email address matched the sender’s name. It did. Nevertheless, she had her doubts.

But this job would solve all her problems at once.

Finally, she googled the address – a fifty minute drive, so a round trip of almost two hours. Petrol costs she couldn’t really afford. But for what the sender wanted, Sophie had to be there in person: Marlene Grafinger was looking for someone to take photographs of her family. Once a month, or even more often, as the grandparents were already elderly and the head of the family was, on top of that, seriously ill. The Grafingers wanted to capture these few remaining weeks in photographs, for as long as his health permitted.

It really was a tempting assignment. Not just because of the money. A recommendation from a client like this was generally worth a great deal. Several generations of a family at a stately country estate – that was a rare and all the more beautiful subject. And it would also expand her portfolio if she could use the photos on her website.



Family, however, had long been a sensitive subject for Sophie. Particularly since her own dream of a home, a sanctuary, had just burst once and for all, leaving her to wonder if she would ever let anyone get close enough again to form a deeper bond. She had struggled with that even with Philip. Long before he had shown his true colors.

Sophie looked up from her laptop, took a deep breath and let her gaze wander across the meadow.

An unusually plump bumblebee, flitting from flower to flower, caught her attention. Sophie could clearly see its bulging pollen baskets. She quickly reached for her camera. It had a 35mm macro lens fitted – not ideal, but she simply had to capture this shot. The hazy background and the warm morning light were just perfect.

She took a few careful steps onto the meadow so as not to startle the insect with any sudden movements. She knelt down and adjusted the focus of the lens. The wind swept through the grass, the flower on which the bumblebee sat was swaying back and forth.

‘Just hold still for a moment,’ she murmured, keeping her eye on the subject through the viewfinder.

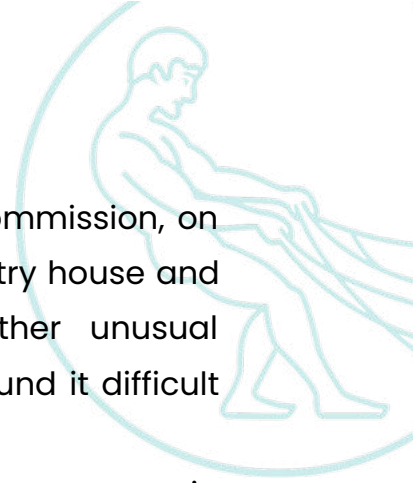
Then she pressed the shutter button, adjusted the focus, and took a second and third shot just to be on the safe side. Satisfied, she lowered the camera and watched for a moment as the bumblebee flew on.

Sophie shivered, zipped up her jacket and turned up the collar. Her stomach growled.

She hurried back to the trailer and swapped the camera for her laptop again. This message couldn’t possibly be real. But she couldn’t bring herself to simply ignore it either. She read it again.

The client’s instructions were clear: Sophie had to come on her own, without any assistants. The photos were to be taken exclusively with an analogue camera provided by the client, along with the film, tripod and lighting, as well as the equipment for developing the negatives. No duplicates, no digital post-processing.

It was, in fact, a dream. Photography in its purest form. Without the software or filters that nowadays allow any amateur to take good photographs.



Marlene Grafinger justified the high fee she offered for this commission, on the one hand, by the long journey to the family's remote country house and the time involved, and on the other hand, by the rather unusual circumstances of the photo sessions. Some photographers found it difficult not to work with their own equipment.

For Sophie, however, these conditions seemed perfect, and she was certain she had what it took.

Nevertheless, she hesitated.

There was that bit about her having to come unaccompanied. She looked up the address again on Google Earth. The house stood in a secluded spot in the middle of a green space, surrounded by woods and meadows. The nearest neighbour was kilometers away.

Was this some sort of trap? Was she being lured somewhere for dubious purposes?

She quickly typed the name 'Grafinger' into the search bar and waited eagerly for the results.

Old money aristocracy, industrialists and bankers; one scion of the family hailed from the north of the Netherlands and had made his fortune in the flower trade.

Nothing that would have given cause for concern.

But Sophie also knew that her own website listed hardly any clients worth mentioning as references. There was only the photograph that had made it into the National Geographic annual desk calendar, the 'lost place' photo that graced the cover of a thriller by a well-known bestselling author, and the mention that she'd been nominated for an industrial photography award a year ago.

Most of her work was simply listed as stock photos and could be bought by anyone for very little money.

That was the bitter truth.

So why on earth did Marlene Grafinger want her, of all people, for this special commission, rather than a renowned photographer? Were they perhaps too busy at such short notice?

Sophie licked her lips and considered how to phrase a reply. She decided to keep it as brief as possible. So she asked for the earliest possible date to carry out the assignment, as well as the specific reasons for the unusual conditions. Then she resolutely pressed 'Send' before she could change her mind.

The wind picked up again. Goosebumps spread across her arms. But not because of the cold. She had the feeling that someone was nearby.

Sophie turned her head and looked towards the edge of the wood, which began behind the meadow. She could have sworn she'd seen something move there. It wasn't the first time she'd felt as though she was being watched.

But it was probably just her nerves playing tricks on her. She was sleeping poorly; her financial situation haunted her even in her sleep, causing her to jolt awake time and again. She'd read that this condition was called night terrors, and that it stemmed from nervous tension.

No wonder.

She glanced discreetly once more out of the corner of her eye towards where she'd noticed the movement. It was probably just that boar again, the one she'd encountered on her arrival and whom she'd often heard snorting and grunting at sunset. Frightening sounds that echoed loudly across the plains.

On the spur of the moment, she raised her camera, trained it on the edge of the forest and pressed the shutter button, even though she stood no chance of making out any details with this lens. But if someone was lurking out there, they might as well know she had noticed them. And perhaps she could figure out from the zoomed-in image what was hiding in the shadow of the trees.

After all, it had been a long time since she'd last set foot in the woods.

Not since that night twenty years ago.



5

Twenty years earlier – before the crime

It was far too hot, even here, in the middle of the forest, in the small clearing. The trees seemed to be gasping for air; their leaves were already, in July, withered as if it were autumn, and their roots were withering from the futile search for water. Everyone was talking about the scorching summer heat, the hottest month Germany had seen since weather records began.

I was wearing nothing but a T-shirt and a short denim skirt, yet sweat was running down my back.

'And you really think this will work?'

I could hear the doubt in his voice. I simply knew him too well. He wanted to appear strong. But he wasn't. Only when he'd been drinking or when pills were clouding his mind could he be the version of himself he wanted others to believe he was.

I didn't know what he'd taken today. It was a risk. But there was no turning back now. It had to happen that night. Time was running out.

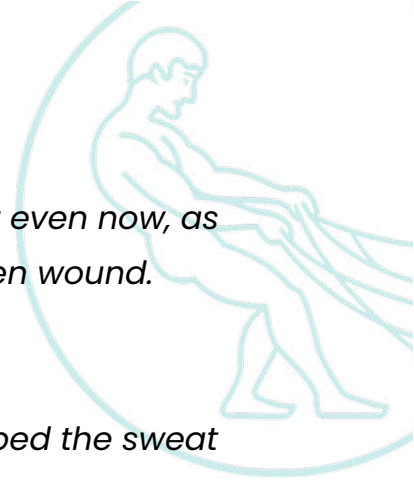
So I nodded. Even though my doubts were eating away at me inside. What if the plan didn't work? I didn't want to think about the consequences. It would be the end.

A rustling in the undergrowth made us jump. An animal scurried past us, crouched low to the ground. As if it could already sense the danger.

'Tsk, tsk,' I hissed, hoping it would disappear again and not give me away too soon.

I looked down at myself; my skinny legs ended in red canvas trainers with a tiny hole on the outside. We'd torn the top of my shirt's hem. The huge bruise on my shin was from a bike crash, just like the fresh graze on my knee.

'It's got to look real,' he'd said. We hadn't been able to come up with a better idea in the spur of the moment.



It had hurt, but I gritted my teeth and didn't make a sound. Not even now, as he smeared more dirt onto my arms and legs, right into the open wound.

He scattered dry leaves over my head and ruffled my hair.

I looked up; the night was starry and clear.

And yet the heat was still there, making it hard to breathe. I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

Suddenly we heard the gravel crunching and the sound of an engine. A beam of light cut through the darkness.

'Get away! Hide!' I shouted to him.

Our eyes met; then he gave me a quick nod and ran off through the undergrowth.

I lay flat on the ground in front of the tree trunk, directly beneath the knife stuck in it.

My heart was pounding; I could hardly breathe. The car was getting closer. Any moment now it would round the final bend and then come to a halt at the fork in the road.

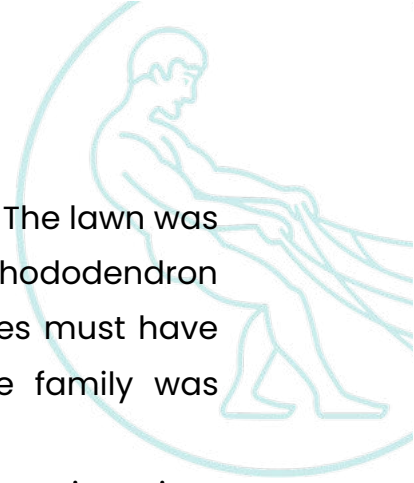
I spread my legs slightly, bent one at the knee, and hoped I wouldn't get a cramp. When the headlights finally illuminated my body, I closed my eyes.

6

July, a few days later

"Incredible!" murmured Sophie as the estate's intricately wrought-iron gate wings swung open before her. The cameras mounted on the posts did not escape her notice. Whoever lived here certainly didn't get any surprise visitors.

She drove slowly along the tree-lined driveway, which rose gently. Out of habit, she wiped her hand across the dusty dashboard, even though it didn't do any good. In this old banger, she felt completely out of place here. But it was too late to turn back now.



She eyed the park-like greenery surrounding the manor house. The lawn was perfectly trimmed, green and lush despite the heat. The dense rhododendron bushes, huge oaks and red beeches, chestnut and walnut trees must have been standing here for decades. She'd suspected that the family was well-off, but she hadn't expected grounds of this scale.

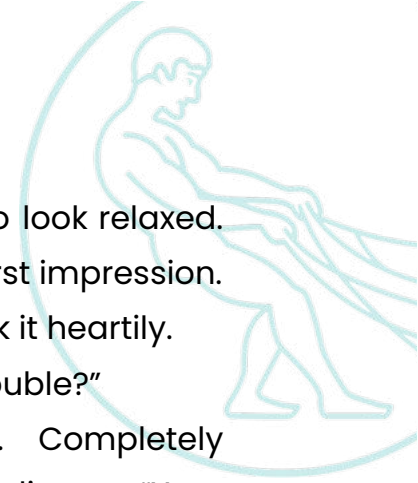
The tree-lined driveway curved, and only then did the estate come into view. The three-story building with its red roof and four dormers on either side of the entrance was painted pale yellow. The semi-circular bays on the first floor featured gray stone balconies, and the windows and shutters gleamed bright white, matching the double front doors at the entrance.

In the distance Sophie spotted two gardeners who were in the process of pruning a rose vine. Of course, one had staff when one lived like this. Hardly any other way could a property of such proportions be maintained.

The path ran in a semicircle in front of the house, with a fountain adorned with statues in the centre. According to Marlene Grafinger's message, a parking spot was reserved for her on the left side of the building. Next to the Range Rover and the BMW 7 Series, her ancient Polo looked even shabbier. But they hadn't hired her for her appearance, Sophie tried to reassure herself, but for her skills. She repeated it like a mantra as she walked towards the wide stone staircase leading up to the front door.

Before she could even wonder where the doorbell was, a very slender blonde woman with her hair tied back in a tight ponytail opened the door. Although she was wearing jeans and a polo shirt, she looked anything but casual. Her entire outfit was white; the narrow gold belt matched her ballet flats exactly, perfectly complemented by subtle gold jewellery. No one looking at her would question that Marlene Grafinger belonged here. She exuded an effortless elegance, the air of someone who had always known her exact place in the world and owned it completely.

Sophie smoothed down the blazer she'd chosen to wear despite the heat. Just as well, she thought to herself, because she'd rather sweat than look underdressed. After all, this meeting would ultimately decide whether she got the job or not.



She squared her shoulders and descended the steps, trying to look relaxed. Not too fast, not too slow. You only get one chance to make a first impression. Smiling, she held out her hand to the lady of the house, who took it heartily.

"Mrs Roth, how lovely! Did you manage to find us without any trouble?"

"It was very easy with the sat-nav," replied Sophie. Completely unaccustomed to small talk, she therefore began with a compliment. "Your estate is beautiful, Mrs Grafinger van Dorn."

"Grafinger is enough. I don't use my parents' surname. It's too complicated." She made a dismissive gesture. "But thank you. I actually live in a separate building at the back. The main house is occupied by my mother and my grandparents. Please come in." She stepped aside.

An arched entryway flanked by two columns was the first thing that caught Sophie's eye, along with the gleaming, black-tiled floor. Combined with the wooden gallery and the countless windows filling the space with pleasant light, the entrance hall looked extraordinarily impressive.

"We'd best go into the small drawing room," suggested Marlene Grafinger, gesturing towards an open door. "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"I'd be happy to have whatever you're having," Sophie replied politely, though she couldn't take her eyes off the two-tone stained-glass windows that adorned the doors to this room and cast beautiful patterns of light onto the waxed wooden floor made of old ship's planks. The dark green brocade curtains matched the Biedermeier-style seating perfectly.

And, of course, alongside a bookcase stood a black concert grand piano, its bench upholstered in matching fabric.

'Do you play?' asked Sophie curiously, so as not to say yet again how impressed she was by it all.

"Good heavens, no! I'm completely tone-deaf. My family is very good with numbers; nobody in our family has had any artistic ambitions since my cousin passed away many years ago." She gave the instrument a brief once-over. "That's why we're so delighted that you've accepted our invitation." Then she smiled and gestured for Sophie to take a seat on the sofa. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll just fetch some drinks."

Sophie exhaled audibly and was glad to be alone for a moment. She examined her appearance in an antique mirror with a gold frame, gave her red curls a quick tug, and noted with relief that her make-up hadn't smudged and that, despite her nervousness, her neck showed no signs of flushing.

Satisfied, she stepped over to one of the windows, which offered a view of the imposing garden. On either side stood a separate, smaller two-storey building; Marlene Grafinger presumably lived in one of them. There was not a neighbour to be seen far and wide, only huge trees, flowerbeds, bushes and lawns criss-crossed by gravel paths.

There could hardly have been a more stark contrast to her current lodgings. Sophie hoped no one would notice just how unfamiliar and awe-inspiring the surroundings were to her.

She quickly sniffed her jacket sleeve; fortunately, after weeks in the trailer, it didn't smell musty, she noted with relief. She relaxed a little and took a seat on the very edge of the sofa.

It was pleasantly cool in here. And the light was perfect for the planned photos. Suddenly, she noticed how quiet it was in the house, even though Marlene Grafinger had mentioned children in her email. Yet there was nothing to be heard apart from the ticking of an old clock.

Her hostess returned to the drawing room almost silently. A faint draught had been felt when the door opened; otherwise, Sophie would probably have flinched.

"I've made us two cappuccinos, if that's all right," said Marlene Grafinger, setting the tray down on the small table in front of Sophie. Then, with an elegant flourish, she sat down sideways on the armchair next to the sofa and was the first to help herself to a cup. "I always have to drink my coffee hot. You'll find sugar in the sugar bowl, if you'd like some."

"Thank you," Sophie replied, leaning forward but deciding not to sweeten her cappuccino, but quickly taking a sip herself. "I've just realised that the light in this room would be perfect for the portraits. Or are we not taking the photographs this morning?"

Marlene Grafinger held her cup in both hands. Contrary to what her remark might have suggested, however, she wasn't drinking. Instead, she seemed to be scrutinising Sophie intently.

Had it been a mistake to get straight to the point? Sophie grew nervous when she received no reply. After all, she didn't even know whether she would actually get the job.

"I'm sorry if I was a bit hasty, but this house has so many interesting details that I'm constantly thinking in terms of images," she quickly added.

"What would be the first subject you'd photograph here?" asked Marlene Grafinger, now taking a sip from her cup and silently setting it back down on the saucer.

Sophie thought for a moment. "I'm still torn between a photo of the door handle with the stained-glass window in the background, the sunbeam that falls in through the round skylight from above into the stairwell, and a detail of the stucco ceiling. These are all originals, aren't they?"

She gestured upwards, but noticed that her hostess was still scrutinising her.

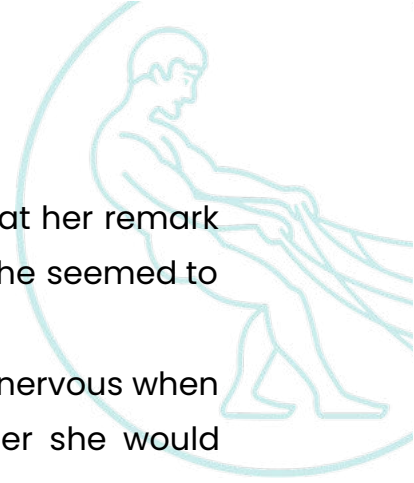
Sophie felt increasingly uncomfortable under that gaze.

But before she could add anything else, a smile flitted across Marlene Grafinger's face. "Well spotted. The vast majority of it is still original from when the building was constructed." She paused briefly. "The last person I had here for an interview wanted to photograph our gardens with the building in the background."

So there had been other applicants, and it hadn't been a request directed exclusively at her. Sophie should have known. No doubt they'd written to every photographer in the area, and it was pure coincidence that she was sitting here.

"I found his reply unimaginative," Marlene Grafinger now interrupted her thoughts. "A portrait is all about the details, isn't it? About good lighting, the right moment. About capturing a person's character. Their soul." Marlene Grafinger almost whispered the last two words.

The way she described it may have seemed strange, but at its core it captured exactly what Sophie had always sought in her photography: authenticity. To reveal the essence of the subject and, in doing so, draw out



more than just the superficially visible from a scene. That was why she loved taking photographs of lost places: she was drawn to the reflection of beauty in decay.

Her curiosity piqued, Sophie plucked up the courage to ask the question that had been on her mind the whole time: "Why do the pictures actually have to be taken on film?"

'It's just a quirk of my grandparents' – nothing more. They don't like modern bells and whistles. They want something authentic. I've tried to convince them of the benefits of digital post-processing, filters and Photoshop – especially at their age, it does have a certain charm. But they wouldn't hear of it. Analogue and developed by hand. Those are their rules. They reckon photographers used to put in more effort back in the day." She laughed briefly. "I hope I'm not out of line here. I'm well aware that this approach involves more effort. That's why I'm offering generous compensation."

"My very first camera was analogue, and I've got some experience with developing film too. Basically, I started out that way as a child ..." Sophie took a deep breath, trying to push away the memory of those days that was flaring up. To avoid further questions, she quickly pulled a folder out of her handbag. "I'd actually be delighted to work in this way, and I've put together a portfolio of photographs from the last few years that aren't on my website. Although I've tended to specialise in architecture..."

"No need." Marlene Grafinger waved her off and pushed the portfolio away as if it were a nuisance.

"I thought ...," Sophie began, but was abruptly interrupted by Marlene Grafinger.

"I just wanted to get to know you. To get a feel for whether you can handle us. We're not exactly easy to deal with, you should know. My grandparents don't hear well and therefore think nobody notices their snide comments. My mother is a real diva who constantly wants to be fawned over. It's best to pay her a compliment right at the start about how young she looks. My brother has a short temper. I've no idea how my sister-in-law puts up with him. Incidentally, he thinks this whole photo business is a waste of money and utter nonsense. I, on the other hand, think my niece and nephew will be glad

later on to have a memento of their grandparents. With four generations under one roof, there are bound to be differences of opinion. But most of the time, we're all pulling in the same direction."

Sophie nodded. Such strong family bonds were rare. A real gift, she thought wistfully.

"Once you've finished your coffee, I'd love to show you the large hall where we plan to take the photographs," Marlene Grafinger interrupted her thoughts. "In front of the family tree, you see. I've already had the equipment set up there so you can see if anything's missing."

For a moment, Sophie thought she'd misheard. "Does that mean I've got the job?"

"If you're happy with everything, I'll give you the contract to look over straight away, and you can simply bring it back signed at your next appointment."

Sophie emptied her cup, and as she stood up, she realised her knees were shaking. "I'm ready. Could you show me where the great hall is?"

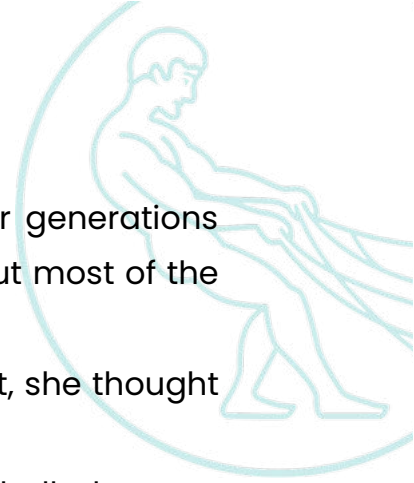
"So we're agreed, then?"

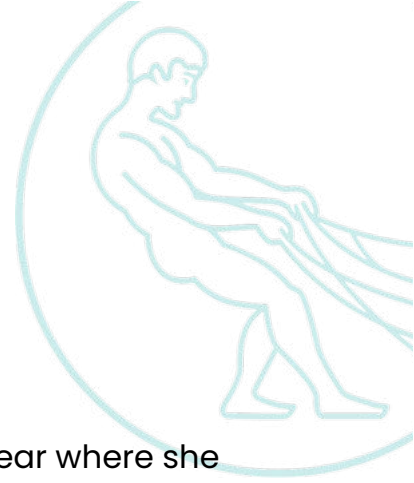
Sophie nodded. "Yes, we are."

"Just don't say that I didn't warn you later on," said Marlene Grafinger with a smile, before striding ahead with determined steps.

Although the last remark was presumably a reference to the family and was meant to be a joke, Sophie for a brief moment had the feeling that there was something else behind it.

But then she hurried to follow her client. She was used to far worse in her life. But Marlene Grafinger didn't know that.





Afterwards, Sophie had driven straight back to the small town near where she lived. She'd spotted the vacant shop premises with the 'To Let' sign in the window during one of her wanderings.

It would mean a lot of work, but Sophie could still hardly believe her luck. Having her own photography studio had been her dream, but Philip had always calculated for her how long it would take for a business to become self-sustaining, and Sophie had quickly realised that she would never be able to earn that amount. So she'd remained financially dependent on him, and he clearly enjoyed having her at home all the time. He'd always dismissed her profession as a hobby, even though she'd completed an online degree with top marks.

But now she was standing here, in these business premises, which, although rather run-down, offered almost perfect conditions for her own shop: affordable and with no competition in the immediate vicinity. It was situated in a purely residential area with many detached houses, so there was hardly any chance of walk-in customers, but there were parking spaces right outside the door. What's more, it overlooked a little garden with trees and benches, which created a bit of distance from the neighbours on the opposite side of the street.

She'd driven there straight after her meeting with Marlene Grafinger and was now clutching the bunch of keys tightly in her hand; she had to feel them to really believe that she'd managed to reach an agreement with the landlord. He would fit a kitchen if, in return, she carried out the entire renovation using her own funds. She'd handed him the deposit in cash straight away, before he could change his mind.

Perhaps she'd acted too hastily. But after all, she had the Grafingers' agreement; all that remained was to sign the contract. And for that, she needed a different workspace than the trailer, where she wasn't able to develop photos.

In the glazed front shop area facing the street, she would display her best photographs, welcome customers and hold initial consultations. She could convert the back room into a studio for photo shoots. A small, windowless room, which had probably once served as a storeroom, would become her darkroom, and in the adjoining bathroom, clients would be able to freshen up. Which also meant that Sophie would no longer have to shower at the public swimming pool. The third, and by no means insignificant, reason for her hasty decision.

In the studio, she planned to put a sofa that she could pull out to sleep on at night. And in the hallway there was a floor-to-ceiling cupboard left by the previous owner, in which she could store her clothes and other paraphernalia. Admittedly, there was no kitchen to begin with, but she could use her camping stove here too and that way save on the rent for an apartment. She hadn't mentioned the latter to the landlord. He didn't live in the village, and if push came to shove, she'd simply put it down to long working hours.

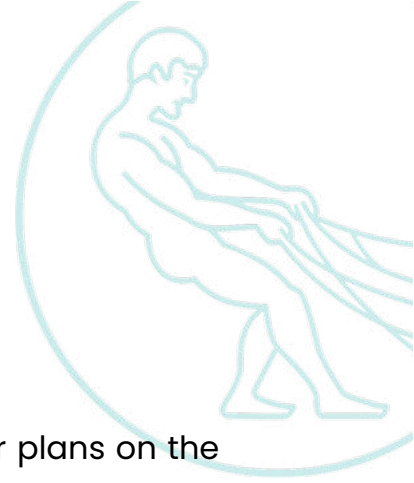
Sophie opened the lid of her thermos flask of ginger tea. It wasn't champagne, of course, but ultimately it didn't matter what was inside when you had something to celebrate.

Just the day before yesterday, the fear of bankruptcy had been plaguing her and had given her a sleepless night. And today she had more cash on her than ever before in her whole life.

With a "Here's to the future!", she raised a toast to herself and spun round once, cheering. The day couldn't have gone any better!

She had to laugh when she noticed a passer-by walking past outside, shaking his head. But at the same time, she realised that he'd instantly spoiled her fun.

To quell any nagging doubts, she decided to head straight to the DIY store. There, as well as paint and cleaning products, she would get some packing paper to cover the shop window and shield herself from any more prying eyes. And then she'd start renovating first thing tomorrow.



The heat hung heavily over the plain. Sophie had changed her plans on the spur of the moment and, after shopping at the DIY store, hadn't returned to the shop. The day had been long and exciting, and all of a sudden her enthusiasm had evaporated, giving way to a leaden weariness.

Dark clouds were gathering on the horizon, approaching rapidly and heralding a thunderstorm. It was unbearable inside the trailer; Sophie had no way of airing it out, so she sat down on the steps outside with a steaming plate of pasta with red pesto. She'd stirred in some hot pasta water to thin the sauce. As she chewed thoughtfully, her gaze wandered across the meadow.

Now that she knew she would soon have a proper roof over her head and no longer had to worry that the trailer's owner might suddenly turn up, she was able, for the first time, to appreciate just how freely and unhindered she had lived here. She was wearing nothing but a T-shirt and her underwear, and nobody took any offence at it. The path through the industrial estate was a few hundred meters away and was used, if at all, by hurried dog-walkers wearing in-ear headphones who paid no attention to their surroundings. No one judged her; it was almost like in her childhood days.

At that thought, she felt a little wistful.

She sighed, piled her fork high, stretched her legs – on which there were finally no more bruises – out onto the grass, and, chewing, turned her face towards the sun whilst the mountains of clouds gathering on the horizon had not yet obscured it.

Something tickled her knee. Sophie opened her eyes, puzzled, and spotted a ladybird crawling down her shin. She pushed her plate aside, held out her index finger and let it climb onto it. She counted the black spots on its wings. It was a seven-spot ladybird, the most common species, capable of devouring countless aphids.



"Hello there! Are you my lucky charm?" she asked, letting it scuttle about on her hand before gently blowing on it; it then flew off over the withered grass, which was rustling in the freshening wind.

She was just about to reach for her plate again when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She quickly turned her head and tried to make out what had been there at the edge of the wood.

It was too early for the wild boars. They only came at dusk. But she had seen something there. She was one hundred per cent sure. Even if it had only been for a fraction of a second. This time she was certain. She shielded her eyes, focused intently and let her gaze wander back and forth over the spot again and again.

Nothing. Just impenetrable darkness.

Perhaps a shy roe deer that had fled into the undergrowth to escape the heat? She'd once seen a doe with her fawn hiding in the tall grass in the morning mist. Perhaps she was reading too much into it all, but she went inside anyway and pulled on her jogging bottoms before taking her seat on the steps once more.

That brief moment of relaxation however was gone.

Once again, she had that feeling that someone was out there in the thicket, watching her. Sometimes it seemed to her as though the forest were a single, gloomy, impenetrable entity with a deeply unsettling and ominous aura about it.

And yet, as a child, she had loved the forest. Back then, it had been like a vast playground where she had experienced boundless freedom and adventure. But at some point it had become a symbol of darkness and terror, seared deep into her soul, like a scar she would feel for the rest of her life.

One last time, Sophie peered cautiously towards the edge of the forest with its densely packed trees. She didn't know whether it was the sudden memory of the past or her inner conviction that something like happiness was not meant to be part of her life.

She stood up abruptly. All of a sudden, she felt that Philip might have found her hiding place, which she had believed to be safe. To mess up her plans.

Her breathing came in gasps; she could barely catch her breath. A sudden headache shot through her forehead, as it so often did when she was stressed.

She picked up her plate and ran back inside. There, she rummaged through her handbag for the paracetamol and washed the tablet down with what was left of the stale tea from that morning. She couldn't afford a migraine attack now. Not when she'd finally found work and had prospects.

This time, she wouldn't let it bring her to her knees.

With determination, Sophie reached for her mobile, which, as always, lay on the small shelf right next to the entrance. Her hands were shaking. She'd recently set up a voicemail box to which Philip's messages were automatically forwarded, but she hadn't checked for days to see if he'd tried to contact her again.

Her fingers flitted across the screen. But there was nothing there. There had been radio silence for weeks. He hadn't sent any new messages. He'd stopped making threats. He'd finally admitted defeat.

She stared at the ceiling, placed a hand on her chest, felt her heart pounding, and tried to calm herself by gently tapping her sternum and breathing deeply.

When she closed her eyes, shimmering dots seemed to dance behind her eyelids. She brought both hands together, concentrated on the rhythm created by the tapping, and waited for the tension to ease. But once again her thoughts drifted, conjuring up images and feelings she'd been trying to suppress for weeks.

Enough of this, she told herself resolutely. He wasn't going to spoil this evening for her. Perhaps she was simply low on sugar. Reluctantly, she ate a few more mouthfuls of the cold food.

She had to focus on the facts. Stay in the present. Even though it had seemed unlikely to her that Philip would give up so easily, he had obviously done just that. He might even be glad to have finally gotten rid of her.

Besides, how was he supposed to find her? If he'd installed a tracking app on her mobile, he'd have been here long ago.

Sophie licked her dry lips, then shook her head. Perhaps she was simply on edge. The visit to the Grafingers had stirred up thoughts of her family and her childhood. That was probably all there was to it.

She stepped into the doorway and stared out towards the woods again. It had grown even darker, and the first raindrops were falling from the band of clouds; the wind was picking up.

She turned quickly, slammed the door shut and placed a chair against it, as there was no lock.

Just to be on the safe side.

9

Twenty years earlier – after the crime

In the middle of the night, I heard him coming up the stairs with heavy footsteps. Mum was asleep. I got up and went to meet him.

I noticed it straight away. there was blood. Everywhere. On his face, on his hands, on his shirt.

‘What have you done?’ I whispered, not daring to speak aloud, for it was clear that something monstrous must have happened.

Something that threatened to throw our lives completely off course.

“Shh,” he said, putting a finger to his lips and pushing me towards my room.

“You don’t want to know. Go to sleep. Everything will be all right.”

But I couldn’t move; I stared fixedly at the red splatters on his pale face. In his eyes I saw an unfamiliar pain. But I could also tell that he wouldn’t tell me any more. For he lowered his gaze and turned away quickly before I could say anything else.

Even at that moment, I knew that nothing would be all right.

Never again.



As if in a trance, I went back to my room. Silent and obedient, without a will of my own, I resigned myself to the inevitable.

He stood in the doorway, his eyes nothing but dark shadows.

'You have nothing more to fear,' he said. 'I've made sure of that.'

For a moment, our eyes met. Then he closed the door. A floorboard creaked, probably the one directly outside the bathroom.

Shortly afterwards, I heard the water rushing through the pipes. The porcelain basin would turn red when he washed himself.

He'd manage to wash the blood away.

But not the guilt.

'What have you done?' I asked again into the silence, which suddenly seemed to grow louder, like a deafening roar heralding a catastrophe.

That night had changed everything.

I slipped under the duvet, pulling it up to my chin, but it didn't warm me. I was frozen stiff with cold. And fear. Whenever I opened my mouth, my teeth chattered.

And yet it had been so warm. Even in the forest, the heat had shimmered. Countless fireflies had danced in the air at midnight.

They alone were witnesses to what had happened out there.

Long Summary (with spoilers)

Sophie Roth (32) flees in the middle of the night from her possessive partner, Philip. She hides in an abandoned construction trailer on the edge of the forest and tries to set up her own photography business. Six weeks later, Sophie receives a lucrative offer via email from Marlene Grafinger: she is to photograph four generations of the Grafinger family at their remote estate, working exclusively with a fixed analog camera. At the same time, flashbacks reveal how, twenty years earlier, Sophie's father, Stefan, left the family for their neighbor Julia—an event that ended in tragedy.

In the present, a series of threatening incidents unfold in Sophie's everyday life: a stranger is spotted outside her photography studio, she receives anonymous food deliveries, and someone vandalizes her doorstep with urine. Sophie initially suspects Philip is behind the stalking and confronts him, only to discover that he has a new partner and has been abroad for the past few weeks.

When Sophie spots a portrait in the Grafinger family's ancestral gallery that bears a striking resemblance to her brother, Marc, she is deeply alarmed and realizes that the events of twenty years ago are finally catching up with her. Marc is still wanted as the prime suspect in their father's murder—he had allegedly stabbed Stefan to death when he was 15 and Sophie was 12.

Back then, Sophie and her brother had lured their father into the woods to convince him to return home and care for them. Sophie and Marc were due to be placed in foster care because their mother had suffered a breakdown following the separation and was no longer able to look after them. When their father refused to listen to reason, Marc attacked him and fatally wounded him. Marc then fled abroad, while Sophie covered for him and destroyed the evidence. However, living a normal life proved impossible for her; throughout the village, she was known only as part of

the “murderer’s family.” Sophie, whose real name is Pia Faber, eventually took on a new identity and moved in with her aunt.

In the present, Sophie finds her photography studio ransacked. All negatives and prints from the Grafinger photo shoots have been stolen or chemical-destroyed in the toilet. The words “BLOOD FOR BLOOD” are scrawled in red paint on the wall. Shortly afterward, Sophie discovers a photo on her phone of herself sleeping in the construction trailer—proof that the stalker has invaded her most intimate space.

Sophie finally returns to her hometown and to the clearing in the woods where her father died. There, she meets Marc, who had been lying low working as a gardener for the Grafingers and had also recognized Sophie. At that moment, Marlene Grafinger appears with a gun. It turns out that Marlene is the cousin of the late Julia Jordan and had harbored deep feelings for her throughout her life. Marlene blames Marc for Julia’s suicide following Stefan’s murder and has staged the entire scenario to lure Marc into a trap. She wants him to finally atone for his crimes and end up behind bars. To this end, Marlene plans to make it look as though Marc murdered his sister.

Before Marlene can put her plan into action, however, the extreme situation causes Sophie’s repressed trauma to resurface with full force. She remembers the night of the crime twenty years ago: it wasn’t Marc who killed her father, but Sophie herself, who, in a fit of rage, stabbed Stefan repeatedly when he tried to abandon her and her brother. Marc had simply taken the blame to protect his little sister and fled as a result. To break the vicious cycle of lies and revenge, Sophie stabs herself in the stomach in front of Marc and Marlene.

Sophie survives the suicide attempt, though seriously injured. At the subsequent trial, both siblings confess to their respective roles in the crime. Sophie is convicted of manslaughter, and Marc of perverting the course of justice. Marlene Grafinger shows remorse and supports the siblings financially. The novel ends with Marc and Sophie visiting their

parents' grave together, before Sophie begins inpatient therapy to finally process the past trauma.

