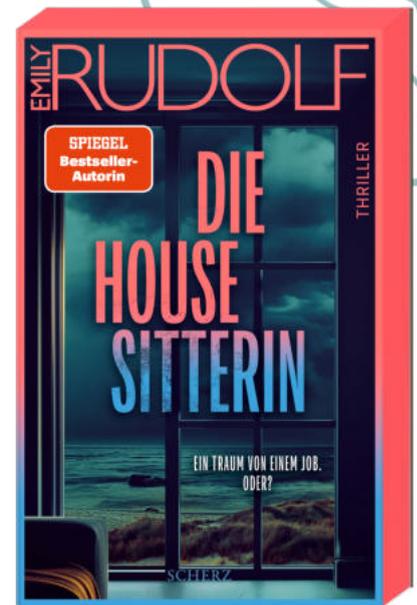


Emily Rudolf

# The Housesitter

Thriller

January 2026 . 432 Pages



**The Housesitter – A dream job. Or is it?**

**The perfect idyll. The perfect trap.**

Cecilia works as a housesitter, drifting from one assignment to the next. Since her mother's death, she has completely lost her footing; she can't even afford a room in a shared flat anymore. Now, she is being dropped off at the villa of the influential Waldner family, isolated on a tiny island in the Baltic Sea. The perfect idyll—the perfect trap. For Cecilia is not here by chance: A powerful attraction binds her to Johannes Waldner, the son of the deceased owner. While Cecilia still believes she is alone in the house, four people are making their way to the island. Bearing dark secrets and agendas of their own. But would they kill for them?



**Emily Rudolf** knows her way around sophisticated psychological suspense set in fascinating locations: Her debut “The Retreat” brought her a direct breakthrough as a thriller author. In her new book, “The Dinner”, she explores the abysses lurking behind friendship and how human emotions can escalate to deadly levels. The author, born in 1998, grew up near Leipzig, published her first books alongside her studies and job and then turned her passion into a career. Emily Rudolf currently lives and writes in Nuremberg; in her free time, she likes to play mystery dinners like the protagonists of her current thriller, but with a less murderous outcome.

## Summary

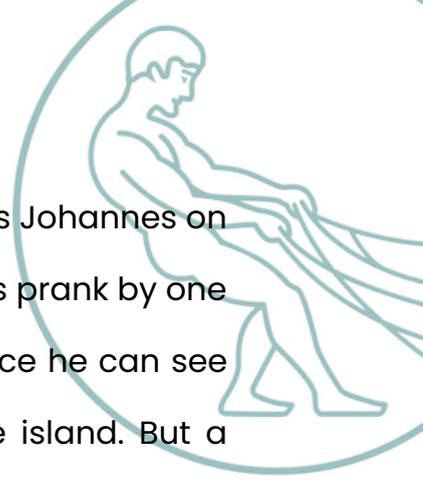


Eighteen months ago, Cecilia Altmeyer's world collapsed when she found her mother in the bathtub, her wrists slit. Since then, nothing has been the same. Cecilia's mother is dead, her future lies in ruins, and the concept of "home" no longer exists for her. She works as a housesitter, drifting from one assignment to the next, always on the run—from the past, the future, but above all from herself and the guilt she carries regarding her mother's death.

However, upon arriving at the influential Waldner family's dreamlike estate on a secluded island in the Baltic Sea, she feels a spark of joy. For several months now, she has been falling for none other than Johannes Waldner, the son of the wealthy family, with whom she plans to spend a romantic weekend for two in the luxurious villa. But Johannes hasn't arrived yet, and as the evening progresses, she feels increasingly exposed in the isolated house.

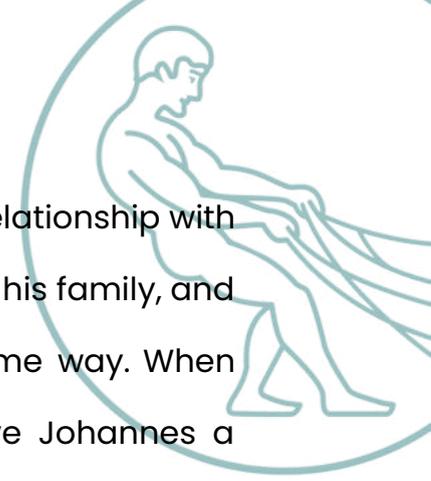
Trying to relax, Cecilia takes a bath and is relieved when Johannes calls—until he tells her he can't make it as planned due to a work emergency. The idea of spending the entire weekend alone on the deserted island makes her uneasy. This unease quickly turns to fear when she is abruptly jerked from a light doze by someone pulling her ankles underwater. Yet, there is no one in the room. Only the words "Sweet Dreams" written on the steamed-up mirror.

Cecilia is frantic, trying to steady her nerves, but it takes Johannes on the phone to calm her down. He insists it was just a harmless prank by one of the cleaning staff, nothing to worry about—especially since he can see on the security cameras that no one but Cecilia is on the island. But a vague sense of unease lingers, and she gladly accepts Johannes' suggestion to invite her friends over for the weekend.



After a restless night, Cecilia is relieved to see the sun shining the next morning, her friends' arrival imminent. But before they arrive, Johannes surprises her by suddenly appearing on the terrace. What Cecilia doesn't suspect: He lied. There never was a work emergency. He never intended to stay away. Quite the opposite... he was in the house the entire time, ensuring Cecilia was frightened enough to lure her friends to the island.

You see, there is someone with whom Johannes has a score to settle. The one person who knows his secret, having filmed him and successfully extorted two million euros. This very person threatened to expose him if he didn't stay away from Cecilia. It dawned on him that his blackmailer had to be one of Cecilia's friends—why else would they care that he was dating her? So, instead of ending the romance, he asked her to be his official girlfriend, always with one goal in mind: to meet her friends and identify the blackmailer. What the extortionist doesn't know is that Johannes has a video, too. A video of the money drop, showing an arrow-shaped scar on the blackmailer's hand. All Johannes has to do is look for someone with that exact scar among Cecilia's friends. Since Cecilia had made no move to introduce them, he decided to accelerate the process.

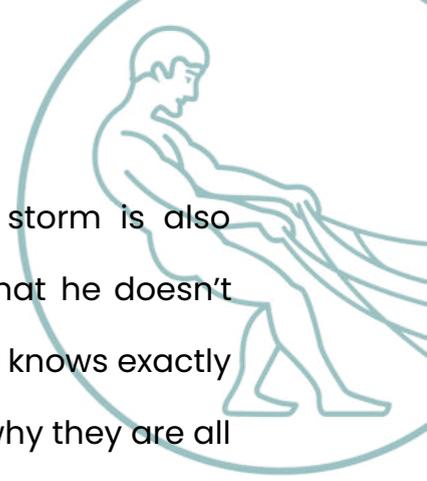


For her part, Cecilia hasn't told her friends about her relationship with Johannes. For good reason: Her friends know Johannes and his family, and they are not fans. In their eyes, Cecilia should feel the same way. When they arrive by boat at the jetty, Cecilia asks them to give Johannes a chance. Nevertheless, an uncomfortable tension hangs in the air during the introductions and refuses to lift as the evening wears on. Nick—Cecilia's best friend since kindergarten—is particularly skeptical of Johannes. That is because Nick is the one blackmailing him, having filmed Johannes committing a murder.

Nick was waiting tables that evening at Johannes' father's birthday party when the older man suddenly collapsed. As a medical student, Nick provided first aid and only realized later that night that he had captured video footage of Johannes swapping his father's spoon shortly before the collapse. He quickly realized Johannes must have laced the spoon with poison to eliminate his father. Driven by gambling debts, Nick decided not to go to the police but to contact Johannes anonymously instead.

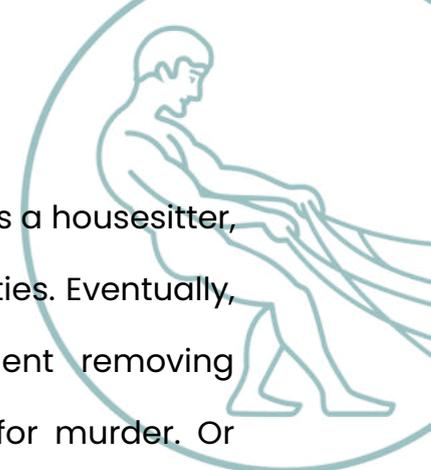
Now, meeting Nick for the first time, Johannes spots the scar in the pool, previously hidden beneath a smartwatch. He is certain Nick is the blackmailer. He confronts him, reminding him that he would do well to keep both their secrets. After all, it wouldn't look good to anyone—neither the authorities nor Cecilia—if Nick admitted to turning a blind eye to murder for two million euros.

While a thunderstorm rolls in later that evening, a storm is also brewing inside the house. Nick decides to warn Cecilia. What he doesn't suspect, however, is that Cecilia doesn't need a warning. She knows exactly who Johannes is and what he has done. And that is exactly why they are all here.



The night Johannes poisoned his father was also the night Cecilia's mother's life changed forever. She had catered the birthday party. To cover his tracks, Johannes had also mixed a tiny amount of poison into one of the salt shakers. That way, it would look like food poisoning—which, in his father's case, proved fatal. But it also meant Cecilia's mother was accused of serving spoiled food. Despite her protestations of innocence, she could only watch as her company, and with it her entire livelihood, went down the drain. She began to investigate, trying to uncover what really happened that night—but no one believed her. Even Cecilia dismissed her mother's wild theories as the product of guilt and despair. A despair so deep that she eventually took her own life.

After her death, Cecilia fell into a deep abyss; it was six months before she dared to enter her mother's room. There, she discovered all the theories and speculations about what had really happened that night. Her mother had been convinced that someone wanted to kill old Waldner. The evidence she had gathered pointed to the son—Johannes Waldner—and it convinced Cecilia, too. For the first time, she doubted the food poisoning story. If her mother was right, a murderer was walking free—one who had not only old Waldner's death on his conscience, but her mother's as well.

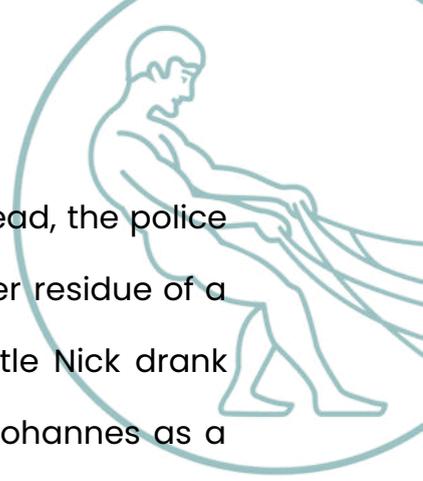


Seeking clarity, she applies to work for the Waldners as a housesitter, hoping to find evidence of the crime in one of their properties. Eventually, she stumbles upon a copy of a testament amendment removing Johannes as successor to the family empire—a motive for murder. Or perhaps Johannes never wanted to be CEO? A question only Johannes himself can answer. She realizes that housesitting isn't enough; she must become part of Johannes' life. What she hadn't counted on was genuinely liking him. While she started the relationship looking for proof of his guilt, she was soon searching for proof of his innocence. Then, months later, she finds a burner phone containing only a single chat history—between Johannes and an anonymous blackmailer. The chat contains a video showing Johannes poisoning his father. She has the answer she has been seeking all this time. But it isn't irrefutable proof that would hold up in court. Yet, a plan forms in her mind to ensure Johannes does not get away with it.

This weekend on the island, she intends to see that Johannes receives his just punishment. She deliberately plants the evidence she has collected and begins to construct a narrative. But Cecilia didn't just find the phone with the poisoning video; she also found a tiny SD card containing a video of the money handover. A video showing a person with a scar all too familiar to her. A video showing Nick, her best friend. All these months, he could have ensured Johannes was convicted, could have saved her mother's company and her life, but instead, he kept his mouth shut.

While Johannes deserves justice, in her eyes, Nick deserves death. She lures Nick to the pool, where she poisons him with the very same toxin Johannes used on his father. By the time Johannes realizes what a twisted

game Cecilia is playing with him, it is far too late. Nick is dead, the police are on their way, and what they will find is damning: Powder residue of a poison in Johannes' belongings. His fingerprints on the bottle Nick drank from. An old prepaid phone with a chat history exposing Johannes as a murderer. A video showing a blackmailer with a scar. And a corpse in the pool bearing that very scar. It is a story that tells itself, and no matter what Johannes does, he will go to prison for the murder of two people. His father, and Nick.



**Sample Translation  
by Alexandra Roesch**



**Prologue**

As I swallow the water, I can already taste death. Like a storm cloud spreading across a flawless blue sky, the blood, and with it life itself, seeps from the wound. It dissolves in the chlorinated water I have thrown myself into as if there were still something I could do.

I press my lips together, keep my head up, and fight against the weight of water tugging at my clothes and demanding more from my shaking body than it can give. My legs give way, buckle, and I go under.

Startled, I squeeze my eyes shut, only to open them again moments later. The harsh beam of the pool lights cuts through the darkness and bathes the scene in ghostly pale light. I register stiff limbs, glassy eyes, a lifeless face. The face looks completely unfamiliar, and yet I know it almost as well as my own.

I scream. A shrill yet dull sound. Bubbles trail up in front of me, rise to the surface, and burst one after another.

Gasping and coughing, I break through the surface of the water. I gasp for breath as if waking from a bad dream, but instead of the relief I had hoped for, I am overwhelmed once more by the taste of blood and chlorine.

I swallow, retch, and press a hand over my mouth to fight the nausea that wants to purge my body. But I must not throw up. Not here. Not now.

Grimly, I fight my way through the pool to grab the hand that is drifting limp, in the water. I tell myself it is still warm.

I scream again, this time not from shock but for help. I scream so loudly my throat burns and my eardrums vibrate, then lace my fingers in his and drag his body behind me towards the steps.

“Everything is going to be all right. Stay with me,” I whisper. “Everything is going to be alright.”

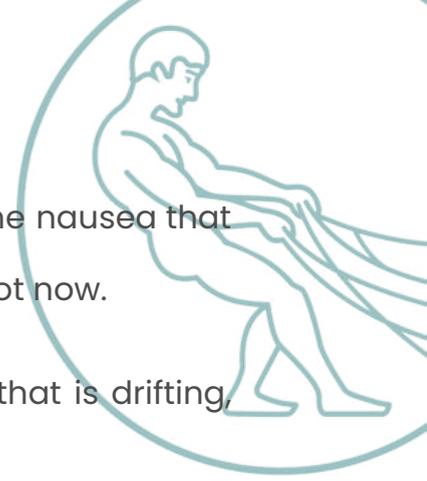
In the distance a light comes on, filling the tall windows that by day look out over the garden and the sea, over the idyllic view this place has to offer when death is not lying in wait.

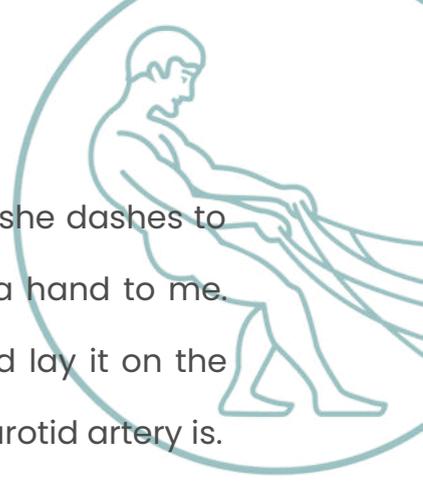
Then I see her. A dark silhouette, hair tousled.

She is wearing one of those dressing gowns that are neither practical nor remotely sensible.

“For God’s sake, what has happened? Who is that?” I hear her hoarse, sleep-heavy voice. The wind carries her words over to me, while the fabric of her gown billows with every step, as if it wanted to tear itself away from her and drape itself over what has happened here.

“Help me! Quickly!” I shout, without answering her question. Her expression gives her away anyway – she already knows what has happened, but she just does not want to accept it yet.





I almost expect her to break down hysterically, but instead she dashes to the edge of the pool, drops to her knees, and reaches out a hand to me. Together we manage to haul the body out of the water and lay it on the rain-soaked stone tiles. I press my fingers where I think the carotid artery is.

“Can you feel a pulse?” she asks, her voice hollow.

Yes, but I am not sure it is not my own. Because I can feel it in my fingertips there and everywhere else, in my chest, my head, even in my ears. That is the problem with adrenaline.

“I... I don't know, I... I'm not... not sure.”

She pushes me aside, drops to her knees, and presses again and again on his stomach as if she were kneading a lump of dough. Is that how you resuscitate someone who has drowned? I do not know. Should we not be doing chest compressions instead? Mouth to mouth? Forcing his jaw open and sticking a finger down his throat?

The solution is probably obvious. But it is as if the shock has robbed me of any ability to think straight and left nothing but painful bewilderment in my skull.

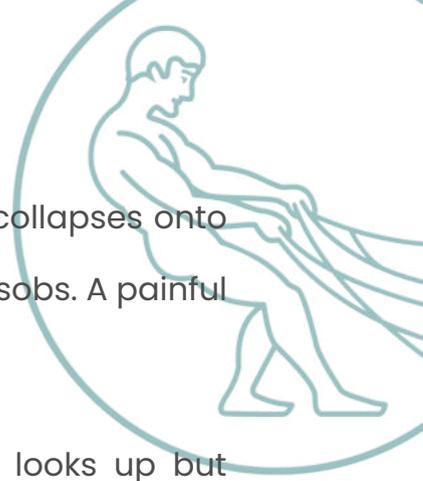
“Wake up,” she orders, as if he might still obey her words. But his eyes remain fixed on the night sky.

There is no water trickling from his blue lips. No rasping, no gasping for air. The only signs of life here are her breathing, my pulse, and the gurgle of the pool pump.

“Wake up,” she says again, her voice choked this time. She collapses onto his lifeless body, buries her face in the crook of his neck, and sobs. A painful sound that penetrates me to the bone.

I touch her shoulder gently, wanting to comfort her. She looks up but cannot put her thoughts into words. She does not need to. It is obvious what is going through her mind. Tears run down my cheeks as I say out loud what we both already know.

“It’s too late.”





## Part One

Waldner family private island, Baltic Sea, now

### 1

#### Cecilia

Show me your house and I will tell you who you are. It does not take me more than a few minutes. I take one look over here. One look over there. I already know who I am dealing with. I see most of my clients for half an hour at most, usually less. They hold out their hand, shake mine, and we chat about the weather, about where they keep their toilet paper, and how they deal with their recycling. That's it.

Even so, when I go back home, if you can call my tiny room in a shared flat 'home', I know more about these people than their friends do.

I know what setting they put their heating on so it actually gets warm, whether their mattress is sagging, whether they sort their socks, and what detergent they use for their washing.

I slip into their lives and make them my own for a limited time. It is very easy to become someone else when you live in their house. That is one of the reasons I love this job so much. Because it is escape and arrival at the same time.

It is true what some people say; the place you call home is the key to your soul. Not in any obvious way. It hides in the details, in the hand creams left

lying around, the crumbs in the kitchen drawers, the meticulously folded scarves.

I wonder what it says about you if you do not really have a home at all, if you live out of a suitcase.

I push away the cynical voice that has been nagging at me for a while.

But there is another kind of home. A place with no soul but plenty of purpose. A place designed to make people admire you. A home like this one.

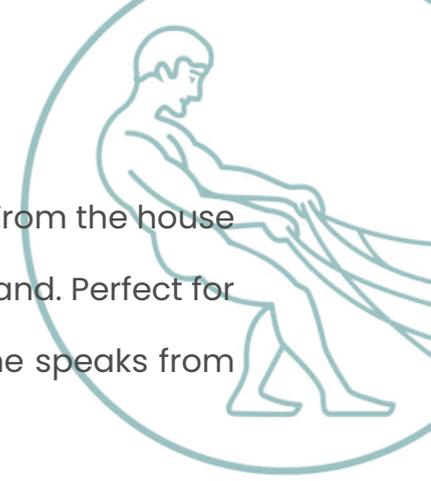
The house perches on the island like a gateway to another world, lit up by blinding sunshine and trapped in the solitude of the sea.

“Wow.” Even though by now I am booked almost exclusively by wealthy clients and in the past, especially in recent months, I have spent time in many of the Waldner family’s houses, this one, with its size and its location, is still something special. Johannes, the son of the family, has been my boyfriend for just over two months – I can hardly believe it myself – and he definitely did not exaggerate.

“Is this really the only house on the island?” I ask, although I already know the answer. It is just hard to grasp that some people own entire islands while others can barely afford a room in a shared flat.

The blond man in the dark blue peaked cap, with the friendly face and the white shirt, smiles. He introduced himself as Daniel, the Waldner family’s boatman.





“Yes, it’s. Everything you see here belongs to the Waldners. From the house to the artificial beaches, here and at the other end of the island. Perfect for relaxing and finding some peace.” He almost sounds as if he speaks from experience.

“There is certainly enough peace and quiet here,” I reply, letting my gaze drift over the endless-looking sea around us.

“I would say peace and loneliness are the only things you get more than enough of here.” He laughs, and I join in. “You will see for yourself over the next few days.” He cuts the engine, and the boat glides gently through the waves towards the jetty.

“That’s all?” he asks, eyeing my pathetic little carry-on case when we have tied up at the narrow jetty and are standing on solid ground. Instead of answering, I hold up my phone and ask, “There’s no reception here?”

Johannes did not mention that when he suggested I come and house-sit for a while and turn it into a romantic weekend for the two of us.

“You’ll see. It’s really dreamy and romantic there. If you ask me, there is no better place to spend time together than that island,” he had said. Maybe that is what he meant, complete isolation with no disturbance from other people or from phones ringing all the time. It would make sense, because as far as I am concerned his stupid phone rings far too often anyway.

“Not down here. You get normal reception up there for calls. Internet as well. There is a satellite dish for that. It’s not particularly fast, but it works.” Daniel gives me a patient smile. “So, is that everything?” he asks again.



"Yes," I say, and slide my phone into my jeans pocket.

I never bring much. Partly because I do not own very much. Partly because I know that everything I need will already be in the house.

Daniel frowns. "Okay. Good. I'll walk up with you and show you the house. The access is just over there." I follow the direction of his pointing finger but can only see the rocky coastline and a bright yellow sign whose writing I cannot read from here. Only when I take off my sunglasses can I make out a flight of steps cut into the rock, about fifty metres away.

"Pretty steep," I murmur.

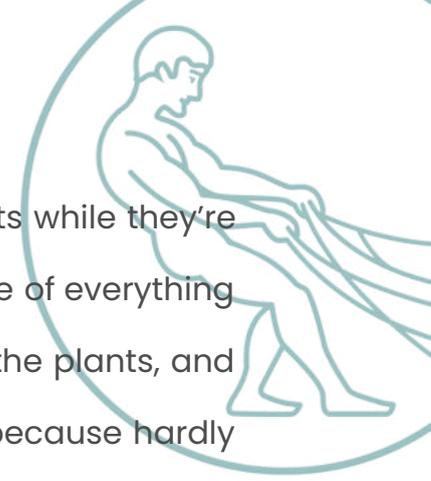
"Yes, you wouldn't want to go down that if you were drunk." He winks at me before setting off, my suitcase in his hand.

I swing my small rucksack onto my shoulder and follow him. The sun beats down mercilessly on us, burning the tops of my thighs, which are barely covered by my shorts. There is almost no wind, and before I have even get to the steps I can feel a bead of sweat running down my spine.

We reach the steps, and the yellow sign with black lettering announces that this is private property. I also notice a large surveillance camera positioned so that both the jetty and the steps are in its field of view. A red light is blinking.

For a moment I look straight into the lens, then turn away and follow Daniel up the steps.

"So you're a house sitter?" he asks.



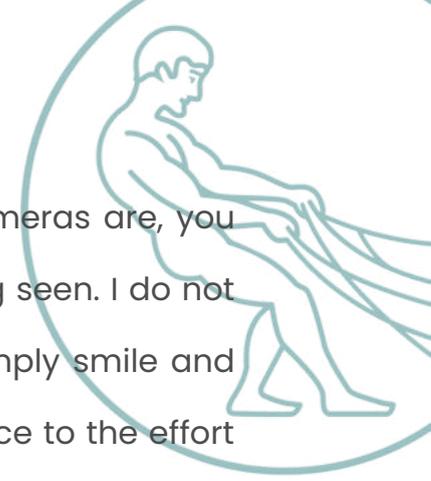
“Yes, that’s right,” I say. “I live in other people’s houses or flats while they’re on holiday, on business trips, or at another home. I take care of everything that needs doing, mow the lawn, look after the pets, water the plants, and flush the toilets regularly so the pipes keep flowing,” I add, because hardly anyone in Germany has any idea what house sitting is.

What I don’t say is that I am not only here as a house sitter. I don’t wish to invite in nosy questions or odd looks, and I will leave it to Johannes to explain things to Daniel when he brings him out here tomorrow, knowing that I am waiting for him.

“How interesting.” Coming from him it sounds just like it does from most people, as if house sitting were something to aspire to. In reality it is only the result of the fact that I have very little that makes it worth staying in one place. My friend Ying used to house-sit as well, but for her it was more a way of escaping her student flatshare than her life in general.

“So apparently you’re my replacement. Until now it’s always been my job to come out here, flush the toilets, and check everything is in order.” He turns to look at me, his smile a little tight.

Have I taken something away from him? Who knows how long those inspection visits used to last? In an empty house like this, with no neighbours anywhere near, you could probably stay for days, if not weeks, without the owners ever finding out. Granted, there are the cameras. But with the Waldners they seem to be set up according to a fixed pattern, as I noticed during my previous stays in their houses. The gates, the grounds, and the front door are all monitored. Inside the houses there is only one



camera, in the entrance hall. So if you know where the cameras are, you can avoid them and get safely into the house without being seen. I do not want to accuse the poor man of anything though, so I simply smile and quickly end the conversation. I have always preferred silence to the effort of making conversation with a stranger. Besides, in this heat the climb is hard enough even without small talk.

By the time we reach the top, my heart is hammering in my throat and my legs feel heavy and sluggish.

Daniel looks just as breathless. Sweat shines on his forehead, and dark patches have spread across his white short-sleeved shirt.

“Some climb,” I say, panting, and enjoy the rough wind that lashes through the trees up here and tugs at my hair.

“Oh yes. But it’s worth it, I promise.” This time his smile looks genuine. I smile back and follow him along a paved path that passes a small bungalow, probably a guest house, and a pool on the way up to the house.

Elaborate stucco and elegant pilasters decorate the façade of the three-storey building. I peer through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the pale outlines inside. I make out chests of drawers, ornate chairs and... a movement. Just a vague shadow, but something was there. Definitely.

I stop. “Did you see that?”

At that moment the wind changes direction and presses suddenly against my chest, as if it wanted to push me back. The fine hairs on my arms stand on end.



“What do you mean?” Daniel asks, still out of breath.

“I think something moved in there,” I say, pointing towards the house.

He raises a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun and follows the line of my finger.

“Oh.” He waves a hand dismissively. “It’s quite windy. I was here briefly this morning to get everything ready and opened the windows while I was at it. One of the curtains probably moved in the wind. No reason to worry.”

I hesitate for a moment, feel the adrenaline in my body and my racing heart, then start walking again.

“Would you like a glass of water?” I ask as we reach the entrance.

“I would, yes,” he replies, while I walk past him up the three steps to the massive front door. With sweaty hands I rummage in my rucksack for the key.

“It must be in here somewhere,” I mutter.

“Here, let me.” Daniel squeezes past me, pulls a key from his trouser pocket, and opens the door. “After you.”

As always, the anticipation sets me almost buzzing. I love other people’s houses. I love stepping over the threshold and breathing in the smell that is particular to each house. I love leaving my old life by the door with my shoes and giving myself over entirely to someone else’s world. And the Waldners’ world is the kind that many people lie awake at night dreaming about.



I do not even know where to look first. At the imposing chandelier hanging in the centre of the high entrance hall? At the broad wooden staircase to my right, with its deep steps and ornate banister leading to the upper floor? At the dark wooden furniture along the left wall, or at the mouldings and the patterned tiled floors?

This house differs from many of the others I have house-sat in that it does not greet you with modernity, loud designer furniture, and flashy architectural experiments. Instead it offers the charm of an English manor house, imposing, traditional, cosy.

Mouth slightly open, I look up. The tall, light-flooded entrance hall with its two surrounding galleries gives a view onto every floor.

Slightly dazed, I slip out of my sandals. The mosaic floor is icy cold, and a shiver runs through me as I walk past the dark staircase and across the hall, which opens on the left into a wide corridor linking all the rooms on the ground floor. At a glance I count four doors. On the right I see only a narrow, tall window with a view of the sea and a single door under the stairs, which probably leads down to the cellar.

“Come on, this is the heart of the house.” Daniel leads me straight through a pair of double doors into a large living room. My eyes catch on an impressive home bar, then on a door that must lead into the next room, a generous corner sofa, and a big dark fireplace that promises cosy evenings. All of it fades into the background, though, when I take in the breathtaking view through the wall of windows. Straight ahead, they look out onto a huge terrace, a lush green lawn, the swimming pool, and the

bungalow. To the right, the sea rolls out below. One of the windows onto the terrace is tilted open. Warm air drifts in and sets the long curtains billowing.

Relieved, I let out a breath. It really was only a curtain moving in the wind. There is no one in the house.

I step up to the window and look outside. "There is really absolutely nothing and no one here," I murmur. Even though I knew that would be the case, it is only now that I fully grasp how remote this place is. I doubt anything could have prepared me for it. There is simply no bigger contrast to a city flat.

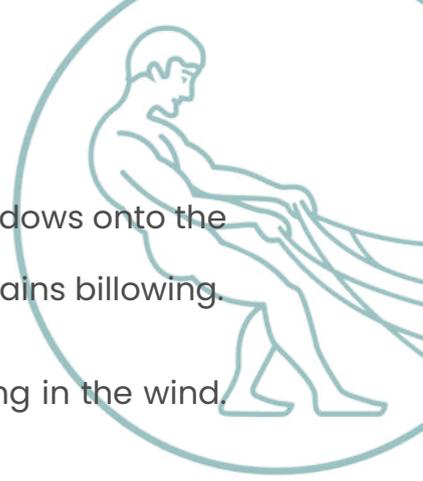
I cannot help thinking of my room in the shared flat. Because I am booked so regularly, I no longer have my own place, just a small room so I can be officially registered, store my few belongings, and have somewhere to go if I ever need it. At least thirty strangers on the opposite side of the street can look straight in through the window, and you feel watched even when the curtains are closed.

"Don't be fooled," Daniel says suddenly, with a note of ominous seriousness in his voice. He comes over slowly and stops only when I can feel the warmth of his body at my back and catch the sharp scent of his deodorant.

"How do you mean?" I ask.

"Do you see that?" He gestures vaguely past me. In the distance I see a boat. Sleek, with a high mast and white sails.

"Don't let the solitude fool you. Out there is the Baltic Sea. There are a lot of boats, ships, and fishermen here."





"That's why there is a surveillance camera at the jetty? So people don't just come up here?"

"Yes, exactly. It's mostly as a deterrent." He lowers his voice. "You see... up here it feels as though you are in the middle of nowhere, far from any kind of civilisation. But it's not like that. People are curious. You can be sure that everyone who passes by down there looks up," he says, pointing towards the sea again. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

Yes, this house is like the light; it draws the moths in.

"You're telling me not to walk around naked and to keep the curtains closed – I get it," I say with a grin, turning to face him.

Fine lines fan out from the corners of his eyes as he laughs. "That's exactly it."

For a moment our eyes meet, then he runs a hand through his sweat-damp hair and gives me an expectant look. "Right, I'll give you a quick tour of the house, shall I?"

I hesitate. Although Daniel is nice, I would rather be on my own now. These first few minutes, when I get to know the house and the house gets to know me, are sacrosanct. But after he has hauled my luggage all the way up here, it feels wrong to turn down his offer. And I still owe him that glass of water.

"Sure, why not?" I hear myself say, before I reach for my phone again. Several messages have come in.

*YING: Hey hey, I just realised you still owe me 150 euros. Think you could transfer it soon?*

I type back: *Did I not do that already?*

Then I write a message to Johannes:

*Just arrived. It's incredible. You were not exaggerating. Kiss*

After that I open the list of notes and instructions Bianca, the Waldners' assistant, sent me in advance, and nod to Daniel. I am not going to let anything or anyone spoil this weekend for me. For the next few days I will be someone else, and I will leave my worries at the entrance, along with my shoes.

