



The first volume of a new trilogy by the bestselling
Kerstin Gier!

Kerstin Gier: Vergissmeinnicht. Was man bei Licht nicht sehen kann (Vol.1)

© S. Fischer Verlag, 2021

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

Quinn

‘I’ll have a Mai Tai, please. Actually – make that two!’ Both for me. I hadn’t planned to get drunk tonight, especially since I’d promised Lasse I’d stay to the end and make sure nobody played too much beer-pong and smashed up the furniture, puked on the carpet or went to sleep in Lasse’s parents’ bed – like at the last party. But plans change. I, for example, had intended to break up with my girlfriend Lilly that night, and instead I was now wearing a bracelet with the words ‘honey bee’ on it, and urgently in need of alcohol.

‘Excuse me! I was here first.’ I’d completely overlooked the girl currently flashing angry glares in my direction. As I looked her up and down her cheeks flushed fiery red. ‘Oh, it’s you, Quinn,’ she mumbled.

I knew her too. She was one of the dreaded Martin girls, the daughters of our strict Catholic neighbours, ‘the biblical plagues’ as my father liked to call them. The Martins’ female offspring all looked the same: snub noses and angelic blond curls. Or I could never tell them apart, anyway. ‘Oh, Luise,’ I hazarded a guess. ‘I wouldn’t have thought you’d be the gate-crashing kind.’ I turned to the barkeeper and added: ‘Go ahead and start on my Mai Tais. This little angel here hasn’t got an invitation.’

The barkeeper grinned and Luise’s cheeks turned even redder. Officially, Lasse had invited fifty guests to his eighteenth birthday party. Unofficially, there were at least twice that

many here and the drinks would have lasted until ten at the latest. Luckily for Lasse, though, his grandparents had contributed a mobile cocktail bar, which had arrived just on time for the party as a surprise present. Barkeeper included.

‘First of all, I’m not Luise, I’m Matilda, and second of all Lasse definitely did invite Julie and me. Personally,’ said Luise. Or Matilda, as I now knew. Her voice trembled slightly, presumably with rage. ‘And I’d like a Caipirinha. Please.’ She tried to smile at the barkeeper but the smile came out pretty grim. My mood, on the other hand, picked up a little. ‘Annoying the dreaded Martins’ had been a kind of sport in my family for years; even my peace-loving mother occasionally joined in.

‘First you crash the party and now you’re drinking alcohol.’ I shook my head in mock-concern. ‘You’re going to make the dear Lord very sad today, Luise.’

‘I’m Matilda, you stupid arrogant...’ She pursed her lips. The barkeeper had started mixing the drinks, but I got the impression he was eavesdropping as he filled glasses with lime wedges and ice cubes.

‘Uh-oh... insults?’ Someone had turned the music up but I could tell she understood me by the way the wings of her characteristic stubby Martin nose flared with anger. ‘Stupid arrogant what?’ Are you scared you’ll be sentenced to eternal damnation if you say any more?’

She glared at me, her enraged eyes moving down from my face until they stopped at my wrist. ‘Stupid arrogant honey bee,’ she said, her voice dripping with unmistakeable schadenfreude.

One point to her. I instantly remembered why I had come over. ‘To be precise, I’m honey bun,’ I corrected her. That was what Lilly’s bracelet said, anyway. And she was constantly calling me that; one of the reasons why I’d intended to break it off that night. Which I couldn’t any more, or at least not sober and not without feeling like an utter asshole. Because – surprise! – it turned out honey bun and honey bee had now been together for exactly seventy-five days, apparently the perfect date for honey bee to present me with home-made bracelets and assure me she had never, ever been so happy in her whole life.

The barkeeper scooted our drinks over and I gave him an apologetic smile before knocking my first Mai Tai back like a glass of water. I mean, honey bee? Really? If I’d ever said that I would have absolutely deserved the bracelet, plus another seventy-five days with Lilly. As punishment. Why had I listened to my parents and not just finished with her by phone before the party, short and sharp? Then she couldn’t have given me the bracelet in the first place. Me being dumb enough to inform my parents of my plans was down to them

having grown even fonder of Lilly during the past two and a half months than they were of my girlfriends before her. My mother always adored having a girl in the house; for her, all my girlfriends were ‘delightful’ and ‘enchanting’. The way to my father’s heart was through his stomach – and Lilly’s parents had two delicatessens in town. She often brought along treats when she came over.

‘Does that mean no more free carpaccio cipriani and cep risotto delivered to our door?’ my father had exclaimed in horror when he realized what I was planning. ‘Farewell, cinnamon macarons and lemon sorbet pralines? You’ll never find a girl as wonderful as her, Quinn.’

‘Of course he will, Albert!’ My mother glared at him. ‘And perhaps another girl’s parents might have a fitness studio where you can work off your freeloader’s belly.’ As my father eyed his freeloader’s belly in shame, she turned to me and smiled indulgently. ‘You’re doing the right thing, darling. Follow your heart. But breaking up by phone is not on, it’s something you have to do in person.’

‘Absolutely!’ my father confirmed. ‘Otherwise they hate you forever! You have to be brave and look her in the eye.’

And now I had to do exactly that, if only so as not to disappoint my parents. I put the empty glass down. Perhaps it would be wise if not only I had a bit of drink inside me on my second attempt, but Lilly as well. So I reached out one hand for my second Mai Tai, and with the other I grabbed the Caipirinha, which the Martin girl had not yet touched, practically enough, having been too busy staring at me wide-eyed.

‘I’d better take this, Luise,’ I said as she gasped with indignation. ‘You know the score, no hard alcohol for underage drinkers.’

Without waiting for her answer, I began to make my way back through the crush to the living room, the glasses raised above my head.

‘My name’s Matilda, you smug little... honey bee,’ she called after me. ‘And you’re not eighteen yet either!’

‘Better pray I don’t go to hell then!’ I laughed back over my shoulder.

‘If it’s not too late for that,’ said someone sardonically, and I stopped in my tracks. I knew most of the party guests from school or from parkour, but I’d never seen the girl right in front of me. I wouldn’t have forgotten her if I had, that’s for sure. She had short hair dyed bright blue and a small silver ring in one nostril, and was wearing skin-tight black jeans and a low-cut black top with rugged lace-up ankle boots. Her pale, almost turquoise eyes were heavily outlined with black pencil. The only thing missing from the cliché was an upside-

down crucifix pendant around her neck or a 666 tattoo. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, she was pretty attractive. I guessed she was a couple of years older than me, maybe in her early twenties. As she gave a brief smile, she revealed another piercing above her front teeth, a stone glinting blue from her gums. Then her expression grew serious and her tone almost solemn. 'I'm glad I've found you, Quinn Jonathan Yuri Alexander von Arensburg.'

'Okay,' I said, stretching out the word. How did she know my full name? Even I didn't know it off by heart. I'd always been embarrassed that my mother had overdone the whole middle names thing, so I'd never made a big song and dance about using all of them. Pronounced so slowly and unctuously, 'Quinn Jonathan Yuri Alexander von Arensburg' sounded almost threatening, like the beginning of a magic spell.

'We need to talk.'

'I'm afraid I haven't got time,' I explained. I have to take the drinks in my hands to my future ex-girlfriend, and you seem to be a bit crazy. Unfortunately. Then again, I was curious. 'Do I know you?'

'My name's Kim.' Another smile before she got serious. 'What I have to tell you about yourself will probably sound bizarre at first. We haven't known you exist for long.'

'Aha.' *She's not just a bit crazy, she's totally gaga*, I corrected myself silently, but I couldn't bring myself to leave her standing there. She was really very pretty.

Her pale eyes gazed at me urgently. 'It's important. If we've found you, they will too.'

Now it was getting silly. 'And they are? Killers from an international crime syndicate looking for the secret plans an agent deposited in my backpack unnoticed last week? Or maybe envoys delegated from the Planet Metis, from where I originate unbeknown to me, and only I can save them because...'

'I'll meet you outside the front door in ten minutes,' the blue-haired girl interrupted, unimpressed. 'And Metis isn't a planet, it's one of Jupiter's moons.' At that, she turned on her heel and left. I watched in amazement as she stalked past the bar and vanished into the hall.

'She was hot!' That was my friend Lasse, who had popped up beside me and swung an arm over my shoulder, making me spill Caipirinha on the carpet. 'Who was she, dude?'

'I was gonna ask you that, man! It's your party. I hoped she was one of your weird cousins or something. Her name's Kim.'

'No, my weird cousin is that one by the window who's been trying to get chewing gum out of her hair for the past half hour. I've never seen that Kim girl before, I swear,' Lasse maintained. 'Someone from parkour probably brought her along.'

‘She wants me to meet her outside in ten minutes. I guess that’s where she parked her spaceship.’

‘Crazy!’ Lasse gave me an enthusiastic shake, spilling even more alcohol on the floor. ‘Man, you’re so lucky with the ladies! I mean, I get it, you know? I’d be totally into you if I was a girl, honest.’ He grabbed one of my drinks and took a slug. ‘Just look at you. It’s the opposites. The athletic body with the cute Asian babyface, the pitch-black hair with the bright blue eyes...’ He interrupted himself. ‘Oh, was that racist? I didn’t mean it like that, I swear, man, I love you!’

‘How much have you had to drink, Lasse?’ I frowned at him. He wasn’t one to express his feelings, sober. But hey, you only turn eighteen once. That downed Mai Tai was beginning to take effect on me, too. ‘I love you too, man. And the blue-haired babe wasn’t coming on to me, she was just... totally strange.’

‘I wouldn’t care, the way she looks.’ He took another mouthful of Caipirinha.

‘Do you know my full name, by the way?’ I asked him. ‘With all my middle names?’

‘Sure I do. Quinn Johann Mega Gengar Duke Duck von Arensburg.’ Lasse laughed. ‘Or something like that.’ Then he spotted the bracelet. ‘Honey... Oh shit, what’s that? From Lilly? You’d better take it off before you meet the blue-haired babe, it’s really not sexy.’

‘It won’t come off,’ I said darkly. Lilly had tied the leather band around my wrist with an enthusiastic triple-knot; it wouldn’t just stay on for the next seventy-five days – more like seventy-five years at least.

‘You’ll need scissors.’

Also an option. ‘But Lilly will be really offended if I cut it off.’ Then again, she’d be really offended anyway when I finished with her, and at least I’d have my dignity back. And maybe Lilly would be so upset when she saw me without the bracelet that she’d turn the tables and finish with me. Then I’d have killed two birds with one stone. Or one pair of scissors.

‘Upstairs in the bathroom, in the drawer under the sink.’ Lasse had read my thoughts. ‘Give me the glass! I’ll wait here.’ He took my Mai Tai as well and sipped at it straight off. ‘Oh, man, I think this is the best party I’ve ever had. We just have to make sure no one tips anything in Dad’s aquarium this time.’

We certainly did. After Lasse’s sixteenth birthday party, we’d spent a fortune replacing the fish before his parents got back from their holiday. We’d had to comb every pet shop in town in search of African jewelfish, chocolate-coloured catfish and Siamese algae-eaters – not something I wanted to repeat.

‘I’ll be right back,’ I told him, not sensing in the least that they’d be the last words I’d say to Lasse for a long time.

All was quiet upstairs. I’d checked Lasse’s parents’ bedroom to be on the safe side but the bed was untouched, the party still obediently confined to the ground floor. As always in the past few years, Lasse’s parents had gone on holiday and left the house to Lasse under the condition that they found it in the same condition when they came back as when they’d left it. Like my parents, they were less bothered by scratches on the parquet floor, though, than by the smell of cigarette smoke that soaked into the curtains and carpets. So the smokers were huddled outside under a patio heater, but no one had complained about it yet.

The nail scissors I found in the bathroom weren’t designed for left-handed people, unfortunately, and since Lilly had knotted the bracelet around my right wrist it took me a good while to saw through the leather. I almost threw it in the bin, but then I thought better of it and put it in my pocket in case Lilly wanted it back. I wasn’t in a big rush to find out, though. The bathroom window looked out over the road, and I was curious about whether blue-haired Kim really was waiting for me out there. I was still unsure whether I should follow her instructions, but then again, I did want to know how she knew my many names – unlike my best friend – and what she wanted from me. We haven’t known you exist for long – what was that supposed to mean?

As a precaution, I turned off the light before opening the window as quietly as possible and leaning out to peer under the porch roof. Oh yes, they were definitely her long legs in the black boots. She seemed to be leaning on the wall by the door. She was alone, the constant stream of arriving guests died down by now. I couldn’t make out the look on her face but she was drumming her fingers impatiently against the stone cladding. It looked like she really was waiting for me.

Alright then, I would go and talk to her. I could always take care of Lilly later.

Just as I was about to close the window and head down, a figure peeled itself out of the shadow of the front garden bushes and strolled along the path to the front door. Curious, I leaned out further. It was a rather short man in a coat and hat; I couldn’t tell his age in the sparse light. But since it was the type of hat I only ever saw on old codgers with dachshunds, I assumed he was on the elderly side. He clearly wasn’t coming to the party; he was here for Kim, who now leapt away from the wall.

‘You!’ she said, shocked.

The man stopped in his tracks. 'Did you really think we hadn't noticed you? On our terrain!? You should never have dared!' He had a strangely shrill voice, and it wouldn't have taken the blue-haired girl's reaction to know straight away that he was no harmless dog-walker.

She took a few steps to the side and now I could see her whole body, which looked extremely tense.

That seemed to please the man. 'Has no one ever told you there's no escaping us?' he said with a low laugh.

Kim looked around, as if seeking an escape route. Or someone to stand up for her.

Drugs. That was the first explanation that came into my head. The blue-haired girl was a dealer and had been selling on the competition's territory.

The man started moving closer again. 'You're going to tell me everything I need to know. Who else is in on it and how you did it and who's behind it...'

'I'd rather die,' Kim replied quietly.

The man laughed properly now, a sound just as shrill and sinister as his voice. 'That's a wish we're always happy to fulfil. And for misdemeanours smaller than yours. All we have to do is talk a little first. But that's not to say you can't start dying as we speak.'

The girl lunged to the side, as if to test the speed of the man's reactions. He clicked his fingers and a growl sounded out. I couldn't quite place it but it made my hair stand on end. Had the old codger down there just growled? The creepy sound seemed to make Kim freeze on the spot as well.

'You can't do anything to me,' she blurted out. 'It would cause too much of a fuss.'

That didn't trouble the old man. 'Oh really?' he asked, reaching into his pocket. Without thinking, I swung onto the windowsill, jumped down onto the porch roof and squatted on the path between the blue-haired girl and the man in a perfect four-point landing a second later, as I'd practiced a hundred times before at parkour. Not until I straightened up did I realize what I'd done. You could say I was nearly as amazed as them, who stared at me, incredulous. But there was no time for musing on it now.

'Let's get out of here!' I grabbed the blue-haired girl by the arm and pulled her along with me. The front door was closed and the man was blocking the path, so our only escape route was a leap through the dense privet hedge dividing the front garden at the side from the rest of the garden. Seeing as Lasse and I had been friends for since we were little, I knew my way around as well as I did at home, and also exactly where you could squeeze between two bushes with a bit of momentum. I pushed Kim through the gap first and followed her without

a glance back at the man, hoping he hadn't yet recovered from my surprising entrance. If we made it round the house to the patio, we could get to safety inside.

'Who is that guy?' I panted as we ran through the darkness towards the strip of light falling on the lawn from the conservatory.

'How can anyone be so stupid?' she asked at the same time.

OK, it wasn't that clever to jump out of the window spontaneously with no plan whatsoever, I realized that. Perhaps I should have just thrown something heavy at the man with the hat, like the bathroom scales. Or yelled out in a deep voice: 'Police! Put your hands up slowly and turn to face the wall.' But still. It was nice of me. And pretty cool. Talk about ungrateful.

'You're welcome,' I said.

'You don't get it. They mustn't get their hands on you, whatever happens.'

'On me?' I asked. She was a funny one. Nobody had threatened to kill *me* so far. 'What's going on here? Don't tell me it's some kind of weird cosplay scenario.' She didn't answer, perhaps due to the three figures currently coming around the back corner of the house, ten or fifteen metres in front of us. Unfortunately, they weren't party guests getting intimate in the fresh air. Judging by their silhouettes, they were a man and a woman and something that looked like a giant dog.

'Shit!' whispered Kim.

Yeah, shit.

The woman's silhouette looked pretty small and fragile, but even as a shadow, the man seemed way younger and more muscular than the one with the hat. The actual problem, though, was the dog – it went up almost to the man's hip. There was a panting sound and the beast threw itself towards us, apparently only held back by a leash.

Behind us, the hat man struggled through the hedge, something we heard more than saw. We were trapped.

The garden here at the side of the house was only a few metres wide, divided by a two-metre wall from the neighbours, Lasse's generous grandparents. Aside from a few redcurrant bushes, composters and a pile of firewood, the only other thing was the tool shed. The party's music and voices sounded quiet from here. No chance of calling for help.

There was one way out. 'This way,' I hissed, grabbing the blue-haired girl's hand, forcing myself through the bushes with her and running at the tool shed. 'Can you jump over the wall?'

It wasn't all that likely that she also did parkour and could leap two metres at the drop of a hat, but it would have made things a bit easier.

'No, I can't! You have to go without me, OK? They mustn't get you.'

What was her deal with me? Never mind, I could find that out later. So far, our pursuers seemed to be still getting their bearings; at least, I couldn't hear any footsteps, only the hat man's voice giving orders somewhere on the other side of the bushes. 'There's a boy with her. Bring me both of them,' he buzzed. 'But I need the girl alive. Let Sirin loose!'

Oh damn! Sirin must be the gigantic dog. And if they only wanted the girl alive, that must mean it was alright for the boy – me, that is – to be torn limb from limb by the dog.

We had to act fast. When Lasse was little, his grandparents had put a kind of cat flap into the wall here by the shed, so he could come over to their place whenever he liked. I'd often crawled through with Lasse back then, and I really hoped that flap was still there. While Kim snarled at me not to worry about her and to get out of there alone, I knelt down, found the handle and pulled open the flap. 'You first!'

The hatch was pretty small but thankfully, the blue-haired girl was slim and supple. I was grateful she didn't waste time arguing over who went first, instead squeezing through on her belly. Though not without whispering urgently: 'We have to split up, Quinn! Run away and don't stop until you're safe. No matter what happens, and no matter what you hear, don't come back to rescue me. Promise me!'

'Right.' I couldn't help but hear it was really important for me not to rescue her.

'Venatores, capite!' called the shrill voice, and I dropped the hatch and leapt to my feet. Were there more people after us now, by the names of Venatores and Capite? I heard a brief howl and, fearing the giant hound might bite my feet as I squeezed through the opening, I took a running jump at the wall to get into Lasse's grandparents' garden. Just in time. As I landed, I heard the dog breaking through the redcurrant bushes with loud growls and bouncing off the wall. It may have looked gigantic but it clearly couldn't tackle that obstacle. In my case, the months of practice sessions with Lasse had paid off. If they didn't spot the flap, the wall would hold them off for a while.

There was no sign of the blue-haired girl. Had she run towards the road or the neighbouring gardens? I didn't have the faintest idea. And as clever as it might be in theory to split up and lead our pursuers in different directions, I did want to know what on earth was going on here.

Randomly, I turned left and sprinted past the garden pond to the fence dividing the property from the neighbours one street back. Lasse's grandparents' house was brightly lit but

when they'd delivered the surprise cocktail bar they'd told us they were going to the opera. The lights were only on to scare off potential burglars. It helped me to find my orientation in the dark, though. Still no trace of the blue-haired girl. I hoped she'd manage somehow. And I hoped she had a phone with her to call for help. Mine was in my jacket pocket as usual, and my jacket was on Lasse's bed. All I had in my pocket was the delivery note from the mobile cocktail bar, which I'd accepted on Lasse's behalf earlier. Oh great; that would come in handy.

As I planted my feet in the next garden, having crossed the fence by a fir tree decorated with multi-coloured lights, I heard a rush of sound like the wings of a bird – a huge bird, to be precise. The feeling of being hit by a gigantic wing any moment was so strong I ducked instinctively. But when I looked up there was nothing there.

Probably just an owl startled out of one of the trees. I had no time to relax, though; that same instant, I heard a loud howl behind me, a noise that definitely didn't fit into the pre-Christmas suburban paradise, more like something out of a medium-bad horror series. The hound really had got over the wall somehow and was hot on my heels!

And suddenly I wondered whether I really was experiencing all this. A blue-haired girl, a dog-walking old codger with a gigantic hound and an invisible bird hunting me down? What was in that Mai Tai? It would probably all go away the minute I put my head under cold water.

But then the howl grew into a caterwaul, and that sounded so terrifying that there was no choice but to keep running. I could always laugh at myself later.

I legged it across a lawn lit up by a motion sensor and jumped over a fence into the next garden. In there, I sidestepped, climbed up a trellis onto a garage roof to get via a driveway onto the next road, which I crossed to leap into the next garden via the next drive, the next hedge. 'Don't stop until you're safe,' Kim had said. Great tip. Except where exactly was that? This was a strictly residential area and there was nothing going on at this time of night; the only person you might meet was a pizza delivery boy or a lonesome jogger. There was presumably no point ringing a doorbell at this hour; in the worst case no one would open up, or they'd slam the door in my face while the giant hound buried its fangs in my neck from behind. Better to keep running and get enough distance between me and the beast. Especially as I could feel how fast I was, which gave me more and more confidence as I got further and further along the gardens. Parkour in the dark across unknown, unsecured terrain was ill-advised and dangerous, but my feet found the exact right take-off position of their own accord and my body was perfectly tensed as I sailed from one garage roof to the next. The further I

got, the more alive I felt. Impossible for anyone to keep up with me, least of all an old guy in a hat. And there wasn't a dog in the world that could jump over a garage.

In a couple of leaps, I climbed onto an oak, or whatever kind of tree it was, with branches that stretched out over the next high garden fence. For a moment, I listened into the darkness and felt a wild sense of triumph rising inside me. No footsteps, no shrill orders, no hideous howls. I'd shaken them off!

Time for a deep breath. Whatever had just happened here, it was totally crazy and unreal, like a scene from a dream or a movie. Only in movies do people say lines like 'I need her alive!' and 'They mustn't get their hands on you!' And only in movies are there sounds like the flapping of wings that now turned up above me without warning, accompanied by a high-pitched screech that seemed to come from neither man nor beast, sounding like a mixture of screaming and hissing. So much for shaking them off.

I plunged sideways out of the treetop and climbed down hand over hand until I was low enough to drop to the grass. I'd landed in a garden again; by now I didn't know what road I was in but since the traffic was louder I guessed it must be near the main road. There were restaurants there, trams and theatres. And people.

Everyone around here, though, seemed to be in bed already. Even when several lights went on, triggered by motion sensors, there was no movement in the house. The screech sounded out again, driving me on towards a garage that I hoped would have an open back door. But I didn't even get a chance to try the handle. Before I reached the door, I discovered two glowing yellow eyes glaring at me from the bushes.

No! It was impossible! And yet – when it stepped out into the lamp's beam, I knew the giant dog was a wolf, black, shaggy and with its teeth bared menacingly. It had been waiting for me.

Its teeth were monstrous, and after a frozen second my body reacted of its own accord. I jumped onto a wobbly pile of wood next to the garage and from there, managed a desperate leap onto the roof. A couple of logs tumbled to the ground as I pushed off. Still no motion in the house. If the people looked out of the window now, they'd see a giant wolf galloping across their lawn and jumping up against their garage wall, growling. But stupidly enough, they didn't look out of the window. I dived onto the neighbours' garage roof, from there onto a long porch, down to a fence ringing in the rubbish bins, and back up onto the next garage roof. Further on, I could make out the pink neon of the hairdresser's salon on the corner of the main road. Like a man possessed, I ran towards Hair to Dye For. I would escape into Güngör's kebab shop right next to the hairdresser's and call the police from there. Or the zoo.

Or my parents. ‘Dad, can you come and pick me up, a wolf and a giant bird are trying to eat me up!’

The noise of passing cars meant I didn’t hear the wings beating until they were directly above me. In my panic, I didn’t jump properly, and instead of landing on the next roof, my dive ended somewhere in mid-air before it. The guttering I grabbed hold of instantly pulled off the wall and landed with me, crashing against the paving stones. A sharp pain flashed through my foot but I took no notice, running as fast as I could to the crossroads. The lights of an approaching car dazzled me so I didn’t see the wolf until it leapt at me from one side, throwing me into the road. The last thing I heard before I hit the tarmac was the car’s brakes, screeching as loudly as the winged creature. And the last thing I thought was that the people on the street would hopefully work out all this noise wasn’t coming from their TVs. But it was too late for me.