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Opening Extract from...

THE PACKAGE

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'Hello, Salim.'

'Good morning, Frau Doktor.'

Emma had waited for the delivery man to climb the few steps before opening the door a crack, as far as the metal bolt inside would allow.

Sitting beside her, Samson started wagging his tail, as he always did when he heard the delivery man's voice.

'Sorry to keep you waiting so long, I was upstairs,' Emma apologised with a frog in her throat.

She wasn't used to speaking any more.

'No problem, no problem.'

Salim Yüzgec put the delivery on the top step under the porch, kicked some snow from his heels and smiled as he fished the obligatory treat from his trouser pocket. As he did every time, he checked that Emma didn't mind and, as every time, she gave Samson the sign to grab the dog biscuit.

'How are you today, Frau Doktor?' he asked.

Fine. I've just swallowed ten milligrams of Cipralex

and spent from nine o'clock till half past ten breathing into a bag. Thanks for asking.

'Getting a little better by the day,' she lied and felt that her attempt to return his smile was a desperate strain.

Salim was a sympathetic chap, who occasionally brought over a pot of vegetable soup his wife had made. *'So you don't lose any more weight.'* But his concern for the psychiatrist was based on false assumptions.

To stop the neighbourhood from gossiping wildly about why the Frau Doktor no longer stepped outside the house, spent the whole day in her dressing gown and was neglecting her practice, Philipp had told the woman who owned the kiosk that Emma had suffered severe food poisoning, which had attacked her vital organs and almost killed her.

Frau Kolowski was the biggest gossip on the estate and by the time the message had reached Salim's ears, the poisoning had escalated into cancer. But it was better for people to think that Emma had lost her hair through chemotherapy than for them to chinwag about the truth. About her and the Hairdresser.

Why should strangers believe her if her husband didn't? Of course, Philipp tried as hard as he could to hide his doubts. But he'd done his own investigation and found practically nothing that supported her version of the events.

In everyday Chinese, Japanese and Korean the number four has a similarity to the word 'death',

which is why it's considered unlucky in some circles. In the areas where Cantonese is spoken, the number fourteen even means 'certain death', which is why the Le Zen owners, who were from Guangdong, not only did away with the corresponding room numbers, but the fourth and fourteenth floors too.

Not even the suspicion that Emma had mistaken her room number was of much help. From her description of the view the only possibilities were rooms 1903 and 1905. Both had been booked for the entire week by a single mother from Australia with three children, who were having a holiday in Berlin. In neither room was there any sign of forceful entry or a physical assault. And neither room had a portrait of Ai Weiwei, which wasn't a surprise as there wasn't a picture of the Chinese artist anywhere in the hotel. This was another reason why the investigating team didn't accord Emma's 'case' a particularly high priority.

And why she increasingly doubted her sanity.

How could she blame Philipp for being sceptical, given such an unbelievable story? A rape in a hotel room that didn't officially exist and which she'd searched thoroughly just before the alleged attack had taken place?

Emma also claimed she'd been abused by a serial killer notorious for shaving the heads of his victims. But all of these so far had been prostitutes and none had lived to tell the tale. For that was another of

the Hairdresser's trademarks: he killed female escorts who he'd ambushed in their rooms.

I'm the only one he let live. Why?

It was no surprise that the police were reluctant to attribute her case to the Hairdresser. Amongst Philipp's colleagues she was seen as a self-mutilating madwoman who invented horror stories. But at least she wasn't being hassled by the press.

Only by the delivery man.

'I didn't expect you so early,' Emma said, opening the door to Salim.

'I just fell out of bed this morning,' the delivery man laughed.

Since she'd stopped leaving the house (even walking the dog was Philipp's job), she had many things she needed delivered to her door. Today Salim stood there with relatively few packages. She signed for the receipt of her contact lenses; the online pharmacy had finally sent the painkillers; and the larger, lighter box probably contained the warm slippers you could put in the microwave. Finally there was her daily crate of food for which she'd set up a standing order with the online supermarket.

Philipp was responsible for drinks and all non-perishable items such as preserves, detergents or loo paper. But it was better that vegetables, milk, fish, butter and bread didn't hang around in his car when, as so often, he was suddenly called away and came home hours later than expected.

Recently he hadn't spent several days away at a time, as he did that fateful weekend. Not since the madman had rendered Emma immobile with an injection, stripped off her pyjamas and lain on top of her with all his weight.

In the last few months Philipp had insisted on spending the nights with her. He was even prepared to cancel the Europa Meeting this weekend, even though it was the most important workshop of the year. The leading profilers throughout Europe met only once every twelve months to pool their knowledge. Two days, and a different city every year. This time it was in Germany, in a hotel in Bad Saarow beside the Scharmützelsee. A must-attend event for this sworn band of extraordinary personalities who had to spend every day engaging with the worst things that mankind was capable of – and on this occasion Philipp even had the honour of giving a lecture about his work.

'I insist! If anything happens I'll call you right away. I mean you're practically round the corner, only an hour away,' Emma had said this morning as she gave him a goodbye kiss, while actually wanting to scream, *'An hour? It didn't take that madman much longer to turn me into a psychological wreck.'*

'Step by step I've got to drag myself out of this hole,' she'd said, hoping he'd realise that she was merely parroting hollow phrases from the psychiatry manual that she no longer believed in. Nor did she believe the final lie she sent Philipp off with: 'I'll cope on my own.'

Yes, for five whole seconds as she waved to him from the kitchen window. Then she'd lost her composure and started headbutting the wall until Samson jumped up at her and stopped her from doing herself further injury.

'Thanks very much,' Emma said once she'd taken everything off the delivery man and trudged back into the hallway.

Salim offered to carry the boxes into the kitchen (*I'm not that bad yet*) then slapped his forehead.

'I almost forgot. Could you take this for your neighbour?'

Salim picked up a shoebox-sized package from the floor. Emma had thought it couldn't be for her, and she'd been right.

'For my neighbour?' Her knees began trembling as she evaluated the potential consequences of this dreadful request if she were to be so crazy as to agree to it.

Just like the last time, when she'd kindly accepted the book delivery for the dentist, she'd sit for hours in the darkness, unable to do anything but think constantly about *when* it would happen. *When* the bell would shred the silence and announce the unwanted visitor.

As her hands became clammier and her mouth drier, she would keep counting the minutes and later the seconds until the strange object had vanished from her house.

But that was not the worst thought running amok in

her mind when she read the name of the addressee on the sticker.

Herr A. Palandt
Teufelssee-Allee 16a
14055 Berlin

Having the strange object in her house was one thing – she might be able to cope with that. It would change her routine and throw her emotional balance into disarray, but in itself the package wasn't a problem.

It was the name.

Her pulse racing and hands getting wetter by the second, she stared at the address printed on the package and just wanted to weep.

8

Palandt?

Who… *the hell*… is Herr A. Palandt?

In the past she wouldn't have given the matter a thought, but now her ignorance gave free rein to her darkest fantasies, which frightened her so much that Emma was on the verge of tears.

Teufelssee-Allee 16a?

Wasn't that the left-hand side of the street, three or four houses along, just around the corner? Hadn't old Frau Tornow lived there alone for years? Not…

A. Palandt…?

She knew everybody in the area, but she'd never heard *his* name before, and this unleashed a general feeling of helplessness inside her.

She'd been living in this small cul-de-sac for four years now. Four years since they'd bought the far-too-expensive property, which they'd only been able to afford because Philipp had inherited some money.

'You want me to take it?' Emma asked, without touching the package.

It was wrapped in normal brown paper and the edges reinforced with sticky tape. Two lengths of fibrous string were tied around the package, forming a cross on the front. Nothing unusual.

Apart from the name…

Herr A. Palandt?

'Please,' Salim said, inching his hand with the package closer to her. 'I'll pop a note through his door to say he can pick it up from you.'

No, please don't!

'Why not?' Salim asked in astonishment. She must have spoken her thoughts out loud.

'Those are the regulations, you see. I have to do it. Otherwise the package isn't insured.'

'I understand, but today I'm afraid I can't…'

'Please, Frau Stein. You'd be doing me a huge favour. My shift is almost over. For a very long time, I fear.'

For a very long time.

'What do you mean?'

Emma unconsciously took a step backwards. Sensing her anxiety, Samson sat up beside her and pricked up his ears.

'Don't worry, I'm not getting the sack or anything like that. It's good news for me Naya and Engin.'

'Naya's your wife, isn't she?' Emma said, confused.

'That's right, I showed you a picture of her once. For

the moment there's only an ultrasound thing of Engin.'

A cold draught blew through the door, fluttering Emma's dressing gown. She froze internally.

'Your wife's… *pregnant?*'

The word weighed so heavily inside her that she could barely get it out of her mouth.

Pregnant.

A combination of eight letters that had a completely different meaning today from half a year ago.

Back then, in the time before, the word represented a dream, the future, it was a symbol of joy and the very meaning of life. Today it merely described an open wound, lost happiness, and spoken softly sounded similar to 'never' or 'dead'.

Salim, who'd clearly interpreted her visible bewilderment as stunned delight, was grinning from ear to ear.

'Yes, she's in her sixth month,' Salim laughed. 'She's already got a belly like this,' he added, making the corresponding gesture with his hand. 'It works brilliantly with the admin job. You know, office work? The pay's better, but I'll be sorry not to see you any more, Frau Stein. You've always been really nice to me.'

All Emma could say was, 'What wonderful news' in a rather monotone voice, which made her feel ashamed. In the past she'd responded with enthusiasm to every baby announcement amongst her acquaintances. Even when some of her friends started asking why it was

taking her so long, and whether there was a problem. She hadn't once felt envious, let alone bitter, just because it hadn't worked immediately for her and Philipp.

Unlike her mother, who became really irate when others revelled in their delight at being pregnant. The unexpected miscarriage when Emma was six had changed her. And her mother never fell pregnant again.

What about now?

Now was the time afterwards; now she could understand her mother's bitterness.

Fecund? Feck off!

Emma had turned into a different person. A woman with a sore vagina who knew the taste of latex as well as the feeling of vibrating steel on her shaven head. A woman well aware that a single, fateful event could change or even kill off all emotions.

Nice.

She thought of the last thing Salim had said and something occurred to her.

'Just wait a sec, please.'

'No, please don't. It's not necessary, really,' Salim called out after her. He knew what she had in mind when she instructed Samson to sit by the door.

To guard the delivery man too.

In the living room she noticed she was carrying the small package by her chest; she must have taken it from Salim after all – *Christ!*

Now it's in the house.

Emma placed it next to her laptop on the desk, which stood in front of the window that looked onto the garden, and opened the top drawer. She rummaged around for her purse that hopefully had enough for a tip she could give Salim as a parting gift.

The purse had slid into the corner at the very back of the drawer, which meant she had to take out some papers obstinately stuck in front of it.

A letter from the insurance company, bills, unread get-well-soon cards, brochures for washing machines and…

Emma froze as she saw the flyer in her hand.

She was desperate to turn her gaze from the glossy photo.

Bzzzzzz.

A buzzing started up in her head. A loud buzzing. She felt the vibrations on her scalp. It immediately started itching. She wanted to scratch herself but there was as little chance of doing that as there was of freeing herself from the vice that was keeping her head in position and forcing her to stare at the flyer.

Philipp had taken down all the mirrors in the house so that Emma didn't have to be continually reminded of that night by looking at her 'haircut'. All scissors and razors had been banned from the bathroom.

But he hadn't thought about a simple flyer that came with the paper.

Hand-held appliance with stainless-steel blades.

Only €49.90. With hair-cutting function! Save on your hairdressing bills!

Emma heard a soft click, which always preceded the avalanche of her nightmares, right before they fell from the precipice of her soul.

She closed her eyes. And as Emma collapsed to the floor she fell into the rats' nest of her memories.

9

Most people think that sleep is death's little brother, whereas in fact it is his arch enemy. Not *sleep*, but *tiredness*, is the vanguard of eternal darkness. It is the arrow the man in the black hood shoots unerringly at us every evening, and which sleep endeavours with all its might to pull out of us every night. Unfortunately, however, it is poisoned, and however much the flow of our dreams tries to wash the poison away, a residue always remains. The older we get, the more difficult it becomes to climb out of bed feeling recovered and rested. Like a once-clean sponge, the capillaries of our existence soak up a black ink, and the sponge becomes ever more saturated. The dream images that were once happy and colourful turn into nightmarish distortions until sleep finally loses its battle against tiredness and one day, exhausted, we pass over into a dreamless oblivion.

Emma loved sleep.

Only she didn't like the dreams that the poison of exhaustion had transformed into horrific visions.

Horrific because they were so real, and this reflected what had actually happened to her.

As every time when she was unconscious, it began with a sound.

Bzzzzzz.

Not with the violent penetration, the heavy breathing in her ear or the fitful coughing that thrust waves of peppermint-smelling breath into her face while the Hairdresser pinched her nipples as he came inside his condom. She couldn't be certain if these visions were real memories or the excruciating attempt by her brain to fill with nightmares the lost hours between the attack in the hotel and waking up at the bus stop.

It always began with the buzzing of the razor, which grew shriller and sharper when the vibrating blades touched hair.

Hair.

Symbol of sexuality and fertility since the dawn of time. The reason why women in many cultures cover their heads to avoid arousing the devil inside men. The devil, who otherwise…

… would overwhelm, rape and then scalp me…

The Scalper, an awkward but far more accurate term for the attacker than *the Hairdresser*, because he didn't style his victims' hair, he tore their lives from their heads.

As ever, Emma was unable to distinguish between dream and reality when she felt the cool blade on her head, paralysed as she was either by exhaustion or an

anaesthetic in her bloodstream. She felt the electric blade vibrating on her forehead, and it didn't hurt when it moved upwards and to the back of her head. It didn't hurt and yet it felt like dying.

Why does he do it?

A question to which Emma thought she'd found the answer.

The attacker had raped her and he felt ashamed. An intelligent man, well aware of what he'd done, he wasn't trying to undo the crime, but to shift the responsibility to the victim.

Emma hadn't covered herself; her plainly visible, abundant locks of hair had enticed the male animal from his lair. For this she didn't have to be punished, but made to look respectable so that no man gazing at her could possibly get wrong idea.

That's why he shaved my head.

Not to humiliate me.

But to drive out the devil that led him into temptation.

Emma heard a crackling whenever the blades hit a crown, felt her head being turned to the side so he could get at her temples, felt a burning when the foil went in too deep and caught a bit of skin, felt a latex glove on her mouth, smelled the rubber covering her lips which would have probably opened to scream, and it dawned on her…

… that he waited for me…

He'd sought her out. He knew her!

He'd been watching her beforehand. Her hair when she twisted a strand around her finger. Her locks that danced on her shoulder blade when she turned around.

He knows me. Do I know him too?

At the very moment she asked herself this question, Emma felt the tongue. Long, rough, full of spittle. It was licking her face. Slobbering over her nose, closed eyes and forehead. This was new.

This had never happened before.

Emma felt a damp pressure on her cheek, opened her eyes and saw Samson above her head.

It took a while for her to realise that she was lying on the living-room floor beside her desk.

She was awake. But the arrow of tiredness had buried itself deeper than before. Her body felt as if it were full of lead, and she wouldn't have been surprised if her own weight had dragged her down into the basement, if she'd crashed straight through the parquet floor into the laundry room or into the study that Philipp had set up down there so he didn't have to keep on going to the office at weekends.

But of course she didn't crash through the robust parquet; she stayed where she was, lying on the ground floor, a couple of metres away from the sizzling fireplace, its flames flickering with unusual vigour.

They were being stirred, as if by the wind. Immediately Emma felt a breath of cold on her face, then on the whole of her body.

A draught.

The fire dancing in the cold draught could only mean one thing.

The front door!

It was open.

sorry, had to go.

take care!

A tiny Post-it note with little space, which was why Salim had written his farewell note in small letters.

With clammy fingers Emma removed the yellow sticker from the wooden frame of her front door and screwed up her eyes. It had started snowing again. At the other end of the street, just before the junction, children were playing 'It' between the parked cars, but there was no sign of the delivery man or his yellow van.

How long was I out of it?

Emma checked her watch: 11.13.

So she'd been unconscious for almost a quarter of an hour.

During which the front door had been open.

Not wide open, just a few centimetres, but still.

She shuddered.

What now? What should I do?

Samson was rubbing up against her legs like a cat. It was probably his way of saying it was bloody cold, so she finally went to shut the door.

Emma had to brace herself against it, for all of a sudden a violent gust of wind blew straight at the house, howling and hurling a few snowflakes into the hallway before the lock clicked and the room fell silent.

She looked to her left, where the mirror that had been left in the wall unit would have shown her red cheeks had it not been covered in packing paper.

It would have probably been fogged up by her breath too.

With writing on it?

Emma was briefly tempted to rip the paper from the mirror to check for hidden messages. But she'd done this so often and never found any writing on the glass. No *'I'm back'* or *'Your end is nigh'*. And Philipp had never complained about having to repaper the mirror.

'I'm sorry,' Emma told herself, unsure what she was referring to. The conversations she had with herself, which ran into the dozens per day, were making less and less sense.

Was she sorry that she'd abandoned Salim without giving him a tip? That she was causing Philipp all this trouble? Ignoring his suggestions, avoiding being intimate with him and having refused him her body for months

now? Or was she sorry that she was letting herself go? As a psychiatrist she knew, of course, that paranoia wasn't an illness but a weakness, for which you needed therapy. *If you've got the strength for it.* And that the overreactions were a symptom of this suffering, which wouldn't go away of its own accord, just because she 'got a grip on herself'. Those who weren't afflicted were often suspicious of the mentally ill. They would wonder, for example, how a world-famous actor or artist who 'had it all' could possibly commit suicide, in spite of their fame, wealth and endless 'friends'. But these people knew nothing of the demons that would embed themselves, particularly into sensitive souls, then at the moment of that person's greatest happiness whisper into their ear and reel off their shortcomings. Psychologically healthy people would tell depressives to stop being so miserable all the time, and urge paranoid individuals like her to stop making such a fuss and checking the front door every time the beams creaked. But that was a bit like asking a man with a broken shin bone to run the marathon.

What now?

Unsure, she looked at the post by her feet, which Salim had delivered. The narrow, white packet of contact lenses could stay in the hallway for the time being, as could her medicines and the slightly larger box with the gloves. The food had to be put into the fridge, but at the moment Emma felt too weak to drag the crate into the kitchen.

I can't be afraid and carry stuff at the same time.

At her ankles, Samson shook himself and Emma wished she could do the same, simply shake her entire body and cast off everything that was currently bearing down on her.

'You would have barked, wouldn't you?' she asked him. Samson pricked up his ears and put his head to one side.

Of course he would have.

Samson was so attached to his mistress that he growled whenever a stranger approached the house. Never in his life would he allow an intruder to enter.

Or would he?

Although she was paralysed by the thought that she couldn't be one hundred per cent sure she was alone in the house, she could hardly call Philipp and ask him to come back for no reason at all.

Or was there a reason?

She had an idea.

'Don't move!' she ordered Samson, and opened the fitted cupboard by the front door, which housed the small white box that controlled the alarm system. The digits on the control panel lit up as soon as her hand moved close.

1 – 3 – 0 – 1

The date they met. At Sylvia's birthday party.

The alarm was programmed to call Emma's mobile at the sign of a break-in. If she wasn't available or didn't

give the correct code word (*Rosenhan*), a police patrol would be dispatched immediately.

Emma pressed a pictogram showing an empty house, thereby activating all motion detectors. With a second button (*G*) she switched the ground-floor sensors back off.

'Now we can move around,' she said. 'But we're staying downstairs, do you hear me?' If anyone entered unauthorised, she'd hear as soon as they moved upstairs or in the basement.

It was highly unlikely that anyone was hiding on the ground floor. There were no curtains in the living room, no large cupboards, chests or other hiding places. The sofa was right up against the wall, which itself had no nooks and crannies.

But better to be safe than sorry.

Emma took her mobile from the pocket of her dressing gown, opened her list of favourites and pressed her thumb on Philipp's name, so she could contact him in an emergency. She was about to go back into the living room with Samson, but had to turn around again because she was no longer certain if she'd turned the key twice.

Once she'd had another check and again resisted the impulse to look in the mirror, she followed Samson who'd already pattered noisily back to his sleeping blanket beside the fire.

I really ought to get his claws cut, she thought, but

not out of concern for the parquet, which was tatty anyway and urgently needed a good polish as soon as she could cope with people in the house again.

In another life, perhaps.

She was ashamed that he got so little exercise. This morning a mere quarter of an hour, when Philipp had taken him once around the block before leaving for the conference. Emma herself always let him out on his own in the garden, where he did his business like a good dog at the rhododendron beside the tool shed, while she waited behind the locked door for him to come back.

The fact that the dog was behaving so peacefully was a sure sign that they were alone, at least here downstairs. A mere fly would get Samson worked up and he'd start wagging his tail excitedly. He was so fixated on Emma that even in Philipp's presence he never relaxed completely. She was never far from Samson, which meant that her husband automatically assumed the role of a guest who was watched affectionately, but without a break.

Emma sat at the desk, its drawer still open. She managed to stuff back in the flyer that had triggered her memory, without looking at the razor advertisement again. Then she decided to break from her usual routine and take a closer look at the package before embarking on her 'work'.

Taking it in both hands she turned it around. It couldn't weigh more than three bars of chocolate, perhaps less, which probably made it a parcel, although

Emma wasn't an expert in these matters. As far as she was concerned, anything in a solid container and larger than a shoebox was a package.

She shook it beside her head as a barman might a cocktail mixer, but she couldn't hear anything. No ticking, no humming, nothing that suggested an electrical item or (God forbid) a creature. All she could feel was that something light was moving inside. Sliding back and forth. It didn't seem particularly fragile, although she couldn't say this with any certainty.

Emma even gave the package a sniff, but couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary. No pungent, acrid smell of some caustic chemical or maybe a poison. Nothing that pointed to anything dangerous inside.

Apart from the fact that Emma found its mere existence threatening, it appeared to be a perfectly normal package, of the sort that is delivered in Germany every day by the tens of thousands.

You could get that packing paper in any stationer's or at the post office, if you could still find one open. In *the time before*, Emma remembered, they were closing at an alarming rate.

The string tied around the package looked exactly like the stuff she used to make things out of as a child: grey, coarse strands.

Emma studied the sticker on the front, which gave A. Palandt as the addressee, but oddly the box for the sender's details was empty. No company or private address.

It must have been dispatched via an automated Packstation, the only way of sending packages anonymously, something Emma had discovered this last Christmas when wanting to send her mother a package without her immediately realising who it was from. All the same Emma had entered an invented name *(Father Christmas, 24 Santa Street, North Pole)*. On this package, however, the address box was completely empty, which nearly unnerved her more than the fact that she didn't know of a neighbour by the name of Palandt.

She put the package aside again, almost in disgust, pushing it well away from her to the far end of the desk.

'Do you really not want to keep me company?' Emma said, turning back to Samson. In all her hours of loneliness she'd become used to talking to him as if he were a small child carefully watching whatever she did during the day. Today, however, he seemed peculiarly sleepy, having snuggled up so peacefully next to the fire rather than at her feet beneath the desk.

'Oh well,' Emma sighed when he continued to make no reaction. 'The main thing is you don't snitch on me. You know I promised Philipp I wouldn't.'

But today of all days she couldn't help herself. No matter how angry he'd get if he found out.

She simply had to do it.

Feeling as if she were betraying her husband, she flipped open her laptop and began her 'work'.

11

There was only one photo of her with Philipp that Emma didn't hate, and that had been taken by a two-year-old thief.

Around five years ago, on the way to an exhibition of a photographer friend of theirs, they'd taken refuge from a downpour in a tourist trap on Hackescher Markt – a 'potato restaurant' with long benches lined up along a sort of trestle table, which they had to share with a good dozen other fugitives from the weather.

Obliged by the waiting staff to order more than just drinks, they opted for potato cakes with apple sauce. It is unlikely that this unspectacular late-April afternoon would have branded itself on her memory if Emma hadn't found these strange photos on her mobile the next day.

The first four were completely dark. The fifth showed the edge of a table, as did the six that followed, plus the individual responsible for these blurred pictures, starting with just the thumb and ending with the entire person:

a blonde girl with sticking-up hair, a semolina-smeared mouth and the sort of diabolic smile that only small children are capable of. She must have stolen the phone without them noticing.

Seven photographs taken without a flash showed bits of Philipp and Emma. On one of them they were even smiling, but the nicest picture was the one in which time seemed to have fled into another room: Emma and Philipp standing side by side, gazing into each other's eyes while both their forks had spiked the same piece of potato cake. It was as if the image were from a film in which the sound – restaurant guests yelling over one another, children bawling and the noisy clatter of cutlery – breaks off abruptly and the freeze frame is accompanied by a romantic piano melody.

Emma had no idea that she and her husband still exchanged such loving glances, and the fact that this photo had been taken unawares, free from any suspicion that it might have been staged, made it all the more prized in her eyes. For Philipp too, who loved the picture, he thought there was something 'James Dean' about his gangly poise, whatever he meant by that.

Earlier, in the time before, Emma looked at the photograph every day at five o'clock, when Philipp called her to say if he'd be back for dinner or not, because she'd selected the image as the contact photo for his number. She kept a copy of the picture in the inner pocket of her favourite handbag, and for a while it

had even been the screensaver on her notebook, until a system update inexplicably wiped it from the computer.

Just like my self-confidence, my zest for life. My life.

Sometimes Emma wondered whether the Hairdresser had also given her a system reboot that night in the hotel and restored her emotional hard drive to its factory settings. And clearly she was a dud: defective goods that unfortunately couldn't be exchanged.

Emma clicked the Outlook icon on the taskbar, the standard screensaver vanished and now she could focus on her unpleasant, but necessary daily task.

Her daily 'work' consisted of trawling the internet for the latest reports about the Hairdresser. Philipp had expressly forbidden her to do this after the papers had got hold of the criminal profile he'd drawn up thanks to an indiscretion by the public prosecution department. They'd slugged it out for days. Philipp was worried that the sensational tabloid reports would unsettle Emma even more, and so she had to proceed with caution.

Secretly, like an adulteress.

She surfed in private mode via a search engine that didn't save browser history. And the folder where she chronologically stored all the reports and information about the case was labelled 'Diet' and password protected.

Currently the internet was awash with another flood of speculation because the Hairdresser had struck again the previous week. Again in a five-star Berlin

hotel, this time on Potsdamer Platz, and once more a prostitute had been poisoned with an overdose of gamma-hydroxybutyric acid. Residues of it had been identified in Emma's blood test too, but the investigating officers didn't see this as conclusive proof. She was a psychiatrist, which meant that it was easy for her to get hold of this product, which in small doses was a stimulant and often used as a party drug. Even easier than shaving her hair off.

The tabloid articles gave more details about the sexual preferences of Natascha W. (22) than the person who'd lost her life in agonising pain. A study of readers' comments in internet forums gave the impression that the majority pinned at least some of the blame on the women, for who offered themselves to total strangers for money?

It didn't occur to most of the commentators that the victims were sentient beings. The Russian woman who'd knocked at Emma's hotel door that night had more empathy than all of them put together.

It was just bad luck that the investigation team hadn't been able to find her. But hardly a surprise. What female escort would give their real name to reception or say which room they were booked in? In luxury hotels such 'girls' were unavoidable but invisible guests.

Crack.

A log fell from its burning pile in the fireplace, and whereas Samson's nose didn't even twitch, Emma jumped in fright.

She glanced out of the window, staring at the fir she decorated as a Christmas tree every year. Its branches were weighed down by the snow.

The sight of nature was one of the few things that calmed her. Emma loved her garden. To be able to get back outside and tend to it was a major impetus to ridding herself of this ridiculous nuisance in her head. At some point she was certain she'd find the strength to go into therapy and let an expert check her self-medication.

At some point, just not today.

In her inbox Emma found what was obviously a spam email threatening to block her bank cards, as well as several news alerts for the keyword 'hairdresser', including an article in *Bild* and one in the *Berliner Zeitung*, which she opened first. When she established that it didn't say anything new, she copied it as a PDF in the 'Hairdresser_THREE_Investigations_NATASCHA' folder.

In truth she'd taken the place the Hairdresser had earmarked for Emma. Natascha was already number four.

I'm just the woman who doesn't count.

For each victim Emma had subfolders for 'Private life', 'Professional life' and 'Own theories', but those dedicated to the official investigations were obviously the most important.

Here there was also the *Spiegel* article about Philipp's initial profile, which characterised the killer as a psychopathic narcissist. Affluent, cultured and with

a high level of education. So in love with himself that he was incapable of forming a firm relationship. Because he believed himself to be perfect, he blamed women for his loneliness. Women who gave men the come-on, but who only wanted one thing from them: money. It was their fault that such a handsome chap like himself couldn't control his urges. He regarded the act of shaving as a service he was performing for the world of men by making the women ugly.

It was possible that there were other victims, like Emma, who'd 'only' had their hair shorn off after the rape. Maybe he didn't necessarily want to kill his victims, only if he still found them attractive when they were bald.

This idea had led Philipp to the suggestion that the Hairdresser might have worn a night-vision device during his attacks to assess the end results. A supposition that Emma had put in the 'Theories' folder, along with the one that the attacker could be repulsed by the sight of blood. But he'd cut Emma while shaving her head. In hospital they'd treated the wound on her forehead and washed away the encrusted blood. This had possibly been the reason for her survival, for the wound and the blood might have disfigured her in such a way that the Hairdresser considered his deed complete.

Philipp was not officially on the case because of his personal involvement, although 'involvement' was a polite euphemism for 'crazed wife with madcap violent fantasies'.

Unofficially, of course, Philipp was tapping all his sources to keep abreast of the investigations. Emma was convinced he wasn't telling her everything he knew, otherwise she wouldn't have gasped when she opened the *Bild* home page.

Jesus Christ!

Emma slapped a hand over her mouth and blinked.

The headline above the photograph consisted of only three words, but these filled two thirds of her monitor:

IS THIS HIM?

The green-tinged colour photo had been taken by a camera in the ceiling of a lift.

From the back right-hand corner a man in a grey hoodie was visible. His face was three quarters covered and the rest could have belonged to pretty much any white adult male wearing jeans and sneakers.

What unnerved Emma wasn't the sight of the slim, average-height man about to step into the lobby of the hotel where victim number two had lost her life.

But what the man was holding as he left the lift.

'Here you can see a man who wasn't registered as a guest leaving the hotel on the night that Lariana F. died,' the article said. As it was not certain that this man was the killer, they had refrained earlier from publishing the photograph for reasons of data protection. Now, however, they were doing it given the lack of alternatives.

The usual telephone numbers were listed for information relevant to the case, as well as a direct link to the police.

God almighty! Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is that…?

Emma looked on the desk for a paper bag she could breathe into. When she couldn't find a bag she considered going into the kitchen to fetch one, but then decided to enlarge the photo first.

Zoom into the hands that were still wearing latex gloves.

Into the fingers.

Into the object they were gripping.

'*The authorities are working on the assumption that this is the Hairdresser making off with his trophies,*' the lurid text continued.

Her hair? In a package.

Emma looked up. Her eyes wandered across the desk, then back to the picture.

A small package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Roughly like the one in front of her. The anonymous package that Salim had given Emma for her neighbour.

A. Palandt.

Whose name she'd never heard before.

Emma felt a small bead of sweat drip from the back of her neck and trickle down her spine, then she heard Samson growl before the alarm sounded in the attic.

What was that?

Once the fear had coursed into her limbs, Emma forced herself not to panic but to find out what was going on.

The noise was too quiet and too distant for the shrill din that the motion detector would have set off. Captured by the infra-red sensors, a single movement would trigger a deafening interval alarm throughout the entire house. Not just on one of the upper floors.

Besides, the sound was too rich, almost melodic.

Like a…

Emma had an inkling, but couldn't put a finger on it. Her thoughts dissipated almost simultaneously with the beeping that stopped as abruptly as it had started.

'What was that?' she asked out loud, but Samson remained horizontal, not even raising his head from his fat paws, which was very unlike him and caused Emma to worry that she might have imagined the sound.

Am I suffering from aural hallucinations now too?

Emma shut her laptop, pushed her chair from the desk and stood up.

The parquet creaked beneath her feet, which is why she tiptoed her way to the stairs in her ballerina slippers. Leaning against the wooden banisters in the hallway she listened, but could hear nothing save for a soft whooshing in her ear, the tinnitus that everyone experiences when they focus too hard on their own hearing.

Emma switched off the motion detectors using the control panel by the front door.

Then she crept upstairs to the first floor, where there was the bedroom, a dressing room and a large bathroom.

She'd forgotten to turn on the light by the stairs, and up here (she was just two steps from the first-floor landing) the roller blinds were still down (sometimes when the migraine side effects of her psychotropic drugs set in she blocked out the light all day long), so it felt as if Emma were climbing into the darkness.

Bugger this, she'd go into the basement. At least there she could defend herself with the fire extinguisher that was hanging on the wall by the stairs.

'Samson, come here, boy!' she called out without turning around because she was suddenly afraid that someone might slip out of the black hole and come at her on the stairs. And then, as if Philipp had also installed a voice detector for her security, these words set the alarm off again.

Oh God!

Emma bit her bottom lip to stop herself from screaming.

It could, of course, be pure coincidence that she was hearing it again now. But there it was: the mysterious sound. And she wasn't imagining it.

A high-pitched beeping, somewhat louder now because she had moved towards the source, which evidently wasn't on the first floor, but higher up, below the roof. And the alarm reminded Emma of her incomplete thought from a few minutes ago, with a number of associations.

An alarm clock was the most harmless, but also the most unlikely, explanation, because up in the attic there was nothing but paint pots, pulled-up floorboards, a torn-down drywall and all manner of tools dotted about the place. But no clock! And even if there had been, why should it start ringing today, half a year after they'd abandoned their renovation?

No, there wasn't an alarm clock in the nursery building site, which Emma secretly called BER after the capital's airport which probably would never be finished either. That night her desire for children had been shorn along with her hair.

'For the time being,' Philipp had told her. *'For good,'* her soul said.

But if it wasn't an alarm clock, then it could only be a…

… *mobile phone*.

'Samson, come on!' Emma called out again, louder and more energetically. She was unsettled by the thought of a mobile ringing in the attic above her head. The inevitable conclusion that it must belong to somebody pushed Emma to the edge of panic.

Which she toppled over when the bathroom door slammed shut only a few metres ahead of her.