Blood Eagle

Craig Russell

Chapter 1

Part One

Wednesday 4 June and Thursday 5 June

Polizei Hamburg Mordkommission

From SON OF SVEN
To ERSTER KRIMINALHAUPTKOMMISSAR JAN FABEL
Sent 3 June 2003, 23.00
Subject TIME

TIME IS STRANGE, IS IT NOT? I WRITE AND YOU READ AND WE SHARE THE SAME MOMENT. YET AS I WRITE THIS, HERR HAUPTKOMMISSAR, YOU SLEEP AND MY NEXT VICTIM STILL LIVES: AS YOU READ IT, SHE IS ALREADY DEAD. OUR DANCE CONTINUES.

I HAVE SPENT ALL OF MY LIFE ON THE EDGE OF OTHER PEOPLE'S PHOTOGRAPHS. UNNOTICED. BUT DEEP WITHIN, UNKNOWN TO ME AND HIDDEN FROM THE WORLD, LAY THE SEED OF SOMETHING GREAT AND NOBLE.

NOW THAT GREATNESS SHINES THROUGH ME. NOT THAT I CLAIM GREATNESS FOR MYSELF: I AM MERELY THE INSTRUMENT, THE VEHICLE.

YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT I AM CAPABLE OF: MY SACRED ACT. IT IS NOW MY SACRED DUTY, MY MISSION, TO CONTINUE, JUST AS IT IS YOUR DUTY TO STOP ME. IT WILL TAKE YOU A LONG TIME TO FIND ME, HERR FABEL. BUT BEFORE YOU DO I SHALL HAVE SPREAD THE WINGS OF THE EAGLE FAR AND WIDE. I SHALL MAKE MY MARK, IN BLOOD, ON OUR SACRED SOIL.

YOU CAN STOP ME, BUT YOU WILL NEVER CATCH ME.

I SHALL NO LONGER BE AT THE EDGE OF OTHER PEOPLE'S PHOTOGRAPHS. IT IS MY TURN AT THE CENTRE.

SON OF SVEN

Wednesday 4 June, 4.30 a.m. Pöseldorf, Hamburg.

Fabel dreamed.

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Hamburg's element is water: there are more canals in Hamburg than in Amsterdam or Venice; the Aussenalster is the largest city-centre lake in Europe. It also rains throughout the year. Tonight, after a day when the air had lain over the city like a damp, stifling cloak, the heavens opened with vehemence.

As the thunderstorm outside flashed and growled its way across the city's sky, images sparked across Fabel's mind. Time imploded and folded in on itself. People and events separated by decades met in a place outside time. Fabel always dreamed of the same things: the untidiness of real life, the ends left loose, the stones left unturned. The unravelled ends of a dozen investigations would insinuate themselves into every corner of his sleeping brain. In this dream Fabel walked, as he had done in so many dreams before, among the murdered of fifteen years. He knew them all, each death-bleached face, in the same way most people would remember the faces of their extended family. Most of the dead, those whose killers he had caught, did not acknowledge him and passed by; but the dead eyes of those whose cases he had not solved gazed at him in bleak accusation and held out their wounds.

The crowd parted and Ursula Kastner stepped out to face Fabel. She wore the same smart, grey Chanel jacket as the last time, the only time, Fabel had seen her. Fabel stared at a tiny spot of blood that stained the jacket. The spot grew larger. A deeper red. Her bloodless, grey lips moved and formed the words 'Why have you not caught him?' For a moment Fabel was puzzled, in that vague, detached way one is in dreams, as to why he could not hear her voice. Was it because he had never heard it in life? Then he realised: of course, it was because her lungs had been torn out and therefore there was no breath to carry her words.

A noise woke him up. There was a rumble of thunder beyond the picture windows and the soft crackle of rain on the panes, then the urgent trilling of the phone. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Hello Jan. It's Werner. You'd better get down here, Chef . . . there's been another one.'

The storm continued to rage. Electrical flashes danced across the Hamburg skyline, throwing out the black silhouettes of the Fernsehturm television tower and the spire of St Michaelis like flat stage scenery. The wipers on Fabel's BMW, switched to their fastest setting, fought to clear the windscreen of the barrage of thick viscous globs that exploded against the glass and turned street lamps and the headlights of oncoming cars into fractured stars. Fabel had picked up Werner Meyer at the Polizeipräsidium, and now Werner's considerable bulk was squeezed into the front passenger seat, filling the car with the smell of the rain-soaked fabric of his coat.

'This definitely look like our guy?' asked Fabel.

'From what the guy from Davidwache KriPo said, yep . . . looks like our guy.'

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'Shit.' Fabel used the English word. 'So he's definitely a serial. Did you call forensics?'

'Yep.' Werner shrugged his vast shoulders, 'I'm afraid it's that asshole Möller. He'll already be there. Maria's at the scene as well and Paul and Anna are waiting for us at Davidwache.'

'What about an e-mail? Anything through yet?'

'Not yet.'

Fabel took the Ost-West-Strasse into St Pauli and turned into the Reeperbahn, Hamburg's Sündige Meile – sinful mile – which still glittered joylessly in the five a.m. rain. The downpour dulled to a heavy drizzle as Fabel swung the car into the Grosse Freiheit. Traditional indecency and imported middlebrow banality were waging war, and this was the front line. Porn shops and stripclubs were fighting a rearguard action against the invasion of trendy wine bars and musicals imported from Broadway or London's West End. Bright promises of 'Live Sex', 'Peep Show' and 'Hardcore Movies' competed with even brighter signs for Cats, The Lion King and Mamma Mia. Somehow Fabel found the sleaze less offensive.

'Did you get the message that a Professor Dorn has been trying to get in touch?' asked Werner. 'He said he needed to talk to you about the Kastner case . . .'

'Mathias Dorn?' Fabel kept his gaze on the road, as if the act of concentration would keep at bay the ghosts that stirred, somewhere deep and dark in his memory.

'Don't know. He just said he was Professor Dorn and you knew him at the Universität Hamburg. He's very keen to talk to you.'

'What the hell has Mathias Dorn got to do with the Kastner case?' Fabel's question was to himself. He turned into Davidstrasse. They passed the narrow opening of Herbertstrasse, concealed by a baffle of screens. Fabel had worked this district years ago and knew that beyond the screens prostitutes sat bleakly illuminated in their windows while the shadowy forms of browsing customers floated insubstantially in the lamplit drizzle. Love in the twenty-first century. Fabel drove on, passing through the pulse of dance music that bled into the night from the Weisse Maus in Taubenstrasse, and he pulled up outside the red brick ship's-prow front of the Davidwache police station. A couple sheltered in the doorway: the man was tall and lanky with sandy hair; the girl was petite and pretty, with spiky black hair and firetruck- red lips. She wore an oversized black leather jacket. Seeing them in this context, Fabel couldn't help thinking just how young they both looked.

'Hi Chef,' Kriminalkommissarin Anna Wolff dropped into the rear seat and slid over, allowing her partner, Paul Lindemann, to climb in and slam the door after him. 'I got directions from the Davidwache KriPo. I'll tell you where to go . . .'

They drove out of Davidstrasse. St Pauli's sham glamour now degraded into sheer seediness. The garish neon promises of libidinousness had the night to themselves

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and reflected bleakly on the rain-soaked pavements. The occasional pedestrian shambled along, shoulders hunched against the rain, resisting or accepting beckoned invitations from the spiritlessly enthusiastic stripclub doormen. Another turn: the descent continued. Doorways were now occupied either by gaunt and cheerless-looking prostitutes, some frighteningly young, others unfeasibly old, or by drunken down-and-outs. From one doorway an animated bundle of rags slurped from a bottle and yelled obscenities at the passing cars, at the prostitutes, at everybody and at nobody. And behind the doors, behind these blank, blind windows, the trade of flesh was conducted. This was Hamburg's eternal twilight: a place where human beings could be bought for any purpose and at any price; a place of dark sexual anarchy where people came to explore the murkiest corners of their souls.

As part of an investigation, Fabel had once had to watch a snuff movie. By the very nature of his job, Fabel usually walked onto the stage after the act had been concluded. He saw the corpse, the evidence, the witnesses, and from them had to build a picture of the killing: a slow envisioning of the moment of death. In this case, for the first time, Fabel was to become a witness to the crime he was investigating. He had gazed at the television screen, a vortex of fear and disgust swirling deep in his gut, as an unsuspecting porno actress performed her accustomed part with the usual insipid imitation of ecstasy. Throughout the loveless, crude penetration by three PVC-masked men, she moaned with transparently fake rapture, unaware of the denouement of this particular drama. Suddenly, with a swift and skilled single movement, one of the men tied a leather thong around her neck. Fabel saw the surprise and vague unease on her face: this was not part of the script, if these things were ever scripted, but she played along, miming heightened sexual excitement. Then, as the thong was tightened, her feigned ecstasy became a genuine terror. Her face blackened and she thrashed about wildly as her life was squeezed from her.

They had never caught her killers, and she had joined the accusatory legion of murdered who marched through Fabel's dreams. The video had been filmed somewhere near here, behind one of these blank windows.

Maybe another was being made now, as they passed by.

Another turn took Fabel into a residential street lined by four-storey apartment blocks. The sudden normality made Fabel feel disoriented. Another turn: more apartments, but this was where the normality ended. A small crowd had gathered around a police cordon, which in turn encircled a knot of police vehicles parked outside a squat 1950s apartment block.

Fabel gave a blast of his horn and a uniformed Obermeister parted the crowd. It was the usual mix of nobodies, faces blank or cheerlessly curious, some in night clothes and slippers, having dashed out from neighbouring apartments, some lifting themselves on tiptoe or twitching heads to see past their fellow ghouls. It was perhaps because he was so used to these crowds that Fabel noticed the old man. As Fabel inched his car through the huddle he saw him: he was in his late sixties, short – no taller than one metre sixty-five – but robustly built. His face seemed like a flat plane edged with sharp angles, particularly in the high cheekbones beneath the small, penetrating green eyes – eyes that, even in the insubstantial light from street

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lamps and headlights, seemed to gleam bright and cold. It was a face from the East, from around the Baltic or Poland or beyond. Unlike the others, the old man's expression held something more than a casual, morbid half-interest. And unlike the others, he wasn't turned towards the bustle of police activity outside the apartment building: he stared directly and intently at Fabel through the side window of the BMW. The uniformed officer moved between the old man and Fabel's car, bent over and peered in as Fabel held up his Kriminalpolizei shield. The uniform saluted and waved to another to lift the tape and allow Fabel through. When the policeman moved out of the way again, Fabel tried to find the old man with the luminous eyes, but he was gone.

'Did you see that old guy, Werner?'

'What old guy?'

'What about you?' Fabel asked Anna and Paul over his shoulder.

'Sorry, Chef,' answered Anna.

'What about him?' asked Paul.

'Nothing . . .' Fabel shrugged and drove through to where the other police cars huddled around the entrance to the building.

There were three flights of stairs up to the apartment. The stairwell was bathed in the bleak glow of wall-mounted half globes, one on each landing. As they climbed, Fabel and his team had to stop and flatten themselves against the stairwell walls to allow uniformed officers and forensic technicians to pass. On each occasion they noticed the grim seriousness on the silent faces, some of which were blanched by something more than the dismal electric light. Fabel could tell that something pretty bad waited for them at the top of the stairs.

The young uniformed policeman stood half bent over in a posture like that of an athlete who had just completed a marathon run: the tail of his spine resting against the door frame, his legs slightly bent, his hands spread out over his knees and his head forward and down. He breathed slowly and deliberately, staring intently at the floor at his feet as if absorbing every scratch and scuff on the concrete. He was unaware of Fabel's presence until the last moment. Fabel held out his oval Kriminalpolizei shield and the young policeman pulled himself stiffly upright. When he pushed back his mop of unruly red-blond hair it revealed a face that was pale behind its constellation of freckles.

'Sorry, Herr Kriminalhauptkommissar, I didn't see you.'

'That's okay. Are you all right?' Fabel looked into the younger man's face and rested his hand on his shoulder. The young policeman relaxed a bit and nodded. Fabel smiled. 'This your first murder?'

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The young Polizeimeister looked directly into Fabel's eyes. 'No, Herr Hauptkommissar. Not the first. The worst . . . I've never seen anything like it.'

'I'm afraid I probably have,' said Fabel.

By now, Paul Lindemann and Anna Wolff had arrived at the top of the stairs and joined Fabel and Werner. A sceneof- crime officer, wearing his Tatort tabard, handed each of them a pair of pale blue forensic overshoes and a pair of white surgical gloves. After they had slipped on the gloves and overshoes, Fabel indicated the door of the flat with a movement of his head.

'Shall we?'

The first thing Fabel noticed was the freshness of the decoration. It was as if the short hall had only recently been painted. The colour was like pale butter: pleasant but bland, neutral, anonymous. There were three doors off the hall. Immediately to Fabel's left was a bathroom. A brief glimpse inside revealed it to be compact and, like the hall, clean and fresh. It seemed almost unused. Fabel noticed that the scant surfaces and shelves were uncluttered by the knick-knacks that tend to personalise a bathroom. The second door was opened wide and revealed what was obviously the main room in the apartment: a bedroom and living area combined. It too was small, and made even more cramped by the cluster of police and forensics in it; each doing his job in a bizarre dance with the others, arms raised, squeezing past each other in a clumsy ballet. As Fabel entered, he noticed that each face wore a solemnity that one would expect in such a situation but which is, in reality, rare. Normally there would be an element of gallows humour: that inappropriate black levity that somehow allows those who deal with death to remain untouched by it. But not these people. Not here. Here death had reached out and seized them, gripping their hearts with fingers of bone.

When Fabel looked over to the bed, he saw why. Somewhere behind him Werner muttered, 'Scheisse!'

There was an explosion of red. A sunburst of blood had encrimsoned the bed and splashed across the carpet and up the wall. The bed itself was sodden with dark, sticky blood and even the air seemed heavy with its rich, copper odour. At the heart of the bloody eruption, Fabel saw the body of a woman. It was difficult to make out how old, but probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. She was spreadeagled on the bed, her outstretched wrists and ankles bound to the posts, her abdomen grotesquely deformed. She had been sliced open through the chest and the ribs pulled apart and outwards until they looked like the superstructure of a boat. The bony whiteness of the sheared ribs shone through the prised-open mess of raw flesh and glistening dark viscera. Two dark, bloody masses of tissue – her lungs – speckled with frothy, bright blood, lay thrown out over her shoulders.

It was as if she had been blown apart from the inside.

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Fabel's heart pounded so fiercely that he felt as if his chest, too, were going to burst. He knew his face had blanched white. When Werner made his way over to him, squeezing past the police photographer, Fabel saw the same pallor on his face.

'It's him again. This is bad, Chef. This is really bad. We've got the mother of all psychos on the loose here.'

For a moment Fabel found he couldn't direct his gaze away from the corpse. Then, taking a breath, he turned to Paul.

'Witnesses?'

'None. Don't ask me how this much mayhem could be created without someone hearing, but this is the way she was found. All we've got is the guy who found her. No one saw or heard anything.'

'Any signs of forced entry?'

Paul shook his head. 'The guy who found her said the door was ajar, but no, no signs of forced entry.'

Fabel moved towards the body. It seemed so cruel that such a violent and terrifying leaving of her life should go unnoticed. Her terror had been a lonely terror. Her death – a death he could not imagine, no matter how graphically it was laid out before him – had been desolate, solitary, in a universe filled with only the cold violence of her killer. He looked beyond the devastation of her body to the face. It was spattered with blood; the mouth gaped slightly and the eyes were open. There was no look of terror: no fear nor hate nor even peace. It was an expressionless mask that gave no concept of the personality that had once lived behind it. Möller, the pathologist, masked and bunny-suited in his white forensic kit, was examining the sliced-open abdomen. He gestured impatiently for Fabel to move back.

Fabel pulled his attention away from the body. The corpse wasn't just a physical object, it was a temporal entity: a point in time, an event. It represented the moment that the murder had been committed and, in the sealed scene of crime, everything around it belonged either to the time before or to the time after that moment. He scanned the room, trying to imagine it without the swirl of police and forensic technicians. It was small but uncluttered. There was a lack of personality about it, as if it were a functional space rather than a home. A small, faded photograph sat on the dressing table by the door, propped against the lamp; the photograph was conspicuous as the only truly 'personal' personal effect in the room. There was a print on the wall, a female nude reclining, eyes half closed in an attitude of erotic ecstasy: not something a woman would usually pick for her own enjoyment. A wide, full-length mirror, fixed to the wall which divided the room from the room beyond, which Fabel surmised would have to be the kitchen, reflected the bed. He noticed a small wicker bowl on the bedside table: it was filled with condoms of various colours. He turned to Anna Wolff.

'Hooker?'

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'Looks like it, although she isn't . . . wasn't anyone Davidwache vice knew about.' Anna's face was pale beneath the shock of dark hair. Fabel noticed she was making an effort not to look in the direction of the devastated corpse. 'But we do know the guy who called in.'

'Oh yes?'

'A guy called Klugmann. He's ex-Polizei Hamburg.'

'An ex-cop?'

'In fact he's an ex-Mobiles Einsatz Kommando officer. He claims that he was a friend . . . he has the lease on the flat.'

'"Claims"?'

'The local boys reckon he must have been her pimp.' It was Paul who answered

'Whoa, hold on . . .' Fabel's impatient expression implied he held Paul responsible for his confusion. 'You said this guy is a former Mobiles Einsatz Kommando member and now he's a pimp?'

'We think he may well be. He worked with the MEK special-operations unit attached to the Organised Crime Division, but he was kicked out.'

'Why?'

'Apparently he developed a taste for the goods.' It was Anna Wolff who answered. 'He was caught with a small amount of cocaine and sacked. He was charged and got off with a suspended sentence. The Staatsanwalt prosecutor was cagey about sending an MEK member to prison and anyway it was only a few grams of coke . . . personal use, he claimed.'

'You seem to know the story pretty well.'

Anna laughed. 'While Paul and I were waiting for you at Davidwache, we got the whole story from one of the guys there. Klugmann was involved in a couple of raids in St Pauli. Typical surprise attacks on Turkish Mafia drugs factories by MEK special units. Both times the premises were as clean as a whistle – they'd obviously been tipped off. Because they were joint operations with Davidwache KriPo, the MEK tried to pin the blame on Davidwache for being loose with security. After Klugmann was busted it all fitted together.'

'He bought his drugs with something other than cash?'

'That's what they reckon. The MEK tried to prove he'd been passing information on to the Ulugbay organisation but couldn't come up with any hard evidence.'

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'So Klugmann got off with a slap on the wrist.'

'Yes. And now he works in an Ulugbay-owned stripclub.'

Fabel smiled. 'And as a pimp.'

'Like I say, that's what the local police suspect . . . and more.'

'I can imagine,' said Fabel. A former special-forces policeman would be incredibly valuable to Ulugbay: muscle and inside information. 'Should we look at him as a suspect for this?'

'He needs checking out but no, I doubt it. Apparently, he was in genuine shock when the local uniforms got here. We talked to him briefly at Davidwache. He's a tough-looking son of a bitch but he clearly hadn't worked out a credible story. Just kept saying he was a friend and had called around to see her.'

'Do we have a name for her?'

'That's the thing,' Paul answered. 'I'm afraid we have a mystery woman on our hands. Klugmann says he's only ever known her as "Monique".'

'Is she French?'

Paul half smiled, looking at Fabel to see if there was any sign of irony in his expression; he had heard of der englische Kommissar's reputation for a British sense of humour. No irony. Just impatience. 'Not according to Klugmann. Sounds like a professional name to me.'

'What about her personal effects. Her identity card?'

'Nothing.'

Fabel noticed the bedside cabinet had already been dusted for prints. He pulled open one of the drawers. There was an oversized dildo and four pornographic magazines, one of which specialised in bondage. He looked back at the body: the wrists and ankles were tied tightly to the posts of the bed by what looked like black stockings. The choice had been practical and improvised rather than erotic and premeditated; nor was there any other evidence of the usual paraphernalia of bondage. The next drawer held more condoms, a large box of paper tissues and a bottle of massage oil. The third drawer was empty except for a pad of writing paper and two ballpoint pens. He turned to the head of the forensic team.

'Where's Holger Brauner?' he asked, referring to the forensic department's chief.

'He's on leave till the weekend.'

Fabel wished that Brauner had been on duty. Brauner could read a crime scene like an archaeologist could read a landscape: seeing the traces, invisible to everyone else,

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of those who had passed by before. 'Can one of your guys bag all of this stuff for me?'

'Of course, Herr Hauptkommissar.'

'There was nothing else in this bottom drawer?'

The duty forensics chief frowned. 'No. Anything we removed for examination and dusting has been replaced. There was nothing else.'

'Have you found her appointment book?'

Again the technician looked puzzled.

'She's been a hooker but not a street girl,' explained Fabel. 'Her customers will have been by appointment, probably made by phone. She must have had an appointment book.'

'Not that we've found.'

'My guess is that, if she had one, it was in here,' said Fabel, nodding to the open third drawer. 'If we can't find it elsewhere then it's my guess our guy took it with him.'

'To protect himself? You think she's been done by a client?' asked Paul.

'I doubt it. Our guy – and this is our guy – wouldn't be so dumb as to pick someone who has prior knowledge of him.'

'So this is definitely the same guy who did the Kastner girl?'

'Who the hell else could it be?' answered Werner, nodding towards the corpse. 'This is obviously his signature.'

A silence fell between them as they each sank into their own thoughts about the implications of this being the work of a serial killer. They all knew that they would not close the gap between themselves and this monster until he had killed again. And more than once. Each scene of crime would yield a little more: small investigative steps paid for with the blood of innocent victims. It was Fabel who broke the silence.

'Anyway, if our guy didn't take the appointment book with him then maybe Klugmann swiped it to protect the identities of his clients.'

Möller, the pathologist, had remained bent over the body, peering into the empty chasm of the girl's abdomen. He straightened up, peeled off his bloodied surgical gloves and turned to the Hauptkommissar.

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'This is the same man's work all right, Fabel . . .' With a surprising gentleness, Möller swept the blonde hair back from the girl's face. 'Exactly the same form of killing as the other victim.'

'I can see that for myself, Möller. When did she die?'

'This kind of catastrophic dismemberment makes temperature readings –'

Fabel cut him off. 'Your best guess?'

Möller angled his head backwards. He was a good bit taller than Fabel and looked down at him as if he were surveying something unworthy of his attention. 'I would estimate between one and three a.m.'

A tall, blonde woman, dressed in an elegant grey trouser suit, emerged from the hall. She looked as if she would be more at home in the boardroom of a corporate bank than at a murder scene. She was Kriminaloberkommissarin Maria Klee, Fabel's most recent addition to his team. 'Chef, you'd better have a look at this.'

Fabel followed her out to the hall and into a small and extremely narrow gallery kitchen. Like the rest of the flat, the kitchen seemed almost unused. There was a kettle and a packet of teabags on the counter. A single rinsed cup lay upturned on the drainer. Otherwise there was no trace of the mechanics of living: no plates in the sink, no letters sitting on the counter or on top of the fridge, nothing to suggest that this space contained the cycle of a human life. Maria Klee indicated an open wall-cupboard door. When Fabel looked inside he saw that the plaster of the wall had been cut away and a sheet of glass allowed a clear view of the room beyond. He found himself looking directly at the goresodden bed.

'One way?' Fabel asked Maria.

'Yep. The other side is the full-length mirror. Look at this.' She squeezed past Fabel, reached her latex-gloved hand into the cupboard and stretched out an electrical cable. 'I reckon there's been a camera in here.'

'So our guy could have been caught on video?'

'Except there's nothing in here now,' said Maria. 'Maybe he found it and took it.'

'Okay. Get the forensic guys to give it a good going over.'

Fabel made to leave but Maria stopped him. 'I remember, when I was a kid, my school went on a day trip to the NDR television studios. We were shown around a set for some TV show . . . you know, a Lindenstrasse or Gute Zeiten Schlechte Zeiten type soap opera. I remember how real the room looked – until you got up close. Then you saw that the sky beyond the windows was painted and the cupboard doors didn't open . . .'

'What's your point, Maria?'

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'There's everything here you would expect from a call girl's apartment . . . but it's like a set designer's idea of what a call girl's apartment should look like. And it's like no one has really lived here.'

'For all we know this place wasn't lived in. It could simply be "business" premises used by a team of girls . . .'

'I know . . . but there's still something about it that doesn't ring true. Know what I mean?'

Fabel took a deep breath and held it for a moment before replying. 'As a matter of fact I know exactly what you mean, Maria.'

Fabel moved back into the main room. The scene-of-crime photographer was taking detailed shots of the body. He had set up a lamp on a stand; the stark light was focused on the corpse, making the blood spattered across the room even more vivid and adding to the sense of explosive violence. The young uniformed officer was still standing at the door, his gaze fixed on the corpse. Fabel placed himself between the young cop and the body.

'What's your name, son?'

'Beller, sir. Uwe Beller.'

'Okay, Beller. Did you speak to any of the neighbours?'

Beller's gaze had started to drift across Fabel's shoulder and back to the horror in the room beyond. He snapped himself back. 'What? Oh . . . yes. Sorry sir, yes, I did. There's a couple on the ground floor and an old lady immediately underneath. They didn't hear a thing. But there again, the Oma underneath is practically deaf.'

'Can they give us a name for the girl?'

'No. Both the old lady and the couple say they hardly ever saw her. The flat used to be owned by another old woman who died about a year ago. It was empty for about three months and then it was rented out again.'

'Did they see anyone come or go this evening?'

'No. Other than the guy who arrived at two-thirty, the guy who phoned us. The couple on the ground floor were woken up by the front door slamming – it's on a spring hinge and it closes with a bang that echoes a bit in the hall . . . but nobody heard anything before that. There again the couple on the ground floor were asleep and, like I say, the old lady underneath is a bit deaf.' Beller tilted his head to look over Fabel's shoulder towards the body. 'Whoever it was is a complete psycho. Mind you, she was asking for trouble getting mixed up in this game – bringing back all kinds of pervert off the street.'

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Fabel picked up the dog-eared photograph that leaned against the lamp on the dresser. A worn fragment of someone's life, a real life. It was as much at home in this spiritless apartment as grit in an eye. The photograph had been taken in what Fabel guessed to be Hamburg's Planten un Blomen park on a sunny day. It was an old photograph, the quality was not good and it had been taken from a distance, but he could just make out the features of a mousy-haired adolescent girl, around fourteen. It was a face that was not ugly, not pretty, but one you would pass in the street without noticing. With her was an older boy, about nineteen, and a couple in their mid-forties. There was that feel of familiarity and ease between them that led instantly to the conclusion that this was a family.

'She's still a person,' Fabel answered without looking at the young Polizeimeister, 'still someone's daughter. The question is whose.' He took an evidence bag out of his jacket pocket and placed the photograph in it. Then he turned to Möller. 'Give me your report as soon as you can.'

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