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**Berlin Heat**

**Thriller**

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

*It's not a party,  
it is a fight.*

Anonymous inscription in the  
backroom of *Erika and Hilde*

## 1

*Arena*, the bookie's at the corner of Potsdamer Straße and Pohlstraße, is almost deserted at lunchtime. Dmitri the Puncher sits in the back and punches holes in discarded betting slips with a ballpoint pen. The screens show yesterday's soccer matches, advertisements for online betting services and reasonable instant loans. It's thirty-two degrees outside. I've been on my feet since seven in the morning after three hours of sleep, it's one of those Ritalin days, one hundred and eighty beats per minute, one of those days when there's always something going wrong, and in this heat no less. My paisley shirt is sticking to my upper body. I'm standing at the cash register to get paid out three hundred and twenty Euros for Camila Giorgi's win in the last sixteen when Rudi comes in carrying a plastic bag. Rudi is one of the regulars who turn up here every day to place a few bets, the money's gotta keep rolling in. You can't tell he's a gambler by looking at him. Summer jacket casually thrown over his arm, open shirt, leather shoes. Rudi is usually in a good mood, says hi to everyone, always has a smile on his face, a winner.

»Hi Rudi,« I say, »how's it going, got a tip for me?«

Today, Rudi doesn't have a tip. Today, he's not saying hi. He's bleary-eyed, his face pallid. He gets in line behind me, his breathing laboured through his open mouth as though he's just been for a run. It still makes me nervous every time when someone breathes down my neck

without a mask. Attila at the register is taking his time paying out the cash, he always does when he has to fork out money. Parting with the notes causes him physical pain.

»You could really spring for a couple of fans,« I say. »You can get them for thirty bucks in any hardware store. It's disgustingly hot in here.«

»Tell that to the boss, Tom,« says Attila, still studying my betting slip to find a mistake. »He won't listen to us. Maybe he'll listen to you. Tell him about it. He wanted to talk to you anyway, something to do with paying off some debt.«

»The slip's fine, Attila, Giorgi won and the odds are correct,« I say. That's just what I need, did it have to be now of all times, business is slowly starting to pick up again. The tourists are starting to come back to Berlin, they need holiday rentals, flats, and I'm the guy for that, Tom Lohoff. Better to stick to the weather: »I'm just saying. It's thirty-two degrees outside. In here it's more like close to forty. The sun's hitting the building all day long.«

»I know,« Attila says and reaches into the compartment with the notes. »I work here. Three hundred and twenty Euros, not bad. Nice shirt you're wearing, where do you always get those shirts from?«

Rudi shoves me aside, pushes in front of me. He reaches into his plastic bag and takes out an axe. A sturdy axe with a shiny blade.

»Easy now,« I say. My mouth is dry, I'm cold now. Rudi ignores me, lifts his axe. »I want my money back,« he says to Attila. »Now. Everything you got.«

»Allahu Akbar, my friend,« Attila says behind the plexiglass shield and raises his hands to mollify Rudi. He smiles his cashier's smile. »Are you planning to behead someone here? You think that's funny? I'll have you know, it's not funny. This isn't France. I'll ban you if you don't put down that axe, ban you immediately and for life, then you can go find somewhere else to gamble.«

The armchair next to him is empty, his colleague Ufuk is running errands, having a smoke outside or getting coffee. Attila knows that he's alone. He knows: When the gamblers snap and go berserk there's nothing that can stop them. Everyone's nerves are raw this summer.

»I want my fucking money back,« says Rudi and lifts the axe above his head. His carotid artery protrudes when he starts to yell, there are red blotches on his neck. »I've had it up to here, this has got to stop, once and for all.«

»You'll get your money,« says Attila, »but it's Tom's turn now, he was here first. We gotta keep order.« He slides the three hundred and twenty Euros towards me over the counter. Rudi pockets the notes before I get a chance to grab them.

»Hang on,« I say. »That's my money. Giorgi played Halep in the last sixteen, three short sets.«

Rudi turns around and goes to his machine, the second from the left. Each of us gamblers here has their special machine we prefer to place our bets on. Call it superstition, it doesn't matter. They all look completely the same, but you just get a certain feeling for your personal favourite if it got you five thousand, fifteen thousand Euros that one time, for that one ingenious multi bet three years ago. On that one night, when everything was going right. When the streak just wouldn't end. Multi bet won, goal in extra time in the Polish league and Connor McGregor defeated his opponent in the octagon within forty seconds, and you bet on it. Just had a hunch. Every one of us has had that one night. Twenty thousand Euros for the win, you got rid of all your debt in one stroke. There's land in sight again. You're on firm ground again. Each and every one of us is chasing that night. That's why you stick with your machine, develop a bond with it. My machine is in the middle, Rudi always chooses the second one from the left. Has fed it with ten, twenty, fifty Euro notes day after day for years. Now he swings and slams the axe down on his machine with all his might, with all his anger, his frustration, the pressure of his debts. Right in its screeny face. I get it, I'd had fantasised about beating the living daylights out of that piece of metal a thousand times, because all it ever does is take, gobbling and gobbling and never giving you anything back but blanks, worthless betting slips that Dmitri gets to punch holes into. There is a hideous noise when the blade pierces the machine, the creaking of hard plastic. Dmitri in his corner at the back lifts his head, doesn't understand yet what's going on and turns his attention back to the old, crumpled-up betting slips. Rudi takes a big swing and hits the machine again, now the screen splinters, a gap shows the black emptiness behind the touchscreen.

»I want my money back,« Rudi says to Attila. »Hurry up.«

»I need your betting slip, *götveren*, don't you get it,« says Attila and I know he's cursing his colleague for not coming back from his break and talking to Azra for hours on end instead. »I can't give you any cash out without a betting slip. You know that full well. I need your betting slip.«

Rudi doesn't say anything, walks back over to the cash register, swings and hits the plexiglass shield with his axe, it splits open wide immediately, splinters, breaks apart under the second, third, fourth hit. I take my hands off the counter just in time, the blade penetrates the Formica, a set of new fingers is expensive, I don't have that kind of money. Rudi is far from done, he guides the axe with both hands, his face contorted with the effort, the muggy heat is bothering him. Attila draws back in his booth.

»Alright,« he says. »Okay. Got it. You want your money. Just hang on. I'll give you your money, *tamam*.«

Rudi lowers the axe for a moment and watches Attila pull the notes from the compartments quickly.

»Hurry up,« he says and lifts the axe again. »Why didn't you do that right away, we could have been done here ages ago, I don't have all day.«

I never worried about Rudi. There are many men in this betting shop who are strapped for cash, actually, we all are. I myself owe at least twelve thousand Euros to Krasniqi alone, he owns *Golden Dolls* and also runs this branch. On top of that, I've got a bank loan I haven't been paying back in months, I no longer open the letters. And I owe money to my flatmate David, to my father, of course, to a few friends. The way some people read the number of Corona infections last winter – 12,473 on Monday, 17,377 on Tuesday, 18,874 on Wednesday – I wake up every morning and make a rough estimate of my level of debt. Normal procedure. Every day I think to myself: New day, new luck. The mantra of every self-employed person. But Rudi is a teacher. One of those lateral recruits the senate lured to the schools when there were still funds. Eighteen months of extra occupational teaching practice, training, permanent contract and a good salary ever since then. Rudi could technically gamble as much as he wants, the money will keep coming in. At least that's what we thought. I did, too. Rudi likes to tell anyone who will listen that he just made seven hundred bucks. Net profit. Indiana Pacers versus Chicago Bulls, you just have to know who's fit and who's not and invest accordingly, says Rudi. Eight hundred Euros for a match in the Slovakian Fortuna league. At least five hundred Euros net at an underground boxing match in Berlin. Rudi always leaves the pitch victorious. »I don't gamble, I win,« that's his line.

»Congrats,« I always say. »You deserve it.« The things you say. Everyone here at the bookie's talks about their wins, no one loses a word about the losses, those constant, fucking, shitty losses that cut right into your heart and that just won't stop. The losses that kill you. Like everyone, I have those nights on which I win seven hundred and then lose three thousand that same night because the ref just has to give a penalty kick in the 93. minute and the video referee doesn't intervene and ruins my whole multi bet. Even though the penalty kick is weak and the goalie grazes it with his fingertips, he steers the ball towards the inside of the post and from there it rolls into the goal. That hurts. A heart attack is nothing compared to that. Then I just sit there. The seven hundred Euros that I almost had for sure just then are gone, simply disappeared. That sort of stuff really gets to you. You always try to stay cool, to take the losses in your stride with a smile. But the pressure during a losing streak that lasts for weeks can become so

unbearable and Rudi hasn't won anything since April or May, as far as I know. Has only lost. Rudi is skint. And Rudi has a family. That's why he has to take a stand now, take an axe and go on the offensive. After all, we're all exhausted from the endless waiting during the second wave in winter, because we had long since blown our Corona benefits online when the betting offices and gambling halls were closed. Olaf Scholz can roll out millions and billions as much as he wants, we spent all of it on the betting machines by summer the latest and burnt it all. There are no loans to be had anywhere since spring except from Krasniqi. We're all in his books, sometimes I wonder how I am ever going to pay him back the twelve thousand Euros. Honestly? No idea. I have to recoup it, that's why I'm gambling. But Rudi? Rudi with his teacher's salary?

Rudi dismantles the plexiglass shield as Attila throws the cash on the counter.

»There you are,« says Attila and slaps down everything he has in the till. »You're making a mistake, just so you know, you're getting your money but put away that axe, it won't do any good.« He throws down note after note in front of Rudi. Twenty, fifty, hundred Euro notes.

»Don't take it personal,« Rudi says and hacks at the counter like a madman, the Formica top splits open, the plexiglass breaks away. »All I want is my fucking money back. You understand? My share. Everything I've been putting into this place, for years. All those piles and piles of cash I've stuffed down your throats, want me to add all of that up?«

When he pauses and takes another pile of notes from the counter, breathing heavily, I try to tear the axe from his hand. He took my winnings, my three hundred and twenty Euros for Giorgi in the last sixteen, that's just impolite. It's a solid axe one would use in a garden, probably from the tool shed in his allotment next to the new urban motorway in Treptow. The handle is wet from his sweaty hands, he won't let go, we stumble against one of the betting machines. His wheezing breath is right in my face and I can smell his panic, he has lain awake all night, kept going through his extremely complex system of borrowing and returning over and over again to find a loophole somewhere, but there is no one left to ask for money, to wheedle even just a tenner out of. And it's also obvious that he has considered and scrapped every possible form of income during those long hours of the night, from collecting returnable bottles to robbing a bank, fraud to theft, you just think of everything and the headache won't let up, nor will the sweats. And certainly not the urge to keep gambling. I've done this too. Rudi is nothing but a trembling animal, cornered, scared, panicked. You're being suffocated, can't breathe. Maybe his wife has left him, taken the kids. Those are the nights when God deserts you and shows no more mercy.

»Take your money and get out,« I say to Rudi, even though I'm drooling over all those notes myself. One grab at the money on the counter and I could have a couple of thousand between my fingers too. »Come on. Give me the axe.«

Rudi isn't listening to me. He's exhausted, empty, close to tears and finally his hand goes limp and he lets go of the axe. Attila's colleague comes back from the toilet or from his flirt with Azra. Ufuk is back in the joint, a huge man, weighing in at one hundred and fifty kilos. Attila motions to him, Ufuk understands immediately and sprints past the betting machine towards the till. All Rudi can see are the bank notes, he gathers them greedily, crumples them, stuffs them into his trouser pockets.

Ufuk tackles and punches him on the nose at the same time, it breaks straight away with a crack, bright blood shooting out even as Rudi is still falling, and then Ufuk is on top of him.

»You wanker,« he says and slaps his face. He is wearing fat gold rings on all fingers and they are doing their job. Rudi's head flops back and forth, his face is wet, covered in blood, he doesn't say anything, doesn't even whimper, maybe he's passed out.

»Do you know what he wants with his axe?« Attila asks from his position at the counter. »He wants his share. He wants his money back. Are we a bank that people pay into? I'll give Krasniqi a call, see if he wants to give him his money back. But before that I'll kick him in the balls.« Ufuk keeps beating Rudi, he just enjoys this sort of thing.

I drop the axe, wipe my hand on my trouser leg and step out onto the street. Once outside, I call the police and hope that they arrive before Krasniqi's men get here and take Rudi with them. My heart is pounding as though it was me who had smashed the joint to pieces. One hundred and eighty beats per minute. I've had enough for today. Have to guard my resources. This was my day so far: three hours of sleep, up since seven, Ritalin with my first coffee, then drove my BMW E39, which has recently developed a rattle, all over the city, the temperatures are still bearable that early in the morning. I worked off my agenda. Tidied up the flat in Hellersdorf, stripped the bedding and took it to the dry cleaner's, called the cleaning crew. Original *plattenbau*, twelfth floor, the lift never works. Brown laminate on the walls. The old square buttons for the levels. *VEB Berliner Aufzug- und Fahrtreppenbau. Fahrkorb nicht rückwärts und nur wenn beleuchtet betreten. Personen haben sicheren Stand einzunehmen. Tragfähigkeit 6 Personen.* The hipsters from all over the world are so impressed by it that they take pictures of it and post them on Facebook. They love the lift, its accordion door, the buttons. The flat is usually rented, people are lining up for it. After that, I had to go to the flat in Kreuzberg, Ratiborstraße near Görlitzer Park, typical party flat with the corresponding trouble. The neighbours have complained vehemently about the three Spaniards who apparently partied

round-the-clock for two weeks. I have two Pakistani cleaning ladies who take care of this kind of stuff but now even they've started to complain about the extra effort. They don't want to deal with this anymore either. Broken glass, dirty couch, vomit on the carpets, the kitchen a pigsty, the toilet clogged, red wine stains on the walls in the hallway. Straight after that I have to go to Fennpfuhl, my favourite neighbourhood, still in Lichtenberg but almost Friedrichshain, my father also lives there and the day before yesterday a fussy couple from Boston moved in on the thirteenth floor.

My BMW guzzles an incredible amount of petrol and the rattle is so bad as I go down Landsberger Allee that I break out in sweat. Taking the car to get fixed is going to be expensive and if I do it myself it'll be even more expensive. And at some stage, Krasniqi with his debt repayments is going to come for me, but there is nothing to repay him with, nothing, let alone twelve thousand Euros. You can't pick the pockets of a naked man. But Krasniqi is never going to understand that. If I don't pay he's going to change his collection management and send Zef and Gezim, his Albanian dogs, and that's called Tirana Collection. I really deserve a break and retreat to the gambling hall for the rest of the day to gamble and to forget Rudi's beaten-up face.

[...]

## 9

I have two grand. How can I get another ten by tomorrow night? David has money. He makes tons of money with dealing, he doesn't even know what to do with all the dough his clients shove into his hands. He has stashed away envelopes with fifty and hundred Euro notes all over the flat. In his room. In the kitchen behind the stove. In our storage unit in the cellar. When it comes to that, his paranoia about the cops doesn't matter at all, he just stuffs the envelopes behind the pasta, the packets of rice. Under the cutlery tray. Because at the time he doesn't have a better place put the money. And then his drug-addled brain forgets where he hid the envelopes. Like a squirrel that can't find its nuts again. Because of Alzheimer's. Or because it stopped caring, because it hid too many nuts, lost track. So then someone else takes the nuts. I don't like to say it. I don't like doing it, either. But when I want to gamble and have nothing left, I help myself, because I know that David doesn't need all that cash anymore anyway.

But I can't just steal ten grand. I wouldn't even know where else to look. The stashes I've cleaned out before have run dry. I have to talk to him, he has to lend it to me.

The streets are full again, quite a nice day actually, Marla is working at *Deli* today and normally, I would go and see her, drink an americano, have a chat. Make a date. The evening we spent together was great, there's a lot more that could happen between us, I think. But now, that's no longer possible. I'd start to cry if I saw her, just the thought of her smile makes my eyes sting, I'm not a hardened criminal, just a stupid small-time gambler who shuffles through the streets and wants to cry like an eight-year-old boy. Marla would just laugh at me. Marla hasn't had Zef's dirty dick in her mouth. And that wasn't all, that was just the beginning, Krasniqi's twelve grand are due the day after tomorrow and I'm going to pay, whatever it takes. I have to scrape the money together come what may. I don't know what Zef means when he talks about the garden hose, and I don't want to find out.

When I get home, David is asleep.

»Sorry,« I say and shake him. »Are you up? Can I talk to you for a sec? Hello?«

David's face looks ghostly, wrinkled and emaciated. What drugs do to you, awful, but I can't be considerate right now. He opens his eyes with great effort.

»Dude, what time is it, how long have I been asleep?«

»Maybe an hour,« I say. »Sorry, David, you can go back to sleep in a minute, but I need money. Krasniqi sent his guys, I'm fucked if I can't find twelve thousand Euros by tomorrow. And I mean well and truly fucked.«

»An hour?« David says, sits up and reaches for his Gauloises. »Do you have any idea what it's taken me to finally go to sleep? And then you wake me up after a goddamn hour to hit me up about twelve thousand bucks? After you just threatened to send the cops my way? My head is killing me.«

»I'm really sorry,« I say. »Zef and Gezim came to the gambling hall just then, they literally put a knife to my throat. They're going to kill me if I don't have the money by tomorrow night. Please can you lend me some. Please.«

»You went to the gambling hall?« David ruffles his hair, holds his head in his hands. »The stuff we took yesterday was fucking shit. But you have to explain this to me. You owe Krasniqi twelve thousand bucks and the first thing you do is go gamble some more. Why? What kind of an idiot are you?«

»I wanted to win it back,« I say.

»And? Did it work?«

»No,« I say. »They came before my lucky streak set in. I won maybe thirty bucks.«



»Thirty bucks,« says David. »That's the spirit. But you know something, I don't have the money. I don't have twelve thousand Euros I could just fork out.«

»You do too,« I say. »Don't lie to me.«

»You owe me at least eight hundred,« David says. »Just for that I can lie to you as much as I want. You're not getting a cent out of me. Get it somewhere else.«

»I owe everyone,« I say. »You know that full well.«

»I certainly do,« David says and blows smoke right in my face. I don't even bother to fan it away, it's what I deserve. »That's why I can't give you anything. What would you do if I gave it to you? You wouldn't go see Krasniqi, it's only Saturday afternoon and apparently you have to pay by Sunday night, there's a bit of time 'til then. Isn't there, Tom? You could work with your new capital for a little while, try out a new system to make more money, get a little bit more out of it, you're on a streak, after all. And you know what happens on Sunday? I tell you what happens Sunday. I'll lie down at eight o'clock at night and finally go to sleep, finally, after having been awake for three days. And an hour later you asshole are going to wake me up again to borrow another six grand, because it's really, really important, or eight thousand or five thousand, whatever, as long as David the idiot doesn't get to sleep a wink. Mate, you won't get another cent from me. Better you use the time and run away, as fast and as far as you can. And now let me go to sleep.«

I let him sleep, walk into the kitchen, search all the hiding places I can think of, raid the envelopes. And I hit pay dirt: A few hundred here, another couple of fifties there. A disgusting feeling of shame cuts through my back but it doesn't stop me, on the contrary, I'm in a looting frenzy and am becoming more frenzied still. A looter in my own home. Sick with the fear of having to face Krasniqi with empty hands on Sunday. I even sneak back into David's room when I can't find any more in the kitchen and stick my fingers between the couch cushions while he snores in his bed. He didn't want to lend me the money so he will have to live with the consequences. I look behind his radiator too. Two envelopes fall out from behind, fat piles of fifties in them. Jackpot. But it's not enough. Not enough by far for Krasniqi. I lie down next to his bed and lift up the mattress because I know for sure that that's where David has stashed away envelopes with cash. He told me so himself. Because sleeping on a few thousand Euros, he says, gives him a good feeling of having a foundation. If I'm lucky it'll be enough to pay back my fucking debt. I reach one arm far underneath the mattress. David turns around, opens his eyes and looks at me, dreamy gaze, he doesn't catch on. But after that, I'm done. I see myself in his eyes: a flatmate robbing his friend, the lowest, most disgusting creature ever.

I draw back my arm and that's the moment I start crying, with shame, with self-pity, with desperation and helplessness.

I walk out of David's room, snatch up all the envelopes from the kitchen, all the piles of money I found and sit down on the toilet with them, bawling my eyes out as I check the haul, count the notes. There's five thousand Euros all up, with the two thousand from Henne and Ronny I have seven thousand. Five thousand short. I want to avoid asking my father at any cost. Have asked him often enough, too often.

Maybe I can sell my BMW. Rudi once wanted to have it. But Rudi has other problems right now and he certainly doesn't have any money. I call Ömer to see if he knows someone who wants to buy a BMW E39. *Goldenes Lenkrad* 1995, after all. The car is still in good nick, if you look past the rattling, which is very new.

»Sure, I might know someone,« Ömer says on the phone. He's watching a Turkish tv show and doesn't seem very interested. »You wanna sell your car? Is it that bad?«

»I don't need the car anymore,« I say.

»I saw it on Pohlstraße once, it's nice but pretty old.«

»The car's tiptop,« I say. »Purrs like a tiger, doesn't guzzle much, pretty sturdy in general. Do you know someone looking for something like that?«

»'Course I know people looking for a BMW,« Ömer says and then talks to someone in Turkish for a while, the dialogues from the tv show keep going. »Sorry, Tom. Was a bit distracted. If I understand you correctly, you're looking for a facilitator to advertise your car. You want me to sell your BMW.«

»I'm looking for a buyer,« I say. »If you know someone who wants to buy a cheap BMW E39, great. If not, I don't want to bother you.«

»Hang on, my friend, don't get your knickers in a twist, I'm only asking,« says Ömer. »What's in it for me? You know, if I start calling my people now, talk to them, d'you need a car, *lan*, whoosh, awesome car, BMW E39, like that, you know, what do I get out of it? That's what I'm asking about. My share.«

»Ten percent, I'd say,« I say and already know that it's not going to happen.

»Ten percent,« says Ömer. »That sounds reasonable. I can do that. Can you give me that in advance? Can you come by later today? I'm working at the bookie's, just come by, give me the money and I'll get started. One, two weeks and you'll have sold your ride. Can probably get two thousand for it, I'd say. So that'd be two hundred in advance. Shall we do that? Are you gonna come by? Bring the car too, so I can have a better look, maybe take it for a test drive, to get a feeling for it. The better the feeling, the easier the sale.«

»Two thousand bucks,« I say, »are you crazy? I need five thousand and I need them now, today, cash.«

»Me too,« says Ömer and laughs. »I need five thousand too. But you can forget about it, Tom. Not for that car. You should be glad to get two thousand out of it, you won't get it through the MOT without spending a bit on it.« He talks to a customer, makes me wait. And then, minutes later: »You still there? Tom, I'm at work, I can't talk to you forever, think about it and then come by.«

So, to the police after all, ask for a reward. Just ask if there is a reward. If not, I can leave. There's no harm in asking.

Directorate 2 Precinct 28 is located behind the Tiergarten in Moabit. I drive there in my BMW, the rattling has progressed to the third gear by now. I shove the money I got so far under the driver's seat, I don't want to turn up at a police precinct with seven thousand Euros cash to ask for a reward.

It's an old, stuffy building and I don't have a good feeling as I walk towards it. I think of my father, feel like the loser son that I am in his eyes. The way he'd look at me now. Every police officer has the same eyes: disappointed, hurt, bitter. I push the door open, it's as hot inside as it is outside.

An older police officer mans the reception desk: tie, sweat stains spreading underneath his armpits, endlessly tired eyes. He has seen everything in this city, and he has given up on Berlin. Behind him, his colleagues are talking on the phone, doors bang, voices echo through the hallways. The place is packed like a *Späti* on *Weserstraße* on a Friday night. I have to wait, there's ten or twelve people before me pushing and shoving towards the reception desk. An elderly woman yells across the heads of the other people: »I recognised the flat, it's Antifa underground. The lefties are the Nazis, red-painted fascists, round 'em all up and then point the gun straight at them!«

Two guys in front of me in shorts and flip-flops, bottles of beer in their hands: »Right on, dolly. Get the whip out.«

It takes twenty minutes until it's my turn and it seems as though the officer at the desk has aged five years during those twenty minutes.

»How can I help?«

»The kidnapping.«

He breathes out with a quiet groan.

»Great,« he says. »Very well. Do you have anything concrete? It's a bit chaotic here, as you can see.«

»I'd like to know if there's a reward,« I say. »I mean, money.«

He nods as though he hadn't expected anything less of me, turns his head to the side and asks his colleagues: »Do you know anything about a reward yet? Are we offering one?«

»How much would he like?« someone asks back. »I can give the public prosecutor's office a ring, Saturday afternoon, they'd love that.«

»I know where that Pallatzky guy is,« I say.

»Great,« says the officer in front of me. »But you're not the only one, everybody seems to know that. Since the story made the news the people have been trickling in, and not just here, you can be sure of that, to tell us that they know exactly which flat the man is being held in.«

»But I actually do know,« I say.

He looks past me, takes a breath and breathes out slowly. »Well, then I suggest you do the following: Go home and write everything you know about it on a piece of paper. Legibly. And when you're done with that, you can come back and give it to me. And because I will hopefully no longer be here by then you can hand the paper to my colleague. And then we'll think about a reward. Next, please.«

I should have known beforehand, I think to myself once I'm back outside. I still have that taste of piss and humiliation in my mouth, and a bit of a headache on top of that. I feel for the bag with the seven thousand Euros under the driver's seat. You never know in Moabit. For a nanosecond I think: Go gamble, take the seven thousand and feed the betting machines at *Arena*, put everything on Ashleigh Barty, on Shaun Murphy, and then you'll have Ömer pay out fifteen thousand. For a nanosecond I'm sure that it would work. But then I think about Dmitri and the thrown-out betting slips, how meticulously he punches the holes in them, think about Zef's dick and Krasniqi's thin-lipped smile and feel sick. I have to go and see my father, ask him. He definitely has five grand at home and he will give them to me. But before that I'll go by *Deli* and get an americano from Marla.

»How are you, alright?« she asks when I arrive at *Deli* half an hour later. »Did you hear about that AfD politician they kidnapped? We had a good cheer. What a dickhead.«

»I did hear about it,« I say. »Crazy story. Who still kidnaps people these days? What's the use?«

»No idea,« Marla says. »They're all crazy. Maybe they'll just shoot him. Remember, that Lübcke guy they shot on his terrace a few years ago?«

»But that was the Nazis,« I say. »Supposedly a one-off.«

»Whatever,« says Marla. »But anyway, Pallatzky should be glad that all they did was kidnap him and put images of him in his vest on the internet. He looked so cute, with his broken glasses and that really moving message to his family. He'll be crazy famous when he gets out. He can sign up for *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here*, I'm from the AfD!«

Across the road, I see Zef, Gezim and Krasniqi's third man leave *Arena*. Zef cocks his head when he sees me and looks at his wristwatch. Grabs his balls and winks at me. I feel sick, the smell of his piss is back right away, its taste in my mouth.

»You know those guys?« asks Marla. »They get coffee here sometimes, they always come in pairs. They're really cheeky. Today they told me that their boss would like to meet me. That he'd love it if I danced for him. I don't want to dance, I said, I make coffee. You'll dance, they said, if your boyfriend doesn't pay. What boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend.«

She looks at me with her bright green eyes. What should I tell her? Why are they involving Marla in this? How do Zef and Gezim even know about Marla? I told Ömer and Konan that I was going to ask her if she wanted to have a game of table tennis with me, idiot that I am. Ömer and Konan tell Krasniqi's guys everything when they ask. Zef and Gezim know how to put pressure on someone.

»What's up with you?« Marla asks. »You look sick.«

»I can't even remember the last time I slept,« I say. »But it's okay.«

Marla leans forward and whispers in my ear: »Maybe I can help you. I know ASMR.«

Her voice is incredibly soft. The hairs on my arms stand up. The noise on Potsdamer Straße fades into the background for a little while as though it was no longer important. Marla whispers, barely audible, I can feel her breath on my ear, my scalp is tingling.

»What's that?« I ask.

Marla leans towards my other ear and whispers: »It's called ASMR. Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.«

»Pleasant,« I say. »Where'd you learn that?«

»I did a course,« she says. »Now I'm a certified ASMR healer. I've got a YouTube channel and everything. Three thousand subscribers.«

»I thought you made coffee,« I say. »Thought you worked here.«

Marla laughs and shows her dimples. »This is just for the insurance. Do you have any idea how much health insurance is for self-employed people every month? You don't even want to know.«

»I have to get going,« I say.

»You do not,« says Marla and sits down next to me. »I'm off soon, we can go to my place. The whole thing on top of the crane was a little clumsy, we can do better, don't you think?«

Marla lives on the Red Island in Schöneberg, you can see the Gasometer from her kitchen. Her room is tidy, flooded with light. She owns books. A large bed with a bedspread.

And she is right: We do better than the night before in the cramped driver's cab of the crane.

»Now you look happy again,« she says, just before I fall asleep next to her.

[...]

## 18

They get Ronny out the next morning at six. I get breakfast at half past six by myself, the trolley guy slides two rations into my cell. Bread, margarine, strawberry jam in plastic containers, an apple. I eat it all. Two hours later they come to get me too. The preliminary investigation was concluded, they say, the judge had decided on detainment prematurely. No word of apology. No message from Romina either. They hand me back my things and let me go. My phone has died.

The morning traffic takes my breath away as I stand outside on Rathenower Straße corner Alt-Moabit. Everyone is in a hurry, taxis speeding up on the way to the main station, lawyers walking hurriedly to criminal court, plumbers going to work. There are countless election posters on the lamp posts at the intersections, including some from the AfD that feature Max Pallatzky. He really benefited from the whole thing. Yellow pieces of paper have been stuck next to his face, they read *FREED. Your vote against left-wing terror.*

I walk to the tram station, take the M8 to Anton-Saefkow-Square, seventeen stops, and walk from there to the high-rise in which my father lives.

»Come in,« he says at the door.

The envelope with the five thousand Euros is lying on the coffee table, he doesn't take a seat in his armchair, remains standing next to his punching bag, lurking. Things are tense.

»Have you had breakfast?« he asks. »Do you need anything?«

»I had two rations in Moabit,« I say. »Ronny was let out before breakfast, but they still gave me two rations anyway, bread, margarine, strawberry jam.«

»Can't complain about that,« my father says. »That's what we had in our jails too back in the day, bread with jam and coffee substitute, stew for lunch, bread with sausage spread for dinner. Wednesday was carrot soup day, everyone looked forward to that. And who is Ronny?«

»One of the guys who took Pallatzky,« I say. »You probably startled him in the flat that night. He wears glasses and mumbles.«

»And you guys became friends in Moabit,« he says.

»I wouldn't go that far,« I say. »Romina said he'd talk to me.«

»And who's this Romina now?«

»The young inspector,« I say. »The one who always talks so much.«

»Romina Winter,« says my father and nods. »She's good. Talks a lot, but she's smart, I have to give her that. That's rare on the force.«

»Well, anyway, she thought Ronny would tell me why they kidnapped Pallatzky,« I say. »That's why I had to spend the night in jail.«

»I hear you saying ›kidnapped‹ all the time,« says my father.

»Well, that's what they did, isn't it?« I say.

»So this Ronny didn't tell you about that,« he says. »He probably forgot to mention the fact that the whole thing was a set-up. The party wanted more attention for their campaign. They were at six percent in the polls, had to do something. That's why they hired those two idiots, your Ronny and the other one.«

»Henne,« I say.

»Exactly,« he says. »Henne. Who had that very unlucky fall from the window. Did Ronny say anything about that? When I went into their room, they were both doing fine.«

»We didn't get that far,« I say. »Ronny told me about his childhood, his step-father would push his head into the dishwater when he hadn't cleaned the plates properly. That really threw him for a loop.«

»Ronny is one of the many from your generation who's just nuts,« my father says. »Generation of sissies, nothing is good enough for you. Now there has to be another Greater German Reich so that people like your Ronny can feel good. That's where they get their jollies on the internet, talking about how they're part of the resistance like Sophie Scholl once, send each other pictures of Goebbels and Himmler and Hitler, Aryan greetings in German type. Infiltrate the police, the army, think they're the country's elite. Wank off to seizing the power again, natter on about well-tempered cruelty.«

»What does that have to do with my generation?« I ask. »Are you talking about me? What do I have in common with Ronny?«

»You just won't grow up and find excuses and more excuses instead,« he says. »There's always something. Someone treated you badly. Teased you, deceived you, didn't understand you and that's why you can't sort out your life. You don't know what making a living means.«

»Oh, and you do?« I say. »You're just in a sulk because they showed you up when they freed Pallatzky. You can admit it. Are you going to be investigated because of that? Are you going to be charged? It was your fabulous idea to just break into the flat and get Pallatzky out.«

»There won't even be an indictment,« my father says. »I told you, that Winter woman is smart. Romina. She knows exactly what she wants. I made my statement and I guarantee you that no prosecutor is going to investigate. Why should I be sulking? Because my son constantly asks me for a few thousand Euros? And can't even figure out how to manage the flats in a way that lets him make a living off it? Because he spends day after day gambling away at the bookie's? That's why I'm supposed to be in a sulk? Nah, I'm not sulking. I'm not.«

»Alright, alright,« I say and get up. »You know what: Keep your money. You deal with the flats. You be the *lellek* for the tourists who want to party, pills, coke, pizza, whores, who want to go to the happening clubs. You try to make ends meet after a year where everything is closed, no one books anything, no one pays. Screw yourself and your living.«

I take the envelope with the money and slide across the table so that it falls onto the floor in front of my father. No idea how I'm supposed to pay Krasniqi without the five grand, but I don't have to put myself through this. All I wanted was to get the money to sort out this thing and make it go away and he gives me a lecture. Just what I need right now.

My father picks up the envelope, I want to get to the door, I've had enough. He's by my side in two, three strides, grabs the front of my shirt with one hand and shoves the envelope into my trousers with the other.

»You think I'm stupid,« he says right to my face. Still strange to have a face so close to mine, I can feel my father's breath, remember the aerosols, that's what 2020 has done to us. »But I'm not stupid. Take the money and pay your debt. Who do you owe five grand to?«

»Krasniqi,« I say and turn my head, »He owns the *Golden Dolls* on Potsdamer Straße.«

»He's the one who lent you five thousand bucks? The owner of a whorehouse?«

»Because I have the flats.«

»You don't have the flats,« my father says and lets go of me.

»Tell him that. I own them. And if the police investigate what happened in the flat on Rudolf-Seiffert-Straße, there'll be trouble. That used to be Stasi safe house, all the documents have been destroyed. What am I supposed to tell them about who I got the flat from? Why it is



being used as a holiday rental? So that my son can keep gambling in peace? Take the money and pay Krasniqi.«

He gives me a shove, making me stumble against the door frame, he points a finger to my face. »On the one and only condition that you never show your face here again. I'm over it. I don't need visitors that I know full well are going to cost me another five grand and another three the next time if I open the door.«

»I'm sorry,« I say.

»You don't have to be sorry,« he says. »It always worked. You're a gambler, an addict, I got that. And it won't get better, especially not if I keep giving you money every other week. You probably had a difficult childhood, traumatic experiences, it's not your fault at all. And now get out.«

»Thanks for the money, I really won't gamble again,« I say. He doesn't answer and I leave. Close the door behind me, run down the stairs, my legs are trembling with shame. Thrown out by my own father, fobbed off with five thousand bucks. Despite the fact that I just got out of custody and my clothes still smell like jail. What an incredibly awesome start to the day. It can only get better from here on out.

I have to walk past number 33 on Rudolf-Seiffert-Straße, red and white police tape that is flapping in the wind now has been stuck to the living room window up on the thirteenth floor. I'll have to take care of that. One thing after the other. Pay my debt, call a glazier, look for Marla. If I had a Ritalin in my pocket, I'd take it right about now, just to get into gear, but they took my last two pills at intake in Moabit, didn't even ask if they're medication. I feel sorry for my father, he screwed up his life himself, he could have come clean about working for the Stasi, then he wouldn't walk around all bitter today.

I take the tram to Alexanderplatz, the cars are full, women are fanning themselves with air, the dogs at their feet pant with exhaustion. I think about the fat woman with her dog in Dragana's gambling hall, she no longer takes the tram. She drags herself to the gambling hall every morning and buys her time off there until she runs out of money. Maybe I should stop by sometime too, after all, I've got the money now.

The Saharan heat vaults over the city. The image of a jackpot builds up in my head. The winner takes it all. Just one last big bet at *Arena* and take it all in one stroke. Walk over to the counter not with an axe but with my betting slips and hand them over to Attila and Ömer: eighteen thousand, twenty thousand Euros, payable right away, hurry up. Sabah Homasi the clear winner in the MMA fight against Curtis Millender, Osasuna wins 3:1 against Alavés, Camila Giorgi's streak continues. Let me have a look at who's playing in the second division

right now, live bets with an anticipation strategy are the best, feel the momentum of a match, when it turns, when the goal has to be scored. I'm good at that, can read a match like no one else. And now I have capital available for once, five thousand in my pocket, seven thousand under the driver's seat in my car. Win big just once. Then I could pay Krasniqi and would still have twelve thousand left to repay my father. Just hand them over at the door without saying a word. And then I'd still have a few thousand for myself, could put the notes back in David's envelopes, he'd be none the wiser.

»Cute,« Zef says when I get to the back entrance of *Golden Dolls* an hour later. I didn't go to *Arena*, didn't bet anything. Kept walking, got the money from the BMW, two fat envelopes in my pockets, and walked past *Arena* one more time. Nobody knows what that cost me. A small, bitter victory. Maybe it really is stupid. Should have tried. Dunno. Zef is wearing Puma shorts, a Milwaukee Bucks jersey, Adidas slippers with white socks. »What do you want? Need another filling?«

»I want to see Krasniqi,« I say, not looking at him, just the smell of his sweat is enough. We will never be friends now, Zef and I.

»Today is Tuesday,« Zef says and picks his teeth with his pinkie, looks at the nail, spits. »The boss isn't in today. But on Sunday, you know, he was waiting for you, asked: What about Tom Lohoff, didn't we have an appointment? We agreed on eleven, didn't we? Why has the boy not shown up, Krasniqi said. I didn't know what to tell him.«

»I got held up,« I say. »But now I've got the money with me.«

»That's great,« says Zef. »You can give it to me, I'll pass it on when he gets back.«

»I'd prefer to give it to him myself,« I say.

»Don't you trust me?« he says and stands right in front of me. »Are you implying that I might keep some of that money?« He gives me a slight shove. »Do you think I'm lying to you when I say that I'll give him the money?«

»When will he be back?«

»How should I know?« says Zef. »You know, you're starting to get on my nerves. It's, like, your tone of voice, you know, so condescending. Am I your lackey? Where is Krasniqi, when will Krasniqi be back. Fetch me this, fetch me that.«

»I would just like to repay my debt,« I say. »You are right, I'm overdue.«

»Yes, you are,« he says. »We had agreed on Sunday. Personally, I don't care, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. I know where to find you. But Krasniqi takes this kind of stuff personally, he gets in a bad mood, he feels disrespected and that affects the whole team.«

»Is there any way I can reach him?« I ask.

»You can suck my dick, that's what you can do,« Zef says. »I know you're good at that, you the kind of sucker who really knows what they're doing. Over at Dragana's, you liked that, didn't you? That's why you drop in two days late to get another filling from good, old Zef.«

»No,« I say. »You know, I'll come back tonight, maybe he'll be here then.«

»Exactly,« Zef says. »Come back tonight. I'll get out the rubber hose.«

I walk back down Potsdamer Straße, twelve thousand Euros in my pocket, back past *Arena*, the World Snooker Championship is being held at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield and Ronnie O'Sullivan has been undefeated for twenty-three games, but every streak ends at some point, the odds are incredibly good. Forget it, Tom. Never gamble again.

»Where have you been?« asks Denise, who is clearing away the dishes from the tables in front of *Deli*. »Marla tried calling you over and over on Sunday. She's normally so cool but she cried then.«

»My phone's flat,« I say. »Where is she?«

»Where she is?« Denise retorts, standing there with the plates and cups in her hands, and looks at me. »I'd like to know that myself. She was meant to do the morning shift today and didn't show up. Didn't get in touch, doesn't answer her phone. And yesterday she left after just half a shift, just dropped everything right then and there, gapped it. Did you guys fight or something?«

»I haven't even seen her,« I say.

»Before I forget,« says Denise. »The guy from the bookie's, the one who always walks on his heels and punches holes in the betting slips ...«

»Dmitri,« I say. »What about him?«

»Right,« says Denise. »He came over yesterday and said that you should come and see him.«

She puts the coffee cups into a plastic tub. The place is full, as always, there are beads of sweat on her forehead. There are two guys behind me wearing designer shirts by Murkudis. »That's more of a sanity item,« one of them says. »Put a little more brainwork into it and push your other to-dos back.«

»By the way, this is not your office,« says Denise. »And I am not, I repeat: not your secretary. David was here too. Asked about you, seemed a little tense, I'd say. And the two guys from the night club up the street, they came by too.«

She disappears behind the counter because her colleague can't keep up at the till. The coffee machine is grinding. The Rainbirds with *Blueprint* are playing. I go outside. Where is Marla, what's this all about?

Zef is standing outside. Still in his Adidas slippers, but he must have hurried, because his forehead and his temples are wet. He is wearing mirrored sunglasses, looks annoyed.

»And now I'm chasing after you,« he says, »like I'm your errand boy.«

»You're not,« I say.

»No, I'm not,« he replies. »I'm Krasniqi's errand boy, he has been asking for you. He wants to see you after all, at the Ritz-Carlton. You gotta get over there.«

»I was going to visit a friend,« I say.

»Right now,« Zef says. »And no need to look for your friend, she's with him. Marla is his new girl. We went and got her because you didn't pay. An appointment is an appointment. You can't take us for idiots, we get what's owed to us and if we don't, we go get something else. Marla was only meant to be collateral until you paid but now Krasniqi likes her so much he wants to keep her. He still wants the money, though, so if I were you, I'd start running. Right about now.«

[...]

## 24

Twenty, thirty homeless people are camping at the back of the Brandenburg Gate towards the Tiergarten. They have pushed together their shopping trolleys and suitcases on wheels and put up a tarpaulin. Their little fortress. During the Corona winter they were lying in sleeping bags along the side streets all over Berlin, their mattress snuggled up against the walls of the houses, slept in tent at the bank of the Landwehr Canal. People left them alone. Now people preferred it if they disappeared from the cityscape, but they keep coming back.

Hundreds of tourists are strolling across Pariser Platz this evening, most of them in T-shirts and shorts, tops and sandals. Buskers are playing *Yesterday* by the Beatles and other evergreens, rickshaw drivers are waiting for customers, cabs are pulling up in front of the *Adlon*. The square is lit by nostalgic streetlamps, the insides of the Gate's columns are illuminated by subdued lights.

The first shot is fired at twenty past nine. A few women scream. Most people believe it's fireworks, I am one of them. Then a Latin American father collapses, his children try to

support him, red stains are spreading on his white polo shirt. His wife puts her hand over her mouth, her hat slides off her shoulders. A group of helpers quickly gathers around the family. Someone is frantically calling an ambulance, another the police.

Barely two minutes later the second shot whips across the square. An evil, cracking sound, definitely not a firecracker from Poland. Shortly after that the next. Screams and shrill cries for help waft across the square, interrupted by more shots, now in quick succession. I look at the smartphone Ronny gave me and see the events taking place on the square, streaming live on Facebook. It's filmed from a bird's eye perspective, it turns from side to side, following the fleeing people, and the next shot is fired. And the next. I hear the shooter's laughter, Ronny's quiet voice. His breath. He is talking to himself, barely audible.

I call Romina, know her number by heart.

»Ronny is on top of the Brandenburg Gate,« I say. »He is randomly shooting into the crowd. And he is streaming it on Facebook.«

»Where are you?« she asks.

»I'm there,« I say as the next shot is fired. My body tenses up with shock, no idea where to find safety now. A strong urge to run, to flee somehow, but it's the people who run across the square that are getting hit, collapse as they run, hit the ground.

»I'm standing right inside the Brandenburg Gate. He wants me to be there. Everyone is panicking, he has fired eight or nine shots.«

»I'll pass that on,« says Romina. »We'll get him down from there. Just leave. Get far away from there.«

Police sirens flare up, three cars reach the square and are joined by more coming from Unter den Linden. They take over the square within a few minutes, nobody pays any attention to the Brandenburg Gate. As I make to disappear into the Tiergarten, I see Ronny lowering himself down on a rope at the back of the Gate. Two tourists are filming him. He is wearing Russian camouflage, has a weapon strapped to his back, a camera on his cap, needs all but five seconds to reach the ground. Just two meters from where I am he starts running down Ebertstraße towards the Holocaust Memorial.

My phone rings. »What's happening,« Romina says, »talk to me. Where is he?«

»He's come down,« I say. »Where are you guys? He is running towards the Holocaust Memorial, a machine gun on his back, maybe he's got something in his hand, I can't see it.«

»To the Holocaust Memorial ... ,« she says. »Oh, please no.«

»You can watch it on Facebook,« I say. »I'll send you the link.«

»You can't send a link to a 3310,« says Romina. »Let me give you another number.«

Cars are starting to jam on Ebertstraße, some drivers stop to see what's happening, want to take pictures. The ones behind them honk their horns, urging them on. A woman runs past me: »Do something!«

I take off after Ronny. He jogs fast, takes the machine gun from his back as he turns onto the area of the Holocaust Memorial to disappear among the concrete slabs.

Two security guards make a beeline for him, Ronny shoots immediately while running, they stagger sideways, fall. His shape becomes smaller as he delves into the sea of stelae, he shoves children aside, fires two shots at random in the narrow passages, people seek shelter on the concrete blocks. Then he disappears from view. Gone. It's impossible to find him down there, all I see are the flickering images taken by the camera on his cap, stele after stele glides by. His mumbling voice: »Awesome here, in the heart of the guilt cult ... a world-famous sight ... get to be an absolute beast today ... you'll see ... keep watching ... it's worth it.«

I don't follow him into the labyrinth of the thousands upon thousands of stelae and wait for him on Hannah-Arendt-Straße instead, because now I know his real destination.

He reappears after three or four minutes, keeps running. He is on the way to the ›Hitler parking lot‹. The machine gun is strapped to his back again. The area is called Hinter den Ministergärten, behind the ministers' gardens, prominent figures of the GDR used to live here in luxurious prefab buildings, Katharina Witt, mid-level party bigwigs. That was a long time ago, some of them still live here, now retired. The row of houses is run down. A boom gate separates the private parking lot from the street, there is one of those dark yellow charity collection bins on the corner, a deserted playground. The people who live here don't have children, only grandchildren at most.

Hitler's bunker, where he waited out the last days of the war with his people, is located underneath this parking lot. Of course, nobody talks about it, but everyone knows. A secret tourist attraction. The City of Berlin wants nothing to do with it, but the tourists love this place, not the neo-Nazis but normal mainstream tourists with their Starbucks cups. Six, seven years ago, I used to give guided tours for tourists here, easy money. A new group every thirty minutes, half giddy, half reverent. Americans, Brits, Brazilians, Argentinians, even people from Japan and South Korea. They gather around you as you describe Hitler's last days in the bunker in a dramatically lowered voice. »He moves slowly, his left hand is trembling heavily. He is suffering from gastric distress and severe flatulence. The airstrikes are raging above the city. He hopes for relief, screams at his generals. Then no one can get through anymore. Hanna Reitsch wants to fly him out, he refuses. On April 29, he marries Eva Braun. On the first day of their marriage, he gives Eva the capsule with the poison and shoots himself. At that point,

the bunker is already under heavy artillery fire from the Red Army. His body is dragged outside by the bodyguards. Covered in petrol by Günsche, his adjutant, and set alight. Just like the corpses of his two dogs.« At the time, I knew this by heart, did eight to ten tours a day. You can always make money off Hitler. For the tourists he is simply a creepy pop star like Dracula is in the Carpathian Mountains. Hitler's parking lot is a must-do when visiting Berlin.

That's where Ronny is going. The sirens grow quieter, all the officers are gathering at Pariser Platz, I hear Ronny's panting as he runs via the stream, his laughter. He is muttering under his breath, no idea how many of his guys are following him online, celebrating him. »You can all get fucked. The white anger rages within us. You'll never forget me. Never. This is how we purge the fatherland.«

The Boeing 747-400 is back in my stomach, rolls onto the runway slowly, gets clearance from the tower. The engines are glowing, two hundred and seventeen thousand litres of kerosene on board, that'll be enough. I run after him, I don't care if he notices me or not, I want to finish him. Kill him. Somehow. Just don't know how yet. My rage is only just building up. Ronny is thirty metres ahead of me and much faster despite the weapons, he has been training for weeks, months, maybe even years, has prepared himself for this moment. The tourists make way as he sprints past them, most of them think his run in this getup with weapons is part of a movie scene, a few film him with their mobile phones. There's always something going on in Berlin, it's crazy.

The air is stagnant on the parking lot behind the minister's gardens. Ronny reaches the charity collection bin rusting away in the sun, kneels down in one fluid movement, takes the machine gun from his back, releases the safety and shoots aimlessly into the group of tourists. They scatter in panic, fall down, hit, scream, get up, keep running, fall again. I see the images taking place just twenty steps from me on the Facebook channel and in real life at the same time as I run. I dial Romina's number.

»He's on the Hitler parking lot, shooting into the crowd, I'll be with him in a sec.«

Before she can say anything, I throw away the phone and start sprinting towards Ronny's back to pin him to the ground, separate him from the rat-a-tat of the gun. The Boeing 747-400 speeds up to three hundred kilometres per hour, full engine power. The air is burning in my lungs, I can hear my shoes hitting the pavement, faster, faster. The tourists scream, run onto the street in mortal fear, cars break abruptly, honk their horns, the injured, bleeding bodies hit bonnets and windscreens, a car hits the Mini in front of it at full tilt.

When I am still ten metres away from him, Ronny puts down his machine gun, reaches into a compartment at the side of the charity collection bin with soldier-like serenity, takes out a bottle of water and unscrews it.

I run as fast as I physically can.

Ronny pours the liquid over his head, his body, as though he was going to take a shower, he lifts his arms and I see the lighter in his hand when I'm just five metres away. Can virtually hear the scraping of the flint. Hear Ronny's raspy voice as he yells: »We have to die so that Germany may live.«

A blaze.

Take-off.

Ronny throws his right arm in the air to give a Nazi salute right when I reach him and drag him to the ground. The fire envelops us both. I smell the sharp odour of the accelerant he has doused his combat gear with immediately. It's too wet to burn properly. Instead, his skin is on fire, the heat fuses the remains of his hair with his scalp, the eyebrows, the eyelids, his nose are melting away. His eyes look at me, it's only now that he realises what he has done. I don't feel any pain yet only anger and despair, but I know that the pain is going to hit soon and mercilessly, as I roll myself off to the side, try to extinguish the flames on my shirt.

Around us the piercing screams of the women, men bellowing in panic. They pour water from their drink bottles on us helplessly. Ronny tries to get off the ground, to get up, he reaches for his gun, wants to die with a gun in his raised hand, be a role model for his guys, become immortal with this final image.

But instead, he begins to scream. He doubles over under the sheer force of the flames, a blazing torch, a screeching torch that takes three steps, swaying unsteadily, the crowd moves away from him. He turns around, bumps into the charity collection bin blindly, calls for his mother.

»Mummy ... my ... Führer ... German ...«

I curl up, don't want to see any more. Someone puts a blanket over me and pats it to smother the flames. Underneath the blanket I hear the shrill cries of the women and Ronny's shrieking. »Führer ... Mummy ...«

At that moment the pain sets in, burns through my body, makes me want to leave my body, peel away my skin to escape the pain. But I stay even though the pain escalates. My hands feel as though they had gripped glowing embers and couldn't let go of them. My chest is ablaze from the inside as though I had swallowed fire and could never put it out again.



Ronny's screams are getting quieter, now he just whimpers, a dying animal. An animal that dies in agony. Ambulance and police sirens flare up, the crowd answers when they come closer and stop, I hear men approaching, sharp cries.

»Here's another one.«

»Don't touch him, we'll do that.«

The blanket that covers me is lifted carefully, two paramedics, young guys, look at me.

One of them says: »Holy shit.«

»I'm sorry,« the other says to me as he vomits the contents of his stomach onto my jeans.

»Be careful, man,« his colleague says. »That's gross.«

They give me an injection, the pain subsides after endless seconds. I see Ronny's eyes before me as I slowly sink into a black ocean, Ronny's eyes that understood. Then Marla is looking at me as I sink deeper into the depths of the ocean of painlessness, Marla with her cool smile. Romina, adjusting her bra strap and looking at me from the side, my father with his tired eyes as he slams the door in my face, once and for all.

God is great for creating an ocean of painlessness. He holds the ocean in his hands, I dive in and finally shut my eyes.

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