

FIELD OF GIRLS



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MANILLA



First published in Germany in 2012 by Ullstein Buchverlage GmbH, Berlin

This e-book edition published in Great Britain in 2016 by Manilla Publishing,
80–81 Wimpole St, London, W1G 9RE
www.manillabooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-7865-8012-2

This e-book was produced by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Manilla Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



Prologue

It was as if it had been waiting for her.

When Berta entered the gloomy forest glade, the wind tore open the cloud cover and the moon shone through. Its light struck the moss and the young woman like a spotlight.

While Berta sunk to the ground alongside the naked corpse, a voice taunted her: *don't tell me you're surprised; you knew it would happen again.*

'Yes,' she said, 'yes, yes . . .' At the same time, she shook her head. She wanted to get up, run away, as fast as her old bones would allow. But her body failed to carry out its duty, and she cowered, while her gaze adhered to the corpse.

You cannot escape, not you, you know that, just as you know why it's happened.

Berta felt the bile pushing its way up her throat when she noticed the young woman's disfigured breasts and abdomen that looked as if an animal had sharpened its claws on the flesh. The abdominal cavity gaped open like a crater, revealing a hole without entrails.

Tears streamed down Berta's cheeks, while her eyes sought out the dead woman's face. But the corpse was missing its head. Without looking, Berta knew that the woman had also had her hands severed.



Fear threatened to overcome her. She fought against it. It was not her fault. It had never been her fault.

'No,' she uttered, 'no, never, never ever.'

And yet it had happened.

Because you're bad, because you're all bad, is that so hard to understand?

'No,' Berta wailed. 'No, I can't, I don't want to . . .'

But she knew what she had to do.

Of course you know, it's not the first time that it's happened, and . . .'

Reluctantly, Berta struggled to her feet, took the dead woman's arms and placed them across her chest. So that they wouldn't slip out of position, Berta supported them with two thick branches. With a groan, she scooped up some earth and filled the abdominal cavity. Laboriously she gathered moss, which she spread over the mutilated corpse. Afterwards, she collected fir twigs and spread them over the body like a blanket.

. . . and it won't be the last time that it happens! You realise that, don't you?

Exhausted, she fell to her knees again in front of the dead woman. She quietly said a prayer. Only then did she trudge back to Finkenwerda. Her house lay at the end of the small village. Berta had just reached the village square, when someone called her name.

'Lisa?' She suddenly heard a voice behind her.

Lisa spun round. 'Shit, Sam, are you mad?'

Her little brother took a step back.

'And what are you doing here anyway?'

Scared, he raised his shoulders and tucked his head down.

'So?'



'I, um . . .' He kneaded his fingers. 'I followed you.'

'Oh, really?'

He avoided looking at her.

Lisa hung the receiver back on the cradle, picked her backpack up off the floor and stepped out of the phone box. It was one of those yellow ones that you only really saw in television programmes nowadays. *Or in Finkenwerda*. Things are different in a small village; at least they seemed to be to sixteen-year-old Lisa.

'And?' Sam asked. 'You are coming back, aren't you?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

He didn't reply.

'Sam, what?'

His lips moved silently.

'Earth to Sam: talk to me!'

He took a breath, looked up at her, but his shaky voice was still barely audible. 'On the phone you just said that you want to run away . . .'

'Were you eavesdropping on me?'

' . . . and that you're going to spend the weekend in . . .'

'I'll do nothing of the sort!' she interrupted him abruptly. 'And keep your bloody mouth shut.'

Sam immediately hung his head again. Dark dots were sprinkled all over his red T-shirt. He cried.

Lisa wanted to grab him, shake him thoroughly and scream into his tear-stained face: *do you always have to cry like a sissy?* like when he'd broken his toe, in his incredible clumsiness, against the bathroom door two months ago.

She turned round and marched to the bus stop, just as she had intended right from the start. When she crossed the village street, she stumbled over a paving stone.



The cobbled paving in Finkenwerda was doubtlessly twice as old as the telephone box. Walking on it in high heels like those Lisa was wearing this evening was almost an adventure in itself. But that was the only adventure that Finkenwerda had to offer. Up until a few months ago, the old youth club on the village square had been acceptable, but now it was somewhere only for young children. Children like Sam.

‘But,’ she heard him whisper behind her. ‘Mum will be cross.’

‘Hey, just a reminder!’ Lisa stopped and enunciated every single word: ‘She already is bloody cross!’

She laughed, but it sounded more like an angry snort. However, she did not know who she was angrier with: herself, because she’d left the door open earlier while she’d painted her finger- and toenails black and then slipped into her favourite dress and sandals, or with her mother, who had barged in without knocking and discovered Lisa’s three-day-old belly button piercing? Lisa could still hear her nagging.

Then again – whether Lisa’s mother had found out about the piercing or not – it probably wouldn’t have made any difference to her bad mood. Recently, she was always stressed and angry. *Don’t use such language*, she would grumble. *Why do you have to wear such tight things?* Or: *will you finally tidy up your room?* You couldn’t really do anything right by her. As if Lisa was to blame for the entire misery.

‘But,’ Sam stammered, ‘If Mum finds out . . .’

‘If you don’t spill, then –’ Lisa pauses, when she perceives some movement on the other side of the road. A smile spreads over her face. ‘Look, Sam.’

Her little brother’s eyes widen, when he also spots the unkempt figure, muttering to itself.





‘Shall I call her?’ Lisa asks.

Aghast, her brother shakes his head.

Lisa grins and calls: ‘Berta, hey, wait a minute!’

Didn’t you hear, you’re supposed to wait, the voices in Berta’s head snap, so stand still for goodness’ sake!

‘No,’ Berta whispered solemnly and quickened her steps. ‘I am not going to stop, certainly not, I’m not doing it.’

Her old body balked the movement, but Berta paid no heed to the pain. The fear that lurked deep inside her was much worse; waiting like a Beast for the right moment to pounce on her again.

Berta forced herself to walk faster. The pain brought tears to her eyes.

That will be a lesson to you for opposing my decisions. Do you actually think that you can escape me?

‘No,’ Berta whispered, ‘no, of course not, I never thought that, never, never ever.’

Her gaze fell upon the girl who was calling her name from the other side of the road, and she stopped.

‘Hey, Berta,’ the young woman called out, ‘I think my little brother wants to talk to you.’

Berta could not remember the girl’s name. There were so many things she could no longer remember. Her memory was not what it used to be.

But you haven’t forgotten me, and you will never forget me. I have made sure of that.

‘No,’ Berta said, gasping, ‘no, I have never forgotten you, never . . .’

And that was also down to the girl, who was laughing, with a high, clear voice, which seemed made for an evening like this.





Shocked by her thoughts, Berta shook her pounding head, but the truth was in plain view. The girl on the other side of the road had long black hair; she wore a smart dress, with make-up and black nail polish. She had dressed up. She almost looked like –

Yes, take a look, take a good look at her, her sweet face – you know who she reminds you of!

‘No,’ Berta whispered. ‘No, that can’t be right, that’s not right, no, no . . .’

Panic drove her forwards; she stumbled over the paving stones, towards her yard. A dog barked in one of the houses.

‘Sam, do you know what she is?’ the girl called and laughed out loud.

The little boy gasped.

‘She’s a witch. A wicked witch.’ The girl giggled. ‘And if you tell Mum anything, then . . .’

The remaining words were muffled by the leaves, which crackled and rustled as Berta entered her overgrown front garden. As if it had been waiting for her there, she suddenly remembered the girl’s name.

She’s called Lisa. Sweet, naughty Lisa, and now you can no longer deny who she reminds you of.

Uncontrollable sobs burst from Berta’s throat, and the wind propelled them through the village like the howls of a wolf.

‘Hey, do you understand?’

Although his sister was standing next to him, her words seemed to be travelling from afar. She waved her hand impatiently in front of his face.

‘Are you dreaming or what?’



Sam took a breath. He took one more look at old Mrs Kirchberger, who vanished into her overgrown yard. The hunched figure rarely made an appearance during the day; it was only late at night that she gave people a huge fright when she suddenly appeared on the street. The fact that she constantly talked gibberish in the process only fuelled the rumours that the other children in the village spread about her.

At the thought of these stories, but even more because of the crazed look that she had directed at him and Lisa, Sam was frightened once again.

‘She’s a witch. A wicked witch,’ said Lisa, grinning. She pointed to the old woman. ‘And if you tell Mum anything, then something bad will happen. Do you understand?’

Sam got angry, although mainly with himself. He knew that they were just stupid scare stories. *There is no such thing as witches!* His sister was playing a joke on him. She constantly needled him, just like the other boys at school always did. *Sissy*, they called him, or *Garden gnome* or *Pansy*. Sam had no idea what this meant, but he was sure it was nothing good. That’s why he preferred to stay out of the boys’ way. And also out of Mrs Kirchberger’s.

‘So, what now?’ Lisa snapped.

Because Sam was not quite sure what she meant, he just nodded.

‘Shit, what’s that meant to mean?’

He nodded again.

Lisa groaned. ‘So, you’ll keep your mouth shut?’

Repeated nodding.

‘Good,’ Lisa said, smiling.



I don't want you laughing about me like the other kids in the village, Sam would have liked to have told her, but he didn't want her to get upset again. So he kept his mouth shut.

His sister shouldered her backpack contentedly. From one of the side pockets, she produced a sparkling bracelet, which Sam had never seen her wear before. She pushed it over her wrist and headed off. Her black dress fluttered in the wind and the bright clatter of her high heels mingled with the rustling of the leaves.

'Lisa,' Sam called.

Although his sister had her back to him, he knew that she was rolling her eyes. 'What?'

Embarrassed, he looked down.

'Are you going to say anything?'

Nervously, he tugged at his fingernails.

'Sam, really,' she sighed, 'sometimes you're really . . .'

'You are coming back, aren't you?' It burst out of him.

Lisa sighed. 'Really? What rubbish!'

Sam's eyes filled with tears. He couldn't help it.

'Of course I'm coming back,' his sister said, smiling. 'On Monday.'

This time Sam didn't mind that she laughed.

'But remember . . .' Lisa made a gesture of zipping her mouth shut. *If you tell Mum, something bad will happen.* Then she turned around and headed towards the bus stop. '*I want you to make me feel,*' she started singing one of her favourite songs, '*like I'm the only girl in the world.*'

Her contented humming became quieter, as did the clacking of her heels. A little later both sounds were swallowed up by the noise of a passing car. The bright headlamps slid over Sam, before the car disappeared into the darkness again. Silence set in.



Slowly, Sam trotted off home. His big toe was hurting again. Even though he no longer wore a cast, he occasionally still felt the odd twinge.

A sudden howl made Sam stiffen. Goosebumps ran down his arms. *It's just a fox*, he calmed himself. *Or a wild boar.*

Nonetheless, he hurried to get home.



Chapter 1

I knew you were coming. No, not you. But someone who had found out the truth. Sooner or later it had to happen.

Please, come on in. Go into the living room. Take a seat.

I am happy to tell you the truth: things simply happen, whether you like it or not, and things are set in motion, which you really cannot put right. It's like that game with dominos.

Today's children barely know it. Many of them prefer to play with their phones, those little computers and the other devices whose names I don't know. I'm too old for such things. Yet every day I see the girls and boys playing with them on the village square. What are a few wooden blocks, whose only purpose is falling down in a row, in comparison to the colourful flickering on these tiny screens?

But I'm digressing. I find it hard to concentrate. There is so much going through my head.

As a small child, I often played dominos with my father, in the summer evenings, behind the house. With the patience of a saint, like I never experienced with anyone ever again, he lined up the domino blocks next to each other on the terrace. He even placed some of the wooden blocks that I passed him from a small sack in my mother's flowerbed.

‘Eduard,’ she called, when she came out onto the terrace with a tray full of plates, knives and forks, ‘are you messing about with my geraniums?’

‘Geraniums? Which geraniums?’ My father took a flying leap, which was surprising given his mighty stature. Seconds later he was stood amongst the tomato plants. ‘I can only see tomatoes. Fresh tomatoes. Don’t you need some for the salad?’

He plucked a fruit from the vine and bit into it, grinning from behind his dense beard like a cheeky schoolboy. I could only giggle.

‘Don’t take too long now.’ With a smile, my mother distributed the plates on the garden table. ‘Dinner’s ready in a minute.’

‘With or without tomatoes?’

With the fork in her hand, my mother turned round, an equally cheeky response at the ready. I liked the way my parents treated each other. Their relationship was shaped by respect and affection.

One day I would like to be that happy, I thought to myself in such moments.

When all the domino bricks were standing, without the geraniums or tomato vines having been damaged, we sat on the old garden bench. We waited until mother put the steaming dishes on the table and joined us. Only then did my father pluck a packet of Karo from the breast pocket of his dungarees, which he preferred to wear at work. Soon we were enveloped in cigarette smoke, which I breathed in deeply through my nose. I liked the fragrant scent, which blended with the smell of braised meat, potatoes and cabbage, which clung to mother’s apron.

‘What do you think, little one, shall we let it run?’ My father ruffled my hair.

I jumped up.

On tiptoes, gathering the fluttering flowery dress that my mother had sewn for me in my hands so as not to disturb things, I padded over to the domino bricks. I bent down and gave the first one a nudge. The domino train immediately set off with a clatter across our terrace and through the garden patch.

Any other child would probably have accompanied the spectacle with loud cheers. I, on the other hand, sat down again with my parents. My father kept his eyes closed, listened to the whirring of the falling bricks. For him, I think, the game – from the patient setting up to the hypnotic purring of the bricks – signified relaxation after a tiring day of work. For me it was the time that I was allowed to spend with my parents, who I didn't get to see very often. To be close to them, leaning against my father's strong shoulder, the tickling of Mother's hair against my cheek, the smell of cigarettes and dinner: I was as happy as a child could possibly be. And later, when I got older, I understood what it was that made their relationship so unique: the ability, in those few quiet moments after the day's toil was done, to enjoy their happiness together.

You want to know what this has to do with the terrible current events? I am happy to tell you. But in order to understand the reasons, you need to hear the story from the beginning.

Everything began with my parents. Or perhaps I should say: Everything good ended with my father.

Chapter 2

‘What?’ Laura Theis stopped and looked at her son in horror. ‘What did your father say?’

‘That . . . that . . .’ Sam’s voice was little more than a whisper. ‘. . . that we’re moving away soon and that we . . .’

‘What a load of rubbish!’ Testily, she pushed aside the strands of hair that hung across her face. In doing so, she noticed a couple of pensioners and housewives staring at them over the supermarket shelves. There would probably be talk: *have you heard about the Theis woman? She’s moving away. It was bound to happen.*

‘What a load of rubbish!’ Laura repeated, this time much more quietly. She took Sam’s hand. ‘And now let’s go, you still need your sandwiches.’

‘Ouch, my foot.’

‘Oh, Sam, please, it’s been two weeks since your cast came off.’ She forced her way through the aisles, which had been arranged so narrowly in the village shop that one could barely get through with a shopping trolley, even less so when accompanied by a clumsy boy. At that moment Sam banged against some ravioli cans with his backpack. ‘Pay attention, Sam!’

He made a plaintive sound. An old lady with her Zimmer frame turned into the narrow aisle some distance away. Sam slowed down.

'If you carry on dawdling like that then you'll miss the school bus.' Laura didn't like to think about her own bus that she needed to catch for the journey to work in a call centre in Berlin. At that moment, her mobile rang.

'Yes, Rolf, what is it?'

'You called.'

Her husband's calm voice made her angry. 'Yes, last Friday.'

'Sorry, but I was . . .'

'No, I don't want to hear it. I'm not interested what you got up to with her, OK?'

Meanwhile, the old woman had made her way along the shelves and was suddenly standing directly in front of Laura, who forced her way past the Zimmer frame, brushing a shelf with Coke bottles in the process, which swayed, but did not fall. 'Instead, tell me why you're telling Sam such rubbish. So much for us moving away. The hell we will.'

'But it would be better for us if we were to sell the house.'

'You mean it would be better for *you*!' Laura's mobile beeped. She had received a text message. Then she heard a crackling noise. 'Sam, put the crisps back and hurry up and come here, otherwise you really will miss the bus.'

He set off clumsily.

'Sam, bloody well get a move on!'

'Watch your mouth when you talk to the boy,' Rolf shouted.

She grabbed hold of Sam's jumper sleeve and dragged him along behind her. 'Rolf, I don't constantly want to . . .' Her words were lost in a deafening bang.

'What was that?' her husband enquired, alarmed.

Soup tins, which he had knocked over with his backpack, rolled around Sam's feet. Everyone was staring at them. *Mrs Theis and her odd son. Typical.*

‘Rolf, lay off, will you.’ Laura said angrily. ‘Why don’t you worry about the bloody roof, OK? It was leaking again last week.’ She hung up. ‘And you, Sam, can you just pull yourself together? Would that really be too much to ask?’

Frightened, Sam pulled his head down between his shoulders. His lips quivered and his eyes filled with tears.

Laura took a deep breath in and out, controlling her anger. She read the text message that she had received: *Laura, my darling, did you sleep well? I hope so . . . looking forward to seeing you in a minute. LYL, your Patrick.*

Patrick was her office colleague, who she had been seeing outside work for a couple of months. She chucked her phone into her handbag and bent down towards the tins. Fielmeister’s Finest: ‘the best part of the day.’ She sighed. Her hair fell across her face again.

‘Wait,’ a man next to her said, ‘I’ll help you.’

Laura pushed her hair out of her eyes. She could see the school bus approaching through the shop window. Children and teenagers were gathering at the side of the road. She jumped up hastily. ‘Would you mind . . .?’

‘No problem!’ He picked up two tins. ‘I’ll sort it.’

‘Thank you, that’s kind of you, Mr . . .?’

‘Lindner. Alex Lindner. We’ve met a few times in the village.’

‘Yes, probably.’

‘I own the Elster.’

‘Ah, yes.’ She had caught her daughter hanging around outside the old pub several times late at night with other teenagers. Laura took a step towards her son.

‘So,’ Lindner said, ‘you’ve probably . . .’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she interrupted him, ‘but the school bus.’



‘Oh, yes.’ He blushed. ‘Of course.’

‘Thanks again.’ She took Sam’s hand and grabbed two sandwiches from the chilled counter. She met Lindner’s gaze again on the way to the checkout. He smiled shyly.

Alex Lindner stayed behind in the narrow aisle. He was penned in between the displays of ravioli and washing powder amid a sea of battered tins of Fielmeister’s Finest. His gaze alighted on the two tins of soup in his hands. ‘The best part of the day.’ He could not shake off the feeling of having behaved like a teenager.

‘Young man?’

Behind him an old lady was rattling her Zimmer frame impatiently. Alex stepped aside. While the woman steered past the sea of tins, he tried to remember her name. Without success. It was too early and he was too tired. With a yawn, he placed the tins back on the shelf and bent down to pick up the rest. He had piled half of them into a pyramid, when an unshaven face appeared above the shelf.

‘Well, look who’s here!’ said Ben with a grin.

Paul appeared alongside him. ‘He’s found himself a new job.’

‘He listened to us.’

‘Of course he did. We’re his friends after all.’

‘Friends? You guys?’ Alex picked some more tins up from the floor. ‘Then I don’t need any more enemies.’

‘O-ho,’ Ben and Paul said in unison.

‘Monsieur is tetchy.’ Ben came round the shelf and helped Alex to stack the tins. ‘I suppose it was late last night.’

‘Or,’ Paul said, chuckling, ‘he’s angry because he got a put-down.’

Alex picked up the last tin. ‘Don’t talk rubbish!’



‘Hey, man, we saw it with our own eyes.’

‘You didn’t see anything.’

‘I told you,’ Paul nudged Ben with his elbow, ‘old Mrs Krause with her walking frame doesn’t want anything to do with him.’

Alex looked into his friends’ smirking faces. He couldn’t help laughing, while he walked to the chilled counter and took some ham, cheese and butter. He yawned.

‘Right after all,’ said Paul, who had piled bread and jars of strawberry jam in his arms. ‘It was late yesterday.’

‘Maybe.’

Alex saw the old lady push her Zimmer frame down another aisle. At that moment he remembered her name again: Krause. Her husband, Anton Krause, was one of the regular punters in the Elster. One of those Alex secretly called the ‘bar stools’, because they liked to order pale ale and a shot at three or four in the morning.

‘It’s your own fault,’ Paul taunted, ‘we did warn you.’

Alex stopped them with a wave of his hand.

‘But you had to saddle yourself with the pub. Do you really think that you . . .’

Alex let him whinge. He saw Laura Theis at the till. She was slender and had long black hair, whose tangled strands framed a striking face with a high forehead and dark eyes, a straight nose and full lips. Alex guessed that she had a lovely smile, which she rarely showed.

There were some rumours that circulated amongst the bar stools about her. According to them, her husband had done a runner with her best friend and left her alone with the children. He had also not paid the mortgage on the house and gambled away her inheritance.

‘Hey, man, are you listening to me?’ Paul asked indignantly. Alex shifted his gaze from Laura Theis, whose phone started to ring at that very moment.

Annoyed, Laura pressed her mobile to her ear. ‘Rolf, I thought I had made myself clear.’

For a second or two, she could only hear crackling noises from the receiver.

‘Damn, Rolf!’

‘Mrs Theis?’ a female voice asked.

‘Oh, sorry.’ Laura handed the cashier a five-euro note. Without waiting for the change, she gave Sam the two sandwiches and pulled him towards the exit. ‘I’m sorry, I thought you were someone else.’

‘No, this is Mrs Schneider.’

‘Oh, yes, Mrs Schneider, hello.’

Once again the caller remained silent, as if she were waiting for Laura to remember her.

‘Er, yes . . .’ Laura said. ‘You are . . .?’

‘Your daughter’s class teacher.’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’ Laura coughed in embarrassment. She stepped outside. The air was cool, but the sun was shining and indicated that a nice autumn day was on the cards. Her son stopped on the pavement. ‘Mrs Schneider, please wait just one moment.’ Briefly she rearranged her hair. ‘Sam, what’s the matter now?’

His gaze was fearfully directed at a dog, which was sleeping in the sun near the bicycle stand.

‘He’s sleeping, he won’t hurt you.’ But Sam didn’t budge an inch. Laura stood in front of the animal. ‘Better now?’

Keeping his eyes glued to the dog, Sam lolloped past him. Laura took her son's hand and dragged him over the road to the village square. Meanwhile, the bus had arrived at the stop. The doors opened with a hiss and the children pushed their way inside.

'Right, Mrs Schneider,' Laura spoke into her mobile, 'I can talk now. What's this all about?'

'It's about the trip to the museum, which is planned for today.'

'Ah, yes, Lisa mentioned it.' Laura almost overlooked the postman on his bike who crossed their path. Impatiently she let him past. 'I transferred the money for the trip weeks ago. It did appear in the school's bank account, right?'

'Yes, of course.' The teacher hesitated. 'But we are waiting for your daughter. Is she sick again?'

'No, Lisa is . . .' Sam crashed into Laura when she suddenly stopped. 'Isn't she at school?'

Alex turned to his friend. 'What did you say?'

'I said, keep your hands off her.'

'Off who?'

'Oh, come on.' Paul rolled his eyes. 'I saw the way you looked at her.'

'Who saw what look?' Ben joined them at the checkout with coffee and evaporated milk.

'I saw Alex's look, just now,' Paul explained. 'The way he was looking at Theis's backside.'

'Don't talk bullshit!' Alex objected. He could see Laura Theis standing on the village green through the shop window, not far from the old telephone box. She was holding her son's arm with one hand and pressing her mobile to her ear with the other.



Ben followed his gaze. 'Well, she is pretty'

'Look at me instead!' Paul blocked their view.

Alex and Ben turned away in unison. 'Oh god!'

'... and then you'll know what counts.'

'What? Grey hair? A beer belly?'

'A good friend, *that's* what counts,' Paul declared. 'Not a woman, who one day will ...'

'... take you to the cleaners?' Alex asked with a smile.

'Quite, I can't ...'

'... say it often enough, right?' Ben added with a grin.

Paul furrowed his brow. 'Are you taking the mick?'

'Never,' Ben replied.

Alex coughed into his fist so as to suppress a laugh. He paid for the butter, ham and cheese and shoved everything into a backpack. 'And what was it you wanted to say to me?'

'You know what?' Paul snarled. 'You can go fuck yourselves!'

Shrugging his shoulders, Alex stepped outside into the sun. Gizmo jumped up, pranced towards him and licked his lips.

'Forget it!' Alex reprimanded him.

But the retriever had already smelt the ham in the backpack. Barking, he followed his master across the empty marketplace.

Finkenwerda might be surrounded by idyllic river courses, but at the same time, it appeared lost within the Spreewald area, almost forgotten by time. The majority of the old buildings in the heart of the village showed signs of decay. Peeling plasterwork revealed that their owners had long abandoned most of them.

The Elster was no exception. On arriving at the pub, Alex opened the letterbox. Seven letters and one package tumbled towards him. He opened the package first. As if he had not been fed for days, Gizmo tried to snatch the falling bits of paper.



'If I were you,' Ben said with amusement, 'I'd have a serious talk with your dog.'

'I talk to him all the time, but he just doesn't listen.'

The retriever cocked his ears and tilted his head.

'Unless it's something to do with food.'

Gizmo barked in agreement.

'You see,' Alex said to Ben, 'that's what I meant. He pulled a CD out of the package. Nirvana. *Never mind*. Original Master Recording.'

'Didn't you say that it no longer exists?' Ben asked.

'Found it on eBay.'

'Expensive?'

'Don't ask,' Alex went through the letters. Three were from breweries, probably bills, two from gastronomy associations, and one from the tax office. The sender of the last letter was the City of Berlin – Senate Administration for Culture, Science and Research. Just as Alex was about to open the envelope, the sound of a car horn caused him to pause for a moment. A BMW that had followed the school bus from the bus stop pulled up outside the pub.

The door opened and revealed pleated trousers, a shirt and jacket with cufflinks. Norman was grinning from ear to ear and ran his fingers through his bleached hair. 'Good god, boys, why are you taking so long? Can we finally get going?'

Paul gave him the finger.

Norman laughed. 'As your lawyer, I recommend . . .'

'You're not my lawyer,' Paul contradicted, 'and you haven't been for about five years now.'

'Really? Five years?' Ben scratched his unshaven chin. 'One would think that your divorce went through five days ago the way you talk sometimes . . .'

‘And you – you can go and get stuffed.’

Old Mrs Krause was struggling over the bumpy pavement with her Zimmer frame on the other side of the road and grimaced in the process.

‘Seriously, sometimes I am really embarrassed for my friends.’ Ben laughed quietly.

‘I told you so.’ Alex chuckled the letters into the backpack and opened the boot of the BMW. Gizmo jumped in between the fishing rods, landing nets and bait boxes, barking in the process. ‘So, what now? Should the *Endeavour* set off without us?’

Laura had to wait for a few seconds before the teacher reacted to her question.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Theis,’ the words finally emerged from the receiver, ‘but your daughter hasn’t come to school again. I wanted to contact you because of that and the fact that the bus is about to set off any minute.’

‘Because of that?’ Laura nervously played with her hair. ‘Mrs Schneider, what do you mean by that? *Again*? And whether Lisa is sick *again*? She hasn’t been sick for weeks and . . .’

‘But she’s been missing from lessons repeatedly recently. Apparently she was sick.’

‘No, I said that she wasn’t.’

‘She had sick notes, signed by yourself.’

‘But . . . wait a moment!’ Laura looked around for her son. He was strolling along the pavement with the two sandwiches in his hand, examining the worn-down paving stones. ‘Sam, the bus!’

At this moment the doors closed with a hiss. The roar of the engine shoed the sparrows from the treetops. Shortly afterwards, the bus disappeared from the entrance to the village. As

if this was all none of his concern, Sam kicked pebbles into one of the wild bushes on the village square. There were days when he drove Laura mad.

‘Mrs Schneider, I’m sorry,’ she said into her phone, ‘but I didn’t sign any sick notes for Lisa.’

‘I thought as much. That’s why I’m calling you. So that you know what’s going on. And we need to talk about the rest another time; as I said, our trip is starting in a few minutes. Would tomorrow morning work for you?’

No, it doesn’t work for me at all, Laura almost answered, but instead she said: ‘I have to work in the mornings; afternoons would be better.’

‘Is 4 p.m. a good time for you?’

Laura agreed, ended the conversation and went through the following day’s schedule in her mind. She would have to get up a few minutes earlier, so that she could at least style her hair and ensure Sam did not miss the bus again. She hoped to start her shift at the call centre a bit earlier, so she could get to the secondary school in Koenigs Wusterhausen on time. She braced herself for a day that would be even more stressful than usual.

Laura called her daughter’s mobile, but it went straight to voicemail. Loud techno music sounded, making Laura’s message hardly audible. Laura could barely contain her anger. ‘Missy, could you please explain to me why – once again – you’re not in school? And where on earth are you? Call me! No, just come home. Immediately!’ She hung up. ‘Sam!’

Sam winced as if she had rudely awakened him. He lowered his head, so that his tousled hair covered his face and he kneaded his fingers.

Not for the first time, Laura asked herself what was going on in his head. And yet she knew the answer and also the reasons why despite his eight years he still behaved like a small child.

She fought against the resentment that persisted in spite of the smiles of her children. Apprehensively, she checked the time on her phone. 'Sam, the next bus is coming in a minute.'

He didn't react.

'Don't miss this one, all right?'

Finally he lifted his gaze. He tightened the straps of his backpack and limped after her. She didn't believe that his toe was still giving him trouble. But she didn't have time for that now. She only had a brief moment before her own bus arrived. Just a few minutes in which she could check that Lisa really was sick and had returned home. The weeds grew so high in the flowerbeds of her front garden that even the rose bushes in front of the kitchen window looked like a wild bramble. Laura used to love gardening, and had spent hours in the sun out in the fresh air. A lot of things had been different then. She pushed the strands of hair from her face and unlocked the front door.

Everything will be resolved now, she whispered to herself, *for sure*. Her daughter would be at home because she had a cold, migraine, tummy ache or her period.

Laura stepped into the hallway. 'Lisa?'