

Prologue

September 1981

There was still enough air to breathe.

The pages of The Black Jaguar lay open next to his bed, under a well-thumbed copy of Batman magazine. Typical reading material for a thirteen-year-old. The light had been out for a while. The duvet rose and fell like a soft swell.

Suddenly he found himself gasping for breath.

Just before he woke up, he dreamed he was drowning. A recurring nightmare.

When he was a small child, he fell into the ice at the edge of a nearby lake. It was dusk, and a blanket of fresh snow had buried everything under a pure, deceptive cover of powdery white. The mountains stood out sharp and clear against the backdrop of an empty sky. The ice gave way without warning. Black water closed in around him, like a clenching fist, and the ripples sloshed together over his head. His padded coat was soaked and heavy, dragging him down like a life jacket filled with lead. He sank to the bottom, crippled by the shock.

His mother had come to his rescue that time, literally at the last second. But in some of his dreams her hand morphed into a powerful male hand with a crescent-shaped scar on the back, grabbing him and pulling him out of the water like a little kitten.



Ever since then he had avoided water any deeper than his hips.

But there wasn't any water here in his bedroom.

He was lying in his bed.

Someone was pressing a pillow into his face.

He frantically gasped for air, only to get a mouthful of cotton instead. The tip of one of the feathers pierced through the pillow and cut his lip. The pillow pressed his nose against his face, making his body cry out for oxygen. Blinded by panic, he tried to wriggle out from beneath the pillow, frantically waving his arms and trying to break free. Someone was sitting on top of him, pinning him down with the weight of their whole body. His lungs felt like they were about to burst. He clenched his fists and lashed out.

Suddenly the pressure eased.

He snatched the pillow away from his face and gasped for air to cool his burning lungs. There, in the pale moonlight, he saw the vague outlines of a figure, barely a silhouette against the cold lustre of the wallpaper. Wriggling around on top of him was a body with a misshapen, insect-like head. He almost forgot to defend himself for a moment. The figure got up, hissing as he breathed. Its shadow looked like something from Batman's Gotham City. The head was strangely smooth. Staring back at him instead of eyes were two circular pieces of glass the size of fists. He could see his own pale face reflected in them. A black oval protruded from the space where a mouth and a nose should have been.

He was about to scream, but a sharp blow to the temple from his left stopped him before he could make a sound. Faint stars shimmered, then the second blow struck him. He lost consciousness. Everything went dark, like a fuse had blown.

For a while there was nothing.

He woke up when he felt the floor shaking. No, trembling. He lay curled up like an embryo, his ears ringing and ribs aching.



Every now and again he felt a harsh jolt, sometimes two in quick succession. He tried to move his hands and feet but realised they were tied. There was a sheet of tarpaulin tacked down overhead, and when he tried to stretch his body, he found there was only so far that he could move. He realised he was freezing cold and wearing nothing but his underpants. The wind pushed through the gaps. The air smelled of exhaust fumes, which he guessed were coming from a moped judging by the high-pitched buzzing of the engine, like a circular saw. He screwed up his eyes and fantasised for a moment that it was all just a nightmare.

How could this be happening? He had only just been in bed, fast asleep!

'Wake up, please let me wake up,' he quietly begged.

The sound of his own voice brought him back to reality.

This wasn't a dream.

He wasn't going to wake up.

His throat became constricted. He tried to breathe through the fear. He was thirteen! He was too old to just give up. Yes, he'd given up before – back then, under the ice.

But never again.

He felt his way along the boards around him as best he could, even though his wrists were tied in front of his stomach. It seemed he was in some kind of flat-bed trailer. The tarpaulin was pulled tight overhead; presumably it had eyelets and was fastened on the outside with a rope. There was a hook protruding from the board in front of him, possibly for securing loads.

He tried to locate the knot between his wrists, but he couldn't see much in the darkness. When he twisted his wrists against each other, he felt a thick, bulbous knob, like several knots on top of one another. He thought about one time when he'd tied his shoes in a double knot and had to unpick it with a fork when he couldn't get them off.



He lifted his hands up and pressed the knot into the sharp end of the hook. He carefully tugged at the knot with his hands, then he pulled it away from the hook and pushed it back in again. A damp film of sweat crept over his skin in spite of the draught. The knot became looser and looser.

Suddenly the trailer started juddering, as if it was being pulled along a path full of bumps and potholes. The loading platform banged against his body. The whirring gave way to a sombre rattling sound and finally fell silent.

Someone folded the trailer stand down.

The air smelled of damp earth, resin and fir trees.

The rope purred as it came loose from the eyelets. The cover was cast aside, revealing the silhouettes of trees against a torn sky. The insect head leaned over him.

'Get out!' The voice had a strangely hollow and metallic tone. And it sounded like it was coming from a teenager like him. A boy.

'I can't,' he replied, pointing at his feet with his chin.

Without saying a word, the boy unfastened the ties around his feet and bound his legs together instead, so he could walk in very small steps. Then the boy stood back and observed as he struggled and stumbled his way out of the trailer. He straightened himself up, panting.

A clearly defined crescent moon briefly emerged from between the wisps of cloud. The boy was holding a knife in his fist. Its blade gleamed in the moonlight.

'That way,' the boy said.

'What . . . what are you going to do with me?'

'Sir!'

'What?'

'You have to call me "sir"!'

He gulped. 'What are you going to do with me, sir?'



'Just shut up and move.'

The boy shoved him and made him walk ahead. Leaves rustled on the ground as he shuffled along. Stones and hard branches jabbed the soles of his bare feet. The boy's breath hissed softly through the mask. There was no path, just a short zigzag line through the trees. He thought he could hear a waterfall rushing down in the distance. He wrung his hands, turned his fingertips inwards and tugged at the knot. The rope would be loose before long. His heart was pounding wildly. If only the boy didn't have that knife!

Then he saw the hole. Suddenly he was standing right in front of it: a gaping black hole in the forest floor. Rectangular, like a grave.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

'Over there,' said the boy.

'You want to kill me?'

'You've been dead to me for a long time.'

'What do you . . . what do you mean, sir?'

The boy behind him said nothing.

He gave a desperate jerk with his arms. The cords chafed his skin and the knot tightened again. This couldn't be happening! But wasn't the rope looser? 'Please . . . let me go,' he whimpered.

'No,' the boy snapped.

He made one last attempt to break free from the knot by squeezing his hand as tightly as he could, then forcing it through the loop. The rope burned like fire as it chafed against his skin. Suddenly his hand was free. He spun around with his fist clenched and punched the other boy in the stomach. The knife fell to the ground as the boy staggered backwards, gasping for breath. He quickly bent down and picked it up. The handle was warm from the heat of the other boy's hand. Or was it his own hand, still burning from the rope?

'Stay where you are,' he hissed.

The other boy stood stooped less than three steps away against the trunk of the next tree, glowering at him with his insect eyes.

He bent down and reached between his feet, his fingers trembling as he cut the rope.

That very instant, the boy pounced on him. They fell to the ground, wrestling for the knife. The moon illuminated their hands – and suddenly he froze. He knew those hands! They were . . .

The boy snatched the knife right out of his hands. He instinctively turned around to get up and run away but was stopped dead by a hot, overpowering pain in his back. He cried out in agony. All the strength drained from his body. He fell to the ground on his stomach, right next to the hole in the ground. A boot pushed against his pelvis and bumped him to one side, defenceless. He rolled over the edge like a useless bag of bones and fell into the pit. His head banged on a stone as he hit the ground. He lay there motionless.

For a while it was completely silent. He felt like he had gone deaf, like he was locked up somewhere outside of his body while it raged with pain. The trees above him were clouds of black leaves. A voice seemed to whisper directly into his brain from the sky.

‘Ma?’ he whispered.

But there was no answer.

‘Maaaaaa!’

He saw the figure appear in a blur at the edge of the hole in the ground. A huge black insect holding a shovel in its hand. The first scoop of soil hailed down on his face, drawing a curtain on the sky and burying the last glimmer of hope.

Thirty-two years later



Chapter 1

Berlin – Saturday, 5 January 2013, 3.18 a.m.

Jesse woke from the dream with a jolt and sat up straight in his bed.

Darkness surrounded him. He was sweating.

It took him a moment to realise that he was no longer a young boy, but a full-grown man. Christ, it had all been so close and so real. He felt like he could still taste the soil in his mouth. The old scar on his back itched like someone had been scratching it. But the scream he had heard wasn't coming from inside his dream. It was the cry of a young girl.

He threw the duvet to one side, planted his feet on the floor and stood up.

Cold laminate flooring. Fresh air on his damp forehead. The floor was dry, firm and light. Forty-five years old and he was still having the same old nightmare. It started with the insect man shovelling earth onto him and ended when he was just about to suffocate in his grave. That was it. Nothing else. No location or time, nothing before or after it. There was just one variant of the nightmare, when he was drowning in a frozen lake.

The girl's scream was preying on his mind. He pushed the handle on the bedroom door and, rushing through the hall past

the last of the boxes he still hadn't unpacked, he tripped over his doctor's bag by the coat rack. He always left it there, packed and ready to go. He cursed and kicked it aside, noticing the colourful beam of light shining through the crack under the door. Another three strides and he made it into the bedroom.

'Isa,' he whispered.

The little girl with a shock of tousled blond hair was sitting bolt upright in her bed with her eyes fixed on the window directly opposite.

'Isa!'

'Shh,' she whispered without moving a muscle. 'Dad, there's someone there.'

Jesse glanced at the window. 'Over there?'

'Where else?' Isabelle whispered, her voice positively brimming with exasperation. Adults were so incredibly slow sometimes.

Jesse gave a quiet sigh and walked over to the window. 'What did he look like?'

'He had a dark mane and wild eyes.'

'Wild eyes?'

Isa nodded. 'He looked at me.'

Jesse opened the window. Fresh air rushed towards in. He leaned out over the window ledge and looked right and left at the street below. 'No monsters anywhere. Want to come and see for yourself?'

Isa shook her head. Wisps of blond hair waved back and forth. 'It wasn't a monster.'

Jesse smiled. 'So then what was it?'

'I don't know. Something a bit like a monster,' she whispered.

Jesse nodded and carefully closed the window. He walked back over to her and sat on the edge of the bed.

Isabelle budged over to make room for him on the crumpled bedcover. Jesse smiled, swung his legs onto the bed and lay down next to his eight-year-old daughter.

Isa curled up and silently pressed her head against his armpit. She sighed as she inhaled and exhaled, like she'd been short of breath for a while. Jesse could feel her heartbeat racing beneath her delicate ribcage.

'Dad?'

'Hmm?'

'You won't leave me here by myself if I fall asleep, will you?'

'Hmm,' Jesse mumbled wearily. The heat from the bed and the presence of his daughter were helping to still the reverberations of his own nightmare, one that had been haunting him for as long as he could remember. He hated waking up and having to make sure he wasn't drowning or buried beneath a layer of earth. Sometimes, when the dream was longer and began differently, he could observe himself as if separate from his body. It was like he was standing right there watching his mirror image: a small boy playing on the banks of a frozen lake. Sometimes they even spoke to each other. Words from Jesse to Jesse.

Jesse didn't know which part of the dream was from his past and which part was a fantasy. His memory was cut off when he had his accident at the age of thirteen. Since then, his life had been divided into the *before* and the *after*. Everything from *before* the accident was shrouded in darkness, even the things the others told him about it in the children's home. Little by little, he crudely pieced together the fragments of his life to make some sense of it all. His father was the captain of a ship, they said, but nobody knew anything about his mother. He didn't

much like the things they told him about himself. Some of it made him feel ashamed.

For a moment he found himself wondering who needed who more. Did Isa need him – or did he need Isa? Strands of her hair tickled his cheek. The scent of pine needles and damp earth lingered in her hair after their day out in the woods. Good thing Sandra wasn't there. As far as Isa's mother was concerned, children's hair should smell of shampoo, not the forest. Ever since their time together as kids at Adlershof children's home, Sandra saw the forest as another word for prison, unlike cities, which were her definition of freedom. For Jesse it was completely the opposite.

'Have you brushed your teeth?

Isa didn't respond. Her breathing was suspiciously even, like it always was when she was pretending to be asleep.

'Oi!' he whispered in her ear, gently tickling her on the hip. His daughter giggled and squirmed under the sheets. 'That's enough. Up you get now – go clean your teeth.'

'Oh, Dad! But I'm sooo tired.'

'I know. Me too,' Jesse yawned.

'I could always brush my teeth tomorrow instead.'

'Or next week, huh?'

'I'll be at Mum's then. I always have to brush my teeth a thousand times when I'm there.'

'Well, then, I suppose you're getting off pretty lightly if you only have to brush them three times when you're here. So off you go!'

Isa threw the covers off in exasperation and clambered over Jesse, making sure she gave him a hefty jab before she climbed out of the bed. He quickly dodged her, protecting the old scar

on his back, but she caught him between the ribs. 'Ouch!' Jesse grinned. 'Should I come with you?'

'Nope.' Isa trundled over towards the bathroom with an air of defiance, her bare feet slapping on the floor as she padded along. The bathroom door creaked as she closed it behind her.

Jesse gave a weary sigh. His eyes skimmed the walls of Isa's room, the only one in the flat he'd finished decorating so far. Colourful glowing fish floated idly around the room, projected onto the wallpaper by a small lamp with a rotating shade. He had given the lamp to Isa as a gift six months ago, the first time she stayed overnight with him in his new flat. That wasn't long after he separated from Sandra. One time, Isa woke him up in the middle of the night because she thought the fish were dead. He brought them back to life by changing the light bulb.

Jesse's eyelids drooped. He dozed off.

When he opened his eyes again he felt cold. The bed next to him was empty. The flat was completely quiet.

'Isa?'

No answer.

He swung his legs out of the bed, shivered and rushed over to the bathroom. No beam of light under the door. No noise.

Silence.

Cold air gushed towards him when he opened the door. The bathroom was empty and dark, except for the faint glimmer of light from the yard shining through the frosted window. He ran his thumb along Isa's toothbrush. It was dry.

A quiet thud made him turn around. The sound of wood on wood. The window flapped in its frame and the handle was in the unlocked position. Had *he* left the window open? It was

unlikely to have been Isa, particularly after the episode with the monster – or whatever it was she thought she'd seen.

Jesse tried to remain calm. He opened the window and looked out. The night sky was clear and there was not a single cloud above the grey, abandoned yard. 'Isa?'

Silence.

Why the hell was the window open? He felt like a band of iron was tightening around his chest. Jesse turned around, rushed into the corridor, tore the living room door open and flicked on the light switch.

He squinted. No Isa.

He tried to stay calm, but his heart was pounding.

Onward to the kitchen. Door open, light on.

He stopped in the doorway and let out a deep breath. The tension drained from his body as he sighed. It made him feel dizzy with relief.

There she was.

Isa was sitting on the floor next to the table, with her back against the radiator and her chin on her chest. The corners of her mouth were smeared in brown. The jar of Nutella she'd evidently polished off was on the floor next to her with a spoon sticking out of it. Isa's small ribcage rose and fell peacefully in perfect time with her breathing.

Jesse nestled in beside her by the warm radiator, her narrow shoulder blade resting against his upper arm. Their figures were reflected in the glass of the kitchen door. It was almost as if they had been fused together. He saw himself with his short, clean-cut blond hair and receding hairline, his brown eyes shining back at him as he sat there in his black T-shirt and bare legs. Isa's hair was the same shade of blond as his, with the

same characteristic cowlick. Like so many times before, Jesse found himself wondering what he had done to deserve her. He knew there were many things Sandra wouldn't forgive him for, particularly his absence, his self-absorbed ways, his restlessness and his selfish decisions. He had always been afraid that Isa might feel the same as Sandra, that she would adopt her mother's point of view. The greatest of all the fears that hounded him was that maybe he really didn't deserve her.

Jesse sighed.

He hated cities with a passion, but he would even have moved to New York for Isa. So when Sandra decided to move to Berlin after they broke up, it probably wasn't the worst thing she could have done.

Chapter 2

Garmisch-Partenkirchen – Saturday, 5 January 2013, 4.21 p.m.

The wind whistled furiously as it battered against the walls of the west wing. Artur Messner couldn't help but think it sounded like it was trying to avenge the ugly stories that had played out behind the walls of this building. He hated these old walls. But he needed them too. Those were the two sentences Artur Messner would use if anyone ever wanted to know his definition of home. But nobody asked him these days.

They would probably have to carry him out of here in his beloved burgundy wing chair sooner or later. He jerked and swivelled the heavy armchair as he sat in it, edging it closer to the dormer window to look outside. He needed something to stop him glancing back, over his left shoulder, into the dimly lit room. But not because he found the furnishings ugly; things like that ceased to matter so much with old age. A threadbare oriental rug, a makeshift row of kitchen fittings and a tiny television on top of the fridge.

No, it was the package on his dining table. The package was the thing he didn't want to look at. He wished he could have just thrown it out of the window.

A frosty wreath framed the view over the billowing treetops onto the frozen lake. Muffled cries rose through the building

at regular intervals and echoed through the long corridors. Charly had run away for the third time and they were still desperately trying to find her. They would have to tell the police eventually. Artur was fully aware of what an ordeal that always turned out to be.

Artur Messner was seventy-four. He regretted many things in his life, including his marriage to Hannelore. Six years after the wedding, she had an affair with a Canadian ski jumper during the traditional New Year ski jumping event at the Four Hills Tournament in Garmisch. It wasn't his wife's first affair. She couldn't cope with the 'miserable life' she said Artur offered her. She left for Canada two months later, without so much as a second thought, and never came back. She left their son Richard with him, saying the two of them were just the same and belonged together.

But nothing hurt Artur more than having to hand over the reins of Adlershof to Richard seven years ago. If only he didn't have this damn rheumatism. Almost thirty years of pain and high doses of cortisone had taken their toll, and his body was worn out and frail.

And he had *this* to deal with.

Even without turning around he could see the package staring at him from its perch on the top of the table. Nothing compared to *this*. Not his loveless marriage, nor his bitter end as the principal of the boarding school and children's home, nor the excruciating pain he constantly had to endure.

He stared at the lake stubbornly. The sun was disappearing behind the tops of the Wetterstein mountains, casting a cold, ever-expanding shadow. The fading light turned the snow blue and the rest of the landscape to black. Artur thought about just throwing the package away or burying it somewhere on the

hillside, as far away as his old feet would carry him. But how was he supposed to bury it if he didn't even dare to touch it? This damn package was turning him into something he never wanted to be: a coward.

It had come with the mail around midday. Philippa brought it up to him with his lunch – well, if you could call the spartan diet crap she served him lunch.

The package was roughly half the size of a shoe box and came wrapped in smooth brown paper. Philippa gave a tight-lipped smile as she placed it on the table in the middle of the room, the kind of smile that said she wanted to express a warmth she'd lost over the thirty-nine years of her life. Although Artur wasn't particularly fond of Philippa, he was grateful that his son had appointed her. It was one of the few choices Richard had made that he could actually understand. It was difficult enough to find good staff for a home, but finding good staff who didn't crack under the pressure was even harder.

When Philippa left the room, he was left with a choice: either open the package or eat lunch first. Had he succumbed to curiosity, he would have started with the package. Mail like this was something of a rarity for him. Still, he chose to eat lunch first.

His fingers were positively trembling later that day when he opened the package. He put it down to the arthritis, trying not to admit to himself how nervous he was. He was partly nervous out of excitement, and partly because the package unsettled him for some reason. Well, he hadn't been expecting any post or gifts, after all. And it wasn't like he was particularly popular with the former pupils of the combined children's home and boarding school. In a moment of wistful nostalgia, he found himself thinking about Christmas and his childhood birthdays.

Good grief, how long had it been since someone had given him a present?

The paper rustled as he unwrapped it. There was no sender, just his name, Artur Messner, written in pointy block capitals above his address. He peeled the paper away to reveal a cardboard box, then he opened the lid and found a white container inside. An inconspicuous opaque Tupperware box. Perhaps it's something to eat, Artur thought to himself.

He lifted the lid with his thumb and recoiled in shock. What a foul stench! He hesitated for a moment and thought about just throwing the container in the bin. But curiosity got the better of him.

He opened the lid.

Inside was the bloated, pale-green hand. A man's hand.

He felt sick.

Still, he couldn't look away. The large hand was clearly marked with the lines of age and had a striking crescent-shaped burn on the back. Tears welled up into Artur's eyes. He tried to blink them away, but the images were gushing towards him uncontrollably, moving in circles around his brain. He was always forgetting things these days, but he had the memory of an elephant when it came to the past. His last encounter with the owner of this hand wasn't something he liked to recall. He had dismissed Wilbert with a cool farewell – to be on the safe side, he said at the time. But now he knew that fear was the real reason he had sent him away. Maybe he would have been able to stop thinking about it if Wilbert had only been a school acquaintance. But people who hurtle down the closed Olympic bob run by the lake at night and steal motorbikes together are more than just acquaintances.

He snapped the container shut. Who in God's name would do something like this? And why?

He spent the rest of the day in his burgundy armchair, caught between ponderings and memories. Finally, a shrill noise startled him. He reached for his Bakelite telephone with stiff fingers and raised it to his ear. He was glad he still had the old thing. Those new modern phones weighed next to nothing and their buttons were far too small. 'Messner speaking,' he answered.

'Artur Messner?' It was the voice of a man and it sounded muffled, as if he was speaking through a handkerchief. It was difficult to judge how old he was. Thirty, perhaps. But then again, he could be fifty.

'Yes, who is it?'

'Did you get the package?'

Artur's hand started trembling. He pressed the receiver closer to his ear. 'Who is this? Was it *you* who sent the package?' Oh dear, how helpless he sounded. He used to be the head of Adler-shof, for goodness' sake. Now he was just a dodderly old man.

Losing his independence had been an insidious process, but the fact that he'd lost it was a sudden, painful realisation.

'So you *did* get it,' the man surmised. 'And you probably opened it too.'

'Who is this? What do you want from me?'

'All I want to know for now is where Jesse is.'

'Jesse?' And what in God's name was this 'for now' supposed to mean? 'What do you want from Jesse?'

'Just tell me where I can find him.' Something in the man's voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Artur couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. His tone was calm, which only served to make the whole thing seem even more surreal. The contrast

between his voice and the gruesome contents of the package was unsettling. The man seemed to think there was no need to threaten him, and in Artur's experience, that could only be a bad sign. From what he had seen, only people who had far from exhausted all their options could be so calm and composed.

'But I have no idea,' Artur said. 'I don't know where Jesse is.' For God's sake! He really wasn't as good a liar as he used to be.

'Should I take that as an invitation?

'I . . . um, an invitation?

'To talk face-to-face. Sometimes it's easier to talk when you look someone in the eyes.' He paused for a second, 'And shake hands.'

Artur's stomach tensed up. *Shake hands?* Was that really what he'd said? Artur had never been the type of person who would be willing to give up their right hand for anyone else, Jesse included. As a little boy, he had been forced to stand by and watch as his father and his older brother Werner were gunned down by an SS captain not long before the end of the Second World War. His mother had finally backed down and told the SS officer what he wanted to know, saving Artur's life and her own.

'I . . . um, I'm not sure if the address I have is still the right one, it's been a while . . .'

'Just give me the address.'

Chapter 3

Berlin – Monday, 7 January 2013, 6.56 a.m.

‘Out you get, your highness,’ Jesse held the door of his Volvo open, somehow conjured up a tired smile and gave a light-hearted bow in Isa’s direction. ‘The queen mother awaits.’

Isa blinked and pouted. According to Sandra, she was ‘just like her dad’ when it came to her grumpy early-morning moods. It had been a cold start to the day for them in many respects. If it wasn’t already bad enough that it was Monday, the words ‘no more hazelnut spread’, ‘pit stop at Mum’s house’ and ‘test’ only served to make matters worse. Isa’s mood was almost as icy as the temperature outside, which was now minus eleven degrees. An area of low pressure from Siberia had covered Germany in snow from the Baltic Sea to the Alps. They were calling it ‘System Adrian’ on the news.

Isa climbed wearily out of the back seat of the car with the stiff collar of her dark-blue pea coat turned up to her ears. Solitary snowflakes fell from the colourless sky and got caught in her silky blond hair as they twirled to the ground. She had insisted on wearing her red tartan skirt. When Jesse reminded her it was winter, her response was to put on a pair of dark blue tights with the toes cut off so that she could feel the lambskin

inside her boots with her toes. That was the most important thing, after all.

Her footsteps crunched in the fresh snow, and Jesse could smell the Colgate wafting in the air as she plodded past him. Had she eaten the toothpaste instead of brushing her teeth? He resisted the urge to comment. His shift in the children's clinic at St Josef's hospital was due to start in half an hour. Best not to part ways on an argument.

He grabbed Isa's bag and followed her to the door. Looming above the brickwork on the ground floor of the apartment building were five floors of grey-tinged stone punctuated by traditional Berlin-style windows and elegant ornamental details. The black Victorian grille in front of the oak door at the entrance exuded the charm of an upper-class London area, even though Berlin Wilmersdorf certainly wasn't a patch on Chelsea or Mayfair. But no doubt that was exactly what Sandra's new boyfriend Leon had in mind when he rented the flat here on Hildegardstrasse. Leon Stein had spent a few years as a choreographer in the West End in London and had all the smug, over-the-top facial expressions to be expected of a dancer. He had squandered almost all his assets and he was hardly ever at home.

Isa had already buzzed upstairs and she was now standing in the open doorway of the apartment building.

Sandra was waiting for her on the third floor. Her blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and her thin, slightly pointed face was flushed from her early-morning dancing exercises and stretches. As usual, her blue eyes looked strained and slightly sad. They used to beam with light, but now they had the same look Jesse recognised in a lot of children who had been taken into care, himself included.

Isa threw her arms around Jesse and hugged him goodbye with all the strength she had in her arms. 'Bye, blue man!' she said softly. He smiled. Quite predictably, everything he was wearing was blue except for his boots. His winter jacket with its fur-trimmed hood was dark blue and his scarf and jeans were slightly lighter. Isa first noticed his penchant for blue when she was just four. Since then, she called him her 'blue man' every time she said hello or goodbye.

'Morning, Mum,' Isa mumbled as she scurried into the flat. She made a point of putting her scruffy Ugg boots away under the coat rack before darting across the whitewashed parquet towards her room.

'Morning, young lady,' Sandra gazed after her, raised her eyebrows and shot a sharp glare in Jesse's direction. Bare toes and no hat. Of course he was in her bad books. He was sure Sandra had noticed the 'eau de toothpaste' too.

'So,' Sandra began. 'Did you get my message?'

'What message?'

'Oh, it doesn't matter.' There was a strange undertone in her voice. Was she annoyed? Or nervous?

'What did you want?'

'Do you ever check your landline these days?'

Jesse shrugged. His house phone was usually on silent and he only really used the answerphone to screen his calls. Sandra completely failed to understand why he didn't feel duty-bound to answer messages. 'Why didn't you call my mobile instead?' he asked.

'You don't use voicemail—'

—and I have no desire to keep running around after you until you finally decide you can be bothered to answer, Jesse thought

to himself, mentally finishing the sentence for her. 'Just tell me what you wanted to talk to me about.'

'I told you, it doesn't matter. It's sorted now.'

There was a brief pause. He started to get annoyed, like he always did when he felt this mix of guilty conscience and rejection.

Isa's head appeared behind Sandra. 'Aren't you coming tonight, Dad?' she said, peering out from the gap between the door and her bedroom.

'Tonight?' Jesse looked from Isa to Sandra in confusion.

The woman he was still officially married to rubbed her right index finger with her left hand, like she always did when she felt awkward.

'I heard the message,' Isa smirked, adding fuel to the fire without realising it. Her mother glanced reproachfully over her shoulder, then Isa's head instantly disappeared.

'Do you need me to help?' asked Jesse.

'Help? How about you give me some *support*?'

'If you need someone to look after Isa—'

She wavered, her emotions fluctuating between irritation and – well, what was it?

'When are you going out?' Jesse asked.

'Six o'clock.'

'Is there a problem with me seeing my daughter? Is Leon around?'

'Nope,' a cheery voice replied from Isa's room. 'He's in Chicago.'

'I'm going to look at a little dance studio. I'm thinking maybe I can rent it and teach classes,' Sandra said. She sounded reluctant to tell him about it.

A dance studio. So that was it. 'While Leon is off touring the world making big bucks?'

'Leave it,' Sandra snapped flatly.

'Well, he's away so much—'

'Says Mr Doctors Without Borders himself!' Sandra said.

'At least you seem to be much more understanding of Mr Dancing Without Borders's absence.'

Sandra wanted to answer back, but instead she just stopped and closed her eyes for a moment. She smiled when she opened them and looked at him again. A distant smile. False and cautious. 'Please just leave Leon out of it. I don't want to have to worry about him.'

'Worry? About Leon?'

She looked at him silently and rubbed her finger again.

'Oh, come on!' Jesse said. 'Please tell me you're joking?'

The look in her eyes answered the question for her. For God's sake! Where had all this come from? 'What happened with Markus back then was different,' Jesse said. 'And you of all people should know that.'

'*He* says differently.'

Her use of the present tense didn't escape Jesse: *says*, not *said*. 'Have you been speaking to him?'

Sandra kept quiet.

He sighed and bit his tongue. 'And I'm guessing you've already asked Jule if she can do it?'

'Jule doesn't have time; she's working. But it doesn't matter anyway. Like I said, Isa will be fine on her own for a while.'

Jesse glanced at the clock. Six o'clock was too early for him really. He wanted to see Isa, but he was aware that the combination of 'Sandra like a cat on a hot tin roof' and 'Jesse running late' was a delicate one. 'I'll be there around six o'clock, give or take ten minutes,' he said.

Sandra looked far from happy.

‘For sure,’ he said.

‘OK,’ she sighed. ‘By the way, I meant to ask: have you been to Adlershof recently?’

Jesse looked at her in surprise. ‘No, what makes you think that?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘OK, well, see you tonight, then,’ he said.

‘Yeah, see you later.’ Her voice was calmer now. That was one of the few advantages of their separation: the anger didn’t take as long to subside. They could still push each other’s buttons, but at least they’d managed to make more of an effort since the split.

The Volvo S60 made a brittle electronic sound when it started up. Jesse had bought the S60 on impulse from a used car dealer when he let Sandra keep the old Volvo estate after the split. He ended up hating the car in just a few weeks. It was too much: too sporty, with too much electronic equipment. The only thing he liked was the sound system, and that was mostly because of the excited look that crept onto Isa’s face whenever he turned the volume up.

He cranked up the volume and rolled down the passenger-side window. Icy wind blew into the car. Billy Idol’s ‘White Wedding’ blasted into his ears.

Worry. About Leon. What a load of crap.

Snowflakes drifted into his field of vision. He stared at the windscreen and found himself picturing Markus’s stocky body there like a projected image. He saw the dark hair and his razor-sharp parting on that square skull of his. It suited him just as little as his false air of sophistication and his alleged fondness

for dance. He was about as stiff as a snapped broom – just who was he kidding?

The old scar on Jesse's back itched again, like it often did whenever his thoughts turned to Markus and the accident. If it really was an accident. He still found that hard to believe.

Billy Idol's voice broke into a scream singing about a new start. Cynical, perhaps? Damn! It was much too late for him to start again. Now going to work again every day was the only thing he had left. Ever since the split he had been feeling more homeless than ever.

Start again.

That was what he did back then, after the accident. Focal retrograde amnesia. One day a light goes off, like someone's pulled a plug out of the socket, then you forget everything and boot up again. If human beings are a sum of their experiences and memories, he must have been completely erased at the age of thirteen. Except for his genes and fundamental skills such as speaking, running, calculating, cycling – oh, and the inability to swim properly. Other people had to tell him who he was. He had pieced himself together from the fragments. And even now, he still had the empty feeling of not really knowing who he was.

The window hummed as he rolled it up. He indicated. The best place to forget about it all was in the clinic at St Josef's. Or on a day out in the forest with Isa.