

Part One

Stifling





Sunday, 24 July

At first there is only her fear. She opens her eyes and sees the pale early morning light, her familiar room. For a while she lies there, listening to the blackbirds courting and bickering outside her window. Then she thinks of Barabbas, and her tired body tenses up as she strains to hear him. Silly old fool, she tells herself, you worry about your dog the way another woman might worry about a man. But she has to convince herself that the barely audible rasp from the passage is Barabbas's breathing before she can muster the courage to sit up.

Pain shoots into her arms and shoulders even before her feet touch the threadbare weave of the wool runner. Pull yourself together. Don't let yourself go. The morning's always the worst, but you know you can get up if you want to. She presses her lips together. Wear and tear, decades of bad posture, too much work and stress – that's all the doctors have to say. Take a pain-killer, try to take it easy. They hide what they are really thinking behind cold, youthful smiles and sanctimonious questions. You live alone? How old are you, Frau Vogt? Eighty-two? A large garden to look after? And an Alsatian? Isn't it all a bit much for you? There's the open-cast mine too – Frimmersdorf isn't what it used to be. You're old – what do you expect? Time to kick the bucket. That's what the doctors really mean, but she won't do them the favour.





The heat of the new day hangs over the vegetable patch like a hint of what's to come. I ought to see to the courgettes and beans, and pick the strawberries before the blackbirds get at them, she thinks. Later it will be too hot. The kettle whistles, she pours water over freshly ground coffee, spreads a slice of toast with butter and honey, fills Barabbas's bowl with water and throws him a few dog biscuits. He nuzzles up to her and she fondles his ears, ignoring the shooting pain – her body's punishment to her for stooping. Inside, Barabbas laps his water; outside, she sips her coffee on the veranda. Half past four. If there's a bad omen in the air, she senses nothing.

It should always be like this, she thinks instead – a beginning rather than an end, a day so clean and new, it feels as if it's been made just for us. Blackbirds fly up, and longing gleams in Barabbas's brown eyes. When did they last have a decent walk? When did he last run around the fields? The day before yesterday? A week ago? She can't remember. Another curse of old age, these memory lapses. You need an awful lot of optimism to stop life from getting you down, and the older you get, the more you need. She carries her empty cup into the kitchen and puts the Alsatian on the lead, suddenly buoyed up by the thought of a long ramble. She'll just have to pick the strawberries when they get back. The veg can wait until the evening.

She decides to go through the village, and although it's early she doesn't let Barabbas off the lead. As long as she sticks to the rules, no one can say she's too frail for such a big strong dog, that she's a danger to others, that the creature should be put down and his mistress stuck in a home. On the outskirts of the village, beyond the playing fields, she lets Barabbas run free. The colossus of a power station never sleeps. Steam hisses



into the morning sky; the plant siren wails, the conveyor belts carrying brown coal rumble and shriek. She takes the road through the tunnel and crosses the river, where men will later sit and fish. Barabbas is on good form; he hares around like a puppy. After a while he leaves the road and makes a beeline into a wood. She follows slowly, careful not to trip. The sun is higher in the sky, but not too hot yet, and the scent of wild camomile fills the air.

The sudden roar of an engine makes her start and she wheels round in confusion. What was that? The engine roars again. Then there's a discordant rattling. Rowdy youths, she thinks. No respect. But aren't young people sleeping off their hangovers at this hour on a Sunday morning? Another rattle and a flash of light, back towards the road, and for a second she's afraid that whoever's making all this racket is coming straight for her. Then the sound of the engine moves away and all is silent again.

Where is Barabbas? Last night's fear grips her again. Where would I be without him? What would I do if he died? She calls him and finds him rolling ecstatically in a dirty hollow; it will take ages to brush the dust out of his coat. She hears her daughter's voice. *The entire house reeks of dog – you might as well admit that it's months since you last managed to wash the animal.* Elisabeth Vogt shakes her head in a futile attempt to forget.

'Here, Barabbas. Here, boy!' Her call is the hoarse croak of an old hag.

'Barabbas!'

At last the Alsatian deigns to obey, wagging his tail with an almost roguish look on his face. She can never bring herself to be cross with him, not even now as he slips her grasp and tears



back to where the rattle and the flash came from. Oh well, it doesn't really matter which way they go. She follows him. The ground is sandy. Dirt gets in her Birkenstock sandals, and she has to keep stopping to extricate herself from the undergrowth. She hears the dog's throaty growl before she sees him, and a shudder runs down her spine. The woven leather of the lead hangs limply from her hand like a dead eel.

'Bara—' Her voice gives out. In all the sixteen years of their life together she has never been afraid of her dog; he has never given her reason. Now she wants to run away; she doesn't want to see what it is that has turned her friendly companion into a slaving hellhound. But something stronger than her propels her forward between the stunted trees.

At first all she sees is Barabbas's hunched back, his fur bristling, his muscles tense. He's got his teeth sunk into something, and he's tearing at it, a constant rumbling deep in his throat.

'Drop it, Barabbas!' In her outrage she finds her voice, and brings down the leather on his back. Never has she given him more than a slight tap with a rolled-up newspaper, but now she's thrashing him like a madwoman, with a strength she didn't know she still possessed, tugging at the dog's collar and choking him until at last his growl gives way to a whimper and he opens his bloody maw.

Limp and destroyed, his prey lies in the dirt. A wire-haired dachshund. Images flicker in front of Elisabeth's eyes. The boy from down the road with his little dog, both of them with shining eyes. Her grandson with his arms around Barabbas, begging his mother to please, please let him have a dog – just a small one. It didn't have to be an Alsatian; a dachshund would do just as well. He'd never ever *ever* ask for anything else again – not for





Christmas or Easter or his birthday – and he'd always take it for walks. I promise, Mummy, I promise. Please, please, please.

Still holding Barabbas in the stranglehold of his collar, she closes her eyes for a few moments' respite. She doesn't want to know what's lying there; she doesn't want to stay here – she won't, she can't. Barabbas's panting and the intrusive buzz of a shimmering greenfly bring her back to reality. We must go home, she thinks. We can't stay here. If they find us and see what Barabbas has done, they'll take him away from me. She clips the lead onto his collar and drags him away step by step. Her back is screaming with pain; she can suddenly feel it again. Barabbas's energy seems spent too; he's cowering, trembling, at her side, a confused old dog. How could she go and beat him like that? Home, she thinks again. We must go home. It's safe there; everything will be all right once we're back.

The sun is climbing quickly; Elisabeth's dress clings to her thighs and back, and every breath hurts. No one will find out what you've done, Barabbas – I'll take care of you, my friend, my companion. They won't put you to sleep. I won't let them. Forgive me for what I did to you.

Forgive me. Forgive me. With all her remaining strength she forces herself not to think anything but that.

The villa in Bayenthal, one of the more upmarket districts of Cologne, stands listless in the heat. The media are talking, with rapidly waning enthusiasm, of 'a record-breaking summer'. Even the trees lining the streets look exhausted. Judith Krieger, a detective superintendent who is on leave at her own request, throws back her head and stares up at the sky through the open soft top of her 2CV. She wishes she could leave the engine





running, put her foot down and drive with the wind in her face until she gets to a lake. She can see the lake if she shuts her eyes; cool and almost picture-postcard turquoise, the water close enough to touch.

A dark Mercedes draws up behind her 2CV. The man who gets out is familiar and yet strange, just like the house she is parked outside. He approaches her with steps too small for his body, as if he weren't using his legs at all, but shuffling towards Judith – an overweight, blue-eyed crab in pale leisurewear, trained not to move sideways. Something flutters in Judith's stomach. It was a mistake to come, she thinks. This is my last week of leave. I shouldn't have let him talk me into it, not even for old time's sake. Better to leave the past alone.

'Judith Krieger, thank God!' Judith's former schoolmate reveals teeth which would make a packet for the orthodontist who got to put them straight.

'Berthold Pretorius.' Judith gets out of the car. She withdraws from the warm, clammy handshake as soon as she can.

He beams at her. 'I knew you'd come.'

'You knew more than I did.'

He runs a hand through mousy strands of hair in a nervous gesture. At school his fingers were bitten and ink-stained, the nails practically non-existent. Now only the broad, fleshy fingertips betray data-processing expert Dr Berthold Pretorius as the one-time nail-biter and class freak.

'Please, Judith. I told you Charlotte's in danger. You have to help me.'

Berthold's call had come as a complete surprise. He had almost begged Judith to meet him at Charlotte's villa. Their old classmate, he told her, had been missing for several weeks – since the end





of May, to be precise. No, she wasn't on holiday. Charlotte often went birdwatching by the Baltic, but not this time. It was as if the earth had swallowed her up. He was afraid something might have happened to her, but his hands were tied, and he knew nothing about anything except computers. The police didn't understand what he was worried about – and wasn't Judith a detective? OK, she had said in the end, I'll have a look at the house, but on a purely private basis. Maybe we can find something out.

She watches him fumbling in his trouser pockets until at last, with a sigh of relief, he pulls out a key and dangles it in front of her face.

'Will you do the honours or shall I?'

'You're Charlotte's friend, not me.'

He nods and puts the key in the lock. The coolness in the hall is a shock; the air is stale. Dead, thinks Judith, although there is no hint of the unmistakable whiff of decomposing human flesh. It smells of dust and mothballs and a little of disinfectant. Berthold pulls the front door shut and Judith feels as if she has stepped into a mausoleum.

'Isn't there any light?' She feels along the wall for a switch.

'The blinds are down. Hang on.' Berthold pushes past her and opens a door. She finds the light switch just as he pulls up the blinds. Fabric wall coverings in pale old rose are suddenly visible, a coat stand, a mirror and an old-fashioned telephone table.

Berthold Pretorius sets off down the hall and Judith follows him into a living room with heavy oak furniture. This room too is in semi-darkness until Berthold raises the blinds to reveal a view of a park-like garden framed by tall conifers. Light floods the room, but there is at first nothing warming in the shafts of sunlight that assail their eyes.



‘The lawn looks as if it’s been recently mown,’ says Judith.

‘Charlotte has a gardener.’

‘How does she pay him?’

Berthold shrugs. ‘Standing order? No idea.’

Judith looks about her. Above the studded leather sofa is an oppressive oil painting in a gilt frame – red-coated jockeys reining in hysterical-looking horses; hunting hounds with bloody chops; a fleeing stag.

‘It isn’t a very youthful house.’

‘It’s all as Charlotte’s father left it.’ Berthold sounds as if he’s trying to defend Charlotte. Unlike Judith, he has kept in touch with her – ‘stayed friends’, as he puts it.

‘Is her father dead?’

‘Yes, he died nine months ago.’

‘Enough time to make some changes.’

‘Charlotte’s rooms are upstairs. Feel free to have a look around. I’m going to have to leave you now, I’m afraid.’ He doesn’t look at her.

‘You’re leaving me to look for the corpse by myself?’

His rosy face grows a touch paler; his fleshy right hand moves to his chest. ‘There’s no corpse here. I’ve searched the whole house, even the cellar.’

‘That’s reassuring.’

‘As I said, the idea is to find out where Charlotte might have gone.’

‘And you really don’t know . . .?’

‘I’ll take you upstairs. Then I really must be going. Got a system error to fix. I couldn’t have known when I rang you. The company’s stuck without me.’

‘Didn’t you say you were always free on Sundays?’

‘I’m sorry. For computers, it’s a day like any other.’

He shows her upstairs, deeper into the darkened world of Charlotte Simonis. A brown carpet, secured with brass stair rods, deadens their footsteps. The smell of disinfectant and mothballs grows stronger; the lake Judith was dreaming of only a few minutes before seems more and more like a mirage.

‘Here.’ Berthold opens a glossy white door. The room is gloomy, musty and warm. Judith finds the light switch and starts. Glassy dolls’ eyes stare out at her, catapulting her into a time she would prefer to forget and reminding her that she has amends to make, although it is probably too late. Berthold’s concern about Charlotte suddenly grips Judith, seeping into her body like poison. Why has Charlotte kept her dolls? What does that say about her life? Judith feels a twinge in her belly, which isn’t helped by the stuffy heat of the attic.

Bluebottles buzz. A cricket rasps away. The sun bites mercilessly into Elisabeth’s neck and lower arms. She leans on her spade for a moment to catch her breath, and red and black circles dance before her eyes. She must be mad to be digging a grave in this heat. But she had no choice, of course. Ignoring Barabbas’s whimper of protest, she had shut him in the house and set off for the woods again, this time armed with spade and suitcase. She resumes digging, pleased to see that the hole will soon be deep enough. There’s no alternative, she thinks. I must finish this job – make sure that Barabbas’s sin is forgotten.

The wire-haired dachshund lies beside her in the sand; its glassy eyes seem to watch her. A fly lands in the corner of one eye, and Elisabeth raises her spade to shoo it away. But the fly is persistent and keeps coming back. Of course it does, Elisabeth

thinks. It wants to eat – eat and provide for its brood. That’s life, isn’t it? The thought that there will soon be maggots feasting on the dachshund’s eyes turns her stomach, although she grew up on a farm and, goodness knows, isn’t squeamish. She drives the spade into the sand and sinks to her knees with a groan. Come on, little dog, let’s get this over and done with. This will keep the flies off you at least.

She opens the lid of the children’s suitcase and takes out one of the old terry sheets to use as a shroud. She pulls the dachshund onto it. It looks so small, but it’s heavy. Elisabeth tastes bile on her tongue. Barabbas’s bite marks are hardly visible in the soft dishevelled coat. Another shimmering greenfly tries its luck. Quickly Elisabeth lifts the dachshund into its red-and-green checked coffin. It is still watching her. But it isn’t the staring eyes that make Elisabeth begin to shake uncontrollably. The dachshund’s right ear is missing. Somebody must have cut it off with a knife, not long ago; there is blood clinging to the neat gash.

Detective Inspector Manfred Korzilius is sitting in the beer garden when his weekend off is brought to an abrupt end. He is wondering whether or not to approach the cat-eyed blonde in a pink dress who is loitering at the bar with a rather less attractive friend. If he throws himself at her, he risks being given the brush-off. On the other hand, the pair of them look as if they might be glad of a distraction. And nothing ventured . . . The question is always, of course, whether it’s worth the effort. Miss Cat’s Eyes pushes a silver clip into her hair and fans herself with the drinks menu. Very pretty. But Manni’s Nokia is vibrating more and more insistently, demanding instant attention. Sod it, he thinks, flipping it open. It’s too hot for sex anyway.

‘Sorry to disturb you,’ a voice barks – Thalbach, his new boss.
‘I’m not on call today.’

‘I know, but I’ve just spoken to Millstätt and we agreed that you’re the right man for this operation.’

‘Aha,’ Manni says, annoyed that nothing more articulate occurs to him. Why, for Christ’s sake, has Thalbach been discussing him with the head of the murder squad? Is Manni going to be transferred back to Criminal Investigation Division 11 at last, after months of trying? But then why doesn’t Millstätt ring himself?

‘A boy’s been reported missing,’ Thalbach announces in his sonorous voice. ‘There are inconsistencies in the parents’ statements. Looks as if it might turn out to be a homicide within the family; that’s where your experience at Division 11 comes in. The boy’s parents are unable to say exactly when their son went missing. Sometime this weekend while he was camping with his dad – who isn’t his biological father, by the way.’

Now that it’s clear that this particular hot summer’s night isn’t going to come to anything, Miss Cat’s Eyes throws him a glance which is by no means indifferent. Typical. Manni holds her gaze for a moment and then tries to concentrate on the phone call. He takes a sip of shandy and pulls a face. It’s warm and flat, although he’s only been sitting here for ten minutes. He pushes the glass aside and signals to the waitress.

‘How old is the boy?’

‘Fourteen.’

‘Maybe he’s with his mates. Swimming. Or at his girlfriend’s.’

‘That doesn’t appear to be the case. Would you drive to the parents and talk to them, please? Try to get an impression of the situation.’

‘Who am I working for?’

‘Me. For the time being, at any rate. And let’s hope, for the sake of the family, that it stays that way.’

And if the boy turns out to be dead, can I go back to Division 11 with this case? The question is on the tip of Manni’s tongue, but he doesn’t ask it. The last six months have taught him caution. When his first investigation with Judith Krieger went pear-shaped – a murder in a forest clearing in the Bergisches Land – Millstätt had informed him that he was transferring him to the Missing Persons Department. Temporarily, he said, to fill a staff shortage. A sanctimonious lie that Manni doesn’t believe. Judith Krieger has taken leave to do some soul-searching and heal her wounded psyche, while he’s stuck doing penance with the manhunters instead of making a career for himself – that’s about the size of it. It’s outrageously unjust; after all, it was bloody Krieger who flouted all the rules. And yet she’ll get to go back to Division 11 when she returns from leave in a week. It looks as if she still has Millstätt eating out of her hand.

‘Any questions?’ Thalbach’s voice brings Manni back to the present. Manni stares at his shandy which doesn’t look as if it ever had a head on it. Why not give them a hard time, if they’re going to mess him around? He doesn’t owe them too much enthusiasm right now and he certainly has no desire to struggle through town to the vehicle fleet at headquarters.

‘I’m in the beer garden. I’ve been drinking alcohol.’

‘A lot?’

‘Not too much. Shandy.’

‘Get yourself an espresso and take a cab.’

Manni catches the waitress's eye at last and she comes over to his table. He smiles apologetically and wordlessly wrests pad and pen out of her hand to note down the address that Thalbach dictates to him.

Downstairs, the front door shuts. Judith can't take her eyes off Charlotte's collection of dolls. She is hypnotised by these unblinking imitation children with their brightly coloured clothes; it is like looking at a glassy-eyed time machine. She knows she was in this room once before, decades ago. How old was she? Fourteen or thereabouts. It was a wet, grey day in May, soon after Charlotte's birthday. She and Charlotte are almost the same age – both born in 1966. 'Happy birthday,' she says out loud, to shake off the sense of unease she feels in this room, which is set in the past as if in gelatine.

At the birthday party, Charlotte's mother had given them rhubarb tart with whipped cream and hot chocolate. There had been candles and flowers – and presents, of course – but somehow the party had never really got going. The other girls had nudged each other under the table and giggled. They were a tight-knit gang who had known each other since the beginning of secondary school; only Charlotte and Judith were newcomers, interlopers, outsiders. The next day, in the school loos, Judith overheard the other girls squeezing into one of the cubicles to have a smoke and bitch about Charlotte. They whispered about her white lace blouse and her dolls. About the lack of ice cream and chocolate bars and Coke and music – and just about everything that was 'in'. And of course there was worse to come. In the weeks that followed, the other girls stopped talking to Charlotte.



They acted as if she didn't exist. Charlotte asked Judith round to her house, sat next to her in class, told her secrets in the playground at break – all the things that girls do. Judith thought her slightly strange, but by no means stupid or boring. And yet she had stopped meeting up with her. And then she had betrayed her. Hadn't she?

Judith goes back down to the ground floor, fills a glass with tap water in the kitchen and sits down on the sun-warmed stone steps which lead from the terrace to the garden. The heat makes her feel heavy and sluggish and pulls her far back into the past. She's still queasy. She tries to push aside the memories of Charlotte and her dolls and think instead of her turquoise lake – an innocuous summer daydream, a dream of now. She fails.

She wasn't at school with Charlotte and Berthold for long – only two years. Her restless father had landed yet another new job, and they had moved again. Judith doesn't like to recall those years when she was at the mercy of her parents' decisions. Her true life, or so it seems to her, didn't start until she left school. She had moved back to Cologne as soon as she'd sat her school leaving exams, not out of nostalgia, but because she had a place to read law at the university. Even so, right from the start, she was determined to make Cologne her home. She was almost intoxicated by the thought that she never had to move again if she didn't want to; she could build her own life, her own circle of friends. Meeting up with her old schoolmates was not part of her plan.

Judith rolls herself a cigarette. She knows more or less nothing about Charlotte Simonis, and supposes it would be not only wrong but also presumptuous to imagine that the few experiences they shared as teenagers or the inglorious role she played



back then might have had any influence on Charlotte's life, let alone on her disappearance. But Charlotte is missing, that much is clear. Certainly no one seems to have seen her in the last seven weeks. Judith lights the cigarette and enjoys the familiar tingle of nicotine in her lungs. What has happened to Charlotte? What course has her life taken? Is it possible that she was happy here, in this mausoleum of a house? Is her disappearance the delayed after-effect of a screwed-up life – or did she leave in search of happiness? And what does that mean anyway? Judith takes a drag on her cigarette. We all chase after happiness, surrender to our desires as if to some insatiable god. We refuse to accept that life also has its setbacks – the daily grind, accidents, parents and partners who betray us or leave us. At the end of the day, this desperate pursuit of happiness is pointless; we have to keep on breathing, whether times are good or bad.

Charlotte wanted to be my friend, thinks Judith. I rejected her. That's all that happened – full stop, end of story. But Judith knows there is more to it than that. Suddenly she is released from her paralysis. She stubs out her cigarette and gets up. If there is any clue in this deserted villa to Charlotte's whereabouts, she is going to find it.

On the other side of town, in the district of Brück, Manni stuffs his taxi receipt into his trouser pocket, pops a Fisherman's Friend into his mouth and looks about him. The semi-detached houses look the same as everywhere and the front gardens offer the usual range of flowers, benches, miniature trees with grotesquely pollarded branches, and the inevitable plastic paraphernalia of family homes. Manni steps over buckets and spades, a red plastic sit-on car and a deflated football – an ugly

mess on the fake cobbles leading to the house. Before he can ring the bell, a man pushes open the front door, barefoot and blond. Two small children cling to his faded jeans, their mouths smeared with chocolate.

‘CID?’ Without looking at Manni’s warrant card, the man grabs the bigger child by the shoulders. ‘Go in the living room with your sister, please. Daddy and Mummy want to speak to this man alone.’

The kids stare up at Manni like stuffed dummies. Their father wriggles his hips to shake them off. ‘Leander, Marlene – you know what we agreed. Go in the living room now or I’ll send you straight to bed and there’ll be no telly for a week.’

The threat seems to have an effect, and the children detach themselves from the man’s legs in slow motion. He gives them a last push in the right direction before turning to Manni.

‘Frank Stadler, come on in.’

Stadler’s wife, Martina, is in the kitchen, sitting on a corner bench behind a roughly hewn wooden table, her legs drawn up to her chest, her eyes vacant. Chestnut hair falls in shimmering waves over her shoulders and she is wearing a light green sundress. If you ignore her swollen eyes, she looks fantastic. Her slim fingers are clutching something as if her life depended on it.

‘You have to find Jonny,’ she says, in lieu of a greeting.

Manni nods and sits down opposite her. Yes, he thinks, sooner or later we’ll find your boy. And maybe you’ll wish we hadn’t. You’ll find yourself longing to return to this uncertainty that now seems so unbearable. Stadler pushes an empty glass over to him and fills it with water from one of those plastic bottles that cheapskates use to make their own fizzy water. It tastes warm and stale. Manni puts the glass down on the table.

‘So you’re missing your eldest son, Jonathan Stadler. He’s fourteen—’

‘Röbel,’ Martina Stadler interrupts him, ‘Jonny’s surname is Röbel.’

‘Röbel.’ Manni lowers his pen. ‘But you’re both called Stadler?’

‘Jonny is actually Martina’s sister’s son,’ says Frank Stadler. ‘We took him in because his parents were killed in an accident.’

‘Don’t bring up the past.’ Martina Stadler’s voice is barely more than a whisper. ‘All that’s neither here nor there. What matters is that you find Jonny.’

‘Jonathan Röbel, known as Jonny,’ says Manni. Martina is the boy’s flesh-and-blood aunt, then, and her suffering seems genuine. But what about her husband? Are stepfathers potential offenders? Is that why his boss is considering the possibility of a violent crime within the family? Manni scrutinises Stadler, who runs his right hand over his forehead and buzz cut. New beads of sweat immediately form on his hairline. He is thirty-odd, about Manni’s age, and the kids clearly have no respect for him. But what does that mean? Maybe Stadler was jealous of his adolescent stepson, and saw him as a rival who had to be eliminated. For a moment, Manni thinks of his own father. Was he ever young and cheerful? Was he ever interested in his son? Manni can’t remember that he was. But it’s too hot and stuffy to concentrate on more than one thing at a time.

‘How long has Jonny been living with you?’

‘Three years.’ Frank Stadler clears his throat. ‘I know what you’re going to ask next. Yes, it was difficult – of course it was – what do you think? The boy was grieving; the two of us were in shock – my wife and her sister were very close – and little

Marlene was only a few months old.' Again he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. 'So it was difficult and Jonny ran away twice in the first year, wanting to see his old home again. But that's over now, believe me. We all pulled together and we coped. My wife's right: Jonny's disappearance has nothing to do with what happened back then.'

'Where is his old home?' Manni asked. No matter what Stadler says, the boy's former home will have to be checked out. At the Cologne headquarters, Criminal Investigation Division 66 files 2,400 missing persons reports every year. But most of the missing persons haven't really disappeared. Teenagers come and go, especially if they're from dysfunctional homes. Their parents always swear that all's well, of course, but what do they know about their children?

'Jonny used to live in the Eifel,' says Stadler, his lips narrowed. 'In Daun, to be exact.'

'I'll need the address. And if possible the addresses of Jonny's old friends there.'

'Jonny's not in the Eifel. He wouldn't have gone there without letting us know,' says Stadler, struggling to contain himself. 'We rang acquaintances in Daun just to make sure, and no one had seen him.'

'Did you have any kind of argument before he left? Was anything troubling the boy?'

'No, nothing.' Both the Stadlers shake their heads.

'Is he healthy? Intelligent?'

'Why do you ask? Yes.'

'Sporty?'

They nod.

'Reliable?'

‘Completely.’

‘But there have been times in the past when he ran away – you said so yourself.’

‘Jesus, yes, because it’s the truth. But that was in the past, you know – three years ago, before he’d settled in here. If I’d known you were going to use our honesty as an excuse not to look for the boy, I wouldn’t have mentioned it to you.’

Going by what Manni has learnt about missing teenagers over the course of the last months, it is by no means unlikely that Jonny has run away again. But perhaps he hasn’t. Manni feels cold sweat on his neck. What if he is underestimating the danger? What if the boy has been abducted and is being held underground somewhere, injured and desperate with fear?

‘His torch.’ Martina Stadler gives a sob. ‘Jonny’s torch was still in his bed. But it doesn’t make sense – he never forgets his torch, he can’t get to sleep without it.’

Keep calm, man, keep calm. Manni takes a deep breath. ‘Can I see this torch?’

Sobs.

‘Please, Martina, show the inspector.’ Cautiously, as if afraid to injure her, Frank Stadler reaches across the table and begins to wrest the object from the woman’s fingers.

‘I shook up Jonny’s duvet and it fell out.’ Martina is trembling all over; it is almost impossible to understand her. ‘I picked it up straight away and it’s still working, but the glass is broken.’

‘It’s only a crack. I’m sure Jonny won’t notice.’ Frank has managed to get hold of the torch. He looks at it before putting it down on the table in front of Manni.

‘It’s broken,’ Martina whispers, ‘broken. He’s scared without his torch. Why didn’t you remind him to take it?’



‘God, Tina, you know what it’s like. The little ones were whining, we were late and Jonny said he had everything.’

‘When was that?’ Manni asks.

‘What do you mean?’ Stadler looks at Manni as if he had forgotten his presence.

‘When you left with Jonny. When was that?’

‘Saturday morning, at about eleven. We dropped the little ones at my mum’s in Bensberg and then went straight on to the campsite.’

Manni leafs through the pad he wangled out of the waitress in the beer garden. ‘And the camp was at the edge of Königsforst, in the grounds of a club called the “Sioux of Cologne”.’

Stadler nods. ‘Yes, damn it. Why the hell aren’t there search parties out there?’

‘We have to assess the situation first. When did you last see Jonny?’

Martina Stadler begins to cry harder.

‘Listen . . .’ Manni tries to get Frank Stadler’s attention. ‘Please answer my questions. And perhaps it would be a good idea if your GP—’

‘Jonny’s torch is broken. I broke it! Oh my God, I can’t bear it!’ Martina’s voice cracks.

‘Don’t say that.’ Frank Stadler strokes the slim fingers that are lying limp and useless on the table, like a puppet without strings. ‘Please, Martina, nothing’s broken. And Jonny still has Dr D.’

‘Who’s—?’ But Manni gets no further because, as if the name were a call to arms, the children burst into the kitchen with deafening yells. ‘Dee-Dee! Jonny! Dee-Dee! Jonny! Where’s Dee-Dee?’



Before either parent can react, they are clambering onto the corner bench and plunging their smeary faces into their mother's chest and belly. She begins mechanically to stroke their tousled heads and murmur soothing nonsense.

Frank Stadler gets up, signalling to Manni with a jerk of his head that he's to follow. He seems to have given up wiping the sweat from his forehead; a fine trickle is creeping past his ear towards his chin. From the living room a piercing child's voice trills a little song about a crocodile called Snappy. Manni feels as if he's being slowly smothered in this house.

'I don't know when Jonny disappeared,' Stadler says softly. 'The kids live according to their own rules at the camp.'

He turns round abruptly. 'Come on, I'll show you Jonny's room.'

It almost looks as if Stadler is running away from him. Manni ignores his need for oxygen and follows on his heels.

'Who's Dr D.?' he repeats, when they reach the bottom of the stairs.

Frank Stadler opens the door to a basement room. There is a bed, neatly made up with dark blue bedclothes and, on the floor beside it, a dog basket.

'Dee-Dee, Dr D., is Jonny's dog, a wire-haired dachshund. The pair of them are inseparable.'

The muffled silence of Charlotte's villa seems to swallow Judith's anger. The heat creeping in at the open windows, the furniture, frozen in another era, her own memories of Charlotte – everything gives Judith a feeling of unreality. She doesn't touch or move anything yet, but all her senses are on the alert. Searching a house is like gradually decoding an unknown microcosm.

Every home guards secrets, even if its occupants have done their best to eliminate any evidence. Has Charlotte Simonis burnt love letters and bank statements? Has she destroyed photo albums, or perhaps her father's life insurance policy, which might have raised questions about the cause of his death? Has she tidied up where once chaos reigned? I don't know, Judith thinks, walking from room to room. This first silent tour of a house is her ritual prelude to a search. She doesn't proceed systematically like her colleagues on the forensics team. Instead she surrenders her senses to the house, letting it guide her, attentive to its smells and sounds, but most of all to anything that seems to be missing or out of place.

The ground floor consists of kitchen, utility room, toilet, dining room, living room, hall and Charlotte's father's study. This last is without a doubt the most congenial room in the house, in spite of the dark shelves of academic tomes lining two of the walls. In front of the bookcases, two dark green leather armchairs and a polished mahogany side table create the perfect atmosphere for talking shop or playing chess. The third wall is hung with photographs, paintings and prints of animals, plants and landscapes. The quality of the pictures varies considerably; some of the photos are very faded. They show men in knee breeches with rucksacks on their backs, staring into the camera like conquerors. There is something disconcerting about the wall of pictures. Judith stops and studies them with an analytical eye, focusing on each in turn. Something is wrong, but she can't put her finger on it.

Upstairs she crosses the white room with the glass-eyed souvenirs of childhood. Beyond it is Charlotte's second room, painted light blue. A narrow bed with a girlishly floral cover, a

glossy white wardrobe, a rocking chair and a bedside table are the only pieces of furniture. Pinned to the wallpaper above the bed is a cheesy poster of a sunset in pastel shades. This is not the room of a grown woman.

Next door are bathroom, spare room and a large room with a wall of fitted wardrobes, which looks like a typical parents' bedroom. But where you would expect a double bed, there is a hospital bed, and instead of carpet, there is linoleum on the floor. The smell of disinfectant is overwhelming.

Charlotte had studied biology, like her father, and even embarked on a Ph.D., Berthold had said. Behavioural research – something involving rats. But then Charlotte's mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and hadn't recovered. For seven years Charlotte had nursed her mother and no sooner had she died than her father fell ill. Judith examines the bed with its immaculate white sheets and tries to imagine Charlotte's life – an existence between girlhood room and bedpan, watching her own career slipping out of reach. No hope, as long as her parents were alive. It's awful, Judith thinks. No matter what Charlotte said or did, she must have suffered, she must have had feelings of frustration. And dreams. No one lives without dreams.

But several hours of intense searching yield no clue as to what Charlotte might have dreamt of. Judith stares at the dolls again. They look like dusty-lashed keepers of the Grail, but the chest of drawers they are sitting on is empty. Judith goes down to the kitchen and washes her hands and face. She drinks two glasses of tap water, fills the glass a third time and takes it onto the terrace. The sound of distant traffic on the Rhine embankment hangs in the air, a constant low buzz. 'Come on, let's play with the dolls,' fourteen-year-old Charlotte had said. 'Pat and



Isabel, Darrell Rivers – I’ve got enough for a whole school class. Come on, Judith, it’s fun.’ But Judith hadn’t thought much of the relentlessly cheerful and well-ordered world of Enid Blyton.

She goes back inside, and for a moment Charlotte seems palpably close – a lanky girl with permanently hunched shoulders who apologised too much. What was Charlotte’s dream? Again, Judith looks at the wall of pictures in the study, but she still can’t say what’s bothering her.

In the desk she finds stationery, files of bank statements and insurance policies, and Charlotte’s father’s academic correspondence. Money is clearly no object; a considerable sum flows from an investment fund into Charlotte’s account on a regular basis, and the household expenses, including the gardener’s wages, are paid by standing order – an arrangement which does not require Charlotte’s presence. Judith kneels down on the Persian rug and leafs through the letters. Intellectual shop talk, polite banter – nothing exciting, nothing personal. Judith reaches out and feels along the back wall of the shelf behind the files. There is something there. She pulls out two framed photographs. One is a close-up of a plump toadstool; the other shows a roughly twenty-five-year-old Charlotte on an Alpine meadow, her blond hair blowing in the wind, and beside her an elderly man in knickerbockers who must be her father; even through the cracked glass of the frame, there is no mistaking the similarity of their chins and eyes.

Still holding the photos, Judith gets up and returns to the wall of pictures. In the centre, a painting of a bird looks as if it has been squeezed into a gap too small for it. It is done in oils and hung in a simple wooden frame, stained blue. The bird seems to be sitting on a nest on the shore of a lake. It has a black beak



poking out of a black head, the feathers on its back are flecked with white squares that look as if they've been painted on, and its breast is white. The most unsettling thing about it is its eye, which glints at Judith, perfectly round and ruby red, as if the bird were filled with lava.

On a sudden impulse, Judith holds the two picture frames up in front of the painting. They are considerably smaller. She lifts the painting off the wall. Bingo! In the gap that is revealed, two small dark oblongs are clearly visible, exactly the same size and shape as the two pictures from the desk. Judith turns the painting of the bird over. '*Gavia immer* – common loon – voice of the wilderness – 5/2003', someone has written on the back of the canvas. Judith can also make out the address stamp of an art studio in Cologne's Südstadt. She rings the number, but only reaches an answering machine.

Later that day she meets the forensic pathologist Karl-Heinz Müller by the plane trees in Römerpark. The summer air feels like velvet on their skin, the sky above them is fading, the red wine which Karl-Heinz has brought tastes of berries and smoke. They move slowly, not saying much; they've worked together long enough to be silent in each other's company. They play boules, polishing the smooth warm metal balls, cradling them in their hands, throwing them with languid, flowing movements. They drink the wine and smoke. When it grows dark they share a pizza in the Volksgarten. There are loudspeakers hanging in the chestnut trees overhead, but for once the racket doesn't bother Judith because they're by the water, fairy lights floating at their feet, the buzz of voices cocooning them, the air tropical.



Her attic flat still holds the heat of the day; the thermometer in the bathroom shows thirty-eight degrees. Judith makes herself a camp of duvets and mats on the roof terrace. The last thing she registers before falling asleep are the jerky movements of the bats and the feverish buzz of the restless city.

The ringing sound tears Elisabeth Vogt from an exhaustion bordering on apathy. It takes her a long time to heave herself up from the kitchen sofa and drag herself to the living room where the telephone continues to shriek. It is a little before eight; Carmen will be wanting to know whether she's still alive. She rings every evening just before the eight o'clock news to make sure all's well. Elisabeth knocks her hip on the sideboard in her hurry to get to the phone. Tears shoot into her eyes – that'll leave her with a nice bruise. She presses her palm against the painful spot. Her hand feels cool through the cloth of her dress, although goodness knows, she sweated enough today; even now, the stifling heat lingers in the darkened rooms. She lifts the receiver from the cradle.

'Vogt speaking.'

'You sound funny, Mother. Aren't you feeling yourself?'

'I'd just dropped off.' Elisabeth can hear how hoarse and choked she sounds. That won't do at all; she'll end up getting involved in yet another discussion about when she is going to see sense at last – give Barabbas away, sell the house where she lived for forty-three years with her beloved husband.

'Something's the matter. What is it, Mother?' Mother is such a harsh word; her daughter fires the syllables down the phone as if aiming straight for Elisabeth's heart.

'Everything's all right. I'm fine,' Elisabeth replies ponderously.



‘You haven’t drunk enough water again.’ Resignation has crept into Carmen’s voice. Elisabeth wonders what would happen if she told her daughter the truth. This morning Barabbas savaged a wire-haired dachshund to death, she would say. But don’t worry, it was a one-off – it won’t happen again. Nobody saw it happen and the dog was a stray – didn’t even have a collar on. I took Barabbas home and then walked back and buried the dachshund; I couldn’t leave it for the vermin – or something even worse. I buried it in the little checked suitcase you used to take on holiday – do you remember? But don’t worry, I buried it nice and deep – no one will find it. That’s why I’m so exhausted.

‘Say something, Mother.’

When had she stopped wanting to talk to her daughter? When had she accepted that blood ties do not necessarily mean mutual understanding? Elisabeth clears her throat. ‘You’re right, I haven’t drunk enough today.’

‘You must take better care of yourself, Mother.’

‘Yes.’

‘Go and have something to drink now. And sleep well.’

‘You too, Carmen.’

She really is thirsty when she hangs up; she can feel how parched her throat is. Carmen is right; she keeps forgetting to drink. She should count herself lucky that her daughter takes such good care of her, the doctors say. Not all children are like that, Frau Vogt. Not all children love their parents.

But Elisabeth doesn’t feel loved; she feels controlled. It’s a good thing she can still keep a secret. It’s more important than ever now, because if she gives anything away, they’ll kill Barabbas.

*

Detective Inspector Manfred Korzilius had only been the vanguard, and was soon joined by two brisk uniformed colleagues who made it feel as if they'd taken over the house. She had wanted to drive these strangers away. She screamed at them that they wouldn't find Jonny here; they needed to look in Königsforst, where he went missing. They must hurry up; it was getting dark. But they didn't listen to her; they just kept repeating that they had to take things one step at a time. She wasn't to worry herself – Jonny would probably only be gone a day, like most missing teenagers, and turn up tomorrow, safe and sound. Besides, it was warm; even if Jonny had to spend the night out in the open, not a lot could go wrong. And he had his dog with him. If anything had happened to Jonny, the dachshund would have made its way back to the camp, or been found by people out walking. But he hadn't and that was a good sign, they said – a sign that Jonny and his dog just didn't feel like coming home right now.

She had ended up shouting at them – get lost, leave us in peace, if you don't want to look for our boy. But when the police really do leave, she realises that it was a mistake, because now there is no escaping the despair that descends on the house. Martina Stadler presses her forehead against the kitchen window and watches Manfred Korzilius's silhouette folding itself into a police car. The windows of the surrounding houses have been dark for a long time, but that doesn't mean a thing, of course; the neighbours are probably twitching the curtains in their darkened rooms, watching the heralds of disaster drive away, shocked and yet unspeakably glad that their own lives have been spared.

Frank comes up behind her and puts his hands on her shoulders.

‘Come to bed, Tina. The police are right. The best thing we can do for Jonny at the moment is to keep our strength up.’

‘Why don’t you know when Jonny went missing?’ Softly, almost tonelessly, she asks the question that blond inspector Korzilius asked, the one he repeated so many times without receiving a satisfactory answer.

‘God, Tina, Jonny’s fourteen – you don’t expect me to follow him around all over the place. He knows everyone at the camp, he knows the woods. He went roaming about with Dr D. as usual. Scouting. You know what he’s like; he needs his freedom. And the kids had a secret meeting in the evening – strictly no adults. I assumed Jonny was with them; everybody did. And at breakfast time I thought Jonny had got up early and gone for a walk with Dr D.’

He presses his thumbs gently into the tense muscles between her shoulder blades. He knows her so well – her husband, her friend, her love. Even in the terrible early period when Leander and Marlene had screamed all night and exhaustion had reduced Martina to a cheerless wreck that knew no desire but to sleep – even then, Frank’s tenderness had given her strength and courage.

‘Come to bed. You must get some rest,’ he says softly.

But there is no hope of sleep now and Frank’s caresses cannot distract her from the all-consuming, poisonous thought – taboo and yet insistent – *I would have noticed that Jonny had gone missing.*

Martina wriggles out of Frank’s grasp. She needs to be alone. Although everything in her is crying out for comfort, she mustn’t let herself go, mustn’t stop thinking straight. She doesn’t know where to put herself, trips over a toy in the living

room and ends up in the garden. An alarmingly low cargo plane drones overhead, cutting through the night, and for a moment Martina wishes, ludicrously, that the plane would crash in the garden so that she'd be spared having to dwell on the inspector's questions.

Glow-worms flit around the garden. In Marlene's favourite picture book they are portrayed as friendly beetles with little lanterns in their hands. Jonny sometimes read that book to Marlene, Dr D. sitting bright-eyed at his feet, and in his hands his beloved torch, the last souvenir of his father. When they had turned off the lights, Jonny would play glow-worms for the little girl with his torch – on, off, on, off. He had whispered to Marlene that the glow-worms communicated in a secret Morse code; he would tell them to look after her at night and watch over her.

Where are you, Jonny? How are you going to make your light signals now? And who is watching over you? I can't believe you're gone. I don't even want to contemplate the thought that you might be dead. Martina switches Jonny's torch on, then off again. Has the beam grown weaker? Is there perhaps some way Jonny can know that she's kneeling here on the lawn, sending him Morse signals?

'There you are.' Frank squats down beside her and tries to hug her. She pushes him away, focusing all her energy on the torch, her link to Jonny. On, off, on, off. How quickly a light can go out.

'Tina . . .'

'Go away,' she says. 'Leave me alone.'