

Andreas Pflüger

Endgültig

Novel

(c) Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2016

approx. 430 pages

Sample translation pp. 1-70 by Shaun Whiteside

When the times comes,
if there's time,
I don't want to be asking myself why I have to die.
I want to know why I have been alive.

The Sagrada Familia

Nothing soothes her like cleaning her gun. Other people would have to check the cartridge chamber to be sure that it's empty. Not her. She knows the weight of the magazine that's sliding into her hand, right to the last gram. She knows that there is no cartridge in the barrel of the Browning Hi-Power, just as she knows that her eyes are green. And sometimes black.

It takes her four seconds to fold down the trigger guard, unlatch the breech lock, slip it off and deftly extracted the spring from the barrel. High-class Belgian workmanship.

How often she has been grateful for that.

She first killed at twenty-two, when a drug dealer wanted to take her life and neglected the fact that it takes two to tango.

A year later, when the ransom money was being handed over, she was prepared for the moment when the bag of newspaper cuttings was opened, but not for the two-inch revolver that the kidnapper of the little boy had in a leg holster. For the next few months she had to sleep with the lights on.

There were others, too, and she will remember all of them for ever.

In Moscow she met the hitman that she was supposed to pass on greetings from Igor Nikulin to. He played cat and mouse with her in the underground car park of the Aralsk Hotel until she was the cat and he the mouse and she could hear him squeaking. She wasn't bothered about the bullet he took to the belly. But even today she is still stared at by the young hotel employee who took a ricochet from her Browning right in the middle of the heart, she sees the eyes of the woman whose hand she held until it was all over.

In the basin of the luxurious bathroom she brushes the barrel and the breech with gun oil, carefully, and reflects that she hasn't cleaned her pistol one single time.

Naples. The alleyway near the Basilica of Santa Chiara, where the capo of the Mazarella clan was waiting, the one with whom she had negotiated the fake purchase of ten million of fake Euros. When the burped word 'puttana' revealed to her that she'd been unmasked, it didn't matter how quick she was.

She pulled the trigger, but the shot didn't come.

The previous day, she and Niko had had to fly back to Berlin for a few hours. The Secretary of State demanded to be informed in person about the state of things; a human tortoise who would never understand the difference between a memo and a .357 magnum. After that she let off some steam in the shooting simulator, three hundred and fifty cartridges, had to get to the airport in a hurry, back to Naples, to the meeting with the capo where condensation, combustion gases and powder residues made the Browning jam.

That will always be a lesson for her.

The barrel of his Luger rested on the bridge of her nose. She registered with amazement that she wasn't frightened. She just thought that the gap in the capo's teeth, which he was wolfishly revealing, would be the last thing she ever saw.

But he fell at her feet without a sound.

Niko. A shot to the head with a Colt from a hundred metres.

You can't learn something like that.

She scrubs all the parts of the gun with a toothbrush, taking care not to miss a crack, sees with satisfaction that the oil is turning deep black; only then is it right. She pushes the toothbrush into the barrel and cleans it from inside. She's aware of how much she likes touching the steel, which is indestructible and at the same time soft and warm.

That was what it was like when her father first took her to the old quarry as a twelve-year-old girl. He taught her everything about shooting that a policeman can pass on to his daughter.

She got her own first gun on her eighteenth birthday. A used but well-looked-after 9 mm Starfire, which weighed only four hundred grams and snuggled into her hand. She loved that pistol, a daisy of a gun.

She rubs the steel and sniffs at it.

Enjoys the smell. Nutty. Sweet. Clean.

Four seconds to put the Browning back together.

The loud click with which the breech slips back in is the best beta blocker.

But not today.

Jenny Aaron goes into the bedroom of the suite. Niko Kvist is lying on the bed. He must be studying the dossier for the third time. Aaron doesn't need to. Her

memory is high-performance software; it only took her five minutes to store everything:

In February 1912 in Paris Marc Chagall painted 'The Dream Dancers'; two lovers, entwined on a dizzyingly high tightrope stretched above urban canyons. Chagall liked the painting so much that he kept it. When he returned to Russia just before the outbreak of the First World War he gave it to his muse and later wife, Bella.

In the early 1920s they took it to Berlin, where it hung in their bedroom and delighted Bella. But when Chagall confessed to her that he had had an affair, she sold 'The Dream Dancers' to a Jewish gallery-owner to punish her husband.

Four years after seizing power, the Nazis had all the works of Chagall that they got hold of confiscated and mocked them in the House of Art in Munich as 'degenerate'. Then the exhibits were supposed to have been sold on in Lucerne. But the night watchman at the museum, lonely after the early death of his wife, had fallen in love with 'The Dream Dancers' and looked at it in the silence of his long nights. He was not a brave man. But the idea of not being able to look at the picture any more was so unbearable to him that he made it disappear before it was transported away and successfully pretended he was stupid. Until the end of the war he hid it in his attic. After that it hung in his sitting room opposite a set of heavy wooden antique cupboards.

When he died at a very old age his children had the painting valued. Of course they couldn't keep 'The Dream Dancers'. It went to the affluent daughter of the gallery-owner who had bought it from Bella Chagall. She knew that the painting had meant more to her grandfather than any other, and wanted to honour his memory; so she gave it to the National Gallery in Berlin on permanent loan.

There it was stolen. Cut from its frame in broad daylight. Cold-blooded. Precise. Without a trace.

Two years: nothing. Early in November Niko was given a tip-off by an informer: a man called Egger had the Chagall. It took Niko three weeks to make contact in Bruges.

His cover story: investment banker, mad about art.

Egger wanted three million pounds sterling. In Barcelona.

That's why they're here. Two hidden intermediaries with a bag full of money.

Aaron's cover story: the art expert evaluating the painting.

Niko gets up. He puts his arm around Aaron and tenderly strokes her cheek. He smells good. They have been together for a year. No one in the department must know, or they would be forbidden to work together. They are good at keeping secrets. But they have so little time. Three times that year Niko was on assignments that didn't allow him to go back to Berlin. And Aaron twice. Warsaw, Helsinki. In their fourteen days' leave in Marrakesh they barely left the little riad on the Djemaa el Fna. They were dream dancers in the blistering heat of the days and the cold of the nights. The wind from the Atlas Mountains blew icily down the alleyways. They paid it no more heed than they did food and drink.

After Naples, Barcelona is only their second mission together. But in Naples they were still creeping around one another like two cats sharing a bowl of milk. She now knows: there's a difference between sleeping with the man you love when you're on holiday or just before a mission. Why is she so tense? She doesn't get it. Barcelona is routine, she's carried out far more difficult missions. And yet last night she couldn't sleep, and couldn't help shaking, while beside her Niko breathed like a child.

In her solitude she tried to find the number to match the shaking. She has assigned a number between one and ten to every emotion. One for pleasure; two means gratitude; four is perfect control; five says contempt; six pity; seven, not being able to wait for something; eight means pride; nine means almost being happy. Ten is adrenalin.

She tries never to think about three.

It's time.

She puts the Browning in the room safe along with Niko's Colt. Where they're going they can't take guns.

The lift door closes. Three floors down. Aaron shifts her weight from one side to the other and back again, cranes her neck, pushes her shoulder blades together, moves them in a circle, rotates her arms, spreads her toes in her ballet shoes, loosens up to built up her physical tension.

Although she's not aware of it, she touches the scar on her left collar bone. Not her only one. But the one.

Niko says: 'I know a great restaurant at Park Güell. How about we leave it for a day and celebrate tomorrow?'

‘Another time.’ She absolutely doesn’t want to stay here any longer than she has to.

In the foyer a boy is sitting beside his mother. He has an ancient face, eyes like stones with sea salt drying on them. He is reading a comic. *Daredevil, Blind Justice*. Aaron feels the boy’s eyes on her back. She looks round. His mother has risen to her feet and wants to drag him to the lift, but he doesn’t move, stays where he is and stares at Aaron.

The colleague from the special unit of the Mossos d’Esquadra who is playing the role of her chauffeur holds open the door of the S-Class Daimler. Jordi. The other two, Ruben and Josue, are playing bodyguards and follow in a second limousine.

The boys are her life insurance.

Jordi drives quickly. Massive rectangles of reinforced concrete, seventies, dumped down there. Aaron likes everything geometrical.

Barcelona is breathing its last light. The sky is sent by the sea, a fire-walker over glowing clouds of coal.

A ten plus. The adrenalin crashes like a tide against the ventricles of her heart. She knows four kinds. The adrenalin immediately before contact: what’s waiting for me, a handshake or a bullet? The adrenalin in the danger of death. The adrenalin of injury. The adrenalin when you think about the mistake you made.

You always have to expect one.

Niko says: ‘Look.’

Aaron knows she will see La Sagrada Familia, on the right, Gaudi’s temple of madness, triumph of faith, ruin of Catholicism, monument to the greatest victory and the most brutal failure, breathtaking, glorious and at the same time the disturbing absence of any order, boundless and frightening.

She turns her head and looks out of the window.

But there’s nothing there. Nothing at all.

The Cathedral has been engulfed in a Black Hole whose mass is so huge that the light pours in, a maw that extends like the universe, sucking in Jordi, Niko and Aaron as if they were asteroids on the edge of a galaxy. Panicking, Aaron tries to feel for Niko, but her hand is alien, cut off from her body, and refuses to obey.

She closes her eyes and opens them again.

They are at the crossing with the Carrer de Mallorca. Street lights flicker on. Taxi drivers laugh by their rank. An ice-cream salesman pack his stall away. A dog pulls on the leash. A child dries.

Aaron whispers: 'Give me a number between one and ten.'

Niko's face is startled, mocking.

'Please.'

'Three.'

There are three of them and they are already waiting outside the warehouse in the harbour. Black Audi. Aaron sees immediately that it has been customised.

Egger is tall, gaunt; lean in spite of his forty-five years, which Aaron likes to tease him about. His suit is made to measure. He has a white camellia flower in his buttonhole. The hand he holds out to her is manicured and cool and smooth. He has the ease of a man who reads Joyce in the original. But his ripped neck muscles tense like steel cables, even when he tilts his head only slightly and says in a soft, sonorous voice to Aaron: 'I would even have waited two minutes for you.'

He's arrogant. Presumably because he rarely meets people who are a match for his intelligence. Aaron doesn't doubt that he knows exactly how much the 'Dream Dancers' is worth. Not just the price he has negotiated. No, its *real* value, the truth and clear-sightedness and depth that allowed Chagall to paint the picture in just one day, the power that Aaron herself felt when she looked at a reproduction.

How beautiful the original must be. Suddenly she wonders why Egger doesn't want to keep it, and instead sell it on.

He makes no attempt to introduce the woman and the man, certainly ten years younger, who are with him. The woman is attractive and confident. She reveals a remarkable sense of balance when she totters around the Audi on six-inch stilettos. If she was holding a water glass, full to the brim, she wouldn't spill a drop.

The younger man has eyes like black plastic tokens, flat and lifeless. His nose has been broken twice. On his right temple there is a scar, a graze wound. One or two years ago, Aaron guesses.

But the similarity with Egger is unmistakable.

Brothers. Strange.

They both wear holsters, Egger can't conceal that even with his Savile Row double-breasted suit. Aaron bets that Token-Eye's Glock 33 is his pride and joy.

Egger doubtless doesn't need such a thing. He isn't the kind of person to show off his firearms. And he has style: a gun with a plastic handle wouldn't suit him. More like a Remington 1911 or a Beretta Target.

The holsters are empty, Aaron can tell that with a glance.

A confidence-building measure.

Niko asks: 'Where is the painting?'

'Where is the money?'

In response to Niko's nod Jordi opens the big bag on the passenger seat of the Daimler. In Berlin they had talked about using flowers. But they would only get it once they'd handed over the painting. As they didn't expect the painting to be at the scene of the action they had opted for clean, used banknotes.

Egger's eyes dart over them almost casually. He smiles, his cheekbone rising a fraction of an inch. 'Only you, the women and me. Your men stay here with him.' The brother. 'See him as a deposit.'

Niko thinks for a moment. 'Agreed.'

They follow Egger and the woman into the warehouse.

And Aaron knows that they have made their first mistake.

Niko and she had talked about whether they should go armed. Niko was in favour: 'Egger trusts me.' But for Aaron the risk of being frisked was too great. She prevailed.

That guy only trusts himself. He can't be a hundred percent sure that we're not cops.

And he doesn't shake us down?

Stay calm. Presumably he has the same eye as I do, and spotted immediately that we weren't armed.

No. A leg holster would be possible.

Damn it.

Aaron glances behind her. The Catalans shake their heads as Token-Eye holds a pack of cigarettes out to them. Good lads, she convinced herself of that on a shooting training course; she wanted to know who she was entrusting her life to. Afterwards they were all invited to dinner at Josue's. Children clambering over the furniture, laughter, paella, brandy from Andorra that brought tears to their eyes.

Later she had gone out on to the roof terrace to smoke. Trees negotiated with the wind. House windows gleamed through their foliage as if in an advent calendar.

What would be in it for Aaron on the third of December? Party music, nearby. But she was far away. Jordi came and scrounged one. They smoked like two people who know that there isn't chocolate behind every little window.

Jordi said, 'I've been doing it for too long. I've stopped sleeping. In January I'm getting a desk.'

The door of the warehouse falls shut behind Aaron. A coffee depot. The aromas are so intense that she gasps for breath for a moment. Dandelion, caramelised sugar, damp pipe tobacco, freshly split wood.

On a sack of coffee, a cartouche. The painting.

Aaron asks: 'May I?'

The woman hands her the cartouche.

She has unusually good hearing. Once in the shooting simulator Pavlik rolled some cartridges from the ammunition store along the floor.

Aaron knew without looking: five.

Now, when she hears three quiet plopping sounds in a row, she knows there is no painting in the cartouche. That Jordi will never get his desk job.

A Remington suddenly appears in the hand of the man who calls himself Egger. Aaron flies over sacks, feels the draught made by bullets, rolls away, jumps to her feet in the same movement, sees Niko falling to the ground, runs in a zigzag to the hall at the back, and meanwhile a red-hot pincer grabs her arm and she can think nothing but *Niko! Niko! Niko!*

Two doors, roulette. She stakes everything on red, tears the right-hand door open and finds herself in a pitch-dark corridor. Aaron stumbles forwards, feeling her way, until she bumps into a wall. Black. Wrong door, blind alley. She presses herself into a niche. Something hot runs down her arm. No pain. The light goes on. Like a machine, her heart pumps raging fear into her bloodstream. She hears dainty footsteps. The woman has taken off her stilettos and is barefoot.

Another five metres. Aaron sees the light switch on the opposite wall. Too far away. She spins the thought like a coin and stares at the alternative.

There isn't one.

Another four.

Three.

Aaron flies out of the niche. The woman fires. Right hand, graze wound. Aaron hammers her fist against the switch. Darkness. She drops to the floor, two

shots into the void. She does a quick leg scissors, which cracks against the woman's ankle and knocks her over. Her index and middle fingers jab into the solar plexus of the other woman, who pants for air. Aaron notices that the woman is bending her gun arm, grabs her head crosswise, twists it round violently and hears the neck breaking.

She takes the pistol, feels that it's a Walther and takes out the magazine. Empty. Her heart machine pumps desperation into her veins. But perhaps there's still a bullet in the barrel. *Please, please, please.* Aaron is shaking too hard, she has no feel for the weight. She doesn't dare to take out the slide to see, too loud.

Her pulse is far too fast. It needs to get down to between sixty and seventy, and she's at over two hundred. In this state she couldn't even pull the trigger.

Aaron forces herself to breathe slowly through the diaphragm, enlarges the volume of her lungs, enriches her muscles with oxygen and allows herself half a minute to bring her pulse down. Enough?

She stands in the dark. Breathes deeply one last time, in, out. Half in, half out. Her right hand feels the light switch.

Now.

Aaron turns on the light. Token-Eye. Fifty metres away. Her finger twitches against the trigger. She's never heard a better sound than that shot. She hits Token-Eye in the neck. He turns round and topples over. Sixty drumming footsteps. Token-Eye stares at the ceiling. His jugular isn't injured, but he can't move. Shock. There are three cartridges missing from his Glock 33 with silencer. Jordi, Ruben, Josue. Jump into the hall, stand, aim two-handed, make body surface smaller. No Egger.

Niko! Niko! Niko!

He is lying in the foetal position beside the empty cartouche. His shirt is wet with blood. She can feel his pulse. Aaron wants to shout, she's so glad. Red foam appears on his lips. His voice is like the breathing of a little bird. 'Get out of here.'

She tries to pull him up, ninety kilos of muscles, but can't do it. Tries again. Tries and tries.

Where is Egger?

Niko grabs her hand. He pulls her to him, her ear to his mouth. She understands the words but doesn't grasp them. Niko still has just enough energy for that: 'You've got to.'

Egger magics himself into the hall as if appearing on stage. Aaron throws herself in his direction. They fire at the same time. Five shots which sound like one. He dives back into the darkness. She doesn't know if she's hit him. NO. Aaron hears him putting a new magazine in the shaft.

Niko's expression. An eternity.

She runs off. The Remington hammers out a staccato. Aaron wedges the Glock between her teeth and catapults herself into the open with a double flip. She is hit, her right arm again, and loses her balance. She crashes on to her back, fires two shots through the door over her head and rolls into cover.

Three corpses.

Aaron wants to spring up, but can't feel her body any more. She prays that the auxiliary power unit will kick in and produce the five percent reserve that a person still has when he thinks: it's all over.

She bends one small finger.

Ok.

Two fingers.

Ok.

Move!

She creeps to the Daimler. Slumps behind the wheel.

The key is in the ignition.

The heavy limousine leaps away with a roar. Egger dives out of the hall. Bullets shatter the rear window. A bullet slices the back of Aaron's neck. She swerves into the Via de Circulació. Five hundred metres at full speed. On the left she senses rough cliffs, on the right harbour lights race past like photons in a particle accelerator.

Only now does she feel her bullet wounds. Her right arm seems to be made of ice, her hand a ball of flame. Blood runs down her back.

Aaron looks into the mirror.

And sees the Audi.

She presses the accelerator to the floor and takes the vehicle up to two hundred and fifty. Eggers still keeps up. His car is five hundred kilos lighter and has twice the power. Ahead of her a van pulls out to overtake a truck. She looks from the overtaking lane to the hard shoulder. The mirror scrapes a road-sign, is torn off and whirled into the darkness.

Egger clings to Aaron's back bumper. They plunge into the tunnel in the Plaça de les Drassanes. Two hundred and sixty. She despairingly acknowledges: *I can't get any more out of it.*

He effortlessly brings the Audi in line with Aaron.

They look at each other.

For a moment that lasts for the whole of time.

In front of her she sees a shadow, a car. Her eye twitches to the carriageway, no hard shoulder, she can't avoid it, knows she has only a few blinks of an eye left, as she raises the gun with her injured arm.

Her finger is on the trigger, but Egger is faster.

Something explodes in her head. A lightning flash cuts through the world like paper. Aaron sees everything in a very slowed-down and over-distinct form, in dazzling white as if in a grotesquely overlit film: the sky of the car turning until it's below her, the banknotes that flutter like dry leaves from her wallet, her face in the rear view mirror, amorphous landscape, snowy desert, eternal nothingness.

Then the same thing again, but a thousand times faster, a single whirlwind, pain, screaming. And another lightning flash.

In a nanosecond the world is gone.

Aaron hears steel eating into the concrete and then everything is still still still. The last thing she will remember is the smell of coffee, as repellent as cold ashes.

The stewardess asks again: 'With milk?'

'Black.' Aaron reaches out her hand and feels the cup being placed in it. She hears the pilot's voice: 'In thirty minutes we will land in Berlin. It has already been snowing all morning. Please keep your safety belts fastened, we are expecting some turbulence.'

Aaron forces herself to drink the coffee.

Since she has been working for BKA, the Federal Criminal Police Office, in Wiesbaden, there have been several opportunities to travel to Berlin for work. The office has a branch in the district of Treptow, where the Security group, the Anti-Terror centre and the 'Special Unit' department are based. But Aaron has always been able to avoid it.

She grew up in the Rhineland, but in her early twenties made Berlin her home, which it still is in some way today, even though she hasn't been there for five years. She feels that quite clearly, with every kilometre she gets closer to the city. Impatience spreads through her, the joyful anticipation of arrival, a tingle. It irritates her, because on this return journey, the twenty-four hours that she will stay, fear is her luggage.

Five years. Aaron hasn't even closed down her flat in Schöneberg, her father did that for her.

In Berlin she left only a few people that she misses behind. The life she led hardly allowed her to have friendships. Pavlik and his wife Sandra were, in fact, the only ones. When at the age of twenty-five she moved to the nameless department, he immediately took her under his wing.

The only woman among forty men.

It was from Pavlik that she learned that everyone, regardless how long they had been there, had nights when the shivering came.

That came as a great relief to Aaron: being hugged, and also allowed to console others.

None the less in the years that have passed since Barcelona she hasn't spoken to Pavlik. They spoke two or three times on the telephone in the first few months. But they were both helpless. Pavlik's attempt to pretend nothing important had happened in Spain, the coolness into which he fled because it was the only way

he could deal with it ended in speechlessness for both of them. Aaron found no words to say what it means for her, still hasn't even today. And eventually the calls stopped.

Will I still recognise his voice?

'We are now coming in to land at Berlin-Schönefeld. Please fold away your tables and put your seats in the upright position.'

'Thank you!'

When Aaron's neighbour furiously presses her coffee cup into her hand, she realises that she has left it half full on the table, and must have spilled it over the man's trousers.

'Are you blind?' he snarls.

'Yes.'

The ground stewardess leads Aaron into the hall – 'I assume someone is coming to collect you?' – and leaves her alone.

As she stands there calmly, with her suitcase beside her, she could be a quite normal woman in her mid-thirties, tall and attractive. Neither does Aaron give away the fact that she is quivering inside because she knows who is going to collect her. Most recently she had worn the armband with three black circles on it that identifies blind people in Germany. But sometimes she would be standing on the pavement or in the supermarket, lost in thoughts, with no particular destination in mind. And suddenly she would be grabbed without preamble and dragged away because some over-keen assistant thought that she wanted to cross the road or head for the escalator. When she protested, the person sometimes just left her somewhere, completely overwhelmed, so that they could creep away. And she didn't know where she was.

Perhaps they'd got the wrong flight. What then? A taxi?

That's a nightmare. You go and stand where the first taxi might be, hear the boot being packed and travel destinations named, next car, doors closing, driving away, and you yourself keep silent vigil like a Jehovah's Witness. Waving would look ridiculous. Luckily a driver eventually bawls her out: 'Hey, why don't you just get in?'

Suddenly Aaron knows that Niko has been standing there looking at her the whole time.

Lost two litres of blood. Retained missile in the lung. Survived.

At last he touches her shoulder. 'Hi.' He hugs her as if they'd said goodbye yesterday.

Aaron smells of iodine. Cut himself shaving. She doesn't want to, but her left hand does, reaches under his leather jacket and brushes the handle of the gun. A Makarov Single Action.

Niko takes her suitcase and they go to the exit. Aaron has to link arms with him. The cold hits her in the face. Snowflakes dance on her skin. Niko's light, swaying gait, which can't deceive her, because she was once a beast of prey like him.

In those days she usually wore flat shoes. Now, on the way to the car, her steel spike heels are Aaron's echo sounders, which send information about her surroundings to her cerebral cortex. Each object reflects sound differently. She can define size and density from between five and two hundred metres, and receives a roughly pixelled image. Like a bat or a dolphin.

Even better would be Aaron's click sonar, with which she produces sounds close to her ear so that they aren't diverted and scattered. The echoes model the world, illuminating them like a stroboscope.

At first she herself couldn't believe it. In the rehab clinic there was a woman who had been blind for a long time and who came every day to stand by the patients in the first desperate weeks. She went walking with Aaron in the park of the clinic. Stopped, clicked her tongue and said: 'On the right there are six trees. Beeches, chestnuts or oaks. On the left two, but smaller, maybe planes.' She thought the woman was pulling her leg. But a doctor who came by was not surprised and confirmed it. 'But they aren't planes, they're young birches.'

The woman clicked again and tapped Aaron on the arm. 'There's a house over there. I would say it's a hundred metres away. And there's a car parked about twenty metres ahead of us.'

Which was also true. Aaron knew: I've got to be able to do that as well.

People who are blinded later in life seldom master this skill as well as people who have been blind since birth and practised all their lives. But Aaron has trained as if possessed, which is the only way she knows how to do anything.

Her first successful experience was the alley between two buildings at the clinic, which she didn't just hear but also recognised by the draught. Aaron's clicks bounced off the walls of the buildings, whirred to and fro and back to her, until the

sound broke for a second time. She explored the alley and bumped against the container that she had located. Ha!

But Aaron only uses the click sonar when she's alone. In Niko's presence it would strike her as silly. Would he think she was Flipper?

'Watch out, dustbin.'

She knew that already. Not least because she can also smell rotten banana skins and an old hamburger.

One problem, of course, is background noise. Here, outside the terminal, she has to concentrate to an extreme degree on her heels. After days when she has spent a long time in loud and lively places, she has headaches and is shattered.

She locates a street lamp. Or two? Off to the left a tall tower. Advertising? Ventilation? On the right is a bus, engine running, a noisy school class, scraps of words, Scandinavian language, ten metres ahead of Aaron there's something box-shaped, head high, towards which Niko resolutely heads. Pay and display machine.

What he calls seeing is also only an echo of light. That's why he sees the tower, the bus, the school class, the pay and display machine.

Aaron doesn't want to get into the car yet, she wants to have a smoke first. Niko has no idea how long it took her to learn to bring the fame to the cigarette as if it was the most natural thing in the world, while looking quite relaxed.

So now she's in Berlin. How does she know that? Because the pilot said: *We will shortly be landing in Schönefeld?* Because Niko is standing next to her and won't take his eyes off her? Because someone is shouting through an open car window: 'God alive, I can't believe these car parks!?' Wiesbaden is the silent corridors in the BKA in which she thought at first: *Am I alone here?* Green Sauce in the canteen, children's laughter in the children's playground behind her house, the rattle of the Neroberg funicular railway. Of the cities she travels to she is left with the textures of the hands she shook, the spices in the food, the call of a muezzin, the other sound of police sirens, a gust of wind in a huge square. That's London, Cairo, Paris for her. And Berlin? A warm, breathing hide that cuddles up to her, a cry in the night, but also the feeling of having been almost happy.

She tries to remember Niko's face. Can't do it.

He asks: 'What's it like at BKA?'

'Good. What about you?'

'A lot of paperwork. Boring.'

Of course. That's why you've got that Makarov on your hip. There's a good argument for that little trinket: the extremely light trigger pull.

City highway heading north. Aaron concentrates on the sound of the windscreen wipers that are wiping away the snow. She tries to synchronise her heartbeat with the constant, even interval.

I'm grateful for a lot of things, but most of all for the fact that you were never alone by my bed in Barcelona. I wouldn't have been able to bear the silence between us and will never forget how cowardly I was. You never uttered a word of reproach. But I will be eternally ashamed, to my depths, until my dying day, that I left you lying alone there.

Only one person knew that.

Since she's been able to think, her father was the most important person in her life. *Aren't all girls like that?* Later he became her mentor, then her adviser, her confidant. For many years both of them had little time and didn't see each other often. And they didn't need to. They were connected by many things, but they were one in the knowledge of how long a fragment of a second is.

Jörg Aaron. GSG-9 man of the hour. 18 October 1977, 22:59 hours, barracks of Mogadishu airport. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt gave the go-ahead for the storming of the 'Landshut' aircraft. Colonel Wegener stands in front of the troops and asks: 'Who's going in first?'

Ten men step forward.

Jörg Aaron takes one more.

He is the one who pushes open the escape hatches in the fuselage and kills the first two terrorists with shots to the head.

For fifteen years he was present at all important missions. Later commander of GSG 9. On first name terms with Yitzhak Rabin. Cross of Honour. Legend.

At every stage of her career she saw the curious glances.

So that's Jörg Aaron's daughter.

In the hospital he was the first one who held her hand. Who fed and bathed her and rocked her in his arms when she cried. Who made sure that that the third-floor window couldn't be opened.

'I left Niko behind.'

'You were scared. Anyone would have been scared.'

'How am I supposed to live with that?'

'Stop thinking about it.'

'Say it.'

'You'll learn to get up and go to sleep again. Eat, drink, breathe. There will be lots of days, good days, when you forget. But you'll never get rid of it.'

He was the one she asked: 'How do my eyes look?' Because she knew he would tell her the truth, ruthlessly.

'Perfect and gorgeous.' The best sentence of her life.

After a week she had been able to answer questions. Two officers from Internal Affairs flew to Spain and spoke to her by her bed. They were like all the others Aaron had sat facing over the years. Accountants with no adrenalin in their minutes, no fear of death, no pain.

Her father insisted on being present when she was being questioned. It was against the rules, but they didn't dare refuse him. He was Jörg Aaron.

They read Niko's statement to her. "I had one bullet in my spleen, one in my lung. Jenny couldn't move me. She was under fire, had to get help. She made the right decision." '

'Miss Aaron, can you confirm this account?'

The question wasn't a complicated one. She wanted to answer it, too. But she didn't know what to say.

'Miss Aaron?'

'Yes.'

How often she has thought about that 'yes'. Eventually she convinced herself that it meant, 'Yes – could you please repeat the question?' and not 'Yes, that's what happened.' But the 'Yes' stayed in the files as an agreement.

'You were up against three adversaries. By now you'd already eliminated two of them. Is that correct?'

'Yes.' That was what she'd been told.

'Miss Aaron, you are part of the department You were trained in combat shooting and in four martial arts techniques, you are extraordinarily resilient and have distinguished yourself in extreme situations. You couldn't get rid of the third man?'

She should have told the truth: that she didn't remember. She knows that she glance back once at Jordi, Ruben and Josue before the hall door closed. And next thing she's lying outside the warehouse, unable to move. Bending her little finger. Somehow getting to the car. The rear window breaking. Flying along the motorway, with next to her, where Niko should be, only a bag of money. Seeing the Audi in the rear view mirror and knowing: it's over.

A glance, a shot, over.

'From the moment you drove off on the harbour until the shot in the tunnel according to our calculations four minutes must have passed. Do you reckon that's correct?'

Her father's voice was a fingernail on a blackboard. 'Do you think my daughter looked at a stopwatch?'

'It's about the following, Miss Aaron: if you wanted to call for help, why didn't you? You didn't call MEK from the Daimler, and you didn't try to make a connection.'

Four minute.

They sped past like seconds and lasted for centuries.

'Miss Aaron?'

'I'd been shot several times,' she managed to say helplessly.

Again her father leapt to her support. 'Let me tell you something, you clowns. None of you has ever dashed along a crowded motorway with a hitman on your tail. From my modest experience I can assure you: it's hard to make a phone-call.'

Aaron was asked to sign.

The men left. Her father's hand rested on hers. She felt his blood thumping in it. They didn't speak. She knew that he was ashamed for her.

And loved her.

He had another one and a half years to go until his retirement but left the service that meant everything for him and yet not half as much as his daughter. He found the rehab clinic for her in Siegburg, near Sankt Augustin, where the parental home stood. Every morning he read to her from the newspaper before he worked with her. He was unforgiving if she failed to do the simplest things. He practised shopping with Aaron, and telling by the weight of the fork whether she had speared a piece of meat or a potato, helped her learn to do her make-up again, and above all he spurred her on: 'Again! Again! Again!'

How often she heard from her mobility trainer: 'You're trying to do too much, only people blind from birth achieve perfection.'

Every time her father said: 'My daughter can do it!'

And he also plagued her into using the hated stick, unfortunately with limited success. Even today Aaron only has an average mastery of it, because she is too reluctant to be identified immediately as a blind person.

He swotted up on Braille with her, and was the guinea pig to whom she expectantly served up the first Wiener schnitzel that she had fried herself. At that point she didn't yet know how to tell the difference between salt and pepper, that salt makes a sound when you shake it and pepper doesn't. When her father, coughing, croaked, 'Delicious!', they both laughed like lunatics.

But above all he taught her the most difficult thing: to receive help, to accept that she will be dependent on others for as long as she lives, and that she must perceive that not as a burden but as a necessity.

On the first day when she dared to leave the rehab clinic on her own, there was only one way to go: to him. She had spent the night anticipating the moment when he would open the door and she would surprise him. Aaron knew that he was at home because a friend wanted to come and see him. She was so proud when she caught the right bus and, after getting out, had taken her bearings from the guidelines she had learned, had been guided as in childhood by smells and sounds, until she knew at last: I'm home.

She felt for the gate and heard murmurs. She was asked to step aside. Men walked past carrying something. She heard the hoarse voice of her father's friend: 'I'm sorry.'

He had collapsed after the words: 'The Minister of the Interior gave me this whisky when I joined the service.' Aaron will never get over the fact that she was unable to say goodbye to him, and tell him she would be dead without him.

They drive in silence. The traffic is sluggish as they approach the Radio Tower Triangle. Aaron can tell by Niko's breath that he is looking at her again and again. She turns her eyes directly towards his. He concentrates on driving. Accelerate, brake, accelerate.

'Sorry about your father.'

She just nods.

Niko had served under him. He didn't have to apply, her father had sought him out among a thousand possible candidates. Eventually he dismissed Niko, keeping the reason to himself. He had never been as disappointed as he had been by Niko, Aaron sensed as much when Niko's name was mentioned. It was a blow to her father when they became a couple. Once she asked him what had happened between them. Her father said only: 'He's a ship in search of its iceberg.'

A thumping heart brings the memory to a close. Niko has turned off the wipers. He leaves the motorway. 'The guys in the Fourth have copied the file in braille.'

Which she can't do. She curses the fact that she burnt two of her fingertips on the stove last Friday.

Aaron reads with his left index finger, which she won't be able to use for at least a week.

'You know the facts. Tell me.'

Reinhold Boenisch, fifty-nine, life for four murders, in prison for sixteen years. Two days ago the prison psychologist had visited his cell before going home because he had invited her for a cup of tea.

Boenisch killed her, and since then he hadn't uttered a word.

Apart from the sentence: *I'll only talk to Miss Aaron.*

In the double door system at Tegel correctional facility Niko has to hand over his gun. Excessively correct control in spite of their IDs. Papers are meticulously checked. There is whispering.

Ten things that Aaron doesn't like to hear:

the rattling of heavy bowls

crows

whispering

'Are you blind?'

chalk on a board

car engines at top speed

water boiling over

'I'm just doing my job here.'

traditional German pop songs

lies

'What is that?' Aaron knows that the officer who takes her handbag refers to the telescopic walking stick that isn't recognisable as a blind man's cane to the undiscerning eye.

'What does it look like?'

A colleague says: 'A club. It's staying here.'

Aaron reaches out his hand. 'May I?'

She swiftly extends the stick and hears a murmured, 'Sorry'.

As they leave, someone says very quietly, probably too quietly for Niko to hear: 'Does she remind you of anyone?'

An officer takes them to the Psychology Service. As a case analyst and interrogation specialist, Aaron is involved in big areas of investigation in the BKA, organised crime, terrorism, where the victims are only abstract qualities, shadowy entities. Here it's different. She wants to know who the murdered woman was, to understand what life she was torn from.

The wind drives the snow along ahead of them. Aaron feels the flakes on her wrist, hasty, wet guests who don't want to stay here. She's been here often, she imagines the broad, abandoned-looking grounds, knows that all the inmates are working now, or locked in their cells. The Psychology Service is based in the school

building, at the rear near the sports ground. Her thoughts slip into the past, she hears furious men shouting. 'Play the ball! Too thick to buy a fridge!'

This time she hasn't linked arms with Niko, but allows herself to be guided textbook-style, thumb and index finger on his elbow, half a pace back, her hip behind his, but without contact. Her mobility trainer would be delighted.

But she only does that so as not to be aware of the holster under Niko's jacket and feel like a dry alcoholic in an off licence.

'How was Dr Breuer?'

The murder victim's colleague has been crying a lot. Her voice is hoarse, dull, empty. 'Thirty-three. Her birthday was in December. She invited all her colleagues to go to the cinema.'

'How long had she been working in the correctional facility?'

'Three years. We knew each other from university. Then I started here, for a bit of security. Melly always wanted her own practice. But it didn't work. She waitressed part-time, it wasn't a life. When the job here came up I was on at her until she applied.'

Tears start to come, but get stuck in her throat.

'Did she like the job?'

'No. She found everything here oppressive. She started losing her spirit. I said: "It happens, you'll get used to it."' The tears get a little further, but not as far as her eyes.

'Did she have family?'

'A sister in Norway, who's coming today. Both her parents are dead.'

'Was she with anyone?'

'She was on her own for a while, because she had a few bad experiences. But she'd had a boyfriend recently. Tall, handsome. Melly was really smitten. When she came in in the morning the wallpaper brightened.'

'What did she look like.'

No reply.

'Do you have a picture you could show my colleague?'

Her voice quivers. 'She was tall, about five eleven. She had black curly hair, freckles and skin like porcelain. Melly was beautiful, she was special. In spite of her black hair she seemed temperamentally quite cool. But she wasn't, in fact.'

Aaron feels dizzy.

'You look very like her.'

She steadies herself with facts. 'How often did Boenisch come here?'

'Every week. Melly thought he hardly opened his mouth. She was surprised that he came at all.'

'Was she uneasy when she went to see him?'

'Not at all. She was really glad that he invited her to have a cup of –' She breaks off. Aaron gives her time. 'She said, "Hey, maybe he's going to thaw.'

'I'd like to see Dr Breuer's notes.'

'I'll put them together for you. Half an hour?'

'Good.'

The woman reaches for Aaron's hand. 'Thank you.'

'What for?'

'No one from the Murder Commission has asked about Melly at all. They haven't even been here.'

On the gravel path outside Block 6 her heels create a rough-grained image. Four or five metres to the entrance. She stops in front of the door a moment before Niko, which must irritate him. A familiar smell inside. Sweat, disinfectant, bad food.

Ten smells that Aaron doesn't like:

hospitals

fish

the perfume 'Femme' by Rochas

raclette

coffee

air in the underground

prisons

chrysanthemums

cigarette smoke

fear

They are passed on to an officer who leads them to the second floor. A new building. A mop smacks against the linoleum. Apart from the inmates and the domestic staff who prepare the food, clean, change the laundry, in the late morning there are no inmates here.

'How did Boenisch behave?' she asks the officer

'He didn't stand out. In a few weeks he would have disappeared into preventive detention. The building's just over there, all smart as anything. Twenty square metres, kitchen, tiled bathroom, garden. Only a matter of time before they introduce room service.'

Another smell. 'They smoke dope here,' she says to the man.

'And snort, and jack up, and drink. Tell us how to stop it and we'll do it straight away.'

Suddenly she has the feeling of eyes on her back. Involuntarily she looks over her shoulder. Always the same stupid reflex.

'Here it is.' Aaron hears him opening the seal with a key from his keyring. 'You'll be fine.' As he leaves, he mutters, 'In Vietnam they eat feet.' His footsteps fade away like those of a man who is counting every day until his retirement.

'I'd like to go in on my own first.' Aaron steps into the cell and closes the door. She stands still. The smell is so subliminal that it takes her a minute to be aware of it. Tea. She kneels down and feels around on the linoleum. Just before the plank bed there's a sticky patch; a faint dried trickle.

She straightens up. She knows what a cell looks like. Ten square metres, plank bed, wash basin, toilet, cupboard, television. Still, she clicks, very quietly so as not to cause a chaos of echoes in the small room. Her lips form an E, which produces a sound with a high resolution. The sound comes dully back from the left-hand wall. She clicks again. Waist-height, above the bed. Aaron kneels on the mattress and feels her way along the bookshelf. Her fingers glide over the greasy, tattered paperbacks. The second-to-last book is bound, the cover intact. She sniffs the paper. Nutty, as if freshly printed. When she is about to put the book back she notices that there's a gap between the middle pages.

There's a DVD or a CD in between them.

She opens the door. 'What kind of books does he have?'

Niko looks at the shelf. "'With You by my Side'"... "Your Breath on my Soul"... "The Joy of Knowing You"... "Cherry-Red Summer". Shall I go on, or do you feel ill already?'

Aaron holds out the book that she's removed from the shelf. 'What about this one?'

"...Because they are Made for Kissing". Another piece of slush.'

‘Read out the blurb, please.’

“The black detective and psychologist Alex Cross faces an almost insoluble task.” He pauses, then goes on reading. “On the campus of a university in North Carolina attractive young women are being abducted and raped by a psychopath.” Niko’s breath quickens slightly. ‘It’s about a serial killer.’

‘Open it up. What’s inside?’ Aaron asks.

‘A DVD. “Mr Brooks”,’ Niko says hesitantly.

‘Do you know the film?’

‘No.’

‘I do, though. It’s about a serial killer as well. Mr Brooks is secretly observed at work by a photographer by the name of Smith. But Smith doesn’t go to the police. Instead he blackmails Mr Brooks to be allowed to accompany him on his night-time trips.’ Aaron hears Niko’s breath slowing. ‘Is there a DVD player in here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are the walls decorated? Photographs, posters, postcards?’

‘Nothing.’;

She absorbs Niko’s silence until it becomes unbearable.

‘Apart from a drawing.’

‘What does it show?’

His silence this time presses Aaron against a wall that she has built herself. It is an infinity before she hears his voice again. ‘It’s from a newspaper article, by a court artist. From the trial, back then. You’re sitting in the witness stand.’

The wall, built over sixteen years, collapses. Aaron is hurled into the chair in Moabit district court. She clings to the armrest for support as she answers the questions of Boenisch’s defence lawyer. His strategy is based on diminished responsibility: he wants to ensure that his client is sent to a psychiatric hospital. Boenisch is staring at Aaron the whole time. A fly crawls along his underarm. He doesn’t notice. Her eye darts to the courtroom artist. His charcoal scratches on the block.’

‘Jenny?’ Niko asks and brings her back.

‘You said he suffocated the woman with a plastic bag. What sort of bag?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Transparent or printed?’

She hears him scrolling on his tablet. ‘Doesn’t say.’

'Call Forensics.'

Niko phones Forensics. 'Hertie bag. Printed.'

'Was she left in the cell unsupervised?' Aaron asks.

'Of course. She had keys to every house.'

'Did anyone see her going downstairs?'

'Hang on.' He scrolls. 'There were two jailers in the guardroom. She said hello, was in a good mood. It didn't strike anyone that she didn't come out.'

'At what time?'

'Half past three. It was the beginning of recreation. You know what happens then. Chaos. The jailers are under a lot of stress.'

'You said it was the end of her day. At that time?'

'She planned to do some overtime.'

'So Boenisch is supposed to have killed her between half past three and a quarter to four. And then?'

'He stayed in his cell, no one was interested. He let them lock him in at half past nine. Someone on the late shift looked in on him briefly, but didn't notice anything. He presumably left the corpse under his bed.'

Aaron enters her inner chamber. Now she's in the loneliest place in the world. She retreats in here when she wants to see everything from a great distance and therefore quite clearly. She hears her voice from a long way away: 'So that's it until the next morning?'

'Not quite. At half-past one in the morning something happened. Boenisch pressed the emergency button in the cell. A jailer looked in on him. Boenisch complained of a bad headache and was given some aspirin.'

That must have delighted him particularly. Knowing what's under his bed while they look after him and pay him respect.

'They had a regular check at six in the morning. He was lying beside her in the spoons position.'

'How many cups did he use?'

Niko scrolls. 'Two.'

'Milk, sugar?'

No scrolling. She is the only one who would ask that question.

'Why is that important?'

'Was she raped?'

'No.'

'What injuries did she have?'

'Broken larynx.'

'What do the walls look like?'

'Painted white.'

'Nothing else?'

Long pause. 'Black smears. Opposite the bed.'

'How high up?'

'About half a metre.'

Aaron leaves the Inner Chamber. 'What do you think?'

'Boenisch broke her larynx so that she couldn't scream, and pulled the bag over her head. She defended herself and her shoes rubbed against the wall.'

'Why wasn't Melanie Breuer missed at the exit desk? She would have had to clock out.'

'They were having a farewell party.'

Hence the fastidious check.

'Now they're in serious trouble.'

She goes down to the guard room with Niko. Burnt toast, coffee turning bitter in the pot for hours. 'I'd like to talk to the two people who saw Dr Breuer coming in the day before yesterday.'

'Schilling is off sick.'

'And the other one?'

'Special training.'

Aaron reads between the lines: *You're just trying to pin something on us.*

The prison officer who brought her to Boenisch's cell smells of cigarette smoke and yearning glances at his watch. 'Any the wiser?'

'Since when has Boenisch had a DVD player in his cell?'

'No idea. Must have put in an application. As I say: pure luxury here.'

'Had he seemed different over the last few days?'

'I didn't give him a cuddle.'

Niko snaps at the man: 'Do you think it's funny that he spent the whole night next to a corpse?'

'I don't think anything's funny around here.'

She asks: 'Which prisoners was he in close contact with?'

'Bukowski.'

Niko would have asked the same questions if it had been his case. But the department was only asked for administrative assistance.

The guys from the Fourth Murder Commission probably don't want to deal with a blind woman. 'She's been with you lot before. Are you being her nursemaid?'

He yells at the officer: 'Can you be more precise? Why's he in, since when, where does he work?'

'Armed robbery. Four years. Car repair workshop.'

'Take us there.'

Black metal gate on rollers. An angle grinder squeals. A soldering iron does a spot weld, splat-splat-splat, there's a smell of burnt sparklers. Aaron shields the flame of her lighter against the wind. Outside Holzhauser Strasse U-Bahn station an announcement comes over the wall. 'Stay back from the platform edge!'

Bukowski is brought out. 'Hi there. Got a cig?'

The slimy rattle in his voice is one big warning to her to stop smoking. But it's also an excellent soundbox. Aaron sees muscles, tattoos, bull neck. She holds the pack out to him, gives him a light, catches the smell of fresh liquid soap.

I bet you don't guess I'm blind.

Niko asks: 'How well do you know Reinhold Boenisch?'

'So so.'

The administrative employee smokes too. 'Don't talk crap. You're always hanging around with him.'

'He wanted something like a family. I didn't wanna be rude.'

'That's right, you're a good person.'

'That's what I always say.'

'Did you notice anything unusual about Boenisch lately?' Aaron asks. 'Did he turn in on himself, was he chaotic in any way?'

'He's always chaotic. He says there's a party going on in his head.'

'Did you know he was going to a psychologist?'

'We all do. Did you ever see her? Really hot. Sorry. I shouldn't say that to you, should I?'

Aaron knows that he would be grinning all the way to the top of his head if his ears weren't there. She stamps out her cigarette. She's been practising for a week. 'Mr Bukowski, a man like you wouldn't have someone like Boenisch as a friend. He's a big guy, but he isn't good at depending himself. Men who murder women are pretty far down the pecking order here. He needs a fighter to protect him, and you're that guy. In return he gives you some of his wages. Can we agree on that?'

Bukowski snorts.

Niko says: 'Your business relationship is out of date, Boenisch is going to be transferred anyway.' His voice is confident, authoritative. Aaron knows that tone, with which he established, quite calmly, in Naples the first time they made contact, "Ten million isn't a problem."

'And?'

'Telly in the evening for as long as you want.'

Bukowski thinks.

'Have you got a girlfriend outside?' Aaron asks.

'Why?'

'Two hours in the contact room.' She already feels the need for another cigarette.

'Can I bum one more?'

Aaron gives Bukowski her last one. She sees him rolling the cigarette back and forth between thumb and forefinger, and slyly blowing a smoke ring.

'He comes and talks to me on Sunday. Wants to know if I can beat him up. I think he's taking the piss. But he meant it. I whacked him a couple of times. He has a screw loose.'

The corridor is endless. She notices her footsteps getting slower and slower. Niko stands outside the door and takes her hand.

'You don't need to do that.'

'No, I do.'

In the contact room she immediately hears the excited squeak of bedsprings. An officer purrs: 'No stress.'

She holds out her hand. Whenever they greet anyone, Aaron is always faster, so that she doesn't need to try to find the other person's hand. But she would never touch Boenisch if it wasn't absolutely necessary; just the thought makes her want to throw up. But Aaron wants to read his hand.

He grips her hand with both massive cuffed paws. They are damp and quivering with anticipation.

What does he look like, sixteen years later?

His voice has the pleading undertone that she knows and has never forgotten. 'I'm so sorry that you're blind. So sorry.'

Here, I'll give you an erection.

'I want to speak to Mr Boenisch on his own.'

Niko snorts: 'Out of the question.'

She pulls him a little way away. Her heels tell her that there's another metre of air to the wall. Aaron whispers: 'If it makes you feel any better, chain him to the radiator.'

'Forget it.'

'He won't say a word if you're there.'

Niko reluctantly brushes Aaron's hand away, thinks for a moment and goes.

Shifting chair, metal on metal, footsteps, slamming doors.

The bullet entered the back of her head and passed through both hemispheres of the cerebral cortex. But the optical nerve was uninjured. Aaron has clear vision. She takes her bearings from breathing and voice, and has learned to aim her eyes ten degrees above the mouth position of her interlocutor so that he has the impression of being looked at.

But in interrogations she doesn't do that. The seeing person tells the blind one things that he wouldn't confide in anyone else. Because the blind person can't see you turning red, kneading your hands, staring into the distance, wrestling for words. He thinks. It's like a confession. The seeing person thinks he's safe behind the black curtain that separates the blind person from him, and he himself is the blind person.

Aaron looks past Boenisch. She wants him to feel superior to her.

She sets her phone down on the table and starts the recording. His breathing is quick. He can hardly wait for her to ask the first question.

'Are you happy with the food here?'

He exhales a stream of sour air, so disappointed, so disappointed that it isn't a perfect first sentence.

He's exactly right about that.

'Yes.'

'You work in the laundry. Do you get on with your colleagues?'

'I suppose.' He could cry, because she's messing everything up.

'Do they treat you well?'

Boenisch groans.

'What's up?'

'One of the guards beat me up. My ribs are green and blue. Do you want to feel?'

'We'll have to report that. Let's do it later.'

Aaron continues unmoved for the next five minutes: how often his aunt visits him, whether he would rather watch television in the common room or on his own, when he turns out the light in the evening, how good the reception of his transistor radio is, the quality of his mattress. All subjects that she's absolutely fascinated by.

The novel was only the packaging. It's about the film.

When she notices that Boenisch is about to go mad, she asks: 'How do you like "Mr Brooks"?''

At last. He gasps happily for air, and Aaron is back in that hot August sixteen years ago, when she was studying at Police College on a six-month internship at Berlin Murder Commission VI, and was assigned to the Special Commission that had been set up a few days before.

Two lawyers from a Charlottenburg chambers with over a hundred partners had disappeared without trace just a week apart. Both had worked until late in the evening; the night porter at the office block was the last one who saw them alive. Of course a connection was drawn with one of the clients of the chambers. But the chambers was specialised in boring tax law, and the women had never been involved in the same case.

And they seemed not to have anything to do with each other out of the office. No ransom demands. There wasn't the slightest trace.

The job of staying in contact with the families, who grew increasingly desperate with each passing day, was passed on to Aaron. She forgave her colleagues for that; it was hard having to recite the same helpless sentences over and over again: *Don't give up hope. We're doing all that is humanly possible. If you wish, you'll of course receive therapeutic help.*

Soon the faces of the husbands and children wouldn't leave Aaron in peace any more. The files grew to two metres on the shelf. More than a hundred people from the area were questioned. Friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours, staff and customers of a fitness centre. They even considered the possibility that the women had had a secret lesbian relationship and might have gone into hiding.

The night porter had been questioned four times.

'So Dr Marx took the lift to the underground car park at exactly eleven at night?'

'Yes, I was about to go upstairs and do my round, and she was in the lift when the door opened. I said: You go downstairs, I've got plenty of time.'

'That was at about eleven. She must have pressed the wrong button by mistake and ended up in the foyer where I was. I wished her a pleasant evening.'

'I know it was exactly eleven because of my rounds. She looked distracted. She didn't talk to me.'

'It must have been five to or five past. She wanted to go upstairs because she'd forgotten something. Documents or something.'

The interrogations were carried out by various officers and filed in different dossiers, which was why no one had noticed the contradictions. What time was it exactly? Did the woman talk to him or not? Had she pressed the wrong floor or did the lift stop in the foyer because the porter had pressed the button? Did she want to go down or up? If the latter, why had he not gone up with her if he was going on his

rounds anyway? Had he gone to sleep, and had no idea when the woman had left the building? But in that case why would he have tied himself up in contradictions? He would only have needed to claim that he was somewhere in the building and had no idea when she went home.

That night porter was Reinhold Boenisch.

He tries to lean forward. Aaron hears the cuffs jerking along the radiator. She forces herself to do something good to Boenisch and moves her chair forwards half a metre.

He breathes gratefully. 'I'm ashamed that I watched that film. I shouldn't have done. I found it so exciting.' His voice is uneven. 'Do you know it?'

'Yes.'

His breath is pure ecstasy.

'Since when have you had it – and where did you get it?'

'Not long. Somebody recommended it,' he says evasively.

An important sentence. Aaron listens to the echo of its meaning.

'Who was it?'

'Somebody.'

'Somebody you like?'

'I don't know.'

Certainly not Bukowski. The idea of choosing as a cover for 'Mr Brooks' a psycho-thriller hiding behind a trashy title so that it didn't stand out among Boenisch's other books and passed the censors is too clever for him.

'I shouldn't have watched the film.'

Again the handcuffs scrape. Aaron gives Boenisch another ten centimetres.

'I'm so glad you came that time. So glad. You saved me. You were my –' He cries, can't go on talking, slaps his flip-flops on the floor and can't get out the words that fill his mouth.

It takes her such an effort to reach out her hand and stroke Boenisch's shoulder that she gets a cramp in her arm. He eagerly stretches his shoulder towards her. 'My angel. Thanks for ringing my doorbell.'

Yesterday she was in Paris because of a joint investigation between the BKA and the French anti-terror unit RAID. When, between two meetings, she heard Niko's

voice on her voicemail for the first time in five years, she couldn't clear her head for several minutes. Over the hours that followed she was dealing with an Al Qaida sleeper who had been found with plans to carry out attacks in France. It somehow worked. Then she went outside, smoked and heard the humming of the huge, breathing building. *I won't do that. You can't force me to.* But suddenly she found herself thinking about her light athletics training at school, when she landed beside the mat doing the pole vault. After everything was healed she went to the sports ground. She knew she would be scared of that bloody crossbar for ever if she didn't vault at least one more time. After that it was fine.

Aaron called Wiesbaden and asked her secretary to inform the department and book her a flight from Paris to Berlin. On the internet she called up the Berlin weather report for the third of August sixteen years ago. That's how she knows that it rained in the evening, for the first time in weeks.

Boenisch lived in his parents' house in Spandau-Hakenfelde, up by the forest. The trees on the property would have been dripping with moisture. It would have smelled of soil, leaves, dust.

But she can't remember.

Except for ringing the doorbell on the garden gate in the dark.

It was a long time before Boenisch opened the door. More questions? But he's already told them everything... Of course, if he can help. He asked her in and apologised awkwardly for not coming the door more quickly, because he'd been watching television and always had to turn the sound up so loud because of his bad hearing, he only had one ear drum now, the other had burst when he was little and his father beat him with the belt again.

Suddenly he started shaking and Aaron felt sorry for him. His cat weaved around her legs, arching its back but not purring. One of its eyes was lined with black, the other with white. Its tail had a kink.

'Ah, I didn't even ask you – would you like a drink?'

'A glass of water would be nice.'

He went into the kitchen. The cat miaowed. Aaron ignored it. She put one hand on the television.

Cold.

She saw too late that Boenisch was standing in the kitchen door.

'I don't have any more fizzy water. Is tap water ok?'

His forehead was drenched in sweat.

She said hastily that she had forgotten an important appointment and sadly had to go; there was no rush, they could talk another time.

Boenisch looked sad. 'Pity.' When she tried to get past him he grabbed her like a mouse. He was incredibly strong. He threw Aaron down on the stone floor, knelt on top of her, took her phone away, pulled her up, dragged her to the cellar door, pushed her down the pitch-dark steps and shut the door.

She has forgotten so much. But not that stench. She threw up immediately. She didn't know how much time passed before she could breathe again. Her left collarbone stung. She felt the bone sticking out. Her whole side was numb.

Choking, Aaron felt her way forward. Found something furry, an animal, a dog, stiff, as if stuffed, hoped for a second that the stench came from there. And a second later touched the first corpse, the skin of the bare legs doughy, repellently soft.

Aaron screamed and screamed until her body was one appalling pain and at the same time she could no longer feel it.

She lay there whimpering for a hundred years, she wanted to dream herself out of this hell into the arms of her father and couldn't do it.

Couldn't do it.

Eventually the cellar door was opened. Boenisch came into the darkness. He had a torch and shone it in her face so that she couldn't see his.

He sobbed: 'What am I supposed to do with you?'

She wanted to plead for her life and couldn't get a word out.

He left and locked the door again.

Aaron knew that she would never come out alive from this dungeon if she couldn't find a way of turning off the centrifuge that was tirelessly slinging her heart against the her ribs.

Above her head Boenisch put on a record. Roy Orbison: 'Pretty Women'. It crackled and droned.

Dad, what should I do?

Where are you? You have to work with what you've got.

Aaron thought: *I can't do it.* But her hands were starting to feel their way around. *Pretty woman, walking down the street, Pretty Woman, the kind I like to meet.*

The second corpse. The gaping hole in the throat, tissue that felt like dried-up cake.

Keep going. Keep going. And then a feeling of happiness swept through her. A nail. Long and rusty. Aaron gripped it with her fist, crept backwards, took her bearings from the first corpse and the dog, found the steps, took off her shoes, crept up the steps.

Pretty woman, won't you pardon me?

Pretty woman, I couldn't help but see.

At last she knelt by the door.

Dad, I can't see anything.

Don't see, know.

The nail is too big, I can't get the door open.

It isn't fear that paralyses you. Fear is good, it keeps you alert. But damn it all, you've got to control your breath!

Trembling, she pulled off her pullover, rested her right hand on her navel, breathed hard against it and as she breathed out concentrated on making sure that her belly arched all the way to her spinal column.

The drum-beat of her heart quietened.

How incredibly glad she was.

Aaron felt her way along the brickwork. She found a crack between two stones and pushed the nail in. Stamped on it with her bare foot, bent the nail, ignored the pain.

Please don't break! Please don't break! Please don't break!

It didn't.

She guided the nail into the lock. Wiggled it. Registered that it opened.

She pushed the nail back into the wall and bent it straight.

Please don't break! Please don't break! Please don't break!

It held.

A small chink was enough to see Boenisch. He was striding back and forth, every footstep accompanied by a sob, his back turned towards her. The cat sat on

the sofa and stared at her. Aaron had only one chance. She pushed the door completely open. Tensed her muscles.

At that moment Boenisch turned off the music.

Her pulse raced to over two hundred.

Boenisch grabbed the phone.

Too much adrenalin. She was frozen.

When he had dialled four numbers, he was about to turn round with the phone in his hand. The cat jumped past him on to the windowsill and, hissing, swept a flowerpot to the floor. During the second in which he was distracted, Aaron fought down the adrenalin and threw all her strength into five steps that were engulfed by the stone floor. She rammed the nail into the back of Boenisch's neck and drove it right in almost as far as it would go. He uttered a dull gurgle. His hands swept the void like flails. She pulled the nail back out and leapt backwards. Blood sprayed into her face. Boenisch toppled over without a sound. There was a sauce stain on his shirt. His eyes gazed pleadingly. Aaron felt a crazed desire to let him bleed to death like a stuck pig.

She sat down on the sofa and watched Boenisch dying.

The cat paid him no attention. It tripped over to Aaron and jumped into her lap. Purred. Its white eye was shut, and it looked as if it was winking with the black one. Aaron stroked its thin back.

Then she turned her head and saw her father sitting next to her, as he had done on the day when she passed her police entrance exam, and they took a rest on a bench after a long walk.

Where? In the forest? In the park? On the Rhine? Was I excited? Did he show me how proud he was of me? And my mother? Did she pretend to be glad for me?

She remembered his words: Before flying to Mogadishu there was something I kept from Colonel Wegener, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to go on the mission. Jürgen Schumann, the captain of the 'Landshut' had been a star fighter pilot and stationed at Büchel military airport; at the same time when I served there in Airborne Brigade 26. A really good guy, ten years older, he took me under his wing and helped me a lot when I had a problem with my superiors. In Mogadishu the first thing I heard after landing was: "The bastards have shot the pilot!" By that point I should have told Wegener; without emotional detachment the job's a write-off. I kept mum. We killed three terrorists, Souhaila Andrawes alone survived. She was lying at

the back by the galley, she'd been kicked aside. The other guys were at the front. I could have done it. Bullet between the eyes. The end. No one would have noticed me, everything was full of smoke, we'd thrown in stun grenades like confetti. But just one second. When Andrawes was carried out she made the Victory sign for the cameras. It was right, too. Never forget that.'

Aaron called for support and an ambulance. While waiting she stroked the cat. They told her she'd been in the cellar for eight hours. If they'd said two days or two weeks, she would have believed that too.

The siren ends lunchtime break in Tegel. 'What do you like most about "Mr Brooks"?' she asks Boenisch.

He doesn't reply.

'Don't worry, you can tell me, we can both keep secrets.'

'The main character.'

'Mr Brooks, the respected citizen who goes out night after night, kills people at random and never gets caught?'

'Mr Brooks isn't the main character.'

'Really?'

'You know who the main character is!'

'Tell me.'

'Smith!'

'The man who blackmails Mr Brook so that he can go with him when he commits his murders? Someone who isn't capable of killing people himself? What does he have to do with you? Since when have you just wanted to watch?'

'No, Smith could have done! Mr Brooks takes him to the cemetery so that Smith will shoot him. Smith pulls the trigger! He pulls the trigger!'

'Mr Brooks had made the firing pin unusable.'

'But Smith doesn't know that! He pulled the trigger!'

'So? He'd known for ages that Mr Brooks wouldn't allow himself to be shot as simply as that. For Mr Brooks it was a game. Smith is a pitiful coward.'

Boenisch wails. Aaron calls: 'Niko?' He comes in. 'Mr Boenisch and are going to take a little break.'

'No! I don't need a break!'

You do, she thinks as she leaves the room with Niko. She wants Boenisch to wind himself up again, to become as greedy for her as he was at the start.

Outside Block 6 Aaron takes a deep breath. She wishes she hadn't given Bukowski her last cigarette. 'Will you get Dr Breuer's notes from the Psychology Service? I'll wait here.'

She feels Niko moving away. She can't hear his footsteps, even though they must crunch on the snow.

Ten things that Aaron likes to hear:

Janis Joplin

children's laughter

the sea at ebb tide

a pencil on paper

rain on a tin roof

Harley Davidsons

sparrows in the spring

the click of her Dupont lighter

the page of a book being turned

purring

Unconsciously she turns her face towards Jungfernheide, the nearby forest. She's far away from all roads, she feels springy moss under her shoes, twigs brushing the back of her neck, she hears the rustle of little birds and wonders when she was there last.

When she was carried out of Boenisch's house she asked after the cat. No one had seen it. After she was allowed to leave hospital, Aaron went immediately to Spandau and talked to Boenisch's neighbours, but they didn't know where the cat had ended up either. She stuck pieces of paper with her phone number to lamp posts and trees in the area. No one ever called.

But then, months later, she woke up in her flat, and something was nipping at her big toe.

Marlowe.

Her black, smug, fat cat, who had come dancing into her life overnight, as if had known he had to step in for someone else.

Aaron couldn't remember where he suddenly arrived from. Her favourite idea is that he travelled on the roof of the car when she came out of a chocolate shop where she had bought some *langues de chat*.

She doesn't know how old he was when he arrived, but she knows that they immediately belonged together. He left no doubt that he had sought her out. When she went to bed he lay in the crook of her arm and purred her to sleep because he knew she was afraid of her dreams. Every morning he nibbled at her big toe at exactly waking-up time, and didn't go to his food until she was having breakfast too. He snuggled her when she needed him to and left her in peace when she had to concentrate on a thought. He was busy with cat matters and very serious and her best friend.

Thank you for allowing me that.

She never found out how Marlowe spent his days. But when she got out of her car he was always sitting fat and round on the windowsill and waiting for her, although she never had a sense that he had been lonely. Aaron sat down on the sofa, he hunkered on the table, and they played that game that you play with your eyes, where you have to shut your eyes and guess by blinking who's the first to look.

Later, when she was with the department, she spent a lot of evenings with Sandra and Pavlik, and Marlowe always knew in advance where it was going to go. He liked them both and their children, sat expectantly by the door, of course he knew where they were going, sat happily on the back shelf, and even pretended for the benefit of the twins that he was interested in a ball or a toy car because he knew they liked it.

But he didn't like Niko. Was he jealous?

She often had to leave him, sometimes for weeks at a time, and then she gave him to an old lady in the building who was alone and enjoyed Marlowe's company. When Aaron came back, he jumped into her arms, bumped her with his head for a moment to say hello, and wasn't hurt because he knew she must have good reasons for being away.

One morning she slept in because Marlowe hadn't woken her. He was very weak and breathing quietly. Terrified, she drove with him to the doctor. It was a tumour. He wouldn't live long, but he wasn't in pain, they said.

The following day Aaron was supposed to go on a mission overseas. She wanted to take her annual leave. Her boss was sick, and his deputy said it was

impossible. Aaron announced that she would quit the service. She got the leave. For many hours she rocked Marlowe in her arms and told him what he meant to her. She knew he understood her. When she woke up another morning, he was lying in the crook of her arm and had gone to sleep, peacefully, while watching over her dreams as always. She buried him under a birch tree in Jungfernheide Forest and went often to his grave and talked to him until she flew to Barcelona.

Could she ask Niko to drive her there afterwards? No, Pavlik, perhaps. Niko wouldn't understand.

He returns as silently as he had disappeared. She gives a start when he says: 'I've got the notes.'

Two minutes later she is sitting opposite Boenisch again. Aaron senses his impatience. But first she has to go back to the night when she saved his life and his house was swarming with police officers.

4.

If someone had two blood-drained women's corpses in the cellar, and a third victim, injured, defenceless, that he could look forward to, why would they make a phone call?

And to whom?

The four numbers on Boenisch's phone were the code for Kassel. There was a number he had called a few times before. It belonged to a man called Helmut Runge. A travelling salesman in tiles, fifty-two, married, thirteen-year-old daughter, a son about to take his school-leaving exam. A life as interesting as dust on a sideboard. Runge said he had met Boenisch a few years before in a pub in Spandau, when he was in Berlin on a sales trip. They had met now and again, darts, cinema, sometimes drinking. Boenisch was a poor bastard, he had no one to talk to, he sometimes called up and bored on. But two dead women... Runge drank schnaps at six in the morning.

The most exciting thing that the search of his house brought to light was his collection of Kinder eggs in his den. Runge had alibis for the days when the women had disappeared: on the first he was at a sales reps' seminar in Minden, on the second, until midnight, at a birthday party in Peine. Thirty witnesses, including his wife.

That made it quite clear to the investigators: Boenisch had acted on his own.

Hour after hour Aaron stood behind the two-way mirror and watched the interrogation. Boenisch's eyes were one big waterfall. Again and again he cracked his head against the table-top. 'I did it! I did it! I did it!'

They showed him photographs of women who had disappeared, unsolved cases from the last few years. They included two tourists that he recognised. Boenisch also admitted to these murders. There was no doubt that he was the perpetrator.

But Aaron wouldn't leave the bowl of mouldy food leftovers in Boenisch's cellar. The women hadn't been killed immediately after their abduction, and in the days that followed there was no reason why Runge shouldn't have been in Berlin. He was on a sales tour of Sachsen-Anhalt – 'they're mad for tiles'. The hundred and twenty kilometres wouldn't have been a problem.

No one wanted to hear. She was injured, traumatised, she should recover and forget. She had to wear a cast for six weeks, and was released from her internship for that time.

Her father came to Berlin. He asked the right questions: was the record scratched? How many steps were there? What sort of nail?

With him she could cry at last.

Is that all I want? Did I ever cry before I woke up in Berlin?

But he too said: you've got to forget it.

Never.

On the homepage of Runge's employer Aaron found a report about a sales reps' seminar. Runge had the second-highest sales figures in the Northern area. He held a cup high. She enlarged the photograph. His fingernails were yellow, untended, almost like claws. Why could no one else see that? Aaron immediately thought about Boenisch shining the torch at her and sobbing: 'What am I supposed to do with you?'

Why did he want to call Runge, of all people?

'I needed to talk to someone about something, distract myself so that I didn't kill the one in the cellar too quickly.'

Aaron bought half a metre of specialist literature. The first sentences came from Charles Manson: 'If ever a devil existed on earth, it's me. He took over my head whenever he wanted.

Evil is a moral parameter, not an algorithm. And yet among all serial killers, with the exception of snipers, there are agreements that are as valid as mathematical axioms.

The 'butcher' adapts the murders to the situation, improvises, and acts randomly and spontaneously.

Boenisch, on the other hand: 'I wondered for a long time which one I would take. And that's exactly when I was given chocolate by Miss Marx because I took her car through the car wash. That's when I knew: she's the one! And that Lamprecht one was always so stuck-up, come on, jump to it! She really got on my nerves.'

The butcher is incapable of developing feelings for other people, and sees the only as objects. Shifting a chair means as much as torturing, killing, dismembering and eventually throwing the body parts away like rubbish.

Did that apply to Boenisch? No.

Everyone in the office building said that he never forgot a birthday, kept aspirin and plasters ready in the drawer for emergencies, visited sick people. The neighbours knew him as someone who was always ready to help. At Halloween the children liked to ring on his doorbell because he was so good at pretending to be scared; they got by far the most sweets from him. In hard winters, when he came home at six in the morning after the night shift, he cleared the snow for the whole street and scattered sand on the pavement.

Type two is the 'planner', a much rarer species. The nice guy that everyone likes. He has a steady job, a regular life.

Like Boenisch. The planner carefully chooses the crime scene. Everything has to be perfect; a quiet, safe place where you can relax to enjoy every moment.

Like Boenisch's cellar.

He never changes his plan, he needs that for maximum satisfaction. The slightest change would destroy everything.

Both times he had waited for the late end of a working day, anaesthetised the women in the underground car park with chloroform, and only after the days of the fattening phase, in which anticipation feeds the imagination until it's as fat as foie gras, cut their throats in the cellar.

Did not rape, or at least did not penetrate, either of them. He claimed to have done exactly the same thing with the two tourists. Chloroform, cellar, waiting, throats, letting them rot, chopping them up, burying them in the forest.

But had Boenisch taken pictures of the corpses? No. Had he kept a fetish up in the house, a piece of jewellery or clothing that he could play with whenever he liked? No. Had he crept around the houses of the families to catch a glimpse of their suffering and get additionally turned on?

'Otherwise on the way to work I have to go past Lamprecht's house, so I took a detour.'

Too many 'no's.

Boenisch doubtless had murderous fantasies and necrophiliac obsessions. But Aaron thought he only wanted to murder – and couldn't. He had carefully sought out the women and locked them in his cellar, a highly arousing foreplay. Someone else had killed them. Reinhold Boenisch was allowed to watch and keep the corpses. The cellar was his paradise.

He contented himself with his confessions. It was wonderful that he was seen as the perpetrator, and that people saw him as the man that he so wished he was. Pity would have been an extra kick. He tried everything, but no one gave it to him.

Only Aaron, now. 'I know it's very hard for you. Was the break long enough, or should we wait a little longer?'

He says hastily: 'No, that's fine.' She hears him kneading his cuffed hands. 'How blind are you? Really blind?'

'Why Melanie Breuer?'

'She reminded me of someone.'

Now you're hoping I'll ask: of whom? I can't know what she looked like. You'd love to tell me, you really would.

'How did you feel when you went to her?'

Boenisch's breath scratches disappointedly in his throat. 'There was always the pressure in my head. She must have noticed. She was an expert.'

'What happened when she came into your cell?'

'She looked at my books. But not that one. I packed it away.'

'And then?'

'We drank tea. Side by side, there's hardly room. She wasn't wearing perfume, but she smelled good. Exactly as I imagined. She touched my arm. My hands were on fire.'

'How did she like her tea? With or without sugar?'

Aaron knows that Boenisch doesn't like sugar. He lacks a protein molecule, an anomaly, one in a hundred thousand, a marginal entry in his medical file.

'Without.'

She tries to irritate him. 'I've asked around. Dr Breuer only drank her tea with sugar. Why are you lying?' He pulls so hard on his handcuffs that she pushes her chair half a metre back. 'Perhaps the break wasn't long enough after all.'

He pleads. 'No, please! I'm sorry! I'll never do it again!'

Pretty woman, won't you pardon me?

In her fourth week off work, Aaron's collarbone had recovered to the extent that she was able to drive to Kassel. The two murders were fresh, Helmut Runge must still have been in the cooling-off phase. Over the next little while a new victim

was unlikely, but perhaps he would make a mistake, take Aaron to the hiding place where he kept his fetishes. She braced herself to have to follow him on one of his sales tours.

Unnecessary. Runge was on holiday, and spent it with his family on the allotment.

Aaron took a room in the bed and breakfast with the fat landlady who always watched her curiously when she went out of the house with her camera. There are no tourists in Kassel.

Once Aaron stared provocatively back, and the woman murmured: 'A cat can look at a queen.'

Runge made a bird house, grilled pork chops with other allotment-keepers, went canoeing with his son, went on an excursion with wife and children to Heide Park in Soltau, lay in the hammock, solved crosswords, read war stories.

What did the bird house look like? He painted it. In what colour? Was it a canoe, or was it more of a kayak? What was going on in my mind when I lay in the forest glade at last and watched Runge through the telephoto lens? Was I furious because he was behaving so normally? Did I hope I was wrong?

Her mother called. Aaron heard how concerned she was. And she knew nothing about Boenisch. Her father said it was better that way. She had invented a sporting accident, stupid, but soon healed.

Her mother asked: 'Won't you come to ours? You still have friends here, they'll be delighted.'

'Oh, Mum, I have to swot so much for college. And in two weeks I've got to carry on with my internship.'

At the same time she didn't take her eyes off Runge for a second.

'Take care, sweetie,' her mother said sadly.

'Sure.' She focused the viewfinder. Runge was having his wife rub his back with sun cream. She used a little too much and started back when he involuntarily lashed out at her.

One morning the fat bed-and-breakfast landlady was sitting behind her table and crying. At first Aaron tried to pretend she hadn't noticed, and thought the woman must be unhappy about having a complete stranger in her life, but when she was already in the doorway she heard a sob and asked: 'What's wrong?'

They had a coffee together. The woman was glad to be able to talk to someone. Her daughter had abandoned her studies, Geography and Physics, when they were taking on teachers. It was her ex-husband's fault. He had a bar in Hanover, and had persuaded his daughter to start with him as a business manager, she would be able to earn a lot more money. She had always been daddy's girl, and if he had an ice-cream stall in Greenland she would probably go there too.

Aaron noticed how good it felt to listen to someone. That was why she wanted to become a police officer: listening, with a view to understanding someone's fate, because it's only then that can you act justly. She wasn't yet aware that she would become a quite different type of police officer, and follow her father on to the thin ice, beneath which the faces of the dead could be seen with every step one took.

Now she involved herself in the concerns of the woman who no longer knew what to do, saw her child rushing headlong into disaster, just as she herself had done when she married that man. She couldn't remember what she had once seen in him. She shook her head and sighed: 'It never rains but it pours.'

While Aaron struggled to find the right words and advised her to discuss the matter with the other two, she couldn't help thinking of her own mother. She would talk to her friends in a very similar way, tell them how hopeless it was that Jenny wanted to become a police officer because of her father, too young to understand what sort of life it would be and what it meant for her mother. She had only Jenny and her husband. Now she would have to worry about both.

The fat landlady gratefully shook her hand. 'That was a great help.' When Aaron left, the woman's heart was a little lighter and her own a little heavier.

As if it was yesterday. I even remember that her right-hand stocking was laddered.

On Aaron's last day Runge's daughter fell off her bicycle on to a stony path. She hobbled tearfully to the allotment, her knee covered with blood. Runge didn't budge from his hammock. His wife threw her hands over her head and treated the wounds inside. He set his book down and dozed.

Aaron called the Murder Commission and asked if she could stay away for another week. Of course. Take your time.

Nothing for the next two days. But in the two after that Runge did something strange. He drove alone to the station in Kassel. There he sat for hours in the hall.

No paper, no book, no one to pick up. He was absorbed in himself and didn't move. Like a salamander on cold stone.

On the second day Aaron waited until he left the station and then stumbled into him carrying a city map. 'I'm sorry, can you help me? I'm looking for the Brothers Grimm Museum.'

He didn't know her, he had never seen her. His eyes were tar-stained pebbles, his voice thin and inexpressive. His horny yellow claw ran over the map. 'You're right here. Straight on, right at the crossing, second left, then you're walking straight towards it.'

'Very kind, thank you. I got lost. That's what it's like when you don't have anyone to guide you around.'

You're the big bad wolf. But believe me, I'm not little red riding hood.

Now, when Runge offered to show her around a bit, perhaps an outing to Wilhelmshöhe, a little trip that was worth it because you had a wonderful view, she would get into his car, and once he revealed what he was, shoot him unhesitatingly with the Starfire in her handbag.

But with his salesman's smile he wished her a good day.

Aaron went back to the Murder Commission. The fact that she, a twenty-year-old intern, was the only one to have spotted the contradictions in Boenisch's statements won her considerable respect. However there was also much shaking of heads about the fact that she could be so reckless as to drive alone to Spandau in the dark. An experienced colleague saw how distracted she was, and worried about her. Aaron was on the point of confessing to her.

But she didn't.

Before Christmas she had a week's holiday. She hired a car and followed Runge around Bremen. He did his rounds, joked with the customers, watched television in the evening in his cheap hotel, turned the light out early, had a fish sandwich at lunchtime, always taking out the onions, bought Christmas presents for the family. A pearl necklace, nine hundred and eighty marks; Backsteet Boys concert ticket for his daughter, Stadthalle Kassel, forty-three marks; briefcase for his son, who was starting to train as a banker, one hundred and nineteen marks.

On the third evening he drove to a restaurant in Delmenhorst. But he didn't get out. He sat in the car and looked through the clear window with the sticker saying

‘Zum krummen Eck’, in honour of a nearby mountain resort. Aaron parked on the on the other side of the road and saw the waitress joking with customers.

She checked the magazine of the Starfire.

Runge waited until the restaurant closed. The waitress stepped out on to the pavement. She was one of those women whose make-up is inspired by dreams of a life that they have never lived. She got into Runge’s car. They kissed. He gave her a prettily wrapped box. She threw her arms around him and kissed again. He put the pearl necklace around her neck.

Aaron couldn’t move. She followed Runge and the woman to a block of flats in a shabby part of town. When the curtains were drawn on the first floor and the light went out, her heart was beating as it had in Boenisch’s cellar. What was she supposed to do? Warn the woman? And then? She would hardly believe her, and tell Runge everything. She certainly wasn’t in immediate danger, otherwise he wouldn’t have bought her the pearl necklace. Would he give a gift like that to a victim? Probably not. He must have known the woman for a long time, and killing her wouldn’t have fit in with his scheme. Those thoughts, which knocked against one another like the balls on a Newton’s cradle, haunted Aaron’s night.

In the first dirty morning light she started out of her sleep.

Something stupid had happened.

Aaron had ignored the fact that she was in a disabled parking space. Two bored policemen had stopped their patrol car and knocked on the window. They asked to see her disabled parking permit. Aaron asked numbly if they didn’t have anything better to do. And already she had to get out for a telling off.

The door of the building opposite opened. Wearing a dressing gown, the woman said goodbye to Runge. She was still wearing the necklace. When he walked to his car, he saw Aaron with the two policemen. He stopped and recognised her.

Runge showed no reaction.

As he got into the car he dropped his key.

She spent Christmas Eve with her parents. The presents had been unwrapped; her mother was making dinner, just because Aaron is hopeless at cooking.

Her father murmured: ‘Come on, let’s take a walk around the block.’

A deserted street, New Year's Eve bangers already going off. Silent, cold, restless night. Aaron knew her father had seen through her, and got everything off her chest. The perpetrator's profile, her 'time off from her internship', the moment when Runge lay peacefully in his hammock. His lover in Delmenhorst. She only failed to mention the Brothers Grimm Museum and the loaded Starfire in her handbag.

'So he's having it off with the waitress. It happens.'

'And his reaction to his daughter's injury?'

'Maybe it wasn't his day.'

'He was totally the relaxed. And the girl was bleeding really badly.'

'Maybe his old woman was getting on his nerves.'

'Nothing gets on his nerves. He doesn't even see his wife.'

'I know a few guys at Murder Six. Good people.'

She stopped furiously. 'Have you even been listening to me?'

He put a reassuring arm around her and they walked on. 'When you were little, a couple lived in that house over there, he was a master electrician, I'm sure you won't remember them. They came to dinner once. There was bad blood between them and I had to keep topping up his schnapps glass. Eventually the women went and chatted in the garden, probably about clothes, and he vented his spleen. They had a poodle.'

What was he talking about?

'He snapped: "Bloody awful mutt. Every morning there was a yellow stain on the carpet in my study. My wife was away at a spa for two weeks, and I dumped the brute in the forest. On Friday she came back, I told her he'd run away. She went nuts and put up signs all over the place. Yesterday the damned thing found its way back, but not quite. Was run over by a truck, just around the corner. Since then my wife hasn't said a word to me. This morning it turned out that the stain in my study was from a broken heating pipe. I'm so dead in the water.'"

Again they stopped.

'The obvious thought is most often the right one. But sometimes you just can't accept it. You have to lock up Boenisch and Runge forever. If you don't do that, you'll go round the bend.'

She knew her father was right.

Boenisch stood trial in February. The unusual severity of his guilt was established. He got life followed by preventive detention. When he was sentenced he burst into convulsive tears.

Sixteen years later he's crying again. Aaron hears him forcing out the same thick, eager tears as before.

'Why did you suffocate Dr Breuer with the plastic bag? You could have throttled her, wouldn't that have been more arousing?'

'She asked if I wanted to change my job,' he sniffs in a hiccup of sobbing. 'She talked and talked. I silenced her. It's so lovely when they are quiet. Like on a sailplane, when you can only hear the wind.'

'The plastic bag was opaque. But you love seeing fear in women's faces. What do you get from a fight to the death that you can't even see properly?'

He thinks. Hates the question. Chokes on his tears as if they were an unusually big piece of meat. 'It was the only bag I had.'

'There are plenty of transparent ones in the laundry.'

He tries to sound even more afflicted; perhaps then she would change the subject from that bloody bag. 'I was so disgusted with myself.'

When she came in in the morning the wallpaper brightened.

Aaron puts her phone away and gets to her feet. 'No, you weren't. You're a coward who lets someone like Bukowski beat him up so that he can complain, someone who gets an erection when people think he's a murderer. You're not Mr Brooks. You're Smith. A bedwetter. And you and I are finished now.'

Boenisch roars like an animal. 'I'll kill you, you whore! I'll finish you off! I'll pull your blind eyes out! Cunt!'

Aaron is scared that the radiator will come away from the wall. The door flies open. Niko. He leads Aaron out of the room.

'I should have stabbed you back them! I'd have drunk your blood!'

Last of all she hears the prison officer: 'Shut it, or I'll slap you one.'

She can hardly wait to wash her hands.

Snow creaks under his shoes like peanut brittle. Niko asks no questions. He's good at that. Aaron used to be good at that too. In her first life, when there were lots

of answers that needed no question. How to establish contact. What cover story to choose. How much manpower you need. What guns.

The best position. The perfect second. The safest lie.

Sometimes they were calming answers, sometimes there was fear in them. But they always helped you to concentrate on the facts. Aaron wished she could do that now too.

'Hi.' The man they pass isn't a prisoner. She registers a trace of clean sweat and sun cream. Solarium.

Then smells that Aaron likes:

freshly tarred roads

country bonfires

dubbin

a forest after rain

peppermint tea in Marrakesh

her skin

Currywurst

'Eau d'Issey' by Issey Miyake

gun oil

hot chestnuts

The prison administration is in Section II. Aaron feels the Wilhelmine monster looming in front of her, the 'spider' in which Alfred Döblin has Franz Biberkopf locked up in 'Berlin Alexanderplatz', the intimidating mass. Red bricks, bullet holes from the war, behind them the streets of cells, arranged in a star shape, at the level of the first floor the rusty metal net that is supposed to prevent suicides.

Aaron doesn't know Director Hans-Peter Maske, who took up the position four years ago. 'Miss Aaron, Mr Kvist, please sit down.' He speaks quickly, trying to adopt a routine tone, but the tension can be heard in his voice.

Aaron runs her fingers along the arm of the chair in the meeting room.

'Would you like anything to drink?'

'No, thank you.'

'No thanks.'

Maske pours himself a cup of coffee. It smells resinous, bitter, almost metallic. Chrysanthemum. When Aaron turns her head to the left, the smell becomes stronger.

Desk.

'Is there something to celebrate?'

'A promotion. From March I'm going to be in charge of law enforcement in the Senate.'

'Congratulations.'

'Thanks.'

She doesn't like his voice. There's something fake about it, like a smile when you've been insulted, or a blasé mouth concealing bad teeth.

Mask opens a little plastic container of coffee cream. 'Of course we're all very upset about Dr Breuer. Terrible.'

'I'm sure you have an idea of what happened?' Aaron asks.

Powerful overtones enter the words of the director of the institute, giving them an aggressive sound. 'It's not rocket science.'

'Meaning?'

'Boenisch will be transferred to the closed psychiatric institute. Where, in my modest opinion, he should have been for sixteen years.'

Aaron is aware that when he gives this answer Maske is turned not towards her, but towards Niko. She's familiar with that from many conversations. Some people don't see her because Aaron doesn't see them. With others it's thoughtlessness. There have also been some who have sensed that she notices, and do it on purpose, to hurt her.

'Boenisch has a novel about a serial killer and a film on the same subject. I assume that neither of these came from the holdings of your library. How could such a thing get through the postal check? Didn't any of the jailers notice?'

'Would it be asking too much for you not to use that term for our officers? It's discriminating.'

'And would it be asking too much to look at me when you're talking to me?'

'I'm sorry.' He blows into his cup and takes a sip of coffee. She imagines that he licks the rim when he's alone. 'We'll try and trace the paper tail.'

Coarse fabric scrapes. Jeans. Next to Aaron, Niko recrosses his legs. 'Mr Maske, could it be that everyone here was thinking: Boenisch is never going to get out of here anyway?' he asks. 'So it doesn't matter what he watches or reads?'

'I can't say what 655 officers think.'

'Officers who have rules. In other offices, the Finance Office, for example, that mightn't mean much. But here it does. I don't know if that helped your promotion at all.'

Aaron smiles faintly. Guys like Maske are a red rag to Niko. It might be fun to see what would happen if the director irritated him a little more.

'Polemics won't get you anywhere with me.'

'Yeah? That's not how it seems to me.'

Maske brings his cup crashing down.

'You spilled a bit,' Niko says, allowing himself a refill.

'Is it possible that there was a second man in the cell, and left it unnoticed shortly after recreation began?'

Her question is rhetorical. All prisoners wait for the moment when the block is opened. They do deals, run to weight training or yard exercise, dash around, let off steam, join the seething mass along with the officers.

Maske's voice gets a touch higher. 'Hang on. You're trying to suggest that there was a second perpetrator?'

'No. I'm trying to say that Boenisch isn't the perpetrator.'

'Please. That's ridiculous.'

'Why?'

'Have you got a witness?'

Aaron has had enough now. 'Mr Maske, when you come home in the evening, and the streets are dry, but in the morning you look out of the window and there is thick snow on the ground, you know that it's been snowing. Do you need a witness for that?'

'At the time in question there were sixty prisoners on that floor. Perhaps you should question them all,' Maske replies.

Of course he knows the rules by which power and the lack of it are distributed among the prisoners. Regardless of who murdered Melanie Breuer, it's a man you should be afraid of. If there is a witness, he's not about to say anything.

Aaron gets to her feet. 'I want a list of all the prisoners in Block 6. Reasons for their arrest, group behaviour, psychological assessments. By tomorrow, if you would be so kind.'

Maske stays in his chair. His voice turns thin and high. 'Does Miss Aaron have any investigative responsibility?'

Niko gets to his feet as well. 'No. But I will talk to my colleagues from Murder Four, who are working on the case. They'll give you a call.'

'You probably think that because you're from the department you can do anything you like?'

Aaron stops by the door. 'I wonder whether the film and the novel had to pass through the censors. Boenisch could just as easily have got them from a prison officer. So I would also like the names of anyone who had contact with him. Or even better: their personnel files.'

It would be really nice to see Maske's face right now. But it's just as nice to imagine his evening.

Aaron carefully feels her way down the stairs, steps slippery with snow brought in from outside, grateful for the banister. They step into the cold sun. She wants to imagine a blue sky and can't remember what blue looks like.

At twenty-one she completed her studies as best in year, and had nine job offers. She opted for the LKA, the Criminal Police Office in Berlin. Her special abilities were quickly recognised. Only four years later Aaron had to fight for her life with Nikulin's hitman in Moscow.

In that same winter Helmut Runge had a serious car accident. He was revived but died in hospital. In his boot they found the corpse of a woman from Wolfsburg who had been missing for two weeks. On Runge's keyring was a key to locker number three in Kassel station. In it was a suitcase with the fetishes. Hair. Jewellery. Underwear. Toenails. Teeth. The pearl necklace, his Christmas present for the waitress from Delmenhorst, was in there too. Runge had murdered the woman on her fortieth birthday. There were thirteen of them in all, the first ten years before, the last three after Boenisch's sentence. The tourists to whose buried body parts Boenisch had taken the police were among them too. But there was no fetish for the ones in Boenisch's cellar. It was assumed that the two men had met over the internet, which was still outside the law in those days, a place where one was largely unobserved. There was no proof. Boenisch insisted he had killed the women alone.

5.

The journey along the city motorway passes without a glance from Nino, at least none keen enough for her senses. And still not one single question.

Thanks.

The headquarters is on Budapester Strasse in Charlottenburg. The Department belongs neither to the LKA nor to the BKA, and it doesn't appear on any organigram. No one can apply to join. You're recruited.

After the arrest of Igor Nikulin her phone rang. It quickly became clear to her that the man who had asked her for a meeting in the Minister of the Interior was familiar with her career from Police College onwards. Every investigation, judgement, distinction.

Her future boss said: 'We want you.'

'Who is "We"?'

'It's our task to go where the deployment of other forces would be pointless.'

Witness protection, not even entrusted to the BKA.

Hostage rescue operations for which fully equipped SEK would be too conspicuous and too slow. Where the body is the weapon.

Handing over ransom money in kidnappings.

Covert investigations in milieus and groups that are not yet known and still have to be tracked down.

Anti-terrorism through infiltration.

Precision work.

'Of course you will have time to reflect.'

She didn't need it.

Aaron doesn't miss much from her old life. The camaraderie, yes; the solidarity between them, which was only so close because there was no one else who understood them. They were there for each other. When a second woman joined them after three years, Aaron spent a lot of time with her, wanted to help her adjust to a life that no one can prepare you for. She talked to the woman for a long time when she had killed her first person, and knew that there were no words to make it easier.

She became less and less. You get used to it.

Her colleague only stayed for a year and then agreed to be transferred. Aaron doesn't miss the adrenalin. Guns, fine. But it's a consolation that she will never again have to take a person's life.

Only the one. You or him.

Niko comes out on the Kaiserdamm, which is actually a detour. Aaron can tell by the fact that it's uphill. When she collected visitors at Tegel Airport she used to go that way too, because of the panorama.

It didn't happen often. Her mother, once a year. What was Aaron supposed to talk to her about, if the life she led was taboo? They loved each other. But in an hour everything was told. After a few days they were always relieved to part. Still, Aaron was left with an aching feeling at the airport.

Every now and again her two remaining school friends came to visit. They thought she worked for the Fraud Squad. But it was good to fish out the old stories. In 'The Glass Harp' by Truman Capote there are two sentences that describe Aaron: 'I was eleven, then I was sixteen. Though no honours came my way, those were the lovely years.'

Most of all she was pleased to see Mary-Sue, the daughter, the same age as herself, of the guest family Aaron had stayed with for six months in Arizona, in Cayenne, the only town in a seventy-mile radius. There was only colour there, but it had lots of names: crab-tail red, double-bass red, basketball red, clown's-nose red, rubber-raft-rubber red, coral-snake red, tongue-red. Dusty, dirty, swirling, magic red.

There was even 'inner-pussy red' and 'outer-pussy red', and for a seventeen-year-old bumpkin from the Rhineland that was a real shock. Aaron can't help smiling when she remembers.

Blue is gone, but red is still there.

Cayenne was where she first fell properly in love, of course with the quarterback of the high school team. Did they make out behind the shed at Mr Payne's Drugstore? Or in his room when his parents were away? Or in the desert, which they drove into in his father's pickup, which always looked as if it was covered with dust? Somewhere. Did she sleep with him, was he the first? Or was that Tim from the parallel class in Sankt Augustin? Were the two boys similar? Of course. Aaron always liked boys like that, boys who don't boast even though they could. Who are a bit bolshy but still have manners, who work out and know the novels of Max Frisch.

With Mary-Sue from Cayenne she also drove into the city via Kaiserdamm; that was particularly good fun because it was the first time Mary-Sue had been there. Wow! Speer's 'Germania', but the most beautiful axis of Berlin. A broad view over the Tiergarten to the Television Tower, in between the Victory Column with 'Golden Elsa' who would be gleaming in the frostry sunlight right now.

How clearly I can still see it all. And Niko knows me too well.

'Sightseeing tour?' she asks, turning towards him.

'The sky is totally overcast. You can't see anything.'

And for that lie I thank you too.

Aaron's favourite book by Frisch has always been 'Let My Name be Gantenbein'. A man claims to be blind because he thinks that otherwise he won't be able to bear his life. As a blind man he doesn't have to judge anybody, not even himself. That's his liberation. He leaves other people their secrets, because they were what tormented him, the impossibility of ignoring them. That way he can be happy.

On the other hand they expect her to see what sighted people can't, to sense the truth as she alone can. Listen to the noise of lies. They want her to judge. It isn't a liberation for her, it's a lonely prison. But she has one thing in common with Gantenbein: people who have something to hide are afraid of her when they work out that she isn't blind at all.

Perhaps in the end Gantenbein's last words will come true for her. Aaron tries to remember when she last had the feeling: 'I like life.'

Underground car park, diesel, tyre rubber. The building has twenty storeys, but only four are rented by the Department. The others are divided between estate agents, legal offices, insurance agencies. None of their staff, however long they had been employed there, have any idea what happens on those four floors. From the separate area in the underground car park, which has its own entrance and is exclusively at the disposal of the Department, you have to enter a code beside a steel door to access the special lift.

He stops on the second floor. 'Will you go on ahead?' she asks. 'I'll follow you.' No questions. She takes two more floors. Felt carpeted floor, her pumps are useless. Aaron rattles her stick along the doors, finds the right one and opens it a crack.

All the training halls smell the same. Ambition. Rage. Frustration. Humiliation.

This one smells of something else: the memory of Boenisch's cellar. *Fear is good, it keeps you awake.* She started learning karate at the age of eighteen, but it was only because of Boenisch that she learned it *properly*.

Another smell: obsession. Her total will to eliminate any adversary, to be able to control any situation.

Aaron hears the quick commands: 'Chinkuhchi!' Stabilisation of the limbs. 'Kaishu!' Hand open. 'Haishu!' Hand closed. 'Yaze Neko!' Strike, avoid. 'Chikara!' Courage.

By the master's severe corrections she can tell that the Kata is part of preparation for the second Dan. She herself has a black belt in 'Gōjū-ryū', the most effective of the four Japanese styles. Aaron has reached the fifth Dan. To get to the next stage will take as many years as the level of the Dan; for the ninth she would have to be as old as her father. No one has the tenth, because it would mean that you can't make any more progress.

Or as her father said: 'If someone has reached the tenth Dan, he's either spiritually dead or a total idiot.'

Most Olympic fighters have the third Dan. Aaron passed the test for the fifth a year ago, blind.

Don't see, know.

Four times a week she trains on the Neroberg in Wiesbaden. None of the guys from the BKA likes to fight with her. Admittedly, of all the senses, seeing dominates the most, but the cortex, that high-powered processing machine, has focused on new tasks and optimised Aaron's perceptual abilities. Body warmth, breath, draught, vibration of the floor, instinct.

Reliable parameters.

The biggest problem was the lost physical feeling. Even a sighted person can stand on one leg for barely ten seconds with his eyes closed, because the fixed point is missing. For the same reason, many blind people are uncertain in their movements, because they don't know that it's worth training their sense of balance. After countless hours Aaron noticed that her balance, which she had always considered perfect, was at a new level.

She could dance on the tip of one toe.

Punch to the solar plexus. Elbow block. Splits. Hip rotation. Crossing stance. Crescent kick. Tiger. Inner knife hand. Double strike.

The Bushido says: everything is preordained and has its rightness. The warrior who recognises this liberates himself. Even from the desire to live at any price.

The previous evening she bled herself dry on the Neroberg. At ten o'clock she was drinking beer in the men's changing room. She always showers at home anyway, and she doesn't learn anything from watching the boys. Then Boenisch snuggled up to the corpse in the spoons position and was happy.

Aaron is being observed. She feels that it's Niko, before he pulls her to him. She tries to defend herself, but also, even though it's only a hug, to lie to herself.

She can't.

No member of the Department has ever left a wounded comrade behind. She's the only one.

Aaron broke the seventh virtue of the Bushido: 'Chugi'. Loyalty.

Now she is a blind samurai who has received his punishment.

She pulls away from Niko. 'Let's go down.'

On the second floor she is overwhelmed by sounds. Telephones, countless footsteps that she can't assign to anyone. Men whispering, a vacuum cleaner. She likes rooms that she can map, the clear definition of all sounds: the creak of old parquet flooring, the squeaking of a door in the wind, the quivering of water in a glass, the quiet heartbeat of reflection.

But she recognises Ulf Pavlik. Not by his voice, by his gait. When he was in his early forties, he had a motorbike accident and lost his left calf. He went on taking his carbon prosthesis to the limit. *Does he still have the hayabusa?*

He makes it easier for her and punches her on the arm. 'Looking good.'

She grins. 'You too.'

Two voices that ring a bell. Fricke and Wolter?

'Hey Aaron, put on weight?'

'Around the eyes.'

Her laughter, which follows the moment of shock, lets Aaron know that Niko hasn't told them exactly what happened. They never got to read the report from Internal Affairs. For these men, Aaron was a machine and Barcelona was just bad luck, kismet.

But she knows.

The sixth virtue: 'Meiyo', honour.

Lost.

Fricke taps her shoulder. 'Got to go, see you tonight?'

'I've got a lot of work on.'

'It's Pavlik's birthday.'

Damn it, I forgot.

'He's turning fifty. We got together and we're giving him a Zimmer frame.'

'Idiots,' Pavlik replies. 'I don't need a walking aid, I need a wheelchair.'

She holds out a hand to him. 'Come here, old man.'

Aaron hugs him; his latissimus dorsi as stiff as a trampoline, his upper arms and shoulders tough as iron; you have to be like that as a precision sniper, to absorb the recoil. Not a single gram of fat, peak training. At that moment she knows that he's been thinking about her a lot as well, and whispers: 'You're a darling.'

'We need to talk. Roof terrace,' he whispers back.

Pavlik goes with the others, and only now does she notice that Niko has gone too. That's one of the things she hates most: that people disappear from one second to the next, dissolving into nothing.

Aaron stands there not knowing what to do, having lost her bearings when she hugged Pavlik, and wonders whether the lift is down the corridor to the left or the right. She feels for the wall. Runs her hand along it. Touches smooth stone.

The memorial plaque for the men who were killed.

Aaron's fingers slide over the engraved letters, read the names. Seventeen comrades. For a few heartbeats she lingers over four of them. Three have been added, strangers.

Suddenly Niko is back. 'Jenny – my boss – Inan Demirci.'

'Hello, Miss Aaron.' The voice is relatively low in her throat, almost free of tension and at the same time very controlled.

Aaron holds out her hand. Demirci's fingers are long, slender, firm. 'Nice to meet you.'

'I suggest we go to my office.'

Niko takes Aaron by the arm, but Demirci says, 'Thank you Mr Kvist, your presence is not required.'