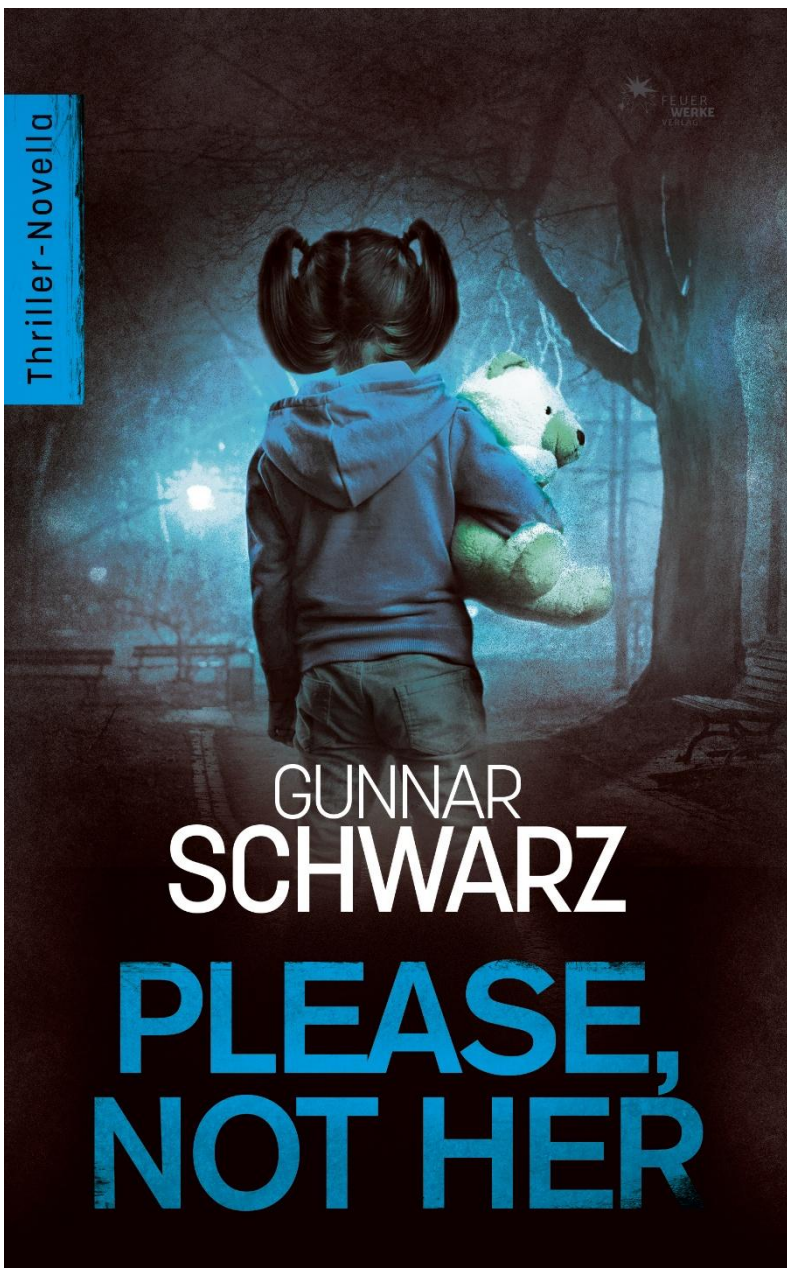


Thriller-Novella

FEUER
WERKE



GUNNAR
SCHWARZ
**PLEASE,
NOT HER**

About the Book

"Are those feet hanging up there? In pink socks? Oh my God, is that a child?"

A murmur ripples through the crowd as a window opens above the golden clock tower in the town square and small feet in pink socks appear. Moments later, the rest of the body comes into view and is shoved out of the window by a rope. The crowd is paralyzed with shock. The police are called.

When Detective Theo Sammers arrives at the scene a short time later to calm the frantic crowd, the blood freezes in his veins. Because what he sees is all too familiar to him...

The Author

I couldn't have done it any other way. Born in the late seventies into a family of writers, I was, in a sense, already on my path to becoming an author.

Inspired by my parents and sisters, I started writing short stories as a teenager and developed a remarkably versatile writing style. The genre where I feel most at home is the thriller. The desire to create a tangible sense of suspense with my own words drives me to work on my stories every day.

When I leave my desk, it's usually for long walks with my dog. The quiet of rural northern Germany inspires me and gives me space for new ideas. I enjoy the peace and seclusion. And although I'm neither shy nor unattractive, I've decided to keep my face hidden—for now.

Before You Start Reading

A story changes when it travels — but its tension remains.

This one began in German and now speaks English.

I've done my best to keep its edge, its rhythm, its pace.

If you find a line that doesn't sit quite right, please let me know at feedback@gunnarschwarz.de — your feedback truly matters.

Now, thanks for reading – and enjoy the story.

Please, Not Her

A Short Thriller

Gunnar Schwarz

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Prologue

This is how it will happen.

I will watch.

And *he* will pay.

I've chosen the grand golden musical clock at the old market hall for my revenge; it has always been the city's most iconic landmark. It will serve as a fitting memorial. Even today, it chimes every day at noon. On the stroke of twelve, the little gears begin to turn as the Nibelungenlied plays, filling the square below with music. A handful of locals and scores of tourists will stand in awe of the spectacle. My masterpiece! Tomorrow is the big day. It's a Friday in the middle of June. As always on days like this, the market square will be packed.

I can already see it. A soft murmur will ripple through the crowd as soon as both golden hands reach twelve and the gong sounds. A small window will open. At first, no one will notice. Then come the first confused glances. Locals will wonder what's going on, while the tourists won't see anything unusual—at least, not right away.

That will change the moment the two tiny feet appear on the narrow windowsill. The murmur of the crowd will grow louder; people will whisper, question, and point. *Are those feet? Pink socks? Good God, is that a child? What's happening?*

They'll wonder if it might be some kind of performance they hadn't heard about. Or perhaps an artist's protest? What else could it be?

Then everything will become clearer. The little legs will follow the feet, then the rest. It will fall and fall, but it won't hit the ground. A rope will stop it. They will gasp, women will shield their

children's eyes in shock, some will press their hands to their mouths and look away.

And then... then they will call the police.

Chapter 1

Detective Theo Sammers was not in a good mood. Actually, he was in a shitty mood, as was always the case whenever he'd just finished a phone call with his ex. So his daughter, Lejla, wouldn't be spending this weekend with him. Of course not. That was his punishment. Last weekend had been *his*, but he'd had to work and had asked to reschedule. His ex had played the part of generosity itself, only to change her mind a few days later. Tough luck, Theo; you're unreliable, Theo; it doesn't work like that, Theo.

Theo pushed open the door to his office, slumped into his chair, ran his hands over his face, and let out a sigh. When exactly had his life taken such a downward turn?

A throat was cleared softly, snapping him out of his thoughts. He looked up and found a young woman standing in the doorway.

"Uh... hello," she said, raising her arm and smiling shyly.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

"Well... uh... in a manner of speaking, yes, I mean...," she began, entering his office, nervously kneading her hands, looking around, and appearing altogether extremely jittery.

"Do you need help?"

"Yes!"

She paused her movement, extended her arm, and pointed a finger at Theo. He raised his eyebrows and studied the striking figure before him. A young woman, maybe in her early thirties, small, delicate, with a body more girlish than mature. She had large doe eyes that seemed almost out of place in her thin face with its high cheekbones, and she was staring at Theo expectantly. Theo slowly straightened up.

"Well... maybe if you tell me what this is about, I can get you to the right department..."

"Coffee machine," she blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

"The..." she turned around, looked toward the door, and gestured with her thumb over her shoulder. "The coffee machine is flashing, and I don't know my way around it. But Mario called; he's coming in soon and wants coffee, and I..."

"Mario? My boss, Mario?"

"Our boss, Mario."

The young woman turned to Theo and gave him a beaming smile.

"Sorry, I think we need to start over. Who are you again?"

"Jo. Jo Peters. Actually, Johanna, but I can't stand the name; it sounds so old. Way too old. Well, my mother wanted me to be named after her mother, and I..."

Theo raised his hand to stem the flow of her words. He didn't actually want to know that much detail.

"And... you work here?"

"Yes. Mm-hm. Since today, to be precise."

"As...?"

"Office clerk."

"Irene is our office clerk."

"Irene is on sick leave. And by the looks of it, she'll be transitioning straight into retirement."

Theo blinked, irritated. He'd been at this precinct for fifteen years, and for those same fifteen years, Irene had been the clerk here. She couldn't just...

"Look... I'm happy to explain everything, but..." she said.

"The coffee machine, right. Come on."

Theo stepped outside, and Jo followed him. The precinct was empty—some colleagues were out on patrol, several were on call, and the rest had simply slipped away for an early weekend. At the moment, it was quiet. Unusually quiet. There were phases like this, but they never lasted very long. Theo went into the small kitchenette, headed for the coffee machine, and began pulling various levers and pressing buttons.

"So Mario hired you, did he? Today?"

"In a way. I mean, we talked about it over the weekend. Mario is our neighbor, you know. Well, now he's *my* neighbor."

Theo turned around and looked at Jo in bewilderment. She talked a lot. A lot, and very fast. Too many words were pouring out of her small mouth in too short a time.

"I've recently divorced," she added hastily, as if he had asked.

"I see. My condolences."

"Not necessary; I should have seen it coming. The marriage was a disaster from the start. We didn't have any luck with kids, either. I should have married Stephan."

Theo stared at Jo with furrowed brows. She seemed to read his warning glance correctly and pressed her lips together.

"You realize it's somewhat difficult to follow your stories, right?" he asked.

Jo blinked. Her lips formed an almost perfect O. Theo pushed off from the counter, grabbed the cup, and thrust it into Jo's hand.

"Here. Your coffee. Welcome to the team."

Theo was about to head back to his office when his phone rang. A glance at the display told him his partner was calling. Theo answered.

"What's up, Alex?"

"You're not going to believe this."

"What's going on?"

"Some lunatic has hung a doll from the golden clock. People out here are running around like headless chickens."

"I'm not following you."

"There's a doll hanging from the golden clock!"

"A doll?"

"Yeah, some kind of... look, just get down here and see for yourself. We're not quite sure what we're supposed to do. I mean... the thing is really weird. But people want to file a report. The only question is—a report for what?"

"Disturbing the peace?"

"Because of a doll??"

Theo sighed. He had been looking forward to a quiet day in the office with boring paperwork. So much for that.

"I'm on my way."

Theo hung up and headed for the exit. Clicking footsteps followed him, and he flinched.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?" called Jo, hurrying after him.

Theo turned around. Jo had set the cup down randomly on one of the desks in the open-plan office; half the coffee had already spilt, forming a trail of droplets from the kitchen to her desk. Her small hands clutched her phone as she stared at the screen, then back at Theo.

"Out on a call."

"Can I come along?"

"What? No! What makes you think... listen. Sit down at your desk. Familiarize yourself with the PC. Mario hired you on his own authority, so let him train you. Got it? See ya."

He turned and tried to make his escape, but the clicking footsteps followed him.

"I just read about it! Totally crazy, right?"

Now, Theo did turn back around.

"You read *what* exactly?"

"You're going to the golden clock, right?"

Theo's eyebrows shot up. Did this woman, who triggered a spontaneous association with Bambi in him, also have psychic abilities?

She looked at him with large, innocent eyes, then raised her arm and held out her phone.

"Set up a Google Alert for stuff like this. Besides, it's already all over the media. Social media, I mean. There's even a hashtag that's..."

Theo raised his hand to stop the new torrent of words.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" was all he could think of to say.

"Uh, no. I'm actually quite good with this stuff. You learn a thing or two about spying and stalking when you've been married to a lying asshole."

Jo flashed Theo an innocent smile. But he had a nagging suspicion that there was far more behind Jo's delicate facade. He just didn't know yet whether that would be an advantage or a very, very big disadvantage.

"So... can I come along? Play cop for a bit?"

"No!" Theo barked at her. "Sit down and learn how to do office work here. Goodbye!"

He turned once more and left the room at a near run to prevent this strange person from bombarding him with any more questions. How did Mario even get the idea to hire a new clerk without talking to his team first? And besides, a position like that had to be advertised. You couldn't just hire some acquaintance or neighbor.

"Weird day today..." Theo muttered, got into his car, and drove off.

The golden clock was located at the market square, about a seven-minute drive from the precinct. The square was separated from the main road by an archway. In emergencies, service vehicles could drive through the arch, but Theo was fairly certain that a hanging doll didn't justify such an emergency. He parked the car and got out. His colleagues, Alex and Roland, stood by the archway; they saw Theo and came toward him.

"Well, what have we got? How are the chickens doing?"

"We managed to calm them down and dispersed the crowd as best we could. Two elderly ladies refuse to be waved off; they're insistent on filing a report," Alex answered.

"Okay. Let's talk to them. Hey, tell me, what's the deal with this new employee?" Theo asked and received a suggestive smile from both colleagues.

"No idea. I thought Mario had talked to you about it," Alex said.

"No, he didn't. She was just standing in my office earlier."

"Yeah, I met her this morning. Pretty little thing. Single."

Theo rolled his eyes.

"Can you think about something other than getting laid for once?" Theo muttered, elbowing Alex in the ribs, and Alex laughed. "But seriously, Mario can't just hire someone new like that. The position has to be advertised," Theo struggled to keep the conversation on track.

"She says he owed her one, and she—to quote her—grabbed him by the balls because she desperately needs a job since her asshole ex-husband—again, her words—refuses to pay her anything. She talks a hell of a lot," Alex explained.

"Way too much," Theo and Roland confirmed in unison.

"It's unbearable," Theo added. "Okay, let's go see the spectacle."

Theo crossed the square. You could see the doll even from a distance. It appeared to be about three feet tall and hung from a rope fastened to something behind the open window. As the three of them moved closer, Theo realized it was some kind of straw doll with its legs stuffed into pink socks. The torso was covered with a pink T-shirt. Standing directly underneath were two elderly ladies. One was on the phone, gesturing vigorously with her free hand; the other stared up at the doll as if frozen.

"So those are the ones?" Theo asked, nodding toward the two elderly women.

"Yep. The peanut gallery who wants to file a report," Alex confirmed.

"Over a doll?"

"Over a hanging doll."

Theo continued toward the scene, squinting against the sunlight for a better look.

"Well, I mean, it's a remarkably tasteless prank, but I don't think..."

He froze. Suddenly, the sight seemed to steal his breath away. His hands curled into fists, his eyes fixed on the doll.

"What's wrong? Theo? Theo, what is it?"

Alex appeared beside him, but his words only half reached Theo. Someone was shaking him.

"Theo!"

"The... the T-shirt."

"Yeah. It's pink. What about it? You look like you've seen a ghost. Theo!"

Another shake. Theo's mouth opened, but the words wouldn't come out. He stood there, motionless, barely able to breathe, still staring at the doll in the pink T-shirt.

Someone pinched his upper arm, jolting him out of his trance.

"What the hell happened to you?" Alex asked loudly, stepping in front of Theo and blocking his view of the doll.

Theo lowered his gaze and looked Alex square in the eyes.

"The T-shirt..."

"Yeah, you said that. What about it?"

"It... it belongs to my daughter."

Chapter 2

His hands were shaking so violently that he could barely pull his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Wait a second! You're overreacting, Theo!" Alex shouted, running after him. "How do you even know that T-shirt belongs to your daughter? You can buy stuff like that anywhere!"

Theo stopped in his tracks, glared at Alex, and yelled,

"No! You can't. Because we made that T-shirt together. In preschool, during craft time, this year for Easter! It's pink, with a purple unicorn on it. Not a particularly pretty unicorn, because we drew it ourselves. And the unicorn has a name written next to it in bright golden letters: Sparkle."

"Sparkle?"

"Yes! Dammit, that's my daughter's T-shirt! I have to call Bine right now."

"Yeah. Okay. Do that. In the meantime, we'll make sure that thing is taken down."

Theo wasn't even listening anymore. With trembling fingers, he dialed his ex's number.

"Sabine?"

"She's not coming to your place, Theo, I already told you."

"That's not why I'm calling! Is Lejla with you?"

"Of course not. She's at preschool. My God, you really have no clue about anything. If you just..."

"Shut up, Bine, this is important, please! Are you sure she's there? When did you drop her off?"

"At eight-thirty, like every day. Theo, what's going on?"

Now, Bine sounded alarmed. For a split second, Theo felt a flicker of satisfaction, but then he remembered the hanging doll, and his stomach turned into a block of ice.

"It's probably nothing, just a sick joke," Theo tried to reassure both himself and Bine. Without success.

"What's going on, Theo??"

Theo explained what had happened. She didn't respond immediately, appearing to weigh the possibilities.

"Maybe it isn't her shirt."

"Of course it's her shirt, Bine, I know that shirt, I made it with her, it means everything to me! I know it!"

"Okay! I'm sure there's an explanation."

"Yes. Yes, you're right. Fine. I'm calling the preschool right now."

"Okay. Do that. Call me back immediately, alright?"

"Yeah, of course. Bye."

Theo ran back to his car while dialing the number. It rang several times, and when no one answered, a recording picked up, featuring a delightfully friendly voice asking him to wait a moment. The wait would be softened by background music.

"For God's sake!" Theo cursed, started the car, and sped off, holding the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear, listening to the instrumental version of a lullaby.

"This is unbelievable," he muttered, just as someone picked up the receiver.

"Annaberg Municipal Preschool, Liese speaking, how can I help you?"

"Liese, hi, it's Theo Sammers, Lejla's father."

"Ah, yes, hello. Go ahead."

"I... is Lejla there? I need to speak to her for a second."

"Yes, of course. The playgroup is outside right now. Hold on a moment."

The hold music kicked in for the second time, and Theo struggled to keep his nerves in check enough to steer the car safely through traffic. He was only ten minutes away from the preschool, but he needed to know that his daughter was okay. She just had to be okay.

"Please, please, let everything be alright," he whispered.

Maybe it was all just a misunderstanding. A stupid prank. Someone was playing him for a fool. Someone...

"Mr. Sammers?"

"Yes! I'm here. Is she coming?"

"I... I can't find her at the moment. I'll check with Susi right away; maybe they're in the restroom. One moment."

Theo slammed on the brakes and stared at his phone as if it were a ticking time bomb. He hung up, slapped the siren on the roof, and roared off.

Chapter 3

A few minutes later, Theo pulled up in front of the preschool with his tires screeching. His heart was pounding in his throat, and he had to use every ounce of strength to keep from collapsing. This had to be a mistake! It *had* to be a mistake. Anything else was unthinkable. A nightmare. A horror trip. A Stephen King novel.

Theo shook his head, took a breath, and ran up the stairs to the entrance, taking them two at a time. He burst into the lobby and stopped dead when he saw three distraught faces. One teacher was sobbing into a tissue, another had an arm around her shoulder, and the third stared into space with a vacant look in her red-rimmed eyes.

"Talk to me," Theo demanded in a flat voice.

"You... we don't know what happened, she..." the woman with the tissue stammered.

"What happened?" Theo screamed.

He stepped toward the three of them, and they retreated in unison. The woman who had been comforting her sobbing colleague raised her arms defensively.

"Please, calm down. We're doing everything we can to..."

"Everything? You're doing everything? Where is my daughter?!"

"You need to sit down, Mr. Sammers, and then we'll talk. All right?"

Nothing was all right. He pushed past the three women, crossed the hall, passed the four playrooms, and kicked open the door to the spacious backyard. Forty children played out here—ten per small group.

Thirty-nine, Theo corrected himself mentally and buried his face in his hands.

"Mr. Sammers, Theo, please. Listen."

"What happened? I want to know exactly what happened, now!"

"Sit down. Here. All right. We hardly let her out of our sight, you must ..."

"Hardly? HARDLY?!"

"Please, don't yell at me. That won't help anything now. So... what happened? Lejla was in the back of the play kitchen with Iris and Marie, in the wooden playhouse where the toy stove is. They're always there. Susi was with them the whole time, wasn't she, Susi?"

Susi, the sobbing woman who was currently pressing a fresh tissue to her face, nodded in agony.

"I ... I was sitting in the house. With the children. The whole time!"

She broke into tears again and turned away.

"From the look of it, Lejla wanted to go gather some ingredients for the dolls' tea. She went out of the house and over to the bushes back there. They're not even ten feet from the house."

Theo stared at the woman before him accusingly, feeling the anger rise in him as his cheeks began to glow. His fingers clenched. He wanted to hit something, kick something, do anything, preferably wake up. Because none of this could possibly be real, right? Whoever was responsible for this would pay.

"Look, I understand that you're beside yourself, but it doesn't help any of us if you lose your cool. Okay? We're calling the police."

"I *am* the police, damn it! You call my ex-wife; I'll notify the precinct. In the meantime, you round up every person who has been here at the preschool today. Clear? Everyone! I want to speak with every single person. Right now!"

"I ... uh, yes, of course, of course. We'll do that. Thank you."

Theo turned away, slumped into a chair, and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. This was all a nightmare. It *had* to be a nightmare! Things like this didn't happen in real life.

"No, things like this don't happen," he muttered as he dialed the precinct's number.

Except that they did. No one knew that better than a detective. It just hadn't happened to *him* before. But out there, in reality, things like this happened all the time.

"Hello?" a voice chirped in his ear after five rings when someone finally picked up.

"Jo, is that you?"

"Yes. Who's calling, please?"

"Theo Sammers. I need another patrol car right away ..."

He glanced around briefly and saw that Alex and Roland had followed him and were already busy bringing structure to the situation.

"To the Annaberg Municipal Preschool. Alex is already here."

"Alex?"

Theo rolled his eyes.

"Unit Three! Unit Three is already here! Send me another."

"What happened, Theo?"

"Just take care of it, will you?" Theo snapped into the phone and hung up.

He had no desire to inform Jo, nor to listen to questions about the situation in general or his state of mind in particular. He had to act—right now.

His colleague, Alex, who was speaking with the preschool director, gestured for Theo to come over.

"What's the status? Do we have a plan?"

"Well, the usual protocol for a possible child abduction. And Theo ...? You can't be part of this, you know that perfectly well."

"What?? Of course I'm part of it."

"No, you're too involved. I've already spoken with Mario. You cannot participate in the investigation. You're taking the Lercher case until further notice."

"Are you all insane? I don't give a shit what the protocol says, I won't stop looking for my daughter until I find her!"

"Fine. But you'll do it without a badge and without a gun. You'll do it as Theo Sammers, the father, otherwise Mario will personally lock you up."

Theo looked away and pressed his lips together. Yes, he knew the protocol; of course, he did. Just as a doctor is forbidden from performing surgery on their own relatives, police officers are forbidden from investigating cases that affect them personally. These rules had their merits; there were good reasons for them, reasons Theo had always understood. Until now. He'd be damned if he'd obey. He would not rest until he could hold Lejla in his arms again. He just had to be careful about what he did, who he did it with, and who he brought on board.

"Tell me you understand me."

"I understand," Theo replied, looking Alex firmly in the eye. That wasn't a lie. Theo understood. He just wasn't going to act on it.

"Great. So, what I wanted to ask: Lejla wouldn't happen to have a cell phone?"

"Of course not. She's four."

"Other four-year-olds already have..." the preschool director began, but was smart enough not to finish that sentence when she caught Theo's icy stare.

"Okay, so tracking is out of the question," Alex said.

"What's the next move? Who's in charge?"

"I am. Mario assigned the case to me. We're interviewing everyone and checking for any surveillance cameras."

"There's nothing out back. It's a quiet street, a row of houses, then fields."

"But at the entrance and exit of the housing development behind the preschool, there's a grocery store and a bank. A team is already on its way. We'll check those immediately. Theo?"

"Yeah?"

Alex grabbed Theo by the arm and pulled him into a quiet corner.

"Listen, I'm saying what we both already know: this isn't a coincidence. Lejla was targeted—because of her parents, because

it's about you or about Bine. Anything else makes no sense. This tasteless staging ... it was a provocation. A *personal* provocation. So you think long and hard about who your enemies are, okay?"

"Are you kidding me? In fifteen years with the CID, I've probably accumulated two hundred enemies. How ..."

"Great, then make a list. Who has a grudge against you? Who's still in prison, who's already been released? Everyone, okay? Professional, private, criminals, saints. I want a complete list. Theo? You have to keep your head now, do you understand? I know it's hard. I have kids myself, I feel for you. But losing it doesn't help anyone. Go outside, run a lap, go scream in the woods, whatever. But then you come back, pull yourself together, and compile that list. Got it?"

Theo nodded.

Alex slapped him firmly on the shoulder, turned around, and got to work. Theo retreated to the terrace. His colleagues were in the process of gathering everyone who had been at the preschool today. They would interview everyone. Someone had to have seen something.

Theo's gaze fell on the large playhouse at the back of the garden. He headed straight for it. The yard was almost cleared; the children had been rounded up and taken inside, and the teachers were with them. Still, Theo sensed a mumble of voices. He went behind the playhouse and was relieved to find that Alex had already taken care of forensics. They were photographing, examining, sweeping, and bagging evidence for all they were worth. Theo's eyes widened when he saw what had captured his colleagues' attention: a large hole cut into the six-foot chain-link fence—large enough for a child to walk through, large enough for an adult to pass through, bending over.

Theo looked away, hot tears springing to his eyes. Exhausted, he leaned against the playhouse so the forensics people couldn't see him.

He'd had that talk with Lejla! Hadn't he? Of course, he had. *Don't get into cars with strangers, Lejla, it's dangerous.* They had talked about it. But... Lejla was four. You could tell a four-year-old a lot, but a stranger could too.

Theo closed his eyes. Hot rage rose within him. Rage that the preschool was surrounded by a chain-link fence instead of a wall. Rage at the preschool teachers' inability to watch over his daughter. Rage at his ex, Bine, who had insisted on *this* specific preschool—it had to be this one and no other, because of its good reputation, the location, and the excellent, well-trained staff. Wonderful!

"Shit!" he cursed, raising his arm and slamming his fist against the playhouse.

Then he turned away and stormed back to the terrace. He had to do something. Right now.

Chapter 4

Jo sat in the car, looking around uncertainly. She wondered if she should touch up her lipstick, but decided against it. This wasn't the same social circle she used to know. No one cared how she looked. She took a deep breath and stepped out, shoulders squared, chin tilted up with confidence. She had traded her old life for a new one—by necessity. Now she had to live with the consequences.

"Damn it!" she cursed as her high heels crunched on the gravel covering the driveway toward the preschool.

Without further ado, she pulled off her shoes and walked up the stairs barefoot. Once she reached the entrance hall, she was met with a scene that looked almost apocalyptic. The large hall was swarming with children, adults, uniformed officers and plainclothes detectives. Some children were crying, a few people were scurrying around frantically, and at the other end of the hall, Theo Sammers was getting yelled at by her neighbor and new boss, Mario Brühl.

"Oh, wow," she muttered and entered the hall, careful to stay out of everyone's way and avoid drawing attention.

Maybe her new life wasn't so bad after all, Jo thought. At the very least, it was a lot more exciting right here and now than her old life, where she'd spent all day sitting in her downtown duplex waiting for her husband to come home and admire her looks, her passionately prepared dinner, or her cleaning skills (which he almost never did anyway).

She waited until Mario, face beet-red, finished with Theo and disappeared. Then she hurried across the hall and followed Theo Sammers outside.

"Uh, hello? You? Theo?"

Theo turned around and winced when he saw Jo standing before him, holding her high-heeled pumps in one hand and a package wrapped in newspaper in the other.

"What the hell are you doing here? How did you even get here?"

"Officer Samuel was kind enough to give me a lift."

Theo rolled his eyes. Jo knew what he was thinking—that Samuel was barely in his early twenties and had been easily charmed by the pretty new colleague. And Theo was right.

"Officer Samuel? Ms.... what was your name again?"

"Peters. Jo Peters. That's my maiden name, I..."

Theo held up his hand, and Jo cut herself off immediately.

" Ms. Peters, you seem to be having trouble grasping this, so I'm going to say it as clearly as possible: we, you and I, are *not* colleagues. You and Samuel are also *not* colleagues. You are *not* a police officer, and you have no business being here."

" Yes, I'm well aware of that, Boss."

"I'm also not your... okay, never mind."

" I just wanted to bring you something. I heard what happened."

" Of course you did."

" Here."

She held the package out to him. Theo Sammers seemed to hesitate for a moment, so Jo decided to take a step toward him and press the package against his stomach.

" There, just take it."

A sigh, a brief roll of the eyes, and then he had it in his hand. He pulled back the newspaper, and when he saw what was inside, his hands began to tremble slightly.

" I found that picture in your office. Your daughter is very sweet. You're going to keep that with you now, and every time doubt or anger rises up in you, you look at this picture. Okay?"

Theo's mouth fell open, but he said nothing. He stared silently at the photo.

" You have to keep a cool head and keep hope alive. This will help you do that."

When there was still no reaction, Jo turned away from him.

" Thank you," she heard a quiet whisper behind her.

"You're welcome. Tell me, why are those two children staring at you so warily?"

Jo and Theo were standing on the terrace, but the glass sliding door was wide open, and some of the children had been seated on small wooden benches by the teachers. Two of them were huddling together and looking at Theo as if he had just told them that Santa Claus didn't exist.

"Uh... a little misunderstanding," muttered Theo, who had now stepped beside Jo.

"Does that little misunderstanding happen to have anything to do with Mario's red face? He looks like smoke is about to come out of his ears."

"I didn't stick to protocol, that's all."

"You're not allowed to work the case, am I right?"

"You're quite sharp."

Jo shrugged.

"I like to read. Thrillers and things like that. You learn a lot."

"Aha, I'm sure you do."

Jo ignored the ironic undertone. People often spoke to her like that. No one had ever taken her seriously. Her appearance was just too... sweet? Cute? They underestimated her. That was their mistake and her great advantage. She turned to Theo and said:

"So, what now? Are you going to sit in the corner and twiddle your thumbs?"

"I questioned a couple of children, but... it didn't go well."

"Well, if you looked at those kids with the same expression you've been giving me for most of our encounters so far, I'm not surprised. And looking around... I mean, you guys do look a little bit intimidating, seriously. These are small children, not petty criminals you're subjecting to an interrogation."

"Thank you, Dr. Psychologist. And what do you suggest?"

"Finesse."

"You're forbidden from participating just as much as I am, but why do I even bother..."

Jo was already on her way. She crouched in front of the two little girls, who were still looking at Theo fearfully, and smiled at them kindly.

"Hi there, sweeties. Are your parents not here yet?"

A shake of the head.

"Everything is so exciting today, isn't it? I bet you're in the mood for something sweet now. At least that's how I always feel when I'm wound up. I need some candy."

"We're not allowed to have snacks before dinner."

"Oh, nonsense! On a day like today? Of course you can. I'm sure no one would mind."

Jo plopped down on the floor, tucked her legs in, and produced two fruit candies from her bag, which she handed to the children. Then she took out two more and held one out to Theo. He shook his head.

Jo shrugged and said:

"Don't look at me like that. I always have these on me."

The children popped the sweets into their mouths with wide eyes, and Jo did the same. For a short while, they all chewed blissfully, then Jo handed the children two more candies.

"Are you in the same group as Lejla?"

A nod.

"What are your names, anyway?"

"Iris."

"Marie."

"Oh, those are such pretty names! And are you friends with Lejla?"

A nod.

" You don't need to worry, you know? I know everything is a bit strange here right now, but that's just how adults are. They're always making a fuss."

Reserved giggling.

" Did you play with Lejla today? Outside in the garden? It was a really beautiful summer day today; I'm sure you played some great games, right?"

" We made tea. With leaves and flowers."

" And Aunt Susi showed us that you can suck nectar out of the purple clover flowers."

" That's wonderful! I used to do that all the time. And was Lejla making tea too?"

" Yes."

" Mhm."

" And where did you get the cool ingredients for the tea?"

" Lejla went to get them. Over there."

Iris jumped up, ran to the terrace door, and pointed her little finger toward the thick bushes next to the playhouse.

" All by herself?"

" Mhm."

" How brave of her."

Jo shot a side glance at Theo and saw that he seemed almost ready to burst with impatience. She waved her hand to signal him to move back a few steps because little Marie still wouldn't take her eyes off him.

" How about we..." Jo began, but stopped when she felt someone tugging at her blouse. She looked down into Marie's big, round blue eyes.

Jo knelt down and said:

" Yes, honey? What is it? Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

A shake of the head.

Then Marie took Jo's hand and led her outside. She motioned for her to come very close and began to whisper in Jo's ear.

" I have a secret."

" Oh, how cool," Jo whispered back.

" I'm not allowed to tell anyone."

" Well, if it's a secret, then it's certainly right not to tell."

" But..."

Jo pressed her lips together expectantly. Her gut told her this wasn't trivial, but something of great significance.

" Does it have something to do with Lejla?" Jo asked carefully, still keeping her voice to a whisper.

Marie nodded slowly, staring at the ground.

" Well, Lejla is your friend, right? If she told you a secret, it's great that you want to protect it so bravely."

A shake of the head.

" Not her."

" Hmm?"

" It's not her secret."

" Oh, no?"

" The secret was from the man."

Jo's heart rate quickened, but she tried not to let her excitement show.

" And the man said you should keep his secret to yourself?"

" Mhm."

" You know, if it was a man you didn't know at all—if he was a stranger—then you don't have to keep his secrets so strictly. That only applies to friends and family, you see?"

Now Marie raised her head and looked at Jo with wide eyes.

" I wanted to check on Lejla because she was taking so long, and we were waiting for the ingredients."

" Of course."

" But she wasn't there. So I went after her. But she wasn't there either. And then I turned around, and there was a man at the fence. And his car was there too. And he slammed the door. And I got really scared and wanted to run away, but then I got stuck on a branch, and it snapped. And then he turned around."

Marie was speaking faster and faster, no longer whispering.

" Oh dear, I'm so sorry you got such a fright."

" Mhm. Because there was a hole in the fence. And that's dangerous, right?"

" Yes, you're right about that."

" And then the man saw me and leaned down and put his finger to his mouth and went 'shhh.' And he grinned, too. And then he said I mustn't tell anyone he was there; that it's our little secret. Because he has a surprise for all of us. For the whole daycare. For Aunt Susi and Aunt Sarah and everyone... he knew everyone. Their names and everything. So I thought..."

Marie's lips began to tremble, and Jo raised her arm to stroke Marie's head.

" You don't need to worry at all, do you hear me, Marie? It was very, very important that you told me that, okay? That was great. You're super brave. I'm going to tell everyone. Your parents, Aunt Susi, and your friends. They'll be so impressed."

Marie's lips finally curled into a faint smile.

" Really?" she asked hesitantly.

" Of course. You're our little hero, you know? But do you know what would be even better? If you could tell this story to the nice men from the police, too."

Marie's eyes widened, her gaze shifting to Theo, who stood in the doorway, watching them. Then she began to shake her head wildly.

Jo shot Theo a reproachful look.

"Oh, don't worry, you don't have to tell the 'scary' man anything. I'll find you a cool police officer. One with a uniform. How does

that sound? Maybe you can even sit in his car for a minute and turn on the siren. Does that sound cool?"

Jo took Marie by the hand and walked inside with her. As she passed Theo, she winked and said:

" Finesse! *That* is how it's done."

Chapter 5

Theo Sammers paced the meeting room like a caged animal. Mario had threatened to throw him out by force if necessary. Theo had replied that he'd like to see him try. So now he was being tolerated—provided he essentially kept his mouth shut and just listened.

Theo could tell that Mario felt sorry for him; after all, they'd known each other for over ten years. Theo had nowhere else to go, and if he retreated to his apartment now, he'd go out of his mind.

And Bine? She was a wreck. She was being looked after by psychological emergency services. Theo couldn't call his parents; they would react just as helplessly as Bine. What else was he supposed to do? He had put together the damn list Alex had asked for. There were about fifty names on it, and Theo wasn't even sure if the list was complete. And what about Bine? Did Bine have enemies? Possibly. She was a workaholic who had enjoyed a meteoric career at an advertising agency, and she'd surely stepped on a few colleagues' toes along the way. She would also be asked to compile a list. Theo fervently hoped that Bine would calm down somewhat soon. Every minute, every second that passed, his panic grew.

"We're assigning tasks now and checking the names on Theo's list. That's our only lead at the moment. There's no video footage, which is a real blow. The preschool has a camera at the main entrance and one in the hall, but none at the back. All we have is little Marie's statement."

"And that is worth jack shit!" Theo exclaimed, earning an icy glare from Mario.

"Well, children make poor witnesses; we all know that."

And how, Theo thought. Marie had spoken to a police officer and a child psychologist, but all they'd gotten was "tall man, dark jacket, funny nose, dark car." From little Marie's perspective, there wasn't much else to say. They were unsure whether it even made sense to create a composite sketch from those details. They'd probably try it anyway. You couldn't underestimate children. But a professional

had to handle it. Someone who could sit down with Marie and create the sketch in a way that allowed her to cooperate. God, the child was only six years old! Theo's hope sank into an abyss.

"Theo. Why don't you go get some coffee, okay? You're making us all nervous here," Mario murmured, signaling with a shooing motion for Theo to leave the room.

Theo didn't fight it. He didn't have the strength to fight anymore. Besides, Mario was right: he desperately needed coffee. Or sleep. But sleep was out of the question.

He walked out of the office and headed for the break room, where Jo stood. She gave him a sympathetic look as she saw him coming.

"I made you a coffee," she said, holding out a mug.

"So you can read minds after all," Theo said, nodding to her.

"No, I just have a good sense for these things. I wish I could do more for you than this."

"I'm afraid you can't, unfortunately."

"He'll get in touch, I'm sure of it."

"Who?"

"Your daughter's kidnapper."

Theo shook his head and turned away. He really wasn't in the mood for this conversation. Jo followed him.

"It's always the same. They only want one thing: money."

"Jo, please! Can we just drop this conversation, okay?"

"Trust me, he'll reach out."

Theo didn't know whether to find Jo's naivety charming or infuriating, though he leaned toward the latter. Everyone knew there were God knows how many reasons why someone kidnapped children! Theo shook his head again. He didn't want to follow that train of thought. Not here. Not now. Preferably never.

"Ha!" he heard Jo exclaim triumphantly from behind her desk. He rolled his eyes. What was it now?

"I was right," she said, half-rising and waving Theo over.

"About what?" he asked, unenthusiastically.

"About what I just said."

"I'm afraid I—once again—can't follow you."

"He's been in touch."

Theo's eyes widened, and he practically lunged to get to Jo's desk instantly. He set the mug down, coffee sloshing over the side, but he didn't care. He crowded in next to Jo, pushing her and her chair aside.

"Hey!" she protested, and Theo raised a hand to silence her preemptively.

"I'll be damned," he muttered.

There it was, in black and white, a subject line so telling it made the blood freeze in Theo's veins:

"About: Lejla ...!"

"Maybe I should tell Mario..." Jo began, but was immediately interrupted by Theo:

"You stay right here! I want to read this. Just shut up for a minute, then you can go get Mario."

Theo opened the email and read, transfixed.

"About: Lejla ...!"

Listen up, Cops!

I hope you liked my little performance! A bit dramatic, perhaps, but we all know some of you have a slight penchant for drama, don't you, Theo? Speaking of you: You're probably wondering where your daughter is. With me. Haha, yeah, yeah, I know, you'd figured that much out already. What you really want to know is how to get her back. It's quite simple: We're playing a game. You stick to the rules, and everything will be fine. The winner gets 5,000,000 EUR.

Spoiler alert: The winner will be ME. The rules are as follows: Theo is the runner. The money is to be packed in 50 and 100 EUR bills into a black hard-shell suitcase and placed by Theo under the red trash can at the corner of Marktplatz and Sielerstrasse. Theo leaves. I collect the money. Lejla goes free. The following additional rules: 1) No cops (come on, you knew that, right?); 2) Theo arrives in appropriate attire (Note from the Gamemaster: In the dumpster behind your precinct, you'll find a yellow box; just take a look inside). Game time ends: 12 noon tomorrow. Theo, believe me: You do not want time to run out before I have the money. Kisses!

Theo slowly exhaled.

"Okay," he muttered, rubbing his hands over his face. "Okay, okay, okay. Think. Jo, how..."

He turned around, but Jo was gone. Theo stood up quickly and heard her clicking footsteps at the far end of the hallway leading to the backyard. To the dumpster. Of course!

Theo sprinted after her, pushed open the back door, and yelled:

"Stop!"

Jo turned around, puzzled.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Stay where you are! Don't touch anything! Absolutely nothing, there could be..."

He didn't get any further. Jo raised her hands and pouted. Her hands were encased in latex gloves.

"How stupid do you think I am?" she shot back, turning and opening the large dumpster.

"I wouldn't have touched anything; I just wanted to see if he was telling the truth. There, see? Yellow box. He's telling the truth."

"Smart girl," Theo said, giving her shoulder a quick pat.

"Come on. Let's brief the others. There's a lot to do."

A few minutes later, chaos erupted. Everyone was talking over each other excitedly; Mario tried to bring some order to things while reading the printed email in his hand over and over, noting something down, crossing it out, noting something new, sitting down for a moment, only to jump back up again. Theo stood in a corner of the room with his arms crossed, tuning everything out. He had to think.

There was a protocol for extortion. Of course, there was. There was a protocol for absolutely everything. The desired outcome was clear: The extortioner gets no money. Obviously. You don't negotiate with extortioners any more than you negotiate with terrorists. The drop-off point would be strategically surrounded, the money would be placed at the requested location—not a dummy, real money. Dummies were too risky. Extortioners *always* took a look, and if they discovered they'd been screwed over, you never knew how they'd react. So the money would be placed, the extortioner would take it and vanish. He would be followed and caught exactly when he felt safe. The protocol was simple, and it worked—usually. Because extortionists were usually less clever than the police. More often than not, they were complete idiots and losers, people who couldn't get anything right in their lives, not even a bank robbery, so their only option was to blackmail the state or some rich people. The problem with these idiots and losers was that they were, well, idiots and losers. They were rarely capable of outsmarting the police.

The only question was...

"Are we dealing with an idiot?" Theo asked the room.

The clamor of voices stopped abruptly. Everyone looked simultaneously at the poor guy whose daughter had been kidnapped and who hadn't spoken a word or moved for a good fifteen minutes.

"What do you think, Theo?" Mario asked back.

Theo shrugged.

"I don't know. It all sounds crazy. Too crazy. So crazy that it might actually be..."

"Intelligent?" his colleague Alex finished the sentence.

Theo shrugged again.

The gazes shifted away, and the chatter came back to life.

"Psst!" came a hiss from beside Theo.

He looked to the side and saw Jo peeking through the crack in the door. She beckoned him over. Theo pushed off from the wall and went to her.

"What?"

"Do you have a plan yet?"

"We're working on it. Do you need something? Has he been in touch?"

"No. Listen, you need to go over your list again."

"My...?"

"List. Your enemies. This is a personal vendetta."

"Yeah, we'd figured that much out already, thanks, Jo."

"No, I mean... *really* personal. Not some criminal or someone you put away—someone you really, really pissed off, someone who trusted you before, which is why they want to humiliate you now."

"Aha. And we know this because...?"

"It's totally logical. Do you know Die Hard?"

Theo furrowed his brow.

"Uh—yeah."

"The third one, to be exact. John McClane has to go into a black neighborhood wearing a racist sign, and after that, he has to do several other humiliating things, and why? Because he killed Simon Peter Gruber's brother. Do you see?"

"Absolutely not, no."

Jo pushed the door to the meeting room further open and pointed with her perfectly manicured red fingernails at the neon-green Borat mankini lying in the center of the table, which had been written on with a black felt-tip marker.

"This. This here tells us that it's something really, really personal. And now, just ask yourself for a second whose life you've destroyed. Can't be that many, right?"

Theo raised his eyebrows.

"You'd be surprised," he shot back, winked at her, went back into the meeting room, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 6

Jo sat at her desk, staring at the closed door. The cacophony of voices coming from inside was loud and showed no sign of letting up. They couldn't agree on how to proceed. The email had arrived two hours ago, at nine o'clock in the evening. It was now eleven. They had a deadline that would expire at noon tomorrow. The money had already been requested. Things like this had to move fast. It was still being held at the national bank, but it was ready the moment the police needed it.

Jo tapped her fingernails on the desktop. Click-clack. Click-clack. Mario had already come out twice to tell her she could go, but added, of course, that they'd be happy and grateful if she stayed. Of course, she was staying. Who would want to miss something like this? Still, they weren't involving her. After all, she was *just* the office help. The lowly secretary. Pah! If they only knew. Jo was much more than that, and at the moment, she was one thing above all else: impatient. Because all of this was taking far too long. While they were in there debating, that little girl, Lejla, was sitting with that kidnapper scum, scared to death. The poor child!

Jo's brain was working overtime. She belonged to the "act first, talk later" school of thought and was firmly convinced that strategic blather rarely achieved the desired results. Of course, she wasn't a police officer. The people in there surely knew what they were doing. This thought was the only thing that had stopped her from taking action so far. From just doing something. You *had* to do something. You couldn't just sit around like this.

Click-clack. Click-clack.

Jo glanced at the clock. Then she refreshed her inbox for what felt like the fiftieth time. Maybe something else would come in. So far, they hadn't replied to him. Jo thought that was a mistake. If *she* was this impatient, how impatient must the kidnapper be?

"Very, very, very impatient," Jo muttered, clicking on the email with the subject line "About: Lejla ...!"

She read the email again, confirming her original opinion: the kidnapper wasn't some sick pig, a sadist, or a child molester. He was

someone who wanted to humiliate Theo Sammers and make some money on the side.

Jo fixed her gaze on the door again, behind which the heated discussion continued. Then she made a decision.

"I can't stand this ...," she muttered to herself as she hit "reply" and began hammering at the keyboard with her long nails.

"Hello? We need a sign of life."

With a fierce, determined look in her eyes, Jo hit SEND, leaned back, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared at her inbox.

Two minutes passed. Then the reply came.

"From whom? The kid? You'll just have to believe me that she's still alive. Kisses."

Jo leaned forward and clicked "reply."

"No. From you. Thanks for that. They're still discussing. I just wanted to update you."

Click—sent! The next reply followed much faster than the first.

"Who is 'they'?"

"The cops. Theo and the rest."

"And who are you then, if I may ask?"

"Nobody important. I'm not even being included in the discussion."

"Then you must be the office help, am I right? How naughty of you. Kisses."

Jo's heart pounded in her throat. She stared at the words. Words that revealed so much more than she had dared to hope.

"So much more," she whispered, typing away again.

"Aren't you the clever one! Yes, that's exactly who I am. I'm new, and yet I still know more than the people in there."

"Everyone knows more than the people in there. Believe me. How's it going?"

"For you? Good. For them? Hit and miss."

"Haha!"

"I'll keep you posted and go play fly on the wall."

"Kisses!"

Jo stared at the screen. Her cheeks were flushed. She printed out the email correspondence and walked to the meeting room with her head held high.

Discussions—pah! As her grandmother would have said, you don't win any prizes for talking.

She knocked and stepped into the meeting room.

"We don't need coffee right now, thanks, Jo," Mario said, turning away immediately.

No one paid her any attention. She cleared her throat. No reaction. Without hesitation, she walked to the wall on her right, stood in front of the whiteboard mounted there, and dragged her fingernails across the white surface. A sound that seemed to come straight from hell echoed through the room, followed immediately by total silence.

"Have you lost your mind?" one of the officers snapped at her. Theo shook his head, baffled, while Mario's face turned beet red.

"May I have your attention for a moment? I'm sure you're all very busy discussing protocol, but while you've been occupied with talking, I took the liberty of bringing us one step closer to the solution."

"Huh?"

"What's she talking about?"

"Excuse me?"

She ignored the skeptical and mocking looks and turned to Theo.

"Theo, is there a former colleague of yours on your list of enemies?"

Theo's eyebrows shot up. He stared at her in disbelief. Mario reached for the list.

"Two. Why?"

With a triumphant smile, Jo held up her printout.

"Because our kidnapper is one of you. That's why."

Information like that hit like a bombshell, and the reactions were varied: several mouths dropped open, a few scoffing laughs broke out, and the most threatening sound of all was the heavy stomp of Mario's feet as he crossed the room, grabbed Jo by the upper arm, and pulled her outside.

Mario slammed the door behind them, though it was opened again seconds later. Theo stepped out beside Mario; both were glaring at Jo.

"You don't look happy," Jo muttered, then pressed her lips together and lowered her gaze to stare at her shoes with intense concentration.

"What the hell have you done, Jo?" Mario hissed.

Jo shrugged and handed Mario the printout of the email exchange. Explanations were unnecessary. Mario and Theo put their heads together and read. They seemed both fascinated and enthralled, as Jo noticed when she dared to look up again.

"I just don't believe it," Theo blurted out, throwing his arms in the air and starting to pace back and forth.

"Jo! I can't believe you did this! You sabotaged our investigation! You've..."

"Obtained a crucial lead," Theo finished Mario's sentence.

Mario turned and stared at him, incredulous.

"She's right, Mario. Don't smirk, Jo, we'll deal with you later! What you did there is ... you know what, I don't have the stomach to deal with it right now. But Mario, she's right! It's not much; it might not be there in black and white, but it's a clue. An important clue."

"What?"

"The fact that he identifies her as office help immediately."

"Oh, nonsense, anyone could see that!"

"Oh, really? Would a shoe salesman write that? A bank clerk? So direct, so to the point? No, they wouldn't. I know what Jo means. It's ... just read between the lines, Mario. She's right."

Jo had to restrain herself from clapping her hands. Of course, she was right. She was often right. Other people were usually surprised by it. She wasn't. She knew what she was capable of. She knew quite a lot.

Don't smirk, she warned herself. Just don't smirk. She tried to put on a humble expression, the look of a low-level employee. She only half-succeeded.

"Okay, assuming that's the case, then ..."

"Peter Absberger," was all Theo had to say.

Mario's eyebrows shot up.

"Peter Absberger was a drunk, botched three cases, and I'm the one who made sure he lost his job. He lost his wife and his house. He has plenty of reason to hate me."

"Mario said there are two cops on the list," Jo pointed out.

Mario shot Jo a side glance but said nothing.

"The other one is Chris Hansler. We ... there was something personal there."

"That's what we're looking for, isn't it?" Jo asked.

"It's not him. He ... he used to be with Bine. Before I got together with her, I mean. But she's my ex-wife now, which is exactly why I don't think he's our man."

"Doesn't matter. We'll check them both," Mario ordered. "And Jo? You sit your backside down over there and don't move for the rest of the night, have I made myself clear? You do nothing, except get coffee. Absolutely nothing!"

"You've got it, boss."

Jo winked at Theo, turned around, and clicked away in her heels.

Chapter 7

They had all spent the night at the office, though calling it sleep was a stretch. Theo had barely closed his eyes. The rest of his colleagues had retreated into various offices to grab an hour or two of shut-eye. Jo had curled up on the sofa in Mario's office, leaving Mario with no choice but to sleep in her desk chair.

They waited until ten o'clock. Then it began. Theo was among the last to leave. He knocked on the door of Mario's office and pushed it open. Jo was leaning against the desk, holding a small hand mirror in one hand while clumsily brushing her hair with the other.

"I look like absolute hell," she said, sounding genuinely distressed.

"Oh, come on!" Theo replied.

"Don't even look at me, you'll get a fright."

"I highly doubt that. Listen, it's starting. I just wanted to let you know because... well, you know."

"What's the plan? Or are you not authorized to tell me?"

"No, I'm not," Theo said, but he stepped inside anyway and closed the door behind him.

Jo turned to Theo, her brow furrowing as she saw his outfit.

"You're wearing a flasher's coat. The kind perverts wear so they can expose themselves to little kids in the park. That doesn't bode well."

"The plan is as follows: We've confirmed to the kidnapper via email that we're playing along. He replied that Lejla will be taken to a safe location once he has the money, and he'll provide the location then. We've already surrounded the marketplace where the briefcase will be dropped at night. There's no way he could have noticed; we were very careful. I'll drop off the money as requested. But..."

Jo raised her eyebrows and gave Theo a questioning look.

"... the problem is... what if it's not true? We have the two apartments under surveillance, but we can't storm them without

sufficient cause. So, all we can do is wait for something to happen. You understand? But we could also be wrong. The kidnapper could be someone else on the list. And we can't risk the deadline passing without... you understand?"

"Yeah. I get it. I just wish I could see your performance," Jo replied, grinning as she looked Theo up and down.

"Don't worry, Jo. I'm sure the video will be on YouTube in three hours. Anyway... see you later."

"Good luck," Jo called out after him.

Exactly twelve minutes later, Theo parked his unmarked car on Thelenbergstrasse, which led directly to the marketplace. From here, he could see the golden clock where this whole nightmare had started. How incredibly symbolic to choose the same spot for the handoff. Hundreds of people would be milling about here. Theo looked down at himself. He was still wearing the coat. Jo had been right—he looked like a pervert. A brown trench coat, knee-length with a collar. And in the middle of June. Underneath, he was wearing that neon green Borat costume that showed a lot and left very little to the imagination. To top it off, the kidnapper had gone to the trouble of attaching a banner to the swimsuit straps that read "I'm a massive asshole." Theo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He told himself it didn't matter. He would do anything to have his daughter back, absolutely anything. He would walk across this damn square completely naked if he had to.

But despite all his self-talk, he couldn't stop a flush of shame from creeping onto his face as he thought about having to show himself in a moment. The briefcase lay beside him. Behind him was a car with two heavily armed plainclothes officers. The National Bank wouldn't leave five million euros unguarded—not ever.

Plainclothes officers were also stationed throughout the marketplace, though they were inside the buildings rather than out in the open. They had been positioned there overnight. If the kidnapper really was one of them, he knew the protocol, the tricks, everything. That made it dangerous. They had deployed fewer officers than they normally would in such a case. Less was more

here. Too many carried too high a risk of being spotted, no matter how well they were hidden.

Theo glanced at his watch. He had waited in the car long enough. It was time. He took another deep breath and forced himself to ignore how he looked. Who cared? Let the kidnapper have his fun. As long as Lejla was okay, nothing else mattered.

"Please, let Lejla be okay," he whispered.

Theo buried his face in his hands and counted to ten. Then he got out. He went around the car, opened the passenger door, took off his coat, grabbed the briefcase, and secured it to his wrist with a pair of handcuffs. National Bank orders. He held the key in his other hand. Then he set off. He adopted a state of tunnel vision and ignored everything happening around him. He wasn't responsible for anything except the handoff. Nothing else needed to interest him. Nothing else *could* interest him. Not where the kidnapper was. Not what the kidnapper was doing. Not whether the kidnapper was watching him. And not the stares that were increasingly fixed on him.

That was his colleagues' problem now. Tunnel vision. A purposeful stride. The red trash can at the opposite entrance to the marketplace was the goal. The rest didn't matter.

Walk. Breathe. Focus. Don't look around. He had to ignore the gasps, the "oh my gods," and the clicking of various cell phone cameras. There was only him and the briefcase. And Lejla, who was on his mind the entire time.

His walk of shame took five minutes. That was how long it took him to enter the square and cross it. No matter how hard he tried to ignore his surroundings, he was acutely aware that he was being stared at. How many pairs of eyes were following him? How many phones were being pulled out right now? He kept his gaze fixed on the ground, but he still heard the murmurs and laughter. It was Saturday. The weekly farmer's market was taking place at the other end of the square. There were hundreds of people around him. He knew all of this without having to look up. The red flush on his face was clearly visible, but he tried to push away all thoughts of his environment.

One step after another, until he finally stood before the trash can. Only then did he lift his head. He inserted the key into the small lock on the handcuffs, which clicked open. Then Theo bent down and placed the briefcase under the trash can.

He turned around and headed back, his eyes once again glued to the ground. He knew exactly where his colleagues were. He knew exactly what line of sight each one of them had. He just had to...

A thundering crash snapped him out of his thoughts. Instinctively, Theo dropped to his knees, rolled, and reached for his weapon, which he wasn't carrying, of course. He stood up, turned around, and saw a cloud of black smoke. Hundreds of screams erupted from all directions, and Theo looked around frantically, unable to process what was happening. Was anyone hurt? Had a bomb just gone off? He spun in a circle. People were running about in a panic; the spacious square suddenly felt incredibly crowded. Theo was bumped several times as he tried to run back to the trash can, which was no longer visible as it was completely swallowed by the smoke cloud.

Theo tried to make something out. Away from the smoke, the buildings around the marketplace were intact, both to the left and the right of the alleged explosion.

"It was just a smoke bomb!" he shouted, not addressed to anyone in particular. "A smoke bomb!" he repeated, but his cries were lost in the chaos. People were running frantically, trying to reach the nearest exit.

"Shit!" Theo yelled and tried once again to run toward the trash can.

He fought his way forward, then a second crash sounded. This time, the smoke was bright red. Definitely another smoke bomb. Nothing dangerous, but the smoke stung his eyes and engulfed everything within a five-meter radius. Theo couldn't see anything anymore; his eyes watered, his throat burned.

"Incredible," Theo shouted, spinning around once more. Half the square was covered in smoke by now; Theo coughed—everyone was coughing.

"Shit!" he cursed again and set off for the trash can once more.

When he arrived, he collided with Alex, who was already kneeling in front of the trash can, shouting frantically into his radio. Theo grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Is the case gone?" Theo asked, breathless.

Alex lowered the radio.

"Yeah, man. Of course, it's gone. That asshole planned this really well. We've already blocked the access roads; he has to leave the square somewhere."

"What about the apartments?" Theo asked, but his last words were swallowed by a coughing fit.

"Nothing, man! Nothing happened at either apartment. No one left the buildings. We had the wrong lead."

"No, we didn't. He was just smarter. He probably stayed in a hotel. Look at all this! This was a professional! This was someone who knew exactly what we would do. Of course, it was one of us. We have to storm the apartments, right now. Lejla is in one of them, I'm sure of it!"

Theo was on the verge of despair. He looked around. The smoke was still thick in the air. He looked at Alex, but Alex didn't move.

"Give it here!" Theo hissed, ripping the radio out of his hand.

"Channel?"

"Two," Alex replied.

Theo knew Alex was on his side and supported him—at least morally. But Theo couldn't blame Alex for not wanting to play the accomplice. If Theo had given the order to storm the apartments now, it would have been a clear violation of protocol. But he would worry about that later.

"Screw it," he muttered and switched to channel two.

"Breach both locations. Now!"

Alex nodded to him, and then they ran. They ran back toward Theo's car. Theo put on his coat while Alex called the fire department. Theo grabbed his cell phone from the glove compartment and stared back and forth between his radio and his phone. How long could the breach take? A minute? Two? Surely no

longer. A door was opened quickly, and an apartment was searched just as fast. If Lejla were there, she would be safe in a moment.

Any second now!

The radio crackled. Theo frantically held it to his mouth.

"What? What happened??"

"Good news and bad news. The good news is: we know who the kidnapper is. It's Peter Absberger. We found the email on his desk. The bad news is: Lejla isn't there."

"Shit!" Theo screamed, kicking the tires of his car several times.

Alex rushed over, pulled him back, and gripped his shoulders.

"We'll find her! Do you hear me? We'll find her! Come on. I'll drive you back to the precinct."

Chapter 8

Jo was leaning so far over her desk that she was practically lying on it rather than sitting in front of it. She could hear Mario screaming from all the way out here. Something had gone wrong. Seriously wrong. From the words drifting clearly out of Mario's office, she pieced together that something had exploded, the money was gone, and they still didn't have Lejla.

The name Peter Absberger was mentioned several times, from which Jo concluded that Theo had been right about his suspicion. So this Peter now had his money. And he had the humiliation of Theo he'd wanted so badly. Then it was only fair that he hand over the child now!

Anger welled up in Jo's gut. She pushed herself away from the desk, crossed her arms over her chest, and thought. He'd gotten everything he wanted. He no longer needed the child. The child was just dead weight. If she had stolen five million euros, she'd already be halfway to Liechtenstein. Or Switzerland. Far away, in any case. She wouldn't return to her apartment. She'd just want to disappear. And the child? You couldn't just leave it in the apartment alone. Strictly speaking, it was totally illogical and unsafe to sleep in your own apartment when you were planning something like this. Even the dumbest kidnapper must know that the police weren't sitting around twiddling their thumbs waiting for something to happen. No, the police would investigate. And they would find some kind of lead.

No, the perpetrator definitely hadn't slept in his own apartment. So the child hadn't slept in that apartment either. Did he have a hideout? Maybe. Or he had stayed in a hotel. Why not? With the child? Maybe. But he couldn't take the child with him to the drop-off point. So he had gotten rid of her beforehand. But where?

Jo practically jumped up as the idea flashed through her brain like a bolt of lightning.

"Of course!" she muttered, switched off the computer screen, and rushed out without telling anyone.

She climbed into her car and sped off. She drove through the city for about ten minutes, then came to a halt with screeching tires exactly where another car had stopped the day before. The kidnapper's car, parked on the small, inconspicuous street that ran along the back of little Lejla's preschool. He had taken her here, and this was exactly where he had dropped her off again. Right?

Jo got out and looked around. The hole in the fence had already been patched up provisionally. So she wasn't there. Jo turned in a circle. He couldn't have dropped the little girl off at the preschool. Nor anywhere else where he risked being caught because of her. Children were unreliable. And someone planning to steal five million euros couldn't afford to be unreliable.

"Only a sleeping child is a reliable child," Jo murmured, walking along the preschool fence. She reached out and ran her fingers over the chain-link. A quiet street, a row of houses, fields. Quiet enough not to be caught immediately, but populated enough that you couldn't be certain.

Fields!

Jo stopped and walked back to the spot where Lejla had been kidnapped. From there, she turned around and walked to the opposite side of the street, to the edge of the field. It was a cornfield; the plants grew high enough to hide a sleeping child. Somewhere at the edge, but far enough in not to be discovered immediately.

Jo parted the stalks, which were over three feet high, winced, kicked off her high heels, and entered the field. She just walked straight ahead, glancing left and right at regular intervals. Somewhere there would be a hollow in this sea of plants, somewhere she was, somewhere...

There! A speck of pink in the middle of the green landscape.

Jo grinned and pulled out her phone. Theo picked up immediately.

"You can stop the prayers, colleague. I found your daughter."

Epilogue

Theo stood in Mario's office. Mario had given him the obligatory dressing-down; Theo had nodded dutifully and feigned understanding. "Yes, Boss, I'll never do it again, Boss, it was a mistake."

There wouldn't be any real trouble. Urgent suspicion provided a solid basis for justifying the raid on the apartments. After all, they had been right: Peter Absberger was the perpetrator. They hadn't found him yet, but they would. He couldn't stay in Germany, and he couldn't cross the border—he had become the most wanted man in the country in a matter of hours.

Now Mario nodded to him, patted him on the shoulder, and said:

"How are Lejla and Bine doing?"

"Good. Well, Lejla is doing great. For her, the whole thing was one big adventure. He didn't hurt her. Bine, on the other hand... I think she's going to put herself in the capable hands of her psychotherapist. She's pretty shaken up."

"I can imagine."

The two were silent for a moment, looking outside. The door to Mario's office was open, and Jo's desk was right across from it. Jo was staring intently at her screen, typing. Her fingernails clacked so loudly they could be heard in the other room.

"Can I ask something indiscreet, Mario?"

"You can try."

"What's the deal with her?"

"With Jo?"

"With Jo, who showed up out of the blue, whom you just dropped into our laps, for whom there was no official job posting, and who has absolutely no relevant training."

"Long story."

"Shorten it and tell me anyway."

"We're neighbors."

"I know that much."

"Okay. You know, Louise and I had some marital problems last year?"

"Mhm."

"Well, I was annoyed and sad and frustrated, and so I... started looking around."

"Looking around?"

"I needed a distraction."

"Oh?"

"I went out on the town quite a bit, and here and there... well, I wouldn't say I actually strayed, but..."

"Is there such a thing as 'not actually' straying?"

"Not according to my wife. Anyway, Jo saw me with another woman and didn't rat me out. She said I was a pig, just like all men were pigs, and that her husband had cheated on her too, and she found that kind of thing unforgivable, but it wasn't her business, and she'd keep her mouth shut. And that I owed her one."

"And now she's here."

"Now she's here."

"God help us all."

Mario laughed and shook his head. Theo left the office and headed toward Jo. She looked up and gave Theo an irresistible smile.

"Is there something I can do for you, Theo?"

"You've done enough. I haven't thanked you yet."

"You don't have to. We're all just doing our jobs, right?"

"Okay, let's agree on that, even if it's not entirely true in your case."

Jo shrugged and smiled.

"You know you just got lucky, right?" Theo asked, trying to sound particularly polite. He didn't want to seem ungrateful, just...

"Lucky?" she asked back.

"Yes. With your solo e-mail stunt. That could have backfired horribly. You were just lucky."

"Do you know what it is you don't understand?"

"You're about to tell me."

"That life can't be planned. And that protocols, process lists, guidelines, regulations, laws, and generally, plans of all kinds are absolutely useless if one thing is missing."

"Let me guess: luck?"

Jo smiled.

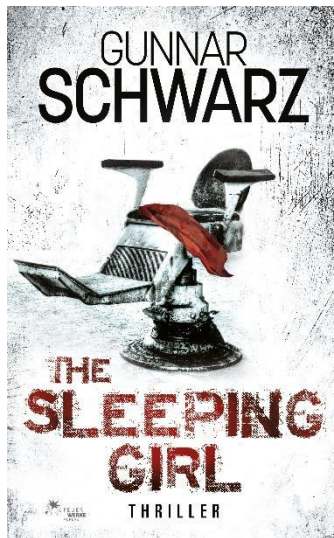
"Apparently, you do understand after all."

- *The End* -

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If you enjoyed this novella, you might also like my debut novel:



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