

# **The Con of a Lovetime**

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# A NEW ME, A NEW MISSION

The morning that held the nasty surprise began like a dream. I woke up with a clear head. My fingers, toes, and the tip of my nose tingled pleasantly. It was probably due to the chemical fumes from the bedroom furniture I'd bought and assembled over the weekend, but I wasn't about to let such a boring explanation spoil the moment. I had reinvented myself, and in this new phase of life, I was determined to be completely honest and do everything right. Gracefully, I swung my legs out of bed, fluffed my hair, and headed to the bathroom. The little bottles, tubes, and cream jars on the shelf above the sink were all lined up, neat as a pin and carefully capped. Being tidy wasn't in my blood, but as I knew from fairy tales, only well-behaved girls got a prince. Which brings us to Lars. As I soaped myself up in the shower, I hummed the song that had been on the radio when he'd picked me up for a drive in his convertible the week before. I turned the water hotter, trying to pretend the prickly drops were his touch. It was no use. I only remembered how cold the wind had been. It had been too chilly for an open-top drive, and my neck had been stiff ever since.

With a sigh, I finished my shower and reached for the towel that lay on the heater. Even more warming, however, was the sight of the delicate

diamond pendant waiting next to the toothpaste in a small blue plastic box. Lars had dropped it into the hollow of my throat when he'd woken me up on Sunday morning. Wasn't that a terribly romantic gesture, sweet as the sugariest rom-com? The way he gave me the gift was enchanting, and I have to say: thank goodness, because the piece of jewelry itself was disappointing. The little stone was set in a simple silver heart – a really basic design. I thought: If a jeweler found this missing, they wouldn't even write it off, because they have these things stocked in bags of a hundred. But no matter. That kind of cynical thought was my old self.

My new self didn't want to be ungrateful and tried to justify the pendant. Maybe Lars thought anything more spectacular would be inappropriate for my job. Although, my old self whispered, he could have given me two pieces – one that was modestly professional and another from his family's inheritance. I still had to meet his mother, Baroness Astrid Signe Anne Jorgensen. If I had something glittering on me that Great-Aunt So-and-So had once worn, I'd feel stronger right from the start. Plus, it might remind my future mother-in-law that every generation eventually has to pass the scepter. Baroness Jorgensen probably wanted a partner with blue blood for her only son, but plenty of European royals had married commoners. Women from the people, like me, had advantages. We still knew how to put in some real effort. Even though the Jorgensens were

only a distant relation to the Danish throne, and it would take 352 deaths before the future child of Lars and I could become the King or Queen of Denmark, I would raise the little one like royalty and send them to a school where a famous opera soloist sang the lunch menu.

But all of that was just a pipe dream that morning. I, single and childless, had to go back to work. My two-week vacation was over. I'd taken the time off to move out of the furnished room in an old widow's house and set up my new nest on the outskirts of Kopenhagen. My psychiatrist Dr. Knud Knudsen had said it was high time to give up the transitional apartment. I was supposed to close the book on the past, start completely fresh, and destroy all the souvenirs. All of them? What did the good doctor think was paying his immodest fee? A smart psychiatrist like him must have already drawn his conclusions. I considered setting up a standing order for him – a regular Christmas bonus, for example – to remind him of his professional confidentiality. But if he ever had the auditors breathing down his neck, that might just pique their suspicion. It certainly would have set off alarm bells for me and my colleagues, and once we smelled something fishy, we were impossible to shake off.

I tossed aside the thought of bribery (it didn't fit with my new honesty anyway) put on the necklace with Lars's pendant, slipped into a gray suit and black pumps, and was ready to leave the apartment. In the hallway, my eyes fell on the

calendar. The date was March 31st, and the next day was marked with a black dot. One more night's sleep, and it would be seven years since I'd stolen anything. I hadn't even plucked a single hair from Lars's favorite mohair sweater. But I'd have to celebrate this anniversary alone. Besides Dr. Knudsen, only one other person knew about my criminal career, and that person definitely wouldn't be congratulating me.

I unlocked my Mini, which was parked in front of the house. The trees had budded, and the fresh green of the leaves glowed a little brighter each morning. But behind the branches of the elderberry bush across the street, something dark lingered. In my positive mood, I wanted to ignore it, but the bush rustled and someone called out, "Emily!"

My subconscious must have recognized the voice, but because I had learned from Dr. Knudsen to ignore things that weren't good for me, I didn't react and got into the car.

Then the someone called, "Little Magpie!"

Now I couldn't stay calm anymore. Only one person ever used that bird name for me: Malik. They'd obviously let him out early.

After a moment of pure panic, I slammed the car door shut, started the engine, and shot backward out of the parking spot. I just barely missed Malik, who was standing on the curb across the street. He didn't flinch. My ex-partner wasn't the type to jump out of the way.

On the drive to work, I kept checking the rearview mirror for a car with out-of-town plates, but none followed me. The taxis all held strangers, too. By the time I rolled into the office parking garage, my hands had finally stopped shaking.

I ran into Ida by the coffee machine. She wanted to know the latest about Lars. I didn't usually talk about my love life with colleagues, but I trusted Ida. She was the kind of woman who wore pearl earrings and a Barbour jacket and was at home in Copenhagen's better circles. Because of that, she knew what kind of champagne to drink, where to buy flowers for a first family visit, and what topics to avoid with blue bloods (cosmetic surgery and tax strategies). Coming from the North of the country, my background might excuse a few social blunders, but I couldn't overdo the "foreigner bonus" because I wanted to fit in, even if it was trickier than eating a lobster without making a mess.

Today, Ida was supposed to advise me on the gun issue. I hated weapons; they had been Malik's area of expertise. To me, using a gun was a betrayal of my art, kind of like a top chef using a pre-made sauce just to save time.

However, Lars went hunting, and to join him, I would have to be able to handle a rifle myself. Where was the best place to learn that? I didn't want to join a shooting club. Ida calmed me down and said she knew a hunter who could give me lessons. I didn't even have to get good; it would be enough to simply aim roughly in the direction of

the game and not take down anyone in the hunting party. On the contrary, in Lars's circles, you only made a fool of yourself by being too successful at hobbies like hunting, riding, or watercolor painting. Being good was for social climbers. Someone who was secure in their status simply wanted to pass the time in the fresh air and toast to it afterward.

"What about the gun license?" I asked.

"That can be dealt with," Ida said. "The hunter I know accepts gifts."

"Fantastic. Thank you, Ida!"

It was only 9:30 a.m., and I had already found a solution to one of my problems. Unfortunately, not the one that had been standing behind the elderberry bush earlier. I decided to ignore it for now. As Lars said, sometimes you just had to keep going. You couldn't clean up the whole world.

I sat down at my desk and worked my way through the emails that had piled up during my vacation. As soon as I was finished, my boss, Casper, called for me.

I went into his office, thinking he wanted to know how my vacation had been. But small talk wasn't on Casper's agenda. Without an introduction, he informed me of a new assignment. A client wanted to buy a shipping company and make sure the books were correct. I put my fingertips together and adopted that particularly attentive expression, which allowed my mind to drift away. Casper loved convoluted explanations and enjoyed expanding on the

obvious. It bored me at first, and then it drove me crazy with impatience. I could have finished not only every single one of his sentences, but also predicted what he'd be talking about in half an hour if no one stopped him. What's more, I could have predicted what he would eat for dinner: meatloaf on country bread. It was written all over his face. He'd be craving something hearty because he'd only had an apple for breakfast, and I knew that because I had seen the core in the trash can. It was lying on top of a parchment bag, the kind parents use for their children's school lunches. His wife had packed him the apple. She thought he should lose weight. Why? Because women always thought that as soon as their husbands reached the age when the hair on their heads started to recede and nothing was left to distract from their bellies. But now I was getting deeper into Casper's private life than I wanted to be. Oh, how he rambled!

Transparency, profitability forecasts, blah, blah, blah, why did he have to explain everything in such excruciating detail?

Wait. Why did he ask if I had a problem with seasickness? That caught me off guard. I tried to use logic to bridge the gap from the part of his speech I hadn't heard.

"The shipping company keeps its books on paper?" I asked. "And they're on the ship? That means I have to be there in person for the audit?"

"Not because of the books. Because of the phantom."

A phantom? Holy cow, I had totally misjudged my boss. He did have something important to tell me after all. How was I going to get out of this without asking questions and admitting my mind had been elsewhere?

"May I sleep on it?" I asked with my most charming smile. "I just got back an hour ago and have a few things to catch up on. I wasn't expecting to have to travel right away."

No, I hadn't expected that, and it was absolutely not going to happen! I couldn't leave Lars alone during this sensitive phase of our relationship. His mother might use the chance to bowl me out of his future plans. There was probably a second or third cousin who would rush to his side and charm him into forgetting all about me.

If I let go of the reins now... Wait, what was I even saying about Lars? He obviously had a will of his own and could be quite passionate, especially after a few glasses of champagne. But he was caught in a predicament because of his loyalty to his family and the heavy burden of his ancestors.

I'm sorry, Casper, but I'm on a mission. You don't just get a prince out of nowhere. Fate sent me Lars as a reward for the virtuous life I've led for seven years. Because I no longer steal, I get to be the woman at his side, and I plan to play that role quite literally. I'll clamp onto his arm and steer our steps gently but firmly toward the church.

But of course, I didn't say any of that out loud. I kept my poker face on for my boss.

Casper sighed and said, of course, I could sleep on it. But just for one night, please.

With that, I was dismissed for the time being and immediately went looking for Ida again. She needed to fill me in on this strange assignment. I had to figure out a strategy to get out of it.

"He wants you to look for the phantom?" Ida didn't seem surprised. "Figures he'd ask you too. Everyone else has already said no. My excuse is a good one, at least. My sister's getting married this weekend, and I submitted my vacation request for Thursday and Friday a year ago."

"I can't use vacation as an excuse. Something big would have to happen."

And it wouldn't. Lars and I weren't even engaged yet, and the chances of us suddenly getting married were close to zero.

"Tell me what this phantom thing is all about," I asked.

"Well, it's a strange story. A stowaway is said to have been living on a Baltic Sea ferry for years. He's never been seen himself, only traces of him have been found: food wrappers in the engine rooms, crumpled sheets in empty cabins..."

"How can someone hide for so long? At some point, he must be found. Does a ship like that never get an overhaul? Or a deep cleaning? And what reason would he have to stay on board? People, at most, disappear from ships. I've never heard of there being one passenger too many."

I thought about the cruise Malik and I had taken. After three days, in the middle of the Atlantic, an antique dealer went missing. I had suspected Malik, and we had had a terrible fight.

"Rumor has it the captain made the phantom up. As a unique selling point, you know? The ferries are under a lot of pressure from competitors, and his is one of the older ones. The shipping company is in the red and has already had to sell several ships. They've kept this one until now because it's still relatively well-booked, and that's all due to the hype about the phantom. They've spun a romantic story around it and are marketing the whole thing. A lot of bachelor parties take place on board. But I didn't listen all that closely." Ida yawned. "As I said, I have a good excuse not to go."

"But if the phantom doesn't even exist," I thought aloud. "How are we supposed to prove that?"

Ida raised her hands defensively.

"How are *you* supposed to prove that? It's difficult. I guess, you could come home sooner if you found it."

"I'm not planning on taking the assignment, Ida!"

"Why not? We're all counting on you here. After all, we covered your work while you were on vacation. Taking time off to furnish a house... I beg you! That's what interior designers are for. Start thinking more like royalty. There are experts

for everything. And that's also the solution to the phantom problem."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Go to the university, find a scruffy long-term student, pay him a hundred euros, smuggle him onto the ship, and then drag him back out into the light as the phantom. He can say he had depression, a burnout, or whatever. The client doesn't care about the background. He just wants an audit to be able to prove his due diligence later, in case there are any problems. We both know that true transparency doesn't exist."

"But if he buys the ship and the real phantom shows up, we'll be liable."

"Not necessarily. Because then there were just two phantoms, and we only found one because we were only supposed to find one."

Ida winked at me. I looked at the ceiling. It was so brazenly wrong that I couldn't argue with it. That often happened with Ida. She had studied law.

"Whatever," I said. "I'm not going to have anything to do with the assignment."

"Suit yourself."

I finished my first day back at work at 6 p.m. Since noon, I had spent my time trying to find out about other people's projects. Was there anyone who urgently needed my help and would ask Casper not to send me to the ship? Unfortunately, I couldn't find anyone. It seemed as if I had become redundant during my absence. I drove my car

through the rush hour traffic feeling dejected. As I approached my neighborhood, I slowed down and started scanning the streets and cafés for Malik. But I couldn't find a trace of him. The coast seemed clear right in front of my house, too.

I made myself comfortable on the couch with a cup of tea and did what I'd been looking forward to since I woke up: I dialed Lars's number.

Although I was calling his cell phone and he must have recognized my number, he answered with his full name. He drew the syllables out even more sluggishly than usual.

"Are you tired?" I asked sympathetically.

"Terribly tired," he said. "I was at a porcelain auction in Hamburg today for Mother. She needed that little bowl from the Fürstenberg service that the Pekingese broke."

"Ah."

I wondered if the dog had broken the fine piece while greedily eating his food out of it. I could definitely imagine that, but I decided not to ask Lars. Everything to do with the spoiled pet had the highest potential for a social blunder. The Pekingese — his name was Tajo von Something-or-other — had his own personal shopper who only took care of his fresh meat, and a dog walker who came three times a day. His winter cloaks were kept in a miniature wardrobe. However, there were limits to his pampering. In the evenings, he was banished from the living area and spent the night in a kennel next to the garages.

"He's a dog, not a cuddly toy," Lars had once explained to me. "Besides, he has a habit of always lying in front of the fireplace, and he shouldn't overheat, that would be bad for his I-don't-need-to-say-it."

He should have said it. I had puzzled over it for a long time until I incidentally found out that Tajo was a dog with a top-notch pedigree. When he was brought together with selected female dogs, their owners paid more for it than for a night at a high-end brothel. Tajo's testicles, therefore, weren't allowed to get too warm, as that would have affected his fertility.

Later, I had noticed that Lars also appreciated cool temperatures while sleeping, and I hadn't been able to get that parallel out of my head since.

"I called your place this morning," Lars said. "I wanted to ask if you'd like to come with me. But you weren't there."

"I have to work again, you know."

"Oh, right," he sounded as if I had mentioned something extremely annoying. "And you probably couldn't have spontaneously taken the day off?"

"Not really, right after vacation."

"Too bad. But well, it wasn't so bad, Suzanne came along instead."

I had never heard of a Suzanne. When he dropped a name without explanation, it was always a person he thought you should know. I made a mental note to Google Suzanne later. Already, without even knowing her, I was jealous.

Didn't I just say I had to clamp onto his arm?  
Scheming sirens lurked everywhere.

"So you found someone else to take my place?"  
I asked, hurt.

"I didn't want to drive the whole way alone.  
And I had a reservation for two at 'Nikkei Nine'  
for lunch."

A cozy meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant?  
Right. Now was the time to act, before Lars fell  
asleep thinking about this Suzanne and her  
possibly brilliant conversation.

"Should I come over tonight?" I asked. "I have  
some of the artichoke salad you like so much in  
the fridge."

"Forgive me, Emily. I'm terribly tired."

"What if I come to you instead?"

That was an absurd suggestion. I had never  
been to Lars's place before because you couldn't  
just go to him, but only to them.

The Jorgensens. Three generations lived in the  
villa in Østerbro, and even though Lars's wing  
probably had its own entrance, I would still have  
to ring the main doorbell, have an employee park  
my inappropriate car, and say hello to the rest of  
the family. But of course not "hello." After all, you  
didn't just casually knock on the door of a  
baroness. It required a special occasion, a dignified  
gift, and the exactly right attire, from the stockings  
to the correctly knotted scarf. And then the "small  
family dinner" would probably follow the protocol  
of a state visit.

A few times now, I'd driven past the villa in the dark. What I actually hoped to see, I had no idea. The hedge around the property hid everything. I guess I just wanted to soak up the atmosphere, to get a better feel for how I might fit into that world. It hadn't worked, and ever since Malik used my old pet name this morning, I knew why. The problem was my past. A magpie brings shiny things back to its nest; it doesn't fly over and move in with them. But what was I supposed to do? Lars didn't want to come to my nest.

"How about we meet up tomorrow night?" he asked.

He was mumbling a little, which probably meant he was leaning his head on his hands. When he did that, his curls would fall onto his forehead, which I found incredibly sexy. I'd never seen curls fall across a forehead more beautifully than they did on Lars. His haircut was the work of an Italian stylist who flew in from Milan once a month just for him.

"Tomorrow night?" I stood up and started pacing the living room.

I was a little miffed that Lars had turned down seeing me tonight, so I wasn't about to jump at his suggestion. It was already dark outside, but a streetlight by the fence lit up the patch of naked earth that was waiting for me to plant something. As the tenant of the ground-floor apartment, the garden was my responsibility. My predecessor seemed to have done little more than some half-hearted digging now and then. Originally, I'd

planned to lay a stone mosaic and put a little wrought-iron bench on it, but I'd since given up on that idea. Lars would never sit out in front of the house where everyone could see him, and who else was I going to sit with – ?

I jumped. Malik had just stepped into the circle of light from the lamppost. He leaned against the pole, crossed one leg over the other, and coolly lit a cigarette. His pose was probably copied from some movie he expected me to guess – a game we used to love playing. Right now, however, I could've done without it.

"Get lost," I hissed under my breath.

"Excuse me?" Lars's voice came through the phone.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "I was just talking to the tomcat that terrorizes the neighborhood."

That wasn't even far from the truth. Malik really did behave like a tomcat – shamelessly roaming around like a king inspecting his kingdom. I had to get rid of him before he started marking his territory and scared Lars off for good.

What kind of hack jail psychologist had signed off on his early release, anyway? Any idiot could see Malik was miles away from feeling remorse, let alone changing his ways. He was still completely ruthless, and if I didn't want to lose my little slice of happiness and go back to being a gangster's moll, I needed to solidify my relationship with Lars, and fast. No, I needed to cement it! The moment I made it into the Jorgensens' villa, Malik would be powerless

against me. For all I cared, he could stand under that streetlight then until he was blue in the face. I'd have the advantage since my staff and delivery service would get me whatever my heart desired. And if I started to get cabin fever? I'd just escape in the helicopter. Haha! Unfortunately, I wasn't quite there yet.

"Let's meet near your place," I said into the phone to Lars. "At that little trattoria?"

Lars huffed indecisively on the other end.

"Please," I begged. "For the last of the mussels. The season's almost over, and then they'll be gone." Where on earth did I pull that from? "And I have something important to tell you," I added quickly.

Silence. First, I'm babbling about artichoke salad, now I'm desperate for mussels and an urgent talk... Lars absolutely had to be thinking I was pregnant.

"Alright, fine," he said. "See you there in half an hour."

That didn't leave me much time. I re-powdered my nose, threw my work clothes back on, and grabbed a handbag that was definitely too big for the evening but had one key feature: little metal feet on the bottom. I figured I could use them to defend myself if Malik got pushy. But he didn't move a muscle as I walked out of the house and got into my car. Without giving him a single glance, I reversed past him, shifted into first, and hit the gas.

I wasn't going to get away that easily.

Malik dived into the back seat before I could even think the words "central locking." Slamming on the brakes was impossible; a BMW was already tailgating me.

Malik casually lay back on the seat, folding his hands behind his head.

"A very good evening to you, Madame."

"I don't have time for your games."

"Not happy to see me? After my father, you're the very first person I've graced with my presence."

"I couldn't care less."

"Pity."

In the rearview mirror, I saw him put a new cigarette between his lips, but not light it. From the bobbing tips of his shoes to the sneer in his eyes, he was completely the same. His chest looked a little wider, but that was to be expected. They lift weights all day in prison instead of reflecting on their misdeeds.

"A lot has happened to me, Malik," I said.

"Oh, really? Me, I was bored."

"You can't just show up. And I don't want you in my car."

"But I need to know how you've been."

"Then write me a letter."

"I tried. But you moved without a forwarding address. It wasn't easy to find you."

"Well, now you know where I live."

I looked for an opportunity to pull over to the right and throw him out of the car. Unfortunately,

traffic was still heavy, and I had a green wave. My self-defense bag sat unused on the passenger seat.

"Listen, we can meet, but on neutral ground and not right now, I have another appointment."

"Oh."

Malik sat up and made his infamous mournful face. What his curls were for Lars, the "nobody-understands-me" look was for him. He looked like a sad dog. The corners of his mouth formed a downward arc. I used to feel the urge to kiss them back up. Used to!

"Just let me out somewhere," Malik said.

He must have noticed that it was currently impossible. By now, only one street separated us from the trattoria. I couldn't afford to make a scene. So I stayed cool, parked on the gravel lot next to the restaurant, got out, and with the key in my hand, waited until Malik had also left my car. The scent of fresh bread drifted from the kitchen. I breathed it in deeply. Think positive! Everything would be fine.

"Hmm, delicious," Malik said. "I'm so hungry."

# IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Malik had, in fact, come into the trattoria. At least he had the decency to wait a minute and not enter through the door with me. Lars was waiting at his usual spot next to the antipasto counter. We drank mineral water from small bottles. Malik sat behind me at a small table near the hallway that led to the toilets. Not being able to see what he was up to made me nervous. Lars didn't seem particularly relaxed, either, but he had a different reason for that.

"What did you want to tell me?" he asked.

Damn, I had completely forgotten the pretext for our meeting! I had to come up with something fast. I took a big gulp of water, caught a lemon wedge with my lips, and pretended to have pulp stuck between my front teeth. My maneuver with a toothpick and a hidden napkin made Lars discreetly look away.

Behind me, as the opera music paused between two tearjerkers, I heard Malik say to the waiter in French that he had an appetite for something light. The waiter consistently replied in Italian. A brief silence, then an arm touched my shoulder, and I smelled Helmut Lang's "Cuiron."

"Pardonnez-moi," Malik said.

I stayed hidden behind my napkin and mumbled, "It's fine." I hadn't noticed the perfume during the car ride, probably because for me, it

was inextricably linked to Malik. But it didn't belong in the trattoria, with me and Lars!

The scent had been discontinued, so apparently, Malik was living off his old stock. Of course, smelling good was unnecessary in prison. I watched him saunter over to the antipasto counter and look at the displays as if he had never seen grilled zucchini before. From the way he tilted his head to find the right angle to the glass, I could tell he was looking at me in the reflection. He, in turn, was being shamelessly scrutinized by two ladies sharing a bottle of Prosecco two tables away from us. Yes, good old Malik was still a ladies' magnet. Always casual with rolled-up sleeves, the gray stripes of his shirt matched his relaxed pants. He looked like someone with taste and a knack for putting together the right outfit in seconds from a well-stocked wardrobe. However, during our time together, he had only owned this one shirt and these pants as "going-out clothes." Besides that, he only had two black t-shirts that he wore interchangeably with the same old jeans. But that wasn't written on his forehead.

"Please, ladies," I thought. "Talk to him, invite him out, take him home, save me!"

The two of them giggled loudly. That didn't seem to be their first bottle. Their antics got Lars's attention too. He followed their gaze, and now we were all looking at Malik.

"I have to travel for work," I said loudly to distract him.

Lars looked confused. "And?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you."

"Oh."

"Starting tomorrow. Early in the morning."

"Alright."

"I'm sorry it's so sudden. I probably won't be back before the weekend. So we'll have to postpone our theater visit on Thursday."

"We were going to the theater?"

"To see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I had tickets. It was supposed to be a surprise."

"Wonderful, thank you."

"But now it just can't happen."

"No problem."

Lars looked for his napkin, but it had fallen on the floor. I gave him mine, and he used it to dab the sweat from his forehead. He must have really thought he was going to be a father. Would he have proposed to me right away? That would have dramatically fast-tracked my introduction to the family. ("Hello, Mother, this is Emily. She's showing up to dinner in her pajamas because it doesn't matter what you think of her. She's having my baby.")

"Should we order mussels?" Lars asked.

"Or carpaccio," I said.

I could eat raw beef; I wasn't pregnant, after all. Lars got the hint, and we both laughed joyfully. It was a beautiful moment; love really does conquer all. Lars tenderly took my hand.

"But if you have to leave so early..."

"Yes, we should probably go," I said.

Lars nodded to the waiter, who brought our jackets. Not a single time had Lars paid at the trattoria, and I was dying to know how the money flowed. Did he run a tab and pay the bill once a year, or were there favors happening in the background? But those were the kinds of questions you never got an answer to if you asked them.

We said goodbye in the parking lot with a long kiss.

"Let's talk on the phone tomorrow night, okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

It was only when I was in the car that I realized he hadn't wanted to know where I was going or what I would be doing there.

About 24 hours later, I was pulling my rolling suitcase over the gangway of the "Störtebeker." I'd taken my luggage to the office with me that morning, not knowing when the ferry would next depart from Kiel. If it had been a few days later, I would have just lived at the office. The carpet under my desk seemed downright cozy compared to the alternative: being besieged by Malik. Casper, at least, was thrilled to see me ready for a trip, and my colleagues were also happy to be spared a several-hour train ride and an indefinite stay in a tiny cabin. ("And you know you don't even have cell service on the ship?" Ida had asked.)

The wind blew salt into my face. I braced myself against it and let my hair get knotted. My cheeks were glowing and my eyes were tearing up.

On the ship, I was greeted by a tired-looking blonde with an Eastern European accent. She described the way to my cabin. My ticket included all meals. If I wanted, I was cordially invited to the onboard restaurant "for a midnight snack." She pronounced the last syllable "snaaack" and followed it with a hearty yawn.

Casper's assistant had booked a single-occupancy cabin for me. I placed my bag in the back left corner under the television, the only place where it wasn't in the way, and looked around. On the right wall was a bunk bed, and on the left was a sofa that could be converted into a third bed. The bathroom was to the left of the door. I took a look inside. Except for the fixtures, everything was made of plastic. What didn't fit the picture, however, was the hair dryer lying on the closed toilet lid. It felt heavy in my hand and was covered in red piano lacquer. In the grill in front of the nozzle was a note: "Welcome aboard. If you're not too tired, I would be happy to meet you on the bridge for a welcome drink. Captain Rasmussen."

I put the note next to the toothbrush holder, took off my sneakers, and opened my bag. On top were my other shoes: slippers and stilettos. The slippers – battered, moth-eaten monstrosities – were my secret weapon. I sometimes wore them to meetings I was unprepared for. Distracting from

small inconsistencies was a trick I used to use often, and it worked in business, too. If I did it right, people would later say about me, "She was poised – except for the shoes."

But for Captain Rasmussen, I would honor him with stilettos. I didn't understand what he was trying to say with the hair dryer, but I took it as a friendly message. And I was right to do so.

He greeted me with awkward pecks on the cheek. The blonde who had led me to the bridge couldn't hide her amusement.

"Good evening," the captain said. "Bonsoir."  
I beamed at him.

"You speak French?"

"Only that, nothing more. I read your name and wanted to prepare a little."

"That's nice. But we can talk in German. I studied in Switzerland and lived in Hamburg for a while. Now I am based in Copenhagen."

"Ah, a cosmopolitan."

You've got that right, I thought. I used to travel to England, Portugal, and Italy, too, always wherever there was something to be gained.

"I want you to feel comfortable on board," the captain said. "On this trip, you will be my most important guest."

"Strictly speaking, I'm not a guest at all. I'm here to work."

"Of course, I know that, but I didn't want to come right out and say it. That's a bad German habit, isn't it? The French make small talk first."

"Actually, the English do that."

"Oh? What do the French do?"

Good question. I thought about it.

"We eat."

"I'm prepared for that, too!"

He half-turned me around. Behind me was a small table with a wooden board holding no less than ten types of cheese. Next to it were two glasses and two carafes. One was filled with water, the other with a cloudy-white liquid.

"Pernod?" I asked.

"Especially for you," he confirmed, and added – as if I could have missed it – "and cheese!"

"Very thoughtful," I said. "And thanks for the hair dryer, too."

"That was the least I could do. This isn't the Queen Elizabeth II, and my resources are limited, but I thought to myself: If a woman lacks everything, what does she most long for?"

"A hair dryer, obviously," I said, without a change of expression.

Captain Rasmussen pulled two stools out from under the table and moved one for me. I sat down and waited for him to hand me a glass.

"Just a small sip, please."

"It's best if you mix it yourself," he said. "I'm only drinking water anyway."

He stood up again because the blonde had reappeared in the doorway and wanted to ask him something. As his back was turned, I took the carafe with the alcohol, filled a glass three-quarters full, added just enough water to make the

Pernod translucent, and drank it down in big gulps.

"That's it, I'm off the clock," I thought. "And not just for today."

I had fled from my past, and the "Störtebeker" offered me asylum. I wanted to stay until Malik lost interest in me and ended up behind bars again for some new "sure thing." The Phantom didn't need to fear me; I had no intention of tracking it down anytime soon, because then my mission would be over. If it hadn't been found for years, a few weeks wouldn't make a difference, and from what I'd seen of the ship so far, my cabin couldn't be too expensive. Casper might get annoyed if I didn't accomplish anything for a while, but what could he do? Come here himself? Send unwilling colleagues?

Outside, the lights of the harbor shone. You could barely see any people, which was a relief when you were used to the hustle and bustle of airports. Only a lonely figure hurried across the pier. I emptied the glass and poured myself another. Of course, I'd have to go home someday, if only for Lars and the Suzannes of this world. I should come up with something for them. Tomorrow. Today, I was drinking.

Captain Rasmussen returned to me.

"Do you actually believe in the existence of the Phantom?" I asked. "Or am I just supposed to search for it to officially confirm that this stowaway doesn't exist at all?"

"You don't have to confirm anything for me," he said. "If the Phantom didn't exist, we would have had to invent it. People love it. Compared to the other lines, we don't have much else to offer. Unfortunately, everything's a bit run down on the Störtebeker. The company isn't investing anymore." He tapped the clock hanging on the wall. The big hand jumped ahead five minutes. "I have two years left until retirement, and I'd like to spend them on this ship. A boat like this grows on you, you know? Yes, it's shabby, but there's still a family atmosphere here. If we get bought out, the new owner will probably do a complete refit. Then bingo night will be a thing of the past. Either everything will be much more luxurious, or he'll turn it into a ghost ship with hardly any staff, and passengers will have to get beer and pre-packaged sandwiches from a vending machine."

He poured himself some water and toasted me.

"You are a charming lady, but I'm afraid you will be my iceberg. Young people like you... Before we even get to Helsinki, you'll have dragged out three or four phantoms and multiplied your success bonus. Am I right?"

He raised a bushy eyebrow, and I had nothing to say. My mind was blank and my vision was no longer perfectly clear. I was relieved to hear a ringing sound. Captain Rasmussen went to the control console.

"No, my wristwatch works fine," he said. "You're right, we need to cast off. Wait, I'll let you know in a second."

A pause, he tapped on something, and then I heard him say: "There was a last-minute booking. Has he... He is almost here, you say? Where?"

He looked outside. The lonely figure had reached the gangway. The floor beneath my feet suddenly seemed to turn to quicksand. I clung to the chair for support. Was the Pernod responsible for my dizziness? Could I no longer handle it? Neither. No, I had recognized who the person was who was so determined to get on board: Malik.

The next morning felt like New Year's Day. Why on earth had I eaten and drunk so much? After Malik appeared, I had hurriedly said goodbye to the captain, who somehow still managed to foist the cheese platter on me. Taking the Pernod with me, on the other hand, had been my idea. With my spoils, I fled to my cabin and locked myself in. What happened after that, I no longer knew. It couldn't have been a stylish evening. On the floor lay half-eaten and spat-out cheese rinds.

I groaned as I got up and opened my handbag. The cosmetic bag was still on top. Thank goodness! That meant I hadn't taken out my phone to make a shamefully drunk call to Lars. I brushed my teeth. After that, I felt a little better. I desperately needed coffee, so I traded the wrinkled suit I had slept in for jeans and a sweater. I folded a headscarf out of the pillowcase from the unused bed and tied it under my chin. It covered my head on three sides and was better than no disguise at all. Something like that helped

in a crowd. As I soon found out, there was no crowd in the dining room. Judging by the plundered buffet, I was late. But I wasn't in the mood for scrambled eggs and salmon anyway. Unfortunately, the thermos container labeled "Kaffee" now only dispensed air.

"I saved a cup for you," Malik said, close to my ear. "If you'd care to join me?"

He had been waiting for me. What should I do? He would definitely get on my nerves, and I could tolerate that better with caffeine. I followed him to a table by the window. Malik had built a makeshift warmer on it. A cereal bowl full of coffee stood on four water glasses, with a tea light burning in the middle. I grabbed it greedily and burned my fingers.

"Let me do that."

Malik put another cup in front of me, used the tablecloth from the next table as a pot holder, and poured for me. I pulled my headscarf further down over my forehead and lowered my face to the drink.

"Hair problems?" Malik asked.

I stayed silent.

"You never once visited me in prison," he said softly.

"That would have been unwise, wouldn't it?" I asked.

"You would have had nothing to fear. The police were satisfied with me. They always only assumed there was one perpetrator."

"Because there was only one perpetrator. You!"

"Because you slipped away like a shabby pickpocket."

"You twist everything!"

I got angry. My stomach felt like the bitter coffee was burning a hole in it.

"I wanted to call the job off," I said. "But you didn't answer your phone."

"Because I didn't hear it. The material of that cursed mechanic's uniform was too thick. And that's your fault, too. You got the uniform."

"But would it have been too much to ask to look at your phone one more time before you stomped into a gallery and stole half a dozen paintings?"

We glared at each other across the table. My anger had ignited his. Nothing had changed. We couldn't be indifferent to each other. That's why he was sitting here, and that's why I wasn't getting up. When we were together, a bubble surrounded us, and no matter how beautiful or ugly it was inside, neither of us wanted to break it, because nothing seemed to exist outside of it. Malik blew out the tea light. Wax splattered on my side of the tablecloth.

"Maybe you should have written everything down," he said. "Because that plan was obviously too demanding for me. For my part, we would have stuck with simple break-ins. But that wasn't classy enough for Madam. After she read that book, it just had to be an art heist."

"The book is called *The Goldfinch*," I said. "You should have read it, too. And I didn't want to do it

like in the book. There, terrorists blow up a museum, and the little boy steals the painting because he has the opportunity. But he loses his mother, and many other people die, too. Did you want me to become a murderer?"

"No. But your idea with the plumbing company wasn't so brilliant." He changed his voice and mimicked me: "Oh, Malik, it's simple! You just dress up as a technician and let them lead you to the boiler room. It's across from the room where they store the pictures for the next exhibition. You get to the pictures out through the ventilation shaft, hand them to me, then you break the locking mechanism, crawl back, and tell the gallery owner you heard suspicious noises."

"No one could have caught you."

"Except that the real plumbers had already been there the day before. You missed that little detail."

"When have you ever heard of tradespeople showing up earlier than expected? But I noticed it. Their van was parked a block away. I asked the foreman about their schedule and found out they were working their way through the streets. I called you immediately after that. I could have saved you."

"You made the mistake. And I still got the paintings out."

"With a weapon, which made it a robbery. You know I would never..."

"Because you lack the courage."

"Hoho," I beat my chest like an ape. "You want paintings? I'll get you paintings, lady."

"Yeah, I did that." He spoke more softly and sounded hurt. "I fulfilled your wish, even though from the beginning I thought we wouldn't make any money from the paintings. And I was right. Since the newspaper article about the robbery, not a single line has been written about the painter. We'd still be stuck with his works today."

"His time will come. He paints with hot wax, it's an ancient technique. Even in hundreds of years, the colors will still shine just as brightly. His expression won't have lost any of its strength."

"I'm sorry, I don't have an eye for that."

He said it without irony in his voice, and I knew: Even though he had given years of his life for worthless works of art, he would have loved to understand what I valued in them. Before, in Paris, we sometimes went window shopping together, and he would listen to me for hours as I explained my enthusiasm for this or that dress, pointing out the details that distinguished it from off-the-rack clothing.

With Malik, I could be who I was. He not only knew my greatest weakness but also understood it. Once, I spontaneously stole a handbag from a display and was almost caught. The same bag was on a shelf in the store, and if I had stolen it from there, probably no one would have noticed. After we had shaken off the security guard in a wild chase and were catching our breath on a staircase to the Seine among puddles of piss, Malik wanted

to know why I had taken the risk. I explained that the bag had been more beautifully draped in the display. He just said that I was absolutely right.

"Why are you here?" I asked Malik. "What do you want?"

"I don't understand the question. What would I want? The same thing as before prison. They caught one of us, and I was the unlucky one. But does that mean the other one can disappear without an explanation to build a new life for herself?"

"I'm sorry, I really do owe you an explanation. I couldn't go on without you, and it was only after you were gone that I realized I didn't want to. Every adventure has an end. I want to live a quieter life."

"That's not my little Magpie talking."

"No. That's someone else. The honest Emily. You know: A clear conscience..."

"You never had a bad conscience."

"Because I saw myself as an anarchist. But that was a youthful thing. Now I'm older and I like rules. They give you security, and you need that when you're alone."

"You don't seem alone to me. What about..."

"Leave Lars out of this!"

"Yeah, yeah, the little lord."

"Stop it!"

I pushed my chair back. Malik was cornering me, and I didn't know how to defend myself. I was now only used to dealing with people who respected the rules and boundaries of a civilized

society. Malik didn't. If he had decided to continue our shared career, it would be difficult to convince him otherwise. Fatally, my arguments sounded weak even to my own ears. Why choose a mundane office job and a noble man with difficult family baggage and an overwhelming code of conduct when you could have a wild, free life with a thief who would steal the stars from the sky for you? Maybe because prison was a threat? But Malik had been there, not me.

I left the dining room. Malik followed me. I couldn't get any further with my mind; I just knew I hated how everything had suddenly been thrown into chaos and my beautiful plans seemed worthless.

We arrived at my cabin. Shaking with anger, I swiped the keycard through the reader. Nothing happened. I cursed the device internally. Like everything on the ship, it had long passed its expiration date. Malik watched my desperate attempts.

"Should I try?" he asked.

"Leave me alone!"

I looked up and down the hallway. We were alone.

"I'll scream for help if you don't go."

He raised his hands. It was supposed to be a calming gesture, but all I saw was his snake ring, and in the same moment, I felt it again. Once we had to hide in a car trunk, and I'd panicked in there. I squeezed Malik's hand and practically stamped the snake pattern into my palm. It had

been visible for days afterward. I could still trace it from memory today.

"Don't touch me!" I screamed.

"I get it. What do you think of me? I'm not... I only asked if I should try the door."

He turned and walked away, offended. I was left behind with the damn card. I wanted to throw myself on my bed and cry. But I couldn't even get in!

"Go ahead, then!" I called after Malik. "Give it a try. You're always so much better at everything, you always know what to do, nothing can stop you, you're a go-getter, never discouraged, always —"

Malik came back. I held out the card to him, but he walked right past my outstretched arm and through the door. Yes, he walked right through it, shoulder-first, but without any visible effort. Plastic rattled against plastic.

I stared in shock at the broken lock, which, admittedly, wasn't exactly burglar-proof. It looked more like a child's toy.

"What was that for?"

"You already tried the card."

Malik smiled, his good mood restored.

"And now I'll leave you alone, Emily, so you can get back to your new, respectable business."

He strolled away, hands in his pockets.

I slipped into my cabin and sat with my back against the door to keep it closed. My flight from Malik had only made everything worse. I was in one of the few places from which you couldn't

simply leave. Even a plane makes a refueling stop after half a day. But the "Störtebeker" wouldn't arrive in Helsinki until tomorrow morning, and even then, I could only leave if I had succeeded in bringing the Phantom to light. I needed to keep a cool head now, but to make matters worse, I felt a familiar tingle along my spine. The encounter with Malik had resurrected something in me that I had buried under many layers of free will with Dr. Knudsen's help. Suddenly, I seemed to be able to see more sharply, hear better, and react faster. I felt alive in a way only those who were used to doing forbidden things and getting away with them knew. No doubt: I was in Magpie mode and desperately needed help.

I fished for my handbag with my foot. Dr. Knudsen's number was saved in my phone under "ICE," "In Case of Emergency." I had thought that if, for example, I got into a car accident, the hospital would call Dr. Knudsen, and her first thought would be, "My patient Emily has relapsed, and this is what she gets for it. She was probably shot in a mafia den." But then she would learn from a friendly doctor what had really happened: no run-in with the underworld, just a collision with a speeder, an honest, respectable crash with a total loss on both sides. And then Dr. Knudsen would be proud of me.

Why wasn't she answering the phone? Only now did I notice the lack of a dial tone. I had no service, just as Ida had prophesied. Great.

I looked around the cabin. There was nothing shiny here. In my worst times, I would have been content with a polished faucet, but I wasn't in that state yet, and besides, I didn't have any tools on hand. Still, I had to quickly find a place where I wasn't alone, couldn't find anything valuable, and could have peace from Malik. Where could such a place be? I couldn't stay on the bridge permanently, and they wouldn't let me into the engine rooms. But what about the galley? I took the pillowcase off my head, put my hair up, and made my way there.

# THE SMALL PACKAGE

The chef immediately wanted to kick me out, but I held my business card under his nose.

"Emily Marchand, from the company Casper&Steffens, auditing. Didn't Captain Rasmussen announce me?"

"He said something in the meeting yesterday, but I didn't think you would be in the kitchen —"

"Oh, yes, we're thorough. But don't let me disturb you. I just want to watch you for a bit."

"Alright. Sit on the stool by the pass-through. You'll be out of the way there."

He seated me and asked if I wanted something to drink. When I said no, he started to whirl around again. Two other men came in without a word and began to chop vegetables. I leaned back and exhaled. It smelled cozy, of rendered fat. Watching the chef was also a pleasure. His movements were precisely coordinated to the tight space; he reached into hanging shelves and base cabinets without looking and could pour oil into one pot with his left hand while stirring in another with his right. Of course, he didn't care about doing his work quietly, but if he learned that, he could become a passable pickpocket.

The chef put a tray of eggs on the counter and cracked them into a large bowl at an insane speed. He was only an arm's length away from me. The rows of eggs emptied, and I felt the urge to save one of them. "Save" was one of the words I shouldn't think in a situation like this, because it

downplayed and excused my behavior. Objects didn't need to be saved; they didn't have feelings. An egg didn't care if it was cracked, and pieces of jewelry didn't get sad if they lay in display cases and weren't touched for weeks. But even though my mind knew that, my fingers snatched the egg that would have been next. The chef, in his machine-like precision, grasped at thin air.

"You just took an egg," he said.

It was a statement, not a question, and I felt ridiculous. My right arm hung down behind the stool, and I held the egg concealed in my hand. I had to show the chef it was still there, otherwise, he might think I'd splatted it against the wall behind me or swallowed it whole, like a boa gulping down its breakfast mouse.

"Yes, that's right," I said and held it up. "Here it is."

"Was that a test? Did you want to see if I'd notice?"

"We auditors have our methods, but... uh, no. I'm just hungry."

"You should have said so. Boiled, poached, fried? With sausage, cucumber, toast?"

"A pancake would be nice. But I can make it myself."

A little later, I was standing in front of the stove. Milk, flour, and sugar waited in plastic bowls. The suspicious chef had measured everything out for me. But I still couldn't part with the egg. Its shell had these tiny indentations, like hammered gold.

How many eggs had I touched in my life? It was strange that I had never noticed that before. When the chef looked away, I let the egg slide into my bag and stirred the remaining ingredients together. I had to move carefully with the fragile thing, and that gave me that familiar tightrope walker feeling. Fear walks with you, don't make a false step. Not using the egg meant I was stealing it, and if I succeeded, I would have restored my thief's honor. I was already triumphing internally. But as I was about to pour the milk-flour-sugar mixture into the hot pan, it dawned on me that I had gotten myself into another problem. Without an egg, the pancake wouldn't set. Idiot. I needed starch. In a ceiling-high shelf were identical clear containers of white powder. It couldn't all be flour. I crossed my arms and looked at the containers, shaking my head. Time for a bluff.

"If I remember correctly, the EU recently introduced a labeling requirement for loose food items."

"I couldn't care less about the EU," the chef said. "We're in international waters."

"Labels would still be useful. This way, no one knows what's in them."

"We know, and that's enough."

"But what if you get a new helper..."

"So what? At worst, the soup will be sugared. What do you think I'm keeping here that's dangerous? Heroin? Rat poison?"

Starch would have been enough for me.

"You know, I'm actually looking for someone," I said, to steer the conversation back to a friendlier topic.

"Our Phantom?"

Well, that was easy, I thought.

"Don't be shy," the chef dried his hands on his apron. "Would you like to book the small package or the large one?"

"I'd just like to talk to him."

"That's not possible, unfortunately. He's a phantom, after all. But the large package includes a ship tour that offers the possibility of getting in touch with the Phantom."

"Then I'll take that."

"That'll be 25 euros. We meet at the bar at 7 PM."

I reluctantly paid the amount. This smelled like a rip-off. I wasn't used to being on the other side of a crooked deal. The kitchen clock showed a quarter to eleven.

"Does the Phantom have appointments until evening?" I asked. "Or could I meet him earlier somehow?"

"You can also book the small package. For 10 euros, a crew member will tell you the story of the Phantom over a hot drink in the Panorama Café."

"But the hot drink is included in the price?"

"Of course."

I pulled out my wallet again. Now I really had to go through with the egg theft. Enough was enough. I was the professional here, after all.

On the pass-through, I spotted a single banana. While the chef was on the phone on the opposite wall, I worked the fruit into my pancake batter. It made the mixture thicker, and when I put it in the hot pan, it actually set. I had barely flipped the pancake when the bell at the pass-through rang. The tired blonde from the previous evening waved to me.

"I am Tatjana. You booked the small package?"

"Correct."

I left the pancake behind in the kitchen. Tatjana led me through the stairwells and corridors of the ship up to a glassed-in observation deck, with small tables and wicker chairs. The hot drink turned out to be instant coffee, which she prepared with water from a kettle. The chair she pulled out for me looked comfortable, but with an egg in my bag, I couldn't just flop down into it. So I balanced on the edge of the furniture with my buttocks and arched my back like a particularly attentive listener. Tatjana beamed at me, put her fingers with their pointed, filed nails together in the style of a Chancellor, and began to tell the story in her heavy accent.

It began at a time when budget airlines were just starting out and most people still traveled to Scandinavia by ship. One day, the Störtebeker carried a not-so-young man from Kiel to Helsinki. The man was very excited because he was traveling to see his childhood sweetheart. In school, they had been inseparable, but then the man had left town and the woman had married a

Finnish doctor, whom she followed to his homeland. The man also later got married and became a father once or twice. (For a story she told often, Tatjana was surprisingly imprecise with the details). The man's life ran a quiet course. When he was about 50, his wife died. The same year, a class reunion took place. He had never attended such events, but this time he did. And he saw his childhood sweetheart again, who was visiting relatives in her old hometown. They spent two evenings together and got along as well as ever. He felt that he still loved her, but she made it clear right away that she was faithful to her husband. Nevertheless, they exchanged addresses and promised to write to each other when they said goodbye. And so they did. They sent long letters back and forth for years. At some point, the Finnish doctor also died, and the man who would become the Phantom took early retirement. Now there was nothing to stop him from going to see the woman. He bought a ticket for the passage to Helsinki. The woman and he were eagerly awaiting the reunion. Finally, the day came when the man began his journey.

"It was winter," Tatjana said. "We have good entertainment programs in the evening, but still: During the day, the man had a lot of time for brooding."

And he asked himself: would everything be between them as it once was? It seemed impossible to him. Almost half a century had passed since they were a couple. Finally, the

Störtebeker sailed into its destination port. The man stood in the panorama bar and spotted the woman who had come to pick him up. What was it that bothered him in this long-awaited moment? What wasn't right? Perhaps the expectation weighed him down. He ran to the windows on the other side and looked out at the sea. When the Störtebeker docked, he did not go ashore. He hid and made the passage back again. However, he didn't leave the ship in Germany either. Nor on the renewed trip to Helsinki.

Tatjana leaned over to me and whispered, "He lives hidden among us."

I waited to see if there was more, but she was finished and was reapplying her lipstick.

"That's sad," I said.

Tatjana shook her head vigorously. Oh no, many people found hope in the story.

I didn't understand. Then Tatjana remembered that she had forgotten one more part.

The woman, you see, waited to this day. Every time the Störtebeker sailed into Helsinki, she came to the harbor. The man surely saw her. And that surely kept him from throwing himself into the cold waves midway, ashamed of his lack of courage.

I still couldn't understand how someone could stand being on a ship for years. When I said that, Tatjana looked at me as if I were a difficult case, put her lipstick away, and became poetic: Had I ever spoken to sailors who, after decades of service full of hardship, had to retire ashore?

Instead of enjoying their golden years and recovering from the strains of hard work, the longing for the sea made them sick. No other kind of travel was as free as being at sea. A train or car could stop at any time, but when you were on a ship in the middle of the ocean, you were truly away. It was like a dream you knew you were guaranteed to be able to dream for another half an hour.

Did I understand the Phantom now? Tatjana looked at her watch. She unfortunately had to go to the dining room because lunch was starting. But I should stay for a while longer and enjoy the view.

"So I might get attached to the ship too and never go ashore again?" I asked.

She laughed.

"No, please. One Phantom is enough work."

With that, she said goodbye. I looked out. There was hardly any movement, and the sky was cloudy. On the horizon, water and air seemed to blend together. I had always liked being around people, but in this place, I believed I could get used to being alone. This mood was good; I should preserve it, because it would help me empathize with the Phantom and find it. That's how the profilers in American TV shows did it. I felt a vibration in my pants pocket. For a second, I thought it was the egg, wanting to hatch into a chick, incubated by my body heat. But then a ringtone was added, and I realized it was my cell phone. The display announced Lars. I hesitated to

answer, because it would destroy my melancholy, but then I saw an abbreviation for an unknown network in the upper corner. I had probably been called via the ship's satellite connection. A return call would be expensive.

"Good morning," I trilled. (The Parisian I still was at heart used this greeting until the afternoon.)

"Good morning, Emily," Lars said formally. "How are you?"

Well, I had no idea. I preferred not to know the answer to that myself. I wouldn't dare to ask again until I had finished the job and Malik had left the country. Hopefully, when no one called me by the bird name anymore, the urge to steal would also disappear. I placed the egg on the table and sank deep into the armchair.

"I have to find the Phantom of the Störtebeker," I said.

We were talking about my work – that was good. I knew Lars wasn't interested in it, but I didn't want to tell him anything more about my life right now.

His answer surprised me.

"No way! You're supposed to find him?"

"You've heard of the Phantom?"

"Uh, yeah, my family has connections to the shipping company."

"I had no idea. You never told me."

"Because business is boring, unless it's taking you away from me. Then it's a nuisance."

That touched me. He wasn't someone who just tossed out flattering remarks. Not like Malik. Maybe that was the downside of honest people. To give good compliments, you had to be able to exaggerate, and exaggeration was half a lie, and lying was stealing from the truth, and stealing –

"Have you found anything out yet?" Lars interrupted my thoughts. "Is there a real person behind the story? A legend might be a nice thing for the passengers, but not for the shipping company. For them, a stowaway is a security problem in times of terrorism."

"If there's anything to it, there are two people behind it," I said. "The Phantom's childhood sweetheart has been waiting for years in Helsinki for him to get off the ship. Can you imagine? She must be over 70 and walks to the harbor once a week, just to be disappointed again."

"Hmm."

We were silent for a while.

Then Lars said, "I miss you."

"I miss you too," I said. "If you were standing at the harbor, I'd get off."

I waited for him to laugh, but the line was silent.

"Don't worry, I'll be back anyway. The ship isn't big, and if I don't find the Phantom by tomorrow morning, I'll do the return crossing, but I'll definitely have him by Kiel, and then I'll take the train home."

Behind me, the door opened. Malik came in. In shock, I knocked the table with my leg. The egg rolled off and broke on the floor. I cursed.

Lars wanted to know what had happened, and I mumbled something about "spilling coffee on my pants." Malik gave me a mocking look. I regretted not stealing another egg so I could smash it in his hair.

In that moment, I was aware that I had once again avoided the truth with Lars. It was just a small lie, but a whole chain of them hung on it. I had to somehow find a way back to honesty. I could say, Chéri, there's no coffee on my pants. An egg fell and broke, a raw one. What did I want to do with the egg? Nothing, really, I just wanted to steal it because I like to do things like that. It used to be my hobby, you know? I used to prefer jewelry, raw gold, or small antiques, but if none of that is at hand, I've learned to be content with something that came out of a chicken's butt. Why did I take up this pastime again? I ran into an old lover. Does that sound like a chance meeting? No, it wasn't; he looked for me, found me, and has been following me ever since. He's standing just a few steps away from me right now. Are you jealous? Oh, you know, he's good-looking and he probably knows more shortcuts to a woman's heart than you do, but otherwise, there's nothing there. And that's all I almost forgot to tell you, Cheri.

Fortunately, Lars preempted a possible confession.

"Then go soak your pants quickly," he said.  
"Coffee is hard to wash out. We'll talk again,  
okay?"

"Yeah. See you soon."

Malik stood with his back to me, pretending to enjoy the view. My anger at him grew without him having to do anything. I took my coffee cup and poured the rest of the watery instant brew evenly over both pant legs. Ha! Now I hadn't lied after all.

Malik turned around and brought me his handkerchief, humming the first verse of "La mer." The handkerchief was cloth, not paper. The snob.

"If you hang your pants outside, they'll be dry by this evening," he said.

"Why by this evening?"

"Seven PM, meeting at the bar. You booked the large package too, didn't you?"

# THE BIG PACKAGE

I lugged my bag onto the bed at 6:30 PM, ready to tackle the age-old question: what to wear? The coffee stains from this morning were still holding strong on my pants. I hadn't seen anyone dressed up during my early dinner – quite the opposite, in fact. Tracksuits were the dominant fashion statement, and I'd even spotted a guy in slippers. Maybe things were different in the evening? The program in the lounge started at 8:00 PM: bingo, horse racing, and performances by the "Queen of the Sea." (I had a sneaking suspicion this was just another of Tatjana's roles.) Oh well, I thought, I'll wear the evening dress. Why else did I pack it?

The dress was a sleek, sleeveless thing made of green silk. I paired it with a pale yellow scarf to hide the tiny holes near the neckline where I'd had the boutique remove the sequins. When I bought the dress, I was in a very strict phase of banishing all things glittery from my life. Little did I know that my precautions were useless, and in my emotionally unstable state, even a chicken egg could become a dangerous weapon. Speaking of dangerous, I appreciated that Malik had left me alone since our meeting at the Panorama Café. He'd claimed that he'd booked "The Big Package" without any ulterior motives – "What else is there to do here? There's no movie theater." – but I had still gotten angry, told him to stop following me, and said I'd gone to the Panorama Bar to be by myself. He insisted he had climbed the stairs for

the exact same reason. Maybe he was telling the truth and I was wrong, but maybe he wasn't. Either way, I didn't care. Sooner or later, he was bound to do something stupid again.

And right on cue, there was a knock on my cabin door. I opened it.

"Surprise, surprise."

Malik stood there in a tuxedo. Typical. He had to one-up everyone and act like he was on the Titanic.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I want to discuss something professional with you."

"What kind of profession are we talking about?"

"Yours. I haven't forgotten that you want your peace and quiet, but you'll have to forgive me. This ship is incredibly dull."

He had a point, though. For lack of anything better to do, I'd spent the time between lunch and dinner lying on my bed, flipping through daytime TV. Malik lowered his head and looked up at me from under his brow. He was more of a flirt than a teenage girl. I hated his charming ways, and I hated even more that his schtick worked, even though I saw right through it.

I decided I should ask Dr. Knudsen if he could prescribe me some pills for confusion caused by men like Malik. If there were emergency drops for blood pressure and pills for virility, surely the market had to offer something that turned handsome people into sheep in the eyes of others.

"Baa," I said out loud.

Malik just smiled, not looking surprised at all. Maybe he thought it was a game. He loved all kinds of games.

"Come in," I sighed.

"Since this is a business trip for you, I assume you're looking for the Phantom," he said. "So, what's your plan?"

"I'll go on the tour, and if we meet the Phantom, I'll ask him to talk to me alone later. Then I'll convince him to finally go ashore."

"And that's supposed to work?"

"Why not?"

"You think the Phantom is just sitting somewhere waiting for us?"

"Maybe."

"With a beer? Doing a crossword puzzle? That would be a super mysterious Phantom."

I shrugged and tucked my handbag under my arm. Malik held the door open for me. Because the cabin was so small, I had to squeeze past him. He was almost a head taller than me, and in the past, I'd often rested my face on his neck. As I slid between him and the bathroom door, I felt the warmth of his body. But I managed not to touch him. Not even the fabric of my dress brushed against him. I could still move like a snake; old habits die hard. Even though I had decided never to use this skill again, I was proud of myself. I could have picked at and removed the laundry tag from the inside of his pants with my fingernails without him even noticing. But of course, I didn't

do that; it was forbidden. I shouldn't even be thinking about it.

"So you've completely changed, huh?" Malik said conversationally. "You don't want to take anything that doesn't belong to you anymore? Doesn't that tempt you at all?"

"No," I said, my voice a little too loud to sound casual. "I'm past that. Besides, I have everything I want now."

At the bar, two older Finnish ladies and a German bachelorette party were already waiting: five girls in sailor costumes surrounding a sixth one dressed as a mermaid.

"Ahoy!" they called out to us. "Time for a drink!"

They ordered two more shots from the bartender. Seven used glasses and a half-empty bottle of vodka were already on the counter. The Finnish women readily accepted their freshly filled glasses. They had clearly gone through this ritual a few times already, cheerfully yelling "Ahoy!" before downing the vodka as if it were water. I repeated the drinking toast and emptied my glass, too. Malik didn't get off so easily. To the girls' cheers, he had to first kiss the mermaid's fish tail. The sailors pushed his head down, and when he came back up, one of them had put her hat on him.

This is going to be fun, I thought.

After the next round, Tatjana's twin sister, who introduced herself as Lydia, appeared. She

announced that the tour was about to begin. We would be going into areas of the ship that passengers normally weren't allowed to enter.

"Please don't press any buttons!" she warned us.

We marched off in a single-file line. Lydia led us through the decks and into the belly of the ship. We saw storage and technical rooms. She explained that traces of the Phantom had been found everywhere: empty chocolate bar wrappers, used tissues, even a toothbrush once. The Finnish ladies watched everything with interest, but the sailors and their mermaid only used the stops to refuel. Malik and I managed to get out of the drinking rounds.

After half an hour, we reached an empty room next to the ship's laundry. Lydia asked us to form a semicircle in front of a laundry chute coming out of the wall.

"Highlight!" she said.

She explained that we could speak to the Phantom through this chute, but it would only answer if it was in the mood.

Lydia tapped the wall of the chute with a clothes hanger and called out, "Phantom, Phantom!" She sounded like she was trying to lure a cat.

She then turned to us and said, "Shhh! Who wants to ask a question?"

The Finnish ladies raised their hands. They stepped forward and shouted something in their language into the chute. The response came back

surprisingly fast. The Phantom seemed to be a polyglot, answering in Finnish, too. I didn't understand what it said, but it rhymed. The Finnish women looked at each other, confused. Malik asked Lydia if she could translate, and she said she wasn't sure, but it sounded like a Christmas carol.

Next, the sailors wanted to know if the Phantom would dance with their mermaid. The answer was no, unfortunately it couldn't, but it wished her and her future spouse a long, happy marriage. The sailors booed and decided to go back to the bar to continue their party, because the Phantom was "really disappointing." But Lydia blocked the way to the door. We would all be leaving together and had to wait; not everyone had asked their question yet.

She discreetly checked her watch and gave Malik and me an expectant look. Malik declined, saying he had no question. I said I had a personal question that I'd rather ask in private. Unfortunately, my attempt failed. Lydia regretfully said she couldn't leave me alone for security reasons. Quietly, she added that she would just pretend not to listen, the Finnish women wouldn't understand me anyway, and the sailor-mermaid group would certainly not remember a thing tomorrow. Encouragingly, she pushed me toward the chute. I stared blankly into its gaping maw.

"Phantom," I called out. "I need some advice on matters of the heart."

"Beg your pardon?" boomed the voice.

"How do you know if a love has a future?"

"Love is the future."

How stupid. The Phantom hadn't given it a moment's thought. It was probably just sitting up there with a catalog of folk wisdom and platitudes.

"Could I see you for a moment?" I called. "Just for five minutes, I have to tell you something that..."

"That's enough, that's enough," Lydia pulled me away from the chute. "One question each!"

She ushered us out of the room, locked the door, and led us back. She kept turning her head at every corner. I had made her suspicious.

"Well, that was a bust," Malik unnecessarily whispered. "That's not going to get you anywhere."

"The Phantom must have been in a room on the deck right above us," I whispered back. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have heard it so clearly. But now it's probably long gone."

"I have an idea," Malik said.

By now we had made it back to the passenger decks. Malik put an arm around my waist, waved to Lydia, and pulled me down a hallway as if we were two lovebirds who couldn't wait to get back to their cabin. I shook him off.

"Stop that. What's your idea?"

"We get another crew member to lead us to him."

"They won't do that; they're hiding him. You just saw it."

"You need to ask with more force."

"Right."

"I'll grab a waiter, hold a knife to his throat —"

"No!"

"I wouldn't hurt him."

"We're not going to force anyone. That was never our style, even back then."

"No, because you always had a good plan. But now you're an office ghost. You've filed away your talent."

This conversation was getting ridiculous. I wanted to leave, but Malik blocked my way.

"Just listen to me for a second. In prison, there was a career counselor. He wasn't bad at all. He advised me not to forget my old strengths when I was reorienting myself. I'm goal-oriented, persuasive, and I can turn a supposed disadvantage into an advantage..."

"You can break down doors, crack safes..."

"Only the legal strengths, of course."

"Yeah, and? Did you start some amazing, respectable career?"

"I'm still in the discovery phase. But I wanted to talk about you. You were so skilled at sneaking around, at stealing! You didn't just take something; you also closed the gap, you made the owners forget that it was ever there, and you yourself were never there, either. You're basically a phantom, too!"

I shook my head dismissively. I didn't want to talk about the old days. But I was thinking about something he had said earlier.

"This ship is too big to search systematically," I mused aloud. "So you're right: the crew has to lead us to him. There's no point trying the captain; he's pretending the whole thing is just a story because he'd be in trouble if he were knowingly hiding someone. But several of the crew members surely know the Phantom's hiding spot. He probably sleeps in an empty cabin, and he has to eat several times a day. The chef must be bringing him food."

"And when he does, all you have to do is follow him."

I looked down at the floor.

"That sounds simple enough..."

"But?"

"But I'm afraid of losing control."

"I don't understand."

"The egg! This morning I've been stealing again."

The secret was out. But Malik had probably already figured it out anyway. There were no raw eggs at the buffet, and it was unlikely the egg was part of my luggage.

"So what?" Malik asked. "Were you hungry? That's just petty theft."

"I didn't want to eat it; I just wanted to steal something. The urge was unbearable, and when I did it—"

"You felt better."

"Yes."

"That's great, then."

"No! If I don't get this under control immediately, everything will go down the drain. My new boyfriend is rich. The villa where he lives with his family is guaranteed to be stuffed with expensive decorations, old paintings, and beautiful, sparkling things. Here, I just stole an egg from a chicken, but there, it would be a Fabergé egg. I can forget about an engagement if it turns out after my first visit that I've walked away with a dozen family heirlooms."

Malik put his hands in his pockets and gave me his sad look again.

"It's that serious to you? You want to marry him?"

"What did you think? That's what people do in his circles. He's a noble and has a lot of family obligations. You don't enter into loose arrangements there. The family is the most important thing to them."

"Like the mafia?"

Malik had recovered his composure and was smiling mockingly. This was the Malik I knew.

"Looks like you're completely set on this," he said. "I know when I'm beaten. But..." — he spun around and clapped his hands together — "you're going to need a bachelorette party first."

I made a pained face.

"Where else?" he asked. "This is the perfect place. And you know at a party like this, you get to misbehave one last time. As they say, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Let's do one last

job. We'll find the Phantom. Transform back into the old magpie one final time, Emily! Hide, sneak around, and steal everything your heart desires."

"I don't know about that..."

"I'll watch out for you. I promise! You'll be safe in your bed by the end of the night, and tomorrow morning, we'll pretend it never happened."

He offered me his arm.

"Have I ever gotten you into trouble? Myself, yes, but you've always come out of every situation unscathed. Trust me. You know we can do this."

I did know it, and everything else he was saying sounded absolutely right, too. Lately, I had been under too much pressure. Knowing that I didn't fit into Lars's world had made me feel small. My self-confidence needed a boost. As long as I couldn't be a princess of Copenhagen, I wanted to be the queen of thieves again. I took Malik's arm.

"Let's go," I said. "We're running late. The kitchen closes in half an hour, and we still have preparations to make."

I was back in my cabin, staring helplessly at the contents of my bag. I used to own a black leotard; it didn't rustle, camouflaged me well, and never got snagged on anything. Unfortunately, I had gotten rid of it, and the clothes in my bag were completely unsuitable for a stealth mission.

"Go in your underwear," Malik said. "If someone sees you, it's a perfectly plausible reason to run away."

He couldn't suppress a grin. I decided to keep that idea in mind. First, I tore off small strips of toilet paper and stuffed them into the cups of my bra. I took off my shoes, and Malik attached them to the back of his belt with the straps. The tail of his tuxedo jacket hung over them, hiding them from view. My bare feet, meanwhile, were also invisible under the long dress that reached the floor.

I linked arms with Malik. We strolled out, playing the part of a harmless couple on their way to bingo night. Even though we only passed a few people and most of them looked tipsy and barely noticed us, I walked on the balls of my feet as if I were wearing high heels. When we arrived at the kitchen, Malik stayed outside the door, and I went in alone.

The chef was already cleaning up. I asked if he had eaten my pancake, and he said it had been delicious. He wanted to know what the secret was.

I told him I had replaced the egg with a banana, and he was quite impressed.

"I didn't know that recipe," he said. "Brilliant. If I used a soy substitute for the milk, there would be no animal products in it at all. We're getting more and more requests for vegan food, you know."

"Vegans," I said disdainfully. "Those people don't even realize what they're missing by passing up your seafood salad."

I figured a little flattery was a good way to distract him from the question of what I had done with the egg.

"To each their own," he said. "But vegans are a problem for a different reason."

The chef raised his eyebrows and waited for me to ask why. He seemed like a talkative guy who didn't get out enough. As we spoke, he had continued cleaning up in a sleepwalking kind of way. When you've been doing the same tasks for years, you probably don't even have to think about what you're doing anymore. He took out a loaf of bread and cut two slices. Were these sandwiches for the Phantom?

"Why are vegans a problem?" I quickly asked.

He lowered his voice and gave me a meaningful look.

"Because the most important ingredient in my recipes is mayonnaise. I add it wherever I can. It's in a lot of desserts and even in the dough for my bread rolls. Guess why."

He went over to one of the large refrigerators, took out butter, cold cuts, and pickles, and started making the sandwiches.

I said I had no idea.

"Then let me tell you: mayonnaise makes people sluggish. As you've probably noticed, the entertainment on the Störtebeker is nothing to write home about, so if the passengers take a nap after their meals, they won't get bored.

Mayonnaise sits heavy in the stomach, and if you drink too much beer on top of it, that doesn't mix well. When people are bored, they get drunk, but if they feel sick in time, they'll sneak back to their cabins and not cause any trouble. We'd sooner

skimp on life vests than on mayonnaise. Just a little joke," he winked. "But as for the rest, you can believe me. Enough mayonnaise guarantees a calm crossing for the captain. Mayonnaise is the opium of ship passengers."

While he explained all this, he had finished making the sandwiches, cut them in half, placed them on a plate, and covered them with plastic wrap. Now he noticed my gaze.

"For the bartender," he said. "He's always hungry after his shift."

He put the plate in one of the refrigerators. The kitchen looked clean to me, and apparently it was, because the chef was now just trying to look busy, sorting knives and wiping away invisible water stains. It was time for me to say goodbye and wish him a good evening. He said I was welcome to come back and teach him new recipes.

Malik was waiting in the hallway outside. Without a word, he opened a wall cabinet that held a fire extinguisher. I squeezed inside, and Malik closed the door behind me, leaving only a tiny crack. He had barely left when the chef came out of the kitchen with the sandwiches. It was easy to follow him, and I didn't even need to take off my dress, because the ship's machinery created a constant background noise that muffled the rustling of the fabric. At every turn and staircase the chef took, I dropped a small piece of toilet paper to mark the way for Malik. I paid close attention to the chef's movements. He carried the plate with his right hand and only switched it to

his left before a staircase to hold onto the railing with his right. We were on the first passenger deck, in a hallway still some distance from the next staircase, when he freed up his right hand again and slowed his pace. I quickly scurried back and hid behind a corner. I heard a knock. A door opened and then closed. No words were exchanged. The chef came back in my direction. I was in a side hallway and counted his steps. There were 18. When he was level with my hallway, I pressed myself against the wall. There was no alcove or cabinet to hide in here. If the chef had turned his head, he would have seen me. But he just kept walking, yawning audibly.

I bounced and shook to release the tension. The hardest part of the mission was done. Back in the hallway where the cabin was located, I imitated the chef's walk. He was barely taller than me, but I'd noticed he took long, stork-like strides. I had to gather my dress to take similarly big steps. After eighteen waddles, I arrived at cabin 142. For good measure, I sacrificed one last scrap of paper.

Malik reached me a few minutes later. We nodded to each other, then I knocked and held my breath. The door opened a crack. Maybe the Phantom was waiting for his dessert. When he saw me instead, he tried to slam the door shut again, but Malik was already there and blocked it. With gentle force, he pushed the door open. Standing before us was a gray-haired gentleman with a neatly trimmed mustache. I had imagined the Phantom completely differently – wilder and

crazier, like a mix of Klaus Kinski and a pirate. But this man could have easily passed for a dentist.

For a moment, I doubted if we had the right cabin, but then I noticed the makeshift armchair. The Phantom had folded one of the mattresses and strapped it together with several belts to create a seating area. There was also a footrest, made from a suitcase with a towel draped over it. Only someone who had spent a lot of time in cabins like this could have come up with such a contraption. Malik closed the door behind us. The Phantom backed away nervously.

"What do you want?"

"Just to talk for a bit," Malik said. "Right?" he quietly turned to me.

I had no idea. My mind had only been focused on finding the Phantom. I'd somehow believed that as soon as I tracked him down, everything would fall into place on its own, a catchy song would start playing in the background, and the credits would roll over our faces. But this wasn't a detective movie.

In a cramped six square meters, we were facing a man who seemed completely at home. He didn't look like he had been waiting to be found and rescued.

I asked if we could sit down, and he offered us the lower bunk. He himself sank into the armchair. The plate from the kitchen was still untouched on a folding table. I introduced Malik and myself, and the Phantom said his name was Walter.

"Walter what?" I asked.

Walter Not-Telling-You-Anymore, would that suffice? I said it would, if it had to; I wasn't with the police or customs. Then I explained why I had been looking for him. An investor wanted to buy the line, and certain inspections were necessary.

"It's all terribly boring, to be honest," I said.

"And your presence in this business is just a small disruption, like when an inventory turns up an unexpected item. I could just leave and say I didn't find you and that I'm sure you're just a marketing gimmick. But you," I leaned forward and looked at him intently, "you're going to have a problem soon. When this ship is remodeled, you'll have to get out. Or maybe they are just buying to save on taxes. In this case, the ship will be brought to Bangladesh and scrapped. You could, of course, stay inside while the workers take everything apart around you – no one there will care. But do you want that?"

Of course, Walter didn't want that.

"And isn't someone waiting for you, too?"

Malik asked. "A woman waiting that long isn't something you can take for granted, believe me."

I ignored the dig. Luckily, Walter didn't seem to understand it.

"Of course, I feel guilty about Ursula," he said.

"How many times have I cursed myself for not getting off the ship on that very first crossing. I hid on the ship because I was ashamed and didn't know how I'd get by at home without her. I had already burned all my bridges in Germany; I

would have been homeless. But when I was heading for Helsinki a second time on the Störtebeker, I never in my life would have thought Ursula would be waiting at the harbor again. That's why I didn't have an excuse ready. And without one, I didn't dare to get off. With every trip, my situation seemed more hopeless. How could she ever trust me again? Every time I went to get bread rolls, she would think I wouldn't be back for another ten years. Do you think Ursula still has hope? I think she only comes to the quay for nostalgia now. If I were to actually stand in front of her, it would be like a dead man coming back to life."

He rubbed his face with both hands, messing up his mustache.

"Now you're being dramatic."

Malik shook his head. He looked just as helpless.

"We understand your difficult situation," I said. "But it's better if you end this misery as soon as possible. Buy all the bouquets the ship's boutique has in stock today, get off the ship with them tomorrow, and get down on your knees to beg for your Ursula's forgiveness. Because if you wait until you're forced to leave the ship, your childhood sweetheart will rightly assume you're just looking for a roof over your head."

"Tomorrow morning? I can't do that," Walter said. "I can't just disappear without a word. That would bitterly disappoint the crew. These people have become like family to me. Even the captain

says the mood among them is much better since I've been here. They aren't paid well and are separated from their loved ones back home. But by taking care of me, they feel less lonely. I have the same effect on the crew as a pet. Everyone is friendlier, more balanced, and there are hardly any complaints about drunkenness on duty anymore."

"Others claim that's because of the mayonnaise," I said.

Walter ignored my comment.

"And let's not forget the passengers! You didn't see my strongest performance today, but people with broken hearts often come to me and pour their souls out. I put them back together again."

"I wouldn't take relationship advice from you," Malik said.

"But I don't give advice, I give hope. Look at me. I am faithful to my Ursula, and that's despite having had more than one opportunity. I don't just spend every crossing watching TV in my cabin. Lydia sometimes brings me wigs and glasses. Then I sit at the bar in disguise. I'm often approached by women traveling alone, and you can't even imagine the offers I get from them late at night."

My phone rang. It was Lars. I apologized and went out into the hall.

"Tell me about these offers," I heard Malik say.

Lars wanted to know how I was and if I had found the Phantom yet. I said I was close. I wasn't proud of lying again, but this time, I wanted to

protect Walter. He had been hiding for so long, and I felt like a dachshund pulling a rabbit from its burrow. Besides, the Phantom story was the kind of gossip Lars might pass on to his mother, who could immediately share it with all her acquaintances, which was half the world. I really didn't need a swarm of tabloid journalists waiting for me in Helsinki. The rabbit would have fled again in no time. I heard bright laughter in the background from Lars's end. I fought with myself for a moment, until the jealous part of me won out over the proud part, and I asked who it was. It was Suzanne. And why was Suzanne there? For dinner, Lars claimed. She was, after all, an old family friend. I didn't know what to say to that, but my silence must have sounded aggressive.

"Oh, Emily," Lars said. "You can believe me, she's really just an old friend. After dinner, she wants to talk to my mother and the interior designers about redoing the conservatory."

"I was just asking. I'm interested in your life, that's all."

"Yes, but you think too complicatedly. It takes much less effort if you keep everything simple. I think if you took that to heart, you would have already found the Phantom. Watch, I'll prove to you how a simple, obvious solution can get you to your goal in a flash."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"You should be," he said mysteriously. "See you soon. Kisses."

"Kisses."

Slightly confused, I returned to Walter's cabin. I couldn't believe my eyes. On the floor was a cardboard box full of money: small bills, large bills, coins.

I felt dizzy and had to lean against the door frame. With a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, Malik was demonstrating how quickly he could make stacks and count them. Walter was beaming like a boy who had just taken his favorite toy out of the closet. But this had not been a good idea.

"A Phantom doesn't earn badly, huh?"

He beamed at me. "This is all my earnings from the entrance fees, minus the commission the crew gets."

"74,600," Malik announced.

"Insane," Walter said.

# CON ARTIST'S ROULETTE

Good heavens. I seriously doubted Walter's common sense. A man who let a stranger count his entire life savings didn't seem particularly well-prepared for the world outside. I had introduced myself as an auditor, but the fact that Walter'd believed me instantly was also concerning. Did he have no healthy suspicion? Had there been no criminals back in his day?

Malik built a little wall out of the stacks of cash. His hands weren't making any quick movements. Apparently, he had no intention of pocketing any of it. He eyed the coins that were left behind in the box, and I thought I knew what he was thinking: it wasn't worth counting. Loose change just weighed down your pockets. Malik yawned. This really should have seemed suspicious to Walter. Anyone who remained so relaxed in the presence of that much cash couldn't possibly earn a living through honest work. That kind of person was either a rich heir or a criminal.

I, on the other hand, was probably giving off a different vibe. I still hadn't stepped fully into the cabin, and my face probably showed the fear of a woman facing a lion ready to pounce. Seventy-four thousand, six hundred! In books, sums like that were fine, but as actual stacks of paper with watermarks and silver threads, they were a walking, breathing temptation.

"What do I do with it?" Walter thought out loud, still innocent as a child. "I've heard everyone in Finland has a summer house by a lake. I could buy one for Ursula with this."

I nervously hopped back and forth on my shoeless feet and gave Malik a pleading look. He had to get rid of the money. He was supposed to be looking out for me tonight!

"A summer house sounds like a good investment," Malik said, finally putting the bills back in the box, which he then stashed under a second pillow on Walter's bed. "How about we have a toast to your farewell from the ship? My colleague Emily looks like she's ready to party. Do you have a wig you can wear, or are you brave enough to go out as yourself tonight?"

Walter said he was going out as Walter today. The wigs had just been a gag anyway. While the captain officially didn't know about him, of course everyone who worked here knew his face and his name, even some of the guests. The truckers who took the route regularly brought him gingerbread cookies at Christmastime, and one even supplied him with socks his grandmother knitted.

The three of us went to the lounge. Almost every seating area was occupied by people hunched over paper, chewing on their pens. It was Bingo night. One of the stewards was calling out the numbers, and the crowd was responding with shouts of joy or groans.

"Too late to join in," Walter said. "Let's just sit at the bar for now. I'm buying."

"Three Irish Flags," he told the bartender, and a moment later, glasses with green, white, and orange layers were placed in front of us.

After bingo came the horse races, a game where cardboard animals were pulled along a string. Participants had to roll a knee-high foam dice to determine their speed.

Four men and one woman were playing with great enthusiasm, yelling at the rolling dice as if they could impose their will on it. We passed the time during the game with two more Irish Flags.

"Now for the samba show!" Walter exclaimed with delight as the woman won a bottle of sparkling wine and the game was dismantled.

The lights went out. The quiet background music changed to deafening drumming. Colorful lights flashed over the stage, artificial fog billowed from a slit in the curtain, and Lydia, Tatjana, and two other women I hadn't seen before danced out. They were wearing samba costumes that looked quite tattered, and they immediately shed a few more feathers during the performance. It was hard to tell from the outside if the four were following a choreography or just imitating Lydia, who was making hand signals. Their expansive wings, strapped to their backs, kept bumping into each other, and glitter rained down, but that didn't stop them from having a good time. They whooped, encouraged the audience to clap, and eventually danced through the rows of seats, at which point a group of men in soccer jerseys started an impromptu conga line.

After the samba, the bingo steward returned. He hauled in a keyboard and performed a sad Russian song. His voice boomed through the speakers and vibrated in my stomach.

"The ship's about to fall apart!" Malik yelled into my ear.

But the song ended without incident, and the steward announced that the crew was now off duty and the audience would have to take over.

"Time for Karaoke," Walter explained.

Laminated song lists were passed around, and before the steward had even adjusted the microphone stand, two teenagers rushed to the front. They sang "In the Ghetto" without looking at the lyrics on the screen even once. Ballads, disco classics, and tons of pop songs followed. Except for a choir group that belted out an a cappella version of "La Paloma," most people sang terribly off-key, and the later it got, the more slurred their words became. When the music ended, many weren't even close to the final verse. But every performance was met with applause, and the mood was as lively as a children's birthday party. Malik was determined to sing "Je ne regrette rien" with me. I hesitated a bit, but he threatened to order more Irish Flags if I didn't join in, and in the face of that, the old sappy song seemed like the lesser of two evils.

On stage, we were blinded by the spotlights. The sound guy gave our performance so much artificial fog that we were singing inside a cloud. I'd thought I wasn't that drunk yet, and maybe I

was only swaying because I couldn't see my own feet. During the first chorus, Malik put his arm around me and pulled me closer to the microphone.

"You're a sweet couple," Walter said as we walked offstage.

I clung to my bar stool, no longer knowing how I was supposed to get back up.

"You need some fresh air," Malik said. "Let's go on deck."

"Whatever you advice, Matron of Honor," I said.

Walter preferred to stay seated and wait until the bartender's shift was over and he'd sing "New York, New York."

Malik led me outside. Somewhere along the way, he had gotten wool blankets. He unfolded two lounge chairs, waited until I was comfortably seated, and tucked me in up to the tip of my nose. The night was clear and cold. You could see many stars, and I asked Malik if he thought they were much closer out here.

"Everything that can be said about stars has already been said," he replied. "They're far away, and that's a good thing. But about something else: if I'm your matron of honor..."

"That's just a joke, right?" I mumbled into the wool. "I don't think Lars would be thrilled if you came to the church."

"But tonight I'm your matron of honor. Because I organized the bachelorette party."

"Oh. Right. Well, you did a beautiful job. I haven't had to draw hearts on any strange body parts, and I haven't gotten sick yet."

"I'm glad you like it. So, if I'm your matron of honor —"

"Fine. But tomorrow morning you're back to being Malik."

"Just let me finish. Matrons of honor have other duties, right? They're supposed to provide emotional support and help a couple when their relationship is in crisis."

"No crisis. Thanks a lot."

"I just want to know one thing. Does this guy make you feel good about yourself?"

"Oh! Is this a father-daughter talk now?"

"Just answer the question, Emily."

"Yes, he does. Satisfied?"

"What does he appreciate about you?"

"Pfff. The same thing everyone appreciates. My intelligence, my wit, and my body."

"But he doesn't know what makes you special."

"My particularly good wit?"

"Has he ever seen you climb a building? Or walk barefoot over a gravel path with the stones leaving no marks on your feet? Has he reached for his wrist at breakfast and noticed his watch was gone, only to have to pull it out of your cleavage?"

"That's enough!"

"Just a question."

"You should be happy that you're the only one who's had those experiences."

"You want to forget everything that made you who you used to be. What will you do with your time when you're a Baroness?"

"Don't know. I guess I'll get involved with charity work."

"That's just casting pearls before swine."

"Maybe. But that's not your problem."

I was tired of the conversation. I threw my blanket over his face and stood up. I almost got away, but because I tried to open the locked door at the entrance to the deck, Malik caught up to me.

"In two or three years, you'll be sitting in your villa, bored to death. Then you'll bitterly regret having wasted your talent," he said.

"Stealing isn't a talent. It's a bad habit that can land you in prison."

"We used your skills for criminal things, but you could apply them differently. You could become a tightrope walker. Or a magician."

"Great idea. I'll get started on my career change tomorrow."

We stood facing each other, our breath mingling in the cold air.

"You're too hard on yourself," Malik said.

"Your conscience is clear because you served your time."

"Emily, come on. You didn't scam little old ladies out of their meager pensions or steal cookies from children. What you took belonged to people who had too much and who could write off the theft on their taxes."

"You can't write off theft, only the cost of replacement."

"Spoken like a true accountant. But have you ever looked into how your fiancé's family got their money? Old nobility, are they? They used to work their serfs to death. They didn't do a single thing for their wealth. Unless you count when the Baron occasionally raped a maid and his illegitimate children had to work in the fields."

"Spare me the socialist sermon."

"Whatever. I didn't mean to ruin the mood. Let's just check the 'Matron of Honor Talk' box, okay?"

"Good idea."

"And now, on with the program."

"What's next? A stripper?"

"Please. Where would I find one at such short notice? They would have to be flown in by helicopter. Unless you want me to..."

"No, that's fine."

"My dear Emily, as you've noticed yourself, you haven't completed any tasks yet."

"I sang."

"Yes. But that was spontaneous and doesn't count."

"If you keep me in suspense for much longer, I'll freeze."

"One word: Roulette."

"Oh no. I assume you don't mean just playing the game."

"Exactly. Because that's boring. Let's do it like we did in Cannes."

"Hmm. I don't remember."

"Come on. Don't let your morals get in the way. If you insist, I'll undo everything by morning."

He pulled me to my feet, opened the deck door, and held it for me.

"The house is the enemy. It must not win!"

"Yeah, yeah, Robin Hood," I said. "Not so loud!"

The Störtebeker's casino was the size of a laundromat and just as warm and humid. About twenty people were crowded around the roulette table in the middle of the room. Slot machines lined the walls, being fed by individual players or couples. Next to the door, Lydia was sitting in a kind of glass booth, slowly drifting off to sleep. A sign above her read "Cashier." I started to head for her, but Malik stopped me.

"Since when do we buy chips?" he whispered.

"Just a few to start with," I whispered back.

"Otherwise, we'll stand out."

"You'll get one," Malik said. "Anything more would be too easy."

His fingers brushed mine, and I felt a plastic chip press into my palm.

Where had he gotten it? He couldn't have bought it tonight; the casino had only been open since 9:00 PM, and we had already been at the evening program in the lounge with Walter. Malik had gone to the restroom twice, but he would

have had to run to get here and back in just a few minutes. And Malik didn't run.

"Are you excited?" he whispered.

I shook my head.

"Then take a look at the chip."

He took a step to the side. Had he put a joke item in my hand? Was the thing about to explode? I opened my fingers. What I saw was a bright orange plastic disc with a lighter inner circle that was enclosed by the words: "Grand Casino Riviera." It was a chip from the casino in Cannes. In the center was a number, and I knew what it was the moment I saw the color: "500."

My first impulse was to pinch Malik as hard as I could, but as if he'd guessed, he moved out of my reach. And grinned.

"Difficulty level: extreme."

Instead of answering, I turned away and slipped into a gap between the players at the table. From now on, Malik would have to stay behind me and couldn't pull any more stunts. I gave the croupier a fleeting smile and took a relaxed stance. He was my opponent. Even if I wasn't going to steal from him, he was my real adversary. But first, I needed a target.

For a few rounds, I watched the other players. One man, looking frustrated, pushed a stack onto the 5, lost, and left the table. Two young women bet small amounts, one always on black, the other always on red. Then there were the usual regulars, older ladies who had pulled chairs up to the table, kept their chips in glittery purses, and bet

according to a system only they knew. I couldn't mess with them. They were incredibly observant, and even if some of them seemed to have forgotten their husband's name, I believed they could recall with absolute certainty which numbers the ball had hit in the last 100 rounds. And most importantly, they knew exactly what they had bet. However, their tunnel vision only focused on the location of their own chips. For example, they wouldn't be able to tell you the color of the sweating, horn-rimmed glasses-wearing man's shirt at the end of the table.

The man was about 50 years old and accompanied by a much younger Asian woman who either wasn't allowed to play or had already lost everything. Her hands were empty, and she seemed more interested in her elaborately manicured nails than the game, with the one on her left pinky finger having a tear. Horn-rimmed glasses was wearing wrinkled pants with baggy pockets, and if he had a plan at all, it was: a fistful for every game. He would reach into one of his pockets, pull out as many chips as he could grab, and scatter them randomly on the felt. When the croupier cleared and paid out at the end, he sometimes had to remind Horn-rimmed glasses to take his winnings. The man seemed to have no idea what he was doing. I noticed something else: Horn-rimmed glasses only bet on the outer numbers—red, black, and the dozens. He could place the chips on those fields himself and didn't have to ask the croupier. This was good for me.

I waited until Horn-rimmed glasses pushed three chips onto red in a game, extended my arm, and made the motions I had rehearsed in my head: I held my own chip between my thumb, index, and middle finger, placed it on Horn-rimmed glasses' stack of three, and made a quick, folding motion with the top three of the now four chips. My chip was now the third one from the top and was hidden by two of Horn-rimmed glasses' 10-euro chips. I removed the top one of those two and placed it next to Horn-rimmed glasses' stack, as if it were my bet. During the entire maneuver, which took no more than a second, my hand hovered over the red field, concealing what was happening beneath it. My pulse raced. But Horn-rimmed glasses was distracted because his companion was complaining that she was thirsty and bored, and the croupier was also busy at the moment, placing a bet for one of the older ladies. My trick could still be exposed, though. The croupier could only see the edge of the Riviera chip, and orange wasn't a color in this casino. Only the 5-euro chips were a light red, which was somewhat close to the color. I felt my forehead begin to sweat and imagined ice cubes.

One of the older ladies was having trouble getting the last chip out of a corner of her little purse. The croupier waited patiently. He was seated on a raised platform, and when he looked at the table, his eyelids were lowered. I couldn't tell where he was looking. Finally, the lady succeeded and bet on 13. The croupier spun the

wheel. A newcomer squeezed in beside me and quickly slid a 100-euro chip onto 36.

"No more bets," the croupier said.

A cloud of something musky enveloped me. The new guy had gone a bit overboard with his cologne. Now he started to bounce on his toes. Annoyed, I turned my head. His lavender polo shirt was unbuttoned low. There was no dress code in this casino.

Polo Shirt let out a silent whistle and looked down at me. Apparently, he was one of those guys who tried too hard to seem laid-back. At the front of the table, the croupier released the ball.

"Bonjour," Polo Shirt said to me. "I heard you singing earlier. Shame I didn't get to see you."

Good thing he hadn't seen me. The cloud of fog had obscured me.

"Obscured..." I thought.

When I had a bit to drink, sometimes things would echo in my head.

"Obscured...scured...scured...scured."

Black! What if black won? My chip would be gone, and the game would be over for me. If that happened, I would just go to bed. That might be the best outcome. I always had a plan, but for some reason, I was missing one tonight. But I had to regain control. Unfortunately, there was no time for further thought. The ball was already bouncing.

"Comeoncomeoncomeon," Polo Shirt muttered next to me.

"Three," the croupier announced. "Red."

He swept the losing chips from the table. Now was the moment of truth. Would he pay out on the wrong bet? And if so, would Horn-rimmed glasses, who was getting a stranger's chip back, notice anything? I felt Malik's breath on my neck. It was unnecessary for him to be so close behind me now. The croupier placed a second 10-euro chip on top of mine and three on Horn-rimmed glasses' stack. Horn-rimmed glasses took the chips. He had also won on the first dozen and the odd numbers and was stuffing his pockets. But as he grabbed the chips, like a child grabbing a handful of caramel candies, he stopped short.

"There's a fake one in here," he said, rolling the Riviera chip across the table toward the croupier.

A hint of contempt crept into the croupier's expressionless face. This was just a casino on a ship, with no tie required and no working ventilation system, but still:

Nobody.

Rolls.

Chips.

It was like crinkling up dollar bills. So classless.

The croupier caught my contraband chip with two fingers. He made a sweeping motion that looked effortless. Maybe we had gone to the same school.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, and slid a 10-euro replacement from the bank across the table.

I couldn't see where my Riviera treasure ended up. But probably not in the ship's trash. The croupier only had to swap the orange Riviera for a

light red Störtebeker chip from his tip box to multiply its value by fifty. He'd probably have to work a long time to get a 500-euro tip otherwise. This job was done. I relaxed. While cameras in the corners of the room recorded the action, I didn't think anyone was sitting in front of a monitor watching live. Who would it be? Tatjana again? Her colleague behind the cashier's window was leaning her head on her hand, and her glassy pupils suggested she was sleeping with her eyes open.

Horn-rimmed glasses' girlfriend got some pocket money to go buy a drink. She said she'd wait for him at the bar. Hooray for couples who still had separate interests! If Horn-rimmed glasses had gone with her, I wouldn't have had a target anymore. Malik placed his hands on my hips.

"The dance begins," he whispered.

The next round was open. Horn-rimmed glasses again scattered chips across about half the fields his arm could reach. As his ostentatious diver's watch dangled over the table, I placed my bet, too. Each round, I chose one of his spots and put a chip on it. When I pulled my hand back, I would take one of his chips, or two if it was a bigger stack. Horn-rimmed glasses didn't notice. I also bet on red or black. The goal was to stay in the game and give the croupier some work to do.

I was sure he had noticed where the Riviera chip came from. But he had taken it, and I interpreted that as silent consent. We had sealed a

pact without a word. But how long would it last? How many times could he look the other way?

Malik was supposed to decide that; he was the matron of honor. I passed my winnings back to him. Horn-rimmed glasses' pockets were emptying out. I needed to be more careful. But after a few disciplined rounds, I succumbed to the thrill of clearing an entire section of his chips and putting my chip on the next one. Malik gave my arm a warning pinch. I had gone too far. Even though Horn-rimmed glasses seemed unfocused, he always bet from left to right, and a rhythm might be ticking away in his daze. His leg was bobbing. One bob for each field? A certain number of chips per round? I hadn't been counting. And sure enough, Horn-rimmed glasses stopped short.

"Far too hot in here," I said loudly to him. "I hope they chill the smoked salmon better than they chill us."

I have no idea how I came up with that connection, but the remark had an unexpected effect on Horn-rimmed glasses.

"Gotta check on the little one. She's just gonna get into trouble again."

He huffed, reached into his pocket one more time, and slammed his remaining chips onto red. The ball rolled and landed on eleven. Black. Horn-rimmed glasses lost his big stack but made a small win on the first dozen. He carelessly pocketed the chips and left the table. I had bet on the last dozen, so my chip was gone, too.

"Time to go," I heard Malik's voice behind me.

I obeyed, gave my spot to a man who was pushing in behind me, and followed Malik out of the casino. As I stepped into the hallway, I realized I was swaying.

"Whoa," I said. "I think the adrenaline is wearing off. I feel drunk again."

Malik laughed.

"That's the sea. A storm was forecast for tonight. Take my arm."

"So we can both fall over?"

But I did it anyway. We wobbled down the hallway and down a flight of stairs without incident.

"Did you have fun?" Malik asked.

"Yes, it was fun. And I was brilliant, wasn't I? I've still got it."

"But don't try this at home alone, kid. You got a little too cocky there at the end."

"You were watching out for me."

"Just like I promised, right?"

We stood in front of my cabin. Malik held out his hand expectantly. I looked at him, confused.

"You still have a few chips," he said. "Give them to me. I'll undo everything. This night never happened."

My fingers defiantly closed around the plastic discs I had won in the last few rounds. The letters on them were raised; they felt nice to the touch. I didn't want the night to have never happened.

"Let me keep a little souvenir," I begged.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"I earned them."

"You know that's not true."

"But I worked for them. That guy was just throwing them away. He didn't appreciate them. With me, they'll have a good home."

"The old lines, Emily."

"Yeah, so what? You said tonight I could have one last hurrah."

"And now the night is over."

"Too bad."

"Yup."

He pushed open the door for me, the one with the still-broken lock.

"Make sure you close it tight. You should probably put a chair in front of it so no one notices it's open."

"I will."

"But first, the chips."

I shook my head stubbornly.

"Magpie," he said, in a warning tone. "Little bird! This morning, you almost had a nervous breakdown over a chicken egg. You said you absolutely didn't want to fall back into old habits, and I promised you I'd prevent that. And that's what I'm going to do. Otherwise, I'll be the bad guy again."

"You're the bad guy anyway," I teased. "I'm a thief, but you're a robber."

"Give me the chips."

He reached for my hand. I backed away until the cold wall of the hallway stopped me and hid both hands behind my back. I switched the chips from my right hand to my left. Malik wrapped his

arms around me from both sides, and I smelled his familiar scent again. He held my upper arms tightly. I could have freed myself effortlessly. I knew tricks and pressure points; I could make myself light and thin and escape like water seeping into the ground. No one could hold me against my will. But I stayed put. I was afraid of getting lost if he let me go. As his hand felt its way down my right arm, I bent my elbow and held my fist with my prize up high. Now he couldn't take the chips without twisting my joint. And I knew one thing: he wouldn't hurt me.

"If you don't give them to me, I'll go to the chef tomorrow morning and tell him you're stealing from his kitchen," he said.

"Ha ha. I'm sure he's already desperately missing that egg. I bet everyone's going to go without omelets for breakfast because of it."

"Just stop."

Malik let me go. A deep crease formed on his forehead. He was angry.

"You said your new honesty was a matter of principle. I don't get it, but I respect it. What more do you want? You're impossible to figure out."

"Why are you complaining? You don't have to be here. I asked you days ago to leave me alone."

"Did you really mean that? What would you have thought of me if I hadn't shown up after I got out? It's terrible to be dropped like that. It feels like crap."

"I'm sorry."

"For what, exactly?"

"That it feels like crap."

I brought my fist with the chips out from behind my back and held it out to him, my fingers now only loosely curled. But Malik didn't pry them open; he didn't touch me at all. He just held out his own flat hand. I let the chips fall into it.

"Good night, Emily."

"Good night."

# A SOUVENIR

I watched Malik walk away, his shoulders hunched forward, his hands in his pockets. It occurred to me that I didn't know where his cabin was. That meant I couldn't reach him. We had found the Phantom together, and if something went wrong tomorrow... Our mission wasn't over yet. Without a moment's hesitation, I crept after him. Maybe he didn't even have a cabin and slept in some hideout? No, that couldn't be right; he had boarded as a regular passenger, so he must have had a ticket. It was just my romantic idea that he was still doing everything secretly, like in old gangster movies.

Malik stopped in front of a cabin. It was number 408. With a swipe of his key card Malik went inside. He hadn't turned around once. I sat down in a swivel chair in an alcove under a framed poster of North Sea shipping routes. What had I been expecting? Why was I disappointed? Something didn't feel right. We had celebrated my bachelorette party and acted as if I were getting married, but that wasn't true. I wasn't even engaged to Lars, yet I had believed it for the last few hours. It was Malik's fault. Since I wasn't wearing an engagement ring, he probably didn't believe my lie either, yet he assumed a wedding would eventually happen. Why? Because I wanted it, and because the old Emily had always found a way. But the only thing the new, honest version of me could influence was giving up the life of a thief

for good. That's what it was really about tonight. I had believed I had overcome the old temptation with the help of Dr. Knudsen, but I had been declared cured too soon. What did that doctor know, anyway? He didn't know the man in the cabin back there.

What would Malik do with the chips? Would he just leave them on the bed tomorrow? Among the crumpled towels on the bathroom floor? As a tip for the cleaning staff? I had to know. I had won them, so it was my job to return them.

I stood up and crept down the hallway. The door to Malik's cabin was ajar. I opened it a crack. No lamps shone inside, but a strip of light from the hallway fell into the room. Malik was lying on the lower of the two beds. He had taken off his jacket, shirt, and shoes; he was only wearing his black pants. Chips had rolled out of his baggy pockets. I tiptoed toward him. It was easy to pick up the chips from the mattress. Since I didn't have anything to put them in, I placed them on the floor for now. I held on to the bed frame with one hand to keep my balance. The Störtebeker was climbing the waves. I wondered if they were still playing in the casino. What would happen if the ball jumped off the wheel from all the rocking? Maybe all the players would insist they had won and raid the cashier's booth. I smiled to myself. When good citizens found a loophole in the rules, they went crazy. It was like when an extra supermarket checkout opened and everyone rushed to it, no

matter where they were in their original lines. A loophole...

Why hadn't Malik closed his door properly? That wasn't like him. He was meticulous when it came to his own safety, and his time in prison certainly hadn't made him careless. His recurring nightmare had always been losing a set of keys. Even though he could crack security locks and disable alarms, he was afraid of people who couldn't do those things. He believed that such people would be hesitant to commit obvious crimes, but if they found a key and could get inside, they would do it and take whatever they could carry. No, he must have left the door open on purpose. For me. To see what I would do. This was a whole new kind of game, and he had learned it quickly. Just two days ago, he had been the same man I had always known. He'd show up and stay persistent. Never would he have thought outside the box, said something between the lines, or chosen any path other than the direct one. He took what he wanted. But now, he was lying on his bed, having fallen asleep waiting for me. Or was he not sleeping at all?

I slowly stood up straight. Were his eyelids trembling? We would see which of us was more patient. I hadn't given myself away with a single sound yet, but now I was breathing even more shallowly. How long did I stand motionless beside his bed? Maybe fifteen minutes. I started to think it was a waste of time. In less than half a day, the Störtebeker would be in Helsinki, and we would

leave this no-man's-land. I wanted to use the remaining hours, but I didn't know how. Maybe I should just stay awake and do nothing. I could wait for the sunrise in the panorama bar. But it was still the dead of night. I was bored. This feeling had only come back with Malik. Before, I was never bored when I wasn't doing anything. I was always content with myself because I wasn't getting into trouble.

By now, I believed Malik was actually asleep. The first hour of sleep was the deepest. I would take all the chips from him. With two fingers, I reached into the pants pocket that was closer to me. I got the first few chips easily without my fingers touching his skin through the fabric. Then I didn't know how to proceed. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. A three-day stubble covered his chin. I gently brushed the tips of the bristles with a fingernail. No reaction. Or was there? Had his mouth been slightly open just now? If I kissed him and he didn't wake up from it, I could take the chips without a second thought. I leaned down toward him. His lips were dry, mine a little moist. I put a hand on his collarbone for support and lifted my head again. Malik followed my movement and returned the kiss. There wasn't much headroom in the bunk bed, and I was stopped by the bed slats. Malik put a hand on the back of my neck and pulled me back down.

"I just wanted... a souvenir," I mumbled.

"So do I," he said.

After we made love, we lay back to back and didn't speak. He had probably said everything he needed to say over the last few days, and I couldn't undo anything with words. But I didn't get up right away either. What would it change if I lay a few feet away in my cabin instead of here, next to him? This ship was a capsule, and until we arrived at the harbor, everything would stay contained inside: the drinks that had just moved from the bottles to the glasses and then into our stomachs, and the chips I had stolen from Horn-rimmed glasses. We could give and take things from each other, but it didn't change anything in the grand scheme of things, because everything was on the ship. And if it were to sink, it would make even less of a difference who had what when. What happened on the Störtebeker stayed on the Störtebeker.

When life around us began to stir in the morning, and I heard passengers running down the hallways, I got up and went to my cabin to pack. I sat on my bag in the kitchen and drank a cup of black coffee with the chef. He wanted to know if I was going to travel back to Germany with them, and I said no, I was all done here and would be taking a plane. I didn't mention the Phantom, and I decided not to go to the captain about him anymore. It was better for the Phantom to vanish into thin air and for an inconspicuous man named Walter to simply disembark as a regular passenger.

The hallways were suddenly full of people who wanted to be the first to leave the ship. I didn't spot Malik, but when I walked past Walter's cabin door, a note was hanging there: "We're in the Panorama Bar."

We? After I made my way up the stairs to the bar, I found myself in the middle of a farewell party. Walter was sitting in one of the swivel chairs with a pair of binoculars in his hand, surrounded by Lydia, Tatjana, and the bartender. Except for the bartender, they were all in tears. By the window, there was a plaid travel bag and a collection of shopping bags and cloth totes. On top of it all lay a bouquet of flowers.

Outside, Helsinki was drawing near. It really felt to me as if we were standing still and the mainland was moving toward us. An announcement over the ship's speakers declared we would dock in half an hour. The women had to get back to their duties. Lydia blew her nose, let Tatjana wipe away her smudged eyeliner, and immediately ruined the repair by starting to cry again. With a hoarse voice, Walter swore he would be in touch as soon as possible. The bartender said his goodbyes with a pat on the shoulder and, as he left, slipped a mason jar into one of the bags. It was probably a quarter-liter of Irish Flag. Lydia and Tatjana gave Walter two sets of ship bedding and wished him luck in love. They didn't pay any attention to me. Maybe they were mad at me and felt betrayed. Several sobs and kisses on Walter's

forehead later, I was left alone with the former Phantom.

"I've been up here every time we've pulled in," Walter said. "Soon, you'll be able to make out the people on the quay with the binoculars."

I sat down next to him. The door to the panorama bar opened again, and I expected another round of farewell drama. Instead, Malik came in, wished us a good morning, and sat down on Walter's other side. This was strange. We were sitting together like a divorced couple accompanying their child on his first day of school. Walter was equally excited. His hand on the binoculars was trembling.

"Ursula once had a red coat," he said. "I could spot her from a long way off with that. It's harder now, plus most people are wearing hats. When you look down from up high like we are here..."

He lowered the binoculars and took a deep breath to calm himself.

"Did you have breakfast?" I asked him.

I didn't want him to faint from excitement.

"I only ever drink tea in the morning, but today I even went to the dining room for it. I didn't see either of you there, though."

"You didn't?" I asked, as if I couldn't explain why.

Malik mumbled something about "sleeping in," and asked if he could look through the binoculars for a moment. They were handed over to him, but only briefly. Walter demanded them back quickly.

By now, I could make out the people waiting on the quay with my bare eyes. I couldn't distinguish any details of their faces, but with the binoculars, it shouldn't be a problem. Maybe Walter's eyesight wasn't the best anymore.

"What does Ursula look like?" I asked.

"Last time she wore a blue down jacket and a white knitted hat," Walter said, turning the focus wheel of the binoculars. "But the temperatures have gone up, she might be wearing something else today. But she always wears her glasses. Small, with a gold frame. And her hair is gray and curly, it goes just to her ears. She had it cut last year."

He jumped up and ran to the window.

"Where is she? She's never been late before."

"I'm sure she'll come," Malik said. "Why would she stop now of all times?"

I wanted to cheer Walter up, too, but before I could think of a comforting line, the sight of a figure with a checkered scarf gave me the fright of my life.

"Hey!" Walter yelled indignantly as I ripped the binoculars from his hands.

I placed a reassuring hand on his arm. He didn't have to be upset for long; one look was enough for me. The magnification was too much.

"What's wrong?" Malik asked.

I fell back into the swivel chair as if I'd been shot.

"Lars is there."

"How romantic. He got up in the middle of the night and flew for two hours just to have breakfast with you."

"What do I do now?"

"Well, get off the ship. Or do you want to become the next Phantom?"

"She's not coming anymore," Walter wailed, ignoring our conversation. "I know it. This is my punishment; it was too good to be true. Why was I so stupid to think everything could be okay?"

"What do we do with him?" Malik whispered.

Walter had collapsed next to his luggage, his face buried in his hands. The binoculars lay on the bouquet of flowers, crushing it. If we didn't get Walter on land in the next hour, I thought, we'd never make it. Besides Ursula, he had no connection to the world out there anymore.

I crouched down beside him on the floor.

"A lady can't always be on time," I said.

"Maybe she misplaced her keys or missed the bus. The least you can do is wait for her this one time. How many times has she done it for you?"

With those words, I linked arms with him, and Malik took him from the other side. Together, we pulled him to his feet. Walter let himself be dragged along without a will of his own.

# ETERNITY IN ITS MOST ELEGANT FORM

Immigration into Finland was slower than expected because, unlike usual, they were checking passports. Walter seemed to have regained a little hope. At least he was standing relatively straight between Malik and me in the line, and he was voluntarily shuffling forward.

"Must be another terror alert," grumbled an older woman.

None of us responded; we were each lost in our own thoughts. As for me, I was planning my next moves. I didn't even want to imagine what it would look like to Lars if I landed on Finnish soil not just with Walter, but with Malik as well. But first, the priority was to get this fragile, former Phantom to his happy ending. I needed Malik for that. We could only carry Walter's collection of bags and totes with the three of us, and also, someone needed to be there to use force if my persuasion wasn't enough. After I had seen how distraught he was by Ursula's absence, I myself no longer believed in a harmless delay. This woman probably led a life as lonely as his. If she had friends, or even just people who looked out for her a little, they would have talked her out of her sad and fruitless pilgrimages to the harbor a long time ago. But she obviously had no one. And that meant she, in turn, had no reason to just stop coming. Except for illness, an accident, or death—

a bleak, tragic end, just before her fate could have taken a turn for the better. A terrible explanation seemed the most plausible to me. Had Finnish melancholy already set in?

The immigration officer greeted Walter with a friendly, but smile-free, face. Her expression barely changed as she handed him back his ID and said that unfortunately, the document had expired, and therefore she had to deny him entry. She used a familiar form of address with Walter, but you only had to look at her to know she wasn't someone you could negotiate with. I wanted to run back and bang my head against the ship's wall. Were we going to fail because of bureaucracy? Malik and I used to have a neighbor who kept a stash of passports from all kinds of countries in his kitchen cabinet. He would have solved our problem faster than I could smoke a Gauloise. But not even that would have been necessary if Walter had just gotten off the ship even once during his time as the Phantom to do the banal things that landlubbers had to deal with, like getting his blood pressure checked at a doctor, filing a tax return, and – damn it all – renewing his ID!

But anger wouldn't get any of us anywhere.

"You go out and find Ursula," Malik said. "I'll stay here with Walter."

So that's what we did. I gave Malik my bag, and Walter gave me his ID. Lars had recently mentioned that his mother had been invited to visit some of Prince Haakon's relatives. Maybe her

Scandinavian circle of friends also included a diplomat from the German Embassy in Helsinki who could solve our problem.

Lars greeted me with a kiss. His forehead curl tickled my nose. I was annoyed that I couldn't enjoy the moment because my mind was on Walter. When had a man ever traveled hundreds of kilometers just to have breakfast with me? I hugged Lars. His checkered scarf scratched my cheek. Lars used a complicated knotting technique that made even thin scarves look voluminous. I imagined it was something that was passed down from father to son in his family. I pushed Lars away from me to look at him.

"What a nice surprise," I said. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"I was just in the area."

"Just casually in Finland?"

"Business, you know. And while I was at it, I brought some of my mother's jewelry with me. She took a goldsmithing course with Heikki Pärväntää last year," he said the name as if I should know it. "I'm dropping off a few pieces for a student exhibition of his. But first, I want to whisk you away for a coffee."

I smiled, but inside, I was already terrified again. Baroness Jorgensen trying her hand at jewelry design? Was she going to present her raw materials case to me at our first meeting? Was this a test I had to pass? But wait, now I was getting

paranoid. She didn't know anything about my weakness.

"What about charity?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Doesn't your mother do charity work?"

"Ah, yes, she supports a whole host of... But why is that important now?"

"You're right, it's not."

The priority was finding Ursula. Without a clue as to where she was, all I could do was wait for her to show up at the harbor. If she did, I'd catch her with Lars's scarf, tie her up nicely, and bring her to Walter in the waiting area behind customs, where the two of them could catch up on what they'd been doing for the last few years. Then, hopefully, once Walter's new passport arrived, they could move into a cozy summer house, feed each other reindeer sausage, and enjoy life.

"Can we get coffee somewhere nearby?" I asked. "I can't leave this spot."

"Why not?"

"I found the Phantom. His name is Walter, and his passport is expired. He can't enter the country. And his girlfriend didn't show up today. Maybe she was held up. I have to stay here and intercept her in case she still comes."

"How stupid."

Lars sounded genuinely annoyed. Nice, I thought, he takes interest in my problems.

"I wanted to go to Café Fazer with you. It's over a hundred years old," he said.

"Let's just get coffee to go. Are those market stalls over there?"

"Yeah," he grimaced. "Paper cups then. But I guess that'll have to do. Good company is what's most important, after all."

He took my hand. We strolled toward a cluster of beer tables and benches and found a spot on a bench. Lars placed his black shoulder bag on it.

"Milk and sugar?" he asked.

"Neither."

"Alright. I'll be right back."

He hesitated.

"Will you watch my stuff?"

I nodded, even though I wanted to scream, "Take your bag with you! Don't leave it alone with me!"

I felt overwhelmed. Not only did I have to look for Ursula, a woman I only knew wore gold-rimmed glasses, in a crowd of shoppers, but I also had the Baroness's jewels to look after. Suddenly, I suspected pickpockets everywhere. But I would outsmart them. I looked around suspiciously. Someone brushed against my back and apologized. Was that a trick? Was the bag in a different position? I knew I wouldn't be able to relax until I checked if anything was missing.

While keeping an eye on Lars, who was waiting in line for coffee about ten meters away, I unzipped the bag. A velvet pouch was on top. I carefully loosened the drawstring. What my astonished eyes saw was reminiscent of ancient jewelry. They were massive, golden pieces; the

Baroness hadn't been stingy with the raw materials. I was especially fascinated by a ring she had made with a ruby. The stone had simply been pressed into a lump of precious metal, as if it were clay. Yes, there was value here, but it wasn't pretty to look at. With a lighter heart, I zipped the pouch and the bag back up. See, was that so hard? I had only looked and not stolen anything.

At the coffee stand, Lars hadn't moved an inch. The customer, who was still being served, was chatting with the vendor. These Scandinavians apparently weren't in any hurry. If there was one thing that made me nervous, it was people who were so calm. Maybe I was a little jealous of them, because a criminal career was out of the question for lazy people. Such a person didn't have to resist the temptations of the underworld and, strictly speaking, couldn't even be proud of their honesty. The customer pulled out a mobile phone and showed it to the vendor. Was this a photo slideshow of her last vacation? My nervousness returned, and I knew only one thing could help.

The seats next to me became free as if the people had smelled my adrenaline. Lars's bag had an outside pocket. What could be in there? Nothing valuable, for sure. In hindsight, I no longer thought it was bad to have stolen the egg from the kitchen. Everything had gone well, after all. It had even led to a new recipe. While I was still building justifications in my head, my fingers were already in the bag. They felt crumpled paper, a lighter, and a small tin of cough drops. I'd take

one of those – that was perfect. Cough drops were – what did they call that in math class – an uncountable quantity. They were weighed, and because they weren't counted, none could be missing. I opened the tin. My fingertips felt foam and a sharp edge. When I pulled my hand out of the bag again, a diamond ring was on my finger. This beautiful piece was definitely a countable quantity. I have no idea how I had managed to convince myself about the cough drops. I hadn't worn jewelry in years, and I could distinctly feel the foreign object on me, but the feeling was pleasant, like a perfectly fitting piece of armor. In my head, a voice whispered: "Having a bad day? Nobody loves you? Promises are cheap, love is fleeting, but a diamond is eternity in its most elegant form."

Lars came back. I didn't have time to return the ring. Under the table, I pulled it off my finger and stashed it in my jeans pocket.

Lars placed the coffee in front of me. Even though I had asked for it black, there was a stir stick in it. I took it out and spilled coffee on the sleeve of my jacket.

"You look flustered," Lars said. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, the thing with the passport is urgent. Do you think your mother can help? Does she know anyone with connections at the embassy?"

"Maybe. She knows a lot of people."

"Of course she doesn't have to do me a favor. But I don't know who else to ask!"

What I meant was: "I don't know who else to ask who can solve this problem legally."

How did other people deal with things like this? Bureaucracy was so frustrating that really more citizens should be counterfeiting their papers.

"Don't worry, we'll sort it out," Lars said. "I know things aren't easy with my family. It's time to show you that we don't just have obligations; we also enjoy certain advantages."

We? Oh, the way he looked at me!

"Emily, I wanted to do this in a nicer setting, but I can't wait any longer." He bent down for his bag. "We've known each other for five months now."

I got hot all over. So that's what the ring was!

Lars held the tin in his hand. "Allow me to give you something, as a chip..."

Oh, God, I thought, send a downpour, an earthquake, a firestorm, anything!

Lars's phone rang. He made an annoyed face, looked at the screen, and mumbled, "I told him not to..."

"You should probably take it," I said. "You rarely get reception here."

That was probably nonsense; but Lars didn't seem to have heard me anyway.

"It's business," he said. "Excuse me."

Sure, darling, no problem, I thought, please take your time.

Lars stood up, answered the call with a curt "Hello," and walked back toward the stalls. As he

did, he slipped the tin into his left jacket pocket. I only saw him from behind, but judging by his gestures, he was annoyed. He stopped in front of a vegetable stand and grabbed a potato. When he got worked up, he had to squeeze something. He kept a collection of stress balls with silly faces in his car ("For traffic jams," he'd once explained to me).

I stood up and approached him. If he suddenly turned around, I planned to ask if he was hungry and if I should get us some sandwiches.

"This can't be happening," I heard him say into the phone. "How could something like that happen?"

Meanwhile, the vendor was holding out a bag to Lars. If you squeeze vegetables, you're supposed to buy them. Lars made an apologetic gesture, put the potato back, and put his free hand on his hip. His jacket puffed out in the back, and the pocket gaped open. I stepped up to him, pretending to read a price tag that his body was blocking. Three quick movements later, the ring was back in its box and with its owner. I felt strange. I had never moved valuables in the wrong direction before.

When Lars returned to our table, I was waiting for him in a much better mood. I had drained every last drop of the strong coffee. Still, I felt calmer than before. Lars, on the other hand, seemed upset

"We have to visit someone in the hospital," he said. "Come on, a car is picking us up."

He slung his bag over his shoulder, took my hand, and rushed off. I could barely keep up with him. Everything was getting so complicated. I had to get to the embassy!

"Should I really come with you?" I asked, gasping for air. "Who are you visiting? I mean, some people don't like visitors in the hospital."

"The Phantom's girlfriend."

"Ursula?"

"Is that her name?"

"You don't know? But you know she's in the hospital?"

We had reached a large street.

"I'll explain on the way," Lars said. "There's Peter."

A black station wagon pulled up beside us. Lars held open the back door for me. He didn't abandon his good manners even in the greatest hurry. He was going to get in on the other side, but because the cars behind him started honking, he just fell into the passenger seat. The man behind the wheel stepped on the gas.

"This is Peter, my driver," Lars introduced him. "Peter, this is Emily, my girlfriend."

He had hesitated briefly before saying "girlfriend." This confirmed my suspicions about the ring's meaning, and my heart beat faster.

"Pleasure to meet you," Peter said. "She just fainted," he added without a pause. "I called an ambulance, and they took her to Mehiläinen with the sirens on."

The name of the hospital was written on a note stuck to the radio.

"What a disaster," Lars said. "And at her age. Is it her heart? Did they say anything?"

"No. They put her in the ambulance right away and slammed the door in my face. I wasn't allowed to go with them."

"Couldn't you have said you were her son?"

"I didn't think of that in the rush."

"Hopefully, they'll let us see her."

"Should I tell the hospital now I'm her son?"

"No! The chance is gone."

Lars huffed in annoyance. The knot in his scarf had come undone.

I spoke up from the back. "May I ask something, too? What's your connection to Ursula? Poor Walter thinks she's given up hope. He's sitting dejected in the waiting area before customs, blaming himself for not getting off a trip sooner."

"Of course, Emily, I'm sorry," Lars turned around. "What's our connection to Walter? Our business matters are probably a minor point right now, but if you must know: My family is buying the ferry fleet. So I wanted to see things for myself on-site and make sure we take over the Störtebeker without a Phantom."

"Ursula was easy to find," Peter said. "She's a local celebrity. The manager of our hotel was able to describe exactly what she looks like."

"I wanted to wait for the ship with Ursula," Lars said. "But she didn't show up. Instead, Peter, who arrived later, found her."

"And then she collapsed," I said.

"That's right," Peter said. "Exactly."

We arrived at the hospital. Peter looked for a spot in the underground garage, circling down the levels. My thoughts were spiraling, too.

"Yesterday you told me your family had connections to the shipping company," I said to Lars. "But it's so much more than that. You're my client."

"What? No."

"Yes, you are, if you're buying the fleet. My firm works for you."

"That's true. But I had no idea they would send you."

"I volunteered."

Peter parked, and we got out.

"Why did you do that?" Lars asked. "Tell me honestly, did that man come with you?"

"What man?"

"After our meeting at the trattoria, I had a strange conversation with a certain gentleman. He wanted to know how long I'd known you and if I knew you as well as I thought I did. At first, I thought he was a lunatic, but the encounter stuck in my mind. I talked to Suzanne about it, and she encouraged me to look into the matter."

Suzanne again!

"You really don't talk much about your past," Lars said. "And nobody is demanding that you do."

But if we're going to have a future together, I need to know a thing or two. For example, where do you know this man from?"

We entered the elevator that would take us up. Because Peter really couldn't pretend not to be listening in this small space, we fell silent. Lars and Peter looked at the floor; I watched the floor indicator as if a message from Santa Claus was about to appear there. If at all possible, I didn't want to answer the question about Malik's role in my life. We got out in the hospital's main lobby and consulted next to a kiosk about what to do. Lars suggested that I should try to get to Ursula. I could tell her about Walter's intention to leave the ship. Maybe that would cheer her up and help her recovery. I frowned skeptically. If I woke up in a hospital bed and was told that the man I had been waiting for at the harbor for years had decided to get off the ship on the very day my health gave out, I'd think I was in heaven.

With a lump in my throat, I walked toward the information desk, stopped abruptly just before I got there and ran back to Lars.

"What's Ursula's last name?"

Lars shrugged. He hadn't even known her first name.

"We have to go back to the harbor and ask Walter," Lars said.

Peter already had his car keys out, but I said I knew a faster way to find out. I still had Malik's number saved in my phone.

He answered on the first ring. He was expecting good news, but I had to disappoint him: No, I hadn't been able to get the passport renewed yet. Yes, I knew where Ursula was, but she wasn't coming to the harbor. She was in the hospital, and no, I didn't know what was wrong with her. Her last name? Malik passed the question on to Walter.

"Schmidt," he then said to me.

"Thanks. I'll say I'm her niece. What's the situation with you guys?"

"What do you think? We're sitting here. What's Lord Count His Royal Highness doing?"

"I'll get back to you," I said curtly.

# JESUS IS WATCHING

The woman at the information desk was friendly, listened patiently to my choppy English, and wrote down the number of Ursula's ward on a slip of paper. I convinced Lars to come with me. At the kiosk, we bought a tiny bouquet of flowers for 45 euros and made our way to the ward. There, we met a nurse who looked exhausted. We were Mrs. Schmidt's niece and nephew? Oh. She gave us a listless smile and checked something on her computer. Either she believed us, or she didn't care if we were telling the truth. When she looked up again, she informed us that she couldn't let us see Ursula at the moment. More tests had to be done. But we were welcome to wait until the doctor had time to talk to us.

So we sat down in plastic chairs, folded our arms, and looked at the depressingly uninspired art prints on the wall.

"Call your mother, please" I said to Lars. "Ask if she knows anyone at the embassy."

It was a long phone call. The Baroness at first didn't address Lars's question because things had happened in his absence that urgently needed to be discussed: the roses had a disease, the carpenter who was supposed to repair an old secretary's desk hadn't shown up, and someone hadn't invited someone else to some christening.

"Mother —" Lars kept trying to interrupt her. "Please, just let me —"

An eternity later, he finally got to speak. When he hung up, he said, "She has an old school friend whose daughter works at the embassy. She's going to try to reach her."

He fell back into his chair, exhausted. His right ear was red. He put his phone back in his jacket pocket, but he didn't pull his hand out right away.

"The setting is getting more and more desolate," he said. "But I've brought it all the way here, so I just have to give it to you."

The jewelry box appeared in front of my face. Lars opened it.

"Ooh," I said.

I hoped I had done a good job of looking surprised.

"It's a pre-engagement ring," Lars explained.

"A... What does that mean?"

"It means that I want to ask you to be my wife one day."

What? I didn't say anything. I had imagined how I would react to an engagement ring: laughing, crying, the whole shebang, but this? Was this ring meant to be a statement of intent to one day, in the next few decades, introduce me to his family – when it was convenient, all the flowers were healthy, and there was nothing more important to do? Was this the kind of ring Camilla got from Charles when she was 20, and did she then wait patiently for half her life?

I took the ring out of the box. It was too tight for my ring finger, but I could slide it onto my pinky. Either the piece of jewelry had been tried

on by Suzanne, whom I imagined as a bony castle ghost, or the size was intentional, and I was only meant to wear the piece on the least significant finger of my hand.

My mood sank, though I didn't think that was still possible.

"It fits," I said dryly.

"Do you like it?" Lars asked.

Oh yes, in principle, I did. The pretty stone couldn't help how it was being used, after all. Still, I had a strong urge to find the nearest pawn shop, cash in the ring, and use the money to buy a few dozen pairs of Finnish designer rubber boots. Lydia had said they were the latest craze in Scandinavia. Me disdaining jewelry. This was also a first in my life.

Peter had discreetly turned away. Lars looked at me expectantly. Were we supposed to kiss now? His phone saved me from the situation. It was a message from his mother; she was sending the contact information for the woman at the embassy.

"Sorry," Lars said. "But I'd better call her right away."

"Of course," I said. "That's more important now."

Again, I waited through an annoyingly long phone call. It seemed it was unavoidable that Lars first had to exchange lengthy anecdotes with a lady named Schultebein about their mothers' school days and give a detailed report on how mutual friends in Germany were doing. At least he was smiling confidently when he hung up.

"She'll see you, but you have to hurry because she's only there until noon. She's going to her summer house for the weekend, and nothing and no one will stop her."

"You're staying here?" I asked.

Lars said yes, he would, and he gave me his most serious look. He reminded me a little of a TV doctor. I understood him less and less. Why was he so concerned about this strange woman? What if he gave her a ring, too, as a chip of his commitment? He could take one of the pieces his mother had made. Maybe it was a good idea for me to get out and get some fresh air alone. I had Lars send me the embassy's address to my phone and said goodbye with a fleeting kiss.

The woman at the information desk read the address from my screen and said it was on the island of Kuusisaari. My heart sank. On an island? But the lady insisted it wasn't far at all, there was a bridge, and I could even walk. Unfortunately, she didn't have a city map, but there was a bookstore around the corner that sold them.

Full of purpose, I marched out of the hospital. I found the bookstore right away, and an employee with intimidating face tattoos and a heavy metal T-shirt over his white shirt found me a map that also showed the hiking trails in the area. With a red pen, the salesman marked our location and the location of the embassy, and he also made a cross on a street. That's where the "Zetor" pub was. Didn't I know it? But I had to see it, even if I was

only in town for a short time. He was going there with friends tonight. Please, I should come too!

I had always thought Finns were taciturn. This one certainly wasn't, and because I was in a hurry, I eventually pretended I no longer understood English, only answered with "Oui" and "Merci," forced the money for the map on him, and left the store while he was still yelling his grandmother's mushroom soup recipe after me. My head was buzzing. Should I find a taxi instead? When it came to navigating foreign cities, I was a failure. I even got lost in Paris often. My problem was that I only remembered unreliable landmarks on the streets: window displays, the location of street vendors, blooming flowers on balconies. The moment something changed, I was lost. But Helsinki was small; I would manage. I consulted the map, made two correct turns (or so I thought), and ended up in an alley where the sidewalk was being repaved. I could walk in the road, but the street signs had been taken down, and I had to hope I was still on the right path. The square I came to a little later was not on my route according to the map. I cursed loudly.

"Do you need help?" someone asked from behind me.

A man in neon-colored athletic wear was sitting on a bench under a tree. A bicycle was standing next to him, with a helmet lying on the seat.

It took me a while to recognize the man who had spoken to me as the ship's croupier. I told him

I was looking for the German Embassy and tried to show him the map. But he waved it away, saying he knew exactly where it was and knew the island well. He asked if he should give me a ride and pointed to the bike's luggage rack.

When I hesitated, he said I could trust him, and that he knew Helsinki better than his own hometown. Every time the Störtebeker was in port, he rented a bike and explored the streets. He said you could get around faster on two wheels than on four.

Alright, I was convinced.

The croupier insisted I put on the helmet hanging from the handlebars. I asked if he didn't need it. He laughed and said the bike rental forced the things on you, but he rode without protection because Jesus watched over him. This reasoning made me a little uneasy, but after a few minutes of riding, I relaxed again. The croupier was a cautious cyclist, stopping at every traffic light, giving hand signals, and paying attention to keeping a safe distance from cars. The city, in general, had a relaxed pace for a metropolis, and there were hardly any aggressive drivers. About fifteen minutes later, we stopped, and the croupier asked me to get off. I looked around. We hadn't crossed a bridge yet.

"But I wanted to go to the German Embassy," I said.

"I know, and I'll take you there, but first, I want to show you something."

"I'm sorry, I don't have time for sightseeing. I have to be there by noon, or the woman I'm supposed to meet will be gone."

"It'll only take ten minutes, and I promise you'll be on time."

He looked at me with an earnest expression. My watch showed just after eleven. There were no taxis in sight. If I tried to find one, it could be a tight squeeze with the car.

"Okay, but please be quick."

The croupier beamed and locked the bike to a lamppost. He took the helmet off me and placed it on the saddle, even though it would have fit easily on the cable lock.

"Don't people steal in Helsinki?" I asked. "Or is Jesus also watching over everything?"

The croupier laughed, but in a cheerfully content way, as if it wasn't a joke at all.

"My name is Clemens, by the way."

"Emily," I said, and shook his hand.

He held it and pulled me along with him, around a corner and up a wide flight of stairs, past people enjoying the sun. At the top of the stairs, we stood in front of a church. Except for the domes, it was white and looked impressive in the bright midday light. But I couldn't fully appreciate its beauty.

"Wonderful," I said. "Can we go to the embassy now?"

"Wait, you'll regret it forever if you don't go inside."

I didn't believe that, but for lack of alternatives, I followed him in anyway. Clemens sat down in one of the back pews and patted the seat next to him.

"But just a very short prayer, please," I said. "Don't start a rosary or anything; you promised me."

"This is an Evangelical cathedral," he said. "And I've already talked to the Lord today. No, I'm only here for you."

"I don't understand."

"I wanted to show you the place where I found faith."

"Look, that's really sweet, but —"

"Because I was on the verge of becoming a lost soul, just like you."

Clemens turned his face upward and bathed in the diffused light streaming through the tall windows. He looked free of all worries, peaceful, like a sleeping child. It must be a relief to put your fate in the hands of a higher power. However, I didn't believe the good Lord would take care of expired ID cards.

"I have to get this ID renewed," I hissed, cursing my terrible judge of character for having trusted Clemens.

My words seemed to bounce off the croupier.

"I used to gamble, too," he said. "I could tell you the long story of my addiction..."

Please don't! I thought.

"...but that's unnecessary, because you already know it. It's your story, too. All sinners are alike."

"I promise I'll never gamble again," I said, and added in my head, "At least not on your ship."

"You're going to have trouble."

He lowered his head. His hair was ruffled from the bike ride and cast shadows over his eyes. I felt uneasy.

"Clemens, listen, I'm sorry. What I did was dumb. It was a bet. I don't usually do things like that."

"Oh yes, you do. You're a pro."

"If you insist, I'll give the man I stole from the value of all the chips back."

"No chance, he's long gone from the ship."

"But there are passenger lists. I'll find his address and send him an anonymous check."

"Yes, yes, that's how you people handle it. But that's the problem. You have no morals! Money is just moved back and forth. You don't need to give him anything back; he stole it himself, one way or another."

"You're involved in it yourself. You work as a croupier!"

"That's just what I pretend to be. But I work where the misery is greatest. I'm like Mother Teresa among the lepers."

I sighed silently and put my hands in my lap. Arguing with religious fanatics was pointless.

"Tell me what you want from me."

"I want to give you the opportunity to reflect. If you need help, I'm here for you."

Thanks, I thought, no need. I already have a psychiatrist.

"Besides," Clemens added. "I wanted you to know that I saw right through you. I noticed every single one of your actions. People like you think they're incredibly clever. They think everyone else would do the same if they were only capable of it. But I'm a pro, too. One on the other side, the good side. And by my own free will."

Aha, so that was it. I had hurt his vanity. That was a damage I could repair. Thanks to Malik, I knew how to deal with big egos.

"Your selflessness is extraordinary, Clemens," I said. "I've never met a person like you. Finally, someone sees behind my facade. But you have to know, I'm a complicated case. We should talk at our leisure. This afternoon, over tea, if you like. But right now, I have a very urgent worldly problem to solve, and no one but you can help me with it."

"You still need to go to the embassy?" he asked.

"Please, quickly."

I was glad for the helmet on the ride that followed, and I made up for what I had neglected in the church: I sent up silent prayers to heaven.

Clemens ignored all traffic rules, sped through red lights, and turned across oncoming traffic, which was honking loudly. During the ride, I couldn't look at my watch because I had to hold on to Clemens tightly. When we reached the embassy, I

pulled up my sleeve and checked the time. It was 12:05.

Clemens offered to wait for me at the gate. But I didn't get far. The doorman shook his head regretfully and informed me that visiting hours were over. I said I wasn't a visitor but had an appointment with Ms. Schultebein. I had to repeat the name twice before he remembered the lady. Lars's mother hadn't said what position the woman held. Maybe she was an intern or just the person who maintained the passport photo punch.

She was clearly not the ambassador herself. At least the doorman picked up the phone. A moment later, he started shaking his head again. Ms. Schultebein had already left for the weekend. Where to? To her summer house, of course. He gave me a number for urgent cases, where someone would be available to take a call in two hours.

Dejected, I returned to Clemens and told him about my failure. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"Wait until I can call that emergency number."

"Shall we eat something while we wait? I'll show you my favorite spot."

I nodded wearily. I had to pass the time somehow.

We rode back to the mainland at a normal pace. By now, my butt hurt.

"Are we almost there?" I whined.

"We're here."

Clemens stopped in front of an entrance with a red awning.

"They have the best pea soup."

"I'm not really hungry."

"You will be once you start eating."

And Clemens was right. When the waitress placed two steaming bowls in front of us, a hole suddenly opened up in my stomach, and I spooned the soup up as fast as I could.

"Damn all terrorists, and the immigration checks, and the passports," I said when I reached the bottom of the bowl. "Next time the world gets too complicated for me, I'll threaten to blow everything up, too."

"You're not the type."

"Oh, no?"

"You'd be more like the Phantom and go into hiding."

"Could be. That's the better alternative. You're definitely more appreciated for it..."

"...and you can even earn a living from it."

"True. Why doesn't that bother you, anyway? Don't you find it reprehensible to charge passengers money to let them speak into a ventilation duct?"

"No, why would it be? Our Phantom is real. Walter has really been on that ship for a long time, and he's had plenty of time to think. I think it's okay to pay for the advice of a wise man."

"And what do you say about him making his girlfriend wait for years? Is that a good thing too?"

"Difficult question."

Clemens took the last slice of bread from the basket.

"Sometimes you have to be alone and listen to yourself. People used to go into the desert for that."

"I'd love to do that too. But I probably wouldn't even be alone there. My problems follow me."

"You mean your accomplice?"

"Yes. You should drag him to church sometime!"

"Do you think I could convert him? He seemed like someone who is content with his life. Hm. Do you want to get rid of him?"

"Absolutely!"

"But if I made him an honest man, you would have one less reason to."

"True. That's confusing."

"No, not at all. You're not sure you'd still want to get rid of him if he were honest, just like you want to be."

"Uh... no."

"How – no?"

"No, I'm not sure if I'd still want to get rid of him if the thing that bothers me the most about him were gone."

I ruffled my hair. The effect the pea soup had on me was gone. Just a moment ago, I had been basking in the comforting all's-well feeling that home-cooked food gave me. Now I felt thrown back into the cold, evil world, stuck in a spiderweb of tangled feelings.

I signaled to the waitress that I wanted to pay.

"This one's on me, wise man," I said. "But in return, please give me some concrete advice. What should I do?"

"Leave your accomplice by the side of the road and keep going."

"Is that Christian?"

"It's the most practical thing to do. Sometimes you have to take care of yourself first. You're also a person who needs help. A part of your problems can be solved by experts. Hand it over to them. Call that emergency number about the passport."

"It's only a quarter to two."

"You have an especially urgent emergency."

"Alright, but I'll do it alone. Go unlock your bike."

I waited until Clemens had stood up and was out of earshot. What I didn't need during this sensitive conversation was someone butting in from the side, which is how I saw my new friend and helper. He definitely had an urgent need to share his thoughts.

I dialed and heard a busy signal. My second attempt was also unsuccessful. On the third try, a woman answered the phone. She sounded friendly and cheerful. I could hear a quiet metallic clicking. She was probably knitting while she talked.

An expired passport? That shouldn't be a problem in the Schengen Area. Usually, they didn't even check, and even if they did, the border guards were lenient with EU citizens. She didn't like to say it out loud, but you could even use

your passport up to a year after it expired. Where had I run into trouble?

This was getting tricky again; I didn't know what to tell her. Given the terror alert, was it smart to let the authorities know that a man was hiding on a ship in the harbor? A man who seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth more than a decade ago? Wouldn't someone like that be automatically suspected of a crime even in peaceful times?

I evaded the question and asked if it was possible to get an expired passport renewed in an express procedure. The answer was devastating: Yes, a renewal could be requested, but a German citizen whose main residence was in Germany had to pick up the passport back home, where it was also printed. He had to appear in person to apply. And an express procedure? Sure, that was possible; it would just take five days instead of six weeks.

Somehow, I found the strength to thank her and hang up. Dejectedly, I called Malik and explained in a few words that I hadn't accomplished anything, but there was at least some good news: Ursula hadn't given up hope. Instead, she hadn't appeared at the harbor because she had collapsed on her way there. Well, phrased like that, it also sounded like bad news. I asked Malik to break it to Walter more gently. He promised he would try.

My next call was to Lars.

"Hello, how are things at the hospital?"

"Emily, I was just about to call you. Were you able to get the passport renewed?"

"No, because your mother's friend ran off for the weekend and didn't even wait five minutes for me. She can't be a very good friend."

"Were you not on time?"

"First, I had to get there. Someone from the crew gave me a ride on his bike."

"And he rode so slowly?"

"He's very religious. We made a stopover to pray. Oh, whatever, it doesn't matter now. The passport can't be renewed. Not by me, not here, and certainly not by tomorrow morning. Any news from your side?"

"I had to leave the ward. Ursula woke up and told the nurses she doesn't have a nephew and that the lunatic should leave. Now I'm sitting in the lobby."

"At least she came to. That's a good thing, right?"

"I guess so. They wouldn't let me talk to a doctor anymore."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Fly home."

"What about Walter?"

"He'll stay on the ship."

"Like – forever?"

"As long as it takes for us to decide what happens to the Störtebeker. If we keep it running, a lot of work needs to be done anyway, and the workers will find him and kick him out. If you managed to track him down – "

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, offended.

"Darling, you did an excellent job. As your client, I'm telling you, you can go home now. With me."

"No, I don't want that. I want this story to have a happy ending. I was the one who convinced Walter to get off the ship. Now he's desperate. He might even hurt himself."

"I don't think so. And if he did, it wouldn't be your fault."

"He's wasted so much time."

"That was his own free choice."

"But it has to be for something good now. And you were worried about Ursula yourself."

"Because I thought she was dying. But apparently, she's alert and not so lonely that she needs fake relatives."

Lars slurped.

"Ugh, this coffee is as black as crude oil."

"Have you eaten yet?" I asked him.

"No, and I don't plan to do it here. I'll get us a room at the Kämp. Let's meet there. And tomorrow morning, we'll fly back."

"If I can't get Walter on land, I'd rather take the ship back."

"You're not serious! With that man? Is he still there, too?"

"Yes. He's looking after Walter."

"How should I feel about that?"

"I don't know," I said, and it was the truth.

But then I remembered the ring on my finger.

"We're pre-engaged now. I didn't know something like that existed before, but now our promise will be sacred to me. You can trust me."

"I'll wait for you at the Kämp," Lars said.

With those words, he hung up.

Outside the restaurant, Clemens was still waiting and polishing the bike's handlebars with a corner of his sleeve. He looked up expectantly when I came out.

"Forget it," I said.

"What?"

"Everything. The passport, the happy ending."

"Too bad. I was looking forward to an exciting time on land. Something is finally happening. But that's Finland. For adventure, you have to go to Norway. So, what now? Are you coming to evening mass later?"

"I should go to the Kämp. To my pre-fiancé."

It had been difficult for me to say that, and the fact that Clemens was shamelessly amused by it really annoyed me.

"You're pre-engaged? Why, isn't your beloved of legal age yet?"

"He's a nobleman."

"Ho-ho."

He burst out laughing as if it were a delicious joke. Since he had already put one foot on the pedal, he almost lost his balance in his fit of merriment.

"Maybe he's used to having his own chapel? He wouldn't want to attend mass with the common folk?"

"Stop it. And no, I don't feel like going to church."

"So, should the rickshaw take you to the hotel?"

He saluted, wiped tears from the corners of his eyes, and handed me the helmet.

"No. How awful would it be if I left my accomplice, as you call him, with zwieback and cold canned food with Walter while I had caviar brought to my room?"

"To each their own. To the ship, then. Officially, passengers aren't allowed back on board until tomorrow morning, but I know a few tricks."

"No, that won't work either."

"Because of the accomplice and your complicated relationship?"

"Exactly."

"Then all you've got left is a park bench for tonight."

"That's the worst-case scenario."

I grumpily looked at the sky, which was a light gray and gave no hint whether it would rain today. Through the pocket of my pants, I felt a prickling sensation. The folded-up note from the bookstore clerk came back to me.

"You can always go to mass," I said to Clemens. "The Lord is patient. Today, we're doing a different program."

"I'm listening."

"We're going to where the sinners are."

# WHERE THE SINNERS ARE

The pub the bookseller had recommended to me belonged to the band "Leningrad Cowboys." Clemens and I were seated at a table built around an old tractor, sipping beers while an artificial cow stared at us over our shoulders. At our first round, the place was pretty empty, but the later it got, the more people filled the room. Just as we were about to call it a night, the bookseller and his friends burst in, greeting us with gusto. "You can't go home now," he insisted, "The night is still young! Just one more round, please!"

Clemens mumbled something about how he "didn't really drink" and gripped a yellow mailbox that was bolted to the wall. A few drinks later, he was trying to milk the cow, getting tips on his technique from a waitress in a miniskirt and rubber boots. Someone ordered blinis, blueberry pie, and endless rounds of vodka. I sang Finnish songs, completely forgetting why I had been so stressed out just a few hours before. There was still a little bit of darkness lurking in the back of my mind, but a few vodkas later, that disappeared too.

When I woke up, I was on a sofa. It was a soft, well-worn two-seater, not quite as long as I was tall, so my head and feet were on the armrests and my body was bent like a pretzel. Next to me, on a brown rug, Clemens snored. Through the

window, I could see the building across the street. It seemed close enough to touch; it was a narrow street. A window in the apartment opposite was decorated with all sorts of crystal animals that caught the light.

The light?! I sat up abruptly, my stomach protesting the sudden change in position. If the sun was already shining into the canyons of the street, it had to be high in the sky. That meant it was nearing noon, and that meant —

"The ship is gone, Clemens!"

The man on the rug didn't react. I shook him and yelled in his ear, "You have to wake up! We overslept, and the ship is gone!"

"What ship?"

"Our ship! The Störtebeker!"

That got him to a vertical position. In the meantime, I had pulled my phone out of my jacket.

I checked my phone. "Quarter to eleven. It's not gone yet, but it leaves in 15 minutes."

Clemens groaned. "Oof. My head."

I had nine missed calls — one from Lars and eight from Malik. I called Malik back.

"Where are you?" he demanded.

"I got... lost."

"So. Get here now!"

"I can't make it. We're in some... I don't know where we are."

"I stalled the ship's departure. But you probably don't have much time regardless. I don't know how fast they'll figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

"The glitch. I pressed a few buttons and turned a few screws."

He chuckled quietly. "No idea what it did. The expert is still stumped, too." He said it with a hint of pride, and I knew why. Malik hated technology he didn't understand. His usual solution was to smash the case with a hammer or simply blow the whole thing up. With my free arm, I hooked Clemens, who was trying to stand up. "I'll hurry."

"You need to fly, Magpie!"

Clemens and I stumbled out of the apartment and into the stairwell. After we made it down the steps, a wonderful surprise was waiting: my rental bike, unlocked and unharmed. This time, I had to pedal. Clemens barely managed to hold on to the back rack. He was apparently a better drinker than I had feared, because after a few minutes of fresh air, he sat up straight and showed no signs of throwing up on me.

He even remembered the way to the harbor and insisted we return the bike first. As Clemens wheeled it into the shop, I leaned against a streetlamp next to the window, drenched in sweat and my legs shaking.

Clemens came back out. We trudged through the streets. He complained of a cramp in his side, and I was just as relieved when we rounded the final corner and the harbor lay before us. And there she still was — the Störtebeker.

Breathlessly, we reached the check-in. The woman at the counter said we were lucky; she was closing in a few minutes and would have already done so if the departure hadn't been delayed due to technical issues. But those were all sorted now. She nodded to Clemens and let him through.

"So it wasn't a bad breakdown?" I asked.

It didn't give me a good feeling to board a ship that Malik had been tinkering with. Who knew if he'd gotten carried away and drilled a hole somewhere for good measure.

The woman shrugged. She didn't know exactly what had happened. Did I want to buy a ticket or not?

I said yes.

"Do you really?" a voice asked from behind me.

I turned around, and there was Lars.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Looking at tractors and drinking some beer."

"You could have at least called."

"I'm sorry. Really."

"I get it now. You were mad because I don't find the ghost story as romantic as you do. For you, it's like a fairy tale that's supposed to have a happy ending, right?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"And that's why I played fairy godmother and made sure the two old folks got together."

"How...?"

"Ursula was discharged, and we intercepted her – well, Peter did, he took over for me in the lobby. She's fine, the doctors said it was just a

fainting spell. This morning, I told her about the expired ID mess and brought her here myself. She's making the crossing to Germany, and hopefully, she and Walter can get off the ship together. And if they aren't dead yet... and so on and so forth."

"That was really amazing of you."

"It wasn't entirely selfless. Now you're not needed anymore and you can fly back to Copenhagen with me."

"Alright, I'm closing up now!" the woman at the counter interrupted us.

Panic rose within me. I was in a real pickle. I twisted the ring on my pinky finger, wishing a genie would appear to make the decision for me. Everything pointed to me leaving with Lars, but the thought of letting the Störtebeker leave without me was unbearable. Why? Would I miss the evening program, the bingo, the karaoke, the Irish Flags? Definitely not. But if I went with Lars, I'd be running away from my mission. While Malik had stalled the ship and Lars had reunited Ursula and Walter, all I had done was get drunk. And the worst part was that my failure had changed nothing. Others had handled things for me, and that would probably always be the case in the future. Once I lived with Lars, the gardener would prune the roses, a chef would cook our meals, and a housekeeper would clean up after us. My days would be spent at charity events. And if I ever got tired of that, it wouldn't make a difference either.

Just once, I wanted to finish something myself and make sure nothing else went wrong.

"Please, let me go," I said to Lars. "Don't be mad at me."

I didn't have time for a full explanation, but an idea popped into my head, and secretly, I was proud of my hungover brain for coming up with something so romantic.

"Let's talk on the phone until the connection breaks, okay?" I asked.

"Okay," Lars said flatly. "If you want."

I gave him a quick kiss, finished the paperwork with the now-annoyed counter lady, and hurried up the gangway. On the main deck, I found Malik.

"It's about time."

I gasped for air. Climbing the gangway had finished me off. It took a while before I could speak again.

"I've gotten enough exercise for the rest of the month today," I managed to say.

"You should brush your teeth," Malik said, wincing. "You've got some serious breath. What were you doing? Weren't you happy with your bachelorette party? Should we have partied harder?"

I waved him off and checked the papers to find my cabin number.

"Should I show you the way?" Malik offered.

"No, thanks. And please, don't follow me. I just want to have a boring trip and say goodbye to our ex-phantom the day after tomorrow."

"Walter's on the sundeck with Ursula. I left them alone."

"Very smart. Thanks for waiting with him, too."

"No problem. Seeing you like this, I'm glad I stayed here. Helsinki seems to be a destructive place. Oh, là là, what's this?"

He'd noticed my ring.

"A gift," I said evasively. After the croupier had already been amused by the term "pre-engagement ring," I didn't want to know how funny Malik would find it.

"Speaking of being left alone, I'd also like some peace and quiet," I said.

"Sure, no need to be unfriendly. I just came to see if you made it back. That's all."

"That's nice. Have a good day."

"Salut, Emily."

Malik stepped aside and made way for me toward the stairs. He looked tired, too. I would have loved to just fall onto my cabin bed and not get up again until we reached Germany. But I had promised to talk to Lars. So I headed up to the Panorama Bar, where I'd have reception for the longest time.

Lars let the phone ring ten times. Maybe he was angry that I was taking the ship back after all. But when he finally answered, there was no anger in his voice.

"Hold on a sec. I've got my mother on the other phone," he said.

The "other phone." He always carried a second one that he never turned off, and he even had a spare battery for it in his wallet. He said it was for his father, who needed to be able to reach someone in case of an emergency with his severe diabetes. But for as long as I'd known Lars, there had never been an emergency. His mother, on the other hand, called several times a day.

His words were muffled by static again. I hung up before he could notice that our connection hadn't actually broken. I really wanted to call the office and demand an explanation. But that would have been a strange conversation. Besides, I had already learned the most important thing. My company had been in financial trouble, and Lars's family had saved it with a large contract. Casper would be shocked when I told him I was dating Lars. ("Pre-engaged!" I told myself. "Repeat it until you get used to it: pre-engaged, pre-engaged, pre-engaged.")

I put my phone away and sat on my hands. I didn't want to tell either Casper or Lars what I'd accidentally discovered. But what was bothering me so much about Lars's behavior? Was it wrong to give a contract to someone to keep your pre-fiancée from losing her job? Lars could have told me, but then again, he didn't have to. To him, it was probably a small thing – he was just making sure my professional future was secure. And yes, I enjoyed being an auditor. Well, "enjoyed" might be too strong a word, but it gave me a good feeling to do something that was absolutely by the book.

My life was taken care of. Until my wedding with Lars, I would have an office job that didn't demand too much of me, but kept me from doing stupid things. After that, charity work. Amen.

But why were my fingers trembling? Why did it feel like ants were crawling through my body since last night? I missed the thrill of danger and the feeling of saving myself through my own cleverness. Stealing was an addiction, and I didn't know what to put in its place. It left a gaping hole.

I wanted to go to the kitchen. But not to steal eggs. The chef's knife case wouldn't leave my mind. I could see the blades clearly in front of me. They were shining and perfectly sharpened. Like diamonds. Suddenly, I craved that treasure with every fiber of my being.

It was high time for a phone session with Dr. Knudsen. I connected to the ship's satellite network and chose the number I had on speed dial. The assistant initially refused to put me through. The doctor was on her lunch break, and I needed an appointment.

"But I can't wait," I said.

"You'll have to, I'm very sorry. How about Thursday in three weeks? Right at 10 AM? Can you make that work? Hello? Are you still there? Hello? I can't hear you."

She couldn't, because I wasn't saying anything. I just breathed shallowly and irregularly so she would know I hadn't hung up. I had listened to all sorts of phone calls in Dr. Knudsen's waiting room, and I knew this was a sure way to get

through to the doctor without an appointment. And sure enough, my silence put the assistant on high alert. I could be having suicidal thoughts, I could have already started to act on them, my blood could already be mixing with the bath foam. In a case like that, she was obligated to help me. There was a click, a short bit of hold music, and then Dr. Knudsen said with a full mouth, "Hello Emily?"

"Hello, Doctor. Thanks for making time for me."

"How are you? Still keeping your addiction diary?"

"I'm not doing so well. But yes, I'm still doing the diary. It's just not helping me right now."

"You feel the urge to steal again."

"Exactly."

The man made a lot of money by listening and occasionally stating the obvious. If I'd felt the urge to expose myself in public, that would have been new and maybe even a fun change. But you can't just switch out your flaws that easily.

"Is there a specific trigger for this?"

"Yes. An old friend has reappeared, and it's thrown me off track."

"Send him away. Draw a clear line. No half-measures. Burn that bridge."

"I already have. But there's another problem. I'm in a new relationship. It's serious. This man takes care of me and handles all my problems."

"That's nice to hear."

"Yes, at first I liked it too. But now I feel powerless. In his world, I'm nothing. Yet I could clean out his villa if I wanted to. I could even get to his accounts; he's noted the access numbers unencrypted in his pocket calendar, and as for the PINs, I have an idea..."

"Emily! You don't want to fall back into those thought patterns."

"No. That's why I'm calling. I don't know what to do next."

"What were you thinking?"

"When one door closes, a new one opens, right?"

"If you say so."

"I don't. But it's an encouraging phrase. You're supposed to be the one to say things like that to me."

"As a matter of principle, I don't lie to my patients."

"Does that mean you think the place where my kleptomania was will forever be a horrible void?"

"That's up to you. It can take time to find something that satisfies you in a similar way as the old addiction. Some people never manage it. There's a reason drugs are so popular. And used in a controlled setting, they can certainly be a solution."

"You want me to get high?"

"If you put it that way: no. But you're an adult, and where you live now, in the Netherlands..."

"I live in Denmark."

"Oh. Then I've mistaken you for someone else."

"So what do you advise me to do now?"

"Nothing at all. Cheap advice wouldn't help you. You have to help yourself."

"But I can't do that. That's why I'm calling."

"It seems to me you need to strengthen your self-esteem."

"Okay, that's a good one. So say something nice to me."

"That is not my role."

"Then let's start at the bottom. Am I the worst patient you've ever had?"

"Worst in what sense?"

"Despicable."

"I don't judge in that way."

"Okay, I get it. You're neutral, a professional, and you want to help all people. But just for a second, take the perspective of a normal person and tell me if I'd be the absolute worst person you could imagine as a neighbor."

"If you lived next to me, I would at least refrain from putting up Christmas decorations in my front yard because you might take them. So I would have disadvantages because of you, yes."

"But surely there are people worse than me? Murderers, child molesters?"

"I see what you're getting at," he said.

"Sometimes it helps to define yourself by what you're not. Even criminals have a code of honor. You should pursue that path. Think about what your conscience wouldn't let you do. You can start there. Once you grab a corner of your own morality, hold on to it and don't let go. If you need

a sense of direction, you could also join a religious community."

"I haven't had good experiences with religious people lately."

"No drugs, not interested in God," Dr. Knudsen murmured. I heard the scratch of a pen on paper.

"Your homework, Emily," he continued. "Find a person who has a lower moral standard than you. Identify the differences, but also realize how little separates you from him. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Essentially, we're all just animals." Dr. Knudsen said this with a full mouth.

"I'm sorry I took your lunch break, Doctor."

"You didn't take anything, Emily. Don't tell yourself that. Good luck."

"Thanks. Au revoir."

I hung up.

From my vantage point, I could see the sundeck. Malik was making himself comfortable on a deck chair. He was heavily bundled up in a hat and a scarf wrapped up to his nose. After wrapping a fleece blanket around his legs, he even put on gloves, fussily tucking them under his sleeve cuffs with his teeth. He was clearly planning on a long nap. He turned his face to the sky and closed his eyes. Sleeping people look innocent, but I was sure Malik's thoughts were completely black. Unfortunately, I couldn't see into his head to study his low moral standards.

My self-esteem project would have to proceed differently.

Maybe I should suggest that Lars take over a series of small bank branches in a remote part of France? Then Malik could rob them one by one. That would prove to me that he was still the same person. It would also keep him busy and keep me safe from him.

Walter came onto the deck, a petite woman in a white knitted hat at his side. They passed Malik, walked to the railing, and looked at the horizon, where the Finnish mainland was barely visible. I hoped they could make up for the years they'd lost. And for goodness sake, I hoped Walter wouldn't get the idea to get "pre-engaged!" I was so touched by the sight of them that it took me a moment to notice Malik had gotten up. I just saw him disappear through the door to the deck. Why would he get up after bundling up so carefully? There could only be one reason: he was up to something, and with him, 99 percent of the time, that "something" was criminal.

I quickly took off my shoes and jacket, and padded in my socks out of the Panorama Bar and down the stairs.

Malik was moving fast, and I followed him silently. As I tiptoed after him, I felt a childlike joy and had to stop myself from skipping. We reached the lowest deck. I knew cabins were assigned from top to bottom, and since I'd seen on the counter lady's computer that the ship was only half-full,

Malik couldn't be heading to his cabin. The lower deck was empty – except for Walter's hiding spot. The old hiding spot. Of course, Walter was now taking a regular trip with Ursula and had an official cabin.

Malik opened a door, disappeared from my sight, and reappeared a moment later with the shoebox where Walter had kept his money. I quickly hid in a fire extinguisher cabinet and waited until Malik had passed me again. From behind, he looked relaxed. He held the box casually under his arm. No secrecy, no rush. No one would have suspected he was stealing a considerable amount of cash. I quietly left the cabinet and followed him.

"Bold," I said to myself silently. "Just bold. No finesse. He's just walking the loot away."

What was Malik thinking? Walter would notice the money was gone soon, and who would he suspect? The crew knew about his savings, but they hadn't stolen from him in years, so why would they start now? The only two people who had recently been clued in were Malik and me.

Malik walked to his cabin. He opened the door with the key card, pushed it open, and tried to swing it shut just as quickly. I stuck my foot in the frame, gritting my teeth as the door squeezed my bare toes, and slipped into the tight space. The bathroom in this cabin was to the left of the door, and I only had to reach out to grab Malik's toiletry bag. The zipper was open. I emptied the contents onto the floor. A toothbrush, toothpaste, and a

comb fell out. With a slight delay, the "Cuiron" cologne bottle that had been in an inner pocket followed. The glass didn't break, but the stopper fell off, and the scent enveloped me. The weight of the bag in my hand had barely decreased. The real weight was in the secret compartment at the bottom. I ripped open two velcro straps and curled my fingers around the handle of the revolver. I let the bag drop and with my free hand, I took the safety off the gun.

"Surprise," I said.

If Malik was surprised, he didn't show it.

"Emily," he said. "How can I help you? Would you like to borrow my gun?"

He smiled a little too widely. That's how I knew he was nervous.

"How can you steal an old man's life savings?" I asked.

"It wasn't like that. He gave them to me."

"Sure. Put the box down."

I pointed the gun barrel at the lower bunk. Malik slowly followed my instruction. The box sank into the perfectly folded, smooth blanket, looking like a piece of jewelry on a velvet cushion in a jeweler's display. I knew I was holding the gun too low to fatally wound Malik, but I was afraid my hands would shake if I aimed at his chest. Besides – would he believe I was capable of shooting him? A bullet to the knee would be more realistic. On a ship, without quick medical attention, that would be unpleasant enough for him.

"You can take the money," Malik said. "But please put the revolver away. That's not your style."

"No, it's not. But on the advice of my therapist, I'm trying out new roles to define myself. Today, I'm a robber."

"And do you like it?"

"Yeah, it's not bad. Nice and simple. You threaten someone and get what you want. No stress with secrecy or complicated plans."

"Yeah. But you have to know what you want. And you don't. First, you tell me to leave you alone, then you sneak after me and wave my revolver around."

He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Hands down!" I snapped at him.

Why was I demanding this? I didn't know. When you don't plan what to say beforehand, you end up repeating lines from crime dramas. Maybe I looked ridiculous, but that wasn't my main concern. I was holding an unsafetied gun, and if I got cornered and lost my nerve, that only made me more dangerous. Malik should have been aware of that.

"You deceived me," I said. "I thought you also wanted to help Walter. But you were just waiting for something to be in it for you. Even the bachelorette party thing. Where are the chips? I bet they're still here."

"When was I supposed to return them? You were with me that night..."

Yes, I hadn't forgotten that.

"...and in the morning, the casino was closed."

"As if a locked door could stop you."

"I thought you wouldn't approve of me breaking in. I wanted to give the chips to Lydia just before we arrived. But then Ursula didn't show up, and everything went crazy. Think about it. Why would I have kept the chips? We were going to get off the ship in Helsinki. I couldn't have cashed them in, so they would have been worthless to me."

"Give me your pillow," I said, holding out my hand. "And your door card. Do you have a warm sweater with you? Take it. Where we're going, there's no heating."

I used the pillow to conceal the revolver and motioned for Malik to go first. "Don't do anything stupid. I'll quietly give you directions. Otherwise, we don't speak."

I let him go first and pulled the door shut behind me. We didn't run into anyone. The room where Lydia had taken us to talk to the phantom was unlocked. The key was still hanging on a hook next to the door. With my free hand, I took it down.

Malik looked around. A few empty boxes were stacked against a wall, but there was nothing else.

"I'll bring you some food later," I said.

"You're going to lock me in here?"

"Looks that way."

"Why?"

"Because you're unpredictable. You can't be trusted."

"I stayed with Walter," he said. "While you were out having fun in Helsinki, we were eating cold bean stew and chewing on baguettes that didn't deserve the name. And we only had that because the chef was kind enough to supply us before he got off the ship. For a whole day, I waited on an abandoned ship with a distraught Walter, constantly assuring him that your noble Lars with his amazing connections could surely get a new ID. I didn't even believe it myself, but Walter might have drowned himself in the harbor otherwise. I barely slept because I was afraid he'd do something to himself. And now you're telling me I'm not trustworthy."

"You helped him, and then you were going to rob him."

"He gave me the money. Really! Why don't you believe me? Have I ever lied to you?"

"No. But you've never had a reason to, because we were in on it together."

"In on it?"

"It's a saying."

"And it's true. Just yesterday."

He gave me a cheeky grin. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of telling him I had been drunk and it would never have happened otherwise. That would have been a lie, and we both knew it. But I wasn't completely immune to his charm. *I have a gun, Monsieur*, I thought to myself.

"See you later, Malik."

"Wait! Ask Walter if you don't believe me about the money."

"Sure, I will. But first, I have other things to do, and until then, you're staying in here."

"What if I scream?"

"Then I'll tell the captain I found this little revolver on you. Are you allowed to bring firearms on board? I don't think so. Are you allowed to own one? I don't think so either. And are your fingerprints on it? Absolutely. You'll end up right back in a room like this until the water police arrive."

I winked at him, tossed the pillow on the boxes, and locked the door behind me. In the hallway, I put the safety back on the gun, tucked it into my waistband, pulled my sweater over it, and went back to Malik's cabin. There, I put the revolver back in its soap-scented hiding place and mentally composed a diary entry:

**Stolen Today:** Nothing.

**Stolen Back:** 74,600 Euros.

**Special Circumstances:** Used a gun to enforce justice.

Had I defined my moral boundaries? I could have stolen the money, but only from someone I didn't know or didn't like. But Walter, the poor old man who had found happiness late in life? Never. Disgusting.

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that Malik had pressured Walter. That's why he'd left his cabin door open. If I went to him now to return the money, he would probably be so

intimidated that he'd tell me the story Malik had dictated. It would be better to give him his money back when we arrived in Germany. I would keep Malik locked up until Walter and Ursula were long gone. I didn't believe they had anything to fear from him. The money had been an easy haul for him; he had just stumbled upon it, but he wouldn't go chasing anyone over it. He wouldn't have even bothered to get out of bed for that amount back in the day.

However, I had to make sure he gave up on me, too. My stealing days had to be over for good, and he would only believe that if I was completely sure of it myself. In Malik's bag, under his neatly folded tuxedo, I found a plastic bag with the casino chips. Hopefully, the croupier was back on his feet.

# DISCLOSURES

I found Clemens in the now-open dining room, sitting in front of a bowl of soup. Seeing the food made me hungry, too. I loaded up a large plate from the buffet and grabbed some baguette and cheese for my prisoner. In a moment of generosity, I also took a yogurt, so Malik would have a little variety in his meals.

Clemens only looked up from his plate for a moment when I sat down.

"How are you?" I asked.

He groaned. "A little better after two headache pills. But I desperately need to catch up on some sleep before my shift."

"I'm afraid I still need you for a minute."

"For what?"

I slid the plastic bag under the table toward him. "First off, I still owe you something."

"Your stolen goods? What am I supposed to do with this? They belong to me least of all."

"Can't you just take them back?"

"The chips were purchased. If I take them, the books won't balance."

"Then cash them out and donate the money."

"Okay. Was that the whole favor?"

"No, there's one more thing. I need you to test me. I want to prove that I won't steal anything, even when I have the opportunity."

"Ugh. I think if I have to spin the roulette wheel now, I'll get sick."

"Oh, come on. You started by saving me, now you have to finish it."

"I wanted to take you to church."

"My church is the casino. Please! Earn some karma points."

"Fine, but it has to be quick. I need at least four more hours of sleep after this."

"You'll get them."

I grabbed a bite of potato salad, quickly devoured half a shrimp skewer, and wrapped the baguette, cheese, and yogurt in a napkin.

"For the seagulls," I explained to Clemens. But he was already trotting off.

We waited in front of the casino entrance until a group of men had passed.

"If the captain finds out, I'm in trouble," Clemens hissed.

He quickly unlocked the door, pushed me inside, and secured the hatch again. He left the blinds on the door and glass walls closed.

I helped him remove the cover from the roulette table and had to turn around when he entered the number combination into the safe where the chips were kept. He slid five stacks of ten-value chips across the felt to me.

"They're counted. Fifty pieces."

"You need some too. We'll play against each other."

Clemens sighed, went back to the safe, and placed five identical stacks on the other side of the table. "So, what are your rules?" he asked.

"We both play. Each of us has to bet on ten different fields per round. Since it's just the two of us and the situation is more manageable than in a real game, we'll have a time limit: all bets must be placed within 10 seconds. I'll count down. During those ten seconds, and while I'm placing my own bets, I'll try to remove one of your chips."

"I can remember which fields I've bet on without any problems."

"Yeah, because you're a professional. That's why it doesn't count if you tell me which of your bets I removed after the time is up. You have to catch me in the act. Just shout. Then you win."

"What's my prize?"

"You get to go to sleep."

"And when do you win?"

"The game is over when I've captured forty of your chips. But I've only won when I give them all back to you and they are back in the safe."

"Got it." Clemens cracked his knuckles and bounced on the balls of his feet.

"Ready?" I asked, grabbing five chips in each hand.

Clemens took eight with his right hand and the remaining two with his left. "Been ready," he said.

"Ten..." I started counting backward. I placed my first chip on 18.

"...nine..." I chose 1. Clemens bet on 12 and the first dozen.

"...eight..." One of my chips landed on the even numbers while Clemens waited.

"...seven..." Apparently, his tactic was to place his bets with both hands at the same time so he could keep a better eye on me in between.

"...six..." But I could do that too.

"...five..." He still wasn't doing anything.

"...four..." If that's how he wanted to play...

"...three..." Alright, my friend, I thought.

"...two..." I hope you're fast.

"...one..."

I had seven chips left, he had eight. Our arms brushed against each other as we both tried to get rid of our chips at the same time.

"No more bets," I called out.

We both managed to make all our bets, but when Clemens counted, there were only nine of his chips left on the table.

"You took one from the black section," he said.

"That's right. But did you see it?"

"No. Let's do it again."

And we played on. He tried a variety of tactics. Sometimes he'd place one chip per second, keeping pace with my countdown. Other times he'd put down three at once, pause, place three more, and then, in the final half-second, scatter the remaining four. His fingers were quick, and I could tell the distances on the board were second nature to him. He could place a chip on the right spot without even looking, but what was normally an advantage served him no purpose in this game. He had to keep his eyes everywhere at once.

I faked a move, making a quick motion with one hand while my other hand seemed to stay

still. If our chips had different colors, my tricks wouldn't have worked, but since they were identical, I could confuse Clemens by placing my chips near his, changing the visual landscape of the table. He tried to catch me, and once he seemed to anticipate one of my moves, stopping abruptly and waiting for my left hand to move. But I demonstratively hesitated, while using my right hand to swipe a chip from out of his sight. All the fatigue had vanished from my body, and I felt completely in my element. I had already captured twenty of his chips, and I switched tactics. To make it more challenging for myself, and to confuse Clemens even more, I started taking my own placed bets off the table and moving them to a new spot during the game.

Because he was used to memorizing the layout of the table, this gave him extra trouble. After some rounds, he couldn't even tell which of his chips was missing. It was like playing a game of Memory where you get worse with each turn because the memories of where the cards were get scrambled.

"You're good," he said when only ten chips were left on his side of the table. "Better than me, I have to admit."

I grinned, beaming with undisguised delight. Winning was a wonderful feeling, but even better was the fact that, without his notice, I had slipped two chips into my pocket and one more was tucked into the cuff of my right sock. The clever cheat always had a trick after the trick.

But now came the moment of truth. I had to cheat myself. What I had captured with all my skill had to be given back. My inner child stomped its foot. That was unfair! I had earned those chips.

I squeezed my hands into fists in my pockets, clutching my treasures, and thought of Dr. Knudsen. What would he say? During our sessions, I often got angry with him because I found his way of responding both disarming and depressing.

"I stole forty chips, Doctor, and from those, I hid three more, Doctor! Isn't that brilliant? You know what, I could give them all back, and then steal them right from under the croupier's nose again before he locks the safe. Wouldn't that be the crowning achievement?"

"You stole, Emily."

"But Doctor, what I do is art."

"Art that can land you in prison."

"Only if you get caught."

"Sooner or later, everyone gets caught."

"Not me."

"Overconfidence is the surest way there."

"I have excellent self-control. If I'm about to get caught, I'll stop."

"Your vanity will be your downfall."

"How?"

"Remaining unnoticed also means not being recognized. Who sees how skilled you are? You are an unloved artist. No one acknowledges your talent."

But there was one person, and I had him locked up deep in the belly of the ship an hour ago.

I stacked my casino chips into small towers on the table. Clemens counted with his eyes and frowned. Before he could say something was wrong, I brought the hidden chips to light.

"Ninety pieces," I said. "And with that, they're all here. You can lock them back up."

Clemens came around the table and placed the chips, along with his own, on the tray. As he worked on the safe, he turned to give me two suspicious glances. I leaned against the wall with my arms crossed.

"You think I'm going to rob you as the grand finale?" I asked, a little hurt.

"No, it just surprises me that you have so much self-control. I see a lot of habitual gamblers and a lot of thieves. People don't usually change."

"You just don't see the ones who do change anymore."

"Could be."

He put the chips away and locked the safe. We walked to the door, and I was about to reach for the handle when he suddenly pulled me into a tight hug.

"I'm so glad. People like you strengthen my faith in the good in the world."

"Hallelujah," I mumbled into his shoulder, overwhelmed by this unexpected outburst of emotion.

"And wasn't that easy, Emily? Tell me, wasn't that really simple?"

"Yes," I admitted.

And it was true. What had happened? I had taken the chips and then given them back. They didn't weigh a ton, they weren't magnetic, and they didn't stick to me. This morning had been a liberating experience. I just had to stay on the path of honesty, always go straight ahead, and then my life would be a beautiful walk in the sunlight.

Lars always knew what to do, too. He didn't brood or struggle with different options. For him, everything was always perfectly clear. And if difficulties ever arose, he had people to clear them out of the way for him.

Clemens had regained his composure somewhat, peered out the door, let me out when the coast was clear, and locked the casino again.

"Sleep well," I said. "And thanks."

"Don't mention it. Someday you'll have to tell me your tricks."

"Maybe I'd rather forget them."

We walked off in different directions to our cabins. When I got to mine, I stood there, unsure of what to do. I wasn't tired anymore, and after the intense game in the artificial light, I craved natural light and fresh air. On the sundeck, I found an empty deck chair among the napping passengers and, in true Malik fashion, wrapped myself in a blanket. We still had almost a full day of travel, and I had nothing to do. Malik was waiting for the breakfast I was still carrying

wrapped in a napkin, but the little scoundrel could wait a little longer. I pushed the thought of Malik out of my mind.

Being on a ship felt a bit like being in bed after a near-complete recovery from an illness, when the doctor has ordered you to take two more days of doing absolutely nothing. I had eaten, I wasn't going back to the casino, and I didn't have any paperwork to go through.

My thoughts drifted to Lars. He was flying back to Copenhagen today, with only Peter, not me. The role of this "Peter" was a mystery, I was just now realizing. Why had Lars brought him along? Just to drive the car? I knew Lars didn't like to drive himself, but taxis would have been much cheaper than round-trip flights for a chauffeur, and Lars was definitely careful with his money. I felt the sun's warmth on my face. There was barely a breeze, and the sea was like a mirror, a smooth surface that could hide all sorts of things.

Lars had said he wanted to surprise me in Helsinki, but was jealousy really the reason for his trip? Why hadn't he stopped me back in Germany? Who cares, I told myself, twisting the pre-engagement ring in the light. It was sparkling beautifully.

But I couldn't stop brooding. I had to ask Dr. Knudsen how to stop looking for tricks and hidden motives everywhere. But for now, with no other distractions, I could let my mind wander a little. Who was it hurting?

Lars was a man of direct action. He wanted his girlfriend — pre-fiancée! — to keep her job, so he gave her company a contract. He didn't care about finding the phantom; for all he cared, it could have been scrapped along with the ship. He didn't even care about the ship itself; he only bought it as a tax write-off. He had only admitted to me that he had bought the fleet after a delay. At the harbor, he had still been talking about being in Helsinki on business. But the shipping company that still owned the fleet wasn't based there, but in Germany. And then there was the thing with Ursula! He'd supposedly wanted to see her because she was a local celebrity. But he wasn't interested in the romantic story she represented. When it came to Lars, suddenly nothing added up.

At the end of the day, only one thing was certain: the purpose of his trip to Helsinki was to get me back home as quickly as possible. It was never his intention for me to be sent on a mission that he, in his opinion, considered completely unimportant. When he also learned that an ex-lover was following me, it became too much for him to handle. Things became even more complicated when he realized that I wouldn't simply leave the phantom to his self-chosen fate. It wasn't in my power to bring about a happy ending, but I at least wanted to make sure the old man didn't end his life as a lonely passenger.

The only way to achieve this, from my perspective, was to reunite him with Ursula. But I

had become so fixated on this romantic outcome that I had overlooked another, more pragmatic possibility. Why was the phantom on the ship in the first place? He made the first crossing because someone was waiting for him on the other side of the Baltic Sea. Held back by shyness and fear of the future, he had returned. The crossings to Germany were the depressing part of the story; the hopeful part was the trips to Finland, where each arrival confirmed that his beloved was still waiting.

But what would have happened if Ursula hadn't been there one day? I had convinced Walter to fight for her, but maybe he would have done so without my encouragement. The fact that he couldn't get off the ship was a twist of fate; otherwise, I'm sure he would have left. His legend depended on Ursula waiting at the harbor. Although he had made a comfortable life for himself in his phantom existence, the legend would have died without the patient woman. No one would have wanted to talk to him through a ventilation pipe anymore, and without their share of the earnings, the crew would have quickly lost interest in supporting him. They might have tried to help him find a place in a home for aging sailors or a similar facility, but that would have been it.

No woman, no phantom. And suddenly, I heard Lars's voice: "It's that simple."

I couldn't lie still anymore. I got up and paced back and forth along the railing. Was I a bad person for thinking bad things? I stopped and

looked at the turbulence the ship's propeller was creating. The waves behind us would flatten out again, and nothing would remain of them. If I didn't ask questions, I wouldn't get answers.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I was standing in a woman's sunlight. Only on my second glance did I realize it was Ursula. She also seemed to recognize me only when I turned around.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving out of her light.

"Please, have a seat," she said, gesturing to the deck chair next to her. "Walter went inside to rest; he was terribly exhausted. But the journey isn't exactly exciting for him anymore."

I accepted her invitation and sat down.

"You were very kind to Walter," she said. "The way you stood up for him, it's not something you see every day."

"It really shouldn't have been a big deal. He would have just walked off the ship if it hadn't been for the terror alert."

"I'm so sick of terrorists. And the copycats. Nowadays, any crazy person with a fake threat can throw an entire city into chaos."

"Luckily, there are still decent people out there. I heard they helped you right away when you had your fainting spell."

"Fainting spell? Yes, that's what it turned out to be, but not before I gave that brute a good whack."

"What brute are you talking about?"

"That journalist, if you can even call him that. He stopped me yesterday morning as I was

running to the harbor, demanding an interview. I told him it wasn't a good time, but he wouldn't let up. He grabbed me and tried to pull me into a cafe. Can you imagine? I fought back. When I started screaming, other people came to my aid, but all the excitement made me dizzy, and I fainted."

"They took you to a hospital."

"Yes, and there another lunatic showed up, an alleged nephew who wanted to visit me. Can you believe it? I don't have a nephew, not even siblings."

"That's crazy," I said.

So my suspicions were confirmed. Peter was the "journalist," and Lars was behind it all. I tried to recall our conversations over the last few days. Had Lars lied to me? Or had he just withheld the truth? I could imagine him having a perfectly clear conscience about not saying anything, as if it were the other person's fault for piecing together a false story from a few bits of information.

It was that simple.

"But as you said, there are decent people out there, too," Ursula continued. "Like this gentleman I met in the hospital lobby when I was discharged."

"A French man?" I asked.

"Yes, his English had that accent."

She beamed at me, probably wondering how I could have guessed.

"He was travelling on the ship and found out they wouldn't let Walter off. So he brought me to him. Sometimes heaven sends an angel."

I bit my lip, staying quiet about that. A young couple stood at the railing, gazing out at the sea. When you're on a ship, you automatically scan the horizon for land, but as for me, I no longer wished for Germany to appear. To do something to cool my anger at Lars, I could throw the ring into the water, but I would regret that a moment later. Diamonds don't hurt anyone, which is why I like them so much.

I said goodbye to Ursula and went to the Panorama Bar. A group of elderly women were sharing a bottle of champagne, so I turned right back around. On the sundeck, I found a quiet spot to make a phone call. It would be an expensive conversation over the satellite connection, but it was worth it. Lars answered in good spirits.

"When were you going to tell me?" I asked.

"Tell you what?"

"That you were responsible for Ursula's collapse."

"I wouldn't call it my fault; she just got terribly upset, Peter says."

"Understandably, right? So would I."

"Luckily, she's fine now. Everything's okay."

"So you never would have said anything to me?"

"No, Emily, if you're asking so directly – I probably wouldn't have. I was worried you'd get upset. And you are, as I can hear now."

"All the time you were waiting in the hospital, you didn't know if it was a trivial thing. She could have had a heart attack."

"Please don't make this more dramatic than it is."

"I saw how scared you were, and you know what? I thought it was because you cared about her. I was touched by your concern for a stranger. But you were much more concerned about yourself."

"Wait a minute. You said it yourself: she was a stranger. Just like the phantom is someone you never met before this trip. I don't understand why you develop this almost hysterical affection for people you have nothing in common with."

"Walter was popular with the passengers."

"Yes, for now. But sooner or later, Ursula or he would have died, and then it wouldn't have been a romantic story anymore, it would have been a depressing one."

"He wanted to get off the ship."

"Supposedly. Maybe the terror alert was a convenient excuse. Maybe in the end, he wouldn't have had the courage."

"You don't know that."

"And you don't either."

"You don't believe that people can change."

"On their own? Without being forced? Very few people can do that."

"Is that why you don't want to hire a detective to follow me? Because you're afraid of finding

something you won't like, and then you'd drop me? Because I just can't change?"

"I believe in our shared future. That's why I gave you the ring."

"The pre-engagement ring!"

"In my circles, you test things for longer before you commit. Divorces are expensive and complicated."

In the background, I heard traffic noise. Peter was probably driving Lars home. How nice, having employees. You don't have to deal with so many unpleasant things. And you just ignore the rest. If I had taken that attitude before my trip, we wouldn't be arguing now. After the first conversation with the captain, I would have simply limited my time on the ship to getting my beauty sleep and eating easily digestible meals. I wouldn't have found the phantom, I would have successfully avoided Malik, and I wouldn't have mentioned any of it to Lars. My pre-fiancé wouldn't have gotten jealous, and therefore wouldn't have come to Helsinki to end the story with a sledgehammer.

But why would I have even gone on the trip with so much indifference in the first place? Just because Lars paid my boss for it? He said himself that he hadn't wanted me to get this assignment, which in his logic meant he had paid for me not to go. Money could ensure you didn't have to do anything and didn't have to deal with anyone, and apparently, that was his goal. But was it mine, too?

For years, I had been chasing beautiful things. It was strange that this was the first time I had ever wondered what I would do if I were rich.

"Don't be angry with me, Emily," Lars said. "Can I make this all better?"

Thoughtfully, I looked at one of the large bolts on the railing. The Störtebeker was made of tons of steel; how long would it take for its skeleton to rust away after being scrapped?

"You can leave the ship to me," I said.

"What, for heaven's sake, do you want with the ship?"

"I just want it to keep going."

"And what if it's not profitable anymore? There are a lot of ongoing costs."

"Tell me about it."

"You can't make it profitable if only every third voyage is booked solid."

"How about you pay? You can deduct the losses from your taxes."

"That's a crazy idea, Emily. Not a single thought has gone into it."

"Was it well-thought-out to violently detain an old woman who wasn't in the best of health? Don't say anything. If it wasn't well-thought-out, that's stupid. But if it was, that's evil. And you're someone who always thinks things through, right? If I threatened to take this story to the press, it would be expensive and complicated for you to restore your good reputation."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Oh, nonsense. I'm just helping you fix your mistake. If a ship isn't scrapped because it represents a romantic story, isn't that heartwarming?"

"If I actually agree to your offer, you'll have to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I can't trust you anymore."

"Fax the agreement to the captain."

"We'd better end this conversation now."

"From my side, everything's been said."

# WHO STILL BELIEVES IN LOVE?

I brought Malik his food. He also demanded water, and I got him two cans from a vending machine. Other than that, he didn't speak to me.

In my cabin, I made a diary entry:

*My pre-engagement can probably be considered dissolved.*

*I've checked myself out of the game.*

It was just before three. I lay on my bed and tried to cry. It didn't work. So I screamed a little instead: "Aaah!"

In response, there was a knock on the wall.

"Everything alright?" a female voice asked, which I heard so clearly it was as if the lady were sitting next to me.

"Sorry," I said. "Just stubbed my toe."

I undressed and took a shower. You could turn the water up surprisingly hot, and I scalded my shoulders. But after I regulated the temperature, the showering didn't provide any distraction. I hopped around the cabin, trying to air-dry my body. I got cold quickly and finally grabbed a towel. I emptied the contents of my bag onto the bed and sorted everything back in, arranged by color, except for the black stuff. I put on the black clothes.

One of the two Finnish TV channels was showing a documentary about reindeer. It was filmed with a handheld camera, but even for that, the picture was very shaky. Maybe the cameraman had been drinking while waiting for the animals for hours. Alcohol! That sounded like a good idea. The bar, however, didn't open until that evening, and I wasn't in the mood for canned beer from a vending machine. I wanted something stronger. I'd get some of the rum they used to flambé the crème brûlées, and then hopefully sleep until the Störtebeker reached its home port.

The chef greeted me with a huge smile.

"Are you hungry outside of meal times again? Or do you want to show me a culinary experiment? We already had pancakes without eggs; maybe today it's cream pudding without cream?"

"I need something for my nerves," I said.

"Valerian? Sleepy-time tea?"

"Schnapps. Rum."

"You're a character. With ice, Coke, or as a grog?"

"Just straight, please."

He nodded, went to a cabinet, took out a bottle, and poured me a generous amount. Before handing me the glass, he hesitated.

"This isn't a test now, is it?" he wanted to know.

"No, this is purely personal."

"Alright then: Cheers."

He left the bottle within my reach. A folding chair was leaning against the wall, but I slid down a cabinet and sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Having a bad day, huh?" the chef asked.

"Oh, I just wanted to see the kitchen from down here."

"You're not an auditor at all, are you?"

"Do you really want to know?" I raised the glass and drank it in one go.

"I'm a thief," I confessed. "I stole the egg I didn't need for the pancakes."

"I see." He seemed to be waiting.

"Don't you think that's bad?" I asked.

"That you stole an egg?"

"Yes. An egg isn't valuable, but it's the principle, right?"

"Not for me. You wouldn't believe who's been through here as a kitchen helper. But the problems aren't with taking things, they're with adding things."

He pointed to a pot the size of a baby bathtub.

"Sixty liters of milk for the pudding are in there. But if you drop salt in it, it's all ruined. If something's missing, you can always fix it, but if there's too much, we have a problem. Guess how much sugar I need for this recipe."

Steam rose from the pot.

"Two kilos," I guessed.

"More."

"Ten?"

"That's too much."

"Five."

"Yeah, about right. I'll take six."

He weighed sugar in a bucket and added ten large packets of pudding powder.

"Would you like to?"

I lifted the bucket over the edge of the pot and poured the contents into the milk.

"Very good," the chef said. "And now, you stir."

He handed me a ladle, and I tried to stir. It was like trying to paddle a boat with a toothpick. I could feel the ring on my pinky finger. I would have loved to throw it into the pudding and watch it sink. But I was being watched.

The chef behind me snorted with laughter.

"Stop, that was just a joke."

He held his stomach, laughing. "I always do that with the newbies. The ladle is just for show."

He took it from my hand, scraped the leftover pudding from the edge of the pot, put it in the sink, and wheeled over a machine that stirred the pudding without our help.

"Very funny," I said sourly.

I needed a second rum for that. My arms were still shaking from the effort, and I spilled some as I poured.

"See?" the chef commented on my clumsiness.

"The problems are always with adding things. You still have to practice that."

I looked at the sticky rum stain on the immaculate stainless-steel countertop and started to cry. This embarrassed the poor man. He awkwardly patted my back.

"I'm sorry, that was a stupid joke. Let me wipe that up."

He got a rag, and soon the countertop was gleaming like before. I thought it must be great to work in a kitchen. At the end of the day, you left your workplace clean, tidy, and with a clear conscience.

"Can I stay here?" I asked.

"You mean, until dinner starts?"

"No, I mean, until... I don't know how long. Indefinitely. You must need another helper, right? I want to... reorient my career."

The chef didn't hesitate. "If you're not afraid of hard work, sure. The captain has to agree, of course, but I think he will. We're chronically understaffed. Some days, the guys and I are completely swamped."

He handed me a tissue. I dabbed the tears from my face and promised to report to the captain right away.

"You'll have to get a thicker skin for my humor, though. We use first names here, by the way. Felix," he held out his hand.

"Emily," I said, withstanding his handshake, which was probably another test.

"Should we drink to that?" I asked.

"I don't drink until after work, and that will apply to you too in the future, but since you don't work here yet – don't let me stop you."

Well, if he said so... I poured myself a third rum. On the way to the bridge, I had to support myself on the walls of the hallway. The captain

was delighted to see me. My desire to work in the kitchen surprised him. If that's what I wanted, he agreed. I would, of course, have to complete a probationary period. He was much more interested in whether the fleet's soon-to-be owner would let the Störtebeker keep going. I solemnly explained that it was as good as certain. The new owner was very keen on keeping this ship with its romantic legend. The captain cheered like a little boy and started singing a sea shanty.

I tried to share his enthusiasm as best I could, but suddenly I felt more tired than I had in a long time. What needed to be done was done; my job was finished. I excused myself and stumbled away. I slept through dinner in my cabin. When I woke up, it was 9 PM. My head was pounding, and I cursed the third rum and the two that came before it. However, I didn't regret my decision to trade auditing for a surely low-paying kitchen assistant job. In retrospect, my old job had been depressing. I had spent my days looking for mistakes that others had meticulously hidden. It was like an Easter egg hunt where you didn't find chocolate bunnies, but foul-smelling fraud attempts.

My first stop after getting up was the kitchen, where the chef was busy cleaning up after what he called the "dinner battle." I had him give me a double portion of leftovers and made my way to Malik with his ration. I put the plate down in front of the door to unlock it. As soon as I turned the

key, the door was yanked open, and Malik rushed past me.

"Hey," I called out, surprised, but he was already gone.

I stood in the hallway, bewildered, wondering what to do. Malik was physically stronger than me. No one on the crew would help me. I couldn't follow through on my threat to report him for gun possession. Malik could incriminate me for too much. Besides, betrayal was a nasty tactic, and as Dr. Knudsen said, I should stick to my code.

But if Malik were to break into my cabin now to steal the phantom's money back? This time, he would find a better hiding spot for his loot. I was still thinking about what to do when I heard something being dragged down the stairs and Malik appeared with a mattress and his bag.

"I desperately needed to pee," he called out to me. "Why did you keep me waiting so long?"

"I didn't think of it," I said, a little sheepishly. "I was sleeping."

"Good for you. In a cozy bed, right? Leave the key here for me."

"I'm supposed to..."

"You think I couldn't get out on my own? It's not a security lock, and there's also the ventilation shaft."

"Then why did you even wait for me?"

"I didn't want to give you a reason to look down on me again. If I had broken out, you'd never believe me when I told you I didn't steal the money. But you know what? This room isn't bad

at all. Much bigger than my crummy cabin, and you get used to the loud engine noise. So I'm moving in here now."

He dropped the mattress, set down his bag, and started unpacking: a tattered copy of "Les Misérables," a pair of nail scissors, various articles of clothing, and a wool blanket he had taken from the cabin.

"You know what your problem is?" he asked. "You don't trust yourself, so you don't believe me either. All you'd have to do is ask the phantom, but you see intrigue everywhere. But it was always you who was devious – or complicated, that's more like it. Look at me: You drag me in here, and I'm peaceful and making myself comfortable. But I'm not your puppet. Don't think I'll do everything you say."

"What kind of threat is that?"

"You'll see. If you even care. Don't worry, my dear magpie, it's nothing illegal. From now on, I'll behave like an honest sheep. But I'm not doing it because you'd like me to. I'm doing it because I'm obviously not clever enough to always get away with it, and because seven years in prison is a long time. More than a free person can ever imagine. And too much when the only hope is disappointed. You're playing the phantom's savior? But you don't even believe in love yourself. You didn't wait."

He threw himself facedown on the mattress, opened the book at a seemingly random page, and started reading.

I stood in the doorway for a while longer, but he didn't look up again. I finally left without a word. What could I have said in response?

Indeed, I no longer believed in love, at least not in terms of love in my own life. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I never wanted to see Lars again. But I wouldn't be able to forget him so quickly, and I felt that his conviction — that people rarely change — had stuck with me.

I would just do the obvious thing now: go to bed, get up early the next day, bring Malik his breakfast, and, just before we docked in Germany, give Walter his money back. Then we would all get off the ship and go our separate ways.

Back at my cabin, I found the door lock intact and Walter's treasure still there. It seemed Malik had really given up on it. I spent a dreamless night.

I woke up early the next morning. I went to get Malik's breakfast order, but found the room empty. Instead, I ran into my escaped prisoner upstairs at the buffet. He coolly wished me a good morning and sat down at a window table, where he stoically dunked his croissant into a bowl of coffee and looked out.

An announcement from the captain informed us that we would be docking on time. After breakfast, I went back to my cabin and packed my things. The shoebox still fit on top in my travel bag, but I didn't want to pack the revolver there. Giving it back to Malik also seemed like a foolish

idea. So I put it in my purse, planning to throw it overboard when no one was looking.

By nine-thirty, the passengers were already crowding the main deck. This time, I was right up front. I hadn't seen Walter and Ursula yet. I wanted to be out there first to intercept them and get rid of the money. Fifteen minutes later, I spotted them ten meters behind me, but the way was blocked by luggage and people sitting on it, so I just waved. The *Störtebeker* was making its turn. Lydia's voice hummed through the speakers.

She hoped all the guests had a pleasant crossing. The crew would be delighted to welcome us on board again, and so on. Finally (here she raised her voice and seemed to be reading from a note), an announcement from the Federal Police. Due to the ongoing terror alert for the Baltic Sea region, identity checks would be carried out upon entry into Germany. All travelers were asked to have their identification documents ready to ensure a smooth process.

A commotion broke out behind me. "Walter!" Ursula cried.

I turned around and saw Walter storming up the stairs to the upper deck. He dropped the jacket he had been carrying over his arm and took two steps at a time. Ursula stood frozen, looking after him in horror. I overcame my shock and gave chase. Jumping over bags, suitcases, and backpacks, I fought my way to the back and also sprinted up the stairs. When I was two-thirds of the way up, I heard the squeak of the swinging

door leading outside. As I passed through it, I nearly tripped over one of Walter's shoes. The next one lay two meters further on. Walter was holding on to the railing and struggling with his pants, the right leg of which was caught at his ankle. He was clearly trying to jump.

"Wait!" I shouted.

He turned to me briefly, seemed to want to say something, but then changed his mind and swung his free leg over the railing. I had once heard you should approach suicidal people cautiously, so I stopped. Walter, however, didn't hesitate. With his pants still on his foot, he simply let himself fall. I ran to the spot where he had just been standing and tore a lifebuoy from its holder on the way. Below me, in the gray waves, Walter's head resurfaced. He bobbed on the waves like an untethered buoy. As far as I could tell, Walter was trying to swim, so he must have some will to live left in him. I pulled back and hurled the ring overboard.

"Hold on to it!" I shouted.

But Walter didn't spot the ring in the waves.

"To your left!" I screamed.

I couldn't tell if he had heard me at all. He had to move away from the ship quickly to avoid getting caught in the propeller's vortex. But he might not be able to move on his own, as the current and waves were tossing him around. I knew: If Walter drowned, it would be my fault. By tracking him down, I had set this chain of events in motion. Without me, he wouldn't be down

there. I took off my shoes, jeans, and sweater and jumped in after him. As I was falling, instructions from my old swimming instructor flashed through my mind: *Keep your feet together, body straight!* But the sea below wasn't pool water, not a smooth, friendly surface under which turquoise tiles shimmered. I lost my sense of direction, spun around, paddled with my arms, and closed my eyes at the last moment before impact. I felt a blow to my head and then a terrible cold.

I woke up and thought I was back on the *Störtebeker*. In my line of sight were a sagging mattress, white sheets, and a television on a wall mount. All just like on board. But then I turned my head. There was a window, through which light was pouring, and outside, leaves rustled in the wind. I sat up and found a button on the bed. I pushed it, and a young woman in a white coat came in a moment later. She clearly didn't belong to the first-class room service that might have existed on the *Störtebeker* in better times. A nurse stood before me, and the first thing she did was gently but firmly push me back down to a horizontal position. I asked what was throbbing behind my forehead, and she explained that it was a concussion. She didn't want to answer any more questions; I should rest. A doctor would come later to talk to me.

"Where's Walter?" I asked anyway.

"Mr. Garbsen is fine; he just had hypothermia. Can I get you anything else? You should drink a lot. Would you like mineral water or tea?"

"Water, please."

She unscrewed a bottle on my nightstand, poured me a glass, and waited until I had finished it. As soon as she was out the door, I got up. Again, my head protested against the sudden change in position, but my legs carried me without complaint. I had discovered my travel bag next to a narrow closet and desperately needed to know what was, or wasn't, still in it. I hastily unzipped it. The shoebox was on top, and as far as I could tell, none of the money was missing. The revolver was also still in my purse. I couldn't believe it. Walter had failed at passport control because his ID was expired, and I had entered Germany with bundles of cash and a gun? My wallet was in my jacket. The hospital had probably only been interested in my insurance card, and my luggage had gotten off the ship unchecked. I lay back in bed, stared at the white wall, and decided to never worry about anything again. The most complicated knots untangle themselves while the smooth threads get hopelessly tangled.

As dusk fell outside the window, a young doctor finally came in with a clipboard. He wanted to know what I remembered and nodded thoughtfully when I said the last thing I recalled was the impact with the water. He'd received a report from the captain, and from that and what other eyewitnesses had reported, the events could be reconstructed.

According to the report, I had managed to swim to the lifebuoy, which Walter was already clinging to. We'd been in the cold water for a few minutes. Ursula, who had run after Walter and me, had raised the alarm immediately, but because Walter and I were located between the harbor wall and the ship, a rescue was only possible after the Störtebeker had gone into reverse. I must have been conscious the entire time, otherwise I would have drowned, as Walter's strength was also gone and he couldn't have held onto me. It wasn't unusual for parts of a person's memory before or after a concussion to be missing. I shouldn't worry; it might come back.

I felt empty inside, wondering what would come back, and whether I should be happy about it or not.

"Is anyone else here?" I asked.

"For you?" The doctor shook his head. "No. Should we contact any relatives?"

"No," I said. "But I'd like to speak with Walter as soon as possible."

The doctor promised to let him know. I shouldn't get up yet; they wanted to run a few tests first.

I looked out the window. Was there a shadow next to the tree? I was probably just imagining it.

I stayed in the hospital for four more days. My headaches got better, but all the energy had left my body. By then, I could imagine what it was like for people who didn't leave their houses for years because they simply didn't have the strength to.

The firm sent me flowers, and I talked to Casper on the phone. He wished me a speedy recovery and praised my commitment, saying it was not something to be taken for granted.

He was shocked into silence when I told him I was quitting to work on the ship. I didn't give him any reasons for it, didn't want to say that the thought of going back to Copenhagen, even just to pack up my apartment, filled me with dread.

My suicidal rescue mission at least had one good thing about it: in the icy water, my pre-engagement ring had slipped off my finger. At least I was guaranteed not to see that again.

All the nurses and orderlies were incredibly nice to me, and a psychologist came twice to determine if the near-death experience had damaged something in me that needed to be fixed. From Dr. Knudsen, I knew how to satisfy people in her profession: I talked a lot and seemed open, but I left out the fact that I had felt dead inside even before I jumped into the harbor basin. Under the psychologist's guidance, I took an inner journey, but the memories of those minutes in the water didn't return.

Walter and Ursula also visited me. Walter's memory hadn't suffered, but he was so ashamed that he didn't want to talk about the event. He just kept saying how grateful he was to me. I had saved his life. The whole time, Ursula clung to his arm, as if the hospital floor could open up and swallow her beloved. It wasn't surprising that the woman had a fear of loss. First, Walter didn't get

off the ship for years, and then he jumped overboard. He really needed to credibly assure her that he wouldn't do anything foolish for the rest of his life. A few times, Walter tried to send Ursula to get coffee; once he even claimed that the vase on my nightstand didn't match the flowers, but nothing would make his beloved let go of his arm. I understood that Walter wanted to talk to me alone, and I also had something on my mind that I didn't want to bring up in her presence, but Ursula remained as vigilant as a guard dog, so we just expressed our joy that everything had turned out so well. At the hospital, they had confirmed Walter's identity and only warned him to renew his ID as soon as possible. Then he wouldn't have any problems.

The day of my discharge had arrived. I had already said goodbye to the doctors and was just packing my toothbrush when the door opened and Walter looked in — alone!

"Ursula is on the phone with her sister," he said hastily. "I wanted to ask for your forgiveness once more, just the two of us. You know, I feel like the biggest idiot, and I don't know how to explain it, but I just panicked. I really thought I was under a curse and would never get off that ship. That's why I had to leave it at any cost, I —"

"Walter," I interrupted him. "I understand. I've been in this hospital for a week and I've already forgotten what the world outside looks like."

"You lose touch so quickly."

"Yeah. Listen: I have your money."

"You do?"

"I caught Malik taking it."

"He was supposed to."

"What? You have to explain that to me."

Walter nervously looked at the door. From the hallway, we could hear the cheerfully chattering Ursula approaching.

"How was I supposed to explain the money to her?" Walter asked. "I've already behaved pathetically enough. And then to profit from exploiting our story? She could take that really badly. Malik didn't want to touch the money at first, but I told him he didn't have to keep it and could donate it. He promised he would. I was supposed to believe that he wouldn't squander the cash."

Walter laughed. "But I didn't care. I just wanted to get rid of that burden and start a new life with Ursula."

"Do I hear my name?" a voice chirped from outside.

Ursula poked her head into my room. Walter beamed at her. I also tried to look happy, but when I had said goodbye to them both and was shuffling down the hospital hallway with my travel bag over my shoulder, I lost control of my facial muscles. I would have cried if there had been any tears. But all I felt was a cold sense of powerlessness. What a dummy I was! I thought I had ruined everything.

But Malik was there. He sat on a bench next to the hospital entrance in a sea of cigarette butts.

"You waited again," I said.

"I couldn't just drive away. Walter said you hit your head." He tapped his forehead. "And if you don't remember who you are, who could tell you besides me?"

"No one," I answered, swallowing hard.

The tears came late. Malik silently pulled me into a hug. It was like before. His embrace was big enough for my whole world. After my sobs subsided and I could breathe calmly again, I felt a pleasant warmth return to my fingertips. But there was nothing valuable within reach. Maybe that tingling had nothing to do with stealing anymore. Maybe it just had to do with Malik.

"I wouldn't have known where to go anyway," Malik said. "Prison isn't really my thing, and I thought I'd try something honest for a change."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

"No idea. You're the one who makes the plans."

"I'm going to sign on to the Störtebeker. They're always looking for crew members. Besides, the future shipping magnate owes me something."

"You mean, I should introduce myself too?"

"Of course. The pay is lousy. But if you have savings..." I winked meaningfully and patted my travel bag.

"Then let's go. The Störtebeker is in the harbor right now, for two more hours."

"Have you thought this through carefully? I hear some people have a hard time getting off the ship again."

He smiled and kissed me. Then he took my bag, and we ran.