



IN THE MOST  
*beautiful*  
MOMENT

A NOVEL



*JOSEFINE WEISS*

## **The Book**

The first impression Lilli and August have of each other couldn't be worse: He's an arrogant jerk. She's a prickly shrew. Luckily, getting stuck together in an elevator for two hours in the middle of the night gives them the chance to rethink those impressions. With a game, they start just to kill time; they not only get to know each other, but they also gain clarity about a few things in their own lives. Their openness breeds warmth and closeness—maybe even more—but it goes unspoken. After they're rescued, they part ways, knowing nothing about the other beyond a first name. They can't forget each other. Will fate offer a second chance for the moment they missed?

## **The Author**

After dropping out of university, I set off on a journey around the world to find out what I really wanted from life.

Along the way, I experienced the highs and lows of being human: great love, bitter disappointment, unexpected luck, and sudden twists of fate. I met countless people with their own stories to tell—each of them left a mark on me.

Inspired by all those encounters and experiences, I began writing my first novels.

Please forgive me for letting my stories speak for themselves and not revealing too much about who I am. After all, life is far too multifaceted to show the world only one face, isn't it?

## **Before You Start Reading**

Every translation is a bridge between hearts.

This story began in German and now speaks English, carrying its emotions across that bridge.

I've done my best to keep its heartbeat, its warmth, and honesty intact.

If you find a line that feels a little off, please tell me at [feedback@josefineweiss.de](mailto:feedback@josefineweiss.de) — your thoughts truly make a difference to me.

Thank you for being here — and for feeling along with me.

# **In the Most Beautiful Moment**

**The Story of Lilli and August**

**Novella**

**Josefine Weiss**

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## Chapter 1

A weird noise, a jolt. The elevator stopped. Somewhere between the third and second floor.

No!

No, no, no, goddammit! Not this, not in the middle of the night.

The guy standing in the elevator with her sighed in boredom and pressed the emergency call button. It actually said "emergency call button." Why not just the emergency button? Did no one care about proper language anymore?

So he pressed the emergency call button, then let his head rest against the big mirror, waiting, and stared into space. Why did these stupid elevators always have mirrors, anyway? What was the point?

From the speaker on the wall came a ringing tone, like on a phone. Any second now, a friendly—or possibly tired—voice would answer, and they could report that they were stuck in the elevator. Then someone from maintenance would arrive to free them within 30 minutes. At least that's what she'd read somewhere. Thirty minutes with the guy who treated her like she was invisible, in maybe two square meters. Fabulous.

The ringing cut off. Now someone had to pick up.

Nothing. The connection had dropped.

The guy frowned, but before he could spring back into action, she'd already hit the button and fixed her gaze on the speaker as if she could magically conjure a voice on the other end.

The ringing started again for a moment and then stopped after a few seconds, with nothing happening.

"What the hell is this crap?" she burst out, slamming her whole palm on the button a third time.

"They'll have gotten a signal," the guy said calmly. "I assume they can tell at the control center where it's coming from and then send someone." He had no idea how the signaling system for stuck elevators actually worked, but before the hysterical cow with the dark roots under her bleached streaks went totally off the rails, he'd rather try to calm her down.

She glared at him as if he'd personally brought the elevator to a halt. He ignored her and leaned back against the mirror again. Cool as can be.

She pressed the button a few more times, then gave up and slid down to the floor.

Please don't start bawling—that was all he needed.

"Are you claustrophobic?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"Good," he said.

Silence. She checked the time. Five minutes passed. Ten. Sometime in the next few hours, she'd have to use the bathroom, and she had no intention of peeing her pants in front of this arrogant, super-chill, poor man's George Clooney. She got to her feet and shouted, "HEEEEEELLOOOOOO!" banging on the door several times as she did.

"That won't help!"

"Oh, really? I'm guessing leaning against the wall, looking laid-back, sends out much more effective signals, huh? Sorry, I didn't realize you were some kind of X-Man who can summon help with the power of his mind."

He twisted his mouth into a small, superior smile. He wasn't going to stoop to this witch's level. Absolutely not. Instead, he wondered why he couldn't at least be stuck in this situation with a woman who had some class. A woman who made it worth getting trapped in an elevator, someone who'd make the wait at least a little more pleasant. A cultured, good-looking, well-groomed woman with style, who'd coolly touch up her lipstick in a crisis instead of freaking out in such a thoroughly unsexy way.

She was seething. This was exactly what people dreamed of: being stuck in an elevator at one a.m. in a stranger's building, no connection to the emergency system, but in the company of a smug idiot.

Couldn't she have left at least five minutes earlier? All because Maja couldn't find that stupid photo from her last vacation with Helge right away. The incriminating photo where his hand was almost on the ass of Maja's former best friend and now biggest enemy, Simone. That really hadn't been necessary. What was the point of the photo anyway? Simone was sleeping with Helge—everyone knew that—and Maja needed to cry it out, fine. But she could've done it five minutes faster.

She could've called the cab five minutes sooner, left five minutes earlier, and everything would be fine. The cab!

"I ordered a taxi," she blurted.

"It'll be gone by now," he replied dryly.

"But the driver will wonder where I am."

He pulled a pitying face. "Hardly. He just drove off—what else?"

Suddenly, she opened her mouth and eyes wide and crowed, "I have my phone."

"Me too," he said, just as calm as he'd been since stepping into the elevator.

She pulled out her outdated cell phone and stared at it hard.

"Damn it! I've got no signal."

"I know."

"How do you know that?"

"I live here. There's no signal in the elevator."

"You could've said that right away."

He chose not to respond.

Bitch.

Idiot.

"I'm not staying here all night," she declared, determined.

"In movies, they always climb out through the roof. You could give that a try," he suggested, without looking at her.

Not only was the guy useless and arrogant, but he was also making fun of her—a complete asshole, in other words.

She pressed the emergency call again. Just because. For the record. With the same result as before.

She sat back down on the floor and thought, searching for a solution, refusing to accept that only dumb luck would get her out of this mess. A random night owl coming home. Maybe someone in the building would have a heart attack and need an ambulance, or there'd be a midnight raid by the tax police. A fugitive hiding out here who'd be ambushed tonight. A burglar. Anyone.

He watched her—he had nothing else to do, and boredom was creeping in. The puckered brow, the pinched mouth, the brown roots, and the clothes that screamed total indifference to fashion. How could a woman walk around like that? There were mirrors everywhere—even here. Did she never look in one? Didn't she have a boyfriend who'd gift her a little makeup or a trip to the salon? A smart blouse instead of that plaid lumberjack shirt she was wearing. Was it a hand-me-down from her dad? And those dented, shapeless no-name jeans... when her ass would actually fit pretty well in a pair of 501s; it wasn't bad at all.

"Didn't you say you live here?" she asked suddenly, looking up at him so quickly and unexpectedly that he jerked like he'd been caught. The elevator light fell from above into her eyes. They were brilliant green, so green he was shocked to realize how beautiful he found them. Green and full of hope, they looked at him and waited for an answer.

"I... uh, yeah, uh... I live here," he said, while she wondered why he'd suddenly gotten so flustered. She stood.

"And do you happen to have something like a wife?" she asked, widening those green eyes.

Aha, she was thinking. She figured someone would miss him if he didn't live alone. Wrong. His wife was the reason he'd left the apartment earlier. Yet again. She wasn't going to miss him, not before morning. She wouldn't expect him to show up in the next few hours. And if she knew he was stuck just a few floors below her in the company of a bitchy scarecrow with mesmerizing green eyes, she wouldn't lift a finger to free him. On the contrary, she'd laugh herself silly and open his best wine to toast this rare satisfaction all by herself.

"As it happens, I do, yeah," was all he said.

"Upstairs?"

"Yeah, upstairs," he confirmed reluctantly. "Probably asleep already." Could she let it go now? No, of course, not—just as he'd suspected.

"But she'll miss you at some point, she'll worry. You don't just sleep through that." Her eyes were darker again now; only now and then, when the light hit just right, did a spark of green flash.

He hated that this unattractive pain in the ass rattled him like this. Unattractive pain in the ass, he repeated to cement the thought and its correctness in his brain.

He looked away, even closed his eyes.

"All right, she's probably not asleep, but trust me, she's definitely not worried."

When she fell silent, and he didn't hear a sound from her for a good while, he looked over at her again. She'd raised her eyebrows and was grinning shamelessly. Nice teeth.

He turned away again and growled: "What's so damn funny?"

She laughed softly and sat back down on the floor. All right, no help to be expected from the carefree wife, but she'd cracked his arrogant, superior shell. Mister I'm-so-cool-and-nothing-gets-to-me had marital problems. The kind that drove one partner—him, in this case—out of the house in the middle of the night. Was there anything dumber than getting stuck in an elevator on a night like that?

"Do you have kids?" she asked.

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

"Do you know *The Silence of the Lambs*? The movie?"

He pulled a questioning, annoyed face, but he slid down to the floor as well.

"Why?"

"There's this deal between Jodie Foster and Hannibal Lecter..."

"One's an actress, the other's a character," he corrected her.

"Yeah, I know. I mix that up a lot because I can only remember one of them. I can't remember what Jodie Foster was called in the movie."

"Clarice Starling," he said.

"So you know the movie?"

"Is there anyone who doesn't?"

"Yeah, my friend Maja, for example..."

"That was a rhetorical question." He rolled his eyes.

Asshole, she thought, but she let it slide. The carefree wife had lent him something human, something a little pitiable. Not really pitiable, but...

"Can you get to the point now? You were about to explain something to me, weren't you?"

Actually, not pitiable at all. But she still had to pass the time with this idiot in here, and making out was off the table, so they might as well lay some interesting groundwork for a conversation.

"Quid pro quo!" she said, challenging.

"What?"

"That's what those two played."

"Played?" he sneered.

"Who gives a shit what you call it," she snapped at him. "She told him something personal about herself, and in return, she got information from him."

"And?"

"Tell me if you have kids, and then I'll tell you something about me."

"What makes you think I want to know anything about you?"

"Have you always been such an asshole, or did your shitty marriage to Mrs. Carefree make you one?"

Wow. So that's the kind of woman she was. He'd hurt her, and she fired right back, sharp and dead on. It was kind of impressive. Her ass, her eyes, her teeth, and her fight—everything about her was impressive. And the way she jutted her chin now and glared at him. One more word from him and she'd take him apart, slaughter him verbally without mercy.

"I don't have kids, and I don't know if I was already like this or if I only got this way during the six years of our marriage," he said after a moment. "May I ask a question now?" His tone was calm and conciliatory.

She had a strong tendency toward defiance and sulking, one of her worst traits, but in a broken elevator, you couldn't afford that. She swallowed her anger and nodded. He cleared his throat.

"I don't mean this to be rude," he said. "I'm just curious."

"Go on and ask, or do you really think I'm expecting you to say something nice? Don't worry. It'll be my turn again right after. So you better brace yourself!"

Right, it would be her turn after that, and that could get very unpleasant.

"I'd bundle up, but my clothes are upstairs," he said.

"We can skip the game," she said.

"And do what? Sit here in silence for hours?"

"Just ask already."

He looked down and sighed.

"Where were you before you got into the elevator?" he asked then.

She shook her head. How stupid did he think she was?

"That wasn't the question you really wanted to ask."

"True," he admitted with a short laugh. "But that doesn't matter, does it?"

"That's no fun."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't care," she replied, annoyed. "Maybe you really don't care about me, and then we can just drop it. But if you do, then ask me what you actually want to know."

She pulled her knees up and hugged them with her arms. Then she made a sudden move and jabbed the emergency button once more.

He waited until the dial tone cut off and she was sitting quietly again, knees hugged to her chest. Then he said, "All right. What I really want to know is: Why do you go around looking like that?"

She frowned.

"I don't mean it in a nasty way," he rushed to add. "But what's with that weird lumberjack shirt, and have you looked at your roots lately? Either touch up the blonde or go back to brown, but that regrowth makes you look so unkempt..."

"You a hairdresser or what?" she asked sourly.

"Answer first, then the next question."

She stayed quiet. He waited.

"Like I said, I don't want to offend you," he said after a while, "but I was supposed to ask a question I really care about, and I care about this. Because you have gorgeous eyes."

"What's that got to do with anything?" she asked, thrown.

"I don't even know myself, but it's true."

She measured him skeptically with a look from those beautiful green eyes, and he met it head-on.

Then she stood up and turned to the mirror. She hated her reflection; it was usually unkind to her, full of accusations. But she didn't care. She was quick-witted and smart; she didn't need a nice reflection that paid her compliments. She didn't need a guy to compliment her either. She didn't need anyone at all. Maja wasn't there yet. She was still mourning Helge. She'd moved past that. She didn't care what she looked like. Not anymore. That's why she could look into her unfriendly reflection now and examine her ugly roots without feeling even the slightest bit embarrassed. It hadn't insulted or hurt her. It had only reminded her.

She sat down again. This time not beside him, but across from him.

"Do you really care?"

"Yes."

"And what if I tell you I just don't give a damn about how I look?"

"That wouldn't be the truth."

"How do you know that?"

"Because of your eyes," he said, as if it were obvious. "Besides, the game isn't any fun if we lie to each other."

"All right then: only questions we genuinely care about and only answers that are true. Are those the rules now?"

"Those are the rules," he confirmed, and smiled a little. No longer arrogant. Almost likable.

She took a deep breath and then said, "I haven't dyed my hair since my boyfriend broke up with me. Since..." She thought for a moment. "One month, three weeks, and two days."

His expression didn't change, neither sympathetic nor the opposite.

"My question was a bit broader," he said when she apparently considered her answer sufficient, "so you should answer it a bit more broadly."

"If we were sitting here with a bottle of wine and I had the chance to get wasted while I ranted about that asshole of a lousy jerkoff, then I'd tell you a whole lot more, but like this... I can't handle it sober. Not yet."

He smirked. "That asshole of a lousy jerkoff!" he repeated, amused. "So you've already moved past the grieving phase."

"I never had a grieving phase," she claimed. "I could've killed him on the spot. Castrated him. Skinned him. You know, the usual, when you hear that the man you live with wants to move in with someone else because he's fallen in love."

"Stop, you're scaring me," he said, scooting a little farther from her. She grinned.

"And because you can't castrate him or skin him, you decided to punish him by walking around looking like a—sorry—a scarecrow?"

"Hey, I thought you were scared of me."

"But I'm still waiting for the answer to my question, and we both have to get through that."

He leaned forward and pressed the button again. When nothing happened yet again, he said, "Well, looks like you won't get around telling the whole story. So?"

"My boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—has a ponytail, wire-rimmed glasses, and is a committed cyclist and pedestrian. Cars are evil; the train is okay," she said out of the blue. It had to be important information, since she felt the need to mention it first of all, so he nodded solemnly and hid his confusion.

"Would you expect someone like that to one day stand in front of you, tears in his eyes, utterly devastated, and confess that he's fallen in love with another woman and has to leave you because of it?" she went on.

"Uh..." he said, because for a brief moment he thought it was a serious question.

"He made me feel like I had to comfort him," she cried, ignoring him. "That's how pitiful he was. 'It's okay,' I said, and 'I'm glad you're being honest with me.' And then I even hugged him."

She made a sudden, impetuous movement, her fists slicing the air, accompanied by an almost animalistic growl. "That little shit, that wimpy little shitface!"

He couldn't help but laugh at her latest string of insults, whereupon she shot him a furious look.

"All right, sorry," he said soothingly. "I just don't understand how someone with as much aggression as you would put up with that. Why didn't you just kick him in the balls? Then he'd have had something to whine about."

She briefly twisted her mouth, but it still wasn't enough for a laugh.

"For that bastard, I bleached my hair because he was into blondes. And I cleaned out my closet because he checked every single item to see where it was made. China? Absolutely not. Do you know how many things come from China? I was already afraid I'd have to go out naked. And I blew all my cash on stuff from the organic store. Organic was important to him. The dye for my hair was, of course, also a very good, costly, supposedly eco-friendly product."

He shook his head.

"Was he at least dynamite in bed?" he asked. She looked at him, and her gaze said it all.

"And now he's torturing someone else? Then it's all good. You're free, which is great. Now you can shop at the supermarket and save money, and use it to buy yourself some cute, cheap clothes from China again."

At last, she laughed. He pictured her with brown hair, a cute T-shirt with tight jeans, and smiled back.

"Is it my turn now?" she asked.

"All right," he said, bracing for the worst. She would ask why he'd run out on his wife in the middle of the night and why his marriage was such a mess. Something he absolutely didn't want to talk about.

"So," she began, repeating the rules once more: "Only what I really want to know, and a truthful answer."

He nodded.

Like a ritual they already knew by heart, she pressed the button and only asked her question after the dial tone faded.

"How did you meet your wife?"

That was her question? He looked at her in surprise. She shrugged, knowing he'd expected something else, and comfortably crossed her legs in a loose lotus.

He had a hard time shaking the latest images from his head: Dani's face, twisted with anger and accusation. Yet again. She had such a pretty face, but none of that remained once she flew into a rage, and her usually pleasant voice climbed to such piercing heights it hurt. It disgusted him, and then he had to get out. They fought over the pettiest things. Earlier, he'd just misunderstood something she'd said, and right away she'd accused him of never really listening, of not caring about her, of having nothing left to say to each other, of living past each other, and that they should get a divorce. Those fights were like an avalanche; they started with almost nothing and ended in disaster. And then he had to leave. One day, he thought that he wouldn't come back. But so far, he had always had. Maybe because it used to be different. Nine years ago, when they met.

He glanced at his fellow prisoner in the elevator. She hadn't interrupted his thoughts and waited calmly for his answer. Was that sensitivity or just patience? So far, she hadn't exactly proved patient. Sensitivity, then?

"I met my wife at a campground," he said. "Nine years ago. She was there with a friend, and I was with a buddy. The girls couldn't pitch a tent. It ticked every box of the cliché." He laughed at the memory of their battle with the poles and canvas, and their helpless, awkward attempts to tighten the guy lines and stake the pegs into the ground.

"We're camping for the very first time," Dani said—my wife, Daniela. And it sounded so sweet and defiant that I fell for her on the spot." His face softened, losing the last trace of arrogance.

"On the spot," he repeated softly.

"And did she fall in love on the spot too?" she asked with a smile. He shrugged and said, "Don't know, I think so. Anyway, after that vacation, we were a couple." He added a small, resigned laugh. Back then, everything was still good, that sound said, and now I'm sitting here, and all the good things are gone.

"Why do most relationships end so shitty?" she asked thoughtfully, more to herself than to him.

"Do they?" he shot back.

"I don't know any couple who still loves each other the way they did on day one after fifty years, many not even after five."

"Some can't even last five weeks together," he added.

"True. Suppose we're stuck here for five hours—then that's practically a long-term relationship."

They grinned at each other.

"I'm afraid this relationship is about to face a real trial, because my bladder won't last five hours," he confessed.

"No problem, mine won't either," she said.

"Well, that sucks!"

They burst out laughing together.

How handsome he looked when he laughed like that, so freely.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Hey, it's my turn to ask."

"Yeah, right. Too bad!"

He smiled and asked, "What's your name?"

"Lilli," she said. Her teeth really were like pearls, he thought admiringly.

"August," he said then. "The name's so awful it comes for free—you don't have to waste a question on it."

"That's very generous of you," she said. "And I don't think it's that bad. My grandfather was named August."

"Exactly," he said. "Your grandfather."

"Hey, don't diss my grandfather. He was a great guy. An adventurer. He traveled the whole world and wrote books about it. Not that anyone read them ..."

He watched the ironic twist of her mouth, and one of her eyebrows lifted a few millimeters.

"And of course he couldn't take his wife and two kids along on his adventures, obviously," she added, the set of her mouth hardening. "Plus, somebody had to stay home and make the money." She snorted. "I think he finally died of some sexually transmitted disease. Nobody really knows for sure. He's buried somewhere in Peru. Or dumped in a shallow grave. Or got eaten—how should I know."

By now her arms were folded across her chest, her mouth a thin line, and two deep furrows of anger had formed between her eyes.

Her sudden mood swings were as astonishing as they were unsettling, but above all, fascinating. With some classy woman touching up her lipstick, this elevator wouldn't have been half as entertaining as it was with... Lilli. Sweet name. Fitting and unfitting at the same time.

"What are you thinking right now?"

Damn, he really needed to keep his expressions under control.

"That isn't your next question now, is it?" he laughed.

"Nice try," she said. "But yes, that is my next question: What were you thinking just now when you looked at me?"

"That's not fair: I ask you something as harmless as your name, volunteer my own, and you want immediate access to my brain. A little unbalanced, don't you think?"

"'Balance' isn't mentioned anywhere in the rules," she shot back mercilessly, then demanded again, "Well? Your thoughts!"

He sighed. Her arms were still crossed over her chest, but her features had relaxed again, revealing how much she enjoyed catching him off guard again and again.

"I wasn't thinking about anything in particular," he claimed. "I don't even remember what it was."

"You're not a good liar," she said. "I'll make it easier: You thought something not so charming about me, didn't you?"

"No, not really," he said back.

"Don't worry, I know the effect I have on people," she said. "I'm not exactly the person you hope to get stuck in an elevator with."

He burst out laughing.

"What's so funny about that? It's true, isn't it?"

He leaned forward a little and said, "To be honest, I was thinking the exact opposite." For a second, he looked deep into her eyes before he admitted, "I was thinking that at the start I'd have preferred the company of some model type, but that by now I'm very glad it's you."

She didn't know what rattled her more, his candor or the way he looked at her. Either way, she was incapable of a reply.

"Well, that's what I was thinking. You wanted to know. And also," he added, "that your name is somehow fitting and unfitting at the same time."

"*Your* name is completely unfitting, anyway," she blurted out. He had embarrassed her, and she hated being embarrassed, especially when, like here, there was nowhere to hide. She wanted to play it off, distract. And she absolutely didn't want to have to look that deeply into his eyes again. A model type, ha! Sure, something perfect and souped-up—that's what he went for...

"... *but that by now I'm very glad it's you ...*"

"Lilli is a very beautiful name," she heard him say. She didn't look at him, just stared at the floor in front of her.

For a while, silence settled.

He couldn't figure her out. If he said something hurtful, it didn't touch her at all, and she'd fire right back, but if he said something nice, she'd fold in on herself and throw up armor around her.

He didn't know any women like her. The women he knew were uncomplicated and predictable. Even Dani was predictable with her constant sulking. It was like pressing a button and knowing exactly what it would trigger. Every word he said, every gesture, every twitch of his face elicited a specific, predictable reaction from her. And in bed, it was the same, all predictable. That is, when it happened at all anymore. What would it be like with Lilli...?

He stopped the thought, startled, shot her a quick look to see if she was reading his telltale face, but her eyes were lowered.

He stood up and pressed the emergency button once more. Same as before. No answer.

"Sooner or later, we're going to have to agree on a pee corner," he mused in mock seriousness. She grunted and glanced up at him. At least she was laughing again.

"Do you want to stop the game?" he asked.

She hesitated, let her arms drop into her lap, then shook her head.

"All right, then it's my turn," he noted as he sat back down.

"If anything else occurs to you about me," she said.

You have no idea all the things that come to mind about you, Lilli with the green eyes, he thought. Lots of things I shouldn't even be thinking. And he was ashamed even for that thought and quickly focused on things he could actually ask. Harmless things that wouldn't summon that armor again.

"Hmm," he said, rubbing his chin.

"See?" she said.

"Not 'see' at all," he shot back. "What was the best moment of your entire life?"

Now that was a good question.

"Pff," she said on impulse. "No idea."

"Oh, come on, surely you've experienced something wonderful at some point."

She turned her head away, annoyed again. The woman was really difficult.

"Okay, maybe we should stop after all. But for the record, you were the one who suggested the game," he said.

"I haven't had a baby yet, I've never had a functional relationship with great sex. I wasn't in the school play, soaking up the applause of teary-eyed parents... My grandmother, the one with August, you know, once gave me a doll I wanted that was actually way too expensive, that was a happy moment, but that's not what you mean, I'm sure."

"How do you know what I mean? I don't mean anything. I ask a question, and you answer, and if that was your happiest moment, then..."

"... that's pretty sad," she finished.

Was it? Did she really have as shitty a life as it sounded right now? She actually didn't feel that way, at least she never thought about it. She figured her life was pretty normal. Unspectacular, maybe boring, but normal. No different from her friend Maja's or anyone else she knew. And now here she was, sitting in an elevator with a complete stranger, sounding utterly dissatisfied. She couldn't remember a "happiest moment" in her life; at best, some nice moments that were so banal you couldn't exactly call them "beautiful" and gush about them. In beautiful moments, you were so happy you wished they'd never end. You forgot everything else. Or you wanted to die because life couldn't possibly get better. She didn't have moments like that. Or did she? Did she just have no feel for it? She had never given any of this a thought, and now she was sitting here, realizing it for the first time: she was just drifting along, had let some braided idiot dictate what she should wear and eat, and wasn't capable of experiencing beautiful moments. She was living a pointless, numb life. An elevator had to get stuck so she could rub her nose in it.

"I could kiss you right now and give you the most beautiful moment of your life, if that's what gets you off," August said out of nowhere.

Her head snapped toward him, her eyes going huge.

"Are you crazy?"

"Sorry, I just wanted to..."

"Just shut up, you conceited idiot!"

That was the end of the game.

Why had he let himself be carried away enough to say something like that? She was absolutely right; he was an idiot. Not a conceited one, though—his kisses really were legendary. If there was one thing he could do, it was kiss; he happened to know that. Dani hadn't been the first and wouldn't be the last woman he'd delighted, sent into sheer ecstasy. Kissing was an art he had mastered to perfection.

But how idiotic was it to talk about it—about kissing. To offer it like a piece of candy: Would you like one?

Sometimes that happened to him: he'd blurt out something you were better off just thinking. Back then, Dani often laughed about it; now it drove her up the wall. Probably because the things he thought these days and occasionally let slip weren't as pleasant as they used to be.

Lilli sat across from him, glaring angrily at the wall. Her arms were clamped around her legs like a vise again. He sighed, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. Maybe the elevator would start up on its own. If he concentrated hard enough. What was that called again? Telekinesis. He should try it; he didn't have anything else to do.

"Does your wife know that?" he suddenly heard her voice. Defiant, as if to say: I'm talking again, but I'm still mad.

He opened his eyes; she was still staring at the wall.

"What?" he asked.

"That you wander around hawking your kisses to other women."

"Hawking?" He laughed. Her mouth twitched.

"I don't wander around, and I don't hawk," he said, then added innocently, "I give them away."

She looked at him and couldn't suppress a grin this time. "You really are an idiot," she said.

"Yeah, I am," he agreed readily. "I'm sorry."

Her features were almost relaxed again. She gave a small nod, and he took it as a sign that she accepted his apology.

"Do you actually cheat on your wife?"

"That's your second question in a row now."

"I'm done with the game."

"Then I don't have to answer."

"No, you don't."

She looked away again. The wall between them rebuilt itself, and the silence returned.

He owed her something for his earlier audacity, and he didn't want to sit next to her in silence.

"Yes," he said simply. Her expression demanded more. "Occasionally," he went on. "You know, when the opportunity presents itself. I don't have a girlfriend or anything."

"What would 'or anything' be?" she asked, one brow lifted wryly.

"If I were sleeping with the same one more often, you know, an affair," he said.

"Uh-huh," she said, as if she'd just learned something important.

"And does your wife know that?" she asked then.

"I don't even know if she cares," he said, and suddenly, it hit him that he was speaking the truth. He didn't know whether Dani had ever noticed when he'd slept with another woman. Whether she even spared the possibility a thought, or whether it would hurt her.

"Why don't you split up?" Lilli asked, baffled. "It's pretty obvious you don't love your wife anymore, and she doesn't love you either, so what's the point of all this?"

Right, what was the point of all this? What was the point of bolting out of the apartment at one in the morning to avoid a fight with a woman he didn't feel anything for anymore anyway. Just for the sake of the memories? That couldn't be all.

Lilli watched him and thought of Thore, her ex-boyfriend. At least he hadn't strung her along; at least he'd given her the chance to be angry with him. You had a right to know when you weren't loved anymore so that you could be angry.

"What keeps you with your wife?" she asked.

"What kept you with that braid-wearing tyrant until he dumped you?" he shot back, annoyed.

"Thore wasn't a tyrant, and he had his good sides, too."

He snorted in contempt.

"Didn't you yourself call him an asshole and a jerk?"

"Yeah, I did," she snapped at him. "He had his flaws, and he went overboard in a lot of ways and demanded things you could hardly live up to, but his intentions were good; he thought things through and wanted to do his part to make the world a better place. Thore's actually a good person."

"An asshole and a good person," he sneered.

"Yeah, exactly," she said. "And what do you do that's good?"

"I'm a doctor, and I campaign for better pay for nursing staff," he said. She was taken aback.

"Seriously?"

"No."

Something in his expression kept her from snapping at him again for that lie.

"No, of course not. I'm a complete idiot—you yourself have kept pointing that out ever since we've been stuck here. And my wife says it even more often. If we ever do split up, she certainly won't have a single nice thing to say about me, not like you about your ex. Maybe that's why I stay with her. So she can't write me off completely. So at least once in a while she still remembers what once bound us together."

He propped his head in his hands and hid his face. His body gave a brief shudder.

She had the impulse to lay a hand on his shoulder, but she held back. She didn't want to make the situation even more awkward. And he would undoubtedly have shaken her hand off.

How unpleasant he must find her—unattractive and unpleasant. What business was it of hers where he stood with his wife? And who was she to judge whether he still loved his wife, and why he stayed with her? For better or worse ... that was something, too. And earlier, when he'd talked about their first meeting, he'd radiated so much warmth. Maybe ...

"You're right," he said, lifted his head, and quickly wiped his hand across his cheek. "We don't love each other anymore. Haven't for a long time. Really only at the very beginning. We were crazy about each other. Totally. I'd never experienced anything like it. Love at first sight. It was ... it was so beautiful."

His eyes threatened to grow wet again, so he waited before he went on.

"We made plans, wanted to move in together, have kids, a house later, grow old together." He laughed sadly.

"What happened?" she asked carefully.

"Nothing special; over time, we realized we weren't actually a good match. Not at all, really. Our interests were completely different, and we rarely agreed on anything, so we talked less to avoid fights. We got married anyway because we had these plans and were oh-so-in-love. We talked a little and had lots of sex."

Lilli drew in a breath. He shot her an apologetic look and lifted a shoulder in a shrug.

"Only no child ever came of it. Or thank God, depending on how you look at it. In any case, that wrecked one of the plans that held us together. The house didn't happen either. We would have had to bury ourselves in debt. No, thanks. So now we're sitting up there in the four-room apartment with no child and nothing to talk about, waiting at least to grow old together. By the way, these days without sex, too."

He laughed.

"And why don't we split up?" he then asked himself. "That's the ultimate question. I can't even tell you about Daniela's good Samaritan sides, because she doesn't have any. She's just a frustrated woman who married the wrong man."

Lilli cleared her throat to brush away her dismay and said, "I think when a couple doesn't split up even though it should, it's because they're still hanging on to each other somehow, or because there's something left unresolved."

She held her hands out in front of her, palms up, as if she were carrying the key to his problems on them. She furrowed her brow thoughtfully. She looked endearing, full of compassion and the urge to help him.

How many sides did she have? If he was getting to know so many of them already in this cramped elevator, what would there be to discover about her out there? Or maybe not? Would she then hide most of them, just as he hid in everyday life everything that weighed on him? He had never talked to anyone about his marriage before. Never. He would have seen it as weakness, and there was no one he wanted to show himself that weak to, not even his closest friends.

"Where were you in the building, anyway?" he suddenly repeated the question he'd already asked once, only now he really was interested.

"I was with a friend," she said. "Maja was recently dumped by her boyfriend and has a broken heart. And since I'm a specialist on the subject ..." She laughed. He smiled.

"It's always about that, isn't it?" he said. "All of life is about relationships. Who wants whom, who leaves whom, how you make it work together ... and why."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Even when two strangers meet in a stuck elevator, that's what it's about."

"Speaking of which," he said, and reached for the emergency button.

"What time is it?" she asked when her gaze fell on the watch on his wrist.

"Almost three," he said.

"Excuse me? We've been sitting here for two hours already?"

"Not quite," he replied, as if that made a big difference.

The dial tone they had long since stopped noticing had disappeared. Suddenly, the line crackled, and a few indistinct scraps of speech sounded.

Lilli and August looked at each other with wide eyes. For a second, they were frozen, then August twisted in a quick movement onto his knees so that his head was level with the speaker. "Hello," he called loudly, leaning so far forward that his mouth almost touched the metal paneling. "Can you hear us?"

Nothing.

Lilli knelt down right next to him and called out loudly too: "We're trapped in here."

"Hello!" August called again.

The line was dead again, but Lilli and August stayed by the speaker, close together, shoulder to shoulder.

How good she felt. How wonderful it was to feel her. He could have put his arm around her. What would she have done then?

She pressed the button.

The line beeped.

"Come on," she murmured.

There was crackling and static.

"Hello?" A male voice, hardly masked by interference.

"Can you hear us? We're stuck in the elevator, on Ringgasse ...," August said.

"Yeah, I see it. All right. Someone's on the way," said the man on the other end of the line.

Lilli let out a joyful squeal and grabbed August's arm in her excitement. Her green eyes beamed at him.

His whole body started to tingle.

She came to herself again, startled. What was she doing? Her hands jerked back as if she'd been burned. She turned away and sought refuge in her usual elevator corner. From what, exactly? From August? From herself? For a moment, she would either be ashamed afterward or never forget for the rest of her life? And what then? Then she'd pine for that moment. She wanted neither. Or was afraid of it.

A tiny flicker crossed his face before he, too, sat back down. She didn't know him well enough to read it.

The conversation had died, snuffed out.

He should've just pulled her into his arms; he'd never get a second chance. But why did he want that? Hadn't he found her awful at the beginning? What contemptuous thoughts he'd had. And she hadn't gotten any prettier since then. That hairline, that shirt... but those eyes...

He should've just done it. Just once, forget everything. Now it was too late.

"Are you going back upstairs once we're out of here?"

Her voice had that strained, trying-to-sound-casual note.

"I don't know," he admitted. "And you?"

"Not me," she laughed.

He smiled.

"I'm going home," she said. He didn't ask where that was.

He cleared his throat before he said, "It was nice meeting you."

How formal! He'd told this woman about the misery of his marriage, and now all he could come up with was such a silly platitude. Even if he meant it.

"I'm amazed you'd say that."

"I mean it."

"But I'm mostly awful," she said.

He burst out laughing. "No, you're not," he countered. "Not mostly, anyway," he added jokingly. She smiled.

"How long will it take until...?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not long, I think," he said. Not long enough, he thought.

They fell silent again. Waiting took the place of talking. They waited and listened to the quiet.

Soon, there would be sounds from the elevator, indicating someone was working on their rescue; a voice would probably call something up to them, and relief would wash over them. Really? Relief?

Should they exchange phone numbers? Email addresses, Facebook—there were so many ways nowadays to stay in touch. But what for? Because they'd been stuck in an elevator together for two hours?

At least their last names. At the very least, they could exchange last names. Just in case. What case? There was no case.

A knock. There it was. Rescue had arrived.

August and Lilli looked at each other, forced themselves into a cheerful grin.

"Hello?" the rescuer called from somewhere below them.

"Yes, hello!" August called.

"This might take another five minutes. You two doing okay?"

Five more minutes.

"Yeah, we're fine!" August called, looking at Lilli.

"Alright, I'll hurry," the man promised.

Take your time, August wanted to say, but he only said, "Okay."

Soon it would be over.

Lilli lowered her gaze.

She shouldn't have snapped at him so often, reacted so idiotically. He did say he'd been glad to meet her, but what would he remember later? Her unkempt appearance and her snippy manner. She should've taken him up on his suggestion—the kiss. She should've swallowed her pride and just done it. And she shouldn't have pulled back earlier; she could've just let herself go. She had wanted it.

She should have...

The elevator started moving.

It happened too unexpectedly and too fast for them to react and let joy light up their faces.

The elevator stopped, the door opened, and a proud, red-cheeked, beer-bellied man in his mid-fifties stood before them.

"So!" he said, satisfied. "That's how fast it goes."

"That fast?" August repeated, outraged. "We were stuck in that thing for over two hours."

The man's jaw dropped when, instead of grateful thanks, he was met with accusations.

"How come?" he asked, confused.

"The emergency line was out," Lilli said, "or no one was on duty, or whatever. In any case, no one answered for two hours."

"That can't be right," the man said, taken aback.

"Oh!" August cried. "Then we must've imagined it. What do you think, Lilli, did we imagine it?"

"Yeah, totally," she confirmed, matching his ironic tone. "Two hours—no way. We just have overactive imaginations."

The man looked from one to the other, not quite sure what to say.

August sighed. "Joking aside. You really should report this, or more people will get stuck in here, and no one will notice."

Overwhelmed and overtired, the man mumbled that he'd take care of it, grabbed his suitcase, and then headed down the stairs toward the exit.

"Thanks anyway," Lilli called after him.

They both stood there on the second floor, unsure what to do.

"You just used my first name," Lilli said.

"Oh, really? Sorry," August said. He hadn't even noticed.

"No, it's fine. It's okay," Lilli said. "Actually, I think it kind of makes sense to be on a first-name basis. After the night..."

She realized the double meaning. "I mean..." she rushed to add, but August said, "I know what you mean."

They stood there smiling, lost in their own awkwardness.

"Well, I should get going," Lilli said. For her, it was easy to choose a direction: down the stairs, out of the building, back to wherever she lived.

Where would he go?

"You know..." she began, then immediately corrected herself. "Do you know where you're going now? Home, or...?"

He shook his head. Their eyes met once more.

"It's not easy, is it?" she said.

"No," he said, "it's not easy."

"You'll do the right thing," Lilli said, "if not today, then someday."

He nodded. "Someday."

"Take care," she said.

"You too," he said.

Their gazes broke; she turned away and ran down the stairs.

"Lilli," August called before she disappeared around the corner.

"Yeah?" She turned around.

"Remember your roots," he said with a grin. She grinned back. Her green eyes flashed at him one last time, and then she was gone.

He listened to the rhythm of her footsteps and stood rooted to the spot in front of the elevator door on the second floor. After a while, he realized he couldn't hear anything anymore—no footsteps, no Lilli.

He was an idiot—she was absolutely right. He was such an idiot.

Now he knew where he wanted to go, and it wasn't upstairs.

He hurried down the stairs, yanked the front door open, ran out into the street, and looked around in every direction.

There was only darkness and silence.

Lilli was gone.

## Chapter 2

She could have gone to see Maja. After all, she lived in the same building he did.

But Maja was very busy—among other things with a new boyfriend—and she herself was very busy too, or so she kept telling herself. Besides, her visit that evening over a year ago had been a rare exception. Most of the time she met up with Maja at the movies, in a restaurant, or at a café when they planned a shopping trip. She'd been doing that more often again lately: buying clothes—what she actually liked. Sometimes she even had a burger. Her hair was brown now, the way nature intended, which spared her the expense of a dye job.

So she didn't go see Maja, and even if she had, then what? Was she going to ring every door on the fifth floor? Or the sixth? She couldn't even remember exactly which floor he'd gotten in on. No, of course she wouldn't have done that.

She could have staked out the building night after night, waiting for him to storm out after another fight with his wife. Like a real stalker. For heaven's sake!

No, none of that was an option. They'd said goodbye back then, and it was clear they wouldn't see each other again. Why would they? The only reason she still thought about him was ridiculously simple: her morning look in the mirror. She'd look in, see her uniformly brown hair, her green eyes, and have to smile. Every morning. He'd found her eyes beautiful, and with that, he'd given her a smile in her mirror for the rest of her life. He'd changed something. In the space of two hours.

Did he still think of her now and then? Of her grumpy manner? Of her flannel shirt, the one she'd tossed in the trash the day after and then, another day later, dug back out of the household garbage? A neighbor had watched, shaking her head, as she leaned far into the big container, shoving trash bags back and forth and checking their contents until she finally found her own bag and pulled the shirt out again. She'd washed it, and sometimes she put it on. Only in her apartment, when the mood struck. When she thought about maybe going to Maja's place after all—and immediately shot down that stupid idea.

The phone rang.

As if on cue, Maja called.

"Hey, Lilli," she sang into the receiver. "How nice to catch you right away—I have to tell you something." She paused, excited, to build suspense and give Lilli a chance to ask. Which she dutifully did.

"What is it?" Lilli asked, rolling her eyes at the ceiling and groaning inwardly. Lately, Maja—with her over-the-top infatuation and nonstop swooning—had been hard to take.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeee," she said, dragging out the word like a verbal drumroll. "WE'RE GETTING MARRIED!"

Loud, shrill, and at an even more painful pitch, the punchline stabbed Lilli's ear. She managed to yank the receiver away just in time to avoid permanent damage.

"Isn't that amazing?" boomed the device held at arm's length.

"Yeah, that's great," Lilli said. Drunk on her own excitement, Maja didn't notice her friend's neutral tone and kept talking about the upcoming event—thankfully at a reasonable volume. So many guests, such an amazing venue, such a big celebration, so much happiness. In two months. And then the honeymoon in the Maldives.

"I can't wait," Maja trilled in a clinking soprano.

Of course, Lilli could bring someone, she added, and waited.

"Okay," was all Lilli said, withholding the expected revelation of whether there was someone or not.

After about fifteen minutes, the exhausting call was over.

Good for Maja, Lilli thought. She didn't know the lucky guy. She barely knew anyone in Maja's circle anymore, since most of their mutual friends had taken the side of the traitor couple, Helge and Simone, back then, and no longer kept in touch with Maja. That would be fun. She wouldn't know a soul and wouldn't even bring anyone. Maybe she should come down with a really nasty cold in time, then she could bow out without causing offense and dodge this fabulous event.

"I'm sooo sorry, Maja. I was really looking forward to it." A little croak in her voice and everything was back on track.

Although, really, she still owed Maja something. If her friend hadn't held her up with that stupid picture back then, she would have left earlier and never ended up in that getup. Then she might still have that awful hair, be running around in terrible clothes, and keep scowling at herself in the mirror every morning.

And anyway, it was a wedding—there'd be alcohol, and if worst came to worst, she could always drink the whole thing pretty.

So, in two months.

Dani got into his car and immediately started rummaging through her handbag. That was so typical. He didn't know her any other way. If he closed his eyes and pictured her, it was always like this: head bent deep over the bag, as if she might crawl inside if she had to, hands frantically rifling through the contents while she shoved around all the useless stuff in there. She was always looking for something: the keys, her ID, her wallet, her phone. Always. Something.

"Wait a second," she snapped at him as he started the engine.

"I think I left my lip balm upstairs." The lip balm!

"That's not such a big deal, is it?" he ventured.

Her head snapped up.

"I'll be the judge of how big a deal it is," she shot back.

He turned the engine off again and waited.

"Okay, got it, we can go," she announced after a minute, sighed with relief, and threw him a conciliatory smile.

He didn't want to sulk, so he smiled back and drove off.

It was a special day for Daniela and August; it was supposed to go smoothly, without being spoiled by pointless squabbles over trivialities. They were past that. Their last big fight had been over a year ago. Then came the big talk. They'd done nothing but talk for an entire day: a day and a half a night. At three in the morning, they'd finally been in each other's arms, crying. Exhausted, relieved, and certain that now everything would get better, because everything had finally been said.

He guided the car through the city and tried to ignore her usual interjections—"Watch out, he's pulling out," or "You're driving way too close," or "Do you even realize you're taking a huge detour?" Dani just couldn't keep her mouth shut and always knew better; that was simply who she was. Today, he was able to accept it and let it roll off him.

He tuned her out and changed the subject.

"You visiting your sister next week?" he asked, just to distract her from the traffic. As if he cared about her sister.

"No, I don't think so," said Dani, explaining her decision in exhaustive detail and taking the opportunity to badmouth her older sister. That bought him a good ten minutes of peace during which he only had to nod now and then or say "mm-hmm."

It was still the same as before: he knew her and could trigger any reaction he wanted as if she were programmed.

"Careful, the tram has the right of way here," Dani warned him, which told him her lecture was over. She checked the time.

"We've still got time," she noted.

"I know," he said.

She tugged at her jacket, fiddled with her necklace, pulled the all-important lip balm from her bag, and smeared some on her lips. She was nervous.

Was he nervous? He checked in with himself. At least a little? It would have been appropriate, wouldn't it?

When the light turned red, he glanced over at her. She met his gaze, smiling. No, he wasn't nervous. For the first time in many years, he was truly at peace with himself and actually felt the calm he generally projected.

He smiled too, but his smile wasn't for Dani; it was for the memory of Lilli with the green eyes. The prickly scarecrow from the elevator. However, she hadn't been that at all. Neither prickly nor a scarecrow, really, but that first impression of her still made him chuckle. She had been difficult, yes. Unpredictable, surprising, odd—all of that. So different from Dani. And unlike anyone else, she'd had the key to his hidden, safely locked little box of thoughts where he stashed everything he didn't want to talk about with anyone. With Lilli, he had talked.

And then she'd been gone. At the very moment, he realized he might never again find someone he could talk to like that, someone he could open up to so completely.

She was gone, but something of her had remained, prompting him to talk things out with Dani. Not right away, but eventually, just as Lilli had predicted.

And now he was sitting in the car with his wife, and everything was fine.

Lilli hurried through the city. It was crawling with people, and she hated that. So many tourists—couldn't they just go somewhere else? To the sea, to the Alps, to Mallorca? But not downtown here, where there wasn't even anything to see, just stores.

She was on the hunt for a suitable wedding present. It hadn't even occurred to her at first that you had to bring a gift, too. What do you give for a wedding? An iron? A tablecloth? A pretty knick-knack you could set somewhere? She didn't know anything about that kind of thing—neither irons, nor tablecloths, nor... stuff. The first thing she should do is buy a guidebook: *Gift-Giving Made Easy*, or something like that. It had to exist—there were guides for everything.

Lilli wasn't sure, but it was reason enough for her to seek asylum in the nearest bookstore. That was her realm; she knew her way around there. Soon she was so engrossed in browsing and reading that she completely forgot about the wedding present. Only when a large coffee-table book on the Maldives fell into her hands did she think of Maja again.

At the register, she briefly wondered how many such coffee-table books the happy couple would receive, and how many copies of this one in particular. She paid and felt satisfied with herself. The heavy book in her bag and the warm glow of a mission accomplished made her tolerate the tourists. She strolled past the shop windows, and when she spotted a dreamy, soft green dress that would definitely look insanely good on her, she didn't hesitate for a second, stepped into the store, and came out half an hour later with a big shopping bag and a satisfied smile. The outfit for the big celebration was taken care of as well, matching shoes included. Probably all "Made in China," she thought, amused, and caught the look of a handsome young man who returned her unintentional, aimless grin with delight.

A present, an outfit, and a plus-one all in one day, within an hour—that would really be a new record, she thought. Then she headed straight for the man.

"Hi," said Lilli. "I need someone to go with me to a wedding next Saturday. I've already got the gift and the dress."

The man's face took on a slightly dopey expression as, caught off guard, he searched for a snappy comeback and couldn't find one.

"Uhhh," he said, and suddenly he didn't look so good anymore.

Lilli laughed and said, "It's okay, just kidding. Have a nice day."

With that, she turned away and left the baffled guy standing there.

Cute, but slow on the uptake, she decided, as she considered for a split second that a harmless afternoon flirt might've been nice. She looked back once more, but the young man had already made himself scarce. He probably had a new trauma now and would never again smile at a random woman grinning to herself. Poor guy, bad Lilli.

Bang! The sudden hard impact seemed to be her punishment.

"Oh, damn!" cursed the man in the white coat. The formerly white coat, now stained coffee-brown.

"Shit!" burst out of Lilli, who had caused the accident but hadn't gotten a drop on herself.

"You should watch where you're going when you walk through a crowded pedestrian zone in broad daylight," the man scolded.

"I'm really sorry," said Lilli.

The man grumbled something unintelligible, held the almost-empty coffee cup out in front of him, and couldn't stop staring at the mess on his coat.

"Can I at least buy you a new coffee?" asked Lilli.

"No, thanks, I don't have time for that now," the man replied, and added again, "Damn!"

"Well, if you want money for the dry cleaning..."

"They wash these at the hospital, not necessary."

The man poured the rest of the coffee onto the ground, crumpled the cup, and tossed it into the trash can, which was conveniently sitting two meters away.

Lilli didn't know what else to say or offer. She had already apologized. But the man was in a hurry anyway. That was probably why it happened at all: because he was in such a rush. Otherwise, he would have seen her and could have stepped aside.

"All right," Lilli said, a bit cooler, "then goodbye."

"Better not," the man muttered and took off without looking at her again.

She should probably make her way home as fast as possible too, Lilli thought, because while she seemed to have unusually good shopping karma that day, when it came to other people—men in particular—there were some deficits. Not that it was any different on other days, but managing to put off two men within a minute—the second one quite literally—was a lot, even for her. So much for finding a date for Maja's wedding.

Whatever. Most men were idiots anyway, as she'd just been reminded, and she had no desire for any kind of relationship.

She stopped short. The swarm of people moving in every direction had to dodge around her because she was standing in the middle of the way. Because the realization hit her like a hammer blow.

It was a lie. It did bother her that she'd be going to this wedding alone, that she had no one, and couldn't even flirt properly.

She'd changed a lot since that night in the elevator, but she was still living the same monotonous life, one with no truly beautiful moments. Because she didn't allow it. Because she kept lying to herself and insisting she didn't want anything different. It was pathetic.

She should've just kissed him... back then.

From some distance, she heard voices chanting slogans; a protest march was moving in. She wasn't in the mood for demonstrations and even more people. She just wanted to go home.

"What on earth happened to you?"

"Don't ask!"

"I thought you just wanted to grab a quick coffee *to drink*. But why take a shower in it?"

"Hilarious."

"Or is there a deeper message here? The coffee-splattered doctor! That's what happens when an underpaid, overworked nurse snaps."

"Just shut up now, okay?"

August laughed and handed his friend and colleague back the cardboard sign he'd been holding for him. The line of protesters started moving. Steffen held his sign high and shouted the chants extra loud, while August, along with a few other colleagues, handed out flyers to passersby.

"What's this all about?" asked an old lady, squinting hard. Clearly, she wasn't able to make out the print on the flyer.

"We're marching to improve conditions for nursing staff," August explained to her. "Better pay, more staff, more time."

"Oh, I see! That's good," the woman said. "Are you a nurse?"

"No, I'm a doctor," August said.

"Oh, I see! Then what are you doing here?" the woman asked blankly.

"We doctors are here to show our solidarity," August replied with nervous friendliness. Steffen and the others were already much farther ahead.

"Oh, I see!" the woman said again. "That's good." She smiled and shook his hand. August dashed back to the front, where Steffen had calmed down a little after the coffee disaster.

"So, have a nice little chat?" he asked as August ran alongside him again.

"Sure!" August said. "You actually look pretty sharp with that brown embellishment on your lab coat."

"I don't give a damn about the coat, but I needed that coffee after last night." He did the math. "After... twenty-eight hours."

"There's a kiosk up ahead," August said.

"Great!" Steffen handed him the sign, took off, and came back three minutes later with a large cup of coffee.

"You going to tell me what happened to its predecessor?" August asked, and when Steffen looked confused, he jerked his head at the coffee.

Steffen sighed.

"Some stupid chick barreled into me. Naturally, she didn't get any on herself—the cow."

"It happens," August said.

"Not if you're watching where you're going."

"And where were you looking?"

"At my coffee cup."

"Uh-huh," August said, grinning.

Guilt stirred in Steffen.

"Poor thing! She was actually really nice. She apologized right away and offered to buy me a new coffee or pay for the cleaning. And I..."

"And you probably acted like an ass."

"I did," Steffen admitted meekly. "When she said "Good-bye," I even said, "Better not."" He grimaced with embarrassment. August just shook his head.

The march had now reached the square where the rally was to take place.

"How many speeches?" Steffen asked.

August checked the flyer. "Five," he said, at which Steffen groaned.

He handed his sign to a nurse at his hospital and sat down, exhausted, on the edge of an oversized flower planter in the square. August sat down beside him.

"Is Dani coming along on Saturday?" Steffen asked.

"What made you think of Dani now?" August shot back.

Steffen shrugged. "I'm overtired; my thoughts are all over the place. So, is she coming?"

"No," August said, "she would, but she doesn't have time. So she says."

"So how was your big day, anyway?" Steffen asked and knocked back the rest of his coffee.

"Good," August said curtly.

Steffen nodded and gave him a sympathetic pat on the back.

Up at the podium, there were problems with the microphone. A shrill squeal threatened to drive away the few passersby who had joined the demonstrators.

"She was actually pretty cute," Steffen said as the result of another mental leap.

"Who? Dani?" August asked, amused.

"No, the one with the coffee," Steffen said.

"Oh, please, you're taken," August reminded him in mock seriousness.

"And very well at that," Steffen confirmed. A rapt grin stole over his face for a moment, then he pulled himself together again and said matter-of-factly, "No, it just struck me. In retrospect. And actually already while it was happening."

The mic had settled down, and the first speaker did a sound check: "One, two, one, two. Can you all hear me, okay?"

"She had incredibly beautiful eyes," Steffen recalled. "Green eyes."

## Chapter 3

Green Eyes.

He had wanted to jump up, grab Steffen, shake him, and under threat of torture, make him take him to the spot where he'd collided with those green eyes. He hadn't. From that moment on, he'd just sat there, numb, on the planter. That had been three days ago.

There weren't many women with eyes that strikingly green, but that didn't mean it had to be Lilli. And even if it were, she would have been gone by then. Like that night in the dark. And even if she'd been standing in the exact same place, what would he have said to her?

Why had the remote possibility that it might have been Lilli knocked him so off balance?

Whatever. It was over. Chance had—maybe—brought her close, and fate hadn't considered it necessary for them to meet. But who knew how many times they'd already brushed past each other, living in the same city. What was so special about that?

He tried to tie his tie but couldn't. He hated ties. If Dani didn't tie them for him, it just wasn't happening, and Dani wasn't here. He could repair blood vessels, but he couldn't tie a tie. He gave up. Dark suit, dark shirt—he didn't need a dark tie on top of that. The dissatisfied face in the mirror wasn't about his clothes; it was about the chance he might have missed.

He checked the time. The ceremony was at one. Until then, he had to work on an appropriately cheerful expression. He grinned at himself in the mirror. His eyes still needed practice.

So many people again, Lilli thought as she entered the church. She was running late. A vague inner aversion to the whole event had nearly made her properly late. And now she was confronted with these crowds. It wasn't even that many people, really, but that's how it felt. All of them dressed to the nines, polished, perfumed, buzzing with excitement. And all of them paired up. All of them chatting, laughing, joking, in high spirits. All except her.

"Bride or groom?" asked a nice natural blonde—you could tell by the roots—her violet-blue eyes going wide.

What movie had she seen this scene in before? Several, probably. It had a Hollywood kind of feel.

"Bride," Lilli said.

"To the right, please," said the cheerful blonde, handing her a program like a ticket. How fancy: a wedding with a program.

Lilli slipped it into her purse and found a seat way in the back. Up front by the altar, the groom was already standing, talking to a few people. Lilli craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the wonder of the world Maja had always made her beloved out to be, but first, she was too far away, and second, he had his back to the guests anyway. Well, she'd meet him soon enough.

Lacking the big circle of friends that had vanished along with her ex, Maja had mostly filled her side of the church with her numerous relatives. It was teeming with elderly aunts, uncles, great-aunts, and cousins of every conceivable degree.

The average age on the opposite side was much younger. Mostly friends and colleagues, Lilli guessed.

The pews filled, the pastor stepped up to the altar, and the church fell quiet. The groom and his best man took on a solemn, expectant stance. Then the music began, the door opened, and Maja came in on her father's arm, floating down the aisle until she reached her intended. Lilli didn't see much of it—too many heads blocked her view—but she suspected everyone had happy tears in their eyes. She could hardly see the pastor either, only hear him as he began:

"We are gathered here today ..."

"... to join this man and this woman in the holy state of matrimony."

August turned out. Holy state of matrimony—what nonsense. What a circus. Steffen had told him his future wife cared about it, so he was doing her the favor. Big church, big ballroom at the castle, big dinner, everything big. Steffen actually preferred things small. If that wasn't a good omen ...

But August hadn't been foolish enough to point that out. Steffen was happy with his girlfriend, soon-to-be wife. That was what mattered.

Dani and I were happy too, August thought, trying to tune out the pastor's monotone. And then all the crap started. So much for the "holy state of matrimony"—what a sorry state that was.

"Do you ..." and so on, the pastor was asking now. The people addressed answered with "Yes" and "Yes."

"Then I now pronounce you ..." Blah, blah, blah. Exchange rings, kiss, applause, everyone getting misty.

And now alcohol, August thought—hopefully. Still, he stood up like a good guest with the rest of the church and clapped. He caught Steffen's eye. How happy he looked. And why was he himself always in such a foul mood at weddings? Get a grip, August, he thought, and flashed his friend a grin.

The newlyweds went first, and the wedding party followed. August took his time.

As soon as the church door opened, Lilli slipped out, even though she was almost certain this would count as a faux pas, since the bride and groom were supposed to go first. But she was just as certain she would have thrown up if she'd had to endure Maja's saccharine, cheek-splitting, ear-to-ear, Cheshire-cat grin up close. So a minor lapse in manners was the lesser evil.

She could always claim later that she urgently needed the restroom.

Didn't the program say where the reception was and how to get there? At the castle, sure—you couldn't miss that—but where exactly? From what she'd heard, there were several ballrooms for occasions like this.

The wedding party now trickled out of the church one by one, led by the newlyweds, who stopped outside the entrance to receive congratulations.

Crap. When was she supposed to congratulate them now? Still, Lilli kept going. First to the castle, which sat on a small rise close by. A sprawling, magnificent building with tall windows and an impressive façade. Behind the elegant balustrade on the first floor, you could easily imagine one of the European royal families waving.

A long, broad drive—more suited to carriages than cars—wrapped around a gorgeous, terraced castle garden that was still in full bloom on this late summer day. Maja had already gushed about the venue, and she hadn't exaggerated. You couldn't get more over the top. Was her husband the same kind of guy? All pomp, flash, and appearances?

As long as there was good food and plenty to drink, Lilli thought as she walked up the drive, she'd slip out again when the time was right. Of course, only after she'd congratulated the happy couple, which she'd catch up on at some point.

When she reached the entrance, she checked the description in her program, which also promised she only had to follow the signs to the ballroom.

And it really was that simple—perfect organization. Lilli made a mental note to mention this approvingly during small talk with Maja later. At the door, a man in tails was waiting, giving her a puzzled look. Of course—she was early; she should've joined the bridal procession.

"May I see your card?" asked the man in tails, actually sounding serious.

"What card?" Lilli asked, bewildered. Then she remembered the written invitation Maja had begged her to be sure to bring. "Oh, right," she said, handing it to the man. He lifted his brows regretfully and informed her she was in the wrong place. Dr. Sievers's wedding was one floor down, in the Blue Hall. This was the Green Hall.

"But the sign said..." Lilli was no longer sure. Sievers? Right, that was Maja's boyfriend's name. Husband, rather. She'd forgotten.

The man smiled down his nose, as befitted a castle.

"Thanks," said Lilli and headed to where the invitation said she should be.

August lingered in the church as long as possible. Not because he liked the place, but because he was embarrassed to fake exuberant joy for his friend. First, he doubted Steffen would be happy with that attention-seeking doll, and second, he doubted anyone could be happy in a marriage. In rare exceptions, maybe, if fate were feeling unusually generous. But he'd had a low opinion of fate for some time now—especially since a few days earlier it had possibly denied him a reunion with Lilli. He'd been in a foul mood ever since, and he liked Steffen too much to ruin his wedding with it.

"Don't you want to miss the reception?" asked a voice behind him. The priest, with his monotone sermon, approached him with a smile.

"I'd love to, yes," August blurted out before he could stop himself. There it was again, his old affliction: saying things best left unthought. The priest, however, laughed.

"Bad experiences with marriage?" he asked.

"Divorced," said August. "Since last week, to be exact."

"I see. Then a wedding is naturally a strain," said the priest.

"No, not at all," August countered. "I'm very happily divorced."

The priest furrowed his brow, any trace of understanding gone.

"I mean," August tried to explain, "that's not the hard part. Not at all."

"Then what?" asked the priest, tactfully adding, "If I may ask."

"I lost someone," August said with spontaneous candor and a hint of sadness in his voice, which led the priest to the wrong conclusion again.

"Oh, my condolences," he said.

"Uh... no," August corrected him again. "Not lost like that. Different." How was he supposed to explain that? And why, anyway?

The priest realized he couldn't help here, if only because he didn't have a clue what August was talking about. He took refuge in a vague, fatherly smile.

"Well, I guess I really should..." August said, gesturing outside, where the whole party was now on the move.

The priest nodded with visible relief. August left the church, and he trailed after the others at a distance.

Lilli sat at the table assigned to her in the Blue Hall and wondered why the Blue Hall was called the "Blue Hall," because it wasn't blue. No bluer, at any rate, than other ballrooms or rooms she knew. She had nothing more stimulating to do. Her tablemates, all older relatives of Maja, were talking among themselves, and the bride and groom were drifting somewhere around the castle to take pictures. Dinner would be later, but a few musicians provided a pleasant backdrop to the general hum, and there were drinks. That was what mattered.

Lilli had placed her gift on the gift table, right next to another one that, in shape and size, looked like it might also be the Maldives coffee-table book.

"All good wishes for the future, to you both, and have fun in the shallow end," she had written on the card. Would Maja get the job? Her husband might—after all, he had a doctorate, so he had to have something in his head. Although that was no guarantee.

Lilli clung to her second glass of wine and looked around the hall. Like in the church, everything was neatly divided into "his side" and "her side," no mixing. How was she supposed to meet anyone like that? Did she want to meet anyone? At the very least, it was a prime chance to brush up on her flirting skills. Or her social skills in general. Now that she no longer looked like a scarecrow. Now that random men on the street were already grinning at her. Now that she was wearing this pale green dream of a dress, and even makeup. And hadn't she vowed to change something in her life? It certainly wasn't going to happen at this table. She was just about to get up and wander over to the other side when the musicians struck up the standard wedding march, and the beaming bridal couple entered the hall: Dr. Sievers and his wife.

August reached the ballroom just in time to see the newlyweds sweeping across the floor in a traditional waltz. Steffen looked dashing, and his bride was admittedly very pretty. Flawless, really.

At the entrance, August found a seating chart and tried to figure out where they'd put him. To his annoyance, he realized he didn't recognize a single name of his tablemates. All his colleagues from the unit who'd been invited were scattered at different tables. Great, now he was also forced to make small talk with complete strangers over dinner. That certainly hadn't been Steffen's idea, but he could have at least given him a heads-up.

The waltz ended, the crowd applauded politely, and everyone took their seats.

August found himself in the company of an older married couple who didn't exchange a word, a young couple still in the throes of acute infatuation and oblivious to everyone around them, and two women who were apparently mother and daughter and were eyeing August with barely concealed enthusiasm. The seat beside August was empty. Either someone had successfully dodged the evening or was inexcusably late.

"Has anyone ever told you you look just like a young George Clooney?"

It was the mother who asked, while the daughter at least had the tact to wish the floor would swallow her up after that remark. Neither the old couple nor the young one cared whether he looked like George Clooney or whether someone at this table had just made a fool of herself.

"You'll laugh, I'm even a doctor," August said coolly. The mother actually laughed, high and cackling. The daughter's face turned dark red.

Help, thought August, but he gave the woman an indulgent smile.

From the following table, he caught a look. An attractive redhead had watched the awkward exchange with amusement and signaled sympathy. August seemed to have his pick today: mother, daughter, redhead—and there were surely a few more. Dani could at least have come along to spare him this, a shield, so to speak.

He buried himself in his food and wondered if there was anything between feeding each other and pointedly ignoring each other.

Lilli seized the first chance to make up for the missed congratulations. It came after about five hours, after the ten-course menu, endless speeches, various silly wedding customs, the opening of the cake buffet, including the cutting of the predictably enormous wedding cake, and nonstop dancing.

The opportunity only arose when Lilli ran into Maja in the ladies' room.

"Isn't this all fantastic?" Maja asked, hugging Lilli warmly but very carefully so her voluminous dress wouldn't get crushed.

"Yeah, congratulations," Lilli said.

"What do you think of Volker?" Maja asked.

Terrible, Lilli wanted to say—conceited, affected, boring, idiotic—but she said, "Nice!" and tried to make it sound like she meant it.

"Yeah, he's just wonderful," Maja gushed. "I never in my life thought I'd have a dream wedding like this."

A nightmare, Lilli thought.

"But he doesn't care what it costs. The main thing is that I'm happy."

"That's great," Lilli confirmed, mustering all her self-control.

"Come upstairs with me, and I'll introduce you." Maja offered.

"Uh, later, I really need to fix my makeup," Lilli said, quick on her feet.

"Okay, see you later," Maja trilled and breezed out of the wash-room.

Right after that, Lilli heard an angry click of the tongue and Maja's indignant hiss, "Watch where you're going!" The expensive dress had apparently been in immediate danger.

Lilli freshened her kohl, tweaked her hair a little, and waited five minutes. She could easily do without being introduced to that moneyed fop. She looked at herself in the mirror and, as always, thought of August. Daily, in fact. You couldn't think every day about someone you'd only met once and would never see again. She had to break the habit. She should go upstairs and finally do what she'd resolved at lunchtime: flirt. Didn't matter with whom. She looked pretty okay. To be safe, she pulled out her lipstick and perfected her mouth.

Then, once again, she pushed away the involuntary, recurring thought of the kiss that had never happened and headed upstairs.

He had his pick and zero interest. Why, exactly? When he'd still been with Dani, he hadn't exactly passed up opportunities.

Now he was free and unattached and as disinterested as a eunuch. He danced once with the redhead, who pretty much embodied the prototype of the classy woman he'd fantasized about in the elevator back then—and was unspeakably boring. Then, out of pity, he asked the mortified daughter to dance, which wasn't particularly entertaining either. He chatted briefly with a few colleagues, but since they were too hyped up for his taste and mostly accompanied by their wives, he soon retreated to his seat again and clung to his wineglass. Steffen stopped by his table now and then, as August suspected, to make sure he didn't slip out early. He was also introduced to the happy bride, Lisa. Even up close, she was still flawless—very friendly, very soft-spoken, very delicate, young, almost girlish. How long would the two of them last, August wondered, and during the encounter with the young woman, he worked hard to keep any inappropriate remarks from slipping out. It was exhausting.

He couldn't endure the labored small talk for long and excused himself with the only relevant pretext that came to mind: he just needed to ...

August slipped out of the ballroom and had the tailcoated doorman show him the way to the restrooms. Two floors down, then left, you'll see it.

He saw it and headed for the door with the gold lettering "Men," when from the door with the gold lettering "Ladies," something fluffy and white burst out and collided with him. In the midst of this white explosion of fabric, someone clicked their tongue and hissed indignantly, "Watch where you're going." Then the woman—obviously the female lead in another ballroom—swept off.

He resisted the urge to shout something nasty after her. First, you didn't insult a bride, and second, she was already gone.

The men's room with its adjoining wash area was disappointingly un-castle-like and austere. Not a place you wanted to linger. Maybe he should seize the moment and just slip out. He'd worked his way through the entire checklist: eat, dance, talk, offer congratulations, meet the bride, clap Steffen on the shoulder. He could leave now.

August left the men's room, turned right toward the stairs, and headed up. A few steps ahead, a woman in a pale green dress was walking in front of him. The fitted cut of the dress, the featherlight way she took the steps, the way her narrow hips swayed as she climbed all brought her body into quiet focus. She had her head slightly bowed. With a small gesture, she pushed back her brown, shoulder-length hair.

August quickened his pace. She was the first person all day who had caught his interest. Just as he was about to reach her, she left the staircase on the first floor and slipped into the Blue Hall.

Lilli had the best intentions when she entered the hall. But the moment she saw Maja and her sleazy husband, the staid relatives on one side of the room and the elite circle of friends on the other, she changed her mind. There were hardly any singles here anyway—or at least none she wanted to flirt with. She wasn't that desperate. She just wanted out.

This wasn't the kind of place where you collected beautiful moments.

The only question was, where was that place?

She pulled her phone from her handbag and dialed the taxi company.

She was told to wait outside; a taxi would be there shortly.

Lilli didn't say goodbye to Maja. What for? She'd only beg her to please wait until she tossed the bouquet and then took off for the Maldives. She'd miss the big wave goodbye. Tragic.

Since Lilli didn't find that even a little tragic, she simply left the not-at-all-blue "Blue Hall," walked down the gorgeous Cinderella staircase, and waited outside for her taxi.

August stood hesitating in front of the Blue Hall for a while, then felt infinitely ridiculous and went upstairs to the Green Hall to at least say a quick goodbye to Steffen.

"Beautiful wedding, but I have to go now," said August, and because Steffen knew him well and was just as good a friend, he let it be and made no attempt to keep August any longer.

August pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed the taxi company.

He was told to wait outside; a taxi would be there shortly.

As he ran down the sweeping staircase, he felt relief. On the first floor, he glanced back toward the Blue Hall, but then kept going and left the building.

When he stepped outside, a taxi was already there—and wouldn't you know it, the woman in the pale green dress was getting in. He was about to protest when a second taxi pulled up the drive.

"Got an admirer tailing you?" the cabbie asked with a grin, glancing into the rearview mirror.

"Excuse me?" Lilli asked, confused.

"That taxi back there's been following us ever since the castle."

Lilli turned around. Another taxi—so what.

"There were two big wedding parties, and I assume there are people besides me who live downtown," she replied coolly and tried to zone out again.

"Still pretty early to be leaving a party," the cabbie remarked.

"Trust me, I definitely don't have an admirer following me," Lilli said, slightly annoyed, thinking to herself: And if you don't leave me alone with your stupid chatter, I'll gladly prove there are reasons for that.

"Who knows, who knows," joked the cabbie, oblivious to the danger, but fortunately, he kept quiet after that.

August couldn't believe it. The taxi carrying the woman in pale green was actually taking the same route as his. They'd been driving behind her for a full twenty minutes now. At first, that wasn't surprising—there weren't that many ways back into the city. But as the road network got more complex, and the taxi ahead still took the same exits and made the same turns at every intersection, it got weird.

"Did you coordinate with the driver up there?" August asked, as if joking.

"What do you mean?" the driver asked.

"That taxi up ahead has been in front of us ever since the castle," August informed the man.

"Really? Well, it happens," was all he had to say about it.

"Often?" August asked, noting nervously that two other cars had slipped in between the two taxis.

"Don't know," said the taciturn driver. "I don't pay attention to that stuff." Then he stopped at a red light, while the taxi ahead had just managed to glide through on yellow. It was gone.

Damn, August thought, and felt ridiculous for considering it. What did it matter? It was utterly irrelevant. She was just some woman with a great figure. No one who mattered. Not Lilli.

He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. Why was she still haunting his thoughts? Why couldn't he forget her?

The light turned green.

## Chapter 4

"The Maldives are the worst."

Lilli got ready to yank the receiver from her ear any second, bracing for a loud outburst, but Maja only whined. And griped. And sobbed.

"But the Maldives aren't to blame if your husband is running around..."

"Oh yes, they are!" Maja protested miserably.

Fine, if that was how she wanted to see it, Lilli thought. Once again, she had to think of August: "Some people can't even last five weeks together," he'd said back then, and in Maja's case, he'd been right. Three weeks, to be precise. That's how long it took Maja to figure out that her newly wedded moneybags was also a complete sleazebag who slept with anything that moved—and on the Maldives, there didn't seem to be many trees to climb.

"At least you got lucky with the apartment," Lilli tried to point out the silver lining.

"Pah!" Maja huffed. "It's way smaller than my old one and not nearly as central."

"Stop grumbling and be glad your property manager was so helpful. At least you don't have to end up on the street," Lilli reminded her.

"Will you help me move?" Maja asked bluntly.

"Excuse me? I'm not a mover!" Lilli shot back, just as direct.

"No, I mean, you know, moral support. Besides, you don't live far, that's the good thing about the new place. And you're my best friend."

I'm your *only* friend, Lilli thought. Still, she promised to be there for Maja on moving day, which basically meant: drinking together afterward in the new apartment and listening to her complain.

It would be the first time she revisited Maja since she'd gotten stuck in the elevator with August. Maybe she should have stopped by the old place one more time while she still could. Now that was over too.

Steffen was raving about married life and his wife. August couldn't help wondering why he was doing this for three hours after quitting the Italian place, and even after his third beer, he showed no sign of rushing home to his marital paradise. And this was already the second time that week.

Apparently, Lisa was often out with her girlfriends too, going to the theater or a concert. Or to a nightclub.

"We give each other space, it's great," Steffen gushed, ordering his fourth beer. A small one this time.

"Nice," August said. He didn't want to be a killjoy. And anyway, who was he to comment on the early beginning of the end of his friend's marriage? Besides, the whole thing could easily last another two or three years. His own with Dani had lasted even longer. You had to see it as a learning curve—experience was everything. Screw it up once, and then you're ready for a real relationship with a decent chance of going the distance.

What nonsense, August thought. He'd clearly had too much to drink as well.

"So, how's your love life?" Steffen asked. His heavy tongue could barely get the word "love life" out.

"Don't have one," August admitted.

"Come on," Steffen said. "There's got to be someone out there, right?"

"Exactly," August said darkly. "Out there."

He raised his hand to call the waiter over and pay, but Steffen said, "It's on the house. I mean—on my house."

"Thanks," August said, patted his shoulder, and left the place.

Lilli sat in a wild jumble of furniture, suitcases, and boxes, and drank Prosecco from a plastic cup. Maja hadn't found the box with the glasses. She didn't care that much. What mattered was to complain—and have someone to listen.

First, she went over the events in the Maldives in detail, then debated whether she had to get divorced after such a short time or if an annulment was possible, and what it would cost and who would pay. The unfaithful bastard shouldn't get off that easy. As a result, Maja spent quite a while filling Lilli in, down to the last cent, on her future ex-husband's income and musing about what she could expect to get out of it, since there was no prenup, and so on. But when she started getting all deep and philosophical and asked what in the world she kept doing wrong that men always treated her this way, it was too much for Lilli.

"Maja, you have to figure that out for yourself," she said, tossed back the contents of her cup, and then added, "It's already late, I have to go. Bye."

She paid no attention to Maja's objection that it was only eleven and not late at all. She raised a hand in farewell and left the apartment.

She walked past the elevator and headed down the stairs. She only used elevators anymore if there was no other choice—and never when she was going down.

August didn't have far to go to get home. That was the upside of his new place: it was close to the hospital. After breaking up with Dani, he'd crashed in a studio for a while, but luckily, he'd always had a good relationship with his old property manager, and as soon as a nice, big apartment opened up in one of their buildings, he got it. Close to the hospital, third floor—easy walking distance, since he didn't take the elevator anymore. Only in an emergency.

When he entered the building and felt a little buzzed from the beers he'd had, he wondered briefly if this counted as an emergency. But no, he was fine. Getting stuck in the elevator right now would not be fun, because in half an hour at the latest, he'd need a bathroom. Grinning to himself, he took the stairs, eyes on the steps so he wouldn't trip over his own feet.

Footsteps approached from above. The light, quick steps of a woman, he decided. Their steady rhythm reminded him of something. Of the last thing he'd noticed about Lilli.

She was racing down the stairs as if fleeing from Maja, from her apartment-and-marriage chaos, and from her self-pity.

Someone was coming up toward her from below. The steps clomped heavily on the stairs. Either an older man or a drunk, she guessed. Why didn't someone like that take the elevator—that's what it was there for.

The steps slowed, then fell silent. Hopefully, she wasn't about to trip over a passed-out drunk.

August stopped. His heart pounded in time with the approaching steps.

What was he thinking? Had he lost his mind? Why on earth would it be...?

The light went out, and just one flight above him, an unmistakable female voice swore: "Damn it!"

"No way," whispered August. He felt his way frantically up the dark stairwell until he reached the light switch. At the same moment as Lilli. A second later, he went down.

She heard the man's ragged breathing and then his footsteps again, faster than before. Panic surged in Lilli. He'd heard her, and now he wanted to use the darkness to his advantage. A rapist, for sure. A drunken rapist. She had to reach the next light switch before the man reached her, but he was already coming at her, a large, shadowy figure about to lunge and keep her from turning on the light so she wouldn't be able to identify him later. Or so she thought. Reflexively, she jerked her knee up and connected—wherever—but hard enough to make him groan and sink to the floor in front of her.

She hit the switch and kept going.

"Lilli!" he forced out through a face twisted with pain, trying and failing to haul himself up.

She stopped. Thunderstruck. Turned around slowly.

Her green eyes looked at him as if he were an apparition and not actually there.

"It's just me," gasped August. Since there was no longer any need to chase her, he stayed curled up on the floor.

Lilli came back up the few steps she'd already gone down.

"August?" she asked, as if she still couldn't believe her eyes.

He didn't need to confirm the obvious and could use the time to catch his breath. Luckily, she hadn't hit dead center, but it still hurt like hell.

"What are you doing here?" asked Lilli, still stunned.

"I live here," he said. "And you?"

It was a bit undignified, the way he sat there in front of her, trying to find the least painful position with the wall for support and looking up at her.

"I... I," stammered Lilli. She seemed to have forgotten what she'd been doing in this house. Instead, she became aware of what had just happened.

"Shit, did I hurt you?" She finally moved and knelt down beside him.

"No, not at all. I'm fine," August deflected, but when he imagined how strained his face must have looked, he had to laugh. Lilli gave him a rueful smile in return.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry, I thought you were some kind of..."

"Rapist?"

"Yeah."

"Good to know you can put up a fight."

Slowly, it sank in for Lilli that she wasn't dreaming. August was sitting in front of her. The man she'd thought about every day for over a year, for whatever reason. She let herself sink down onto the floor beside him and leaned back against the wall too.

Overwhelmed, he looked at her. The pain didn't matter. Lilli was here and sitting right next to him, in the middle of the stairwell, just like that.

"It's good to see you," he said. If only he could tell her how good she is.

"Ditto," she said with a smile. Then she lowered her gaze.

Ditto? Would she ever learn to behave appropriately? Jumping for joy would have been appropriate. Throwing her arms around his neck would have been appropriate. But "ditto"? Lilli was mortified.

She was even more enchanting than he remembered, and she couldn't see how he was practically melting.

"So," said August, to save her from her embarrassment, "what are you doing here?"

Lilli sighed, and when the situation dawned on her, she burst out laughing. Then she explained, "I was at my friend Maja's. She got married five weeks ago and is already getting divorced. So she's heartbroken again, and since I know a thing or two about that..."

"You've got to be kidding me, right?" August asked incredulously.

"It's true," Lilli said, as he joined in her laughter. "Some things never change," she said once they'd more or less recovered.

"Some do," August said, grinning as he pointed to Lilli's hair. "Brown suits you much better." And because Lilli, of course, turned away again in embarrassment, he went right on, "But please let me check where that T-shirt's from." She laughed and swatted his fingers. He would have liked to tell her how pretty she looked, but he remembered she couldn't handle that at all, so she had to read it in his eyes.

"And you live here now?" she changed the subject.

"I live here," he corrected. "I'm divorced." He watched her reaction.

"Oh!" was all she said, unsure how to feel about the news.

"It was the right thing to do," he said.

"Good."

"Yeah," he agreed, and he couldn't stop looking at her. He would have loved to take her hand, to make sure she didn't simply vanish again.

The light went out again. Her hand settled on his.

"There's something else that hasn't changed," she said softly into the darkness.

"What?" he asked just as softly. His hand closed around hers.

"I still don't have a best moment," Lilli said.

She couldn't see his wide smile, but she felt it.

"Everyone should have a best moment," August said, put his arm around Lilli, and drew her close.

"Yeah, and you once claimed..."

"I know."

She reached out, feeling for his face.

"Then let's give it a try," she whispered.

"Okay," he whispered back, his lips very close to hers. "Here we go."

- *The End* -

## Did you enjoy my short novel?

This book was translated from German. If you noticed anything while reading that I could improve, please feel free to write to me at [feedback@josefineweiss.de](mailto:feedback@josefineweiss.de)

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