

Sarafin Lee Phoenix

Verbal Swords

Words Are The Most Powerful Weapons

Novel

Verbal Swords - Words Are The Most Powerful Weapons (Volume 1)

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SarafinLeePhoenix@firemail.de

www.SarafinLeePhoenix.com

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--- *The Canvas of our Soul* ---

Dearest unknown,

Somewhere out there in the vastness of space, everything we think exists. For either the creatures and distant worlds in our minds are already in existence or we create them at the very moment they spring from our thoughts, unleashing their hitherto limited existence as prisoners in our minds to release them into the freedom of a world beyond our stars.

At least I hope so, because it means that somewhere out there is the love of my life. I know how utopian that must sound, and I'm well aware that I'm expected to become reasonable and settle for what everyone else has and what everyone but me seems to want. But I can't. Maybe it will doom me to eternal loneliness and someday I'll be bitter and old and alone. But wouldn't I be just as lonely at heart in the wrong relationship?

You may think I'm naive, but something in me wants to believe in true love. For me, human existence cannot find its expression only in sober numbers and fleeting, superficial relationships. And if I am forever a dreamer, I don't care. All I want is to imbue my soul with the only true happiness. This happiness is like a call that I follow. It is like a spell that will make my silenced heart beat. For it is love that breathes life into us. Without it, we are just empty, aimless shadows on the stage of life.

Perhaps I will never find it, true love, because it doesn't exist, and out there beyond the distant cosmic blackness, nothing but loneliness awaits me as I gaze up at the night sky, searching for the prince from a fairy tale that has long since faded away, shattered in reality like a broken mirror, robbed of its magic by the bitter words of a world I never wanted to acknowledge. The day may come when I must realize that I wasted my life on an illusion.

But what if it is not so? What if the image of love from the depths of my soul, nurtured in sleepless nights, will eventually fall like a glowing spark into the darkness of the world and illuminate everything around it? Only love is capable of this, because it is the longing for something for which there are no words. It is the prism through which the world receives its radiance. It is the music on whose notes we begin to dance. And it is the smile in our eyes that realize all at once.

No matter what others may say and how often they may shake their heads, I will not settle for anything less. I will not stop the relentless search, will not despair and give up in the face of recurring disappointments and aching loneliness. I will hold on like a drowning person in the vast ocean of life, washed by letters that could be my salvation. Until all eternity I will put the unshakable longing of my hungry heart on

paper, until all eternity I will search for it, until my words have found it or eventually fade away.

For it is my words that create the hero of my own play. Reality may not know him, but my lines bring him to life and lure him to me to write the first chapter in our hearts, the canvas of our souls that we paint in all colors.

See you someday. Make a wish!

--- *My Phobias* ---

Damn, I think this is the end for me. That's it. Just like that, everything over and done with. My dreams become burst soap bubbles, my life an ended story with a dramatic finale. Suddenly, without warning, without the possibility of saying goodbye, everything approaches an inevitable ending that makes me disappear into nothingness. What remains of me are merely thoughts, whose stringing together in printed form will outlast the times until they too are subjected to transience, fade away and crumble into dust.

»She was still so young,« I hear my grandmother say.

Yes, of course. But does the Grim Reaper care? He grabs whoever he can – and rather indiscriminately, in my opinion. Instead of working with a list and starting with those who have committed more than one sin in the course of their lives, or at least honoring those who can look back on decades and take enough memories with them as treasures, his pen naturally sets to work on someone like me. Someone who hasn't experienced anything yet. Someone who is just starting out. Someone so innocent!

Oh yeah?, asks a voice in my head that sounds suspiciously like my best friend. *Well, I can still remember what you did to Agnes Willstock in third grade. Or that party on the East Side when the cops came. Not to mention your trip to Washington ...*

All right, all right. Innocence is a stretchy term.

But do I really deserve to die so soon?

No, I think.

Maybe, say others.

To hell with them. I may not be an angel, but I have never done anything bad. At least not on purpose.

A wobble brings me out of my gloomy thoughts, which are already working at the eulogy that would probably have become a pleading, if not an indictment. My sweaty hands clench around the armrests as I try to convince myself that everything is fine.

But nothing is fine. I think I'm about to die. I have to get out of here. I can't stand this any longer. There's nothing below me for miles, and the childlike fear turns me into a toddler stuck in a nightmare. For what feels like the hundredth time in the last seven hours, my heartbeat has taken on an unhealthy rhythm and I'm on the verge of screaming and running through the rows in a panic. I can already see myself in the hallway, screeching hysterically and gasping for air. I probably manage to infect a few people with my exaggerated fear. The first victims of my hysteria are certainly the children. Then come the mothers, who anxiously press their offspring against them. If I do it right, I even trigger mass panic. A movie is playing out before my eyes in which I take the lead role and which ends with me on the crumbly ground, the knee of a sky marshal in my back. I can already see the newspaper report in front of me:

US passenger freaks out at 10,000 meters altitude

Paralyzed with fear I sit there, while my gaze wanders uncomprehendingly through the cabin. I have not yet infected anyone with my panic. Quite the opposite: at the moment everyone around me is endowed with this seemingly ridiculous composure, even though, statistically speaking, one in three suffers from fear of flying.

Or does one suffer for three?

In my case, I'm probably suffering for the whole plane. Am I mistaken or am I the only one with a blood pressure of one hundred and eighty? I can't shake the feeling that I'm the only one who didn't find a keep-calm package under the seat. Instead, there are the sneakers of the teenager behind me who is about to set a record for wearing unwashed socks.

Laughter filters through to me.

Indignantly, I look to my right. What is there to laugh about? Is my death cause for amusement?

A family of four occupies the row next to me. The parents look like they're enjoying their first vacation since the honeymoon. Judging by their jaded expressions, they could have used one without kids. In contrast to the comatose teenager behind me, whose sock smell wafts through the plane, the kids next to me are a little more awake. Almost *too* awake, because for a good two hours they've been playing a game whose purpose seems to be to drive the other passengers crazy.

I would love to open the emergency door and throw them out, but of course I don't move an inch, after all, just an hour ago I was imagining that the door wouldn't be closed all the way or could suddenly burst open and we'd all be dragged out – one of many scenarios that have played out in my head since check-in and not even the most dramatic.

»Not so loud, Clara,« the father asks – he's actually asking, it's not an order, and you look in vain for reproach in his voice.

»They're all asleep or deaf,« replies the brash teenager, giggling a bit more shrilly to be heard by everyone.

»They need rest to sleep, too,« the mother tries.

»Sure,« says Clara and rolls her eyes.

»When are we going to get there?« the son whines, pulling a face as if his parents are to blame for everything that's wrong with his life – from the pimples to the tasteless clothes.

»Very soon,« the father replies.

»Great. And then to grandpa's who doesn't get anything anymore anyway ...«

»That's no way to –«

»I'm about to win!« announces Clara, bouncing up and down in her seat.

»Not on your life,« claims her brother.

»Sure I do! Look at that.«

»Can't be! You're cheating!«

»Bullshit, I'm just the best!«

»Mom! ...«

I turn away. The shrieking and laughter swells a little more, but right now I have bigger worries than the annoying people I have to share the plane with. My hands are shaking and my stomach won't stop contracting or doing loops. The urge to jump up grows and it takes effort for me not to call for a stewardess.

But what for?

For an understanding nod, followed by a smile and the standard sentence: »That's how it is for many. But remember, we are in a safe machine.«

What, for Christ's sake, is a *safe* machine? Are there any unsafe ones?

Yes. The one we're in right now. We're going to crash! We're all going to DIE!!!

Stay calm, warns the sensible voice in my head, which is hardly heard by me on this day. This is totally embarrassing. You can't just freak out and act like a scared little kid. What will people think of you?

To hell with the others, I don't know anyone here. They might as well think I'm a lunatic. I'll never see them again!

Pull yourself together. You're confident, calm, cool in any situation.

But in this situation? Here, high above the clouds?

Take a breath. Calm down. You'll be fine.

Yes, I will be. The wiggling will stop again, I'm sure of it. It *has* to stop.

And what if it doesn't? What if we're about to crash???

My pulse rises again and my mouth is parched. I consider taking a drink, but decide against it so that I don't have to get up in half an hour.

Three reasons speak against going to the toilet:

1. I'm not wearing a seat belt and therefore am the first victim in a crash. I'm not kidding myself that I have a better chance of survival – has anyone ever read the headline: *All passengers of flight XYZ well. Only one fatality because she was not wearing a seat belt ?* – But I imagine that it is better if my remains are found properly strapped to a seat instead of in a mud hole a good three hundred meters away.
2. I pass the door to the emergency exit, which bursts open just at that moment, and am thrown out of the plane. For minutes – maybe only for a few eternal seconds, I don't know exactly, after all I have never dared to jump out of an airplane – I trundle to the ground, where my body bores a few meters deep into the earth. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to land in an urban area, where my remains will fly in all wind directions and people will run away screaming in panic. Or I break through the windshield of a car and cause the driver to have a heart attack and take another innocent soul with me into the afterlife. Who likes to travel alone?
3. I could succumb to the temptation to knock on the pilot's door, which would certainly end in a longer stay in custody. In the worst case, they'd send me back after landing and I'd have to get right back on a plane!

I swallow and decide not to do anything stupid. For now.

Why the hell did I have to leave home? I had a great life.

Well, it also had its downsides. Some low points too, just as every existence does not only consist of cake days. But I really can't complain. How stupid do you have to be to give up everything to try your luck thousands of miles away? I could have looked for something on my own continent. Or I could have just stayed in New York. You can't beat that city. Everyone wants to go there. And I? I'm running away from there? What's wrong with me?!

I wouldn't be in this situation if I had been satisfied with my life. But what was wrong with it? On the whole, it was quite pleasant and could well have continued along this path. I really shouldn't complain. It was going great.

More or less.

Less when I look back, more when I look at the present moment, after all, my dissatisfaction is the reason I'm on this plane now.

Or someone else can be held accountable for it. I shouldn't have listened to my best friend when she told me to look for my roots and dare the unknown. What a stupid thing to say. The unknown. Death is also unknown. Must I therefore make early acquaintance with it?

I take a deep breath and wrestle down the rising panic, which I only partially succeed in doing. I would have loved to build a bridge over the Atlantic Ocean to escape this flight. Unfortunately, no one but me seems to be interested and the construction would have taken a little longer, so I had to get on this damn plane. Why actually? Is it worth it?

Maybe, I doubt it more and more.

At the airport my friend said, »The path we take is always a little scary at first because it's uncertain, but most of the time we make the right decision based on a gut feeling.«

Gut feeling. Good one. My gut tells me I should have skipped lunch. Furtively, I peek at the bag in the front seat and ponder for a while whether I should secure the one from the seat neighbor the next time he goes to the bathroom. Just in case.

»You'll have a great time, I'm sure,« my friend continued.

Sure, especially if I never arrive because I got on the wrong plane.

»And you'll definitely meet a cute guy soon,« she added, a conspiratorial smile on her lips.

Of course that's what I need right now. A guy is about the last thing I want. No, I'm going to stay away from all men. I will only act as a reserved observer.

»I'm sure it'll be great. Have a good flight!« echo the words of my friend, who allowed me to board this death plane. Was she trying to get rid of me?

For a few wicked seconds, I wish for nothing more than to wring my friend's neck and never have gotten on this plane.

Later I know better. In retrospect, this flight was the decisive thread that fate had to spin in order for me to find happiness and for that everlasting smile to settle on my lips.

At this moment, of course, I don't know anything about it yet and am paralyzed with fear that turns me into a child who looks around in search of help, but finds no one to take him in his arms and shower him with comforting lies. At this point, I neither know that I have set out not only out of an urge for self-discovery, to dare a new start that will change my whole life, nor do I want to admit to myself that I am not merely looking for my roots, but for someone whose words have kept me in suspense for months. That he has this power over me, although I know him only from letters, I do not want to admit. Still, he has succeeded in luring me to another continent, even if it is not my intention to meet him at all.

At least that is what I think. Deep inside me, the desire echoes through my heart and won't let me go. Not even now, when I think I am close to the end.

Once again, everything trembles beneath me and I tense up even more. Accidentally, I bump my elbow against the person sitting next to me. As I try to apologize, I wince as if the Grim Reaper were sitting there and grinning at me.

What the hell ...?!

I have to swallow hard before I dare to make sure I'm not mistaken. Bravely, I take another look at the passenger at my side, who has apparently escaped my attention so far. A pang of guilty conscience overcomes me at the thought that I sometimes tend to see only myself and my problems, while completely blocking out the rest of the world. The spotlight above me fades for a moment and I try to become aware of the supporting actors around me, who in turn are the main actors in their own play and are in no way inferior to me.

As if my seat neighbor had only been waiting for my glance, he lowers his head, closes his eyes and begins to pray. »Allahu akbar. Subhanaka allahumma wa bihamdika wa tabarakasmuka wa ta'ala dschaduka wa la ilaha ghairuk ...«

My jaw drops. Speechless, I stare at what's happening before my eyes as my pulse rises word by word. Damn it, I should have known this was the wrong plane. I should have read the signs correctly. Those two Arab-looking teenagers at the airport, shouting in a kind of rhythmic chant, »Stop - Stop - Stop. Stop Immigration. Stop Exploitation.« when I was just standing at the check-in, and who were taken away by policemen shortly afterwards, should have been reason enough *not* to get on this plane.

And now?

Now I'm sitting here and we're all probably going to die.

As if on cue, the plane sinks into an air hole. I suppress a scream and cling to my seat as the entire plane begins to jolt, as if the pilot had lost control of it.

A crackle sounds, and the next moment the announcement comes: »Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. We are expecting slight turbulence and ask you to fasten your seat belts ...«

Slight turbulence? A roller coaster ride is less turbulent!

Again, the plane descends a few meters. Then a rattling goes through the machine, which, together with my seat neighbor, causes a panic in me that has to vent.

Desperately, I turn my gaze to the ceiling. »You got to be kidding me ...«, I groan. »Please, dear God, not yet. Please, please don't. I don't want to go yet. I still have so much to do, so many plans! I just bought a new iPod. I want to use it at least *once*! And my sushi snack pack? For nothing, or what? You can't be serious! And what's going to happen to the project I started? Should it be left unfinished? My life's work?! Oh, please, God, help me. I didn't believe in you until now, but from now on I will. If you let me get out of this unharmed, I will. If I get through this, I'll go to church every Sunday and I'll pray every day. Yes, I'll even make a donation, I was going to do that tomorrow anyway. Please, if you do me this one favor, I'll be a good Christian. I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die. I'll never swear again and I'll be nice to everyone – except the unbelievers, of course. Let your lightning strike them down. I'm behind you all the way. – Just please, please help me. I'll do anything you ask. I also take a look at the – how many were there again ... – seven commandments? ...«

»Ten,« it comes dryly from the person sitting next to me, before he continues to pray.

»Whatever«, I mutter and squint my eyes fearfully as the plane shakes again and a few children cry out. I would have liked to scream with them, but at the moment praying seems more sensible. »I'll abide by them in the future,« I continue my promises. »I'll follow all the commandments. Honestly. I'll also rejoin the church if that's what you want. No problem at all. I will, right after I get out of here. Just please, let me get through this. I don't want to die yet. Don't let me. Please, God. Not like this. Not here. Not now! *Please!*—«

»Excuse me?«, I suddenly hear a voice somewhere above me.

Uncertainly, I open one of my cramped narrowed eyes and peer up. A steward is standing in front of me. I noticed him earlier because he is so wide that he barely fits through the aisle. He doesn't look like typical board staff and I strongly suspect that's why they brought him along: to keep me at bay. I'd flick a little stewardess away with my finger – not because I'm so strong, but because panic gives me superhuman strength – but this gorilla ...

»Would you please pray more quietly? You're scaring our passengers.«

I cast a glance around and find that a dozen pairs of eyes are staring at me. On their faces I read bewilderment coupled with pity and a hint of *This-is-a-hopeless-case-for-the-nut-house*.

I nod and turn my red head towards the window. God, how embarrassing!

Or heroic, after all, I may well have saved us from disaster. The plane is calmly in the air again, as I am relieved to see. Praying seems to help. We have not crashed yet.

Call me paranoid and totally crazy, but have you ever sat in an airplane and thought this is the end for you? And then next to a guy – I'm not biased or xenophobic, but the truth has to come out – who looks like he was on the front lines of 9/11 and barely survived, only to strike again? Well, for those of you who don't know aviophobia – fear of flying for the loanword haters – this is probably hard to comprehend. But my fellow sufferers know exactly what I'm talking about. Still I wouldn't call myself fearful – after all, I'm a New Yorker, and what could possibly scare me? Quite the opposite: Hardly anyone is as firm as I am. Nothing in life, no matter how bad it was and no matter what I had to go through, ever really threw me off course.

At least, that's what I like to claim. And who doesn't?

But as for flying ... I confess, yes it is one of my greatest weaknesses, my kryptonite, so to speak. I think it's mostly because I can't control anything up here. I'm used to being in control of my life, and I pull not only the strings of my destiny, but often those of others as well. I set the tone and everything is based on that. It has always been like that. But at the moment I am helplessly at the mercy of the pilot's skill, whom I accused of drunkenness just a few minutes ago.

Fortunately, everything has calmed down again and we land in about thirty minutes, according to one of the stewardesses, who checks the baggage flaps and points out that the seat belts have to be fastened. While unrest breaks out around me – a few passengers hurry toward the restroom, although they should have been buckled up long ago, others are already rummaging for their bags – I take a deep breath, because, contrary to expectations, I am allowed to continue my life. Quickly, I stow the desperate oaths and lip service under my seat next to the smelly sneakers and turn my attention to the fact that in a few moments I will be on another continent. Isn't it incredible how fast life can change sometimes? Just a few days ago, I was walking across the set in New York as part of a mid-range film.

And now?

Now I am on my way to new shores, have left my old life behind me and will soon set foot on European soil. I would love to let out a shout of joy and ram a flag into the ground. Unfortunately, the ground is still quite far away and the way there bristles with danger. Most plane crashes happen during takeoff or landing. So I have only survived half of the nightmare.

Again the pilot makes an announcement. Briefly he informs us that we are about to land and says goodbye, which doesn't exactly reassure me.

»Please return to your seat,« adds the steward, standing at the mike to make way for his colleagues in the aisle, »and return your seats to an upright position.«

What for? Surely death doesn't care. After all, I'm not sitting in a coffin either.

The next moment, the plane descends and breaks through the top cloud cover, causing the plane to lurch back and forth as if trying to shake off unnecessary ballast. My stomach half turns. Landing is also one of those things. Not really mine, frankly, but necessary, because I want to get out of here as quickly as possible. To be on the safe side, I take two more of these tranquilizer pills, of which I have already eaten at least ten. The great, but also somehow frightening thing about these homeopathic things is: If you take too many of them, you become, apart from being tired, really apathetic. So apathetic, in fact, that at some point you don't even care whether the damn plane crashes or not. Kind of scary, but also very helpful.

Right now I'm diving into this state, having exceeded the designated dose, and I can finally relax. I don't care about the shrieking of the siblings along with the helpless pleas of their parents. Neither do I care about the stares of the stewardesses or the rocking of the plane, which is sinking all too quickly for my liking – or should I say crashing?!

So what? Doesn't matter anyway whether we land or not. What the hell. I've always wanted to know what follows death. It would make for an interesting novel. My readers would certainly be thrilled – although I should probably look for a new readership. I wonder if there are any books there? ...

Again it wobbles, but why the panic? I don't care if the pilot manages to land. Let him have another drink. Cheers!

Is he landing or not?

He's landing.

He's not landing.

He's landing.

He's not landing...

If he doesn't, there's nothing you can do about it. It's just too bad. Come to think of it, I'd like a cheeseburger right now...

The undercarriage is extended and we set down for landing. For a moment, the effect of the pastilles wears off. Anxiously, I cling to the armrests of my seat and hold my breath as if we were diving into one of the countless lakes. Like a toy carpet, the landscape races along beneath us as we plummet toward it, swaying. Some anxious heartbeats later, there is an asphalt strip underneath us and we set down with what I see as an unnecessarily violent jolt. I can't shake off the suspicion that the pilot is new at his job and I'm already spinning images in my head of a half-broken airplane fuselage skidding across the runway.

A glance out the window shows nothing suspicious.

Before I can be happy about the intact airplane, the braking begins. The entire vehicle swings as if we were in an oversized cocktail shaker. That way we glide across the runway. I wouldn't call it *gliding*, but I'm probably the only one who takes such a critical view.

We have landed! It feels so great to finally have Mother Earth under me again that I almost fall down on my knees and kiss the littered ground! A look at the other passengers saves me from such embarrassment.

Slightly drenched in sweat, but more than relieved, I straighten up from my cramped position and cast a quick glance at the man at my side. Calmly, he folds up the newspaper and stows it in the net of the front seat. I rather not know what he thinks of me. Just this much: We didn't become friends on our eight-hour flight, and I think he's even glad that he won't see me again soon, if he hasn't already made an appointment at a clinic for the crazy patient next to him. This lack of sympathy is based on reciprocity, however, because which of the two of us is the crazier is not settled.

The pilot steers the vehicle to the gate and I am overjoyed to finally be able to move my tired feet again and that I will soon get out into the fresh air. Another phobia of mine: claustrophobia. That's why the whole flying thing is not necessarily a pleasant story for me.

But don't misjudge me now. Apart from the fear of flying, claustrophobia and acrophobia, I'm not really a fearful person. Admittedly, I once suffered from lygophobia, but what child isn't afraid of the dark? Dentophobia plagued me when I was eleven, but nobody likes going to the dentist anyway. And scholionophobia I probably had whenever we wrote a math test at school – so it's closely related to my numerophobia between eighth and tenth grade. I remember that I also hated going to school when my classmates were mean to me and called me a ghost because I stood out like an albino among all the Latinos and African-Americans. It didn't help that my parents pointed out that all my relatives had this pale complexion, because I dreaded strenuous family gatherings anyway, which was due to my syngenesophobia.

»Why does she want to be an actress? Only people who can't do anything else do that,« I still hear my aunt say.

Well, pretty bad is my cacorrhaphiophobia, because I'm a bad loser. And I mean really bad. In fact, I freak out so much when I don't come out a winner in a game that my opponents soon volunteer to hand over victory so that they are spared my hysterical fits. I haven't participated in games for years because it brings out a really bad side of me that doesn't need to be seen.

Obesophobia haunted me as a teenager, but I've since gotten over it because I have conducive genes and can eat just about anything without gaining an ounce. That also means I can wear whatever I want – except for white. That color is still a no-no due to acute leukophobia.

Once, I struggled with oneirophobia, but how do you think it feels when dreams come true? And I don't mean the good ones.

Oh yeah, and then there's my methyphobia. Apparently my first experience with alcohol was so bad that I couldn't see anything like it for two years. I even firmly claimed that I was allergic to it, which only earned me smiling headshakes from my friends.

Just before I got my driver's license, I had a touch of amaxophobia until I realized that driving has been mastered by others before and there's really nothing to it, even though pedestrians overtook me while doing the driving test and when I finally found the gas pedal, I almost mowed down my former math teacher. We had a score to settle, though, if you know what I mean. Luckily, the driving instructor was looking at a pretty lady on the sidewalk at that moment and didn't notice. Otherwise, I would probably still be walking....

After 9/11, I suffered from terrorism phobia and suspected literally every Arab-looking person in New York, which gave me a somewhat xenophobic reputation that I had to clear up for four years afterward, and which seems to have been revived today. And after the Japan thing in 2011, I was plagued by an acute nuclear phobia, while the world held its breath and I thought that was it.

But all that was a long time ago. Today I consider myself cured of all these misconceptions. Sure, a little bit of gerascophobia creeps up on me sometimes – which woman doesn't know that and wants to grow old? I am also familiar with gravidophobia, but at the moment everything and everyone is pregnant. In principle, I always do the opposite of my fellows, so I do not follow this newfangled children trend. The biological clock is already ticking, but very quietly and I just turn a deaf ear. Honestly, I haven't had enough time for myself and my plans. In addition, I am avowedly single. So what's the point of planning a pregnancy if I haven't even found the right partner yet? Taking a look at the girls from my old neighborhood, you can do it without a relationship or without the other person's consent, but well ... So I don't suffer from anuptaphobia, because I'm a satisfied single and I don't have to worry about staying alone yet, do I?

Especially on Mondays my ergophobia manifests itself from time to time, but who likes to go to work then? By the way, I've only had nomophobia for a couple of years, but it's a bloody awful feeling to be without cell phone contact. Can you imagine that? As a cell-phone-holic without a network? And for the sake of completeness I have to admit that every now and then I get a severe attack of mageirocophobia, but it's more pleasant to be cooked for than to cook yourself, isn't it? :-)

I almost forgot that I had scriptophobia for a long time, but now I can write anywhere, although I prefer to be by myself. Fortunately, I never had bibliophobia, because if there's one thing I'm not afraid of and that invariably does me good, it's books. Oh yes, and I also suffer from arachnophobia, although I am a huge Spiderman fan. But I don't think that's a big problem, because Spidy as the only spider in the world is enough. After all, I don't want to make him jealous with all the pretend accomplices that keep creeping up on me. And of course I suffer from phobophobia, but with all the phobias ...

You probably now think that I am a phobia-ridden, superficial person who has not understood the deeper meaning of life and who, in the face of death, focuses on non-essential things like a new iPod and her sushi snack pack, and who, in her theatrical way, is incapable of serious thought or deeper feeling. And perhaps you have often encountered people like me. People for whom everything – except a flight across the Atlantic – seems easy, and who always have a silly line on their lips to cover even the worst moments in life with a laugh. People who seem to have everything and to whom happiness just flies by. People you never see crying, but always laughing, and who can really get on your nerves because, unlike you, they don't have bad luck and obviously never experienced pain and suffering, or know what grief means or what heartbreak is.

But you should not be deceived, not by this first, fleeting impression. Everyone wears a second face behind the sober exterior we present to our fellows – even a clown. I, too, have this other side. I rarely ever show it, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Maybe it takes a lot of trust in the world and in people to be open and vulnerable, and not all of us have the courage to do that. Maybe I'm also someone who likes to appear mysterious. But maybe it just took the right person and the right city to show the real me.

I know that life looks easy to some people, and especially at the beginning of my story, everything seemed to go as if it was preordained, smoothly and seamlessly. But life is usually more complicated than it appears, especially when it comes to love. Rarely do we meet someone, fall in love, and then the happy ending follows. I believe that it is the events in between that count, the many small, insignificant moments that are crucial to our journey. Every step and every fall seems necessary to reach the goal.

Or everything is easy and we just make life difficult. How difficult, you can read in the following. Maybe my story will inspire you to take a second look at those actors among you who hide behind a laugh. Maybe you will even succeed in recognizing what their smile covers. Because maybe there is more behind it than you thought possible.

--- *Berlin Tegel. 2 Degrees. The Hairstyle Fits* ---

We have landed, and I have survived my personal nightmare safely, although a queasy feeling still runs through my stomach and I still don't quite want to believe that I am actually still among the living. Stealthily, I wipe my sweaty hands dry on my jeans, while my pulse rate gradually returns to its usual rhythm. As I unfasten my seatbelt, I'm a little surprised that no one is applauding for landing safely, but it seems that hasn't been the case for a long time. Admittedly: It's been a while since I last sat in an airplane – which may be because I inexplicably ended up on a red list with certain airlines after various incidents.

While the family to my right is chattering excitedly and looking for all kinds of odds and ends, and the teenager behind me is sleepily blinking and rummaging for his sneakers, I grab my things out of the hatch above me, say a quick goodbye to my seat neighbor, whom I mistakenly took for an assassin and whose sigh of relief that he is finally rid of me cannot be overheard, and follow the others out of the plane.

Half an hour later I have managed to leave customs control and the much too slow baggage carousel behind me. A little exhausted and tired, but incredibly relieved, I step outside, where I first have to pause for a moment to become aware of the fact that I have reached my destination. Expectantly, I look around. So this is the city I've been dying to get to, the one I've been dreaming about for so long.

With a smile on my face, I let my eyes wander over the first impression of Berlin. Arriving and departing guests cart their heavy suitcases past me, some full of anticipation, others as if they were being sent into exile or returning there. Two cab drivers are yelling at each other for a parking space, not caring about the honking cars they are blocking. Several people intercept the ones who have just landed and try to sell them something or lure them into one of the cabs. Next to the entrance there are chattering groups of people who are in no hurry. Touching, but also funny farewell and reunion scenes play out before my eyes. I discover a pair of twins in tears, being pulled to the front door by their stressed mother, so as not to miss the booked flight. One of the two boys loses his stuffed animal and cries even louder without the mother looking back. A horde of Asian tourists walks through the frame, eagerly photographing every square millimeter. A crowded bus hums past me, leaving a trail of fumes ...

Well, there is not much to see here, after all, airport grounds are never particularly exciting, so I quickly jump into the next cab and explore other parts of the metropolis on the way.

Hard to believe, but I get to sit in the front! I don't know that from New York. It's strictly forbidden there, but here ... First plus point for Berlin.

I curiously observe the passing city while the driver guides us through the heavy traffic near the airport. Everything is clearly structured and only discreetly signposted, I notice, and those passing by my window seem to be following a well-thought-out plan. In contrast to the hectic masses of New York, who behave as if in a war and run wildly, order prevails here. Everyone seems to have a task and is following his or her path.

However, I'm not only amazed by the behavior of the Berliners and the sparse billboards that literally jump out at you in New York, but especially by the numerous vacant lots that crisscross the city. Where do they get all that space? If New York were so wasteful with its land, the Big Apple would probably be quite sparsely populated and today would be just an insignificant dot on the map that hardly anyone knows about, let alone visits.

I like Berlin right away and already feel at home. To my surprise, everything goes better than expected. No plane crash, no lost luggage, no entry ban. But a touch of tension mixes with the joy, because I am here all alone. I sincerely hope that I will settle in well, because I know no one here. Absolutely no one. However, I have a job and I assume that some of my work colleagues could become something like friends. I sincerely hope that I will continue to like this city and that I did not fall victim to the deceptive first impression.

»How was the flight?« the good-humored cab driver asks me after he has finally stopped chatting on the radio with his colleague. Judging by his accent, he's a native Berliner; from his looks, I'd have guessed his roots were more in southern Europe.

»Ok«, I answer scarcely, because I don't want to tell of my panic attacks and have to get accustomed to the German language first. I haven't spoken German for a long time and it still sounds strangely foreign, even though I was already practicing on the plane. More than the prayer, however, did not come out.

»Where are you from?«

»New York.«

»Ah, great city. I often pick up people coming from New York.«

»Really?«, I ask half-heartedly. He's a cab driver, probably posted at the airport for years. Needless to say, he's picked up plenty of New Yorkers in the process.

»Yeah, I get a lot of customers from New York. All the time.«

We leave the freeway, turn into a busy street and accelerate a bit until a red light forces us to stop.

While the cab driver answers a colleague over the radio, my eyes are drawn again to what presents itself to me behind the windshield and that is almost reminiscent of slow motion. I can't help smiling as I watch a native stroll calmly across the intersection. It's hard to believe he's walking. Yes, I mean *walking*, because that's not necessarily the case in New York. We practically run as if we were taking part in a daily proclaimed marathon or as if there was something for free somewhere and one is trying to overtake the other incessantly. What surprises me, however, is that there are hardly any blacks or Hispanics running around here, but I refrain from asking a question on that matter when I think of my seat neighbor on the plane. Berlin offers the chance to start with a clean slate. No one here knows about my prejudices, and it should better stay that way.

»Have had many Yanks here in the car. They all say the weather in New York arrives here two weeks later,« the cab driver continues our conversation after his colleague has said goodbye and the light turns green again.

»Oh yeah?« I've never heard of that before.

»Yep. Many people have already told me that.«

»Then I'm curious if it rains in two weeks,« I ponder and look up at the sky, where, however, not a single cloud is to be discovered, for it is a brilliantly beautiful day with which Berlin greets me.

»Has it rained in New York?«, inquires the driver superfluously and throws me a quick sideways glance.

I just nod.

As we pass a bridge, my eyes wander toward the water. A pretty lake fills a large part of my field of vision. The glittering blue seems tempting, but disappears after a few moments behind an avenue of trees. For a while I hang on to my thoughts and brace myself for the hours ahead, but again and again I forget what's in store for me and let myself be distracted by what's happening behind the windshield.

After a while, the driver turns into a relatively sparsely populated neighborhood that is probably on the outskirts of Berlin, but given the strange development, we might as well be in the center. Honestly, I've already lost my orientation at the airport, but imagine on a mental map that we're somewhere in the south of the city.

»First time in Berlin?«

»Yes,« I confess and look around me again, continuing to explore the city and its inhabitants.

»Berlin is a great city, girl. I'm sure you'll love it.«

Girl?! How old does he think I am?

I'm about to flare up and reprimand the driver when I change my mind. »I'm sure I will,« I say, thinking to myself: being regarded younger is not a bad thing for a woman, is it?

Moments later, I stand in front of my new workplace. Several box-like buildings are spread across the site, with bare patches and remnants of weeds defying the winter in between. Since it's not my first film set, I'm not at all surprised or disappointed by the sight. The buildings serve a purpose that isn't about grabbing a prize for the most beautiful structure. There's nothing too special around it either, so I don't linger long with a tour.

Determined, I approach the gatehouse and introduce myself.

A stocky middle-aged man bends over the counter, studies my ID and waves me through without any problems. When I ask for the right set, he points in a direction that I take as hesitantly as if it were my first day of school. Occasionally, people pass me, but no one seems to know me or be responsible for me. Slowly I approach the large hall, still hoping that someone will come and take me by the hand. I may not be a child anymore, but sometimes, even as adults, we wish for a companion to stand by our side.

Unfortunately, there is nothing of that far and wide.

I tighten my shoulders and calm myself down with the thought that I have just survived a terrible flight. How bad can a new job be?

Sometimes you shouldn't push your luck.

As I step through the double doors, I find myself on a film set that might as well have been the ring of a circus. Dozens of people walk frantically past me – some oddly dressed or painted, others with questionable paraphernalia and even more questionable phrases on their lips. A lion would hardly have surprised me more than the motley bunch.

Am I in the right place?

I take a step back and look to the right. A sign with the series title hangs on the door, confirming that I haven't landed in a film version of *Pippi Longstocking* or *Dr. Dolittle*. But what do the disguises mean?

The first doubts arise in me. I should have signed the contract with Atlanta Studios after all. Who knows what this is going to be ...

Lost, I stand at the entrance and wonder if I've overlooked something in the contract. Several technicians push past me and I move aside so as not to get in anyone's way, but I stay near the door, as if a fire could break out or a lion could march in at any time and I would have to flee headlong outside. My eyes roam helplessly over the set. My arrival has not yet been noticed. Of course, I didn't expect a welcome sign, but I did expect someone to greet me.

A little disappointed, I go in search of Linda, who is supposed to introduce me here. What I know of her is actually nothing – not even her last name – but I trust in my luck that there is only one Linda on the set, and ask my way.

In fact, there is only one Linda in the building, but she seemed to be hiding well. When I finally found her – which I only managed to do after I'd already asked almost everyone here and only ever heard a »I was talking to her two minutes ago« – I run after her like a lapdog, while she shows me everything in quick pass-through. At first, I'm still dragging my suitcase with me, but at some point Linda notices the ballast and finally points out a room where I can put my luggage before she continues to lead me through the studio, showering me with information. Along the way, she tosses me a stack of papers – including a printout of the script – and preaches a few general introductions.

Four instructions later, the tour is over and Linda pushes me into the make-up room, where the traces of the flight are to be concealed. While I'm being plucked and painted – I fervently hope that I won't turn into a harlequin – I flip through the script again, which was sent to me a week ago, and look for the passages that would explain the somewhat too colorfully painted actors.

As far as I know, I'm playing in one of these typical series that are about love, friendship, jealousy, intrigue and all those same old movie themes. Compared to other film creations, this telenovela doesn't use the clichéd set-up I'm familiar with from the American movie business. Instead, the scriptwriters have tried to create diverse characters with multifaceted intentions, which seem to be taken from real life. In my opinion, the German series come a good deal closer to the real world, because they are not just about pointing out mistakes that are settled by insight. They don't just scratch the surface, but go deeper by also depicting flaws that the main characters don't shed. So instead of always heading for a moral happy ending, real life is shown – and that has little to do with the fairy-tale ideas in our heads.

Several times I skim the text, but I hardly manage to concentrate on it. Again and again, my eyes wander to the other performers sitting next to me. I wonder if they have already realized who I am. Probably not. I'm sure new people arrive here every day and no one cares, even if I'm playing one of the main roles.

Hopefully there are some nice colleagues among them, I pray silently, while I look around me curiously once more before I have to close my eyes because my eye shadow is being drawn. Was it right to accept this offer? Maybe I don't fit in here. Or my German is not good enough. Or no one is interested in me – so far no one has noticed me.

Nonsense, they're just busy, says the sensible part of me that doesn't let itself get rattled. Don't make such a fuss. Nobody is marginalizing you. This isn't the Bronx.

I hope it isn't.

I console myself telling my hysterical mind that I'm just too impatient and everything will be fine and I'll soon be part of the community, but the uneasy feeling doesn't go away and soon I'm torturing myself with more horror scenarios. Maybe I'm too different, or maybe everyone thinks I'm a typical American: loud and superficial, uneducated and self-important, and that I only eat fast food ...

»Done,« announces the makeup artist.

Slowly, I open my eyes and look at the face in the mirror while muttering an absent »Thank you.« You can barely see my panic attacks and the strain of the journey – and to my relief, I don't look like a clown either. And yet, for a moment, there is nothing but fear in the eyes of the face that returns my gaze.

»Linda is already waiting,« says the make-up artist when I make no move to get up.

Quickly I rise and leave the room.

Linda awaits me and leads me to the director, who greets me briefly, explains in a few words what he expects from me in half an hour, and then hurries away. Grateful not to have been asked

about the flight, but disappointed about the lack of interest – secretly I had expected a small parade after all – I follow Linda, who stops every two meters to talk to someone, with questions about the upcoming shoot alternating with private trivia.

»Wait for me over there,« she orders, points curtly in one direction and disappears behind a door.

Alone again, I'm left behind, already a bit miffed at being treated like nothing more than a chore.

Moments later, I'm leaning against a counter that's one of the props. Linda is standing at my side, talking to me and a thousand other people in turn. Of course, she has brought more paperwork with her and thrusts a mountain of sheets into my hand before referring me to some assistants and disappearing again. Three people jump around me and bombard me with questions, each showing something different to me on the papers. As so often, I regret my careless wishes. There I was wanting more attention, now I have it. Stupidly, a little too much of it.

Linda's assistants chatter on and it's hard for me to listen to them because I'm pretty tired from the flight and all the hustle and bustle is a bit overwhelming. My head is spinning with all the instructions, questions, explanations and comments. Maybe I should have arrived a day earlier, it occurs to me, but in my panic the flight had to be postponed until the very last moment...

In all the confusion, Linda comes rushing back and throws a question at me. I want to turn to her and answer, but I never carry out my intention. In the middle of the movement I stop, while the unspoken words hang on my lips like lazy drops of water. About seven steps away from me stands an actor who looked up from his script at that very moment my eyes wandered through the studio. My heart takes a leap – before it leaves me. It just goes. Without saying goodbye, it disappears.

While Linda repeats her question and the others are still deluging me with directives or explanations, I look at the dark-blond tall man with the bright green eyes and the questioning look. A look like the one James Dean used to show on movie posters. A look that has captured my entire attention. Unable to react to what is happening around me, I stand there. Dozens pass us. Actors wave their scripts, workmen run cables past us, but for me the world stands still. I don't hear the voices or the music selection that one of the sound technicians is testing to check the speakers because there was a glitch. It's as if the world has stopped turning.

Linda is still chattering away, but I make no effort to answer her. Again and again she asks me the same questions, until she looks at me confused for a moment and finally follows my gaze. And suddenly it is as if the clock stopped ticking.

One by one, everyone around us stops and stares at us as if we were two Martians lost on a movie set. Somewhere in my head a voice murmurs that I must take my eyes off the stranger, but the command does not reach my sense organ. Spellbound, I stare at him as if I've never seen a man in my life. I know I must dive out of my torpor, but instead of turning to Linda, I watch myself start to move.

Panic rises in me to a degree that completely dwarfs my fear of flying. I feel like I'm locked inside my own head. What am I doing?! Turn around! Go away! Stop staring at him!

It does not help. My feet no longer obey me.

Absentmindedly, I push the papers into Linda's hand, while the unknown man's script falls to the floor and the loose pages spread across the room like autumn leaves. Slowly, I put one foot in front of the other and head toward the stranger, who in turn approaches me. Everything around us freezes into a petrified backdrop. From one moment to the next, the entire set looks like a surprised freeze frame. Confused, they watch us, and questions are still pelting us.

I don't hear a single one of them.

When only one step separates us, we stop and for a motionless moment we just look at each other. Astonishment is in our eyes and a thousand questions. I don't know what I'm doing here or why I feel such a strong urge to know who he is. Even less do I understand why I want to be close to him even though we don't know each other, or why I want to touch him even when it's not appropriate. And least of all, I understand why he looks at me just as entranced, captivated by my eyes, which are supposed to say, »Who are you? Go away!« Once again I try to turn around, but I don't succeed. I lose myself in his gaze, which inhibits any intention to escape. But above all, I lose my mind. All rational thinking is gone.

In the next moment, the situation gets completely out of control. With eyes wide open, my trapped self watches as we overcome the last few inches. With each heartbeat, the distance between us narrows, but I don't manage to back away. Everything inside me screams, begging me to turn away before the situation reaches an unsurpassable level of embarrassment and it's too late to escape it all.

I don't make it. Powerless, I surrender to fate.

When my lips touch his, it feels as if a bullet has pierced my body. Something for which I can find no words flows through me with a force like the shock wave of a bomb. It is a feeling that I had not known until then, that I would never have thought possible. It overcomes me so surprisingly that my breath is taken away for a moment. It is as if I had waited a lifetime for this kiss. As if I had lived only for this. For this one moment, when our lips drift into each other and our hearts touch. I cannot grasp a single clear thought. With every breath the world around us fades more. Longingly, his unashamedly tender lips tempt me and I can't resist. I am drawn into another world, fall into a dream that has always accompanied me without my knowing it, and I don't want to stop kissing him. Nothing matters anymore, everything around us disappears.

When our lips part tentatively after a few moments, with decades clinging to them, and I look up into his eyes, which look at me with this sheer endless surprise and this deep longing, suddenly the whole environment crashes down on me like a towering wave. Startled, I take a step back, push the stranger away and struggle for breath. For a second I look at him, half confused, half upset, as if he had attacked me and forced me to kiss him. Then I turn on my heel and storm out of the studio.

I run as fast as I can while shaking all over, gasping for breath and wondering what just happened. What was that? What have I done? Never in my life have I felt such things and let myself go like this. Never have I lost control so completely.

Linda finds me outside behind the studio, leaning against the wall, planning my suicide. If only the damn plane had crashed!

»Here you are,« she comes rushing up.

Guiltily, I look at her. My cheeks are still glowing with shame and I'm sure the whole studio is laughing their heads off at me.

»You have to come. We're shooting now.«

Expectantly, Linda looks at me and I don't dare contradict her. So I nod, rise awkwardly and follow her. She doesn't mention a word about what happened, for which I am infinitely grateful. We hurry down the first aisle as the producer turns the corner, eyeing us intently.

»Well?« he says.

I gulp and can hardly look at him. How embarrassing! I've never done anything like that in my entire life and I don't know anyone who would. You can't even find something that stupid on YouTube! What has gotten into me? Didn't I want to play the reserved observer?

Restraint? Nothing of that sort.

I would love to take my things – fortunately I don't have to pack them – and flee back to New York. If it weren't for the plane thing... Of course, I could also look for another European country, but that would entail work-related hurdles and raise disturbed questions from my film agent. The main problem is that I only speak English and German, because the few foggy bits of Spanish from my hated school days are not worth mentioning. With that, thanks to my Spanish teacher, I can have political debates and lead a successful military intervention – he's been watching Good Morning Vietnam a little too often – but I can't even order a damn cup of coffee!

»I'm sorry,« I whisper.

»Are you ready?« he simply asks, not alluding to the incident.

I confirm and he disappears into one of the offices. Together with Linda, I hurry on to get back to the set.

»Love affairs are not allowed,« I suddenly hear Linda. »Eric, our director, whom you've already met, doesn't like it, at least,« she adds a moment later, after it must have dawned on her that legally she can't forbid such things. »Too many problems, you see? If couples break up, it's always difficult with filming. Don't forget that.«

I blush and nod as I mentally tear up the thank-you card to Linda. »I-I'm sorry. I don't know how – what was wrong with me. It won't happen again ...,« I stammer in an attempt at damage control.

We arrive back on set and Linda shows me the location for the first scene.

»We're going to do the first take now, ok?« she informs me with a look as if she thought I was completely insane.

Great. Here you are not seen as the prejudiced Nazi, but now you are the lusty American woman who snogs strangers. Bravo. Truly dazzling performance.

»Of course,« I confirm a little more composedly, blanking out the last few minutes and telling myself: Be professional. Focus on the shot. It has to work now. After all, the first impression wasn't such a burner. I take a deep breath, shake off the tension and enter the recording area.

»Hi, new here?«, a charming Italian, who seems to be part of the cast, greets me. His face shows a joyful smile, as if we were in a bar on the harbor in Naples.

Faintly, I smile back.

»Welcome to Berlin. I'm Nevio.«

»Hey,« is all I manage to say. I guess my self-confidence hasn't quite returned yet.

»Let me know if you need anything and I can help – or if you want to kiss someone,« he adds with a wink before positioning himself for the shot at Eric's call.

My usually pale face takes on all shades of red, and I wish I could crawl between the script pages to wait there undetected until everyone is gone.

Linda rushes up and pushes me into position so that we can finally shoot the first scene – which I immediately flub.

Why?

I turn around and look at my acting colleague and off went the lines. Well, not quite. Actually, my colleague, who of course happens to be the stranger from before should start, but he just looks at me and so we stand in the middle of the studio and stare at each other as if time had stopped again, until the director intervenes.

»Cut! What's going on today? Did you forget your lines or what?« he shouts impatiently, jumping up and down with the script in front of Linda. A few placating words later, he drops back into his chair. »Let's do it again.«

I compose myself, put on my poker face, and manage to remember my lines. We shoot the first scene, which fortunately isn't too long, without any more bloopers, so I manage to convince the director of my acting qualities after all, not that he starts wondering why he had me flown in from New York in the first place.

During the midday break, I don't have time to eat something, let alone get to know my colleagues or slap myself for kissing a stranger in public, because Linda covers me with countless papers and asks me a thousand questions: work certificate, visa, contract, shooting schedule, guidelines and so on. No end in sight.

After shooting is over, I'm completely exhausted and look forward to my bed. I show no interest in my work colleagues or the city behind the studio walls. I just want to escape the grinning faces and the whispering that has been rustling in my ears since the morning, but to be honest I don't even know what kind of accommodation Linda has organized for me.

»Um, Linda? Where do I actually live?« I ask cautiously, when I finally find her.

»Oh, we hadn't discussed that yet.«

No, I think. Instead, a million other things.

»There was one room left in the shared apartment, so I put you down there,« she reveals to me, waving a few notes in front of our cameraman.

In a shared apartment?!

I start to ask a question when Linda turns to me again and explains: »A few of the actors live together in an apartment, because most of them don't come from Berlin or don't need a big place where they sit around alone. You have a room there. Wait a minute – Sebastian?«

The actor she called slows down in mid-step, turns around and comes back to Linda. »Yes?« he asks, slightly stressed.

»Can you take our new actress to the shared apartment? She's getting the last available room there. And she's new and everything. You know, just show her where to go and where everything is ...«, she babbles as if I'm not standing next to her, »I gotta go.« A paper waving later, she's gone.

»Hi,« I hear Sebastian, who is trying on a friendly look, behind which it is quite clear to read: Now I get to play babysitter, too.

»Hey,« I reply and look at him waiting. My head certainly glows like one of the stop signs I saw on my drive today. I'm still so uncomfortable about my start here that I can barely look anyone in the eye. And talking about it I want even less.

»Do you live in our apartment too?« inquires Nevio, who joins us and gives me his brightest smile.

»Yes.« I just want to get out of here!

»Come on, we'll give you a ride,« Nevio says, and I follow him and Sebastian.

--- »*These Yankees ...*«---

After a twenty-minute drive, we arrive at a factory site on which a box-shaped building awaits us. All sorts of junk is piled up around it, ranging from coiled power lines to bridge parts to pipes in which I could easily stand upright. The adjacent properties show a similar picture. There isn't a soul in sight and it's already getting dark. I wonder where I have ended up here. At the handover point for an organ donation?

I peer at Sebastian, who is striding purposefully along. He seems to have made the deal. I wonder what my kidneys are worth.

»It's up ahead,« Nevio says, smiling his famous smile. He must be the beneficiary of my kidney donation.

Where in heaven's name are we?

All I can see is a bare building and a concrete square in front of it, where a good twenty cars could be parked, but at the moment not a single one is to be seen. Sebastian has parked around the corner in a garage. At first, I thought it was to keep his expensive car safe, but by now I rather think he doesn't want a witness to see the license plate and link him to my kidnapping.

My two companions cross the square and head for the strange building, which looks anything but inviting. I silently curse Linda and then myself for not taking the apartment hunt into my own hands. That's what I get for it.

»It's great here, isn't it?« remarks Nevio.

I wonder what he's talking about. Now as before, I can't detect anything that would have explained his euphoria.

»There's a train station just around the corner down the street,« explains Sebastian, who has slowed his steps a bit but seems equally oblivious to the fact that my gaze is screaming »Help!« and I'm already starting to think about how far I'll get with my huge suitcase, should they actually be after one of my organs. »The connections are quite good,« he adds.

It dawns on me that – should I survive the evening – this is a call to take the train in the morning instead of abusing him as a chauffeur. My mood sinks a bit further. I'm tired to death and the suitcase is getting more and more bulky. On top of that, I think I see the Grim Reaper again, harassing me like a greedy fan.

After a little eternity we have crossed the square and Sebastian pulls a key out of his pocket.

Quite a gentleman, Nevio offers to help me with the suitcase, but when I say, »That's not necessary,« he shrugs and races up the stairs. Sheepish, I look after him. Actually, I expected him to reply, »I insist. You're welcome.«

Silently cursing myself, I heave the suitcase up the steep stairs and through a door behind which Sebastian and Nevio have already disappeared. I brace myself for a couple of shady characters and a man in a blood-stained doctor's coat with some unsterile equipment in his hand. To my surprise, I enter a completely normal apartment with no operating table.

Although, it is not quite so normal after all.