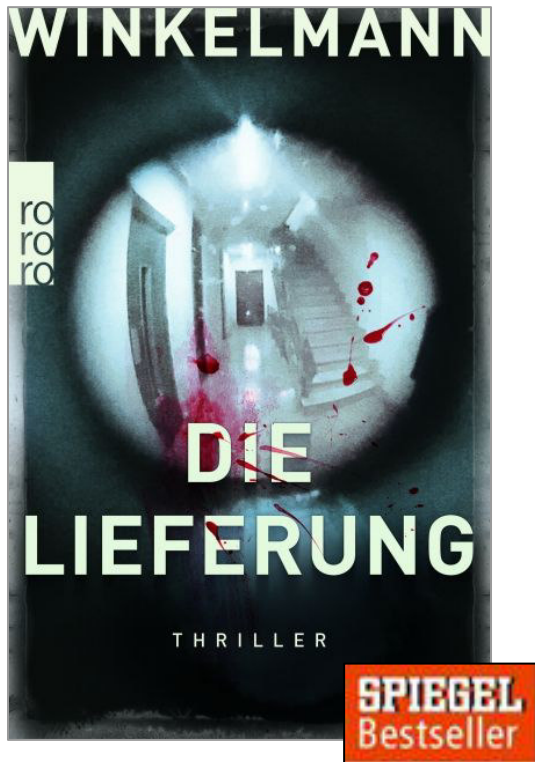


Andreas Winkelmann

THE DELIVERY



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rororo
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416 pages

The front door of the flat is unlocked. On the living room table lies a pizza, recently delivered but untouched. The woman who ordered it has disappeared without a trace. Police Commissioner Jens Kerner and his colleague Rebecca Oswald soon discover that this shocking case is not unique: they are hunting a criminal as treacherous as any they've ever encountered.

The killer has evidently been hunting his victims for years. All the victims were home alone, all had ordered a takeaway. Their food order was to be their last sign of life...

- *The Delivery* sold more than 190,000 copies and made number 1 on the SPIEGEL bestseller list!
- Rights have been sold to Turkey (Pegasus).
- More than 210,000 copies were sold of the SPIEGEL bestseller *The Girls' House*!
- Winkelmann's thrillers have been translated into 8 languages.
- "Andreas Winkelmann pushes the narrative forward with a vehemence only seen in English-language thrillers."
- *Die Welt*

Andreas Winkelmann was born in 1968; he discovered his interest in thrilling stories when he was still young. *Blinder Instinkt* and *Bleicher Tod* have become bestsellers. He lives with his family in a lonely house at the edge of a forest near Bremen.

Backlist:



For weeks now, Viola has felt like she's being followed. It's like a shadow has attached itself to her, but every time she turns around, it's gone. That's why Viola now prefers to stay home in the evening. Thank goodness for Netflix and delivery service!

However, the pizza he delivers will never be eaten ...

A pale, distraught and completely malnourished woman was picked up in the Harburg Hills. Before Hamburg-based police inspector Jens Kerner gets the chance to interrogate her, she dies. Together with his colleague Rebecca, he tracks down a perpetrator whose deceitfulness exceeds all expectations. When the two of them realise who they're dealing with, it's almost too late ...

Andreas Winkelmann, born in 1968 in Lower Saxony, is married and has a daughter. He lives in a secluded house at the edge of a forest near Bremen with his family. When he isn't submerged in human nature's unfathomable depths, he crosses the Alps on foot and scales their highest peaks, or he fishes and hunts in the Canadian wilderness with bow and arrow.

"Andreas Winkelmann moves the plot forward with a consistency that is otherwise only seen in Anglo-saxon thrillers." Die Welt

"The thriller takes off so fast that you can hardly put the book down." Hannoversche Allgemeine on «The Girls' House»

"Exciting, but not for the faint of heart." Ruhr Nachrichten on «The Girls' House»

Andreas Winkelmann

THE DELIVERY

Thriller

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PROLOGUE

Her neighbour's door was left ajar, unlocked, and when she pushed it open, she felt it immediately. Something terrible had happened here.

She heard the flies buzzing and smelled the stench. The warmth of the last few days had settled in the apartment, the air seemed like a thick mass that she could impossibly breathe in.

Don't go in, a voice inside her warned.

"Beatrix?" she asked quietly.

In response, the buzzing increased. Somewhere in the apartment, a swarm of blowflies had risen.

Some of them found their way into the hallway. Drunk on whatever had been their most recent meal, they whirled past her into the hall, humming loudly. She dodged them. She definitely didn't want one to touch her skin.

A particularly fat, black specimen did a few laps right in front of her nose and then flew back into the apartment, as if challenging her to follow.

Come with me, I'll show you something, you'll be thrilled.

She entered. She had come here to check on her neighbour Beatrix, whom she hadn't seen in the hallway for ages, and she wouldn't back down just because the flat stank so horribly. There were many possible reasons for that, not just the one.

The fly whirled through the hallway, bumping into the walls, the lamps, the mirror. After several attempts, it found its way into the living room, and she followed it in.

She put her hand over her mouth and nose and took shallow breaths. The thick air, the disgusting stench - she felt dizzy. Her wide-eyed gaze fell on the low living room table with its glass top that stood next to the leather couch.

On it lay a white pizza box.

The lid was closed, except for a small gap. And out of this gap, they crawled in and out, the fat flies. Industriously, insistently, greedily, like bees in a beehive.

She called once more for her neighbour, but again got no answer, and then, although every fibre of her being was warning her not to, she went towards the pizza box. It was white, with the word "pizza" written on the lid in big, red letters, over which a pizza baker, serving a steaming pizza, was bent.

What were those stains next to him?

They shouldn't be there.

Was that blood? Or just fly droppings?

She took the knife that lay on the table, carefully slid the blade under the lid's edge and lifted it swiftly.

A black cloud rose, and she screamed. [...]

CHAPTER 1

4

Some time ago

Her agonised retching annoyed him, and he was glad that it stopped when the car door slammed shut. The sound of the wind in the spruce trees, on the other hand, sounded wonderful. If he stood still long enough, it changed, and sometimes he managed to filter out voices that most people couldn't hear. He had come here because of the woods. They gave him everything he couldn't find in the city. Without the woods, he would have fallen apart long ago. Like this, he could often flee to his real home, and he was grateful that everyone else seemed to have forgotten to use this place to heal themselves. It meant that he had it all to himself.

He left the car at the beginning of the path and walked the last hundred metres. He wanted to take in the atmosphere slowly, and that couldn't be done in a car - especially if someone in the trunk kept retching and whining relentlessly.

He consciously appreciated every step and soaked in all the sensations. The flexing of the forest floor beneath his feet, the cool forest air, the resinous smell of the spruce trunks and the lively scent of the mushrooms pushing through the moss. Their caps shone in the moonlight like little cathedrals.

The dark buildings appeared in front of him only at the very last moment.

He stopped and smiled dreamily.

He would never have thought that he would ever be capable to smile at this sight. Back then, only fear, panic and thoughts of escape had been on his mind. And anger, of course, that never-ending anger. But he had closed that chapter. Returning this place to its true self helped to gradually erase the purpose people had used it for all those years.

He looked forward to the exciting time ahead of him, but he was a structured person, so he didn't embrace this joy recklessly. Passion and desire had been the downfall of many. Those who didn't understand that both needed to be kept in check shouldn't compete in the game of life and death. He circled the buildings once and checked them carefully. Although there were plenty of trip hazards, he didn't need any light. He knew the places where construction waste still lay, where holes and trenches were covered with planks, or where the ground was so steep that one could easily slide down the entire slope.

After the walk, he felt reassured. All the windows and doors were intact. In the past two years, the vandalism had ceased, but the idiots might return anytime - another reason to make sure that he was alone.

He stomped back uphill to the car, and his heart beat faster. Somewhere, an owl called. Something big crawled through the undergrowth, a marten perhaps, or a raccoon. Representatives of both species lived in his attic as guests, and there were many nights when he heard them in the entire house.

Once he reached the car, he knocked against its metal side.

Immediately, something stirred inside, and he imagined her flinching and crawling away from the side against which he had knocked.

"Your new life starts here," he said loudly enough for her to hear inside.

Then he got in, started the engine and drove down to the house. The headlights cut through the forest like tunnels of light, eventually capturing the impressive wall of brown-painted spruce boards with its embedded white windows. The windowpanes reflected the light. For a second, it looked like someone was blinding him from inside with a flashlight.

He drove past the right side of the main building and down the ramp that led to the former delivery entrance. At the rear, the basement, which wasn't visible from the front because it was built into the slope, stuck out of the earth. A two-winged, white-painted gate served as the entrance. It was just high enough for the delivery van to enter. He got out, opened the heavy padlock and parked the truck backwards. Then he closed the gates, locked them from the inside and turned on the lights. Since it was a functional room that didn't need to be beautiful, it was lit by practical LED tubes that emitted a cold, hard light.

He walked to the car's sliding side door and breathed in and out deeply until he had completely arrived in the here and now. Then he opened the door.

"We're there!"

She was doubled up in the back corner of the car's loading space. He had last transported cement bags and one of them had torn when he unloaded it, so she was covered in the grey, corrosive dust. Also a kind of makeup, he thought. Just not the kind which she was so fond of. She couldn't scream, let alone defend herself; she had a gag in her mouth and shackles on her wrists and ankles.

He looked at her.

The beauty. She made all the boys' heads turn.

"Come to me, darling. From now on, everything will be all right. I promise."

Of course she didn't come to him, instead pressing herself against the metal side of the car. Had he hoped for another reaction? A little bit, yes, but he knew he had to be patient with her. Good things only happen to those who are patient, he had once read that somewhere in the social media, where people were constantly posting quotes that they didn't follow themselves.

"Do I really have to come get you?"

He knew that she wasn't stupid and that she understood the warning, and he was right. Finally, she moved. Hesitantly and clumsily, she crawled to him across the dusty loading floor. He took his time and waited until she had reduced the distance to less than half a metre. She stared at him fearfully with her big, stunning eyes. He could tell that she had cried during the ride.

He held out his hand and she jerked back.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore. Let me free you from your shackles."

She let him, so he turned her over and loosened the knot of the gag at her neck. As soon as the rough cloth had left her mouth, she inhaled greedily, as if she had been about to suffocate. She straightened her back and stretched her chin towards the roof of the car. She seemed to have suffered a lot from her shackles. Of the physical as well as of the psychic kind.

He released the rope from her wrists and ankles and took a step back.

Hard to tell how she would react at the first contact. Did she still have enough strength in her to defend herself? Was there still enough of the old arrogance left in her?

She remained crouched in the car and managed to look at him.

"Why?"

Just one word, mumbled through tears. A word that dampened his joyful anticipation and his expectations. She hadn't understood a thing.

He held out his hand once more.

Do not give up on her, he told himself. That would make you like everyone else.

"You will come to understand it eventually," he said graciously, suppressing his anger.

Nothing was ever as simple as one imagined or wished it to be, and the really sweet fruits grew right at the top of the crown, accessible only to the brave, the fearless.

"Come on, let's go inside."

"I want to go home."

"But you are home. As of today, you don't have another home anymore."

Suddenly, she snapped. Like a dog. Not so hard that she would have cut through his bones, but firmly enough for the flesh on the tips of his index and middle finger. She didn't rip off those tips only because he didn't pull his hand back, but gave in. The pain was insane, and he screamed out loudly, at the same time hitting her in the stomach with his fist as hard as he could.

Her jaw opened, but instead of giving up, she jumped forward, out of the car, knocking him off his feet. In doing so, she screamed like a fury and lashed out. She hit him on the head, neck and torso, and he was so surprised by the attack and by the rage that released almost superhuman powers in her, that he crouched and protected himself with his arms.

Finally, she let go of him.

While he lay on the floor pulling himself together with difficulty, he heard her rumbling about in the underground garage. She shook the gate, which he had closed with a latch, but not with a key.

"No ... wait!" he shouted.

But she didn't wait. He heard the latch snap back, and that noise helped him get back on his feet. If she escaped, he would not find her out there in the dark woods. Then he'd have to give up all of this. That just shouldn't happen!

He saw her stumble out into the darkness and stagger to the left. There, she collided with a tree, fell down, picked herself up and ran on. It wouldn't cost him much effort to catch up with her, unless ...

As soon as the thought came to him, it turned into reality. She was too fast, didn't see the slope, lost control and tumbled down. She rolled and rolled, hitting the tree stumps that had remained after the sick spruces had been cut down. After the second violent crash, he heard no more cries. Just a few seconds later, the noises died away completely.

His whole body trembled with the fear that she might have broken her neck. Then all the work of the last weeks would have been in vain.

Carefully, he climbed after her.

She lay bent against a birch tree that had stopped her fall. Her once beautiful, long hair stuck wildly around her head, with needles and dirt in it. And blood.

He went on his knees down the slope beside her, and carefully turned her over. Her face was scarred and bloody, her eyes closed, but at her neck, he clearly felt a pulse.

She was alive!

Maybe she had broken something, he couldn't tell right now, and it wasn't that important anyway. How would he manage to get her unconscious body back up the slope, though? He wasn't strong enough for that.

He didn't have to think long before the solution popped into his head. Bent far forward, on all fours, he crawled up the slope, opened the garage doors and drove the car backwards to the edge of the slope. He then took a strong synthetic rope from the tool-storage room, fastened one end with a loop to the car hitch and crawled down to her with the other end.

She was still unconscious. Hopefully just unconscious! If she had hit her head so hard that she had fallen into a coma, she was worthless to him. After all, she should be able to enjoy every second of the coming years.

He tied the rope around her ankles and checked her pulse again. It was steady and strong.

As he climbed up, he inspected the slope every step of the way, removing sharp branches and stones that stuck out of the ground. The rescue operation would undoubtedly still hurt, but for these wounds she could blame only herself. No one had forced her to run away.

Once he had reached the top of the slope, he sat down in the car, shifted into first gear, handled the clutch and accelerator with great sensitivity, and drove the six, seven metres back into the garage. He kept his eyes on the side mirror the whole time, but couldn't tell whether the body had already reached the top because of the darkness.

When he couldn't drive any further, he switched off the engine, got out and walked over to the slope. Her legs lay on flat ground, her upper body hung down the slope. A grubby bundle, more like dirt than like a human being. [...]

8

Some time ago

Her body was covered with wounds, there was pain everywhere, especially in and on her head, which threatened to burst as soon as she moved it. She didn't know what had happened, could remember only how an abyss had opened in front of her, into which she had plunged, and then ... blackness. "Will you behave yourself now?"

He was still there, very close by, and now he tore the tight blindfold off her head. The coarse cloth had pressed painfully on her eyeballs, so she couldn't see again right away. Blinking, she tried to recognise something, but there was only light and shadow and a movement in between. She wasn't sure whether this was really just caused by the sudden light or by her pounding, throbbing skull that felt as if she had suffered a terrible blow.

She was tied to a chair, that much was certain. The air in the room was warm, stale and smelled of old dust. The proximity of her captor paralysed her thinking, filled her with an unspeakable fear, and she understood that this wasn't a just a nightmare that would eventually dissolve into a comforting shiver, but reality, cruel and incomprehensible.

She tried to focus on him. A difficult task when you could barely hold on to a clear thought. He also seemed to be constantly moving back and forth in the room, sometimes turning up here, then there, but never really close to her.

Before she could react to his question, he appeared in front of the strong light source that dazzled her. Judging by the heat, it had to be a powerful spotlight.

"I ... I can't see anything ..."

"Well, it's always been that way, hasn't it? From now on, I'll open your eyes."

She heard his words, but didn't understand their meaning and really didn't want to find out either. She didn't care what the man said. Sluggish though her thoughts were, they circled faster and faster around that one terrifying question:

What will he do to me?

"What colour are my eyes?"

The question came from the right, far away enough so that she at least didn't have to feel his breath.

"I ... I told you I can't see anything!"

"You saw me all the time before today. I was near you so often, yet you can't even remember my eye colour? That's really very disappointing."

As he spoke, he changed his position in the room so that his voice seemed to come from different directions.

She turned her head back and forth, provoking dizziness and nausea.

"Describe my hair," he demanded.

Somewhere behind her.

"Describe my build."

From the left.

"How tall am I?"

Again, he pushed himself in front of the light source, and all she saw was an outline, big and black. Legs, arms, the head, but no details. She tried even harder, focused her gaze, but her eyes and her brain didn't cooperate.

"Please ... just let me go," she begged and burst into tears.

"You want to go?"

He laughed dryly and joylessly.

"Oh yes, you will go. For a long time, you'll be doing nothing else anymore. But first ..."

He paused and stepped to the right, out of the light. Now that she was no longer blinded, she saw better and instantly wished that she didn't.

He held a large pair of scissors in his hand. The blades created sharp patterns of reflected light in the room.

"... we have to take care of this."

"I want to go home ... please," she voiced her fear as she burst into tears again.

The scissors were long and pointed and shone like new, and her stomach lurched at the sight, because she suspected that he would thrust them into her body.

"If you keep nice and still, it won't even hurt. I promise."

He was behind her again already, and through her own howling, she heard the the scissors' blades close with a ripping noise. Anticipating great pain and the penetration of cold steel into her back, she only slowly realised that he wasn't stabbing her, but cutting her hair.

"No ... don't!"

Instinctively, she shook her head.

His hand scraped over her forehead into her long hair and painfully tore her head back.

"Hold still," he hissed. "Or I swear ..."

He held the scissors in her field of vision.

"Snip, snip, ears clipped."

She continued crying, but held still as the strands fell to the ground around her. Her beautiful hair, long and smooth and silky, landed in the dust, and she died a thousand deaths then, as if he killed a part of her with every hair he cut off. As soon as he touched her increasingly bald head with the cold blade, she flinched.

Hold still, hold still, she told herself. He'll let you live if you just hold still.

The horror only lasted a few minutes.

Through her wet eyes, she blurrily saw him stepping into the light again, still nothing more than a shadow without contours or details.

"You've spent far too long wasting way too much time on your hair. Here, you won't need it anymore."

Suddenly, a soft humming. She recognised the sound immediately. An electric shaver!

He stepped behind her and gently put his fingers to her head.

"Hold still just a little bit longer, then we're done."

The razor worked its way through the rest of the hair and separated it from the skull. Slowly, with concentration, he shaved her until she was completely bald, turning her head from one side to the other or bending it forward. His touches were tender, almost loving, and when she flinched, he consoled her like one would console a little child.

"We'll be done soon," he kept saying.

At some point, he really was finished and her hair covered the floor in a circle around her. Her head felt strangely light and much too cold.

"So? You probably can't wait to see what you look like, right?"

He dashed through the light and stepped in front of her moments later, holding a hand mirror. She had no choice but to look at herself.

Her reflection shocked her.

The person in the mirror, that wasn't her, was it?

This couldn't be true!

That bald, thin, slightly scabby-looking skull, with bristles of her hair still sticking out here and there. And then those oversized ears and that horribly disfigured face, covered in wounds, abrasions and dirt.

She didn't want to see that and closed her eyes.

"Look what I've made of you."

She shook her head and desperately pressed her eyelids together. But that didn't help at all. Her reflection had long since etched itself into her retina.

"I want you to look."

His voice sounded unyielding, and she knew that to survive, she had to do what he said. So she opened her eyes. The mirror was still there, the grotesque face in it almost jumped at her.

"And, what do you say?

Wordlessly, she stared at herself in the mirror. The shock paralysed her.

"Well, I am quite satisfied. But one thing is still missing. That colour has to go. Come with me, darling, light of my life, I'll show you a place that makes everything equal, a place where nobody is prettier than anyone else." [...]

CHAPTER 2

2

"Can you tell me your name?" Jens Kerner asked.

"Darling ... Light of my life ...

... Darling, light of my life ..."

The pale woman stared ahead vacantly while she spoke those words. She noticed neither the walls of the Mariahilf hospital in Hamburg-Harburg, nor the colourful landscapes on them, nor the view of the small park in which the old trees stood in full foliage. Jens Kerner, however, saw it all, and in the centre of this vivid beauty lay the pale, ghostlike woman, from whom every colour had drained and who had likely lost her mind.

There was no other explanation for her behaviour.

She was still tied to the bed, because she tried to flee again and again, despite the sedatives administered to her. She braced her scrawny arms against the firm straps with which she had been pinned down, until the veins bulged so clearly beneath the pale skin that Jens feared they would rupture or cut through the parchment-like skin. At the same time, the woman kept opening her mouth wide and exposing gaps between her teeth. At the top as well as the bottom, an incisor was missing. Jens preferred not to know what it looked like deeper in her mouth. Fucking shit, that looked horrible! Pro forma, Jens had checked the hospitals' psychiatric departments right at the beginning of their service, but they weren't missing any patients. Actually, he had already suspected that much, because even in the departments for the completely crazy, the nursing staff would never have allowed anyone to be in such a bad physical condition. Better to be safe than sorry, however: he didn't want to have to blame himself later.

The doctors at the Mariahilf hospital, where the pale woman had been taken that night, agreed that she must have lived without daylight for a very long time. Her ashen skin, tooth loss and bad eyes couldn't be explained otherwise. After all, she wasn't a genetic albino, that much was certain.

The pale woman was about twenty-two to twenty-eight years old, and she was one metre seventy-eight tall. She was unusually thin, the subcutaneous fat completely depleted, and her vitamin deficiency was so severe that she had contracted scurvy, the old sailors' disease. There were no special physical features, except for a small tattoo on the hip. It showed tendrils of thorns wrapped around two letters: B.S. No more than that, however. No clues to her identity. Yet Jens needed a name, otherwise he couldn't make any progress.

Before leaving for the hospital, he had combed through the Hamburg databases in search of a missing person, but he had been unsuccessful because of his lack of information. Now, after talking to the attending doctor, he at least had the exact body height, approximate age, and this two-letter tattoo, but that still wasn't enough.

Dr Liebknecht, ward manager and senior physician at Mariahilf, had allowed Jens to interview the pale woman in his presence, but as soon as Jens had entered the hospital room with the doctor, he had realised that there would be no interview.

"Darling ... Light of my life ..."

Again and again, that one sentence that Jens had already heard last night when he had, bleeding from his mouth, fallen on the woman. Jens would bet anything that the two colleagues who had found him like this were recounting the scene at the bureau with relish.

"Darling ... Light of my life', the pale woman repeated.

Doctor Liebknecht took a deep breath and shook his head.

"We won't get any further with questions about her name, we already tried all that," he said reproachfully.

"If you have any idea what I can ask instead, go ahead!" To Jens, the doctor seemed arrogant, but he couldn't do anything about it, because here in the hospital the tall, stocky man was kind of a god.

Liebkecht looked brash, although he was probably going for a pensive expression. Not very flattering, Jens thought. Then he suddenly nodded energetically and straightened up.

"I'll try something ..." He looked directly at the deathly pale patient.

"Darling, light of my life, do you hear me?"

He spoke with a changed voice, which Jens couldn't help but find amusing.

The pale woman's gaze was still turned inwards, focused perhaps on the world in which she had spent the last few years. What if her personality had split after the traumas she had suffered? Jens had read about it, it wasn't that rare. The mind could do that to protect itself from being totally destroyed.

"Darling ... light of my life, do you hear me?", asked the doctor once more.

Unexpectedly, the woman's head jerked towards the doctor, as if she had to detect where the words had come from.

Jens could have looked in her eyes, but he didn't dare. The madness that lay in her gaze frightened him. What if it were contagious?

And then, the pale woman did something very strange.

She tilted her head back, looked up at the ceiling, which was no higher than 2.5 metres, although her gaze went far beyond that, perhaps up into the sky, which she had not seen for so long.

She was smiling now, a joyful, expectant smile, and she opened her mouth wide and stuck out her tongue, as if to receive the gifts of heaven. Her thin face, the translucent skin, the high cheekbones, the missing teeth, in this pose all of that made her look like a real-life witch.

Jens didn't want to look, but he had to, because the scene was just too surreal.

"Darling ... Light of my life, where are you?" the doctor continued. He now seemed excited, like an investigator on the right track.

She didn't answer, didn't seem to notice him or Jens. Her entire attention was focused on the ceiling, towards which she continued to stick out her tongue.

Then, suddenly, the pale woman began to click her tongue loudly. A horrifying sound that Jens had never heard before.

The hairs on his forearms stood up. [...]

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Page 130

Viola froze.

The street was narrow, the noises crept up the house walls and were amplified, so that sometimes she could even eavesdrop on conversations between people passing by. Viola heard someone approaching the house from across the street. Maybe Sabine had taken a taxi, although she didn't really have the money for that.

Viola moved closer to the window and peered through a tiny gap between the curtain and the wall, through which only a small part of the street could be seen.

There was no one there.

Or was there?

She saw a shadow sliding over the bushes.

Viola retreated and stood still in the room, hesitating. Her hands trembled and her stomach hurt. She closed her eyes to calm herself, but her mind immediately conjured up an image of a hand stretching towards the back of her head, scissors cutting a strand of hair ... Viola desperately pushed back the rising tears.

Downstairs in the hallway, the front door slammed. It was never locked, because the house's inhabitants always forgot, including Viola herself. There were six tenants in the house, three of them couples her age, who often came home late. A slamming front door thus was no reason to be afraid. Steps on the wooden stairs. Loud and hurried. No one she knew ran up the stairs at that speed.

Sabine?

Viola pushed back the urge to open the door to greet her friend. Instead, she opened the cutlery drawer in the kitchen. The knives in it were all ridiculously small. She wasn't a good cook and didn't need big meat knives. The one she used to cut her vegetables was just the length of a little finger. She took it out anyway. Better a small knife than no knife at all.

The footsteps on the stairs fell silent, and Viola thought she heard someone breathing outside her door.