

Ursula Poznanski / Arno Strobel

**FOREIGN**

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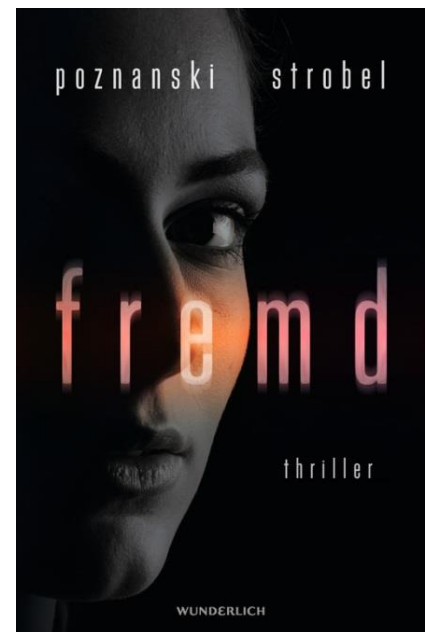
Two authors. Two perspectives. One amazing thriller.

Imagine you're at home, alone, when suddenly a man is standing in front of you who claims he's your partner. But you have no idea who he is. And there's nothing in your home that suggests that someone else lives there. He pleads with you to remember, to be reasonable. You're afraid, and you get the irresistible urge to defend yourself, with a knife. Are you going insane?

Imagine you get home and your wife doesn't recognise you. She thinks you're a burglar. No, worse, a rapist. But all you're trying to do is protect her. But she becomes aggressive, locks herself into a room, convinced she's never seen you before. She thinks you've gone mad. Have you?

The more you both try to understand your situation, the more you realise that something else is going on, enveloping the two of you. That someone is playing a monstrous game with you. A deadly game. There's only one thing left to do: you need to trust one another to survive...

A disturbing thriller that pulls the rug from under the reader's feet – written by two masters of the genre.



**Ursula Poznanski** was born in Vienna in 1968, formerly worked as a journalist writing for a medical publisher. After the tremendous success of her young adult novels *Erebos*, *Saeculum* and her 'Eleria' trilogy, *Die Verratenen*, *Die Verschworenen* and *Die Vernichteten*, her first thriller, *Five*, was a bestseller as well. Her novels *Voices* and *Blind Birds* were also published by Wunderlich. She is now a full-time writer of fiction and lives with her family in Vienna.

**Arno Strobel** was born in Saarlouis in 1962, studied IT and worked for many years at a major German bank in Luxembourg. He began writing short stories when he was nearly 40, publishing them on internet forums before setting about writing his first novel. His psychological thrillers *Der Trakt*, *Das Wesen*, *Das Skript*, *Der Sarg* and *Das Dorf* (all published by Fischer) topped the bestseller lists. He also writes for young adults (*Abgründig*, *Schlussakt*). Arno Strobel lives near Trier with his wife.

- Two bestselling authors writing a thriller together!
- Rights sold to Italy (Giunti).
- Poznanski's previous thrillers sold more than 350,000 copies.
- Rights for Poznanski's previous titles were sold to 12 countries, amongst others: France, Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands and the USA.

Ursula Poznanski / Arno Strobel

## FOREIGN

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### 1

The outside light above the front door flickers on. I only notice it by chance when I glance over to the bathroom window while drying my hair. There's light where there shouldn't be any.

Someone must have activated the motion sensor. But I'm not expecting anyone, and there's no way in hell I'm going to open the door now if it rings. I've nothing against surprise visitors, but the last thing I want is Ela standing at the door with two bottles of red wine and then launching into a two-hour monologue about how this time she really is going to leave Richard once and for all. No way. Today she'll just have to deal with her miserable relationship on her own. Maybe it's just Jehova's Witnesses.

I turn the hairdryer up so that I don't have to lie later about not having heard the door. I ignore the uneasiness that's slowly welling up inside me. Yes, I know that sometimes burglars ring the bell to make sure that there's no-one home before they break in. Someone told me that once, but then I've not been in Germany long enough to know how common that is. I speak the language but a lot of things in everyday life still seem very foreign to me.

It seems childish to feel threatened by something as harmless as a doorbell. For goodness' sake, this isn't like me.

A few seconds later, the outside light goes out.

I switch the hairdryer off, open the curtain in front of the bathroom a little bit and peer out. There's no-one there. No visitor, and no-one fiddling about with the front door or a window.

Dad would strangle me if he knew I was living alone in an unsecured house. Our family home in Melbourne has more security cameras than the Pentagon. Another reason I'm glad to have left.

It's quiet for a few minutes. The pressure inside me eases, replaced by a warm feeling of anticipation. Thankfully there's nothing now to interrupt my quiet evening on the sofa. A cup of tea, a warm blanket and a good book are all I want for the rest of the day. Except maybe someone to give me a back massage. I've no idea what's causing that niggling pain between my shoulder blades.

Just the thought of vanilla tea is warming me from within. I slip into my bathrobe, open the door to the hallway, and go down the stairs. I stop halfway down.

That was... a noise. A high-pitched clatter. In the house, not outside. Was it someone smashing a window? No, it wasn't loud enough.

Straight away, my feeling of unease returns, but this time it's twice as strong. My hand grips the bannister, I take a deep breath, pull myself together and take another step down. This is silly, I tell myself. Burglars would be making far more noise. They'd be taking whatever they could and trying to get out as soon as possible –

Another noise, not a clatter this time but a scraping sound. Like a drawer that's being opened and closed again.

Turn around now. That's my first impulse. Run into the bedroom, call the police. Hide. Instead I fight back my instincts and stand still. Because I know that this, the only rational thing to do, isn't an option. I left my mobile phone in the kitchen, and the battery is almost empty.

I put it on the espresso machine in plain view so that I wouldn't forget to charge it. And the noises are coming from the kitchen and the living room.

Another two steps down. Yes, there's a chink of light coming from the living room door.

I breathe against my fear, which is far stronger than it should be. The light's on, but so bloody what? I'm always forgetting to switch it off. Nothing to panic about. Anyway, the front door is directly ahead of me. If I want I can get out in five seconds and get help. Who cares if I'm wearing a bathrobe?

I hold my breath, listening as hard as I can. Everything's completely quiet. Was I hearing things? My head is seriously considering this possibility while my heart hammers away in my chest, apparently unconvinced. And if there's something I can't deal with, it's uncertainty.

The paperweight Ela gave me as a present a few weeks ago is lying on the chest of drawers in the hall. It's a blue glass cube that weighs at least two kilos. I pick it up, ignoring the junk mail that slides to the floor. Then I very slowly open the living room door.

Nothing. No-one. At least not in here. The room hasn't been touched, and the patio door is firmly shut. Everything is the way I left it. But I'm not sure about the kitchen. Standing here I can hardly see in and the kitchen lights are off.

The paperweight almost slips out of my hand, which is damp with sweat. I grip it tightly and take a step into the living room. Not a sound. Another step. I'm standing in the middle of the room.

Then, just as I'm starting to laugh at myself, a shadow steps forward out from the darkness in the kitchen.

The scream that wants to explode out of me dies halfway out, as though suddenly there's no air in my body. My whole body freezes.

Run away. That's the only thought that manages to reach my consciousness. But I can't. My legs refuse to move.

The ceiling light reveals a man with dark hair and broad shoulders. He says something, his mouth moves, but I can't hear anything. All the sounds seem to come from far away. The only noise nearby is the frighteningly loud hammering of my heart. Is this what being in shock feels like?

The man says something again, but it's like I've forgotten all my German. For a second, the rooms seems to spin. Don't faint, whatever you do.

He tilts his head at an angle, and hesitates. Then he walks towards me. *How stupid.* A new thought bursts through my head. *You're so stupid. Why didn't you stay upstairs?*

Only when he gets so near that I notice a hint of aftershave does my body unfreeze at last. I take a few steps back. But towards the wall instead of the door. By the time I correct myself he's almost next to me.

"Get out!" I shout, in the hope that I can stop him for a few seconds. To my surprise he actually stands still.

"Get out or I'll call the police!" If I shout louder the neighbours might hear me.

A burglar would run away. But the stranger doesn't. Something in me has understood that he isn't here to steal anything. No burglar breaks into someone's house wearing a shirt and jacket. But that means this stranger is after something else... This thought creates a completely different kind of fear in me. I retreat further, and back into the lampstand and feel it tip over. I almost lose my balance.

"Please," I whisper. "Please don't hurt me."

At most he's five steps away. He doesn't take his eyes off me for an instant.

"For God's sake," he says. "What's wrong with you?"

He takes another step towards me. I duck my head as though it would help, as though I could hide inside myself.

"I don't have much money in the house but I'll give you everything. You can take it all, OK? Take what you want. But please... don't hurt me."

"Is this a joke?" He holds up his hands and shows his palms. They're empty.

"Are you feeling sick? Shall I call a doctor?"

He has stopped walking towards me, that's the main thing. I slowly stand up straight again. The paperweight. Maybe now would be a good opportunity to throw it at him.

"Please go. I promise I won't call the police."

He blinks and takes a few deep breaths. "What do you mean? Why are you talking to me like this?"

If that's a sign that he's losing confidence, then I might have a chance. I'll try to involve him in conversation. Yes. And then take my first chance to escape.

"Because... I'm afraid of you. Do you understand?"

"Of me?"

"Yes. You frightened me."

He opens his arms and starts walking towards me again. "Joanna..."

My name. I back off further. He knows my name. Maybe he's a stalker. On the other hand, maybe he only saw it on the letters lying in the hallway.

I take a closer look at him. Blue eyes under thick brows. He has striking looks that I'm sure I'd have remembered if I'd seen them before. He doesn't look dangerous or aggressive. But somehow his face fills me with a horror I can't explain.

Now I've got the wall at my back. This is it, I'm trapped. My pulse skyrockets, I raise the paperweight. "Leave. Now."

He glances at the glass cube, then back at my face. Then his eyes wander lower; I realise that my robe is wider open than it should be.

"Joanna, I don't know what you're doing, but please stop it."

"Stop!" I try to show I'm in control, but instead I sound desperate. "Stop pretending we know each other and please go!"

He probably likes it that I'm afraid because he takes a step closer. I slide along the wall to the left, towards the door.

"Give it a rest, of course we know each other." There's impatience creeping in there. It's not anger yet, but that could change. The door is two metres away. I can make it. I have to.

"You're wrong, you really are." Every sentence buys me time. "So just how are we supposed to know each other?"

He shakes his head, slowly. "Either you're playing some kind of bizarre game or I should take you straight to hospital." His hand strokes through his hair. "We're engaged, Jo. We live together."

I stare at him, dumbstruck. That's so far removed from what I expected him to say that it takes me several seconds to comprehend.

*We're engaged.*

So he's not just a stalker. This is far worse; he's insane. He's one of those that create a fantasy world in their own head, and believe their own hallucinations. But why me, for heaven's sake?

That doesn't matter now. You can't talk to someone who's crazy. And you definitely can't convince them with rational arguments. His mood could change from one second to the next. He seems placid enough, but who knows? One wrong word might make him aggressive. After all, he's forced his way into a stranger's house.

There's only one way out, and it only takes me a moment to decide.

The paperweight carves a shimmering blue arc through the air as I throw it at him. I've aimed well but the stranger takes a step to one side so I only hit his shoulder instead of his head. Whatever. I run out of the living room through the hall and up the stairs to the bedroom. I slam the door shut and lock it twice.

Then I let myself fall to the floor. The door is at my back, I can see the bed. One pillow and one duvet. The bed of a woman living alone. But if he really is insane, his brain will produce some explanation or other. That he recently started sleeping on the sofa, for example.

I can't hear anything outside. I close my eyes for a second. I'm safe. Hopefully.

*Of course we know each other*, the stranger said. With an uncanny sincerity. I search my memory. Nothing. Did I see him at the studio? Is he a client?

No, that's impossible. I never forget a face I've photographed.

A noise, I almost jump out of my skin. A muffled sound, like a door being slammed shut.

I press my ear against the wood of the door. Everything is quiet. Maybe the paperweight hit him so hard that he's run off. I listen intently, with my eyes shut and holding my breath. My hope lasts only for about a minute, then I hear slow, heavy footsteps on the stairs.

He's following me. He won't be calm any more. And I still don't have a telephone to call for help.

## 2

The cockatoo is gone.

It's the first thing I notice when the outside lights switch on as I get out of the car alongside the house. It was a birthday gift to Joanna, an eighty centimetre welded sculpture. A symbol of home. She told me once that Melbourne has lots of cockatoos.

As I walk past the gap in the rhododendrons, I wonder where it's gone to. I unlock the door and go into the house. The hall is dark but I can hear a quiet whirr from upstairs. The hairdryer. Joanna. A warm feeling supplants my perplexity about the missing cockatoo.

I walk along the hallway. There's a soft glow of light from the street lamps outside through the narrow glass panel next to the door, enough for me to find my way. I open the door to the living room. Like the kitchen, the lights are on. I smile. That's my Joanna. When she's alone the house it's often lit up as though there's a party going on. The electricity company will be happy.

I drop the keys on the extension to the work surface. They just miss it and land on the tiled floor with a bright clatter. I'm so tired I can hardly concentrate. Probably also the aftereffects of a strange day. A shitty day. It's was as though everybody in the whole company was trying to provoke me.

I sigh, pick up the keys and put them where they were meant to go.

There's an open bottle of pinot blanc in the fridge from last night. I don't feel like wine. Yet. Maybe later with Joanna, when we make ourselves comfortable on the sofa. I reach for the carton of orange juice next to it. It's almost empty. I pour the dregs into a water glass.

The drawer containing the rubbish bags is jammed slightly and makes a scraping sound when it's opened or closed. A loose guide rail screw, most likely. I'll take a look this weekend.

I'm switching the light off at the doorway to the living room when I remember that the battery on my smartphone is almost empty. I go back and plug it into the charger lying on the waist-high cupboard standing next to the doorway. I turn around and almost jump with fright as I see Joanna standing in the middle of the living room.

I didn't hear her come in. But one look at Joanna gives me a warm feeling, and the tiredness and frustration from the day evaporate in a millisecond.



Apparently she hasn't seen me. I take advantage of the moment and watch her from the darkness. She's only wearing a bathrobe. It's tied so loosely that it's slightly open at the front, revealing the outline of her small, firm breasts. I start sensing another emotion, which adds to the warm feeling from earlier. I instantly feel like a voyeur who's been caught in the act.

I step forward out of the shadow and walk towards her. She hears my steps, turns towards me and... freezes. The warm greeting is suddenly trapped in my throat. I search for possible explanations for the horror I can see on her face. "Hello, darling," I say, carefully. "What's up? Are you OK? Has something happened?"

Joanna doesn't react, and just stands there, looking at me as though I'm talking to her in a strange language. I've never seen her like this. God, she looks as though she's frightened out of her wits. Realising this scares me, too. Something awful must have happened.

"Darling," I try again, with as much sensitivity as I can muster. I take a step towards her, carefully. She's barely an arm's length away now. Then in a split second she breaks free from her statue-like pose; her eyes open wide and she backs away from me. One step, then another.

"Darling, please..." Without intending to, I'm whispering. I try very carefully to get closer. Suddenly her facial expression changes, and her features distort into a scream.

"Get out!" she screams at me with a violence that stops me in my tracks. "Get out or I'll call the police!"

What the hell is wrong with her? She's acting as though she's completely lost it. A thousand thoughts shoot through my head and I have trouble keeping them in any kind of order.

Drugs? Alcohol? Shock? A death in the family? Has she been attacked? Joanna takes another step back against the floor lamp, tipping it over. The glass shade shatters on the floor.

"Please," she whispers. "Please don't hurt me."

I try hard to sound calm. "For God's sake, what's wrong with you?"

She ducks her head. "I... don't have much money in the house but I'll give you everything. You can take it all, OK?" Her voice sounds small, afraid. Childish. "Take what you want. But please... don't hurt me."

Despite my bewilderment, I feel a short flash of anger. "Is this a joke?" I sound gruffer than I'd intended, and raise my hand as a signal that she has nothing to be afraid of. "Are you feeling sick? Should I get a doctor?"

She shakes her head. "Please go. I promise not to call the police."

I resist the fierce impulse to grab her by her upper arms, shake her and shout at her to stop this nonsense. To be herself again. But I need to stay calm. It's important that at least one of us keeps a clear head. I take a couple of deep breaths, looking her right in the eyes. "What do you mean? Why are you talking to me like this?"

"Because I'm afraid of you," she says, hesitantly. "Do you understand?"

"Of me?"

"Yes, you frightened me."

"Joanna..."

At the mention of her name, her expression changes in an odd way. It's as though she's trying to guess from my face what I'm thinking.

"Leave. Now." I get the sense she's trying to make her voice sound resolute. She raises her hand slightly, and only now do I see she's holding something. I try to see what it is. It's the paperweight from the hall. This is getting crazier by the second. "Joanna..." I look deep into her eyes, and try to show her by my expression that she has no reason to be afraid of me. "I don't know what you're doing, but please stop it."

"No," she answers, sounding like a spoiled little child. "Stop pretending we know each other and please go."

This can't be happening. Slowly, the fear takes hold that Joanna has gone completely mad. I take another, careful step forward without knowing how to react in this bizarre situation. I have to be careful not to lose my nerve. "Give it a rest, of course we know each other."

Joanna shakes her head. "You're wrong, you really are. So just how are we supposed to know each other?"

For Chris's sake, I've had just about enough of this. "Either you're playing some kind of bizarre game or I should take you straight to the hospital. We're engaged, Jo. We live together."

She appears shocked. This is no game. She really doesn't recognise me.

Suddenly her hand darts up, without warning, and something flies towards me. My reflexes turn by body to one side, but it's too late. The glass cube hits my shoulder and a firework of pain flashes through my whole upper body. I hear myself gasp and suddenly feel sick while at the same time feeling like someone has kicked my legs out from under me. They give way and I fall heavily on my knees, gasping again. Joanna flits past me like a dark shadow, out of my field of vision. Carefully, I feel my shoulder for signs of injury.

I thought I knew Joanna, but now she seems so foreign, alien even. As though another woman had taken over her body.

The pain in my shoulder slowly subsides. I support myself on the floor and push myself up. The living room sways around; I take two or three faltering steps towards an armchair where I lean against its back. My view drifts over to the open living room door. Has Joanna run outside? She might even be calling the police.

She's mentally ill. I don't doubt that anymore. Maybe she always was. Maybe she knew it too and never told me. Maybe... Yes, maybe I never got to know the real Joanna, until now. No, that *can't* be true. I stand up and look around searchingly. The room has stopped moving, and I'm firmly on my feet again.

Should I call the police myself? Nonsense. What are they supposed to do about it? No-one's broken in. My fiancé has gone insane; we need a doctor, not a policeman. A psychiatrist. I could get one called out, for an emergency. If he saw her like this he'd probably have her committed. And once she's started down that road... She's a foreigner, too, with a time-limited visa. No, I have to talk to her first. Who knows what's happened? Maybe she's just totally confused, for whatever reason.

I switch on the light in the hall, and a sharp pain shoots through my injured shoulder. I take a deep breath and look around. The front door is closed. If Joanna had run out she'd either have left it open or slammed it shut after her, given the state she's in. And I'd have heard that.

So she's probably still in the house. I walk to the stairs and look up. But then I stop. Something's not right, I can feel it. I turn around slowly and let my gaze wander through the hallway. The front door, next to it the chest of drawers, letters on the floor, the coat rack... The coat rack. A fist bores into my gut. My things, they're missing. Right there, where my jackets normally hang, are two empty hooks. Underneath there's a shelf. Her trainers, three pairs of leisure shoes in different colours, nothing else. They all belong to her. What the hell is going on here?

I pull myself together, and decide I have to find out. Without pausing I walk to the front door, open it and glance outside. Everything's quiet. The door clicks closed. I'd better lock it, just to be on the safe side. Then I walk determinedly up the stairs. It's better she hears me, and knows that I'm coming up to see her. I want to find out what's going on.

I look into the bathroom. Empty. With grim determination I go up to the bedroom door, put my hand on the door handle and press it down. It's locked. Ah.

"Joanna," I say purposefully. Not angrily, but she needs to notice that I'm serious. "Joanna, stop this. Open the door so that we can talk. I won't touch you, damn it."

Silence. I wait. Ten seconds, fifteen... Nothing. "Joanna, just think about it. If I really wanted to hurt you, do you think that this little lock would stop me? One kick and it's open. But I don't want to destroy the door, it belongs to me, too, don't you understand? We live here together. And if it seems to you like we don't, then we'll... Wait. Joanna?"

I realise I'm talking very quickly. It's something I always do when I have an idea that I urgently need to tell someone about.

"I've got an idea, Jo. Are you listening? Ask me something. Something only I can know. That I *have* to know if we live together in this house. OK? Then you'll see. Ask me a question, anything."

Another silence. After a while I think I can hear something from behind the door. Click. The door handle is pressed down, and the door slowly swings open. Thank God.

Joanna is standing sideways in front of me. She's looking at me, obviously scared, with her hand still on the door handle. I look past her into the bedroom. An ice-cold hand clutches at my heart. For the first time I have the idea that it's not Joanna that's lost it, but me.

My duvet, my pillow. My wardrobe. It's all gone.