

CHARLOTTE LINK

A Novel

The Unknown Guest

blanvalet

She moaned softly at not having thought of it right away, reached over to his backpack, and opened the outer compartment. His wallet wasn't there, and she let out a breath, relieved. He had apparently taken his cell phone, too, so she could still reach him. Maybe she was always far too quick to brand him a fool, maybe she hadn't been fair in her judgment of who he was for a long time now. After all, he was charging through his studies with excellent grades, and he even wrote term papers for other students. He was partly a mess, but not a mess through and through. It was necessary — for their marriage — that she make that clear to herself from time to time.

She closed her eyes again.

She must have fallen asleep, because she hadn't heard the car approaching. She jerked awake only as someone was bending over her. A hand might have even touched her, but she couldn't have said so for certain.

"Yes, hello?" she asked, totally disoriented, as if she had picked up a telephone and was waiting for the voice on the other end of the line.

Instead she was looking into the face of a stranger. To her he looked somewhat older, mid-forties, maybe. He seemed kind and concerned.

Yes, concerned above all. That was perhaps the trait that she'd most have associated with him at that moment.

"Oh, you're German!" he said. His speech was accent-free, so he was probably German himself, Inga guessed. Now she also spotted the car that was parked behind him. Munich plates.

"I fell asleep," she said. "What time is it?"

The man looked at his watch. "It's quarter past one."

When Marius had set out, it had been twenty minutes past twelve. She'd slept for almost an hour.

She sat up, looked left and right over the empty, sun-scorched street.

"I'm here waiting for my husband. He's trying to find us something to drink." As she said this, she noticed how dry and cracked her lips felt. The longing for a drink of water started to get overwhelming.

"My God, that's no problem at all. Wait here!" He stood up, went back to the car and reappeared with a cooler. He opened it and pulled out a can of soda, covered in condensation from the cold.

"Here. I drink soda like a madman on long car rides, so it's all I've got, unfortunately, but ..."

She took the can from his hand, opened it with trembling fingers, put it to her lips, and drank. Drank like someone dying of thirst, and felt how life slowly returned to her and renewed strength grew within her.

"Thanks," she said when the can was empty. "You're a life saver."

"I was coming up the street, saw you lying here, and asked myself if everything was all right with you. That's why I stopped." His gaze slid down her bare legs and fixed on her

feet, horrified. "Good Lord! Your feet look just awful!"

"We walked quite far. And I, stupidly, was wearing brand-new shoes." She shrugged her shoulders. "Somehow we were thinking the whole hitchhiking thing would be easier."

The man looked around. "I think I'm the only driver to come through here in ages. This village isn't exactly well-situated for finding a ride. In any case ... I guess I don't know where you're headed, but ..."

"To the Mediterranean."

"You've gone a bit out of your way then."

"I know. We're trying to get back to the highway, see, but in this heat we're going to have to wait till evening, I think."

He looked at her thoughtfully; it looked like he was weighing something or other in his mind and trying to come to a decision. "I'm driving to the Mediterranean. Cap Sicié. Côtes de Provence."

"Oh ... but then you've gone a bit out of your way, too, right?"

He brushed the hair off his forehead. It was dark, just barely graying. "They said on the radio that there was an accident. With a lot of cars backed up. I've just been trying to drive around it."

She looked at him. She knew that she looked trustworthy. But only too well did she understand people who as a rule didn't take hitchhikers. She was one of them herself. A friend of hers had let a young couple ride with her in the freezing cold one winter, moved to sympathy because the two of them appeared to be almost frozen stiff. At some point the guy had suddenly put a knife to her throat and made her turn off on a dirt road that led through the woods. There the two of them had forced her to get out and taken off with her car as well as her purse, which had all her money, credit cards, and papers. And she could probably still count herself lucky that nothing worse had happened to her.

The man sighed. "Normally I never pick up strangers," he said, as if he'd read her mind, "but I feel like I can't leave you sitting here. So, if you like ..."

"The problem is ..."

He nodded. "Your husband. We've got to go scoop him up too, of course."

"I can't just leave him here."

"Of course not. Do you have an idea of which way he went?"

"In that direction." She pointed up the street. "And then that first left. I don't know any more than that. He was hoping to find a grocery store somewhere. I can try to reach him on his cell phone."

"Hold off for a second. The village isn't large, we're sure to find him in no time." The man closed the cooler and stood up. "Come on, we'll load your stuff in and then we'll get going."

"Now thanks to me you've got more trouble for yourself," said Inga. She struggled to her feet and stifled a quiet cry of pain as she was putting her feet on the asphalt. "God, that's as hot as a stovetop!"

"Go on and sit in the car. I'll take care of the bags. You can't go walking around barefoot

out here.”

Relieved, she sat down in the passenger seat. The air conditioning in the car must have been running the whole time, because the temperature was comfortable. The man appeared next to Inga and pressed a first aid kit into her hand.

“Here. Try and bandage up your feet. They shouldn’t get any dirt on them now.”

While Inga cut off lengths of bandages, her rescuer found room for the camping gear in the trunk and partly in the backseat. Then he sat down in the driver’s seat and started the engine. Sweat glistened on his forehead. “Dear Lord,” he said, “five minutes out there and it’s like you’ve been boiled. By the way,” he looked at her, “I’m Maximilian. Maximilian Kemper.”

“Inga Hagenau.”

“Okay, Inga — I may call you Inga, yes? — now let’s go look for your husband. And if everything goes smoothly, you’ll be in the Mediterranean by this evening.”

Too good to be true, she thought, and as she leaned back onto the cool, smooth upholstery, she thought how, at least as her mother and a handful of well-meaning friends would see it, she was acting very carelessly. She had given thought to whether she herself might look trustworthy enough to be picked up, but not for a moment had she asked herself whether *he* was trustworthy. Honest. Reliable, whatever you wanted to call it.

She gave him a close look from the side, her eyes half-closed. He was looking out at the road. Not at her bare legs, at least. That would have made her nervous. Before the shorts had been too much, now she found them to be made of an unsettlingly small amount of material. She’d have liked to have had something that she could have pulled over her bare thighs, but she couldn’t get to her things, and she would’ve felt foolish, too, if she were to suddenly spread a sweater over her legs in this heat.

She glanced over at him once more. His gaze was still turned toward the road.

Inga let out a deep sigh. She would breathe easy again once Marius was sitting in the car.

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On this perfectly routine Wednesday morning in July, Rebecca Brandt made a decision about her life, a life which, in the sense of being an existence worth living out, she no longer considered as such — she decided it was time to end it.

It wasn’t as if the thought of suicide had come to her unexpectedly. There had been times when she had turned it over in her mind; it had been a thread that she had clung to in the darkest moments, when hopelessness and grief seemed to have no end and no more paths were visible to her. She had thought then: If I can’t bear it anymore, then I’m leaving. I’ve still got that. The decision to not keep trying to endure it anymore.

She had made preparations. Morphine. Her husband had been a doctor; at the time it hadn’t been hard to get hold of the pills through colleagues who had been friends of theirs. She had hoarded a ton. The extreme overdose would be enough to make her fall asleep and

never wake up again. The packets were in the cabinet in the bathroom, way in the back but barely hidden behind a box of aspirin, a little bottle of nose spray for colds, and various sleeping pills. There had been times in the last few months when she had placed herself in front of the open cabinet door for minutes on end and simply stared at these packets. There had been times when this had even lent her a measure of strength.

On this day she knew it wouldn't work. The mere sight of her pills would no longer set her straight. Her strength had run out. The struggle against depression was unwinnable. The thought of finally giving it up took on an ever warmer, ever more seductive glow.

All throughout our lives, she thought that morning, we learn that you're never allowed to give up. That's why it comes so hard. That's why there's so much resistance within us. And feelings of guilt. Those above all.

She searched deep inside herself. She couldn't find her feelings of guilt that morning. If they were still even there, she, in any case, didn't encounter them, and this was a fact that she absolutely had to take advantage of. Feelings of guilt represented the strongest obstacles in the planning and execution of a suicide attempt. That they had fallen silent meant that fate was giving her a chance.

Really, everything had been the same as always that day. She had gotten up early, put on her jogging suit, and gone out into the yard. Out into an already very bright morning, with clear air that still pleasantly prickled the skin and left the taste of sea salt on the lips. Later on it would get hot, very hot and very sunny.

The yard had been Felix's great love. It was the yard he'd fallen for when the two of them had decided — it was eight years ago now — to buy a house in Provence, somewhere on the ocean, a little cottage with a lot of land around it. Actually they hadn't been at all sure if they really wanted it; Rebecca had had the sense at first that it was more about driving around, dreaming, looking at different properties. They had both been particularly busy with their careers back then. They had led a happy life back home in Munich, it was true, but one very much plagued with stress. Even just the thought of a refuge somewhere far away, a place to turn off, forget, relax, had often been enough to make the everyday rush easier to bear. But then a photo in a real estate agency's window display had led them to Le Brusca, situated right on Cap Sicié — that cliff of black stone that always had a somewhat gloomy cast to it in the midst of the cheery Mediterranean landscape, and which was known among sailors to be dangerous and always unpredictable to navigate around. Suddenly the nice thought, the fondly dreamed dream seemed to want to transform into a reality that was within reach.

"I don't know if I like it here so much," Rebecca had said in the car, as they wound their way up steep, narrow roads. The area was thickly forested, and it was as if you were moving out of the day's sun and into a world of shadows.

"Let's just have a look," Felix had said.

They had gone past wild meadows and old, dilapidated houses that hid from sight in completely overgrown yards. A gypsy camp with brightly colored caravans on the side of

the road ... fruit trees, planted in a surprisingly deliberate way, as if in an orchard ... and then forest again. There was no more paved road, rather just a path full of potholes that had turned into puddles after a downpour a few days before.

"This is like the end of the earth," said Rebecca, and she could hear that there was a shudder in her voice.

One of the last houses appeared to match the image in the display most closely. In any case the property was marked off by a substantially dilapidated white picket fence, and it was this fence that Felix thought he remembered. The house itself shone white through a wall of overgrowth. Rebecca shivered involuntarily as she got out of the car, and her first thought was: Never. I could never get through even a single week here.

Felix was already opening the gate to the yard, which almost fell off its rusty hinges in the process, and stepping onto the property.

"Hold on," said Rebecca, "you don't even know if the people are home."

"I don't think anybody lives here anymore," said Felix. "This all seems completely abandoned. Just look how high the grass is! No one has mowed the lawn or cut back the bushes and trees here in ages."

Branches smacked them in the face or got caught in their hair as they stumbled up to the house along a path that was only feebly recognizable as such. Rebecca had to admit that it actually was unlikely that someone still lived here. The house looked as uncared for as the garden; the plaster was crumbling off the sides, and some of the windows on the second floor had panes missing. The front door hung as crooked in its frame as the gate to the yard.

"We'd have to invest a ton," Felix murmured, and Rebecca looked at him in horror. "You're not seriously thinking that we ... ?"

"No, no," he said, and then they had gone around to the other side of the house, and everything had changed. The light, the sky, the day itself. The yard opened up wide before them, a large, seemingly unbounded meadow, which at its edge trailed over into cliffs, and past the cliffs the sea was shimmering, blue and endless, and it reflected the rays of the sun, which shone down from a cloudless sky and in an instant chased away the feeling of gloom that had prevailed in such an oppressive way before then.

They both stood there, overwhelmed by the sight and the emotions that it set loose within them.

"This is ...," Felix said, spellbound, and Rebecca finished the sentence: "Incredible. It's incredibly beautiful."

They walked over the entire meadow up to the edge of the cliffs. Here, sharp and wild, the escarpment fell down into the sea. Below, the surf raged and flung white foam far up against the stone. The sand of a small bay shone bright between the water and the cliffs.

"You could go swimming there," said Felix.

"You can't get down there," Rebecca countered.

"Sure you can. You can have a path put in."

"Either way, the surf is too wild here."