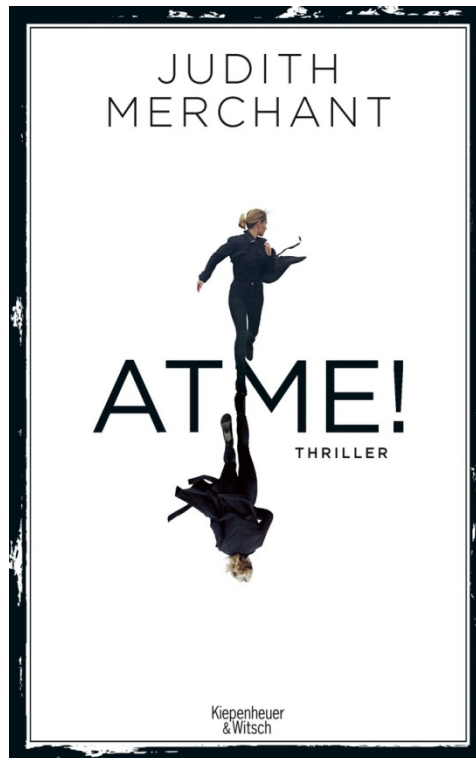


BREATHE!

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Psychological Thriller

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El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.

Francisco de Goya

Everyone is looking for love.

Everyone.

And yet love is so hard to find.

Some think love can be learnt. They think it can be calculated or ordered on demand. It's just a matter of working on yourself, they say. Or on the other person. You need to be exceptional for love. Or just like everyone else.

That's all wrong. I know it is. All you really need for love is the right other half. The one.

The one who is just perfect for you. The one all your magic spells actually work on. The one who takes you in his arms and says: *Don't be afraid*. Who slips under the covers to you and says: *Close your eyes*. Who reaches for your hand and says: *We can do this*. Or: *You're beautiful*. Or: *Everything's going to be all right*.

And it's all true, because he says it.

When you've found this man, you must—listen to what I'm saying here—you *must* stay with him.

Don't leave him. Don't let anyone come between you. Be alert. Be on your guard. Beware of abruptly changing traffic lights and long working hours. Beware, above all, of his ex-wife—but, even more, beware of that fitting-room curtain.

Hold him tight. Don't let him go for a second.

Or one day you may find yourself standing on the street, realising that something terrible has happened.

Like me.

On the road in front of me, noisy cars drive from left to right, hooting, screeching, belching stinking fumes. Pedestrian lights flash frantically, people pass me on the pavement. Across the road, behind the cars, are two cafés, a bookshop, a hairdresser's. My heart thuds against my ribs, sweat runs down my face. I crane my neck. Left and right and left again.

The place is full of people—but other people, not him. They stare at their phones, lug heavy shopping, swing slender handbags, pull dogs, push buggies.

‘Ben!’ I call, as loud as I can. ‘Ben!’

They ignore me.

A man has gone missing. A woman is looking for him. One street. Two directions.

Spot the mistake.

You can run one way or the other, but you can't run both ways at once. And if you make the wrong decision and go the wrong way, you will be moving further and further from the person you are looking for.

Decisions.

Making decisions is so hard.

Nothing we did today was planned.

Ben hadn't planned to trade in overtime hours and take the afternoon off.

I hadn't planned to abandon the dull business report I was translating and pick him up from work—though that was, perhaps, less surprising.

We hadn't planned to drive into town and have lunch in a pizzeria, or to eat ice creams on the market square afterwards—hazelnut and rum and raisin for him, chocolate for me.

Nor had we planned to walk down this street and discover this far-too-expensive dress in the window of this far-too-expensive shop.

None of that was planned.

It all just happened.

So here I am, in this far-too-expensive shop on a Tuesday afternoon, stepping out of the fitting room and staring incredulously at my reflection.

The dress has little cap sleeves and comes up to my collarbones—ravishing collarbones, he always says; if ever I had to identify you, I'd recognise you by your collarbones—we could go on *You Bet!* if it was still on; I'd pick you out from a crowd of thousands. The lacy grey fabric is slightly transparent, so you can see through it, at least to the slip. Goodness, a slip! Don't they only exist in films?

I'm not really the dress type. In fact, this is my first dress for ten years. But it's perfect. Just perfect.

The shop assistant comes over and nods appreciatively.

'Looks great on you,' she says. 'You can really carry it off with your figure. I'd suggest court shoes with it—simple, classic ones—that would look different again.' Her eyes travel down my sunburnt legs to my trainers.

I don't care what she thinks. The only person whose opinion matters to me is sitting around the corner in an armchair, probably leafing through a magazine. But it's no bad thing

that he can't see me in the dress; it means I can keep it for a surprise. Unlike me, Ben loves surprises. I hate them. In some respects, we're very different.

Shall I slip it off and take it straight to the till? Or shall I forget about the surprise and call Ben after all?

The shop assistant misreads my hesitation. 'It also comes in midnight blue. Would you like to try that? The blue's a little more elegant. But you haven't told me what it's for. What's the occasion?'

I suppose I have to answer her. 'It's for a wedding,' I say.

'Oh, lovely,' says the shop assistant. 'Then it depends on the dress code, of course.'

'There is no dress code,' I say, going back into the fitting room.

The woman calls out to me. 'Do you know what the bride will be wearing? Long or short? You're supposed to go for the opposite.'

'The bride will be wearing this dress,' I say, but she doesn't hear me, so I have another look in the mirror.

The slip shimmers through the lace. I really do look slim in the dress. My arms are strong and sunburnt, my nose is peeling, I have a tiny spot on my forehead and a smear of chocolate ice cream in the corner of my mouth. The fitting-room light glints in my eyes and suddenly my whole face shifts and I smile.

I suppose it's a princess moment, like in a film. I've always thought princess moments pathetic—but then, until now, I haven't been the princess.

I stand there, smiling at my reflection, and my reflection smiles back. I don't know what is about to happen. I have no presentiment, not even a funny feeling. I'm far too happy for that, far too secure, far too in love.

Then I decide to call him.

'Ben.' I call.

But he doesn't come and nor does the shop assistant. Instead, the curtain of the fitting room is torn aside and a woman appears in front of me. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she cries, startled, and stares at me. It's only now that I realise she's wearing the same dress as me. Apart from that, though, she looks quite different. She is petite, blond, elegant. One of her slender, shiny legs is adorned with bright pink tape—presumably a sports injury. And she is wearing simple, classic court shoes.

I stare at her, she stares at me, and we both burst out laughing. Our laughter says: so similar! And yet so different! Then she vanishes as suddenly as she appeared, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

I carry on laughing and don't want to stop looking at myself in the mirror, because I'm so happy and everything is so perfect.

We should go out for lunch more often, I think. We should look in more shop windows together. Maybe I should even wear more dresses.

Because now we can. Now all is well. Now, at last, it's time for our happy ending.

I'm a little surprised that Ben still hasn't come to look at me in the dress. It's not like him.

I pull the curtain aside and step out of the fitting room.

Because I'm not afraid.

Because I don't know what awaits me.

My name is a curse.

‘I’m Nilly.’

‘Nice to meet you, Nelly.’

‘No, Nilly.’

‘Nelly?’

‘Ni-i-ily.’

‘Yes, Nelly. Isn’t that what I said?’

It’s the story of my life. Everyone gets me wrong. Everyone thinks they know who I am, but none of them has a clue.

With Ben, it was different.

‘I’m Nilly,’ I said, looking at him without seeing him. ‘Nilly,’ he said, ‘I’m Ben.’ And then I did see him.

Later we talked about it.

This was three weeks after we met—which is to say, three weeks after we first slept together. Because that’s what it was about to begin with—or at any rate, it’s what we pretended it was about. Really it was clear, even then, that it was about something else altogether. That it was about everything.

Anyway, I told him.

‘You were the first, I said, lying next to him on my belly, my eyes closed.

‘Yeah, right,’ he said.

‘No, really.’

He blew gently on my upper arm. ‘You don’t seriously expect me to believe that, do you?’

‘But it’s true,’ I said sleepily. ‘You were the first.’

The sheets smelt of us. They desperately needed washing, but every time I made up my mind to change them, the smell brought me up short. I wanted to hang on to that smell; it was hard evidence of what had happened between us in the last three weeks. I think I might also have been afraid that Ben would never come back to fill the room with his smell again.

‘Tell,’ he said.

He always says that. Whatever the subject, he has this vague way of asking for more information. Most people ask specific questions: they quiz you about details or ask about motive. Others are too shy or obtuse to ask anything. But Ben always says: *Tell*. And every time, I take a deep breath and talk. I’ve never talked to anyone as much as I talk to Ben. I don’t usually say much at all.

‘It was my name,’ I said. ‘I’ve never met anyone who got my name right first time—never. You can’t imagine what it’s like. Everyone hears it wrong. I say, “Ni-i-illy” with three I’s. And everyone thinks I’ve said “Nelly.” So I say, “No, not Nelly, Nilly,” and they say, “What? What’s your name?” They can’t help it—it’s just the way it is. Like a loose paving stone outside my front door—it trips everyone up. If people see it written down, they think it’s a typo; some of them go right ahead and correct it, without even asking. There are rare occasions when customers will address me properly because we’ve emailed beforehand. But I’d never known anyone pronounce my name right on first hearing. Not until you came along.’

I paused.

‘Tell me more,’ he said. His eyes were turned on me and I knew that he was attentive to my every word, my every move, my every hesitation.

I turned on my side to get a better look at him. ‘It’s funny that you should have been the one to get my name right. And now here we are in bed together. It’s so...kitschy.’

He blew onto my arm again, but more slowly this time—a warm current of air, as warm as the inside of his mouth. ‘Why do you say that?’ he asked.

I closed my eyes. 'It's as if you understood me right from the start. It's like in a fairy tale where the poor princess waits for the king's son to come and call her by the right name so that the curse is lifted and she can be free and happy at last.' I pressed my face deeper into the pillow. I didn't want Ben to see that my eyes were wet. He didn't know how long I'd waited for him. Or how awful things were before.

He stroked my back, very slowly, as if wondering where to touch me next. '*Rumpelstiltskin*,' he said. 'The classic fairy tale about getting someone's name right is *Rumpelstiltskin*. But that's not much of a compliment to you and I'm glad to say you don't look anything like him. The princess version suits you better.'

I spoke into the pillow. My voice was quiet and muffled, but I knew he could hear me. 'I don't mind looking like Rumpelstiltskin, as long as you get my name right and rescue me.'

'But Rumpelstiltskin didn't want anyone to know his name, did he?'

'No idea,' I said.

'He didn't—I know he didn't. And he was wicked, too. We're better sticking to our own version.'

'Good,' I said. 'Though actually I'd quite like to look like Rumpelstiltskin. I imagine it might be rather a relief.'

'Rumpelstiltskin,' Ben whispered in my ear, kissing the skin just below.

'Mm.'

'Do you mind if I disappoint you big time, Rumpelstiltskin?'

'Oh.' I turned my head in the direction of the clock, but saw only Ben and the covers.

'Is it time for you to go?'

'No. But I have to clear up this name business, before you build our fairy-tale castle on false foundations and then get into a rage with me when you discover the awful truth.'

'The awful truth,' I said, rolling onto my back and folding my arms behind my head, Ben's eyes following my every movement. 'Tell me the worst. You already knew my name?'

Disappointment spilt through me at the thought. That was ridiculous and even as I felt the first pangs, I gave myself a stern talking-to.

‘No.’

‘You didn’t?’

‘No.’

‘Phew. Then you can’t disappoint me.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ He rubbed the bridge of his nose, the way he often does, as if the words were in there and he had to coax them out. ‘Okay, the awful truth is this: I’ve been working in marketing for twelve years. That means I’m used to having to impress potential clients in the first seconds of meeting them; I need them to feel comfortable with me, right from the start. And the easiest way to do that is to get their names right. Not the spelling—the pronunciation. Every time I meet a new client, there’s this high-powered acoustic recognition programme whirring away in my head. I store what I hear and repeat it like a parrot. That makes people incredibly happy and grateful. And it secures me clients.’

‘That’s all it takes?’

‘Basically—that and grinning away like an idiot. Once that part’s over—unless I’m dealing with Stephanies or Michaels—half my job is done. The rest is optional extras.’

‘And I was a potential client?’

‘You could put it like that.’

‘Oh, my God,’ I say, burying my face in his shoulder. It smelt of me. It smelt more of me than of him. ‘What a tacky explanation for something that seemed to me like a precious miracle.’

‘Yes,’ said Ben, giving me a very slow, wet kiss. ‘But the really terrible thing is that if that bit of marketing slime made such an impression on you, any guy with similar tactics could have picked you up—anyone capable of pronouncing a two-syllable name without getting his tongue in a twist. God, I’m glad I got there first.’

‘You didn’t have much competition,’ I said. ‘Scheming marketeers aren’t a big feature of my world. My world is very, very small. I hardly meet anyone.’

Ben took my face gently in his hands. Something twitched in the left-hand corner of his mouth and, before he could stop himself, it spread to the right-hand corner and his mouth exploded into a smile. The loveliest smile in the world. ‘Aren’t we lucky, Nilly?’ he said quietly.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Aren’t we lucky, Ben?’

And because we were stupid and careless, it didn’t occur to us to touch wood.

I don't at first realise that he's gone.

All I know is that I can't see him.

It's a small L-shaped shop. The door is on the right, the till opposite. On the left, the shop extends further back to where the fitting rooms are. Dresses, blouses and tops hang on rails along the walls. The selection is minimal; it's an expensive shop.

Between the door and the way through to the fitting rooms is a pale-grey leather armchair. The idea, presumably, is that the companions of flustered customers can sink into it and have a rest—and not get under people's feet.

That's where Ben was sitting.

Or am I just saying that because the armchair is there and he didn't follow me through to the fitting rooms?

The shop is deserted. I look about me. 'Ben?' I call. Then I return to the fitting rooms. The curtains are pulled back on both cubicles. In one of them my clothes lie in a limp heap of black and denim; the other is empty. The woman in my dress seems to have left.

'Ben?' I call again.

The shop assistant peers round from behind the counter, a phone at her ear.

'Ben?'

I stride over to the door in three big steps. A bell jangles as I pull it open and step outside. I look to see if he's standing outside the door smoking—not that he smokes. But there's no Ben. Only cars rushing past.

'Are you all right?' the shop assistant says in quiet surprise, joining me on the pavement.

'Where's my husband?' I ask.

'Your husband?' She's slow on the uptake.

'He was waiting for me there.' I gesture into the shop, towards the armchair.

She looks at me.

‘The man I came in with,’ I explain, then run to the fitting room and rummage in my jeans for my phone. I call Ben’s number and press the phone to my ear, almost expecting to hear his ring tone, because he must be here, within earshot. But all I hear is the beep of the dialling tone. He doesn’t have voicemail.

He doesn’t pick up.

It makes no sense. I glance at the display to check the number.

The number is right. But nothing else is.

Nothing’s right at all.

Absolutely sweet FA.

I turn to the shop assistant who has followed me to the fitting rooms. ‘My husband? The man I came in with. Taller than me, black hair, glasses.’

‘You came in alone,’ she says. ‘Didn’t you?’

This knocks me speechless, but I force myself to calm down. It’s true that I came in ahead of him; I rushed in headlong, I was so excited about the dress, the whole day—everything. I was exhilarated by our spur-of-the-moment lunch and all the lovely things that lay ahead of us. Exhilarated because the bad times were over once and for all. But Ben came into the shop just behind me; I remember glancing back before I vanished into the fitting room.

‘He came in right behind me,’ I say. ‘Then he sat down in that armchair.’

‘I see, of course.’

‘You remember?’

‘In a suit?’

True, he’s wearing his suit because he came straight from work. ‘Yes.’

‘He must have gone out again.’ She gestures towards the counter. ‘I was on the phone.’

‘And the other customer? Maybe she saw him?’

‘She’s just left,’ says the woman with a shrug.

I take a deep breath.

I must keep calm, I tell myself. Just breathe.

So I breathe in and out.

I know what’s happening here.

Disaster—that’s what.

I pull open the shop door and run down the street to prevent it.

We went into the Lotus Palace to shelter from a downpour. That was how it began. I'd been translating for his company for a while, but we'd never actually met—and never would have done, if I hadn't had trouble with the pay-and-display machine on the company car park. He got out of his car and came to help me. We got talking. We left our cars on the car park and set off for a walk. The rain was sheeting down and, for some mysterious reason, that sealed everything. We walked through the rain as if it didn't exist—forged on, side by side, getting wetter and wetter. And after a while we stopped and looked at each other. Each of us saw the other, soaked to the skin, and it was clear to us both that something was happening.

We decided to get some food in the Chinese restaurant.

Laughing and sopping wet, we staggered in and found a table. But we had trouble calming down. We gasped and fought back our laughter, pressing our lips shut until our eyes met and we started spluttering all over again. What made us laugh like that? There was no reason. We had got wet. We were in love, although we didn't know it yet—not consciously, anyway. All we knew was that something was happening to us and that more would happen that evening. Was that reason to laugh?

Our wet things hung crooked and dripping on the free chairs at our table, making little puddles on the red Chinese-restaurant carpet. The permanently smiling waitress offered to hang them in the cloakroom. 'No, it's all right,' said Ben and then he looked at me and we exploded again, which was completely ridiculous.

A slick spicy Peking soup warmed us up and then we drank green tea until we felt ready to head out into the rain again in search of a hotel room. We laughed all the way there. It wasn't until we were alone in the room that things got serious.

That was our first time in the Lotus Palace. After that, we tended to meet at my place. But whenever Ben could only take a short lunchbreak, we'd go to our Chinese restaurant because it wasn't far from his office. We could, of course, have gone to another restaurant,

but we didn't. Maybe, given that he was cheating on his wife, Ben had decided to remain faithful at least to the Peking soup.

I don't know.

El adulterio. Adultery.

Did I know on that first evening that he had a wife? Yes. He told me. Though I'd have guessed anyway—and not just because of the ring on his finger. There was something about him.

But he did tell me about Flo on that evening. I suppose he wanted me to know what I was letting myself in for.

So everything was clear between us when we headed out into the rain in search of a hotel.

I fight for breath, my head buzzing. The street is too long and criss-crossed by too many other streets.

I've no idea which way to go. Is every metre I walk taking me nearer to Ben? Or further away?

'Excuse me,' I say to a passer-by who is bumping her suitcase along the pavement, 'have you seen my husband? He's a head taller than me, with black hair and glasses and he's wearing a grey suit. He's clean shaven.' As I say the words, my lips remember the feel of Ben's clean-shaven face.

'Sorry? Did he go this way or something?'

'Have you seen him?' I insist.

She knows nothing. She stares and shakes her head, then pulls her suitcase away from me as if she thinks I might steal it. 'Maybe he just went on ahead,' she says.

I look at her and then something goes click in my head and my pulse races like a swarm of scattering black birds, bumping into each other, splattering against the window with nasty crunching, squelching sounds. I can't see anything except smeared glass and red-and-black feathers.

It's panic.

Approaching panic.

Nilly, calm down.

Calm down!

Breathe!

Ben didn't go either way, of course. What reason did he have? Who did he have to run away from? The very idea is ridiculous. But something must have happened. There must be some reason why he isn't sitting in the shop waiting for me. Why he went out without letting me know. Why he isn't answering his phone.

An accident.

There must have been an accident. Maybe he's been hit by a car.

I cross the road to a bakery chain that has a counter open to the street. 'Excuse me,' I say, 'did you see the accident?'

The woman behind the counter has a pair of baker's tongs in her hand and blinks at me in surprise through thick glasses. Her eyes are pale and her hair is streaked with different colours. 'What accident?'

'Here on the street. Just now. An accident.'

'Where?' She puts down the tongs and wipes her hands on a tea cloth.

'Right here.'

She shakes her head. 'Must have missed it.'

I inhale sharply and step back in a hurry, knocking into another customer. 'Sorry,' I stutter. 'Sorry.' People glare at me, but I can't be dealing with their glares right now.

A kiosk.

'Did you see the accident?' I ask. 'I think there was an accident here?'

The man shakes his head.

Maybe Ben's all right. Maybe he wasn't actually involved. Maybe the accident wasn't serious—just a minor collision, and Ben's gone along to the police station to make a witness statement.

Wrong.

Because in that case, he'd answer his phone.

Ben was hit by a car. He was slightly injured—nothing serious, but the concerned driver insisted on driving him to hospital.

Wrong again.

He'd answer his phone in that case too.

Ben was hit by a car—not badly, but bad enough to pass out. He's still unconscious. His phone is ringing and ringing in his trouser pocket, but no one's answering, because the

ring tone is drowned by the ambulance siren. It's loud, the siren, horribly loud; no one hears Ben's phone, not Ben, who's unconscious anyway—and not the paramedics either. They would answer the phone—it might be family calling—but above their heads the siren shrills so deafeningly that they don't hear the ringing.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. If an ambulance had passed this way, I'd have noticed.

I press *call* again. It rings and rings. 'Ben,' I say, into the ringing. 'Ben!'

Then I decide I'd better pull myself together. There's sure to be a perfectly reasonable explanation. Not necessarily a pleasant one, but nothing to warrant the things going on in my chest right now, where a lift is descending at breakneck speed, as if the supporting cable had been cut with an axe and the lift was plummeting down with nothing to stop it—down, down, down, thousands of metres.

Because that's not real life; it is only my fear.

In real life, he is lying in a clean white bed in a clean white hospital with a clean white bandage.

Or maybe he's back in the shop. Maybe he's sitting in the pale-grey armchair, telling the astonished shop assistant where he's been.

The bell at the door jingles as I walk in. I can see at once that Ben isn't here—I can see it in the casual poise of the shop assistant; I can hear it and smell it and taste it and feel it. Everything inside me is so painfully focused on Ben's absence that I would immediately sense every molecule of him.

The shop looks the same as before; the shop assistant is on the phone again, calmness itself. How can she be so calm? She ends her call and turns around. Her face darkens when she sees me.

'There you are!' she says, stressing the words oddly and jabbing her finger at me.

‘There must have been an accident,’ I say, ‘here in this street. Someone must have taken my husband to hospital. But where is the nearest hospital?’

She stares at me as if I were mad.

‘The dress,’ she says and it sounds like a terrible accusation.

I look down and realise what she means. I’m still wearing the dress and now the fabric is stained with sweat and the hem’s coming down—how did that happen?

‘I must get to the hospital,’ I say.

‘What about the dress?’ she retorts.

‘I must get to the hospital,’ I repeat. ‘Right away, it’s urgent.’

‘You’ve ruined the dress,’ says the shop assistant. She isn’t going to let me go. I see myself embroiled in a duel with her. I see her make a flying grab at me as I try to dodge past her to the door. I see us rolling over the floor, clawing each other like a couple of rabid pups, until she rips the dress from my body and I escape from the shop with a forward roll, stark staring naked.

I put my hand to the back of my neck to pull down the zip she did up for me so tenderly only a short while ago, still believing me to be a good customer. How long has it been? Ten minutes? Twenty? Forty?

She shakes her head in disbelief. ‘It’s torn and soiled. I can’t hang it back on the rail in that state.’

‘I’ll buy it,’ I say hurriedly. ‘Forget about the dress. But I need to know where the nearest hospital is.’

‘You’ll have to pay for it,’ she says.

‘My wallet’s still in the fitting room, I’ll get it in a second. But first tell me where the nearest hospital is.’

She stares at me. What does she see?

‘I promise,’ I say. And, more quietly, ‘Please.’

‘St Elisabeth’s,’ she says. ‘St Elisabeth’s Hospital. Two stops from here.’

‘Call them, please,’ I say. ‘Quickly. And ask about the accident.’ I see the look she shoots me and add another *please*, then dash off to the fitting rooms to look for my wallet—one of these moves seems to convince her because she reaches for the phone. While I’m rummaging around in my clothes with flying fingers, I try ringing Ben again, listening to the dialling tone until I can’t bear to listen any longer. It takes me a while to find my wallet; it’s hiding right at the bottom of my bag.

I go back to the shop assistant with my clothes rolled up under my arm and hand her my card over the counter. ‘Well?’ I ask anxiously, when I realise she’s off the phone.

‘There was no accident,’ she says, scrutinising me with something new in her face—pity, or perhaps sympathy. Whatever it is, it doesn’t stop her from sliding my card slowly into the chip reader and saying imperiously, ‘Your PIN please.’

‘No accident?’ I ask, stunned.

She shakes her head.

My brain’s throbbing. ‘Then he must have collapsed—had a heart attack.’

‘Oh, is he ill?’ the woman asks, demonstratively pushing the chip reader in my direction.

‘No,’ I say. ‘No, he isn’t, actually.’ There’s a deathly hush. I hear the buzzing in my ears that I usually only hear when I’m alone.

‘If you could...’ the woman says, gesturing towards the chip reader and I nod, defeated, and enter my PIN. I need her co-operation.

She pulls the long strip of paper out of the gadget with an air of satisfaction and tears it off, a slip for her and a slip for me. Then she says, ‘I didn’t ask about a road accident; I asked in general. They’d have said if they had anyone.’

‘What?’ I ask.

‘Just now, when I rang the hospital. I asked if anyone had been admitted. And they said they hadn’t had any admissions in the last half hour.’

I nod slowly.

‘Have you tried calling his phone? Maybe it’s something quite—harmless,’ she says, pausing strangely before the word *harmless*.

‘I’ve been trying all this time.’

I see what’s happening. Just a moment ago she was my ally; now she’s beginning to wonder.

‘We must call the police,’ I say. ‘Will you do it, please?’

‘What do you want me to say to them?’ the woman says. ‘No, I can’t do that. I’ve only your word for it that...’ She hesitates.

‘Please,’ I say.

I know they won’t come if I call. They don’t send out patrol cars because a grown woman has lost sight of her boyfriend on a shopping spree. But I need the police. I know something’s not right. And I think I know what.

The shop assistant hesitates briefly, then shakes her head. ‘Listen, I’m really sorry, I can see how concerned you are, but I can’t help you. I can’t lie to the police.’

‘No, apparently you can’t,’ I say slowly and, without bothering to say goodbye, I walk out of the shop with my belongings under my arm.

Ben always answers his phone. If he doesn't have time to talk, he says, 'I'll call you back,' and hangs up. Sometimes, very rarely, he switches it off, but he always tells me first, or texts me. He would never not answer his phone if it were switched on.

There's no point texting him, but I do. I write: *Where are you? Has something happened? Get in touch!* and watch as the message vanishes into the electronic ether and stays there, unread.

I dial 110.

'My husband's disappeared.' Even as I say it, I know it's futile, but I explain, all the same. That Ben definitely went into the shop with me. That I was ten minutes, max, in the fitting room. That...

'You've dialled 110,' says the voice at the other end.

'Yes,' I say, 'I'm aware of that.'

The voice asks me to clear the line. Tells me that the police aren't responsible for men who go walkabout on shopping sprees. Tells me to go home and call Ben's friends and family. Says that most missing persons turn up within forty-eight hours. That anyway, just because Ben hasn't answered my calls for an hour, it doesn't mean he's a missing person. The voice grows impatient and I hang up.

It's been three hours now. But I'm doing my best to be sensible. First I dashed up and down the street, stopping people, questioning shopkeepers. Then I sat down on a bench and tried to think. I'm still sitting there.

I was told to call friends and family—Ben's friends and family... The voice didn't know what it was talking about. It isn't quite that easy.

We're not in close contact with Ben's friends and family. Far from it.

There are various reasons for this.

We want to be alone, Ben and I. We need our solitude. There are some things you can't share with others.

That Sunday in August, for instance.

I remember the sun beating down and the smell of summer in the air—dried grass and wild flowers. We lay on our bellies in a field and dozed. Ben took a stalk of dry grass and etched white lines onto my brown arms.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

And he said, very quietly, 'I'm drawing lines.'

'Like a prisoner, marking off the days on the wall?'

La cárcel.

He gave a brief snort of laughter and said, 'If this is a prison, I want to stay inside.'

When two people are happy, all is well and lovely when they're together. It's enough to lie on the field and feel the sun slowly burning you and a stalk of dry grass on your skin. Ben is pale and sensitive, in spite of his black hair, and I rub him with sunscreen—even the back of his neck, even behind his ears, even in places people would probably forget if they didn't love him as much as I do. I remember wondering whether Flo was as good at it as I was. But it was too lovely and too hot to think of Flo and I dozed off. When I woke, I felt Ben's stalk of grass on my bare back.

He saw that I'd opened my eyes. 'It's a good thing you're so brown,' he murmured.

'Why?' I asked sleepily.

'Because the writing wouldn't show up so well otherwise. If I ever have to take down a number in a hurry and don't have a pen, all I need is a stalk of grass or a stick and a patch of your skin.'

'You're welcome to it. I have plenty.'

'Hmmm.' He cupped my buttock with his hand.

'And what number did you write down just now?'

‘That wasn’t a number; it was your name. Easier to write, because it’s all straight lines. Good thing you’re not called anything else.’

I remember thinking that it would be better if I wrote my name on him. Marked him as mine.

And then I stopped thinking and concentrated on the feel of the sun beating down and the stalk of grass carefully scratching my skin. It was all very beautiful, somehow.

I’m going to do exactly what the police suggested, so that later, when I ring again, I can tell them I’ve done all the right things. Then they’ll have to take me seriously.

The police regard it as unwise to follow up every small mishap the second it’s reported. Experience has taught them that when a man disappears on a shopping trip, there is normally a simple explanation—an argument or an impromptu trip to the pub. In most cases, they’re right.

They can’t know that it’s different with Ben. They don’t know him—don’t know us.

I press *call* and clamp the phone to my ear.

‘Hello?’ says the voice. It sounds cold and terse.

It’s Markus’s voice. I have decided to start with Markus, Ben’s best and oldest friend.

‘It’s me, Nilly,’ I say.

He waits.

‘Do you know where Ben is?’

‘You what?’

‘Ben’s gone.’

Silence quivers between us. Then Markus says, ‘You’re not serious!’ and before I know it, he’s hung up.

‘Markus—’ I say, but the phone is beeping in my ear.

I have Ben’s sister’s number in my phone too.

Her name is Kate.

I only get the answerphone. A cheerful voice informs me that Mila, Leon, Kate and Hans aren't in just now. It's a child's voice, but I can't tell whether it's Mila's or Leon's. I don't know either of them. I only know Kate from Ben's stories.

'Hello, it's Nilly, Ben's girlfriend,' I say. 'Please get in touch as soon as you can.' I leave my number.

Then I call Ben's parents.

'Godak speaking,' says his mother. I picture her in their big hallway, leaning against the chest where an enormous bunch of artificial flowers stands in a cream vase next to the telephone. I see her incredibly wrinkly hands claw the receiver with varnished nails.

I was only there once, but I remember every detail of that afternoon. I remember Ben telling them to get stuffed. He said he didn't want any more to do with them if they were going to be like that. If they were going to treat me like that.

I remember the sound of the door slamming behind us when we left.

'Hello, it's Nilly,' I say and she hangs up.

My heart is pounding.

They are *his* parents. *He* has disappeared. This has nothing to do with me.

I try again.

Someone picks up, but doesn't speak.

'It's about Ben,' I say. 'I wouldn't call otherwise. He's—'

His mother begins to shout. 'If Ben's in trouble, he can ring me himself!'

'That's the thing. He can't. He's gone missing.'

For a moment she is silent. Then she says, 'If that's the case, I'll discuss it with his wife, not you. Goodbye.'

And she hangs up.

They hate me. They all hate me. They hate me because Ben loves me.

What did the police advise me to do? *Go home*. Because he might turn up there. Someone might call the landline. There might be some clue waiting for me.

So here I am. And there's no Ben, no call, no clue.

Only our flat—three big rooms in a partly renovated period building with stucco moulding and scuffed parquet and a quaint bay window overlooking the busy road and the lovely green tree that grows impassively between the parking bays.

A mock privet, Ben says.

He knows that kind of thing.

The first thing I did when I got in was to take off the dress. My wedding dress. It was looking rather the worse for wear. I put it on a hanger in the hall and went into the kitchen in my underwear to get a glass of water.

I turned my phone on and off several times. I even contacted the provider to make sure the connection was all right. It was.

I sent Ben countless texts. I rang him repeatedly.

Now I don't even get a dialling tone. His phone seems to be off—or perhaps the battery's flat. He'd never switch it off—never.

It's one in the morning and something appalling has happened to Ben. I know it has. But nobody else knows. And no one believes me.

Earlier this evening I checked to see if Ben's car was still in the yard, and it was, of course—parked next to mine, exactly where he left it. I don't really need mine anymore; I've been meaning to get rid of it for ages.

Nothing's been touched in the flat either. Torn envelopes on the sideboard in the hall, crumbs and coffee rings on the kitchen table, our bed rumpled and unmade, the sheets cold. Everything looks just as it did when I left to meet him from work.

Just to be sure, though, I slide open the doors of our wardrobe. They glide soundlessly on their tracks and I remember putting up this monster of a wardrobe with Ben. A wardrobe for two. A his and hers wardrobe.

Ben's things are hanging neatly on their hangers. Shirts, T-shirts, jackets. His trousers lie folded on the shelf above. I run my finger over the smooth cotton of his shirt collars. There's nothing missing, of course.

Our flat.

Nuestra casa.

It was something of a miracle that we managed to find it, given the catastrophic state of the housing market and our determination to live in the city centre. But we were lucky. On a supermarket notice board, in amongst the ads for unused fitness equipment and after-school tuition, we spotted this spidery handwritten note.

Ben was always perusing the board for flats, in spite of my protests. 'No one advertises flats on supermarket notice boards in the twenty-first century,' I said. He disagreed. 'Think of all those grannies without internet who don't fancy going through an estate agent because they think they'll be conned.'

And so we found our flat. The granny turned out to be a grandad with a Zimmer and a long-haired dachshund that immediately latched onto Ben's leg and began to hump it. 'You're a sweet little doggy,' said Ben with his scheming marketeer's laugh. 'What's your name?' The dog was called Brawny. 'Hello, Brawny,' said Ben, beaming at him. Brawny's master beamed back. Brawny continued to hump away shamelessly at Ben's leg.

We moved in soon afterwards. It's a large flat, very light and airy—and, best of all, it still has the big old casement windows and some of the original stucco in the sitting room—also a tarnished chandelier which we bought off the previous tenants. The only other thing we bought was the wardrobe. Once that was up, all we did was scatter my things about. There weren't enough shelves, but we didn't buy new ones—just piled the surplus books on the

scuffed parquet along the sitting-room wall. Ben brought hardly anything with him. He said he didn't want to. So we have lots of space.

At first I'd assumed that we'd drive to the DIY store and paint and drill and find a place for everything—that we'd *set up home*. But Ben wasn't keen. 'I like it like this,' he said. 'I don't want to put any more energy into houses; I feel more comfortable just leaving things as they are. Not just in the flat—in general. I want us to leave things as they are and focus on us. Or are you dying to decorate? Is it important to you?'

I'd imagined coloured walls, dusky blue in the sitting room and lemon yellow in the kitchen. But I knew what he meant.

Ben moved here from the house he'd bought and done up together with Flo—the 'blue house', he called it. He and Flo had chosen furniture and had walls moved, put down a patio, laid parquet flooring—but none of that had helped; in spite of all the work and time and money they put in, the promised happiness didn't materialise—and now, for him, at least, the house was gone, discernible only as an additional burden on his shoulders. Along with his guilt at leaving Flo, he felt the weight of house and garden, lawnmower, shed, patio—every last piece of furniture, every last nail. It was a lot to shoulder; it weighed heavy on him. He didn't talk about it, but I could tell.

That was why Ben no longer wanted to be tied to bricks and mortar and furniture. Only to me.

I love the flat. But I'm glad we haven't tried to impose our personalities on it and spoil its shabby old-town charm. I think it's the reason we're so happy here.

An image flashes into my mind. I see Ben coming out of the bathroom in a towel this morning, freshly shaven, his hair dripping, as I put brimming mugs of coffee on the kitchen table. He pushes past me to the fridge, squeezing my bum on the way. 'Cheese,' he says, peering in. 'We must get some more of that new cheese. It was superb, wasn't it?'

‘It’s only available this week,’ I say, leaning forward to brush a fleck of shaving foam from his neck. ‘It was on special offer.’

‘What was it,’ he says, ‘Basque? I’ll have to get a whole kilo, at least.’ And he sits down and reaches for the paper. ‘Have you got the sports section?’

‘No,’ I say, ‘but there’s a story here that will amuse you. About a burglar who got the wrong house and everything went pear-shaped.’

He starts to say something, but goes quiet because he’s found the sports section, and then we both sit in silence, drinking the coffee I’ve made, our heads bowed over the newspaper Ben has been out to get. And from time to time, we smile at each other, for no particular reason. The kitchen smells of coffee, the paper rustles and we smile even when we’re not looking at each other, because all is well and we’re together.

We’re so happy in our new flat. I’ve never been so happy.

And now I’m sitting here, in the middle of the night, wondering why I’m suddenly alone.

I go into the kitchen and collapse on a chair. I drink two glasses of tap water and eat a piece of Ben’s Basque cheese. Then I eat some crisps left over from yesterday. I must keep my strength up. I can’t stop eating just because of this choked feeling in my throat.

In the fridge is the bottle of white wine Ben opened yesterday evening. Wine at dinner was new to me—I’ve never drunk much alcohol—but it’s normal for Ben. He automatically lays wine glasses when he’s setting the table, the way some people lay napkins. That seemed strange to me at first, but I got used to it and now I love it. I love it when he clinks glasses with me—when we look at each other and he breaks into a smile. Drinking wine gives every meal something ritualistic. And that moment when we look at each other with raised glasses is also the moment when I know he doesn’t regret giving things up for me. That makes me so happy I could weep—or maybe burst—but I don’t; I only say, ‘Cheers,’ very softly.

The sight of the wine in the fridge door is painful. I could, of course, pour myself a glass. (Isn't this just the kind of situation that lends itself to getting drunk alone?) But I don't. If I filled a solitary glass of wine now and raised it to my lips without the soft clink of Ben's glass and without Ben's *Cheers* and without Ben's eyes on mine, I really would weep and burst—and not with happiness. So I refrain, because I must keep my cool, I must stay alert; there's no one else who can take care of this. I'm on my own here, and Ben's on his own too—only somewhere else—and I must stay alert because he needs me.

Breathe, Nilly.

Breathe. All you have to do is breathe.

Then all will be well. I only have to keep myself together.

I managed this afternoon. I even managed to ring people I knew wouldn't want to talk to me.

They, too, though, are concerned about Ben in their own way—that's how they explain their hostility: they want the best for him; they think he's made a bad decision. If they knew he'd gone missing, they'd be worried. God, yes. But I don't get a chance to tell them, because they're watching a different film. They're still watching Ben and Flo's break-up drama. They've been watching it for a year and a half now and something about it seems to intrigue them; it creeps them out, but they keep watching with morbid curiosity, munching their popcorn, not realising that the images flickering on the screen have nothing to do with reality.

A break-up like that wreaks havoc, of course—not only to the life of the couple, but also to the lives of those close to them. I understand that Ben's friends and family feel a conflict of loyalties. They went to his wedding. They've known Ben and Flo as a couple all these years—spent time with them, celebrated birthdays, been on days out, had dinner with them. Their albums are probably full of photos showing the two of them as a couple.

Couples like other couples. That's a law of nature.

Couples get freaked out when other couples split up. That, too, is a law of nature. It makes them aware of the precarity of their own union. It sows doubts which many couples can't cope with; they find themselves questioning their own relationships. *What about us?* they wonder. *Am I happy? Is my partner happy? Is he cheating on me? Or perhaps thinking of it? How often does he think of it? Will it be our turn next?*

To avoid having to face up to these questions, couples demonise other couples' break-ups. They form a circle around the newly separated, point their fingers at the one who's supposedly to blame and chorus: *How awful! How wicked! How could you?* They bury one half of the couple in guilt and bathe the other in sympathy. And the third person—the one who was malicious enough to spark the whole thing off—is, of course, the devil incarnate.

It's ridiculous. First they demonise and isolate us, then they think it suspicious that we spend so much time alone.

But now that Ben's missing, it doesn't matter what they think about me or what they feel about Flo—which of us did what wrong or who's suffering the effects of what. This is a whole new situation. This is an emergency. We have a problem that needs solving. We need to find Ben. I'm going to make them understand that. The only question is how?

It is almost half past one.

It's dark outside. I'm exhausted, but at the same time I'm excited and scared. Horribly scared.

I must get some sleep.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I'll find out what's happened.

I wake at six.

I've slept two hours, max, but it'll have to do.

I get up, trying not to look at the empty space in the bed—trying not to put my hand where Ben would usually be and touching nothing, the way I did so often in the night. Over and over, choked with fear.

I try to focus on the facts, which makes me feel a little calmer. One thing I do know: he is somewhere. That is a physical truth.

Nobody melts into thin air. It's an impossibility.

Therefore, he is somewhere. I just have to find out where.

It's possible that he's very close by. Maybe I walked past him yesterday. Maybe we were separated only by a couple of metres and a wall.

When it became clear to me that I wasn't going to get back to sleep, I came up with the idea of tracking his phone. Theoretically it's doable. There's an app, in case your phone goes missing. I rang the twenty-four-hour customer hotline and they explained very long-windedly that the app had to be installed on Ben's phone as well as mine. We must make sure we do that when he gets back, to stop this kind of thing happening to us again, but for the time being, I can't track Ben or see the numbers he's dialled. His phone seems to be off now anyway, and you can't do anything with a flat battery.

Staring at my silent phone is driving me almost insane. It's connected with Ben's, I have his number, his phone must be somewhere—and yet I can't get in touch with him. I feel as if I'm chasing my own tail.

Some months ago, I lost my front-door key and looked for it everywhere. In the two hours I spent looking, I must have come up with the bright idea of phoning it about forty times and every time it took me a split second to realise that you can't phone a key.

It's the same now with Ben's phone. My mind's in an endless loop of futility.

The kitchen looks strange. Empty, deserted. Not the way it looks when Ben's at work or out shopping or away on a business trip or at the dentist or taking the empties to the bottle bank—all those wine bottles he uncorks for us at dinner time.

The kitchen seems to know the difference.

I must concentrate. No, I must do something.

I fill a coffee mug with water and drink it down. I pull on my shoes, put my fully charged phone in my pocket and set off.

I'll take the shop as my starting point.

It looks different in the morning.

For the first time, I notice the shop sign. 'Chloes' the shop is called; the name is emblazoned in white curly writing on both the sign and the window. In the window I see what I saw yesterday with Ben. I see a solitary grey dress on a headless mannequin—a wonderful dress, my dress, the perfect wedding dress for a woman who doesn't usually wear dresses.

A dress whose twin is now hanging, sad and bedraggled and sweat-stained, in our flat.

Rooms look different once you've walked through them. This way they have of undergoing drastic change has always unnerved me. When I go into a shop or café for the first time, I have a fairly clear impression of the place. The second time, my impression is quite different. It's the same here. Is it because I now know that the shop goes much further back than you can see from the outside? Does the brain supplement what the eye can't see?

I rattle at the shop door. It's locked. A sign tells me that it's going to stay that way until eleven.

But inside, there are lights on. I press my nose to the window; there is movement at the back of the shop. I knock.

No reaction.

'Hello!' I call and knock again.

Nothing.

I sit down in the doorway, probably a favourite pissing spot for dogs. I pull my phone from my pocket. Routine check. Negative.

I look at the time. It's been almost nineteen hours.

Nineteen hours without Ben.

He's somewhere here. Breathing, talking.

Living. I can almost feel him calling out to me. He's waiting, I can sense it. There's nothing esoteric about it. 'It's the line connecting us,' Ben always says. Our special link.

The link that tells me how he's feeling. What he's going to say next. Where he wants me to touch him. When he's hungry, when his key's turning in the lock, when he's lusting for me. I know all that as sure as if it's been dictated to me.

And in the same way, I know that he's alive and waiting for me.

I get up and bang on the glass again. Nothing.

The bakery chain across the road is open, so I fetch myself two coffees and sit down at a pavement table, making sure I can see the door. My phone rings as I put the cups down in front of me, and I'm in such a hurry to pull it out that I knock one of the cups, scalding my hand and flooding the table.

It's only a client. Probably wants to know why I'm taking so long with his business report. I hang up on him.

I work as a freelance translator. Spanish into German and, very occasionally, German into Spanish. My job is as fraught with misconceptions as my name.

Misconception number one: translating is the same as interpreting.

Misconception number two: translation means literary translation.

Misconception number three is trickier and concerns my motives. When people hear that I studied Spanish, they smile broadly and ask interested questions about my holidays and

stints abroad, and it soon becomes clear that it's really their own holidays and stints abroad they want to talk about.

Before they can get carried away, I tell them I'm not in love with the country or the culture; it's only the language that interests me. 'Oh, what a shame,' they say, and quickly drop the subject, deciding I must be a nerd or a technocrat—or perhaps an intellectual, or a writer in disguise.

But what I say about being interested in the language isn't really the truth. The truth is that you have to study something and do some kind of job. And at least translators get left in peace, can stay put and don't have to talk to anyone.

I translate instruction manuals and brochures and PR texts; sometimes I edit business reports. None of that is particularly difficult, none of it is particularly important or urgent—not in my price bracket anyway. I work only for direct clients and they don't put pressure on me the way an agency might.

You could do so much more, Ben always says. He doesn't say that because he thinks I earn too little—though he'd be right. He says it because he believes in challenging yourself, in doing a job that interests you. Ben is a marketer, body and soul. He doesn't understand that I'm not like that.

He doesn't understand that I like my job precisely because it's dull and undemanding—that I find that reassuring.

No business is going to go bankrupt because the Spanish version of a homepage is a day late going online. It doesn't matter if I don't take my calls today or answer my emails.

I can focus on more important things.

Los hechos. The facts.

I need coffee. Then I must get to grips with the situation.

The facts are:

Ben has gone.

He's not answering his phone.

He hasn't been in touch.

He hasn't been admitted to any of the local hospitals (no man between twenty and fifty was admitted in the last twenty-four hours—I checked last night).

All that points to one thing: kidnap. But no one's been in touch to ask for money or whatever these people ask for. He can't be a casual victim; no one randomly kidnaps a man from a high-end women's clothes shop. There was method to it. Someone wants something specific from him. Or from me.

And there's only one person who comes into question—the person who has given Ben and me so much grief, the person we thought we were finally rid of. Flo. His ex-wife.

She's clung unhealthily to him all this time, but that's over now; the divorce is imminent. (Yes, all right, strictly speaking, she's still his wife.)

Once Flo had grudgingly accepted that the break-up was irreversible, she came over all co-operative. Ben was grateful for this. I was suspicious, but said nothing. The two of them reached a settlement, partly through mediators, partly through lawyers—and definitely more advantageous to Flo than to Ben so that things suddenly began to move quickly. A date was set for the divorce. The day when everything would be over at last. The day when Ben and I would be free. There's no real reason, of course, why a formal act like that should bring such liberation, but it felt that way to us; we longed for it. Divorce divides time into a before and an after. The divorce is the last hurdle to be jumped in the long, tough process of separation. Had I been feeling uneasy all along—feeling that something might happen, that the suffering wasn't over yet, that something might go wrong?

Hard to say. But something's certainly gone wrong.

That's as much as I know. I have no idea what's going on in Flo's head. Maybe the approaching divorce date has put paid to her apparent good sense, maybe her emotions have flipped back to anger and hatred.

Was the kidnapping planned? And what's the aim? To prevent the divorce? But then, what's she done with Ben? And what good is it to her?

She can't force him to go back to her.

Or was it an irrational, spur-of-the-moment act—a sudden animal impulse? I've already seen what drastic measures she is prepared to resort to. Was she passing by chance? Did she glimpse him through the window? I see the scene before me: Flo, sauntering around town, looking about her—when suddenly, through the glass, she sees him. Ben. The man who left her. The man she loves. The man she refuses to give up. There he is, sitting in an expensive boutique, clearly waiting for me—his new woman. Did she crack up? Did she charge into the shop and forcibly drag him out? But—would she have managed? So quietly that I didn't hear them? Not likely. It makes no sense.

But what would make sense?

I go back to the beginning of the scene: Ben in the armchair, casually leafing through a magazine—or bent forwards, mucking around with his phone. And Flo, glimpsing him through the window. Lurking outside as she puzzles out what to do. Closing in on him. I hear the bell jangle as she enters the shop. But then I'd have heard it from the fitting room and I don't think I did. Maybe I missed it. And then? What happened? How did he react?

Maybe she beckoned him out to her. It's possible that he went to her on the street, to avoid a scene. To avoid another meeting between the two of us—to avoid more shrieks and threats and tears. He had, after all, promised me that we were done with all that. But if he did go out to her, what happened next? Why didn't he come back in?

It isn't really plausible. None of my theories are.

But one thing's for certain: Ben would never have left of his own free will. Someone must have forced him.

And Flo is the only person I can think of. She loves him. She hates me. She'd do anything to prevent our wedding. Anything to prevent the divorce.

She won't want to talk to me, of course. She'll slam the door in my face. Maybe she'll scream. Maybe she'll throw things at me.

No, nothing in the world will make her want to talk to me, but I must try, I must persuade her—with force, if necessary.

She's bound to be in because she works from home; I know from Ben that they converted the loft to make an office for her. That's where she hangs out, designing some stuff or other. She's a product designer; I googled her so I wouldn't have to ask Ben. Her homepage shows an attractive and competent-looking woman, well-dressed with elegantly made-up blue eyes and fine gold bangles on delicate wrists—a woman who is stylish and classy, but arty at the same time. They were too much for me, those pictures. I didn't look at them again. The few times I actually met Flo were so stressful—flashes of screaming and confusion—that I didn't dare look too closely. I won't be brave enough to look now either.

But how can I talk to her if I don't?

I feel slightly sick, but perhaps it's just the coffee. I stare at the two empty cups on the tray in front of me.

There's no way round it. I must go and see her.

Who else could I go to?

I'll muster all my courage and go and knock at her door. Ask her to tell me where Ben is. It's a ludicrous plan, a joke of a plan—in fact, it isn't really a plan at all. But what else can I do? I've no better idea.

I could start by humbly asking her for help. If she really has nothing to do with Ben's disappearance, she's probably the only person who can help me. I know Ben inside out; I know all his thoughts and all his feelings—but Flo knew him first. Perhaps the reason for his disappearance can be traced back to the time of his marriage to her.

And if she *is* involved in things—which is, of course, much more likely—I can use the pretext of needing her help to get closer to her. I can observe her to see how she reacts—poke around her house a bit.

Yes, that's good.

Though I mustn't forget that I'm the woman who snatched her husband.

The woman she wanted to kill for snatching her husband.