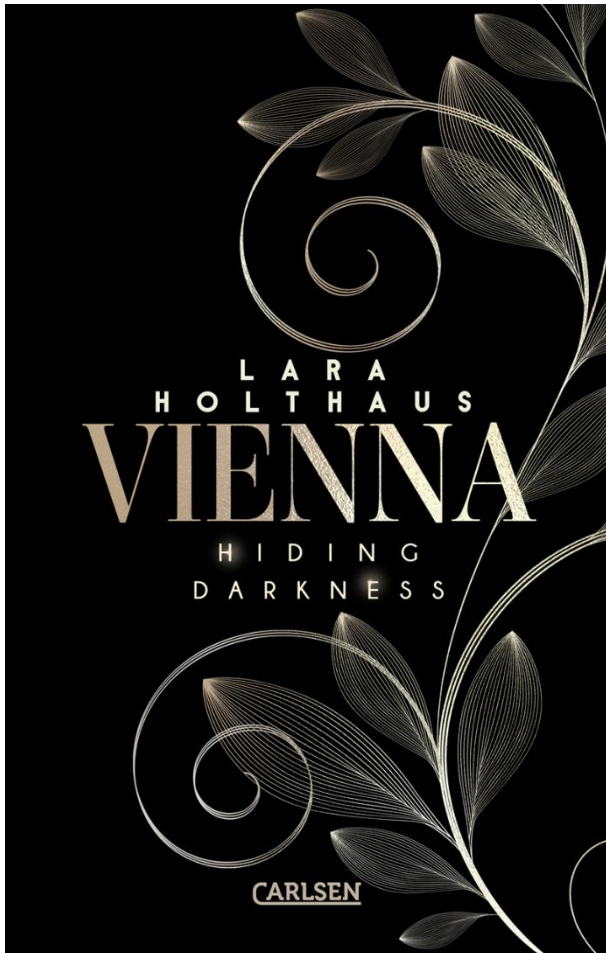


Lara Holthaus: Vienna – Hiding Darkness (vol. 2)

Vienna – Hiding Darkness

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Please always check the original manuscript.

**LARA
HOLTHAUS**

VIENNA

**HIDING
DARKNESS**

CARLSEN

PLAYLIST

Wien – Mayberg
traitor - Olivia Rodrigo
The Winner Takes It All (Acoustic) - Jea Hall
How to Be a Heartbreaker - MARINA
I Can Do It With a Broken Heart - Taylor Swift
Unstoppable - Sia
Zorn & Liebe - Province feat. Nina Chuba
No Time to Die - Billie Eilish
Foolish One(Taylor's Version)(From the Vault) – Taylor Swift
I Feel Like I'm Drowning - Two Feet
Ohne mein Team - Bonez MC feat. RAF Camora feat. Maxwell
Schwarzes Herz - AYLIVA
The Last Time - Taylor Swift feat. Gary Lightbody
favourite crime - Olivia Rodrigo
In Flammen - LEA
What Was I Made For – Billie Eilish
champagne problems - Taylor Swift
Lover (Piano Version) - Will Adagio
You Are In Love (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift
High for This - The Weeknd
Last Dance - Dua Lipa
Daylight - Taylor Swift

CHAPTER 1

SHREDS OF PAPER - SHREDS OF HEART



"How was school, dumpling?"

Before Nora can answer, she is distracted by Heinz, who gives her a friendly wave and shortly afterwards conjures up a red lollipop. Beaming with joy, she hops towards him, takes it and is about to tear open the wrapper when she stops.

"Are you okay?" Confused, I look down at her.

She turns the lollipop back and forth and then looks sceptically at Heinz's puzzled expression. "There's no poison in there, is there?"

"Excuse me?" He scratches his head. "Of course not, young lady." He looks at me questioningly.

I have to giggle. "Our stepmother somehow put a flea in her ear with the whole thing." Then I turn to my sister. "Nora, you can always take lollipops from Heinz. I swear that apart from the chemicals that are in those things anyway, no poison has been added."

"I'm just asking," she whispers and starts to pick at the plastic packaging with her little hands.

"You're right." The porter laughs grandfatherly. "Better safe than sorry. That's what my wife always says."

"See!" Nora puts one arm on her hip.

"Okay, okay." I put my hands up and admit defeat.

"Come on, then. I really want to get on the couch and put on something cosy." *And to Nick*, I add silently. I feel warm when I think of him.

"Stupid," Nora brings me back to the here and now.

"What's stupid?"

"School today. You just asked."

"Oh, yes, that's right." We walk to the lift. My sister pushes the lollipop between her teeth. "And what was stupid?"

"Oscar really annoyed me." She narrows her eyes to slits and looks at herself in the mirror as the lift starts to move.

"What did he say?"

"That dad stole from poor people. And is a corpulent political pig."

Shit, kids can be so mean. "Corpulent?" I ask, confused. "Or do you mean corrupt?"

"No, corpulent."

I rub my forehead. I'd love to walk straight into the classroom, find Oscar and give him a good telling off. Of course I can't. There's a good chance that some panicked teacher at the Phönix private primary school would immediately call the police and I'd be led out of the schoolyard in handcuffs. The gossip press would be in their pants with joy. *Crazy, potentially demon-possessed it-girl attacks clumsy third-grader.* Or something like that. Oscar would just have one more reason to shove a few more lines down Nora's throat. Besides, the boy is just parroting the rubbish his parents say at home anyway.

"Shall I have a word with Mrs Schneider?" I ask Nora

So instead, I'm cancelling my I'm-going-to-be-a-third-grader-less plan.

"No." She giggles. "I can handle Oscar from the dustbin."

"Okay." I wink at her. The lift doors open gently and we step into the spacious maisonette.

I let my gaze wander through the corridor. At the open wardrobe, I spot Dad's jackets and coats, mine and Nora's. Nick's and Tanja's are missing. Nick's and Tanja's are missing. Strange. Tanja is always at home at this time of day to help Nora with her homework.

Something is wrong.

I feel it immediately. Something is not as it should be. My heartbeat triples. Because I know the feeling. I know this unpleasant, sinister premonition that I'm about to make a discovery that will pull the rug out from under me.

That's exactly how I felt sixteen months ago.

"Hello?" I call into the living room. An eerie silence answers me. An unpleasant tug spreads through my stomach.

Take it easy, Livia. Don't panic. It could mean anything. Just because they've had roughly all our assets for a few hours doesn't mean they've taken off with them. It's just the shadows of the past clouding your mind.

I walk past Nora with quick steps.

"Tanja?" I call upstairs. "We're at home!"

No answer again. Again that disgusting tugging inside me.

"Maybe she's taking a nap." Nora shrugs her shoulders. "She looks tired lately."

"Maybe," my lips say impulsively and I hope,

I beg, pray that it's true. That my gut feeling is wrong. That it's just the deep-seated fear of being abandoned and betrayed again. To put an end to my dark thoughts, I walk as calmly as I can up the stairs to my parents' room, which has been turned into Tanja and Papa's room. I'm about to find a sleeping Tanja and prove to my battered heart that it can relax. That it's racing so fast for nothing that it's about to crush through my ribs and shred my Paco Rabanne blouse.

Everything will be fine. You're totally overreacting.

I press the door handle with trembling fingers. No jewellery on the bedside table. No make-up on the Dressing table. My field of vision begins to flicker.

I frantically tear open the wardrobe. Dad's shirts. Dad's suits. Nothing from Tanja. I rummage madly through drawers, pull open more doors, throw myself on the floor and look under the bed. Nothing. There's nothing of her. Nowhere. Not even a single smelly sock. Not a shred of evidence that Tanja Steiner ever lived here. Was ever in our lives.

I jump up, clutching at the last straw that keeps me from falling into a never-ending abyss. Maybe Tanja is a bitch who was just waiting for Dad to sign over the company shares to her. She might be, but not Nick. He wouldn't ...

I almost fall down the stairs as I run back downstairs. Towards his room. The room I didn't want him in for so long, the room I really wanted to get him out of. Now I want nothing more than to open the door and see him. *Are you coming back to iron curtains?* he'll say and grin at me mockingly. That's how it will be. Please. It *has to be like* this.

The three steps through the living room seem like

a marathon. My heart stumbles and a lump the size of a bowling ball grows in my stomach. I wasn't wrong about him. He didn't do this. HE HASN'T LEFT ME. Inside, I scream against the ever-growing doubts.

I pull frantically on the door handle and stumble into the room. A made-up bed. Next to it an equally empty bedside table.

Pa- nik threatens to swamp me, sweep me away and rob me of the air I need to breathe forever. I open the door again the wardrobe.

Empty.

A yawning emptiness on clothes rails, in compartments and drawers screams at me. The ground beneath my feet begins to shake. The world, everything I've believed in over the last few weeks, everything I've lived for, is coming apart at the seams. I spin around and stare at the desk.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

No photos. No camera. Nothing to suggest that a man with summer grey eyes who *saw* me lived here.

My thoughts are racing.

My pulse is pounding.

My stomach cramps.

Then my gaze falls on the pinboard. To where a Polaroid of me and an outstretched middle finger once hung. To where a scrap of paper now hangs.

My eyes read the four words that don't manage to reach my brain.

I am sorry.

I. Am. Sorry. Three words. Written in curved, very familiar handwriting. I can do nothing but stand there

and stare at the letters. My mind refuses to recognise what my heart has long known.

Then, suddenly, the storm of thoughts comes to an abrupt halt. I stare at the scrap of paper, which just a whimper later tears my heart to shreds.

Nick has left me.

My heart clenches.

Nick cheated on me.

My heart crumbles into a million pieces.

Nothing was real.

My paper heart turns to ashes and I am made of all-consuming pain.

CHAPTER 2

HEAVY AS A ROCK



NICOLAS

The sky outside the aeroplane window is slowly turning orange. We left Vienna half an hour ago. Normally, this is the moment of victory. That very special mixture of satisfaction, a sense of power and a sense of justice. Normally, I'd be sitting here imagining the rich bigwigs going mad with rage because we've screwed them over. Because we have *made* a difference.

But not today. Nothing at all is happening inside me today. Zero satisfaction. Zero pride. No matter how long I stare into the ever-darkening sky.

"Oh, that was marvellous." My mum leans back in her extra-wide seat with a satisfied smile. I can see the exact feeling I'm waiting for in vain on her face.

"Are you OK?" She looks at me scrutinising, because I'm not making any mistakes.

"Yes, everything's fine." I avoid her gaze. The orange outside the window turns blood red.

"I think that was our biggest coup so far." Satisfied

"You were really insanely good. Really, the way you wrapped that scraper around your finger. Wow."

This scratching brush. A blonde scraper with sharp talons and cat-like green eyes that always have something bubbling in them. Sometimes anger and contempt. Sometimes devotion and passion. Sometimes happiness. Volcano eyes.

A sharp pain stings in my chest.

"You should be incredibly proud of yourself," she continues, tilting back the backrest of the wide business class seat.

"I am," I say simply and wish it didn't feel like a lie. I wish I would fly away grinning like I do every time and think I'm a hero because I'm not sitting around helplessly watching the world around us get shittier and shittier,,but doing something about it. By being the opposite of *him*. Supporting foundations, youth welfare organisations and educational programmes with money from rich bigwigs sounds extremely heroic. At least it did until a few weeks ago.

Now it feels like shit. Like a betrayal.

Pull yourself together, I say in my thoughts to my own face, which is reflected in the windowpane.

I shouldn't feel like this. I shouldn't feel like this. I mustn't think about her. Above all, I shouldn't think about her *like this*. Her face, her eyes, the way she smiles and the way she glares at me angrily. And I mustn't think about her breaking. Because of me. Because of what I've done to her. She, who trusts no one, has put her trust in me of all people. The absolute wrong person.

At the thought, my heart becomes a sharp-edged rock that presses against my ribs from the inside.

Fuck. I have to stop this!

I let out a long breath and squeeze Livia's sad eyes

Hohenburg out of my head with all my might. Conclusion. She's just a target.

Only. One. Stinking' normal. Target. Maybe I have to keep telling myself that so my foggy brain and rock heart will believe it. She's a spoilt rich brat who I've conned out of money because she has too much of it. That's all she is. She means nothing to me. She *must mean* nothing to me. Otherwise I can throw everything I've built up in my life in the bin.

"I love it when a plan works perfectly." My mum winks at me.

It worked perfectly. I worked and the Hohenburg money will help many people. Who cares about the Obelix menhir in my chest? My feelings are not important. Only the big picture counts.

"I cracked the father and you cracked the daughter."

I try to imitate my mum's confident grin. *Cracked.* The word makes me sick.

"It's a good thing you wrapped her around your finger so that she agreed to this hasty wedding. Otherwise it would have been difficult to have the management of the *Hohenburg Immogroup* transferred to my name." She nods enthusiastically and lets out a contented sigh. "What's more, we now own a large part of the Hohenburg assets."

"Yes, I know everything." *Only I don't find that half as satisfying as you do.* "But what happens to it?"

She waves it off. "I'll take care of that. I think I'll divide the money between several projects and foundations. It will do so much good and I think ..." she tilts her head thoughtfully, "... yes, I don't think we've ever grabbed this much before." Satisfied, she sips a glass of red wine and smiles beatifically. "All the stress was worth it again, wasn't it?"

I can only nod silently. "And the *Hohenburg Immogroup*? What are we going to do with it?"

"I'll transfer it to someone who better appreciates the power that comes with it. Don't worry so much." She lowers her wine scrutinising. "You don't usually ask so many questions. Is everything really all right?"

"Sure," I say firmly. "I just wanted to know again why we're doing all this." And try to drown out Livia's voices in my head. *I want everything from you. Everything.* Whispered words in a forest hut that turned into gasping curses. I've never given her *all* of me.

"You're doing the right thing and I'm really so proud of you, Raphael."

Her warm smile is not enough to dispel the chill that spreads like lightning through my heart at the mention of my name. *Raphael.* Raphael Ketterbrink. My birth name and yet the name of a stranger.

"What's next?" I ask, because it always goes on somehow.

"When we land in Cancún, we're going to go on holiday. A holiday in the Mexican sun. That's what we've really promised ourselves."

"Afterwards, I meant."

"Then it's off to New York." She rummages in her Michael Kors handbag and hands me a black folder. "Here." She points to the documents in my hand. "Familiarise yourself with Nancy Young. She'll be our next target person."

I open the file and look into the face of a dark-haired woman in her mid-thirties.

Vienna - Cancún - New York City.

New city. New name. New target. This is my life. Raphael's life.

It has always
been like this.
And it always
will go on
and on
and on.



LIVIA

Leaves turn golden.
Dad is arrested.
Nora is gone.
I am pain.

Leaves fall to the ground.
Vic says yes.
Leander flees.
I am pain.

Biscuits are baked.
The flat is big.
I sleep with men.
I am pain.

Fireworks explode.
I want to get high.
I do not do it.
I am pain.

VIENNA SPOTLIGHT

Black swan or white swan? How will Livia Hohenburg present herself at the Vienna State Ballet's *Swan Lake premiere*? The whole city is probably wondering. After months of not appearing on a red carpet, Hohenburg's confirmation came as a surprise to everyone. It remains to be seen whether she will now walk with her head held high after the scandal surrounding her father or crawl like a heap of misery.

As a reminder: Livia's father, Alexander Hohenburg, was arrested months ago for alleged embezzlement of taxpayers' money and has been in custody ever since (click here for: [Alexander the Great now very small](#)). The businessman's accounts have been frozen while the investigation into the embezzlement scandal continues. His newlywed wife Tanja has not been seen in Vienna since. Apparently, their great love wasn't big enough to last until they went to prison. A pity, as the saying goes "for better or for worse" - Tanja Steiner was probably only available for the good times. Malicious tongues even claim that dear Mrs Steiner was up to no good from the start and has now made off with her pockets full.

Whatever is going on in the Hohenburg household, it doesn't seem to be rosy times for Livia in particular. So we are all the more pleased that our favourite high society starlet is now back.

"Being there for my family is more important than galas and receptions. We have been treated badly and it is essential that we now stand side by side," Hohenburg said in a press release.

For the family and apparently also for some bachelors. At least Hohenburg has recently been spotted more and more in the company of various men. Most recently, he was snogging Lukas Winter, whose start-up was quickly taken over by Meta, which recently made him very wealthy. However, it cannot be assumed that the two are in a relationship. "@livinglivia? She's currently snacking on everyone who's not on three feet. The girl seems pretty crazy, if you ask me," says a close confidante of Hohenburg in an interview. So we can only guess what the love life of Vienna's unofficial princess is really like. After all, her Instagram channel @livinglivia resembled a graveyard for months. Until yesterday. "See you at Swan Lake", the 21-year-old posted in her story. It's clear to everyone: Livia is going to the opera tonight. Read tomorrow's *Vienna Spotlight* to find out what shape she'll be in and whether an attractive man will be accompanying her.

Leander von Traun, who was long thought to be Hohenburg's secret love, will not be. He hasn't been seen in Vienna since the autumn and seems to be enjoying himself around the globe. He was last spotted at a kink party in Saint-Tropez, defying rumours that Bad Boy von Traun had become tame.

But we can be happy about Victoria Everhofen, who is walking the red carpet for the first time today accompanied by her fiancé (click here for: [YES! Victoria Everhofen is getting married. All the info on the Sacher heiress' dream engagement](#)).

No matter what happens, the evening will definitely be a spectacle.

Clear the stage!

CHAPTER 3

FRAGILE GLASS-ME



LIVIA

Six months.

Six months have passed since I disbanded. Six months in which so much happened on the outside and absolutely nothing happened on the inside. Dad was arrested. Nora is at Aunt Britt's. Vic is engaged. Bennet is constantly travelling on business. Leander is away.

It all flashed past me like a film. I watched but didn't take part. I was just a lifeless puppet in a stinking cinema seat while my life burned to summer-grey ashes.

"Livi? Are you still there?" Nora asks during our evening phone call.

"Yes, sorry." *For a moment, I had to fight against choking on the loneliness that overwhelms me every time I enter the oppressive darkness of our flat.* I pause briefly and just stand in the corridor. Hoping for a miracle, hoping that Nora will come rushing towards me and that it was all just a dream. But there is nothing. Just lonely silence and Nora three hundred kilometres away. "Don't you have to go to bed slowly, dumpling?"

"Right away." She swallows and, despite the distance between us, I can hear that she is unhappy.

"Are you OK?" I ask, even though I know that absolutely nothing is OK.

"Yes, I ..." A sigh as deep and heavy as the lips of a seven-year-old child should not emit. My heart cracks again.

"Hey." I try not to let on. "What's wrong?"

"It's just..." She swallows again. "I miss having a family."

Family. The seven letters slit open my chest. Tears sting my eyes. "Nora. You and me. We are a family. Forever."

"I mean a real family. With Dad and ..." She leaves the rest of the sentence unspoken, but I know what she's trying to say. With a father who isn't in a cursed prison and a mother. But our mother ran away first and then died. And the woman who could have been a mother turned out to be a cheating bitch.

I wipe the salt out of my eyes with my free hand.

"We'll fix it, okay? Dad will come back. Everything will be okay." I wish I could really feel even one per cent of the confidence I put into my voice. "Everything will be fine," I repeat. "And now go to sleep, dumpling. We'll talk again tomorrow. Good night!"

"Good night, Livi."

We hang up and I remain standing in the dark hallway for a few seconds, trying not to collapse under the weight of my life. At some point, I kick my boots into a corner and walk through the dark living room towards one of the windows.

It's snowing outside. I watch the flakes that cover the wide

I've travelled away from the sky only to be trampled on by dirty sneakers on the Viennese cobblestones. I am often the snow. Crashed and trampled flat. And maybe I'll finally melt away soon.

I miss having a family. The sentence echoes in my ears and evokes memories that make my heart tear open and become palpable. Before they can completely overwhelm me, I turn my gaze away from the snow flurries and reach for the remote control. I'd rather hear the screeching of some D-list celebrities destroying their relationships at *Temptation Island VIP* than *nothing*.

The phone rings and I don't care. The last thing I want right now is to be bombarded with questions by an overbearing reporter. *When will your father be released, Mrs Hohenburg? How are you feeling now that you've hit rock bottom?*

What should I say to that? *Shitty, thanks for asking. But actually, I couldn't care less about my social status. It's more the fact that I've shown myself to be vulnerable for the first time in my life and ended up with a crazy impostor of all people. But of course, people's whispering is bad too.*

No thanks. With a bitter taste on my tongue, I boil water and pour it over a tea bag. The doorbell rings again. I grab a bag of peanut flips, plop down on the couch and let the phone be the phone. *Welcome to your second campfire*, says Lola Weippert to the candi- dates and I try to banish everything else from my mind.

"Livia?"

I'm so startled that the hot tea I'm holding spills over my fingers. "Ouch, shit!" A stinging burn flickers across my skin.

A wrapped-up creature, complete with hat and ultra-long scarf, enters the living room. "Oops. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, but it's your own fault."

"Vic, is that you?"

"Yes, who else?"

"I don't know, the yeti?" Shocked, I point to the oversized white thing that only vaguely resembles a coat.

"It doesn't exist."

"Not any more. Because you made him into a piece of clothing, you barbarian."

"Shut up! It's from Hermès and you don't know anything about fashion." She peels herself out of the hairy thing and places it on one of the armchairs.

"Looks like you've got yourself a dog." I look sceptically at the pile of fur. "Or a snow leopard. Are you hungry, Snowflake? Here, eat something." I throw a few flips at the coat. "Yes, good animal. You like that, don't you?"

"It's not real fur, of course." Vic rolls his eyes.

"Woof. Good dog." I throw another flip.

"Can you please stop feeding my coat?"

"But the good guy is starving." Another load lands on Snowflake.

"*The good one* is a piece of clothing." She gives me a judgemental look and picks the flips aka the dog food off the white fabric.

"Boredom." I grimace in her direction and turn my attention back to *Temptation Island*. Vic straightens up and stands indecisively in the centre of the room.

I sigh. "Vic, what do you want? Is there another reason for your visit besides predator feeding your weird coat?"

"Heinz let me in."

"The man clearly didn't understand his job. Since when does a porter let strangers in without prior notice?"

"He wanted to announce me, but you ignored the phone and I'm not a stranger either." She sits down next to me and throws a flip into her mouth.

"I see. And if I don't answer it, is that an invitation or what?"

"I pointed out to him that you're all alone up there." *Wow. That's something new.* "And nobody would notice if anything happened to you. Your body could be lying around here for days, stinking up the place."

"Well, it's lucky I have such positive-thinking friends." I take a sip of tea. "Besides, I've only just got home. So Heinz knows very well that I'm a long way from decomposing."

"A matter of opinion." She looks at me with raised eyebrows and lingers on a stain on my jumper.

"What if I'd just been doing naked yoga? Or had a male visitor? And you would have just barged in?"

"If you believe the tabloids, there seems to be a lot of risk lately."

"What, that I'm a crazy nymphomaniac?"

"Liv, it wasn't like that -"

"Oh, that's all right. It's true." I wave it off.

"Lukas Winter, seriously?" She shakes her head in shock.

"Since when are you interested in a Nemo like him? The guy just wants to brag to his snobbish New Money friends that he saw Livia Hohenburg naked."

"So?" I'm starting to get annoyed by her questions.

"So, a guy like that isn't really interested in you. Just your name and maybe your body."

I sigh. "Maybe that's exactly what I want, have you ever thought about it?"

"You want someone to get you laid just for superficialities?"

"That's right. After all, it didn't exactly end well when I showed someone more than my superficialities, if you remember." My throat gets tight. My heart is heavy.

"Well, no thanks." I'm not going to let anyone make me feel like I can build up the stunted being I am on the inside into a halfway upright person again. Only to shoot cannonballs at my fragile self a few weeks later and make me shatter like glass.

Vic lets out a deep sigh. "Don't you think it would do you good to take another chance? Get to know someone, someone nice. Not those fame-hungry nemos. Just because Nick didn't deserve your trust doesn't mean you can never show that side of yourself again."

I don't say anything back, but stoically look forwards at the television.

Vic lets her breath escape silently. "You've always been destructive when you've been hurt. But instead of destroying everything around you, you always destroy yourself."

"Or I survive." I manage to endure the pile of ashes *formerly known as* my life for a brief moment.

"Are you okay?" she whispers and scoots closer to me.

"Yes." I realise myself how badly I'm lying.

"Didn't we get over this silly all-is-well business?" She pulls me close. "You don't have to pretend with me. It's no use anyway. I can see how fucked up you are."

I try to fight it for another two seconds, then I collapse. "It hurts so much. It still hurts so much." Tears, which I rarely allow, roll down my cheeks.

down and mess up Vic's cashmere jumper with black mascara. "What if it never stops hurting again?"

"It will be. I promise you." My best friend clutches me tightly. Holds me as if I would drown otherwise. Which may be true.

"I don't know what to do, Vic. Every morning I get up and I don't know what the hell to do. The press have been breathing down my neck for months. Nora's in a bad way. My dad's in *fucking* jail. I really wonder what I've done to make some karma Jesus want to fuck me up like this..."

"Life really doesn't mean well with you right now." Vic strokes my hair. "But I'm proud of you, Liv. Incredibly proud."

"Why?" I turn up my nose. "I can't get anything done. Actually, all I do is breathe, eat unhealthy shit, watch trash TV and occasionally lap up a Nemo." Now that I say it like that, it sounds even more pathetic.

"That's not true. You were at university yesterday, weren't you?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't actually know why I do it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I was supposed to do this whole business administration thing to take over the oh-so-touchable Hohenburg empire at some point. But it wasn't that untouchable in the end, in case you hadn't realised."

"Then maybe now is the opportunity to do something else. Something *you want to* do." Vic gives me an encouraging nudge in the side.

"That's not possible. My father has enough problems. He's in prison. A daughter who suddenly turns her life upside down would be the last straw for him." And make a return to a *family* impossible.

"Hm."

"Hm."

"God, that sounds really badass." She buries her face in her hands. "That my dad's in jail thing."

"Damn, yes."

"Are you still visiting him?"

"Once a month." Once a month I have to go through the lock. Once a month I have to look my father in the face and see how the proud mayor of Vienna was broken.

And how he continues to hold the reins of my life.

"I was there yesterday," I explain and the memory turns the flips in my stomach into pebbles.

"So?"

"We have discussed a new PR strategy." My life. A PR strategy.

"Ah, so no more of this 'no Instagram, no gigs' thing?"

"Nope. Unfortunately, not. Actually, my life in the verbal sense has suited me pretty well." I groan. "Now I'm supposed to convey *normality*. I'm supposed to do stories again and go to stupid events. Not in the mood, I tell you. But if it helps him..."

This whole life seems even more pointless to me since I once dared to think of an alternative. Ever since I dared to believe that I could be *more*. But in the end, I wasn't more, but a meaningless nothing. The dream of studying music has moved to a faraway place. Nicolas has probably taken it with him and is chilling with him somewhere in the sun.

"Okay, but still," Vic pulls me out of my dark carousel of thoughts.

"But what?"

"Still, I'm proud of you."

"But I do absolutely nothing to be proud of."

"Well, the old Livia would have reacted differently," Vic says timidly. "To shit like that. The old Livia would have completely lost it."

"Yes, that's right. A few months ago, I would probably have been high all the time and at a party every day."

"But the new Livia doesn't do that."

"She can't either." *As much as she would like to*, I don't tell her. "If I was constantly getting drunk and going out partying, I could forget about being Nora's guardian, and having Crash Livia in the media would probably be counterproductive in terms of PR."

"Besides, I really don't want to have to fear for your life again because you've overdosed!"

"Oh yes, and that." I have to grin and wipe the tears from my wet skin.

"Good." Vic nods contentedly. "So, what are you wearing?"

"Today? I was thinking of a daring combination of an oversized sleep shirt and thermal leggings."

"That would be kind of weird on the red carpet, wouldn't it?"

I groan in annoyance. "Do I really have to go there? I'm not into ballet at all."

"That's a lie, Livia. You used to love ballet."

Back in the day. When mum and I used to sit in the front row at every premiere and dance to everything at home. Back in the day. When she hadn't left me without saying goodbye and then died. Back then, I didn't realise that she was only the first member of the We-Left-Livia-Club and that it would become half a football team just a year later.

"So yes, you have to. I told you that you could wallow in your misery until the end of the year." She claps her hands once. "Now it's January and that's that."

"You didn't say which way to count," I grumble.

"Huh?"

"The Chinese calendar year doesn't start until February. I assumed that's what you meant." I shrug my shoulders and stare straight ahead at a wild party in the *Temptation Island villa*.

"But we're not in China, we're in Vienna."

"You can ask me again when we get to the Year of the Dragon."

"Livia Hohenburg." Her tone sounds stern and she points an outstretched finger at me. "If you don't get up right away, *I'll* turn into a dragon, and you don't want to live that."

"Nice. I've always wanted a dragon. Then I'll start a gang with Daenerys Targaryen and Violet Sorrengail. I imagine it'll be chilled. We fly across the world, torch things now and again and have the time of our lives."

Vic slaps his hand over his forehead. "Please, Livia." Oops, now she sounds almost pleading. "This is the first time Clément and I have been on the red carpet together since we got engaged." As if I wouldn't otherwise understand the implications of what she's just said, she raises her left hand, which has a disproportionately large diamond ring on it. I do my best not to burn the thing with my eyes. "The press will ask so many questions about the wedding. I don't want them to realise how panicked I am about the whole thing. I can already see the headlines. Is *Victoria Everhofen getting cold feet just before the wedding?*" She closes her eyes for a second.

"I really need your help not to let on."

"Then why are you doing this, Vic? This whole wedding thing. You're so young. You don't have to be married at twenty-one. We're not in the 1950s anymore."

I would point out, as if we hadn't already chewed over the subject hundreds of times.

"You know that Clément will only receive his trust assets once he's married."

"It's such outdated patriarchal filth, really."

"I know. But he wants to build his own hotel empire. Together with me. My parents also think that ..."

"Yeah," I wave it off. "I know that they're totally upset because you're forming an alliance with the enemy and thus expanding the empire. You're lucky they didn't sell you off to Paris Hilton."

Suddenly her gaze changes. Sadness gleams in her eyes and I know I've gone too far. "Okay, I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

"Oh, that's all right." She straightens her shoulders. "You're not entirely wrong. But I really do love Clément and I would have married him in a few years anyway." Her lips fight with a smile.

"Him and his kale smoothies."

"They don't taste that bad."

"Lie."

"You're right. They taste terrible."

"Well, maybe you can lend me some money when your new *empire* goes through the roof."

Vic looks at me questioningly.

"My own has snatched up a bad Bonnie and Clyde imitation."

"Bonnie and Clyde were lovers."

"That's why it's *a bad* imitation."

"Besides, it would probably take a bit more than a hasty wedding to plunge the Hohenburgs into financial ruin. Sorry, but your trust assets alone should be enough to buy the Seychelles."

"It's all right." Vic is right. Although Tanja and Nick, or whatever their names are, have snapped up *Hohenburg Immogroup* and emptied my father's account, I'm far from broke. "I think I'll wear the blue Valentino." The resolution has left my mouth before I can stop it. But I can't bear to see Vic so distraught. I want to be there for her. And somehow I have to. Because of this whole PR thing. And because of the all-will-be-well thing I promised Nora.

"So you're coming with me?" Her eyes flash with delight.

"Yes, and I'll tell the reporter vultures a thousand times how overjoyed you are."

"Ahhhhh!" she squeals. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She gives me a peck on the cheek. "Then I can finally ask you what I've been wanting to ask you for weeks ..."

CHAPTER 4

JUSTICE FOR FIVE



LIVIA

My big toes are squashed together by the Louboutins. You're no longer used to this kind of shoe. *P l e a s e , Livia. Give us back the cosy socks and sneakers we've been living in for the last six months*, they'd probably say if they weren't toes and could talk. The dress is also pinching my neck and my hair is pulling due to the pinned-up hairstyle. How have I put up with this every day for all these years? Being an It girl is incredibly uncomfortable.

"You look very pretty, Livia." Clément, who is sitting opposite me in the saloon and clutching Vic's hand, smiles approvingly at me.

"Um. Thank you. You too." I point to his black smoking, which looks really good on him. "And you..." I turn to Vic, "look *very pretty* too."

She strokes her golden Dolce dress once. "So we all look great. Good that we've sorted that out." Grinning, she pulls her iPhone out of her black clutch.

"Do a story about me," I ask her. "Because of the PR thing and all that."

She nods and holds the camera in front of my face. I make a kissy face.

"Okay, done. You look hot, as always." A worry line suddenly forms between her eyebrows.

"Are you o.k.?" I ask, confused.

She shakes her head. "Have you ever heard of Leander? He ignores my messages and calls."

"Mine too."

"Leander's your mate who's staying at Vic's hotel, isn't he?" Clément looks back and forth between us questioningly.

"He lived here," my best friend corrects him. "Until he disappeared from Vienna from one day to the next two months ago." She taps a few times on her mobile phone and then turns it towards me. "Yesterday he uploaded a story from Saint-Tropez. There's something wrong with that."

The saloon rolls over a pothole so that I have to squint to see what's happening on the screen.

Leander's top three shirt buttons are undone. He squints slightly at the camera. In one hand he holds a bottle of Moët. In the other, a woman who could easily pass for a Victoria's Secret angel.

"But didn't the guy always party a lot?" asks Clément.

"It is." Vic tilts his head. "But not like this. My gut feeling is that something's not right."

I remain silent. Because unlike Vic, I think I know exactly why Leander ran away from Vienna and can't stand the brutal reality. He loves her. Vic. He has done for a long time and can't bear the thought of her becoming someone else's wife. But I won't tell her that. It wouldn't do any good. Vic has resigned herself to her fate and it would only hurt her to know that her engagement is the reason for Lean's downfall.

"We'll be right there." Claus turns to us at the back.
"Would you like me to drive up?"

I look questioningly at Vic. "Ready?"

"Ready, maid of honour." She smiles so broadly that my heart skips a beat. Because of course I didn't hesitate for a second when she asked earlier.

"Why doesn't anyone ask me if I'm ready?" Clément complains.

"You were born ready, my darling," Vic teases him.

Claus drives round another corner, then stops at Opernring and turns to me again. "I'm glad you're back, Livia." His smile is genuine and I wish I could say the same.

But when the car door opens, my screaming louboutin toes touch the red carpet and the reporters chatter, I don't feel a spark of joy.



NICOLAS

I should be more excited. More nervous. I should feel *something*. But as I pull on the jacket of my tailor-made suit, all I feel is the familiar emptiness that has refused to leave my body, my head and my heart for six months.

"Have you memorised everything?" My mum tugs frantically at my collar. "Today is an important day."

"Nancy Young. Thirty-five years old. Republican. Wife of Alfred Young, who is running for governor of New York State this year," I rattle off.

"That's all you know? You've been watching this woman for three months!"

"There are suspicions that her husband has staged robberies by supposed Latin Americans in order to push through a tougher deportation policy and give his election campaign new momentum. It seems to be working so far. His poll ratings are top."

"Just hearing that makes me furious." She scowls up at me. "What next?"

"Nancy is fifteen years younger than her husband and doesn't seem particularly happy in this marriage. She hates being in his shadow and always having to be his *wife*. She would actually like to have a political career herself, but her husband has a pretty good grip on her. She is often lonely. Her husband is always out campaigning and I don't think she has a single real friend."

"And you know that how?"

"I didn't speak to her directly, but I overheard her nasty friends talking about her at the champagne breakfast. They weren't particularly nice."

My mum nods contentedly. "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Today is the New Year's reception of the women's association, of which Nancy is a member. Alfred won't be there because he's invited to the senator's today. So Nancy will come alone and loathe the whole thing because she'll be asked about her husband all evening and nobody will be interested in her for a second."

"Except you." My mum winks at me.

"Exactly. I made sure I was on the guest list weeks ago. Or Tom Hauser, as the case may be. A young German entrepreneur who wants to gain a foothold in the USA."

"Okay, Tom. That sounds good. Then let's hope that the good

Nancy is so lonely that after a few glasses of champagne she tells you about her husband's criminal activities, you can record the whole thing and then leak it to the *New York Times*. If it works, that's it for her husband's political career."

"And she crashes with him ..." Something unpleasant is building up in my stomach. It's a feeling that I don't like at all and that I've been getting a lot lately. As always in these moments, I have to think about Livia. I wonder how she's doing? What a stupid question. What a stupid thank you. How is she supposed to be? I've finished her off. It'll be ages before she recovers. If at all. If I haven't made sure her fire is extinguished for good by now. *Fuck*. I can't think about her.

"Raphael?" The shitty feeling in my stomach intensifies at my name.

"Huh?"

"You help so many Latin American immigrants. Don't think about the fate of one individual. Think about the people we are really helping. Think about what happened to us."

What happened to us. I think of my father and the fifty per cent of DNA that lies dormant in me. I think of the pain in my mum's eyes that only disappears for a short time when we have landed another coup. And I think of the tattoo *justice for five* and the scar on my upper arm. Justice for the first five years of my life.

So I tighten my shoulders, lift my chin and put on a crooked smile that I know Nancy Young will like. I suppress the oppressive feeling in my stomach.

And become Tom Hauser.

No volcano eyes.

Just *justice for five*.