

Rabia Doğan: Vol. 1, Staying Was The Hardest Part (Hardest Part 1)

Bd. 1: Staying Was The Hardest Part

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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CHAPTER 1

EVREN

If you had asked me at fifteen where I saw myself when I was twenty-one, I would probably have said: at my own concerts, perhaps in a lecture theatre with people who were once strangers to me, or on the way to my dream job. I would have naively imagined anything except a dead-end job that I couldn't leave.

"Evren, can you shelve the books?" At just under one metre fifty, Melli can almost be overlooked, but her locks and bright voice attract everyone's attention. The book trolley, overflowing with piles of textbooks, reaches up to her chest. This semester's exams are coming up and, as always, students are borrowing books in a hurry, often to return them unused a few days later. We had cases where we had to phone after them. Not me, but the others.

The metal of the handlebars is cool and the wheels can only be moved after a jolt. I've never been athletic. I'm particularly reminded of this when I have to empty the trolley and walk halfway round the library with it. Why are academic books so heavy?

As I put the first tomes away in the philosophy section, someone behind me swears loudly enough for me to turn round. Far too loud for a library where people want to study in peace. With my brows drawn together, I give the person a deadly look. That's usually enough.

Sitting in front of a pile of documents, the young man taps away on his laptop as if every single key is stuck and shakes his head angrily. He realises that I'm staring at him, where upon I cross my arms in front of my chest. His eyes widen and he ducks his head before continuing to type quietly.

Sometimes you don't have to say anything - narrowed eyebrows and an angry expression are enough. That's the beauty of being human. We have learnt to interpret faces, we have been given the basic building blocks for this in the cradle.

My wristwatch tells me that I have to finish in a few minutes. I should actually go home and cook something, but it's often quieter there than in the library. With squeaky wheels, I disappear in the direction of reception to park the car there. The university management promised us new ones by the end of this semester at the latest, but so far nothing has happened and there are only a few weeks left of term. As always, it's a game of patience.

"Are those all the philosophy books that were handed in?" Melli wrinkles her nose and takes the trolley.

I nod half-heartedly. It's always the same students who have to read a lot in a short space of time. Other visitors see the library as an aesthetic photo backdrop, which I can't blame them for. With its long, rounded floors, the Philological Library is futuristic enough for attention-grabbing images on social media. Each study area is equipped with its own lamp and power socket and offers a tidy workspace where you are less easily distracted than in your own room.

"Are you staying here or are you going home already?" I've been working with Melda, who everyone calls Melli, for a year now. She's one of the few people who try to make friends with me. The fact that it's a bit one-sided is my fault. There aren't many jobs that accept my silence. When you work in a café, you have to talk to customers. At the till, you have to tell people the price and wish them a good day. As a teacher, psychotherapist or engineer, you have to talk. It's difficult to earn money if you don't talk - no matter how much you need it. But Melli has no expectations of me.

I raise my index finger and she immediately understands that I want to sit at the last table on the top floor to read a book. Her smile burrows into my heart and my mood sinks with my finger. In these moments, I would rather do anything than remain silent. But the words don't roll off my tongue. They get stuck between my confusing thoughts and my clogged throat.

Onur would have scolded me for it. He would have pushed me in Melda's direction and forced me to say something. His openness shaped me, ensured that

I was never alone and that I overcame my fears. My courage disappeared with him. Faded like his voice, of which only his last voice message reminds me.

I can't take any more, Evren. I've had enough, and I don't even know if I'm sorry to leave you alone anymore. Kiss Azra for me. Seni seviyorum.

I leave my bag in the break room and only take my book upstairs. The stairs are covered with grey carpet and muffle the sound of my boots. Most of the students are spread out on the lower levels, so that emptiness welcomes me. As is so often the case.

That doesn't bother me - I drop into my usual seat and lean against the wall next to me. That's the good thing about the last tables on either side. I take out the thin book I started reading a few days ago and turn to the right page. It's about intersectional feminism and the role Black women have played in pushing it forward. The end is not far off. It's all the more annoying that I've forgotten my highlighters. So now I have to mark important information with dog-ears.

"May I sit down?"

I don't look up until someone sits down on the chair next to me and slams a transparent library basket down on the table. The ceiling lights illuminate the long row of unoccupied tables behind the guy. Why does he have to come up to me when there are enough chairs free?

"I'll take no answer as a yes." The smile on his lips is smug and spreads across his face. The slight accent in his words makes me prick up my ears.

"I've never been to the Philological Library, but everyone says how pretty it is. So I finally had to pay it a visit before I finished my studies."

His eyes are a piercing green and watch me impassively. His eyelashes are framed by a black colour that has run slightly and a silver nose ring adorns his right nostril. He doesn't look much older than me. Maybe a few years.

He waits for an answer as I turn away from him. An answer he will never get.

Why is he even talking to me as if we were friends?

A few printed sheets slide onto the table and then onto the floor after he pulls his laptop out of the basket. I don't bother to pick them up for him. He has disturbed my reading flow.

"You're not really talkative, are you?" He doesn't seem particularly bothered by my apathy. He grins even wider. This causes a deep dimple to appear in his left cheek, which makes me stare. Involuntarily, I reach for my mobile phone and press the power button. The sweat on the back of my neck is icy cold and my heart is racing until my wallpaper lights up. Onur. My brother. He had dimples too. Not under his cheekbones, but high up on his cheeks. My mum always said that they made him special.

"Okay, you don't want to talk. Am I that daunting?" I blink in confusion. The young man pushes his way into my sight, occupies my entire field of vision. His dimple has disappeared. And so has my brother. I can see worry in the steep crease between his eyebrows, which I pay little attention to.

I stand up abruptly, causing the chair beneath me to crash to the floor. By the time I've moved it back into place, I've dropped my book twice. The paper cover tears at the top corner. I press it against my chest and stumble down the stairs. My heart is pounding so loudly in my temples that I don't even realise what Melli is asking me as I gather my bags and pull my jacket over my shoulders. The scarf ends up somewhere in my rucksack. I leave the library in a hurry.

It's been five years. Why can't I come to terms with it?

CHAPTER 2

EVREN

The underground is completely empty at this time of day. Only a few students are scattered around the various seats, chatting. Their words bounce off my eardrums, breaking down into a language I don't recognise. A language that ostracises me, that makes fun of my disintegrated state. I deserve it anyway - an awful lot of time has passed and I'm still letting my emotions get the better of me. Why can't I deal with it? Accept it or even better ... forget it.

I run shaky fingers over my face, which is covered in wet streaks. The winter weather is held back by the doors and doesn't reach my body, yet a merciless cold rushes through my insides.

The ringtone of my mobile phone sounds from my jacket pocket, which I ignore. I don't want to take it out, I don't want to see my wallpaper, I don't want to hear my mum's broken voice, which hasn't recovered since my brother disappeared. That still breaks, no matter what she says.

Why am I doing this to myself? I could have changed the picture long ago. What's stopping me? Do I have a masochistic streak?

Finally the ringing stops, repeating over and over again in my ears. Lamenting. As if I am to blame for my feelings, when it is Onur who has left me behind with all the grief, fears and tasks. A mother who can no longer sleep in her own bed, but only finds peace in his, even though his smell has faded. Escaped through the leaky wooden windows that should have been replaced long ago. He did all this to me. On purpose. And yet I suffer from it. I have to deal with the consequences of his actions, his disappearance. As if being me wasn't hard enough already. To bear myself and my grief.

"The seats are for sitting, not for bags, young lady," hisses a gaunt man with his hands wrapped around the handrail. I pull my rucksack onto my lap while the tears still sting and my lungs contract painfully.

"I don't know what it's like in your culture, but here you have to behave." It is an ominous murmur that I have heard often enough in a similar form. The man's words are sluggish, but the stabs are deep, as if he had taken the nearest kitchen knife and rammed it into my stomach at the speed of light.

I should actually be used to it, I should actually know it. After all, it's not the first time words like that have been thrown at me. My English teacher once asked me in front of the class whether my parents don't take part in consultation days because they don't speak German. In Germany, you don't just breed children to get them, you also look after them. I couldn't tell her that it was because they did the work from morning till night that everyone else was too busy to do.

My brother then went to important appointments. When I was in seventh grade, he turned up at the parents' consultation day at the age of seventeen and spoke to every single teacher. Being angry at his disappearance is heartbreaking at times.

I blink several times to stop the tears from escaping. Showing weakness next to such a person would be fatal. He would like it, and that is the last thing I want. These words should hurt him - maybe not now, but later. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I received them the way he meant them.

I look out of the window and try to block out the heat that the man next to me radiates. The lump in my throat slowly loosens.

The thirty minutes to get home seem like hours. When my station is finally announced, I breathe a sigh of relief. I squeeze past the man who has nothing but scowls for me. After I get off, the footsteps of Berliners echo on the grey tiles of the underground station and in my ears. Outside on Leopoldplatz, there is life that welcomes me with fresh air. As fresh as a city of three million has to offer. People bustle along the pavements, shop in the small, old supermarkets, grab a packet of *baklava* to round off the evening or hurry home after a long day at work. The blisters on my heels make me realise that I belong to the latter group. I shouldn't have worn my new shoes today.

I follow this route every single day, sometimes even on Saturdays. Every time, I'm confronted by the garish billboards of various shops and I learn words from languages that I always hear but can never decipher. But the colourfulness of Wedding blurs into an impenetrable grey when I open the door to my flat on the seventh floor, to which there is no lift.

Out of breath, I let the old wooden door fall back into the lock and lock it as usual. Last month someone broke in on the second floor and my mum has been careful ever since. *As if we had anything valuable here worth stealing.*

"You're here early."

I wince before turning to my sister, who greets me with a beaming face.

"Did you bring me the pedagogy textbook?"

It sends shivers down my spine when I realise that she asked me for the book this morning while I was half asleep. She needs it for an exam that's coming up soon.

"Your look says it all," she moans, running her fingers through her long dark brown hair, which shimmers reddish in the sun. Last week, our mum dyed it with henna and we had to air the living room for several hours to get the smell out of the flat. There is no sign of *anne*.

I bite my lip and walk towards her to take her in my arms. She resists for a few seconds until her hands meet on my back.

"Tomorrow, please bring it to me, *tamam mi?*"

I nod quickly.

"I also have a linguistics exam next Friday," she says with a sigh. The stress is evident on her delicate features.

Azra separates from me and disappears back into our room. A few seconds later, we hear the muffled sound of Bach - she is sitting at her desk and studying. I've long since got used to classical music, as she also listened to it during her A-levels. She has been enrolled at Freie Universität for a semester and is studying special needs education and German as a teacher.

I seem to be the only one in the family who has a problem with languages. Or speaking it. How to take it.

The corridor is dark and the plaster is crumbling around the electricity meter. It exposes a piss-yellow wall colour that must be older than me. I put my boots in the small cupboard next to my sister's shoes, who hasn't left the flat since her last lecture in January. Her first exam period at university is keeping her very busy.

I hang my jacket on the empty wooden hooks. When my parents return from work later, the remaining hooks will also be full. Except for the third one, which has been empty since my brother disappeared. Nobody dares to hang anything on his. While the mahogany-coloured varnish on all the others is peeling off, revealing a lighter-coloured, cheap wood, his looks like new.

Today's memories are like little electric shocks that turn into static crackling in my ears. I don't need any more concrete on my legs, dragging me into the abyss of my past. I've had enough for today.

To avoid having to think about anything, I go into the kitchen, which has no room for more than two people. I tilt the small window and then open the fridge. As so often, it's my turn to cook. My mum has been on her feet for twelve hours, cleaning one hospital room after another. She doesn't deserve to cook after a hard day's work, especially not after her slipped disc last year. Maybe my father will bring something from the snack bar he has been running for years. It's just profitable enough to keep it open, but not enough to replace the unlockable doors on the wall cupboards above my head.

* * *

"Do you think I can go out with friends?" asks Azra as I chop the onion for the bolognese. "I've already eaten a sandwich, I'd just have a drink. Would that be okay?" Her voice is quiet and she bites her lower lip.

My parents were good at keeping her away from our worries. Even when Onur disappeared, Azra didn't realise much about the unpaid bills and the yellow letters on the dining table. I myself was only made aware of it afterwards and since then I've been carrying a responsibility that weighs heavily on my shoulders.

I nod with the corners of my mouth raised tentatively.

Azra jumps a little and claps her hands briefly before taking me in her arms. "I got my money today, but I'm not going out without a limit."

I lovingly push her away from me and tilt my head to take a closer look. She has grown quickly over the last five years. From a shy fourteen-year-old to a student. I can still clearly remember the evening she told me that she wanted to do her A-levels. The image is colourful and bright in my mind. Not like the memories of my brother, which are slowly fading.

I draw a heart under her collarbone, as I have always done.

"I love you too." She hugs me tightly one last time and the coconut smell of her shampoo fills my nose. "I'll be back early too and sit on my desk again. The exams will go well."

She has earned a night out with her friends, whom she hasn't seen for a while. The constant studying is draining her.

It takes a few minutes before the door closes loudly behind Azra and I pick up the knife again. The oil in the scratched pan on the hob shines treacherously, which is why I drop the finely chopped onion into it.

The last time I went out was years ago. Friends turn away when you can only talk about deep sadness. Listening and talking come to an end. Friendships become fewer, attempts to maintain contact more sporadic. There is nothing left to strengthen the connection. It cracks like a telephone line before it completely collapses and the beeping reminds you of what used to be. The friendship is dead.

I can't blame Defne, Cansu or Feyza, because I didn't make it easy for them. After my brother disappeared, I withdrew and lost my voice. Talking no longer made sense. And why would it? It didn't solve my problems. We spent the first few nights searching for him, screaming for him, until our mouths left nothing but a harsh scratching sound. I no longer needed my voice, it was no longer of any use to me.

CHAPTER 3

EVREN

The torn book cover is a thorn in my side, even after I tried to staple it together in a makeshift manner. The ends of the metal clip prick my skin unpleasantly when I turn the pages. Just seconds ago there was a needle in the other arm.

"Like this..." The nurse sticks the plaster on the puncture site. "Wait ten minutes and have a drink, then you can go."

I nod, which she takes as a sign to get up.

"Have you got anything with you? I can offer you some juice or an apple."

Their friendliness is new. I have often donated blood at the Charité and have only experienced distant staff.

I shake my head. The apples here are always bruised and the juice is more of a sugar water mixture, so I take my own supply with me. She goes to the person next to me, asks her the same questions and disappears to bring her fruit and water a few minutes later.

Since my eighteenth birthday, I have been coming round every three months to donate blood. Back then, it was curiosity to find out my blood group and dive into the medical library in the neighbourhood. Each time, I chose a new disease to read up on. It turned out to be a book - and the twenty euro reward was also a good incentive.

Today, the heavy bag of anatomy books reminds me that I have to go to the library again - not my own curiosity, which has been left halfway between work and home. A first-year medical student has begged Melli at the reception to take the books from him because he no longer comes to the specialised library, and she gave in. As I drive past the library on my way to work, she asked me to bring them round.

I silently close my book and stuff it into my jacket pocket. The ten minutes have passed faster than I realised. Armed with my bag, I leave the building and make

my way to the Charité Central Library, which is easy to miss with its inconspicuous plaster walls and the small sign on the door. As always, I am greeted by cool air and a blue interior. Saskia, who has told Melli that I will be making a detour here with books to hand in, is waiting for me at the drop-off point.

"Hey, Evren, long time no see." The look on her face is as warm as the nurse's. Today is apparently a good day, only I missed the memo with the great mood. "How are you?"

I shrug my shoulders. The students who fill the study spaces and have heavy books in front of them leave me with an anxiety that I am unfortunately familiar with. My heart is stretched to breaking point and I know that I shouldn't be here anymore. Actually. The high ceilings are constricting and the silence is deafeningly loud. I used to want to be surrounded by medicine, but now it's all far too close to me. It's not just my home and work that have kept me away, but my attempt at self-protection. Every movement between the shelves reminds me of what I can't have. No matter how much I want to. For my sixth birthday, my parents had bought me a doctor's kit. One of those flashy and colourful ones, all oversized so that children's hands could handle it better. I was thrilled and wanted to examine my classmates, teachers and family members. According to my maths teacher, I only took the plastic stethoscope off my neck when I had to go to the toilet. It's still in my room today.

"There must be a lot going on here too?" Saskia wrinkles her nose and reads the barcodes on the books. "You can really feel sorry for the students."

I press my lips together and hand her the last book. Both the stress and the pressure that keep you on your toes for twelve semesters of medical school must be great.

"Good, I've got everything." She gives me a friendly look and strokes my arm.

"Maybe we'll see more of each other again. Don't you want to have a look around?"

I try to imitate her facial expression, but every muscle movement is wrong ... distorted. Saskia has worked here for five or twenty years. Before I took the job at the Philological Library, we used to see each other a lot. At least every Friday. At my blood collection appointments, I used to sit in the far corner and cram all kinds of medical topics. Not because I had to, but because it really interested me. All that is far away today.

Nevertheless, I turn to the study areas opposite me. Maybe I can sit down between two large shelves and imagine what it would be like to study here all the time. Just for a brief moment. What it would be like not to carry a financial burden on my shoulders.

I walk past several groups who can't afford to raise their heads. There are a few places to study between the books. I immediately recognise the one pair of eyes that turn towards me with curiosity. I can't stop my eyes from rolling.

"Silent girl from philology?" The guy who had dropped onto the chair next to me a few days earlier without being asked sits up and follows my every move, forcing me to stop.

"What are you doing here?" he whispers.

I shrug my shoulders.

"What drives you into the distance? All the way to the Charité?" He watches me with a tilted head and a smirk. "Were you looking for me? Or -"

I approach him, take his pen, which is lying next to the laptop, and scribble on his pad. Anything to get him to talk to me.

*Shh, we're in a library. I could ask you the same thing. What are you doing here?
Are you doing a tour of all the university libraries in Berlin?
before you finish your studies?*

He skims over the words quickly. The corners of his mouth twitch noticeably and he takes the pen from my hand to write something down in a hurry.

Something like that ... What brings you here?

I pick up the pen again and want to answer something, but my mobile phone rings. I drop the pen in shock and reach into my bag.

"Hey, Evren!" Melli is out of breath. "I wanted to ask when you were coming? Unfortunately, I can't grow a third arm. I need you here."

If it wasn't urgent, she wouldn't have called me. I type a reply and she says goodbye before I hang up.

The guy stares at me curiously. I want to tell him that the eyeliner around his lash line is smudged. As if he suspects something is on the tip of my tongue, he pushes the pencil in my direction and leans towards me a little. A strand of hair comes loose from his backcombed hair. It gets lost on the bridge of his nose, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Time to work, I write quickly on the pad. His gaze flits from the page to me and lingers on my face for a second too long for my liking.

"I'm the last person who's going to stop you." He waves and gives me a half-smile, his dimples flaring.

As I leave the Charité's central library, my blood rushes through my veins. I shouldn't confront medicine when I know that studying is beyond the realms of possibility. When I know that I can't enrol, no matter how many books I look at and how often I sit in the specialist library. Because I simply can't afford it.

I did catch up on my A-levels at night school, but I definitely wouldn't be able to study medicine alongside a full-time job. Never. As I can't leave my family in the lurch financially and no one else can help me out, it remains a dream. It's hard for me to realise that.

Even if I could study ... Doctors talk to their patients and colleagues. I can't even talk to my family. At the beginning I *wanted* to. My brother's disappearance choked my throat. Every syllable collapsed into a gurgle. Today I don't even

know if I *can*. The ability to communicate verbally and the courage to actually do it merged into one. I lost the strength to deal with it long ago. It disappeared after the police told us that they couldn't look for my brother because he was nineteen. Maybe he was involved in drug dealing. To this day, I'm sure that this possibility existed in their minds because my brother fitted a stereotype. That he used to live in Wedding has played his part in this.

* * *

The biting wind the next morning heralds the long wait for spring. It may only be the end of February, but the snow and the cold never end. I like winter. It's quieter than the other seasons. People slow down and enjoy each other, are more aware of each other.

As usual, the underground is full. This time it's overcrowded with students as it leads to the Philological Library. My tired bones are the omen of an exhausting day.

Back when life was still good, I liked summer more than winter. I equated it with park concerts and warm lemonade. Sitting on the grass with friends while the sun went down and listening to an unknown musician was the pinnacle of my life. I've never felt freer, never breathed in and out better - despite the cigarette smoke of others.

I enjoyed singing along. Singing along loudly and feeling my heart beat to the beat of the music. I used every conceivable situation for it. I even sang at my cousin's henna evening, where the bride said goodbye to her parents. At fifteen, I thought that was so amazing. I talked to her and my aunt for days until they agreed on a song.

When the bride says goodbye to her mother, she usually sits in the centre of the hall and everything is bathed in red light, with a farewell song playing in the

background. The mothers-in-law smear henna on the palms of the couple's hands as a sign of protection from others.

Normally the song is played over loudspeakers, but I was allowed to sing it at the time and was able to adapt it to the length of the ceremony and make it emotional.

Standing at the front while people looked curiously at my cousin and her husband allowed me to relax, no matter how rigid I was in social situations at that age. Singing made it easier, I felt close to the air and could close my eyes to the crowd. In such situations, my childhood fears had no grip on me. I was one with the music. Ultimately, it was also this fear that knots up my vocal chords today.

Now my heart stumbles when it tries to beat to the rhythm of a song. Too strange, too different, too overwhelming. I am convinced that I no longer have a sense of rhythm.

The conversations bring me back to reality from my whirlwind of thoughts, which is why I close my eyes and lean my forehead against the grab rail. One girl is talking about the crazy party at the weekend and another guy is boasting about his "triple-digit fucking score". I grimace and wrinkle my nose. If my eyes weren't closed, I would have rolled them long ago. I listen to the extremely detailed descriptions of his latest 'bed bunny' until the mechanical voice announces my station.

I've never been so glad to get out of the stuffy car as I am now. I literally rush out and suck the fresh air into my lungs. The first snowflakes of the day are falling at a leisurely pace. Their chill accompanies me all the way into the library, which is scalding in contrast. I put my bag down in the break room and take off my jacket. Melli is nowhere to be found and I am alone with the other staff members, who are just as frantically taking off their coats to look after the students. I pack my things into my locker, on which my name has been scantily stuck. I tuck my hair behind my ears, but my tangled fringes fall back onto my forehead without pity.

The mirror on the inside doesn't reflect a pretty picture. I should have put make-up on or at least covered up the circles under my eyes.

"Evren!"

I turn in the direction of the door, which opens with a loud creak. It should also be oiled by one of the technicians at the university.

"Are you doing the tidying up again? I have to deal with the lending desk," says my colleague. "The trolley is at the front of the checkout. It's very full, is that all right?"

I nod once more. That's all she needs, she turns on her heel and disappears behind the reception desk, which hides us from students through half-height walls and windows. They are already lined up to hand in their books. My colleague makes herself comfortable on the soft desk chair.

With a sigh, I pull the overflowing book trolley behind me. The glass door opens outwards, towards the library foyer. I take a step inside and realise how much sound is absorbed by the thin walls. The students are talking to each other with their heads down and hands in front of them. The wet jackets and dripping umbrellas emphasise the fact that they haven't arrived yet. What would I do to be a part of student life? I wouldn't be here, but I would still be crammed full of textbooks and with too many tabs open on my computer.

learn on my laptop, study ... become a doctor.

The lifts are hidden behind the shelves of the South Asia customer. Having to manoeuvre the trolley through the narrow aisles is the most annoying thing about this job. I'm lucky if I manage it without bringing down a single tower of books.

The inside of the lift is clad in burgundy fabric and scratched metal. The doors are just about to close with a ping when an arm shoots in between.

My breath catches in my throat and I instinctively close my eyes. Fortunately, I don't hear any crunching or screaming, just laughter. A laugh that sounds familiar.

"I'm fine." The voice is eerily close to me, which is why I open my eyes again. The guy from yesterday is standing next to me. His gaze glides from the many books on the trolley to me. I feel ashamed – not because he's looking at me curiously, but because he's noticed my exaggerated reaction. He lifts his arm. "Look ... everything's okay. It's still there." When I don't say anything, seriousness returns to his features. "Which floor do you have to go to?" I don't answer, lean past him to the buttons and press two - he doesn't press any. The doors close completely this time and I concentrate on the tiny gap between them. "My name is Talhah, by the way. What's your name?" I give him a quick sideways glance, which he notices immediately. His waterline and eyelid are once again framed by black kohl and his nose ring flashes conspicuously in the cold light. "You disappeared so quickly yesterday, we couldn't introduce ourselves to each other." He leans casually against the mirror behind us and grins broadly. I should actually clean it too, because the students can't stop touching it. The doors finally slide open and I realise how warm I was in the lift. My body only cools down after I duck between the front shelves with the book trolley. The first German studies book weighs heavily in my hand. The metre-thick layer of dust on it tickles my nose. It should really have been dusted off after I'd picked it up. All hell is breaking loose at the moment is, nobody can keep up with the tasks. "You dropped this the day before yesterday." What does this guy want from me? Hasn't my silence been enough of an answer? I put the book in the right place, at the bottom near the floor. As I straighten up, I kick up dust, which recedes into the background as Talhah holds my bookmark in front of me.

It is a small magnetic clip that has seen its best days. The scratches are deep and the metal has long been dull. My name is written in a filigree font on the front.

"I would have given it to you yesterday at the Charité, but you left so quickly.

Nice to meet you, Evren."

I snatch the bookmark out of his hand and stuff it into my trouser pocket. That was the last birthday present I got from my brother.

When I don't answer, Talhah stays quiet too. Does he not want to comment on my silence this time? He smirks before turning round and disappearing with leisurely steps.

"I'll definitely see you again!" His words are far too loud for the library. He disturbs everyone else here, who can't lift their heads from their papers because of stress and panic. What an arsehole. If I could shout, I would have made a slug of him long ago.

The anger at him doesn't leave me for quite a while - it's bright red and only gradually fades to a pastel pink. What does he want from me? Why can't he leave me alone when he realises that I'm not talking to him?

I haven't had a guy like that on my neck for a long time. The other students aren't really pushy otherwise.

He seems to be a special kind - particularly corrosive.

CHAPTER 4

TALHAH

The cleaning schedule for the fridge is actually clear. On Sundays, it's Yousef's turn to clean the kitchen. When you look at the sink, it's clear that nobody has tidied up for two days. Coffee cups, plates and pans are piled on top of each other and my fingers itch to pick up the sponge and tidy up. Our dishwasher broke down last week and until a repairman can have a look at it, we first have to put together two hundred euros and arrange a date when one of us will be there for long enough. Both damn difficult in a flat share of four.

"I'll take care of it." Yousef stretches, yawning.

"Well, it's your job." I sit down at the dining table and push aside several brochures that Zelal looks at every Sunday morning. At our monthly flat-share meeting, I was in favour of not allowing any more advertising, but she vehemently opposed it. She says it helps her to relax and she knows where to find the offers during the week. In the end, however, she only visits the Aldi opposite us or shops at Rewe using her employee discount. Unfortunately, she can only enjoy this advantage until the beginning of April, when lectures start again.

"Who peed in your muesli, mate?" Yousef circles the table and pours cornflakes and lactose-free milk into a clean bowl, which we forced on him because of his intolerance. We've done ourselves a favour rather than him.

"My mum wants to visit me," I say meekly.

A loose white flyer catches my eye between pages of brochures.

"It's fine." He shovels his breakfast into his mouth and pulls back the chair opposite me with a squeak to drop onto it. "Your brother must have missed you." I have to roll my eyes at the mention of Malik.

"He only comes here so he can be in Berlin. I'm not cool enough for him."

"I can't blame him. Berlin is great."

Yousef is right. After all, I was also extremely happy when I got the scholarship to study here.

"I'm happy too," I mumble and avoid his gaze by focussing mine on the flyer in front of me. It advertises a cultural flea market in the car park of a car park in Wedding, not far from us. Maybe I should drop by there. It's not the first time the market has been held. If I'm lucky, the elderly woman selling Syrian desserts will be there again. I really wouldn't mind *mabrouma* with pistachios. And a hell of a lot of sugar syrup.

When I was little, my mum only prepared *mabrouma* and *baklava* for visitors. If there was anything left over for us afterwards, we were allowed to eat it. But what she always left for us was the syrup, which she didn't spread on the crispy pastries. It usually covered the bottom of her copper pot and my brother and I would dip our fingers or bread into it.

"I would be really happy if she came. She keeps saying she's going to try, but it's not happening." My words are meant to seem indifferent, but I can taste the bitter pain on my tongue. She promises me again and again. So far, she's only done it once. Only once in five years. I can't blame her - she works a lot, it's a long journey from Hanover, and although my brother is independent, he's still seventeen and would leave his head behind if it wasn't fused to his body.

"When did she say she was coming?"

"In the middle of the week."

I should call her and ask. If she turns up, I can go to the cultural market and get some sweets. That way she shouldn't be able to accuse me of lacking hospitality. Otherwise I'll have to squeeze the shopping into the next few days, which isn't convenient as my favourite shop often doesn't have what my mother or I like in stock. I have to order there at least a week in advance, and with *mama's* history it's usually not worth it.

"Has Zelal already looked through these?" I point to the pile of brochures.

"She literally ripped them out of Atlas' hands," replies Yousef, amused.

Atlas is the fourth in the group and the youngest among us. He moved here two years ago to study law. That's why you don't often get to see him - he melts into the criminal law book.

I take the pile and throw it into the paper bin next to the door as I walk past. If Mum says she can't, I'll go to the market and get something. I've certainly earned it after this exhausting semester. As always, Socke lies on my bed and sprawls out as if it's all his. His white paws show off his claws after he stretches out and gives me a

meowing softly.

"Make room," I mumble and lie down on the bed next to him. In an instant, he climbs onto my legs to make himself comfortable. I'm sure he's been protecting me from hopeless depression for the last few years.

From this position, I can see the discolouration on the ceiling. The flat above us had water damage a few years ago and this has also immortalised itself in my room in the form of huge water stains. The landlord doesn't want to look at it until mould becomes a problem or the neighbour above me falls into my lap.

I take out my mobile phone and open the app to call my mum. She looks happy in the little picture next to her number. Really happy, with a big smile, in my father's tight embrace. I'm standing in front of her as a primary school pupil and my brother is in her arms. It's faded with age. You can tell from the corners that she photographed it from an old film. I have to blink several times before I tap the icon for the video call.

"Talhah, *habibi*." Her smile hurts me because it's not real. Ever since the checkpoints at the Damascus borders. Since the soldiers only let us into our house because my father was treating the wounded. Since Assad's last speech, which gave us hope that the unrest was a remnant of the conflicts in neighbouring countries. That the supermarket shelves would soon be full. That we would be allowed to go back to school. That we would have uninterrupted electricity again.

"Mama, how are you?"

"Good, *habibi*. And you? How are your studies going?" she asks in Arabic. In the past, she would have scolded me for addressing her as 'mama'. We grew up speaking Standard Arabic from an early age. *It's ummi, not mama*, she always said. She now also accepts the colloquial language because we are no longer in Syria. I'm not studying in Damascus. And she is no longer a respected lawyer, whose social status was once her top priority, but has just managed to get a position as a paralegal after several tests and thousands of language courses in Germany. Nevertheless, she rarely speaks German with me.

"As always..." I bury my fingers in Sock's fur. "Tiring, but I'll get through it."

"You're doing great." Her eyes glaze over and her bottom lip trembles like bad news that I don't want to hear.

"Mama -"

"He'd be proud of you," she whispers, although those are the exact words that I didn't want to hear. The ones that shoot through my eardrums and make me vomit blood in my mind. The words that hurt more than a stab wound straight to the heart. That are more deadly than a stab wound.

"I know." My voice breaks, and the usually strong tone when I speak Arabic falls into the hope of a little boy who ten years ago asked his mum every day when his father was coming back. When he would play catch with him again and help him stick a plaster on his scraped knee.

She snuffles and runs her fingers under her eyes. "I won't keep you any longer. Are you still working on your dissertation?"

I nod weakly.

"You'll send them to me when you're done, right?"

"I will." I have to blink several times until the tears stop stinging. "Are you coming on ..." I pause.

Wednesday. I want to say Wednesday. In Arabic. But my lips remain sealed. What the hell was Wednesday in Arabic? Why can't I think of it? I don't usually miss words. Not in normal conversations.

My brain searches every mental language catalogue. Everything comes to mind - monkey, shelf, sun, oven. But where Wednesday should be, there is a yawning void.

"I don't know if it's going to work out yet," my mum replies, but I'm light years away. Why can't I think of Wednesday? Damn. "I've got a lot to do at work again and Malik's school hasn't responded to my request to deregister him for three days."

Always the same answer. I shouldn't have expected anything else. But I still can't be angry. It's not her fault that she feels she can't take time off. Hotels in Berlin aren't cheap either, and certainly not for two people. She probably doesn't want to squeeze into my room. She always says that she doesn't want to restrict me and take me away from university. The confinement triggers the claustrophobia that she developed in one of the many refugee centres. Europe's first gift to us.

"Okay, no problem. Just let me know if it works out." I give her a smile that's just as fake as hers. "Otherwise, I'll be home eventually."

She nods. "You do that. We missed you anyway."

Me too. If there's one thing Berlin can offer, it's distraction from all the debris I'm carrying around with me, as if we were welded together. As if they were keeping me alive while I'm actually threatening to break under their weight like a porcelain doll.

"*Uhibbuki*," I say in High Arabic to distract her from my complete ignorance. If *mama* knew that I forget simple words, it would make her unnecessarily sad.

"I love you too, Talhah."

She waves at me briefly before the screen goes dark and jumps back to my home screen. The colourful apps fade before my eyes. I sit up to make my way to the market. If I stay lying down and wallow in my grief like I do after every

conversation with my mum, Zelal will try to force therapy on me again. As if I haven't had enough therapy sessions that could have cured a total of five children.

"Talhah?" someone calls loudly from the corridor.

"Yes?" I stand up, collect my jute bag and camera and take the wallet, which is lying on the keyboard next to my desk.

"Are you going to the cultural market?"

Atlas pulls open the door to the room. He is smartly dressed and pushes his round glasses up his nose.

"I was planning to, yes." I shoulder the bag and fix my hair before reaching for the charcoal pencil and rimming my eyes.

"Can you bring me *künefe*?"

I turn to him with a half-smile. "Sure, but only if you call it by the right name: *knafeh*."

He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Whatever. It's the same anyway."

"Do you want it from the Turk?"

"Please!"

The dessert made from thin threads of pastry with cheese between them, drizzled with cold sugar syrup, could theoretically be the fifth flatmate. I should bring something for the whole troupe.

Zelal always says that she can prepare *knafeh* better because the food she buys is cold. She has yet to prove this. I discard the idea of buying the ingredients after closing the door behind me. She would rip my head off and conjure up an excuse as to why she couldn't make it today.

I prefer cold *knafeh*.

CHAPTER 5

EVREN

"Can you mix the salad?" My mum doesn't even look up from her multigrill, but I nod anyway. She knows I'm going to do it. After all, that's what I woke up at six in the morning for.

The cold today is biting and the people at the flea market are even less talkative than usual. Normally old furniture is for sale, but the people of Wedding have turned the weekly market into a small cultural festival. All the colours of the city are concentrated in the large car park of a cafe on Sundays. Last time I stuffed myself with vegetarian pirogues. This time, we decided to take Arabic desserts with us because that's what my father wanted.

"Azra said that she might want to come later. After studying." As my mum speaks in Turkish, clouds of breath evaporate in the cold. She's worked hard enough during the week, she should really be putting her feet up on the couch right now. But every cent counts, so here we are, among hundreds of stalls, selling something warm. It's not the first time, and sometimes there are three of us here when my father has time in addition to his work at the snack bar. We earn enough to pay for the next week's shopping. Nevertheless, there's this knot in my chest that hurts and won't go away until we're in our flat and my mum can sigh with relief.

When we were younger, she always said that it would soon be over. That we would make it. Out of our miniature flat. Out of Wedding. A house with a garden. Time to breathe out.

I can't remember the last time I didn't hold my breath. We have long since forgotten how to swim and are drowning in ourselves - frozen by panic.

Masses of people wander through the centre aisles and past the white tents of various vendors. An elderly lady opposite us is trying to get rid of old crockery.

Her fragile figure and trembling almost make me want to empty her stall with the little money I have on me.

"Evren, I only have a little filling left. I don't think we'll be here too much longer. This is our last salad too." My mum looks at our few remaining provisions, which tell of a lucrative day. We worked our fingers to the bone baking and selling *lahmacun*. The Turkish pizza with a spicy minced meat filling is very popular at such events. And I was able to eat well too, so perhaps I shouldn't complain. I nod, and my mum smiles and straightens her green headscarf, which has slipped forward a little. I bought it for her with my first salary, which I earned at the post office. It's now frayed at the ends, but she resists any suggestion that I finally throw it away.

"If you like, can you take a look at the stands?

I'll do the rest."

I shake my head and clutch the bowl in front of me, to which she reacts by throwing my hand away. "Go on, *kuzum*, then you can buy *baklava* for us too. I can manage that. Come on."

She is a determined woman, always firmly convinced. Like a rock - you can't move her. I'm sure that's why she managed to bring us up and not drown completely. Her strength is visible between the laugh lines that dig in next to her sad smile, which she can move to despite any circumstances. It becomes clear through the strength she brings to get up every day and to carry on, even though fate has already buried them several times.

"*Hadi*." She points with her tongs outside our sunshade, which today serves as an umbrella.

I slump my shoulders but step in front of our table anyway. She'll insist, so there's no point in resisting. Maybe I'll find a few bargains before most of them dismantle their stalls and go home.

The conversations of the people around me resemble a circle, are joyful and blur into an incomprehensible noise - perhaps I'm not just forgetting how to talk, but

how to understand. My world is nothing but cotton wool in which I am wrapped, through which I can see nothing. There is no danger that reaches me and turns my reality upside down.

I can still remember the exact moment when I realised that my brother hadn't gone to work. That he hadn't been found for four days. That he really had disappeared. Without a trace.

"Onur's mailbox is full. I can't get through any more." My mum's voice shatters like the vase on the coffee table that my father has helplessly smashed. The shards of glass scatter across the laminate flooring, which has long since burst open in some places. I dig my toes into the carpet beneath me. It stings. I should pull my feet away. But all I hear is a buzzing in my ears. The pain is an illusion, but my body is screaming.

Pull your feet away. Blood. Mailbox. Pain. Glass. Full. Confusion. Onur is gone. Can't be found.

I always thought loss felt much more urgent. Much more poignant. Like a huge hole in the centre of your chest. But it's nothing more than splinters in the soles of your feet.

Incisive, draining and so damn hard to get out of.

"You said that the flash sometimes doesn't work. Can't you do anything about the price?"

The voice snaps me out of my trance and I find myself back in the centre of Berlin at the flea market. The noise around me turns into loud voices and the clinking of various objects reaches my ears.

"I can't go any lower with the price. That's really not possible." The indignant salesman crosses his arms.

"Why not?" Talhah's voice feels like a bucket of ice-cold water being tipped over my back. He's standing not far from me in front of the stall, holding both a bag from a Syrian sweet stall and the camera he's haggling over. His head is tilted and the amusement on his lips is unmistakable. Of course he enjoys being the

biggest pain in the arse. Even on the streets of Berlin. He can't be from this city, otherwise he'd know that you can quickly get punched in the face for such silliness.

"Son, I've already given you the lowest price. If you don't like it, you're welcome to shop somewhere else!" The man leans forward and reaches for the camera, but Talhah takes a quick step backwards and clicks his tongue.

"I'm sure we can agree on a price." He turns the camera in his hands. He doesn't even care that people are staring at him as they walk past. How is he not uncomfortable with this? I'm ashamed of him.

Maybe I should disappear. I don't want him to see me. He'll try to engage me in conversation, and that's the last thing I want today: a conversation in which I won't open my mouth once.

I turn on my heel and slam into an elderly couple with full force. The man's shoulder lands in my face and a sharp pain immediately spreads from my nose across my frontal bone. My head throbs like lightning and my hands fly in front of my face - far too late to protect it from damage.

"Watch out!" The woman screeches directly into my ear, and I don't know what's worse to bear. Her screaming or my nose.

I want to apologise, say that it wasn't intentional and that I'm just running away from a boy who is more stubborn than the coffee stains on my white jeans. But I can't. As is so often the case, I just can't.

The woman looks at me with an angry expression and the man, who towers over me by a head, massages his shoulder. I put on an apologetic expression before squeezing between them and disappearing.

I flee. As always.