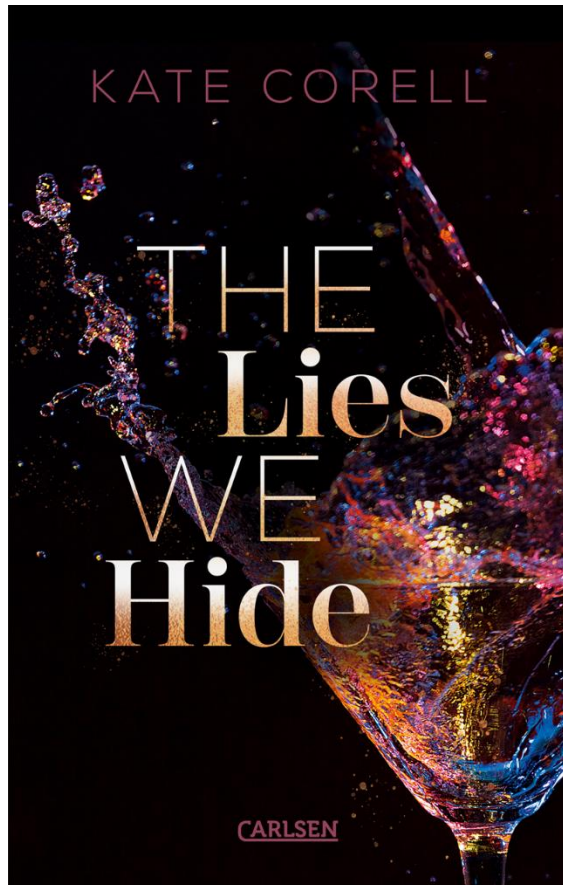


## **Kate Corell: The Lies We Hide – Bouwen Dynasty vol. 1**

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### **The Lies We Hide – Bouwen Dynasty vol. 1**

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### **ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION**

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Please always check the original manuscript!

KATE CORELL

THE  
Lies  
WE  
Hide

CARLSEN

*I have a book full of memories in front of me.*

*A fairy tale in which the good are punished and the bad are rewarded - told by a fool ...*

# MEMORIES

*Dark Chocolate, Milk, Cocoa,  
Salt, Caramel, Cream*

.....



*Bloemdaalen, Netherlands*

## **LEENARD**, FIVE YEARS OLD

"Children, be so kind and give me your attention for a tiny moment," says the nursery schoolteacher and I look around for her.

Vivi is standing in the doorway with two girls who look the same. They are twins, just like Finn and Lukas. Everyone else looks at them, except Paul, who stacks building blocks on top of each other until the tower topples over and makes a racket. Gemma scolds him. She always does that. Yesterday she shouted at me because I coloured my face with a blue felt-tip pen. Smurfs are blue. The colour wouldn't wash off, so Gemma scolded me even more and said I was a horrible boy. Mum smiled and said I looked great. Dad grumbled because my new T-shirt was also smurf blue and said I was a fool. Painting is for girls like mum. Not for boys.

"This is Noa and Nika. They've just moved here. Please give them a warm welcome." Vivi is nice. She never scolds me.

The others say hello to Nika and Noa, but I don't. The girl in the pink dress is smiling, the other one looks sad. I don't like the fact that it's sad. My mum is often sad and then I am too.

"Come on, you two, get to know the other children." Clara, Fiona and Finn go to the girl in the pink dress. The sad girl hides in the play tent. I say to Vivi that I have to go to the loo and sneak to my rucksack. Then I go to the girl, crawl into the tent and sit down next to her.

"What's your name?"

"Nika."

"I'm Leenard Brouwer and I live in Bloem. That's a castle." Dad says it's important that people know who I am, then they'll like me.

"Are you a prince?"

"No. Do you like princes?" All girls like princes.

"No, I like football, do you?"

"Yes, football is great." It's not, but mum allows you to play it if it makes someone happy.

Nika smiles, so I've done it right.

"Are you still sad?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I want to see my friends."

"I can be your friend." I open my fist and show her the piece of chocolate wrapped in foil.

Nika looks at me. "Why do you want to be my friend?" She takes the chocolate, unwraps it and puts it in her mouth.

"Because I don't like it when you're sad."

## **NIKA** , NINE YEARS OLD

I open my school bag and look for my lunch box, even though I know I don't have one with me. Mum has gone with Noa to

Taking photos in Rotterdam. At school, I have to say that my sister is ill so that nobody realises that I'm all at home. Nobody knows about it except Leen. That's our secret.

He's sitting next to me right now, unwrapping a sandwich.

"Here, I told mum I'm hungry today because I want to grow big and strong." Leen takes another one out of his satchel.

"If you stay small, is that my fault?" I ask Leen, because he often shares his lunch with me.

"No, look how big I am already," he replies, jumping up from the bench and standing up straight. Leen is the tallest in the class, but he's not as tall as the older children.

"Your mum makes the best sandwiches," I say after I've finished eating.

When the bell rings at the end of the break, we walk towards the entrance together. Finn pushes me from behind and says I'm ugly. Then he runs into the school building.

In the classroom, Leen pushes Finn off his chair and gets an entry in his homework booklet from Mrs Sommer.

"Why did you push Finn?" I ask Leen as we cycle back to his house. Bloem is a lovely place. There's a big garden with colourful flowers and it's great for playing hide and seek.

"Because he said you're ugly."

"Noa thinks Finn is only mean because he likes me."

"If you like someone, you should say nice things to make the other person happy, not sad," replies Leen.

Leen never says mean things to me or pushes me.

## **LEENARD, TWELVE YEARS OLD**

"Your passports are shit!" Nika shouts at me.

"Just hit the goal!" I shout back across the pitch.

"Then play a sensible pass!"

I walk back to my position at a leisurely pace.

Nika is right, I've played better.

"Cheer up, Leen," I hear my big brother Bastiaan say from the edge of the pitch as I run past him.

I never wanted to play football. It was Dad's idea to turn me into a real boy. Does it make me a real boy because I do things that boys like? Does that make Nika a fake girl because she likes boy stuff? Unlike me, Nika has fun with it. I'd rather paint flowers on a canvas with mum in her studio. Baas thinks I should do what makes me happy. Dad says I have to do what he says.

I pass the ball to Finn, who skilfully outpaces his opponent and runs straight towards goal. Just before the penalty area, he passes to Nika, who sinks the ball into the top right-hand corner. Cheers erupt because we are now in the lead. Finn runs to Nika and high-fives her. I can't stand him because he wants to be Nika's boyfriend too.

"Did you see that?" Nika shouts and comes running towards me. I spread my arms out and wrap them around Nika as she throws herself into them.

I don't feel strange with Nika.

## **NIKA**, FOURTEEN YEARS OLD

It's Friday evening, I'm sitting at my desk doing my homework for next week when a low rumbling noise catches my attention.

"Do you always have to climb through the window?" I grumble at Leen, because he almost scares me to death every time.

"Yes, because your mum won't let me see you this late," he replies as he squeezes through the opening. He knows full well that my mum and Noa have gone to a pageant in Amsterdam this afternoon and won't be back until Sunday.

So he could have just called and I would have let him in through the front door.

"No, she won't let you see me because she thinks we're making out," I reply, annoyed. I don't know how she comes up with that. Leen and I are friends.

"Then tell her you're making out with Paul," he teases me. He's been doing this ever since Paul van den Berg slipped me a note in biology class saying that he liked me and wanted to go out with me. Leen knows for a fact that Paul asks a different girl every week to be his girlfriend. Before that, he turned Noa down. And he asked Fiona after me.

"I don't make out with anyone," I hiss at Leen.

Leen stretches out on my bed and looks up at the ceiling. "You're only supposed to say it so your mum won't look at me like I want to eat you."

I get up from the swivel chair and sit down next to him.

"But you look like you want to eat me," I tease. The truth is that Leen often stares holes in the air, as he is doing at the moment. Every time, I wonder what's going on in his head. Before I can say the question out loud, he wraps his arms around me and whirls me around so that I'm suddenly lying underneath him. His face hovers over mine and for no longer than a second his gaze lands on my lips. And for just as long, I wonder whether the moment of my first kiss has arrived. It's easy, but what would happen to our friendship if the kiss between us was weird?

"Maybe I really like you," he says, grinning broadly.

'Cut the rubbish,' I say and push him away. Laughing, he lets himself fall onto his back.

"Can I crash here?" he wants to know.

"What is it this time?" I ask, because Leen's night-time visits are becoming more and more frequent. From the chest next to my wardrobe



I take out the other bedding I've put in the wardrobe for him.

"My parents argue about how weird I actually am," he replies and lets out a sigh.

"You're not weird," I contradict.

"Tell that to my father. According to him, there are a lot of things wrong with me."

## **LEENARD, FIFTEEN YEARS OLD**

My gaze lingers a little too long on Nika as she does warm-up exercises for the upcoming football training session. She notices and raises her left eyebrow with a cheeky grin. I shake my head

and turn my back to her, not missing the sight of Finn standing next to her on the grass. I hate this guy. I always have, but a few weeks ago I hated him even more. I have no idea what's wrong with me, but all he has to do is approach Nika and I want to raze

him to the ground. I was well aware that the day would come when boys would be interested in my best friend. What I didn't expect was that it would go so against the grain. Nor did I expect Nika to sneak into my dreams and do inappropriate things to me.

There are days when her mere presence confuses me, and then there are those tiny moments when I toy with the idea of telling her about it. But I chicken out every time because I'm afraid she might laugh at me and jeopardise our friendship. would no longer be the same.

"One day I'll find out what cloud your head is always stuck in," says Nika amusedly, at the same time as she bumps her elbow against mine. Right now, I really hope she never finds out. Because she probably won't like the answer. After all, she always emphasises how valuable our friendship is.

"What is Baas doing here?" asks Nika in amazement.

When I spot my brother on the sidelines, I'm shocked. He never picks me up from training, my mum does that.

"I don't know," I say, but I suspect that my mum is going through one of her less good phases. Her mood swings have become worse over the past few months. One minute she's happy and the next she's either holed up in her studio or doesn't leave her bed for days on end. I've never told Nika about this because it's my fault. My parents are always arguing because of me.

Bastiaan beckons me towards him with a serious face.

"Get your things, we're leaving," he says and walks without explanation to his car, which he has parked just a few metres away on the gravelled area. My pulse quickens at his words. An uneasy feeling spreads through me as I walk to the changing rooms to get my sports bag.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" I ask him as soon as I've taken a seat in the passenger seat.

Baas sucks in a deep, slow breath while his fingers grip the steering wheel tightly. "Something's happened," he says completely calmly, yet his voice trembles.

Four words that bring the world around me crashing down in this second.

## **NIKA**, SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

A few centimetres separate me from Leen, but it feels like he's miles away. It's been nine months since his mum Agnes died, but in moments like these it feels like yesterday.

Being friends with Leen has become a balancing act. We balance between high feelings and deep abysses. And I have no idea how to help him. Which is mainly because he won't let me. That hurts. On so many levels. So much so that I find myself wondering whether it's worth all the pain he's causing. You can never

save someone who doesn't want to be saved. I think that's the case with Leen. But what kind of girlfriend would I be if I left him sitting alone on the floor of the school corridor while he stares at his bloody knuckles?

"Get lost, Nika," he says as I sit down next to him on the cool linoleum floor.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say and take a pack of tissues out of my school bag.

"I can't bear to be near you at the moment," he presses out.

"But you'll have to." I'm not going to let him win that easily. I've done that too often in the past few months. Whenever he wanted me to leave, I left. I thought he just needed some space and would find his way back on his own. Now I'm afraid he can't do it without help.

Leen drops his head against the school lockers behind us.

"Will it stop at some point?" he asks quietly and a sigh escapes him.

"What exactly?" I ask, unsure whether he's talking about his uncontrolled outbursts of anger or his grief.

"To hurt."

I take his left hand and dab his bloody knuckles with the handkerchief. "I think you have to go through the pain to heal," I reply and repeat the procedure with his other hand. He pulls it back and wipes the back of his hand on the white shirt, then looks at me. For a long time. Intense. Lost.

"And if I don't want to go a single step further, **w h a t** then, Nika?" There is a clear hint of despair in his voice.

I slide my fingers between his. "Then we'll walk the last bit together, that's what friends are for."

He stands up so abruptly that I let go of him and look up at him in surprise.

"We haven't been friends for a long time. You and I have changed."

"Stop it, Leen."

"What? Don't tell me you don't feel that there's suddenly a wall between us that's getting higher and higher."

"That's not true!" I say gruffly and get to my feet too.

"Then what's true, Nika? That it's okay that I feel too much and understand too little about keeping myself in balance, and therefore lash out at everything and everyone as soon as I'm thrown off balance?"

Klaas provoked him and Leen reacted. Admittedly, in the wrong way. I wish I could say it was a one-off, but it's not. It's as if Leen was just waiting for an opportunity to fight back with his fists.

"No, it's not, but -"

"I'm the boy who lost his mum and is therefore going through a difficult phase where people let him get away with any crap," he interrupts me. I didn't mean to say it like that, but yes, that's essentially tri@ it.

"Leen," I say, without knowing exactly what I'm getting at. He takes a step towards me. Then another. Instinct I pull back. "Have you ever wondered what has to happen for me to lose control with you?" he says, moving even closer.

"No," I reply, but unconsciously put some distance between us.

A hurt expression flits across Leen's face before he looks at me with a fixed expression. He puts his hands on my shoulders. Suddenly I feel cold metal through the fabric of my top as he presses me against the locker.

I hold Leen's gaze and suddenly stop breathing as he leans down to me and whispers in my ear: "Why

Can I see the fear in your eyes?" Then he steps back and shakes his head slightly. The expression in his eyes is blank, as if he has lost all feeling.

"Leen, don't do that, don't destroy us," I say, because he's about to dig an endlessly deep trench around the wall he was talking about earlier.

He turns away. "I can't have you in my life anymore," he says and disappears down the school corridor.

Did he consciously say "can" instead of "will"? Is there a difference for him? I don't know. But I'm sure of one thing: this isn't a phase. Leen has just ended our friendship without batting an eyelid.

## **LEENARD, SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD**

Why did my father agree to this stupid party?

Presumably because he can't refuse the princess anything and it's her last year at the Stedelijk before she goes to Rotterdam to study.

I envy my sister's imminent freedom. I can hardly wait to pack my things and get out of here. Bloem, I hate this place. Everything within these walls feels cold and oppressive. The only place I've ever belonged was Nika. Since I can no longer climb through her window at night and spend the night with her, it feels like I'm sleepwalking. Or at least wandering around disorientated.

Do I miss them? Yes. Even if I'm not supposed to. I banished her from my neighbourhood, not because I didn't want her there, but because I could no longer bear it. Because what I feel for her is too much, just like the fear that the day could come when I lose her too. The paradox is this: I conjured up the very thing I was trying to protect myself from. The second I pushed Nika away from me. My mother's death gave me the

The ground was torn from under my feet. Leaving Nika made me fall straight into the abyss.

"If you hole up here, I'll spend the whole evening worrying about you," says Demy, who is standing in my room in a princess costume. How appropriate.

"I'm not in the mood for your stupid party," I reply and turn my attention back to my mobile phone. I scroll disinterestedly through Snapchat until I get stuck on a photo that Nika posted ten minutes ago. She's wearing a witch costume and grinning at the camera with her sister Noa. Underneath it says: *Halloween party at Bloem*.

My heart contracts. Nika is on her way here. Not because of me, but because Demy has plastered the school corridors with flyers announcing that there's going to be a huge party here. I read the few comments under the picture. It goes without saying that Finn writes about how hot Nika looks and that he's only too happy to be bewitched by her. The guy regularly triggers my gag reflex with his sex talk. It's no secret that he's had his eye on Nika and has left no stone unturned since I disappeared from the scene. Nika has replied to his comment with a grinning emoji. It makes me furious, even though I don't have to care. Because Leen and Nika no longer exist.

"I got you this," Demy tells me. Only now do I notice the bag of clothes in her hand.

"Forget it!" Not even in my dreams will I take part in this stupidity.

"Come on, Leen, for my sake!" She puts on her puppy dog eyes.

I look at the photo of Nika again. Fuck!

I get up from the bed and walk towards my sister. "Okay, an hour if you don't get on my nerves any longer," I offer her as a compromise.

"Deal," she says and presses the bag of clothes into my hand.

Reluctantly, I pull the zip open and take a look inside. "Are you serious?"

"You're the gin prince," she replies and grins, while I just shake my head. Nevertheless, I change and half an hour later I'm standing in the lounge with a beer in my hand, where the party is already in full swing. My gaze wanders over the crowd until it catches Nika. Finn next to her. She's laughing. He smiles at her like a complete idiot.

"Hey, we're going to play spin the bottle, will you join us?" My head snaps to the right and straight to Noa. I freeze for a moment because she's wearing exactly the same costume as Nika. Their resemblance throws me for a loop. They are twins. So it's hardly surprising that the two of them are hard to tell apart. Nevertheless, I've never realised it as much as I did at that moment. I've only ever seen Nika. The girl who looked so sad when we first met that I made it my mission to make her smile. Now it's her sister who smiles at me as if she's happy to see me.

"No way, I'm not taking part in this nonsense," I reply and bring the neck of the bottle to my lips. Noa's gaze fixes on my mouth and stays there long after I've put the bottle down again.

I look again at Nika, who is sitting down in a circle on the floor with a small group.

"Are you sure? Finn is after Nika today," says Noa challengingly.

"I don't care," I reply, unimpressed.

"Well then." She crosses the room to join the others.

For the next few minutes, I watch the goings-on while I finish my beer. My heart rate increases with every spin of the bottle. You don't have to be a genius to realise what this game is all about. Because Lukas is kissing Fiona right now,

after Paul made out with the school bully. When it's Noa's turn, she looks briefly in my direction and grins mischievously. I hate her right now because I'm taking her bait.

I start moving and suddenly find myself next to Nika. She looks at me in irritation. The bottle in the centre is spinning. Quickly, until it finally slows down. What do I do when she points at me? I look at Nika again. Would I kiss her? And then? Would I tell her that I deliberately drove our friendship against the wall because I was in love with her but no longer wanted to be? That I realised long ago that I always will be and that I can't stand being near her for that very reason? It probably only makes some kind of sense in my head.

The neck of the bottle points to Finn. My body tenses up automatically. And then Noa says exactly what I was expecting. She tells him that he has to kiss the girl on his left. Nika.

Her gaze lands on me and I swallow, clenching my hands into fists. My heart skips a beat in my chest as she turns to Finn and he leans in towards her. And I allow it to erupt as I watch him press his lips to Nika's.

## **NIKA** , EIGHT TEN YEARS OLD

I smooth out the fabric of the pale pink dress hanging on a hanger on the wardrobe. Today is the prom. It marks the end of my time in Bloemdaalen and the start of a new chapter. One in which Leen will no longer be a part of my life because we are separated by an ocean.

In my mind, he and I were always endless. But human relationships do not move in such a loop, in which there is neither a beginning nor an end. Every story begins with an encounter and ends with letting go. I force myself to let go of Leen, just as he did long ago. Den-



It still feels strange to spend tonight without him by my side. Because it shouldn't be like this. It was always Nika and Leen. Not Nika and Finn. And yet Finn has been my boyfriend for six months and I really like him.

A rustling sound behind me makes me jump. I blink and look at Leen. As if I had summoned him, he stands before me like a long-faded memory. In one swift movement, he wipes his now far too long blond hair from his forehead. We barely exchanged more than a few words after our conversation in the school corridor. He threw away our friendship as if it was worth nothing, and now he turns up here as if it's okay for him to climb through my window without being asked.

"What are you doing here?", I press out.

"Do you really want to go to the prom with Finn?" he asks, burying his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"Excuse me?"

"Come on, Nika, it's not that difficult a question," he replies and looks at me waiting.

"I don't see why I would owe you an answer," I hiss at him. Because he didn't answer any of my questions at the Halloween party. One of the things I was really interested in was why he got into a fight with Finn. The fact that he kissed my sister to round off the evening was like a slap in the face. On the one hand, it felt like he'd swapped me for her, and on the other, like Noa had taken something away from me that only belonged to me. Which is not true. I have no claim to Leen. But Noa gets everything she wants. And he knew that for a fact. Leen was the only thing I never had to share with my sister.

"Does that feel wrong to you?" he asks a lot more gently.

"I have no idea what you mean." I know that very well, but I won't admit it.

"Yes, Nika, you know that," he exposes my lie.

"What do you want to hear from me, Leen?" I ask him, because I really don't understand why he's here.

He bridges the distance between us. "Tell me to go to the prom with you and I will."

I laugh, then fall silent abruptly. "You're serious."

"I don't like the idea of him picking you up, holding your hand, dancing with you and taking you home in the middle of the night. That should be my job."

"For fuck's sake, Leen, I'm not a to-do list that you work through," I blurt out.

He strokes my cheek with his knuckles. The touch surprises me so unexpectedly that I let him.

"What if you're my list of priorities?" I blink frantically as he pushes a strand of hair behind my ear and steps even closer to me. "What if it's always been you?" When he searches for my gaze and holds it captive, I have to swallow.

"If that's exactly my problem, Nika? Then what is it?" He clasps my face with his hands. "When I'm not myself without you and even less with you?" He lets go of me and takes a tiny step back. "Because we are everything and nothing."

"You made the decision that we're no longer friends, it wasn't me," I say.

"Because our friendship felt wrong." He increases the distance between us.

"It always felt right to me."

"I see," he replies and smiles faintly.

"No, Leen, you don't understand. I miss the boy who shares his lunch with me. The boy who won't let me win at football just because I'm a girl. I miss the boy who climbs through my window because the ceiling is falling on his head at home and I'm his refuge. The boy with whom I can talk, laugh and keep quiet about everything. The boy who makes everything a little better as long as we have each other.

I fucking miss my best friend. And I thought I was to you exactly what you are to me. But I'm not, right? Because if I were..." I pause because he looks at me like I've slapped him in the face.

"No, it's not you," he whispers and disappears through the open window the next second.

I hold back the tears that fight their way to the surface. Leen hurt me more than once and pushed me away, while I kept holding out my hand to help him up. He didn't want it. So where does he get off showing up here and reopening all those wounds?

# RAINY DAYS

*Dry gin, lime, orange, cassis*

.....



## LEENARD

*Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, London*

"What the hell," I gasp as I open the front door and the stuffy air hits me.

The old floorboards creak under my feet as I walk through the corridor towards the bedroom. At the same time, I dodge paper cups and step over a guy sleeping on the floor. As I pass by, I take a quick glance into the living room and spot two people asleep on the sofa, surrounded by a mess. Chip crumbs and popcorn adorn the light-coloured carpet, as do stains in shades of colour that might range from red wine to peppermint schnapps. At any rate, the empty bottles on the coffee table point to this. The eleven o'clock news is on the television, while Irene Cara's *What a Feeling* is blaring from the speakers.

Keep breathing.

Just don't go crazy.

My fingers close around the door handle to the bedroom. For a moment, I hesitate to enter the room because I have an inkling of what awaits me behind the door. My gut feeling is right. To avoid being noticed

I put my rucksack down next to the door and then close it quietly. My next destination is the kitchen.

"Good morning."

"Fuck you, Ezra!" I squeeze out.

My flatmate and best friend laughs. Although I should start thinking about stripping him of the latter status and sending him out onto the street.

"Had a shitty night?"

I ignore the question, just like the piles of dirty dishes in the sink, and take a clean glass from the cupboard. "What the hell is Heather doing in my bed?" I ask him.

"Chelsea brought them."

"So?" I ask, because it doesn't begin to explain what his current flame's sister is doing there.

"You weren't there," he explains, shrugging his shoulders.

"And?", I repeat, because that's no justification either. I haven't set many rules for our life together. One of them is that my room is off-limits if he throws one of his parties in my absence.

"What was I supposed to do, throw her out the door?"

"Yes," I answer curtly. We met four years ago at a freshers' party at Kingston University. We didn't have much in common. The main thing we had in common was that our families were worth millions and our fathers were patriarchs whose value system we didn't fit into. This developed into a friendship that Ezra regularly put to the test with ill-considered actions.

Last summer, he dropped out of university and moved in with me temporarily because he had to vacate his dorm room immediately. The temporary solution has now become permanent. Which I sometimes get on with more, sometimes less. At the moment, he's trying to make a name for himself in the event industry and organises exclusive parties for the

rich kids at Kingston University. So he has turned his hobby into a profession, because Ezra loves organising parties. Which is why he regularly uses my flat for it. He likes to have people around him, I like to have my peace and quiet. We couldn't be more different in so many ways and yet we normally work surprisingly well together. Ezra steps next to me, leans against the fridge and watches as I fill the glass with apple juice. For a fraction his face contorts ruefully for a second.

"Where were you anyway?" he wants to know.

"I needed some time for myself," I reply.

"One word and I'll move out if I'm too much for you," he replies, offended.

"Don't be silly, you're not too much for me, you're getting on my nerves."

"It's the same, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," I assure him.

I cross the kitchen in a few steps and open the balcony door so that the stench from last night no longer stinks up the flat. Then I look at the clock. "You've got an hour to get rid of the people and tidy up here," I tell him, finish my juice and put the glass next to the sink. "I'll meet you for lunch at *Woody's*," I say, softening my previous words.

"You got it."

I'm almost out the door when I pause and add an unmistakable "Alone." because I wouldn't put it past Ezra to bring Chelsea and Heather on a double date. Because that's exactly what he set up last week when he talked me into going to the cinema. Heather is okay, I'm just not that interested in her. Ezra, on the other hand, thinks she would be perfect for me. What makes him think that? I suspect he wants to force her on me so that she doesn't constantly stick to Chelsea like a limpet and disrupt their time together.

Once again, I dodge the chaos and step over the sleeping guy in the corridor, who turns over on his back with a groan and opens his eyes at that exact second.

"Is the party over already?" he mumbles.

Annoyed, I shake my head and tell him to get out of my flat.

I close the front door behind me louder than I intended and breathe a sigh of relief as soon as the silence envelops me and the smell of floor polish fills my nose. A sigh escapes my lips as the old wooden steps give way slightly under my feet and make noises that only a hundred-year-old staircase can make. Living in this house is like a long-dusted memory of childhood days. It takes me back to a time that felt carefree. One where I didn't constantly feel like I was feeling too much and yet not nearly enough. I probably only came to London to get back what I thought I would find here. But the fact is: the lightness won't return, no matter how long I stay here. It's not Ezra who is too much for me, but myself.

The mobile phone in my pocket vibrates the moment I step outside - Demy. I don't feel like talking to my older sister on the phone right now. Our last conversation centred on the fact that I should come home and why it absolutely had to be Kingston University. She also suggested that I do my upcoming Master's in Amsterdam so that I could be closer to my family. I ended up saying: *Don't call me again until you let me live my life.*

I didn't mean to hit on her like that. Demy just found a really bad time to bring up the subject. Ten minutes earlier, I had fished the cancellation letter from Kingston University out of the letterbox. I had been so sure of getting one of the few places. The professor had told me

I had already been indirectly assured of the Master's degree programme, which is why I didn't think about a plan B.

My sister got a full load of frustration for something that I brought on myself. I should apologise for that, but that would also mean having to explain myself - which feels like an admission of failure.

The spring sun shines on my face as the phone falls silent and I put it back in my trouser pocket. For the next few moments, I lean my head back and let the rays warm my face until a cloud moves in front of it. More follow and the sky becomes increasingly grey. Something I'll probably never get used to: the London weather. Statistically speaking, it rains 149 days a year here. That's 41 per cent. The time of year is completely irrelevant. Not that it rains less in the Netherlands, but the rain is different. Somehow milder.

My first impulse is to grab a taxi so that I arrive at *Woody's* dry. In the end, however, I decide to push my luck, so I turn right and walk down High Street. After two hundred metres, I turn left and take the narrow lane that leads me straight onto the Queen's Promenade. The good weather has mostly lured tourists out of their hotel rooms, as I spend the next few minutes dodging people taking photos as I walk along the Thames. Normally I can walk to our favourite pub in eight minutes, but today it takes me twice as long.

As soon as the door closes behind me, my mobile phone vibrates again. I ignore it because Mildred comes towards me.

"Hello, are you alone today?" she asks and immediately looks around for a free table.

'Ezra will join us later,' I reply. She nods.

"Okay, a window table?"

"If you still have one free." I look around the



half full room. *Woody's* is not particularly big. That's one reason why I like it. Because I'm not a fan of big pubs or tourist hotspots.

"For you always." The smile on Mildred's lips widens and I follow her through the dining room. Mildred works in her mum's restaurant alongside her studies because there is a constant shortage of staff.

Before I sit down, I look at Millie. I think about what's different about her, then I reach for one of the dark curls that reached over her shoulders on Friday and now ends at chin level. "I like your new hairstyle," I say, returning her smile for the first time.

With her eyebrows drawn together, she scrutinises me suspiciously. "Are you flirting with me, Leenard Brouwer?" she asks in a stern, but above all disapproving tone.

Laughing, I pull my hand back. "Would never occur to me."

"Good, Ezra will rip your balls off otherwise." I have no doubt about that.

"What can I get you?"

"I'd love a cheeze burger and a bourbon sour to go with it."

"You got it."

I watch her disappear in the direction of the kitchen. The swinging door closes behind her. After a few seconds, she reappears in my field of vision and steps behind the bar. Ed Sheeran echoes through the bar at a pleasant volume while I let my gaze wander over the guests. *Woody's* is a popular meeting place for Kingston University students because it is located right next to the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences. Some of the faces tell me something. However, I only know most of the people in the classes with me in passing. I'm the type of person you invite to parties because the name looks good on the guest list and attracts people. But I'm also the type of person that people give a wide berth to.

to look at him from a distance. The name Brouwer is like a curse that I thought wouldn't follow me all the way to London.

I was wrong about that.

Millie puts a glass down in front of me and opens her mouth to say something when a guest two tables away asks for her. A guilty expression appears on her face.

For a second or two, I look at the golden yellow liquid, which is garnished with a slice of lemon and a cocktail cherry to make it look more attractive. I take a paper napkin from the holder in the centre of the table, fish the superfluous garnish out of the drink and place it on top.

"Isn't it a bit early for that?" Ezra's voice rings out, and at the same time he pulls back the chair opposite me and sits down on it. Before I can stop him, he reaches for the glass and takes a sip. "Honestly, I don't get it, your family produces one of the best gins in the world and you're drinking cheap bourbon."

"As you know, I prefer the woody, spicy flavour of whiskey to bitter juniper." That's the official version of why I disdain the family product. The truth is, when I was fifteen, I took a bottle from the warehouse to drown my sorrows. Baas had to pick me up from the police station in the middle of the night after two officers picked me up drunk at a bus stop. I haven't touched gin since. I'm not sure whether it's because of the gin itself or because my brother told me not to try it again.

I take the glass from his hand and put it back down in front of me. "You're early," I say after glancing at my watch. There's no way he's cleaned up the mess in that short time.

"I've put off tidying up until *after lunch*," he confirms my suspicion.

"Hi, git." Millie puts the Cheeze Burger down in front of me while she greets Ezra in her typically charming way.

Ezra grins wryly and turns to Millie. The next second he opens his eyes in horror. "Fuck, what's happened to your hair?" he huffs out and I stifle a laugh because the look on his face is hilarious.

"It was time for something new."

"That takes more than a little getting used to."

"Leenard thinks I look pretty," she replies snappishly.

"Does he think so?" Ezra fixes me with his gaze. I raise my hands placatingly. "Keep me out of this."

Millie deliberately provokes her stepbrother. It's one of her favourite hobbies. Ezra would never admit it, but he has a completely exaggerated protective instinct. There is exactly one firm rule for our friendship: Mildred Josephine McAllister is off limits. I agree with Ezra on that point, I wouldn't let him near Demy either. If only because he can't stand it with anyone for more than a few weeks.

As if a memory pops up, my mobile phone vibrates again. I pull it out of my trouser pocket and it's actually my sister. It's the third call in the space of an hour. Which is more than strange, because she usually switches to sending me a message saying "*You're not answering again.*"

"Can you bring me some fish 'n' chips?" From Ezra's mouth, it sounds less like a request and more like a demand.

"What do you think about placing your order yourself in the kitchen for a change? You can take the opportunity to say hello to Mum."

Ezra leans back in his chair and crosses his arms behind his head. "There's a reason why I was awarded to my arsehole father at the divorce, while Miss Perfect had to stay with her mummy."

"And yet you keep coming here," Millie shoots back.

"Excuse me a minute," I say and get up. Firstly, to interrupt them before things get out of hand again, and secondly to call my sister back.

Just as I'm about to dial Demy's number, the message appears on the display that a message has been left in the mailbox. So I call it first.

"Leen," I hear Demy say in a shaky voice, then there is silence, interrupted by a quiet sob. I feel a chill run down my spine. The last time my sister cried was when our mum died. "Something's happened."

In that second, it feels as if someone has rewound time. I'm fifteen again, I see my big brother sitting next to me in the car, his face fixed, saying those exact words to me. *Leen, something has happened.* The sentence echoes in my ears over and over again. It causes the world around me to break apart once again, as if in slow motion, while my heart beats far too fast.

"You have to come home," Demy says, saying what I have long feared deep inside. I turn my gaze to the Thames as the rain pours down on me as light as a feather. For the next few seconds, I listen to the silence on the other end of the line, waiting for my instincts to prove me wrong and for my sister to come up with a banal explanation that suggests she's being overdramatic. Instead, I hear a mechanical voice: *end of message.*

My heart is now pounding in my throat as I dial Demy's number. It rings for half an eternity before I'm transferred to voicemail. Next, I try Baas with the same result. My limbs start to tingle uncomfortably and breathing suddenly feels impossible.

I start moving. My legs start moving automatically. One foot in front of the other. Away from *Woody's*. I dial Demy's number again, then Baas's again, to no avail.

Just like before, I dodge passers-by, only this time I only notice them subliminally. My mind is overflowing with thoughts, none of which I hope will become real. My pace quickens.

After a moment's hesitation, I call my father.

Nothing.

# SPRING KISS

*Vanilla Gin, Rhubarb, Tonic, Apple*

.....



NIK A

*Albert Cuypmarkt, De Pijp, Amsterdam*

I love strolling through the market in my neighbourhood because it has a calming effect on me. There is a very special atmosphere at the weekly market that can be experienced with all the senses.

"Good morning, Freya."

"Hello, Nika, up so early?" she teases me, because it's already midday.

"I wasn't in bed until five," I say in my defence, although I don't have to answer to her.

"You work too much."

"Always with the goal in mind," I reply.

Freya laughs briefly, then looks at me with a gentle gaze. The wrinkles around her eyes have become more pronounced and suggest how old she actually is. Her pastel pink hair and somewhat unconventional style of dress make her look much younger. I've never asked her how old she is, even though we've known each other for three years. Basically, it doesn't matter whether Freya is fifty, sixty or even older. She's by far the nicest person I've ever met. After all, she lets me go for a

tiny rent to live with her. Not directly in her home, but in the apartment block that she owns. Her family has been running the market stall for decades. While her brother is responsible for growing the fruit and vegetables, Freya takes care of the sales.

My gaze wanders over the seasonal selection. Spring is my favourite time of year because everything seems to wake up from its winter slumber. The first rays of sunshine revitalise the neighbourhood every year. People are drawn outside to the cafés or to Sarphati Park, which is not far from the market.

"What will it be today?" asks Freya.

"Two of these please," I say, pointing to the apples. "And here - from a stick," I add when I spot the rhubarb.

"Do you have another wish?"

"A bunch of mint, if you have any," I reply, because I can't spot it straight away among all the fresh herbs.

While she packs everything into a paper bag, I dig my wallet out of my rucksack. Freya raises her hand defensively when I try to hand her ten euros.

"On the house."

I smile at her demurely. Freya knows that I'm always short of money because my job at *Sole Mio* doesn't pay much and my hobby eats up a lot of money. That's why she rarely lets me pay for the things I buy from her. But I have found a good way to repay her generosity.

"Only if you try my latest creation later," I say, making her face light up. There are two things Freya loves: good food and gin. But above all, Freya enjoys having company. She is single and has no children. The household is her family. And for me too. I wouldn't miss our little community for the world.

"You're welcome, dear. As if I had known, I prepared the filling for bitterballen last night. I'll bring them later."

At some point I will have to confess to Freya that I am not a fan of this speciality.

"Absolutely," I say as usual, because for her, gin and bitterballen belong together. If you want to know about the culinary history of our country, Freya is the place to go. Thanks to her, I know that this deep-fried delicacy, which usually contains meat ragout, does not taste bitter, but is traditionally served with bitter substances, for example genever, the precursor to the well-known gin. When it comes to gin, however, Freya and I harmonise perfectly. After all, juniper schnapps is the fuel for my hobby of creating cocktails. Gin cocktails, to be precise.

"Are you OK at seven?" she wants to know.

"Fits perfectly."

We say goodbye to each other and I continue on my way through the market, stopping off at Arjen's cheese stall and Benthe's to pick up some Gouda and a bunch of colourful tulips for Freya. The great thing about this neighbourhood is that almost everyone knows everyone else here. And every culture and social class is at home here, as well as creatives and workaholics. People help each other out here. Everything goes hand in hand and most of the money stays in the neighbourhood.

Shortly afterwards, I turn onto Eerste van der Helststraat and follow it in the direction of Sarphatipark. As I pass by, I wave to Izabell and Joris, who live in the flat below me, and scan the playground for Amilia. She has spotted me long ago and comes running towards me.

"Niha," she calls out loudly and a few passers-by turn round to look at her. I get down on my knees to be at eye level with the three-year-old.



"Hello, Amilia, are you having fun?"

She nods eagerly and admires the tulips in my hand. I pull a pink one out of the bouquet and hold it out to her. "Here, a flower for you." I hand her another yellow one because it's Iza's favourite colour. "And this one is for your mum."

Without another word, Amilia turns round and hurries to her parents. I watch her for a moment until someone bumps into me and hurries off apologetically. I also continue on my way to Pastelstraat. The weekly market is only a ten-minute walk from my flat. If I need to get there quickly, I take my bike. I couldn't afford a car anyway and parking spaces are a luxury in the area.

I unlock the front door, take a look in the letterbox and sort out the bills among the adverts. There is no lift and the house is in need of some modernisation. The heating breaks down regularly, as does the hot water, and there is a draught through the windows. Nevertheless, I've never thought about looking for somewhere else. I like living here and accept the little quirks of the ageing building with a grin. Yes, I would even say that Pastelstraat 8 and its residents are inspiring and absolutely unique.

Freya's kingdom is on the ground floor. Akito, Hannah and Pablo live on the first floor. A three-person flat share that is always up for a party. The flat above them belongs to Peter and Gerda Müller, a couple who are enjoying their retirement in Amsterdam instead of Berlin. Then come Iza, Joris and Amilia van der Linden. I bring up the rear on the top floor.

The eighty-six steps are my daily exercise programme and yet I am out of breath every time I reach the top floor. I put the shopping on the small table under the window in the kitchen and take a vase out of the cupboard to put the tulips in for Freya. In the living room

The usual chaos reigns in the bedroom because it is almost impossible to store everything you need in this cramped room and keep everything tidy at the same time.

Before I get on with my task for the day, I feed Gijs-Bert, who is swimming happily in a bowl on the dresser. The goldfish was a gift from Freya to keep me company. I'm very glad that my flatmate is easy to look after, doesn't throw parties and tends to be the quiet type.

"Enjoy it, little friend." Gijsbert immediately pounces on the tiny flakes that slowly sink to the bottom of the water.

Compared to the rest of the flat, the kitchen is the largest room, which is why my workspace is also located here. There is another table in the corner with the necessary equipment. Okay, equipment is an exaggeration, it's just a tripod for my mobile phone, a ring light and a homemade black box that functions as a kind of photo box. Right next to it is an old wooden cabinet containing all the utensils I need for my cocktails.

I open the cupboard and inspect my stock.

"Okay, which one suits my idea best?" I murmur quietly, take out a small selection of bottles and place them on the table.

The ringing of the doorbell makes me flinch. I glance at the clock. So late already? Then I hear the key being inserted into the lock. The front door squeaks softly.

"Nika, are you there?" calls Selma.

"In the kitchen."

Her high heels clack on the old floorboards. "Ah, you're already getting ready," she remarks as she steps into the room.

"I was just about to start."

"Can we have a quick chat about the requests in your inbox first?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't accept collaborations, that's why."

Selma sighs. "Nika, I really hate to say it, but you're so incredibly stupid."

I turn to her and raise my left eyebrow.

"Just because I don't tell people what they should buy?"

"It's a recommendation, you're not forcing anyone to buy the product you're promoting."

We will probably never reach a common denominator on this topic. "If I present this gin today," I pick up a bottle at random and hold it up, "and follow it up with a discount code tomorrow, it will be to make my community a few euros better off and to incentivise the producer."

"Your logic is flawed, I hope you know that, because the only person who currently has no added value from their fame is you."

"I remain ad-free."

"What about your goal of opening your own bar?"

"I will, it'll just take a while."

"It would go much faster if you jumped over your shadow."

I should never have given her power over my social media account. But alongside my job as a bartender and producing content and writing blog posts, I simply don't have the time to do everything equally well. I don't even want to think about my lack of private life. That's why Selma took over answering enquiries and interacting with followers for me three months ago.

"And you'd be a great best friend if you didn't keep coming round the corner with this influencer career thing."

"Memo to you, Miss Cocktailery, you've been one for a long time, but unfortunately not one who earns millions by giving her input to people for free."

Selma is right in that respect, Miss Cocktailery has long since become more than just a hobby. Only the lousy pay has remained the same. My income still amounts to a few euros from affiliate links on my blog, which I then invest in the creation of new cocktails. It doesn't pay off at all. On the contrary, I usually pay on top. Nevertheless, I love it. Precisely because I'm under no obligation to anyone. If I had to pay for it, I would be less free in what I do.

"You already have a low-paid job, you can't afford a second one without pay," Selma adds.

"Do you learn how to offend people in your business management seminar?" I step next to her. I take several long drink glasses and a small plate from the cupboard and place everything in front of me. I then pour a decent amount of the brown cane sugar onto the plate.

"No, it's in the best friend handbook," she replies cheekily and grins at me.

"Really?"

Selma hands me a lime from the fruit bowl. I quarter it and rub the top rim of the glasses with it. "Yes, paragraph 4: If your girlfriend doesn't take her chances, smack her in the face with the truth."

"Is there also a paragraph that says you always stand behind your best friend's decisions?"

I dip one glass after the other into the brown sugar until it sticks.

"Possibly," she replies sweetly and takes a look

into the paper bag that is still unpacked on the kitchen table.

"Rhubarb?" she asks incredulously.

"Seasonal, remember?" I take the rhubarb from her hand and clean it under running water. Then I cut it into wafer-thin long strips with a peeler.

"Well, if you say so. What else do you need?"

"The apples, rhubarb juice and tonic."

"Which tonic?" she wants to know as she gathers the ingredients.

"Mmh, we'll try a mild and a tart one."

"What about the mint?" she asks, taking it out of the bag.

"Yes, them too."

Selma divides the ice cubes evenly between the glasses. I pour four centilitres of gin with a hint of pink pepper and lavender into the first glass, giving it a delicate rosé hue, and fill it halfway with the tart tonic and rhubarb juice. Then I hand the glass to Selma.

She wrinkles her nose because she doesn't trust the flavour, but she sips it and makes a smacking noise to activate her taste buds.

"So?" I ask her.

"Could be gentler. The tonic really packs a punch."

To form my own judgement, I take a sip.

"Yes, let's try the mild version and a gin with a vanilla note to give it a little more substance and reduce the acidity."

We spend the next few hours trying to find the right ratio of ingredients for the Spring Kiss. We are so engrossed that we initially ignore the doorbell until it rings again.

"I'll go, you conjure up a nice set so we can take photos."

"It's Izabell," Selma calls from the corridor. "She's got cake with her," she adds.

"Then let them in," I reply loudly.

"Freya gave you a tip, didn't she?" I ask Iza as she steps into the kitchen.

"I thought maybe you could use a test subject, but I see you already have active support."

"Always, Selma's taste buds are limited to sweet and fruity," I say and prepare her our final version of the Spring Kiss while Selma takes plates for the cake out of the cupboard.

"Visually very promising," notes Iza.

As a garnish, I cut wafer-thin apple slices and formed them into a fan using a skewer. I put a strip of rhubarb in loops and also fixed it with the skewer. Add a small sprig of mint and the work of art is finished.

"Stop," Selma gasps as Iza tries to bring the fruity cocktail to her lips. "We'll take the photos first." She takes the glass from her hand and walks over to the table where the makeshift black photo booth stands. I grab the camera.

Ten minutes later I've taken about twenty-five pictures and hope I've got something usable.

The doorbell rings again and this time I go in myself. Word has obviously got round that a tasting is taking place today, because the flatmates from the first floor are at the door.

"We've brought supplies," says Pablo and presses a bottle of gin into my hand. "My father swears this is the best," he says, squeezing past me. I take a look at the label and sigh. *Brouwen*. Of course.

"Come in," I say and take a step aside to let Hannah and Akito into the flat.

"I've prepared a snack platter. In a hurry, the

fridge," says Hannah, making an apologetic face.

"That's lovely." I'm not at all prepared for a spontaneous party. With any luck, I still have a bag of crisps and a tin of salted peanuts in the larder. "What do you want to drink?" I ask unnecessarily. I'm sure Freya has told them that I'm trying something new today and always like to hear different opinions.

Initially, I kept what I did in my spare time a secret, but then I needed a replacement for the taste test when Selma came down with tonsillitis and asked Freya. Word got round the house faster than I could ask Freya not to tell anyone about it. It's not that I'm uncomfortable about it, it's more that nobody has been interested in my hobbies so far.

Except Selma, she gave me the idea of starting a cocktail blog three years ago when we met at *Sole Mio*. Her date had stood her up and she was sitting dejectedly at the bar. When I asked her if there was anything I could do to cheer her up, she replied: *Only if you sprinkle some glitter on this shitty evening.*

I then made her a Glowing Aurora, which doesn't glitter but does glow in the black light. The cocktail wasn't on the menu, but I had just read on the internet that this trend was currently taking over the bar scene. Michael, the owner of *Sole Mio*, where I work, tends to stick to the classics and leaves me little room for creative development. So one thing led to another and today I present my creations as Miss Cocktailery. However, nobody outside Pastelstraat 8 knows that Nika de Jong is hiding behind the name. Something that characterises this apartment building: Everyone is loyal, gets on really well and we spend a lot of time together. The flat share regularly organises barbecues in the courtyard. Iza bakes twice a week and Freya cooks for everyone every Sunday. The  
muesli

lers look after the garden because no one else has green fingers.

As if on cue, another ring at the doorbell announces that the occupants are still missing.

"Are we too late?" Freya asks, craning her neck when she hears the babble of voices from the kitchen. She pushes the steaming bowl, which is filled to the top with bitterballen, into my hand. Gerda has a platter of freshly cut fruit with her.

A broad smile creeps onto my lips because all my favourite people are now together. "No, you're just in time."