

Naked love Berlin

by: Jin De Luong

Dear reader,

Books about Berlin have focused on war, but that's a perspective from straight men. For gay authors like Isherwood and myself, the German capital represents not war, but freedom to love and lust after other men. Berlin is the greatest cultural and extravagant freedom you can imagine. Like many authors before me, inspiration came from myself, my life, and the lives that comprise Berlin. Details have been changed to protect the innocent and those up-to-no-good. Be prepared to experience this freedom.

Jin De Luong

As a thank you for purchasing this book, please visit jindeluong.com to download my personal photos of Berlin.

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Chapter 1. Kay

Keys jiggle at the apartment door, and I abandon my text message (“...*suck my*”) with a frantic press of the home button. The hefty shake of German-made keys startles me, and I panic. Emails, I’m reading emails as I sit at the heavy maple table. Helmut opens the door and enters with a bouquet of lilies. He grabs a black vase and places the flowers in front of me, and their green and pink fragrance mingles with the smell of vanilla cake baking in the oven. He bakes for my birthday.

“You look good in that shirt,” he says, and squeezes my shoulder as I hold my breath. He goes to the oven and stands with his back to me. I breathe. Helmut is eighteen years older than I am, and we’ve been together for the last five. I met Helmut when his hair was still dark and his jawline firm. After fifty, the visible signs of aging are dramatic. His ass has no shape, his hair is long despite being Chernobyl-sparse on top, and the folds of flesh under his jaws are visible when he turns to smile at me.

Its screen locked, I set my phone aside. I go to the bathroom. With the door closed, I sigh. Is this how I ever pictured my thirty-third birthday? I am Canadian but live in Berlin. I live with a man who loves me, but his friends are older than he is, and they’re dying. Cancer, last stages of AIDS, bad knees. Helmut coughs from years of cigarettes, and with each cough, I resent his love. I’m thirty-three and should be living a carefree life, not one saddled with aches and pains from semi-retirement.

Helmut is very German, and his apartment is *typisch Deutsch* but modern. The bathroom is completely tiled, from the floor with black granite to the walls in white ceramic. In modern German bathrooms, the sink is white, the bathtub is white, and the toilet white. *Typisch Deutsch* bathrooms are clean, and to keep clean, German men sit down while urinating. A sign hangs by the toilet which shows a stick man standing while pissing, slashed

with a red line. *Es ist verboten*. Fuck that. I unzip and let the urine splatter from standing height. I hate these shelf toilets, something so despicably German. They save water, but a platform is built into the bowl to collect urine and other excrement—and my waste sits there like it's on display in a shop window.

“Kay!” Helmut screams. I press the white button to flush and watch everything dissipate in the swirls of clear water. I wash my hands, and they're still wet when I open the door to see Helmut holding my phone and pointing it at me like a knife. “Who is this Georg?”

Shit. I forgot about notifications. “A guy who lives nearby,” I say.

“A guy who lives nearby,” Helmut says. “And loves the taste of your cock.” He throws the phone at me. The screen cracks when it lands on the hardwood floor. “*Arschloch!*” German is powerful when barked in anger. Helmut's eyes are as wet as my hands, and his teeth are bared. Is he more disgusted by the sex or the betrayal? “Are there more?”

“Georg and Uwe,” I say. They're men my age. I don't know if I should say more. Explaining my selfish reasoning won't help: That they haven't lost interest in sex. That I miss the feeling of young flesh against me. That their asses are perky and shapely.

“Were you safe with them?” he says.

I twist my mouth in disgust. “Yes, of course fucking yes.”

Helmut covers his face with his palms. When his hands withdraw, his fingers leave pink trails on his puffy cheeks. His eyes narrow and he commands in slow and deliberate English, “Get out.”

I stand still. What was I expecting to happen?

“Kay,” he says, “Get out.”

I panic. Get out? Where will I go? I moved from Winnipeg to Berlin for him. I don't have family here, and know only people from work. Without Helmut, I'm an alien in this country.

“Kay, I can’t stand looking at you,” Helmut says. “Get out. Now! GET OUT!” Helmut screams the last two words, and his face reddens by rage.

I pick up my phone, and grab my backpack with its “University of Manitoba” stitching on the front. The door slams shut, and in the silence, I contemplate what I've done. Helmut’s expression and twisted features mean he hates me because I'm the betrayer and I cheated on him. In the love story of Canadian boy meets German man, it has a sad ending, and they don't live happily ever after.

I’m outside. It’s January in Berlin—trees are bare, sun is blocked by dark clouds, and the buildings’ colours have faded to grey like black-and-white photos. Grey European buildings makes me feel nostalgic of the past, and grey Berlin evokes eerie echoes of the war. My next steps could mean life or death.

Turn right to hide in a basement café. I sit down and watch legs in leather boots walk past. I recognize the woman’s gait. She’s Helmut’s friend and suffers from bad knees. She walks with hopes for a fun dinner party, but will instead find a crying old man.

A waiter comes to my table. He wears a white shirt framed in a black vest. “*Ein Glas Sekt, bitte,*” I say for my order. German sparkling wine. It is still my birthday.

A young woman wearing a backpack walks in. Her eyes scans the café, then sits down and pulls out her Berlin guide book. The waiter approaches her. “Do you speak English?” she says. He nods. “Coffee please.” They spend a few moments discussing coffee options. “And a glass of water.”

“Sparkling or still?” the waiter says.

“Tap water, I mean,” she says. The waiter looks annoyed. Tourists from North America beware—one does not order tap water in Europe. That person used to be me. I used to be a naive tourist. I was a country bumpkin from Winnipeg. I marveled at churches and castles like the other hordes of backpackers bussed around Europe.

I receive a text message from Mike, another Canadian I met months ago at a party named Queer Beer. “Free for drinks at my place?” he texts. He doesn’t know it’s my birthday. Of course he doesn’t. Only Helmut knows. What do I do now?

Another message. It’s from Georg. “BF just left,” Georg texts. “Your cock not only tastes good but feels good inside me. Come over and fuck me. Please.”

When in doubt, fuck. “OK. I’ll be there in 10 min,” I text. After a pause, I add, “Today is my birthday.”

“A special birthday blow job then ;)” he texts.

My sekt comes. My lips touch the rim of the champagne flute and my tongue tingles with soft bubbles. I drink the alcoholic melody without the glass ever leaving my lips. Foam clings to the side when I put the glass down. The tourist stares at me.

“Welcome to Berlin,” I say, leave money on the table, and head out.

Minutes later, at Georg’s building, I push the button beside “Schmidt/Fuhring” on the intercom, and push the heavy door open once it buzzes. We are in Charlottenburg, a wealthy part of West Berlin. The buildings that survived the war are opulent and hint at the former glory of the capital. This house has a front garden, and the entryway has a curved, domed ceiling with a chandelier. A wide spiral staircase leads to mystery and magnificence on the upper levels.

Georg, however, lives in the *Hinterhaus*, the nondescript building hidden in the back. These apartments behind the opulence were for servants who cooked and cleaned for masters living in the front. The stairwell here is narrow and dark. Georg’s door is ajar, and squeaks when I push to enter. As I walk toward the living room, the floorboards creak under my shoes.

Georg sits naked atop a blue throw on the brown leather couch. We never fuck in the bedroom. He’s tall, his arms stretched out to half the couch’s length, and his legs are so long and outstretched that not only his feet but also his calves rest on the floor. His torso, large and

hairless, glistens in pink glory. His cock is very German, uncut and even rosier than the rest of his body.

I approach him. Georg purrs like a kitty when I'm close. He purrs like a tiger when he squeezes my pecs. I'm built like a rugby player or gymnast, my own calves thick and my forearms striated with muscle, and Georg grabs my biceps as he nuzzles his face into my crotch. I unzip my pants.

"Happy birthday," Georg says and wraps his lips around my engorged and veiny cock. Georg's own grows thicker and longer, the head a deep shade of purple. A birthday blowjob is definitely better than cake.

I grab the lube and condoms. I use my teeth to rip open the wrapper. The condom is snug when I slip it on; I'm a little over average length but thick.

Georg sucks me through the latex. His English is good but heavily accented, and I bite my lip when he talks dirty to me. "Your cock is beautiful. Fuck me with it please." I don't know whether I would sound any less awkward talking dirty in German. *Du blast gut*. Or is there an umlaut somewhere in that sentence?

I turn him around and he lays on the couch like a dog. I push inside him, and I'm greeted by the smell of sex. Georg's breaths turn ragged and I begin with slow thrusts. His tongue laps the navy-blue cloth, and his neck and back flush red. I now fuck with greater force at greater tempo. I'm consumed by a feeling of power as I fuck this tall specimen of a man. Fuck and groan. Thrust and moan.

"*Georg! Bist du da? Ich habe was vergessen,*" another man says from the hallway. It's the boyfriend. Oh shit. The boyfriend walks in. He has a beard, and is just as tall but with a belly camouflaged by a blazer. Thrust, thrust—I should stop, right? The sound of the boyfriend's shoes stop. "*Ein Asiate, Georg? Das hätte ich nicht erwartet.*" You never

expected your boyfriend to be with someone Asian? Well, I never expected to be fucking your boyfriend, *Arschloch*.

The boyfriend walks to a desk on the opposite wall, pulls out an envelope, then steps out with a very prominent, “*Tschüuuss!*”

I’ve grown soft, and pull out. I should be peeved or angry, but instead feel like a popped balloon.

“It’s no problem,” Georg says. “We have an open relationship.”

“Sorry, I can’t,” I say. As I put on my clothes, images of Helmut and our past flood my mind—the holidays spent by the sea, in the mountains, and in villages with all houses painted white. I’m homeless. I’m a single gay man seeking an apartment or room to rent. How many other homeless gay men in Berlin are seeking the same?

I’m back outside. The street lights flicker on, and fortunately it’s not raining. What do I do now? I stare past the traffic and naked trees to find an answer. I then see the tourist from the café, this time carrying a smaller bag. She steps to one side to avoid a group of people chatting, but she blocks the red brick path reserved for bicycles, and no one is as rude with the rules as a Berliner on a bike. *Ting! Ting!* Rings the bike’s bell. That’s just enough time for her to jump out of the way—but she crashes onto the cobblestone sidewalk, the contents of her bag spilling out for all to see.

I rush over. Her face blushes, and although there are tampons and condoms on the pavement, she reaches first to pick up her guidebook, *Berlin Through the Back Door*. I smile.

“Are you OK?” I say, changing my lips to a pout of concern.

“Yes, just embarrassed,” she says. She brushes the dust off her clothes. “Can you tell me where Wiesenstein restaurant is?”

“Good choice,” I say. “It’s straight down this street.” After considering what “straight down” might mean to a North American, I add, “The street hits an intersection, and will curve forty-five degrees left. But it’s still the same street.”

“Thank you.” She walks away, glancing every so often at the ground to make sure she doesn’t step onto the red bicycle lane.

I’m not her. I may be homeless, but I’m no tourist. I’m a Berliner. I may have messed up, but life goes on—another day, another party, another moment to fuck things up.

I call Mike. “Hey. I’d like to join you. How long will you be there?”

“We’re finishing up,” Mike says, “We’re going to GMF soon. Want to meet us there?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Do you know where it is?” he says.

GMF. I know where it is. Not just a Berliner, a gay Berliner. “Yeah. See you in a bit.” I’ll check into a hotel, take a few days off work, and find another place to live. I’ll email Helmut to arrange a time to pick up the rest of my things. Maybe I’ll live with a roommate so I don’t have to buy tons of furniture. It’s Saturday, January 18, 2014 and for my thirty-third birthday, I’ve gifted myself a new life as a single gay man in the sexy big city. I walk toward the U-Bahn without any need for a map.

Chapter 2. Alex

I look in the bathroom mirror and see red hairs sprouting through the black and brown of my beard like a weird type of carrot salad. I guess this is what happens when you get older and you have a mixed German-Japanese background. Some days, my brow bone appears more prominent, and people think I'm German. Other times, my eyes look more Japanese. That's usually when I've barely slept, and my eyes are half-shut and I'm tired as fuck.

The intercom buzzes. A guy is coming to see the room. He says he's Kay from Canada. He didn't speak with any "eh" at the end, but I'm going to pay attention to his "about."

I run into the bedroom and put on the first shirt I can find—a pink shirt I wore last night to a gay party. It's not only pink, it has a lazy pride of maned lions on the front, with a few even sniffing each other's butts.

I open the door for Kay. I'm surprised. I mean, he's Asian. I wasn't expecting this from a Canadian. I can say this because I'm half Japanese.

"Hi," I say. I don't see many broad-shouldered Asians. "Come on in."

"Should I take my shoes off?" Kay says. Of course he'd ask something like that.

"You can if you want, but I don't," I say and walk toward the living room, my shoes resounding on the hallway's hardwood floors. I still have boxes piled against the wall from my last move. "Your room is behind the doors. It's the bigger one, but no balcony." I open the doors to reveal a space empty except for a bed and mattress left by my last housemate. Sunlight shines in through the window, an unusual thing since it's January. The weather has been warm today, although last night was as cold as a Minneapolis winter.

"Nice," Kay says. His voice echoes in the large empty bedroom. He walks around, opens the windows. The room faces the courtyard so it's quiet except for the tweets of birds.

“When did you arrive in Berlin?” I ask him. He’s the third person to inquire about the room.

“Five years ago,” he says, looking at my shirt. He smiles. “My boyfriend and I broke up, so I need to move out of his place.” Gay, Asian, and Canadian. I can’t say I’m not intrigued. “Are utilities included?”

“The *Nebenkosten* yes,” I explain, “but internet, electricity, and a few other things we would split. What job do you have?”

“I work at CoExcel,” he says. “It’s a company that implements clinical studies for pharma companies.” Kay’s a guy with a regular sounding job. That’s a big plus for a roommate in Berlin.

We continue the tour through the bathroom and then the kitchen. He mentions that he likes to cook, and asks whether that would be a problem. Of course I say no, but seriously, what’s the smell going to be like? Even though my mother is Japanese, she didn’t cook. I’ve spent more of my life eating hamburgers than I have sushi or ramen. And don’t fucking give me chopsticks.

I’m not sure I’m feeling it with Kay from Canada. I’ve decided to give him the whole spiel about having two more interviews before I can make my decision when his phone rings.

“Hey Mike,” he says. His face changes. “How badly are you hurt?” Color is draining from his face as he covers his mouth. “Where are you?” More from the phone. “I’ll come get you.”

“What happened?” I say.

“Shit,” he says. “My friend Mike got into an accident. He’s been here for a year and a half, but he doesn’t know German. He doesn’t even know the number to dial for an ambulance. I said I’d pick him up, but fuck, I don’t have a car.”

“I do,” I say. “We can go pick him up together.” We head out of the apartment and walk down the stairs.

“What brought you to Berlin?” Kay says.

“I like your question,” I say. “It’s one of those vague, open questions that doesn’t work on Germans.”

“I know. You’re American.”

“With German citizenship,” I say. “I came here to study opera. And to party. But I don’t mention that to my parents.” Partying in Berlin is so much cheaper than anywhere else. I sing him a piece from *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*. A neighbor pops open the door and quickly closes it when she sees me.

“At least you’ve learned something,” Kay says. “I’ve met way too many students here ‘learning’ German,” he does the air quotes around *learning*, “and when I start a simple conversation with them, their faces go blank like, ‘OK. You’ve caught me. I’m really here for the drugs.’”

I point to where the hatchback is, a black VW. I’m glad I can get some use out of it since most of the time I’m too drunk to drive. “What kind of accident was your friend in?” I say.

Kay is putting on his seat belt. “He slipped on ice and fell off his bike. His right hand hurts, so something there must be broken.”

“I once hit a curb and fell off my bike,” I say. I was piss drunk. “It was near a square and I landed on grass. Otherwise these European cobblestones are painful. What brought you to Berlin?”

“The relationship that I’m moving out of,” Kay says. “That, and the cheap booze.”

He drinks. Good, thank God. I drive and Kay tells me where to go. The GPS navigates but the American voice is mangling the pronunciation of German street names. We arrive. There's an Asian guy pacing back and forth behind a fallen bike.

"Mike," Kay greets. "What happened?"

"Is my face scratched?" Mike says. His words burst out with hardly a breath. Kay shakes his head. "I was going downhill. I've taken this route for so many fucking months. I turn right like I've done how many fucking times, but today, there's ice. The bike slides and I fall. I hold my hands out like an idiot to stop. Fuck, my hand hurts." He looks at his right palm.

"Give me your bike key," Kay says. "We'll lock up your bike and then go to the hospital. You have your insurance card, right?"

"In my wallet," Mike says. In the back of the car, Mike looks at me. Two and a half Asians in my hatchback. This black car has never been sat on by so much yellow ass.

"I'm Alex," I say.

With another wince, he says, "Thanks for taking me."

This is my first time to an emergency room in Germany. I was once in an emergency room in Minneapolis to help a friend who drank too much. This waiting room is way smaller than an American one, and fairly empty with no one bleeding. Instead of filling out paperwork, Kay hands an insurance card to the receptionist, who hands it back only seconds later. Kay explains what happened. I listen, curious whether he speaks better German than I do.

"Mike doesn't speak German, so I'm here to help," Kay says. "He was riding his bicycle and fell. His right hand hurts a lot, so we think a bone is broken." I wonder if I would have explained it like that. When my friend back home was delirious and almost unconscious,

I kept ranting about how they had to do something and we were just partying and how I had found him in the bathroom unconscious like that.

The receptionist asks us to sit and wait. Mike's weeping and supporting his right hand with his left, and Kay has his arm wrapped around Mike's shoulders. I pick up last July's copy of *Der Spiegel*, and along with old news, there is an article about the best vacation spots in Spain. Germans love Spain—Malaga, Barcelona, and Mallorca *ja!* Madrid? Meh.

A woman wearing white pants and a white shirt comes to us. She's not wearing a lab coat. "Herr Mike Lee?"

We all look at her, but Kay says, "Mike doesn't speak German."

"I will take an X-Ray of Mike's hand," she continues saying in German. "One of you can accompany Mike, but not both."

"I'll wait here," I say. They leave. She has a large round ass. I like big booty.

An hour or more later, my phone battery's dead. Kay comes out and sits beside me. "Mike's getting his hand in a cast right now. Thanks again for taking us, but if you want to go..."

"I'll stay," I say. "I like helping." I don't mention that I've got nowhere else to go, or that I don't have friends who would take me to the hospital here, so it's comforting to see people like Kay and Mike that do.

"Mike kept telling me how powerless he felt," Kay says. "And this is just at the hospital. What's it going to be like for him when he has to cook for himself, or shower, or even put on shoes?"

"At least you only need one hand to jerk off," I say with a grin.

"Or if he uses the cast hand," Kay says, "it'd feel like a gracious bottom doing it for him." We both chuckle.

Mike comes out. He has his jacket draped over his left arm because the other's in a bulky cast. "If only I had landed on my left hand," he says. "A cast on the left would have been inconvenient. But I'm right handed, and this," he says while lifting his cast and grimacing, "is life-altering painful. I have an appointment in two weeks. I could at least understand that much."

We head to the car. In one of those strange Berlin twists of the rules, I pay a fine of five euros because I hadn't paid for parking. If I had paid and had been late, it would have been fifteen.

In the car, Mike says, "I called my mom. After the surgery, she wants me to go back to Vancouver." His voice is rather whiny, but who wouldn't be after breaking a bone?

"Is that what you want?" Kay says.

"I think so," Mike says as he looks out the window, as if ashamed. "What's keeping me here? Sure, partying is fun, but I'm teaching English at a language school where there's always a guy who's a little too surprised that an Asian guy is teaching them English. I was supposed to write something, anything, but all I've managed to do is piss away my money."

Shit sounds familiar.

"Although I've heard there's a new night at Lab for guys into casts," Kay says. He's talking about a sex club, one I'd only recently learned about. "Just imagine how popular you'd be. When it comes to fisting, you're a top, right?"

"Oh God," I say. I stop the car at the apothecary's green cross. After the pharmacy, we drop Mike off at his apartment. Kay gets back into the car, and I say, "You're a good person to help him out like that."

"Without family," he says, "We expats have to look out for each other."

I let that settle in my head, and realize it'd be nice to have an expat like Kay in my life. "When can you move in?" I say.

Kay puts on his seat belt. "Tomorrow?"

"When exactly?"

"About two?" Kay says. Yes, that about is fucking Canadian.

"As long as it's the afternoon," I say. "It's Chantal's House of Shame tonight. I won't be getting up before noon."

Chapter 3. Timothy

Who's the bloody wanker who left his alarm on for a Saturday? And why are these walls so damn thin? I thought Germany was renowned for quality, but this furnished business flat is pitiful. It's a tiny one-room place with paper veneer furniture rejected from a motorway hotel. This is what happens when I accept the recommendation of a relocation agency. I was out way too late last night, and may perhaps be mildly hung over. I don't need this.

I try in vain to block out the noise with my pillow. The alarm's shrill and incessant beeping only intensifies my hangover. Exasperation sets in. I pull on a jumper and head to the balcony to light a cigarette. My lips encircle the fag and inhale smoke deep down my lungs while thinking of him.

Even though I only arrived home two hours ago, last night was worth it. His name was Orhan, and we met at the bar over our mutual like of vodka Red Bull. In truth, I hate the cocktail, but I had spotted this fine specimen of Turkish delight earlier in the evening, and had spied on him to see what he'd ordered. We met at the bar while ordering the same drink, I said hello, and after some small talk I carefully placed caresses on his thigh. Cut to me in his bedroom, he pushed me on my knees, and I was sucking on his stubby but oh-so-thick circumcised Muslim dick. It was almost painful when he bent me over and fucked me. I whimpered like a schoolgirl.

Who am I fooling? I relished every minute of my rosebud being ravaged.

I head back inside, where the neighbour's alarm continues to pulsate through the room. I lie on the bed and can't help but think about Orhan shagging me. I can still feel his girth inside me—like wounded soldiers complaining about phantom limbs, I as a power bottom can complain about phantom cock, especially Orhan's hard and fat monster.

I begin to wank, and with each stroke I desperately try to recall every detail. Not only his schlong but his body pounding into mine, him olive-skinned and muscled, me with my pale and freckled limbs. But I was dreadfully pissed, and the details are hazy.

It then dawns upon me. After all our fumbling, he didn't use a condom. With my pathetic German, I couldn't understand all of what he said, or why he didn't want to. It was a strange sense of powerlessness conversing in German, and I couldn't think swiftly enough, couldn't speak swiftly enough. I was left mute. Did it matter? When it happened, when he was inside me, my breathing quickened, and all I could focus upon was the force of his body and the pleasure of sex.

An hour later the alarm stops. My eyes, however, remain wide open. The sun reflects into my flat from the face of the glass office building across the street. I watch the light shift as the hours pass until I sit upright. A sharp tingling erupts on the left side of my chest. I rush to the mirror in the windowless bathroom, and in the paltry lighting, I see it—a swollen lymph node above my ribs, bulbous and squishy underneath my fingertips. As more hours pass, a rash of pink blotches bursts through my freckles.

Why is it taking so bloody long for this laptop to load? I smash my palm onto the desk.

With the web browser opened, I click on a page from the NHS entitled, "HIV and AIDS—Symptoms." The flu-like symptoms are signs that my body fights a battle for its life. I read further because it gives some vague sense that I'm still in control. My immune system musters all its strength to eliminate this invader. T cells, B cells, and macrophages are deployed at full power, and I suffer with a fever and rash in the hopes of continuing to live.

The page, however, also warns that these symptoms are unspecific, and could mean flu. Wasn't there a twat at the office who came to work feverish?

It's now Sunday. I hadn't bothered to bathe after coming home, and yesterday's half-eaten pizza gathers more dust by the foot of the bed. I'd been so daft. I wallow in self-hatred. How could I have been so stupid and utterly reckless after all the books and movies I've read about AIDS in the nineties? Yet this resentment leads to thoughts of Orhan's body, and I feel my cock stiffen—and despise myself even further.

I need to get out, to distract myself with other people, and forget. If I were back in London, there'd be a gaggle of other nancy boys I could join for early-evening cocktails—even if that meant a forty-minute ride on the Tube. But here in Berlin after three weeks, I only have contacts with investors. Except for one person. I dial his phone number.

“Hey Alex,” I say. “How are you?”

“Still hung over,” he says, “but otherwise functional. What's up?”

“I'm bored out of my mind from work,” I say, “and was wondering whether you'd be free and fancy a drinkette?”

“Right now?”

“If you're free,” I say.

“My new roommate moved in Friday,” Alex says. “Saturday was a Swedish shopping spree. We're still assembling shelves and other shit.”

I let out a moan. He's busy. Try not to sound too despondent, Timothy.

“What the fuck was that explosion? Wait a sec.” I hear Alex press the phone against his shirt, and there is muffled discussion. “Kay popped open a bottle of Rotkäppchen, and we've had enough for one day. You're welcome to join. Kay's Canadian, so we can have an Anglo threesome.”

“It'd be prudish of me to decline a threesome,” I say. “Where are you located?”

We clarify details. I shower, and avoid shaving because I just can't look at the rash below my collarbone. I need to be the most bubbly me, so I pour a finger of whiskey in a used

glass and gulp it down. My father would chide me that it's improper not to savour a drink that's aged twenty years, but he isn't here. I head out and onto the U-Bahn.

From the U-Bahn station, I stop off at a convenience store before I walk to Alex's place. He lives in an old turn-of-the-1900s building with five floors and ornate balconies for the front facade. I push the button for "Anders/Hung" and the main door buzzes open. There's no elevator and I walk up and up and up and up until I see the wooden door left ajar. I enter the flat. It amazes me how quickly Americans welcome a stranger into their homes even if it is slightly dreadful inside. The flat certainly looks like someone has recently moved in with boxes piled high, but there's also a layer of dust that dates from before Friday.

"Welcome, Timothy," Alex says. He opens his arms for a hug, and I hug him back.

"Since you were celebrating with Rotkäppchen," I say, "I brought a couple of bottles to contribute. You must be Canadian Kay."

"From cold and humble Winnipeg," he says as we hug.

"Isn't Winnie the Pooh's name inspired by Winnipeg?" I ask.

He takes my jacket. "It is. There's even a statue at the zoo."

"Winnipeg is on the map," I say. I hope he doesn't see me as a snobbish Londoner.

Kay walks to the kitchen. "Interesting tidbit: I've seen tons of weather reports in various countries, and whenever they show North America, they always show Winnipeg. I think it's because there's no other city around it for a thousand kilometers, and this spooks the weather reporters."

We have three glasses of sekt filled to the brim. I suppose when one celebrates with four-euro bottles of bubbly, it's all about quantity. "Prost," Kay says.

"Well, cheers and prost," I say and raise my glass. "Are you new to Berlin like myself?"

“I’ve been in Berlin for five years,” he says. “But boyfriend drama is making me move.”

“Easier to organize a sex date when you don’t have a jealous boyfriend looking over your shoulder,” Alex says. We head to the living room.

“Is that something you two have agreed upon in the rental contract?” I say after a sip. “That random boys will be walking through those doors and depositing their DNA somewhere in the, um, apartment?” I must speak American English.

“The boyfriend took all the jewels in the divorce,” Kay says. “I’m not worried about being robbed if Alex entices a boy over.”

“Or girl,” the bearded Alex says. “I’m actually bisexual.”

“Truly, darling?” I say as I purse my lips. “Or is Bitown just a stopover until you catch the next train service to Gayville?”

“The discos are so much better in Gayville,” Kay says. “Plus you can eat gluten-free cupcakes.”

Alex suddenly gets up. “Assholes. I’m going to piss.”

When Alex is out of the room, Kay asks, “Do you think he’s really angry at us?”

“This is only the second time I’ve met him, so I haven’t a clue.”

Kay then looks at me. “You’re new to Berlin. Has the city changed you yet?”

“How do you mean?” I say.

“In a city so debauched and raunchy it’s debaucherous,” Kay continues, “where the clubs stay open for days, beer is cheaper than cola, and you can fuck a guy at home before going to the sex party and getting gang-banged in a sling—does it change a person?”

The image of Orhan followed by the rash on my body floods my mind, and I feel my entire body grow hot. Would I have done that in London?

“I’m still new to Berlin,” I say. “But it changes you like a potted plant that grows to the shape of its container. Or one of those outrageously priced square watermelons from Japan.”

Kay gulps down more sekt, looking away into the distance as if he’s deliberating. “Those who chose to live in Berlin,” he says, “aren’t innocent and naive. Those who choose to stay are happy to be in the poor but sexy capital. I don’t think Berlin changes you. The city just awakens a part of you that was already there.”

“You chose to stay,” I say.

“I did,” he says, and winks. “Will you?”

I stare at Kay through the translucent fizz of the glass. From the kitchen, I hear Alex pop open another. “To my blossoming debauchery then,” I say and down the rest of my glass. I can’t help myself. After three glasses, this Rotkäppchen is splendid.

The party continues at the obscenely named Ficken 3000, at a Sunday event called Pork. *Ficken* was one of the first words in German I learned, and I dare not imagine the protests that would converge in any other city at a bar named “Fucking 3000.” It has the look of a 1990s bar, with black tables, a mirror as one wall, and a banner in red LED lights flashing drink specials. I love tacky when tacky’s done right.

The cellar has even more love—porn on the telly, and a dark room with men fucking. This definitely takes fucking to the next level.

I climb down the spiral staircase and decide to sit on a fluffy black leather couch in front of a screen playing porn. Of course I think about my mistake, my terrible mistake, but lust compels me. My erection rages against my trousers, but I’m also hyperventilating. I know that once I leave this first chamber, there is another world in the darkness. My hands shake and I can barely inhale from my fag. Of course I’m nervous. I’m a dark room virgin, and despite all the schooling I have undertaken, no classes at Oxford prepared me for this. No

class, but there was that rarely frequented WC of the English faculty also located in the building's cellar. I throw the butt onto the ground and walk into the darkness.

After my eyes adjust, it's not absolute blackness, just poorly lit with shadows hiding the filth. I wander through the place, at first only observing with more than my eyes. In the darkness punctuated by the silhouettes of other men, my nose flares to inhale the scents of man musk, cigarette smoke, and the lingering smell of poppers.

A score of men stand and linger. There is a blond twink with a poor excuse for a beard, and when a fat old man lingers too closely, the twink gazes away. Denied. In another corner, a bear in dark clothes stands in front of one of the few sources of light, an indoor window to the first room with the porn. He appears as a massive, bulging shadow. Another bear walks past, and they make eye contact. The bear mating call is answered. I hear the sound of a belt being unbuckled, a zip's teeth being drawn slowly open, and the soft thud of knees on the ground from the second bear. A moment later, his head bobs in front of the other man's crotch. Sex is that easy below in a bar's basement.

I walk to another chamber. Enough light enters this room for me to discern the face of a short but well-built man—his features are stern although his face is narrow, he has a beard, and he looks Middle Eastern. I approach him from the side, and look at him. He doesn't look away.

He unbuckles his belt. That clinking resounds among the shadows, and the sight of his cock entices me and my mouth waters in anticipation. He has a massive member, so massive and long that it curves downward under its own weight.

I have a brief moment to taste his cock before he fucks my mouth and gags me. He's rough and I struggle to breathe between thrusts. He moans, "*Du Sau, du Sau...*" My cock is erect and I resent myself that I'm hard from his oral abuse.

He takes himself out only so he can flip me around and pull my trousers down, pants and all. I feel his cock nudge against me, already lubed with my saliva. It tingles, and I want him inside. "*Fick mich.*" My breaths are heavy. I wait and feel my insides relax.

"*Scheiße,*" the big-dicked man says. He's coming already, and I can feel the sticky heat on my perineum and inner thighs. Before I can even turn around and catch my breath, his belt clinks frantically like his disappearing footsteps. I am left bare-cheeked. I pull up my trousers and feel cum dribble on my fingers. Unlike everything else here, it smells fresh and clean. I'm tempted to taste it, but smear it on the wall instead.

I head upstairs, gripping the railings tightly. Alex and Kay are where I left them, but their beers are almost empty. Do I tell them what happened?

"I hope you enjoyed yourself, and took fucking to the next level," Alex says.

"I'll take a cab back to Mitte," I say.

"Come on, one more drink," Alex says. "My treat."

"Fine, if you're buying." I rub stickiness from my fingertips with the inside of my trouser pocket.

I sit down. When the beers are almost finished, Kay offers to buy the next round. This is when another dark-haired man enters the bar and stares at me as he walks past towards the cellar. I feel another stirring. But this time, I whisper, "Do you have a condom?"

Kay hands me one. I bolt downstairs without waiting for the next round.

Chapter 4. Thomas

Today is my first time at a medical conference, and I present my poster, “High prevalence of genetic markers DIKY3 and DIKY5 in patients hospitalized for major depression.” The suit is Hugo Boss, my one and only suit, but I had bought it when I had thirty kilos more, and it is simply too big. Drinking before 16h should not be done, but at this moment, I wonder what is the point of “should.” A drink would calm me.

The poster session is at a large hall of the congress. A woman with glasses even thicker than mine stares at the poster. The printing job is last minute. Whereas the other posters from drug companies are glossy and printed on huge poster paper, my poster is printed on A4 sheets pinned together to regulation size like a jigsaw puzzle. Where is she from? Will she ask a question? She reaches the end, scrunches her nose, and then moves on.

It was a terrible morning. I cut myself shaving below the jaw line. There is a pink bandage covering it, and I am certain that everyone who passes by can see it. I mean everyone. I am the tallest person in this room, so when people look up to talk to me, they will see a two-meter giant of a man who shaves like a teenage boy.

It is 15h30 and one of the drug companies sets up a wine reception. Is that allowed? The conference program states that evening receptions should start no earlier than 17h.

“How did you hone in on the DIKY genes?” says someone.

I look down. There’s an Asian man in a neat suit and rimless glasses smiling at me. He has a preppy, safe-to-take-home-to-your-parents appearance, but his jaw is square and strong. I don’t see that often—and I have forgotten his question.

“Your question again please?” I say.

“How did you know to look for these particular genes in the millions of genes on a human DNA, Dr. Urning?” He says and smiles.

“The genes are linked to serotonin receptor expression,” I say. “A paper had published that earlier.” Although not that many people ask questions about the poster, many ask questions that are answered in the poster. *Can't you read?* I want to say. There are personality types, and a major determinant is whether a person is extroverted or introverted. I am introverted. It exhausts me to be with new people, especially if they are superficial and can't talk about anything important.

“It's a paper you wrote,” the man says. “I find it remarkable that you could find the needle in the haystack.” He actually read the citations list?

“The honest truth is that my mother has severe depression, and out of plain curiosity I got my family's genome sequenced,” I say. “After countless hours of scanning, one late night I noticed a sequence that only my mother had and not me, my father, or my brother.” I can't think of any other answer to give.

“This fascinates me about science,” the man says. “How scientists get these hunches. In your case, a personal connection.”

I nod. I don't mention how severe my mother's depression was, and how awful it was to be motherless for weeks on end. I look at his name tag. “Kay Hung from CoExcel in Berlin?” I say.

“Yes, and I had to write some creative emails to get approval to be here,” he says while he extends his hand. “Dr. Urning, nice to meet you.”

“Just call me Thomas,” I say as I shake it. “I haven't gotten my PhD yet.” Asian and in Berlin? I want to ask where he really comes from but he continues.

“I know some of the people at the GKS booth, the ones sponsoring the wine reception,” Kay says. “I can probably get us a glass now. Do you want to be bad and leave your poster?”

“Yes,” I say, before adding, “Everything is online now anyway.” Being with this Kay from CoExcel makes me want to break the rules.

Wine leads to dinner.

At first, dinner is new and interesting. I meet pharmaceutical men and women in suits, and medical academics in sweaters. The food and wine is paid for, and I’m glad because one meal in this restaurant costs enough for a week’s worth of groceries. I order steak. The conversation centers around safe heterosexual topics—work, children, and more work. The most interesting topics were vacation spots, but I have nothing to contribute. I’ve never traveled farther than Amsterdam. I grow bored.

Kay touches my shoulder when people order coffee. “We should go,” he says. Where? But Kay says to the table, “Dinner was wonderful. Thank you, but Thomas and I are expected somewhere.” We leave the restaurant without paying anything, and hail a taxi.

In the car, I ask, “Where are we expected?”

“Someplace gay,” he says. He squeezes my hand. How did he know?

We enter a smoky gay bar in Prenzl’berg. On a Wednesday evening, Marietta is packed with clean-cut and respectable gays. The crowd is mostly German, and although I am still the tallest, the men here are taller than at the international men at the congress. Kay comes back with a *Kristalweizen*, and hands it to me. It is the first drink we’ve had to pay for.

“How did you know I was gay?” I say.

“You were a tough one,” Kay says. “I asked my standard questions—why did you move to Berlin, what do you think about Berlin’s nightlife, or what do you do for fun—my gaydar wasn’t going off.” My answers were the following—PhD, never been, video games. “But then you were talking to my female colleague and a cute guy walked past, you looked at him like she was invisible.” Oh yes, him, I remember. He was a dark-haired Mediterranean

man with bulging biceps, a waiter for another table. “And then I asked what your favorite movie was. That was irrefutable evidence,” Kay says.

“Chicago?” I say.

“You might as well have said, ‘My favorite movie is Buttsex.’” We clink glasses, and in unison, say, “and all that jazz.” It surprises me how comfortable I feel doing that.

I excuse myself to go to the toilet. Kay isn’t like other Asians I’ve met. The Asians I have met growing up in Hannover were shy and seemed as though they were never truly comfortable in Germany, even if they spoke perfect German. Is it different for Asians growing up in Canada?

As I urinate, a guy uses the urinal beside me. He’s skinny and twenty centimeters shorter than me. He cocks his head down to stare at my penis.

“That’s big,” he says. Did he really say that? “I love to suck on a big dick. Want to go to the stall and I’ll give you a fantastic blow job?”

I shove my penis back into my pants. I’m in such a hurry I don’t even flick the last drops of urine off. He frowns, shrugs his shoulders, and continues to piss as if nothing happened.

I rush out of the bathroom. When I sit down, I say, “You wouldn’t believe what happened to me. A guy—” I struggle to find the best English word, “propositioned me at the urinals.”

“How exactly did he ‘proposition’ you?” Kay says while he raises one eyebrow.

“He was urinating beside me, and commented on my penis,” I say. Why is this important?

Kay smiles and finishes his beer. “At least he waited until you were in the bathroom. Last summer, there were two guys here. One was pulling his pants down on the street and

showing off his cock, and another guy pulling down his shorts to show his ass. Like baboons on the African Savannah disturbing the peace of a gay pride of lions.”

“This is Berlin gay nightlife, or?” I say.

“It can be,” Kay says. “But I think those guys weren’t from the area, because the regulars were shocked, and one guy whispered, ‘We don’t do this in Prenzlauer Berg. There are children here.’ If only he knew that the children’s café down the street was once a sex club.”

My eyes stare at the guy as he leaves the toilet and passes by us while acting completely normal, as if he didn’t offer me a blowjob.

“You have a deer-in-the-headlights look,” Kay says.

“I don’t understand this expression,” I say.

“Wide-eyed and shocked,” he says. “I’m sure this didn’t happen in Hannover, but I would take it as a compliment, since he’s a pretty good-looking guy. I’m not surprised. You’re a good-looking guy yourself.”

I cross my arms across my chest. There’s a mirror across from us, one of those brass-rimmed mirrors that my grandmother had and we threw out when she passed away. “I know I’m tall, but good-looking? Look at my eyes.” They bulge out of their sockets from the magnification of my thick lenses.

“You may need contacts for that,” Kay says. What does he mean by ‘may’? “Stand up Thomas. I want to check something.”

I do as told. I am still wearing my suit and say after inhaling the thick cigarette air, I say, “I will need to dry clean this.”

“And have some tailoring done.” Kay reaches to touch my shoulders. “But the shoulders fit, and the arm length is still good. You just need to reduce it around the waist, and

that isn't expensive to do. Open your blazer." I do. "You could probably also get the waist of your pants narrowed. They wouldn't fit perfectly, but it would look a lot better."

My beer is finished, and Kay wants to take a taxi to drop me off. But we live in opposite directions, so it doesn't make sense. I say I will take public transport. How does one say goodbye in these mixed business and social situations?

I reach my hand out for a handshake. "I think we're past that," he says. "Gay artists are a dime a dozen, but gay scientists are rare indeed—we have to stick together." He opens his arms for a hug. I bend down to hug him, and am surprised that I can feel his pecs through his shirt.

Kay touches my chin. It tingles, and my face feels hot. "Your bandage was falling off," he says. He waves goodbye.

Later that night, when I step out of the shower, I look at myself in the mirror. Good-looking? I take off my glasses, but when I get close enough to the mirror to see my features clearly, all I can see are parts of my face. My nose is not bad, but face? I will have to trust Kay on this one.

I put on my glasses and look at my body. Broad shoulders. I have blond hair everywhere, although it's odd that my chest hair is darker than the rest of my body. I still have stretch marks around my armpits and belly from when I was fat, but at least the skin doesn't sag.

I look further down. One good thing about walking around while fat is that my legs got a good work out, and they still look like tree trunks. Then there is my cock. Big? Of course I measured my dick before, but it wasn't gigantic, only bigger than average. But my body was something that always disappointed me, and I tried my best to avoid looking at myself. Until now.

I haven't measured since losing weight, and now it does look bigger. It dangles low. I take a tape measure from a drawer. I look down, see my thighs, hold my cock in my left hand, and press the yellow tape measure against it with my right. Soft and flaccid, I measure seventeen centimeters. Wasn't the average erect penis in Germany fifteen?

I am big. As I realize this, the blood rushes to my dick, engorges in the palm of my hand, and it protrudes from my body like a tree branch. My eyes scan up on the tape measure—seventeen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-one point seven. Round up to twenty-two. Losing pubic fat gave me three extra centimeters. The foreskin doesn't retract, so it looks like the end of a sausage link. A *Blutwurst*. As I stand and stare at myself, I jerk off and roar when the orgasm erupts. My semen makes a mess of the mirror. I'm ashamed, like how I felt this morning cutting myself. I touch the wound. Kay touched me here. It tingles.

Chapter 5. Kay

My favourite bar is closing. Sharon Stonewall is a casualty of the ever-increasing rents in a gentrifying Mitte, and as implied by the name, is a campy gay bar with divas as decor. Drawn on walls painted pink, in chalk lines pixelated by the rough drywall surface, is the eerie portrait of Sharon Stone. The face looks like her, and it's not bad, but something's off. It's the eyes. The whites encircle the irises like halos, like she's days into a cocaine binge. Cray-cray crazy.

For her last weekend, Sharon goes all out with half-priced booze to clear the liquor cabinet. Mike and I arrived here early, too early for anything good to happen. "What's Queer Beer going to do once this place closes?" Mike says.

"I hope the organizers find another bar," I say. Mike and I met at Queer Beer, a party for expats, and bonded as gaysians. I knew he was Canadian when I asked him what his favourite grade in high school was. Americans say "eleventh grade" but Canadians say "grade eleven."

Mike leans on my shoulder for support, holding his pink drink with his left hand since his right is still in its cast. Cranberry-something pink. "Queer Beer saved my sex life. I was living in Bremen for six months before I moved to Berlin. I had no luck approaching German guys," he says.

"Flirting with a German guy is like playing fetch with a lazy dog," I say. "You throw the tennis ball and he only stares as the green glob bounces down the driveway."

"It'll be English every day in Canada," Mike says with a smile. He has already moved out of his room, and is fully packed for tomorrow's flight to Vancouver. He has been sleeping on our couch.

"Even in Hongcouver?" I say.

“Especially in Hongcouver,” he says.

I had invited the guys here. Alex had been trimming his shaggy beard as I passed the open bathroom door, and had told me over the shaver’s buzz, “I may show up if my date sucks, but if you’re a real friend, you’ll hope that I don’t show the fuck up.” He gave me a sheepish grin. Timothy had said he’d come, but I hadn’t heard from Thomas.

As always, the music at Sharon’s is loud. Tonight it’s even louder than usual, with speakers distorting Kylie’s pop voice. The bartender is a blond twink wearing a pink tank top, and he extends his arm outward to grasp at something invisible.

When the twink’s arm drops, I see the entrance. Timothy walks in. A draft blows his brown coat, and it billows around him like a superhero’s cape. Or a supervillain’s. Alex follows behind, sporting a leather jacket with the collar turned up around his neck. The crowd parts and opens a path toward us.

“Gentlemen,” I say and hug Timothy and Alex in turn. They greet Mike.

“I’ve had to endure a taxi ride without a drink,” Timothy says. “This round is mine. Beers for all?”

I gulp the rest of my beer, and we all nod. “Alex, should I be worried that you’re here and you’ve lost your mojo?” I say.

“I’ve still got it,” Alex says. “He was hot. Full lion-mane beard. But he also had terrible halitosis.”

“So you made a quick getaway?” Mike says.

“Yes, but only after he sucked my dick,” Alex says.

“Was that such a great idea?” I say. “You probably have halitosis dick right now.”

Alex’s nose and mouth twist to one side in disgust. “Excuse me a moment,” he says. “I’m going to freshen up.”

Timothy arrives with beers. I take one and say, "We shouldn't wait for Alex. He's washing his dick in the bathroom because he's a considerate gentleman."

"Cheers," Timothy says and stares at Mike's pink glass before clinking bottle-to-bottle with mine and mine alone. "Aren't we all gentlemen?" he says. "I'm freshly prepared for any encounter tonight."

I toast Mike, and whisper, "We probably shouldn't have eaten Chinese. And we definitely shouldn't have ordered the squid dumplings."

"I've already resigned myself to a sexless future after I get fat from too many carbs," Mike says.

Alex returns and downs his beer then says, "I hope I didn't miss anything important."

"We were talking about sex," I say. "So you didn't." We chatter and babble about the crowd but before long, though I'm not sure how late it is, I struggle to keep my eyes open.

"Wake up, Kay," Alex says as he jabs an elbow into me.

I glance at my watch. It's midnight. "Can you watch my beer? It's my turn to head downstairs," I say and wonder whether I should go home as I descend the stairs to the basement bathroom. I piss and flush.

I then wash my hands and see my tired reflection in the mirror. I'm tired, really tired. I should go home. I ascend the stairs to the party that's pop music. Timothy and Alex are chatting with each other, and Mike is at the other side of the bar with two blond Americans wearing glasses.

Timothy hands me the beer. "Bottoms up," he says.

"Prost!" I say and down the rest of it. Mike returns.

"This bar's too pink with too many twinks," Timothy says. "There's no one here I'd fuck. Gentlemen, time to spice things up?"

"It's Snax tonight," Alex says.

“What’s that?” Mike says.

“A big fetish party where Lab and Berghain are connected,” Alex says. “Men only.”

“Would that mean even my prissy ass could get into Berghain?” Timothy asks. Alex nods. “Good. I tried twice already, and was denied entry both times by that eight-foot-tall dragon of a bouncer.”

“And what fetish are you wearing?” I say.

Timothy lifts up his shirt and pulls up the thick red strap of his jock. “That’s a thing, isn’t it?” he says. Alex and I nod.

“Do you need a Red Bull?” Alex asks me.

For some reason, I’m starting to have more energy. “No. Second wind,” I say. Not second wind—second horniness. I jerked off already today yet I want more. A rumbling vibrates my crotch, and I answer my phone with a peek at the caller ID. “Hey Thomas.”

“I’m sorry I did not call back earlier,” he says. “Are you still at Sharon Stonewall?”

“We are, but we’re going to head to the party at Berghain,” I say. “What have you been up to?”

“Just in my apartment,” Thomas says. That’s a poor excuse for a late reply, but he adds, “I was trying to put in contact lenses and they weren’t going in. It took me two hours, and now that they’re in, I’m afraid it’s going to take another two hours to take them out. My fingers are too big to do this.”

“You might as well head out,” I say. “Why don’t you meet us at the entrance to Berghain?”

“OK,” he says. “See you later.” He hangs up.

“Thomas is going to join us,” I say to cheers from the others. “Our token German!”

“Considering how tall he is, he counts as two, doesn’t he?” Timothy adds.

As we head out and wait for a taxi, Mike says to me, “You go on and enjoy tonight. I’m going back to your place. I don’t want to be too hung over for my flight tomorrow.”

“As long as you promise to wake me up before you leave, hung over or not,” I say. We hug, and he walks off toward the U-Bahn.

When we’re inside the taxi and on our way, Timothy asks me, “How are you feeling, Kay?”

“Good,” I say. “I want to dance the night away.”

“Just dance?” Alex asks. “And I’m only going to meet friends and chill.”

I rarely take a cab to get anywhere since the U-Bahn network is extensive, but whenever I do, I’m amazed at Berlin’s beauty. We pass Alexanderplatz and the former East’s TV tower, with its top resembling a disco ball. Even at night it glitters. Around the area, government officials planned the buildings as a showcase for Soviet architecture, and there is something beautiful in the repetition of simple windows stacked one on top of another like blocks in a game of Tetris. The lights mask the emptiness of the buildings inside—a hallmark of Berlin, where communist-era buildings stand unused because of walls insulated with asbestos.

We head deeper into the East. In the late 1800s, factories lined the banks of the Spree River, and after 1945, the northern part was sectioned off in communist Berlin. As opposed to Alexanderplatz, there was no grand government plan here, so it looks like an architecture student puked up schemes for these streets, with factories ruined by Allied bombing, nineteenth-century homes destroyed to build the Wall, and massive communist apartment blocks mixed in with capitalist big-box stores that rushed in after 1989.

At the center of this mess is a former power station turned club. I see the massive concrete edifice through the taxi front window. I’m not a size queen normally, but Berghain is massive and industrial like a German *Fabrik* would be. I’m impressed.

We get out of the taxi, and walk the long dirt path to Berghain's main entrance. No billboard is displayed because Berghain needs none. Normally there would be a massive line of hopeful Berliners and tourists trying to get into the hottest club in Europe. Though the line of men and women usually stretches a city block, it takes only twenty minutes to reach the front because the bouncer rejects everyone but a select few who know the secret of getting in.

Tonight, the line comprises only men. This weekend, we know the secret. Snax is a fetish party where men from all over the world descend on Berlin in leather, rubber, or nothing but boots. We don't use the main entrance but we go around the side where we wait in a deep corridor painted black, with the words "LAB.ORATORY" in red. Standing in line with hundreds of other men, I realize this party is a big fucking deal.

I text Thomas that we're in line and he should find us.

As we wait, Alex laments that we didn't stop off at a *Späti* and buy a pack of gum and some beers for the wait. "But that would make us look common," Timothy says.

"Who gives a fuck," Alex says. "I want to be drunk."

We're not the last in line anymore, and I see a straight couple in their forties walk past, scanning the partygoers' faces in confusion. They leave without trying to get in our line and turn the corner to where the main entrance would be, if it weren't for Snax.

They're back a few moments later. The woman says hesitantly to the gay guy behind us, "Do you speak German?" In the German capital where a third of Berliners aren't Germans and there are countless hordes of tourists on any given day, this is a legitimate way to start a conversation.

"Yes," comes a high-pitched reply from a man who looks much gruffer than his voice would suggest.

"Is this the line for Berghain?" she says.

“No,” the gay man says. This is the beauty of dealing with Germans in German—one answers only the question posed, nothing more.

“What party is this, then?” she says. Only she is asking, and I wonder whether she or her guy has noticed that only men wait in line.

“Snax,” the gay man says.

“What’s Snax?”

There’s a sigh. “If you need to ask what Snax is, this isn’t the party for you,” the guy behind me says. “The entrance to Berghain or Panorama Bar is around the corner. This line is only for men, if you haven’t noticed.”

The woman gasps, apologizes for disturbing, and rushes away, holding onto her man’s hand very tightly.

“When a couple in their forties is looking for Berghain,” I whisper, “you know the club is getting mainstream.”

“They’re not from Berlin,” Alex says.

A few minutes later I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around and have to look up. “Hey Thomas,” I say. “Glad you could make it.” Thomas isn’t wearing his thick glasses, and without them he’s handsome in very German way—blond, blue-eyed, and square-jawed. He’s clean-shaven.

“Hey Kay,” he says and bends down to hug. I’m aware of how good his body feels, and he smells like freshly laundered clothes.

I realize I’ve been silent for too long. “How do the contacts feel?” I ask.

“Uncomfortable,” he says. “My eyes feel itchy, and I have to keep massaging them every now and then.”

“At this party, be careful about touching your eyes,” I say.

Thomas' brows rise. "What do you mean?" he says. Even though he looks more like a Berliner than me, I've been in the city longer than he has.

Alex explains. "If you want to dance, there's an upstairs dance floor the size of an airplane hangar. If you want to have sex, and the sleaziest sex you can imagine, well, there's a never-ending Alice-in-Wonderland maze for that too."

When we enter, we each grab a giant polyvinyl bag to store our stuff. We sit on benches and change. I wasn't necessarily planning on going to this party, but thank the morning divas that I decided to wear my sexy underwear today. I tuck condoms and lube in my sock; like a gay credit card, I never leave home without them. As I'm stuffing the rest of my clothes into the bag, I check out two men across from me. One is a muscular guy wearing leather pants, the other a tall twink in athletic shorts and sneakers with hairless legs. Seeing me staring, he says defiantly, "Sportswear is a legitimate fetish," and storms off.

I hear you, sister. Those rugby shorts, knee-high socks, and pecs bulging through a tight jersey are legitimately sexy. Actually, staring at all the men changing is sexy, and my mind wanders to when I'm in the locker room of the gym and stealing discreet glances, but here, I don't have to be discreet. By entering Lab, as gay and bisexual men, we are given and have given permission to gaze.

Timothy sashays in front of us in his black boots and red jock. "What do you think, gentlemen?" he says.

"Looks like a baby's bum," I say. "Which is surprising, considering how much mileage you've gotten out of that thing."

Timothy caresses one cheek then says, "A daily skin-care regime shouldn't be just for your face."

Alex seems to have anticipated the possibility of going to Snax this weekend because he's wearing a black leather harness over his hairless chest. When Thomas joins us, he has taken off his jacket, but still has his shirt and jeans on. He looks at us with unflinching eyes.

"Darling, you could be going to church in that outfit," Timothy says. A man in his sixties walks past us completely naked in all his sagging glory, belly, tits, and balls. "Granted, you don't have to be that nude."

"At least take off your shirt," I say.

Thomas crosses his arms.

"I thought Germans were supposed to be OK with nudity and their FKK," Alex says.

"Not all Germans," Thomas says. "I'm from Hannover."

"How about this?" I say. I begin to lift his shirt, and he doesn't stop me. "You hook your T-shirt into your belt, and if later you don't feel comfortable, you can always put it back on." I lift his white T-shirt past his belly button, and he gives in, pulling it off completely himself. His torso looks like something from one of those 1950s physique magazines—hairy and barrel-chested with a bit of a gut.

"I don't have a body like you," Thomas says to me, "so I'm not used to showing it. But OK. I can agree to this."

We wait in line to drop off our bags. The guy behind the counter scrawls a number in black marker onto each of our shoulders in turn. When the guy marks my shoulder, the marker's felt tip presses into my deltoid and I feel as if I've been branded like a piece of meat. As we head to the bar, I say, "Whoever got 69 has the easiest pick-up line ever."

"Considering I have 2124," Alex adds, "he was also here way too early."

We buy beers and gather near the bar. "Since it's Thomas' first time," I say, "we should each toast to something. I toast to the party never ending."

"To self-discovery," Thomas says.

“To forgetting all our troubles,” Alex adds.

“As the power bottom,” Timothy says, “I hope my asshole is still intact after all of this.”

Thomas downs his entire beer in less than a minute then says, “I need another. I’m not drunk like you yet.”

The club is as dark as a student’s basement apartment. We meander through a maze of shadowy tunnels to arrive at a green-lit room with a dance floor and another bar. Moans erupt from black crevices hidden by concrete.

“A few pointers to the uninitiated,” I say to Thomas. “Early on, men walk around and check things out. There’s always the hope that someone better is around the corner, and no one wants to commit. Later on, desperation sets in, and it becomes a free-for-all. Get close, and if he doesn’t move away, start touching.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Alex adds. “But that’s the gist of it.”

“Timothy, you could just crouch on all fours and present your assets like a stock portfolio,” I say.

“Is this the main dance floor?” Thomas asks. “It’s not as large as I had imagined.”

“You get the next round and we’ll show you more,” Alex says.

Which beer are we on now? We walk past the dark corner where faceless bottoms are on all fours, asses lined in a row like loaves of bread at the neighbourhood bakery.

“Is he getting fisted?” Thomas says.

“Worse things happen here,” I say.

We head for the main chamber where a giant steel stairwell leads upward to thumping music. Berghain's main dance hall is high above us and we climb the wide metal stairs. Each silver-steel grate reverberates with every heavy step up we take. The beat grows louder the

higher we go, and the scent of sweat grows thicker as we rise. Our ascension to techno heaven booms with pungent notes.

We reach the top and the orgy of men. Sometimes, the hype deserves the hype. The hall is the size of a church with giant speakers overlooking the thousands of shirtless men like a crucified Jesus. We merge with the other men, and together, our near naked bodies dance while our hands supplicate to the rhythm. I do and feel the music. Unlike other clubs that pretend to be cool and play music too loud for their speakers in a distorted mess, the speakers at Berghain pump out techno that's loud but clean. Null distortion. The bass resonates deep within my thorax, through the muscles of my pecs and through my rib-cage. I feel it there, that deep. Above me, lights glow and pulsate blue from the ceiling like they float in the air, as if their power emanates from space. I dance with my fellow gay and bisexual men, our naked chests heaving and sweating. Our musk and pheromones thicken the air, and I breathe in to taste the pungency. I've always imagined what a gay party on steroids would be like, and this is it—thousands of men from all over the world pumped full of testosterone, drugs, or everything.

“This may be the last time we're together tonight,” Alex says. At these parties, who you come with is rarely who you leave with.

“I've got to piss,” I say.

“It starts already,” Alex says, winking.

I head back down. Down from techno heaven to descend into the basement of LAB.ORATORY. The air is thick here, but not from dancing. I walk to the bathroom down a long corridor. At the far end, there's a shower room, and to my right the wall is lined by a row of sinks with four-litre buckets of soap dispensers. Opposite the sinks, a naked bald man lays spread eagle in a bathtub, one leg dangling over the side. Is he waiting for someone to piss on him? The answer comes when another naked man with a long flaccid cock sprays the bald

man with a golden shower, and some of it ricochets to the floor. The wet floor. Wet and soiled bathroom floors disgust me and make me want to burn my shoes. Here the pungency arises from more than just urine.

The urinals in the piss room are guarded by men sat on the soiled floors with their mouths gaping open. I really need to go, but I have enough difficulty peeing with someone pissing beside me. I peek into the area with stall toilets. The line is crazy long. A door opens and three men walk out while looking very happy.

I can't wait anymore, so I go to the urinals. I think about going swimming when I was a kid, something innocent to distract me as I unzip my fly and—actually, the guy beside the urinal is kind of cute in a teddy bear way. He looks at me with big eyes, and I decide, fuck it. I pivot, and start peeing ever so slowly on his tongue and throat. This is polite etiquette, right? He holds the urine in his mouth. Like a sommelier judging a new wine vintage, he savours it, slishes it across his palate, but in the end, spits it out.

He smiles, and I say, “Thanks.”

“No, thank you,” he says. I zip up and leave.

A bull of a man walks down the corridor, his skin tinted crimson from the light. His back is a massive expanse of muscle, his arms thick and covered in black-inked swirls. The tattoo surges from his forearm and encircle his biceps but leave his left shoulder bare. A perfect circle of peach skin with a single Chinese word written in its center: rabbit in red.

I follow the red rabbit, shoes sloshing through puddles, but when I turn the corner after him, he's gone. Fuck, I've lost him. But I'm horny, so I wander. Hundreds of men and dozens of flaccid cocks pass me, and in a matter of seconds I judge whether each is fuckable. Just like they judge me. I imagine the countless other men who have wandered through countless other venues in search of one memorable moment of sex—bathhouses, parks, the

video stalls of adult bookstores. Tonight, I wander through them all. Am I wandering only for sex, and these men as well? Or are we hoping for something less fleeting?

I once had something less fleeting. Saturdays with Helmut on the leather couch. I had comfort while laying my head on my old lover's lap. Moments pass as I lean against a wall and not a friend, alone in the crowd.

A muscle bear approaches me from the left. He's in his forties with a beard and shaved head. Although he has a belly, he also has huge pecs. I unbuckle my belt, and he falls on his knees. His mouth is warm, and his beard ginger, but more blond than red.

"I want to fuck you," I say. I guide him to a corner and roll a condom on my cock. His pants are assless. He's taller than me, so I push his knees in so his ass is level with my crotch. I ease myself in. He's pre-lubed. He moans "*Fick mich!*" and I grunt. I'm not the first to fuck him tonight, but the feeling of fucking and dominating this taller German man is exhilarating, like I'm a pilot in the Allied forces bombing Berlin into submission.

A crowd gathers, and I give them a show. Fuck yes, fuck yes, take my cock. I'm transfixed by his ass jiggling after each thrust. I'm close, and I fuck as furiously as his hand jerking his cock. The smell of his sweat and my sweat, and then he roars. As the scent of his cum wafts up my nostrils, I feel his sphincter squeeze around my own cock, and it's so damn tight. I erupt inside him. Fuck yes.

I'm careful with the condom when I pull out. I kiss him on his neck. I cradle the small of his back, and he turns around with a grin on his face. He kisses me on the cheek, and before I know it the crowd around me has disappeared, and he with it. My nose sniffs. I'm left with only the specter of his scent.

I should be tired. But as the parade of soft cocks flop past, I can feel myself stiffen again.

The speakers crackle, and for a moment, silence punctuates the techno. Then the music blares again, and at that exact moment, I see the bull with the red rabbit tattoo. I almost sprint toward him, but he turns a corner again.

I turn into the darkness. His face is hidden in shadow as he leans against the cement wall. He's wearing leather shorts and boots. I approach him from the side like I'm nearing a horse or other beast. He doesn't move as I draw close, so I reach out and touch his chest. He grabs my wrists and pushes me against the concrete, and his chest heaves against my back. He's not only taller than me, he's stronger. He breathes on my neck, and my skin tingles.

"I'm going to fuck you," he grunts in German, his breath reeking of cigarettes, beer, and something fouler.

"No, I don't get fucked," I say.

He laughs. He pulls both my wrists high above me, locked tightly in his left hand. His hands are twice the size of mine. My arms grow numb from the strain and submission. With his other hand, he rips my underwear down past my knees.

"What a sexy tiny ass," he says. His cock slides between my cheeks. It's long and skinny like a worm.

Is this happening to me? Is this what I want? And if not, why is my cock so hard?

He spits on his dick with a frog-like croak—and rams his cock in me. My insides tear and pain radiates from deep within.

"No! *Nein!*" I say. His huge palm smacks my mouth closed. His violation is an assault yet as a fag, I feel I deserve this.

"*Schlampe,*" he says between ragged breaths. I focus on the grey wall, on the cracks and bubbles in the concrete, on anything but the pain. "*Du Schlampe. Deine Fotze. So eng.*" He grunts and his body convulses, each of his muscles flexed, and he pounds one last hard thrust. His orgasm splatters inside me, heat burning with pain.

When his penis shrivels and he deflates out of me, he spits in my face. He grabs me by the neck and throws me off to the side like a cigarette butt. I crash onto the dirty floor. There's too much moaning, darkness, and fucking. He struts away and no one notices.

I notice my underwear and crawl toward it. It's tattered and black with dirt. As I pull it past my calves, I realize—better naked than torn. I walk to the changing chamber with everything exposed. I try to walk normal but each step feels stiff. Past the bathroom, the maze of corridors, past the green-lit bar, past the men who stare at me, now completely naked. Finally, waiting in line for coat check, my eyes staring down my hands, I know I need all strength to say my number. I stare and see my dick, and see a white glob dangling. Did I come again? From him?

“Nächste bitte!” The man at coat check is skinny with a nose ring.

“2120,” I manage to say in German.

“Your ticket,” he says. Of course I need to present my coat-check ticket. It's in my sock, and as I bend down, intense pain radiates from my ass and rectum. I squeeze my eyes shut, and pull out the laminated ticket. He grabs it and returns with my clothes in a clear plastic bag. I sit on a bench and grab my jeans. I pull them on and stand, no longer naked. Paper towels are everywhere, and litter the ground like tumbleweeds in a western movie. My cock feels the cold metal zipper.

“Kay,” Alex says in surprise. He stands beside me and touches my shoulder, his palm resting on the 2120 writ in faded black ink. His friendly touch is the most comforting feeling in the world.

“Hey,” I say. I put on my shirt.

“Look at all these paper towels,” he says, and rips a few sheets to wipe sweat from his chest. “I wonder what brand they use.”

“What?”

“I mean,” he adds, “maybe they have a sponsorship deal. Can you imagine if Zewa had a deal with Lab, and after the eight o’clock news, an ad came on that said, ‘Don’t use any paper towel. Use the paper towel trusted by sex clubs all over Germany.’ And there were testimonials of guys saying, ‘It’s so absorbent I only need one sheet to wipe the cum clean from my face. It’s bukkake strong!’”

“Sometimes you’re very American,” I say.

“How was your night?” he says without looking at me. “I fucked this guy with perfect chest hair. I’m in love.” He grins but I don’t grin back. We’re fully dressed and head to the exit. The security guards open the door for us and say goodbye. I can’t make eye contact with them.

We’re outside now. It’s raining. Crows caw through the pattering raindrops. I reach into my pockets. Shit—only change. I just want to go home. This is all I want in the world.

“Do you have cab fare?” I ask.

“Yeah, this weather is *Scheiße*,” Alex says. A line of cabs wait outside Berghain. We get in a beige Mercedes station wagon. “I hope you didn’t try to call me. My phone’s been dead. I lost Timothy and Thomas. I think they’re both still inside. No surprise, but Thomas was pretty popular. I saw him being worshiped by two boys of a darker persuasion.”

Where did my watch go? Another thing lost. I check the time on my phone instead. It’s ten in the morning. We drive past other beautiful buildings, and Alex describes another beautiful man he may be in love with. I say nothing. I can only focus on the striated pain from the fissures inside me. We arrive at the apartment, and my heart sinks when I realize that this may be my apartment with the bed I sleep in, but at a time like this, I’m not home. The smell is off.

We’re inside the hallway when I remember that Mike’s supposed to be here. But he isn’t. There is a note where his luggage was. “Dear Kay, thanks for letting me stay the last

few days. I didn't want to be late for my flight. Canada beckons me. I hope we can meet again soon. Maybe sushi on English Bay? Love, Mike."

"Have you seen my charger?" Alex yells from his room.

"It's here," I say. "Mike must have borrowed it." I take the charger to Alex. When he bends over to plug it in, his body wobbles, and he holds onto my shoulder with one hand for support.

I hear my phone ringing and head back to my room. I check it and see it's Thomas.

"Hello?" I say.

"Kay? Can you help me?" he says. His voice is frantic.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I can't see," he says. "My contacts fell out, and I can't see anything. They helped me get outside, but I haven't enough euros for a taxi, and I don't have my EC card. Could you come get me and help me home?"

"OK. Wait there, and I'll pick you up. It could be more than a half hour."

"Thanks. I am really grateful Kay," he says. "I feel so lost and I'm just happy you're coming."

I walk to my underwear drawer, where I keep an emergency hundred-euro note in all its green glory. I sigh. I don't want to go out. It's not safe. But I think about the tone in Thomas' voice, and shove the large bill in my wallet. Its edges peek out. I change into a fresh pair of underwear but I don't have time to shower.

I tell Alex I'm leaving as he walks into the bathroom. When I get downstairs, the cab that dropped us off is still there. "Berghain please."

"The party there never stops, or?" he says. I nod.

Arriving, I see Thomas standing like a lighthouse as the rain soaks his hair, jacket, and jeans. I approach him. "Hey, it's Kay." I imagine he sees me as no more than a human shape

with black hair. He rushes to me and places a hand on my shoulder. The rain hasn't washed away the smell of sex on him.

I wonder if he can smell sex on me. Not sex. Rape.

Back in the cab, he says, "I don't know what happened. I was in the bathroom, and my face was sweaty, so I splashed some water on my cheeks—and then everything was blurry. I started to hyperventilate, and a guy asked me what was wrong. He helped me to the exit."

We reach his place. "I'll get you to your door," I say.

The taxi driver waits. Thomas holds onto the railings of the entrance stairwell. He lives in Wedding, a neighbourhood that was in the West and has always been touted as an up-and-coming part of the city, in a 1970s building that looks anonymous from the outside. Inside, fluorescent lights reflect from dark blue floor tiles with walls painted a pale yellow—but there's an elevator, a luxury in Berlin.

The elevator is tiny, and only a sliver separates Thomas' head and the elevator's ceiling. It rumbles as it ascends, and then slides open. Thomas unlocks his door. "It smells like my apartment," he says. The right smell at the right time is comforting. He turns to me and says, "You're my hero, Kay." He bends down and kisses me on the cheek.

The right words at the right moment give strength.

"We both had eventful nights," I say. I stroke his cheek and kiss him on the lips. I taste him. His breath tastes like beer and the bodies of countless other men. "Goodbye for now."

"*Tschüss*," he says as he closes the door.

When I'm back in the cab, the driver asks me, "Back to Berghain?"

"The apartment on Lychener street," I tell him.

I call Mike. Maybe he hasn't boarded the plane yet. When he picks up, I notice the rain has stopped. "Hey Kay. I guess you had a crazy night," he says.

“I did.” Two words, and I start to sob.

“What’s wrong?” Mike asks.

I peek at the cab driver, but he doesn’t look my way. “I feel like such a fool,” I say.

“There was this guy there, and he—I don’t know how I let this happen, but he raped me.”

“Rape?” Mike asks. My silence is his confirmation. “Did he use a condom?” More silence.

“Shit. They’re boarding my row. This is terrible, and I wish I could be there for you. You’re not thinking right, but the number-one priority is to get to the hospital. You told me about Post-Exposure Prophylaxis for HIV. You need that. You can’t blame yourself. If you go to the hospital, you’ll take control of the situation. I’ll call you as soon as I land in Frankfurt.”

I say goodbye. I stop my crying.

“Change in plans. Charité hospital,” I say. The taxi driver nods. As the sun peeks through the clouds, we drive from West to East Berlin, past a wall that no longer exists, and through a checkpoint that once claimed lives and is now just a traffic light. A moment of red before it flashes green. We accelerate.

