

The Boy From the Woods

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*Mein Ruf ist dünn und leicht,
verschleiert und fast schüchtern.*

Spürst du mich?

Ich berühre das Gold

der Dämmerung des Lebens.

Ich bin der Engel der dich trägt.

Du bist mein Kind, mein Stern

Meine Sonne, Meine Liebe

Ich sehe durch dich;

Spürst du mich?

(German original poem used as lyrics for the song in this book)

Jen Minkman, 2009

1.

Flashing disco lights lit up a sea of faces and clusters of bodies in motion. The air in the school hall was vibrant with the booming pulse of trance music blasting from the speakers. At eleven o'clock at night, the temperature inside the building was stifling, despite the late hour and the open windows.

Julia Kandolf stood at the edge of the dance floor, her eyes scanning the crowd writhing to the beat. She couldn't find her friends. Where had Gaby run off to? And where was Axel?

"Hey, Julia." The voice startled her. She knew who it belonged to.

Julia's heart sped up as she turned around, her gaze settling on the boy behind her. Michael. His trademark cheeky smile made her blink shyly at him.

"That's a really nice dress you're wearing," he continued when she didn't respond and just kept staring at him, mouth slightly agape. He gestured at the medieval costume she'd rented for the party.

Julia swallowed, her mouth turning dry with nerves. "Your costume is really cool, too," she finally responded, letting her gaze trail down his body. He was immaculately clad in a sexy Napoleon outfit.

"Wanna dance?" He put down his glass of beer on a table and extended his hand courteously.

"Y-yes, of course!" she stammered, her stomach giving a lurch. Together, they made their way through the throng of party-goers. From the corner of her eye, Julia finally spotted Gaby on the other side of the hall, giving her an encouraging nod and a thumbs-up before taking out her plastic vampire teeth in order to gobble down some crackers from the snack table. Julia giggled nervously and followed Michael as he pulled her onto the dance floor.

"Weird, huh? Our senior year finally ending." He looked at her pensively. "I mean, we've spent, like, an entire *era* at this school. We grew up here. And now we're here, celebrating our graduation." Julia

felt his arms around her waist and his hand on her lower back as he pulled her a bit closer.

“Uhm, yeah.” A blush crept up her face. “It’s really great everyone passed their exams, but now we’ll all go to different universities. That’s sort of sad, you know. We might never see each other again.”

“Well, never say never,” Michael commented breezily. “Don’t forget those *wonderful* reunions they always organize here.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Julia looked up at him, biting her lip. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you again sooner, though,” she whispered almost inaudibly.

Oh, crap. Had she just said that out loud? Or as loud as she’d dared, anyway. She looked at him insecurely, registering the look of surprise on his face.

“Me?” he asked, clasping her hand more tightly. “Why?”

She gulped down the lump in her throat. Her heart was hammering like crazy, despite Gaby’s pep talk and the three glasses of wine she’d downed earlier that night.

“I, uhm...” she started out, her voice faltering. In the dimly-lit room, she saw a smile tugging at Michael’s lips. That all-too-familiar, teasing, somewhat mocking smile that had made her shy in his presence for the past two years – that had followed her in her dreams, even. He lowered his face closer to hers.

“I get what you mean. I don’t want to let you out of my sight tonight, either,” he mumbled, his hand trailing up her arm, caressing the sensitive skin of her neck.

Julia stopped breathing altogether when he came even closer and pressed his lips to hers seductively. His arms pulled her upper body against his chest. He leaned in and kissed her again, more deeply this time.

She couldn’t believe this was for real. He was kissing her. He was *really* kissing her! This was not a daydream – Michael was holding her in his arms.

Julia melted into him. When he let go of her at last and asked her if she wanted another drink, she was shivering with sheer excitement. Sporting a jubilant smile, she stayed put at the edge of the dance floor, scanning the multitude for Gaby. Her best friend waved at her from the other side of the room and was now giving her *two* thumbs-up. Julia's face split into an even stupider grin.

By the time Michael returned with a beer in each hand, her heartbeat had slowed down to an acceptable rate again. It made her hand steady enough to quickly save her number to his contacts when he handed over his Blackberry.

2.

Sunlight and green leaves.

Those were the first things she saw when she opened her eyes and peered at the sky above through squinted eyelids.

Julia held still, acutely aware of everything around her – rustling leaves, the fat trunk of the tree against her back. The oak felt steady, reliable, and supportive, the century-old life force in the trunk like an extension of the energy running through her own spinal cord. She was part of something bigger – a dream encompassing the entire forest spreading out around her.

Every once in a while, she felt the strong urge to come here to rest – or ‘meditate’, as her mom playfully called it. Julia loved venturing out into the woods bordering on the small Salzburg suburb where she lived. People called her loopy for it, but so what? This spot under the ancient oak tree had become her solitary hang-out, the oak being a true friend whenever she felt down and out.

This was the place she’d come to when her grandpa had passed away. This was where she’d broken down into tears when her parents had announced their divorce and her dad had told her he was moving away to Innsbruck. But this was also the place she went to when she wanted to write poems or write lyrics or sing out loud without being disturbed – or to daydream about the boy who had stolen her heart two years ago, never giving it back.

Julia opened her eyes wider and let out a heavy sigh. This time, the peaceful atmosphere in the forest wasn’t enough to calm her down. She was waiting for something.

She paused for a few more beats, then sat up and grabbed her bag. Her heart started to pound as she fumbled around in the front pocket of her messenger bag to fish out her phone.

Nothing. No new messages.

With a tortured sigh, she slumped back against the tree, her mind lingering on the boy she couldn't get out of her head. Michael Kolbe's handsome face. His radiant, green eyes. The teasing smile on his lips. His lips on her trembling mouth.

She gulped for breath when her phone abruptly came to life in her hand. 'Gaby' flashed across the display, the phone blaring out a 'Friday I'm In Love' ringtone by The Cure. The forest seemed to jolt awake too, a bird overhead flying off shrieking indignantly.

Julia couldn't help laughing, following the bird in flight with her eyes. "Hiya, Gab," she answered the phone cheerfully.

"Hey! Where are you at?" her best friend said. "I called you at home, but your mom said you weren't in."

"Oh, I'm in the forest."

"Ah! Getting all cuddly with Mr. Oak, huh?" Gaby knew her too well. Ever since they'd learned the word *treehugger* in English class last year, she'd been teasing Julia with her 'unhealthy oak fascination' – Gaby's words, not hers.

"Aren't you the psychic," Julia retorted with a grin. "And no, we haven't hugged today yet. I'd rather wait for one of Michael's hugs – if he's *ever* going to reply to my messages, that is." She cringed, recoiling from the bitter tone in her own voice.

Gaby exhaled on the other end of the line. "Why don't you come to town? You won't cheer yourself up sitting around talking to trees and feeling sorry for yourself because Asshole Kolbe hasn't been as communicative as you'd hoped for. I'll see you in a half hour at Mozartplatz, okay?"

"A half hour – are you crazy? I'll have to run like the wind to catch the next bus!"

"You aced Phys Ed this year," Gaby said relentlessly. "You'll manage. And if you get here on time, I'll buy the two of us *Sachertorte* from Tomaselli's. The carbs will brighten your day."

“All right, okay,” Julia caved. “I’ll see you soon.” She clicked off and turned around to hug the tree behind her for a second, despite her words to Gaby. She couldn’t leave without doing this. It was her ritual. “Thanks for your support,” she whispered against the bark, pressing a light kiss to the gnarled skin of the oak.

Her hair was dancing in the wind as she broke out of the tree line, hitching the strap of her bag onto one shoulder and sprinting to the bus stop. The doors were just closing.

“*Grüss Gott*,” Julia hiccupped breathlessly as she held the door and yanked it open again. Stepping inside, she flashed her travel card to the driver and made her way to the back seat of the bus – her usual spot. Once the suburb of Birkensiedlung had disappeared from view, she dug up her MP3 player to listen to some Enya. Maybe that would help her relax.

After a few minutes of staring out the window, Julia realized she had once again pulled her cell phone from her bag, her thumb tentatively stroking the keyboard. Of course, there was no harm in sending Michael a text message, but she’d already sent him one two days ago. And three days ago. And a week ago.

She was *such* a loser. Why couldn’t she have waited more patiently? Suppose he was out of town and he’d forgotten to bring his cell phone. Maybe he’d turned it off, or maybe he’d lost his charger. If he ever got round to switching his phone on again, he’d immediately find out that she was Obsessive Stalker Girl.

She frowned and put the phone away again, leaning back in her seat. Gaby’s Asshole Kolbe remark had made her restless. Of course, her best friend called everyone names constantly. She was probably just kidding, but then again... she *had* kind of made it sound like Michael was playing her.

Why was she even listening to Gaby? Her friend didn’t know. And shame on her, Julia, for not having more confidence in the boy who’d stolen her heart – Michael, whose kisses tasted of passion and

fire. Michael, who had whispered to her how beautiful she was, as he lay her down on his bed.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip, feeling her face flood with color. Okay... maybe she should leave out a few details when she talked to Gaby. It all felt too special to divulge everything. Too precious.

Meanwhile, the bus was driving along the river Salzach, pulling over at the bus stop near the bridge leading to the Old Town. The river was low – June had been an unusually dry month in Austria.

While ‘The Memory of Trees’ started to trickle through her earbuds, Julia got off the bus and crossed the river. It didn’t take her long, and she got to Mozartplatz by the time she’d agreed to meet up with Gaby. Her gaze swept the square, but she didn’t see her friend anywhere. However, she did spot another familiar face – her cousin Axel was just exiting the bookstore on the corner, carrying a plastic bag crammed full of books.

“Ax!” she yelled, waving at him to get his attention.

“Hey, Julia!” He sauntered toward her, his blond curls dancing in the breeze. “How’s life?”

“Full of surprises, apparently. What are *you* doing here? Weren’t you supposed to fly out to London last night?”

“I was,” Axel replied with a long face, pushing up the glasses sliding down his nose. “But Florian has a bad case of stomach flu, so we postponed our trip. Uncle Helmut bought our tickets and took aunt Verena on a short city break.”

“Poor Florian.”

“And poor *me*, too. I was literally storing my bag in the overhead compartment already when he suddenly called off, the miscreant.”

“Yeah, I bet he was hoping for a miraculous recovery. Our eternal optimist.” She rolled her eyes.

“Ha. I’d call that naive.”

Julia chuckled. “Sure. So what should we call you – an optimist with life experience?”

“Ouch, Jules. You want me to run away bawling?” Axel grinned. “Sarcasm bites, you know.”

“Sorry. Why don’t you drop by O’Malley’s tonight? I might be easier to talk to with a drink in my hand.”

Axel smiled. “I’ll even buy you one. See you at ten?”

At that moment, a voice rang out from across the square. “Jules! Hi!” A disheveled Gaby was racing toward them, her dyed-black hair all tangled up and her eyeliner even more smudged than usual. She reached them and extended a purple nail-polished hand to Axel. “Hey there, Axe Effect.”

“Hey yourself, Gaby Gloom,” he shot back. “Been crying again? Your make-up is all over your cheeks, you know.”

“Meh. That joke’s getting old. But you’re right this time. I’ve *really* been crying. I just had a hotdog with hot curry sauce and it was a bit *too* spicy for my taste.”

“You went and got food?” Julia asked in dismay. “I thought you wanted to go for pastries at Tomaselli’s!”

“Yeah, don’t your parents feed you at home?” Axel chimed in.

“I’m having my period.” Gaby glowered at him.

“Okay, I’m not here,” Axel decided, backing away. “See you tonight!” he told Julia before rushing off.

“That cousin of yours is peculiar,” Gaby concluded, staring at his retreating figure. “But funny.” She threw Julia her widest smile. “Sorry I’m late. I’ll buy you *two* pastries to make up for it.”

“Thanks! I’d love that. I sort of forgot to have lunch, actually.”

The two girls entered Tomaselli’s and made a beeline for a table at the window. Julia dug up her cell phone and glanced at the display for the umpteenth time that day. Still nothing.

“So tell me – what happened after the graduation party?” Gaby asked, catching Julia sneaking a look at her phone. She patted her friend’s hand over the table. “I want to know *everything*.”

Julia bit her lip. Gaby had left for a city-trip to Paris with her parents and sister after graduation, so her best friend wasn't up-to-date with all of her woes and worries.

Everything had started at prom – the Masked Ball graduation party that she'd been agonizing over for months. She'd reserved a gorgeous medieval gown at a rental store weeks beforehand, so she could make an indelible impression on Michael with her appearance in costume. It had been the perfect opportunity to catch his eye at last, erasing her previous two years of invisibility. After summer, he would move to Graz to go to college, and she'd probably never see him again. The party had been her last chance.

It had been a huge relief when Michael showed up stag that evening. And the things that had happened between them had been on her mind ever since.

Gaby practically drooled over her cake when Julia told her all about Michael asking her to dance. “Yeah, I know, right?! I saw you two. When he started kissing you, I guessed it was time to leave you guys alone and play vampire somewhere else.”

“Thanks.” Julia smiled weakly, prodding her cake with a pastry fork.

“Anyway... So, once you saved your number to his contacts...” Gaby prompted her to go on. “What happened after that?”

“Well, we spent the rest of the evening together. He kissed me one last time under the stars in the school yard before I caught the bus home. The day after, he called me and invited me over for dinner and a movie.”

Julia slowly turned red when Gaby looked at her inquisitively. “Hmm. Were his parents around?” her friend whispered.

Michael came from a wealthy family. His parents spent more time at work than at home. “No,” she muttered back.

Gaby fell silent for a moment. “Aha.” She cocked her head with a small smile, staring at her friend expectantly.

Julia bit her lip, her face flaming. “It was so wonderful when it happened,” she whispered, staring at her hands. “So beautiful. It was how I’d always imagined it.”

When she looked back up, tears were pooling in her eyes.

“So why are you crying?” Gaby said in shock. “Darling, what happened?”

“Nothing.” Julia sniffed desolately. “That’s the thing. We said goodbye the morning after, and he said we’d talk soon.”

“And you didn’t hear back from him *at all* after that?”

Julia shook her head.

“Well, what did you tell him that evening?”

“Just... how I felt about him. What I’d been feeling for him for the past two years. How special he was to me. How I’d wanted to tell him I was in love with him before he moved away.”

“And what did he say to that?”

Julia paused for a minute, looking at Gaby with growing doubt. “He said... he never noticed that I liked him so much. That I should have told him before – I had no reason to be so shy and insecure, because I was a beautiful girl,” she haltingly repeated his words.

He’d caressed her everywhere, slowly undressing her in the dreamy candlelight of his bedroom. And yet, the same candle flames had also turned the two of them into erratic, unpredictable shadows on the wall.

It had been a dream, and now she was abruptly waking up.

Michael hadn’t said a single word about his feelings for *her*. He had only told her how he’d never noticed her silent admiration. A heavy brick grew in her stomach.

“Didn’t he say *anything* about your little, uhm, ‘dance in the sheets’?” Gaby asked incredulously.

“He said he’d had a great night,” Julia whispered.

“Well, *dub!*” Gaby viciously stabbed the cake with her fork as if she were staking someone’s heart. “No surprise there. Jesus, what a to-

tal asshole. Flatters himself by listening to you professing your undying love to him, sets up a private date so he can get you in the sack, then never calls you back. If I *ever* get my hands on him..."

Julia went cold inside. She closed her eyes, claspng her hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying out, tears running down her cheeks.

She felt Gaby's arm around her shoulders in consolation. "Look, I'm sorry if I was being too blunt." Gaby wiped Julia's tears away. "I don't have a filter. But I'm just giving my honest opinion, as your best friend. If things really happened the way you described, I'm afraid he's been playing you."

Gaby sat down on the armrest of Julia's chair, hugging her with both arms now. "You wanted to let him know how you felt. If he can't respect that, it's his problem, not yours. You didn't do anything wrong." Her jet-black head against Julia's platinum blonde locks painted a sad black-and-white picture.

A waitress pushing a pastry cart shuffled toward them. "Is everything all right?" she asked a bit perplexed.

"Sure," Gaby replied. "We're not crying because of the pastries. They're wonderful."

Julia giggled despite her tears. "Ugh," she said, rubbing her face. "I'm such a gullible sucker. I was *so* in love with Michael. Why didn't I see this coming?"

Gaby shrugged. "Love is blind. That's the way it is."

"Maybe I should call him. So I can ask him why he didn't text me back? Who knows, he might have a very good reason."

"Yup. I bet his thumbs fell off," Gaby nodded solemnly, and Julia snickered. "But, seriously, just call him. The sooner you know what's up, the better."

Gaby chatted on about her short vacation in Paris. It was nice to listen to her friend's babbling and entertaining stories, but Julia couldn't entirely shake the dark cloud hovering over her head. When

they left the café and Julia had to walk back to the bus stop all by herself, her feelings of misery returned full-force. Taking her cell phone from her bag and staring at the thing in doubt, she leaned against the wall next to the bus shelter. Wasn't it better to put off her phone call to Michael for one more day? She should give him a fair chance to respond to her text messages. Maybe Gaby was wrong after all. Couldn't she give him the benefit of the doubt for a little while longer?

A familiar sound in the distance interrupted Julia's musings. Her heart skipped a beat – she'd recognize the strangely rattling exhaust of Michael's vintage Honda motorbike anywhere. Whenever he'd pulled up into the school yard riding his prized possession, she'd been around to shyly watch from the sidelines. Her stomach tightened as she looked up, quickly stashing away her phone.

He approached the bus stop, turned off his engine and parked the bike against the same wall she was using for support. His brown hair had a golden gleam in the sunlight. Michael hadn't spotted her yet, but when she hesitantly edged toward him to catch his eye, an impatient frown crossed his handsome face for just a moment, and the broad smile he flashed at her the next second didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Julia," he exclaimed a little too brightly. "*Grüss Gott*. Coming back from town?"

"Yeah, Gaby invited me for tea and cakes at the pastry shop." She swallowed down the lump in her throat before continuing: "And where have you been?"

"Oh, you know – around," he answered glibly. "Stayed with my aunt and uncle in Hallein for a few days. Went clubbing with my cousins. Nothing special." He fumbled with his keys, surreptitiously looking past her at the narrow alley leading to the Old Town.

Julia blinked back tears, her last glimmer of hope gone. This all felt so vastly different from the morning they'd said their goodbyes.

It was as if she was talking to a stranger she had nothing in common with – or hadn't shared anything with. "Why didn't you call me back?" she asked with quiet determination.

Michael sighed, putting a warm hand on her shoulder condescendingly. "Look, I thought you'd be happy with our night together." He sounded genuinely puzzled. "I mean – you told me how much you wanted me. How you longed to be with me before I moved to Graz. I wouldn't mind going on a date with you again sometime, but I've been busy. Am I missing something?"

She took a step back. This was horrifying – Michael made it sound like he had done her a *favor*. He'd been generous enough to meet up with her because she admired him, and he'd had a good time. That was all – he'd never been serious with her. All the street sounds faded into the background, leaving her and Michael in the middle of a silent, barren plain where she could no longer lie to herself or pretend she'd misunderstood him.

"You told me we would talk soon." She cringed when she heard how plaintive and clingy she sounded. "That was a week ago."

"I was out of town," he replied curtly. "It's summer vacation. Why would I hang around in Salzburg all the time? Aren't you going anywhere this summer?"

Julia closed her eyes, biting back tears. *Summer*. She desperately tried to chase away images of her and him – fantasies she'd had in the days after their date. A Salzburg summer with Michael, who'd visit the forest with her so she could show him the places that were special to her. Evenings full of kissing and embracing under the stars. Sweet words he'd whisper in her ear.

"No. I'm staying here," she said softly.

"Too bad," he replied flatly. "Oh well, maybe I'll bump into you somewhere later. I have to go now before the music store closes, okay?" He leaned over and gave her a meaningless kiss on the cheek.

“Okay, s-see you,” she stammered at his back. He wasn’t even listening anymore. One of Michael’s friends emerged from the alley, enthusiastically thumping him on the back before dragging him along to the Old Town of Salzburg.

And then he was gone. Julia fell back against the wall, taking a long, steadying breath. Of course she should be relieved to finally know where she stood after a nerve-racking week, but she wasn’t. Frankly, she couldn’t feel anything. She got on the bus on auto-pilot, lowering herself onto her usual seat in the back.

Reality was harsh. She didn’t mean *anything* to him. For two years she’d been staring herself blind at someone who was blind to her.

This time, the realization hit her in the gut. Julia closed her eyes and tried to hold back her tears, but his indifferent reaction to her words was too painful to forget. The way he’d impatiently looked past her while she was talking to him, so eager to get away. The way he’d looked past her at school all those years until she turned out to be easy prey at the party. What a bastard. Who the hell did he think he was?!

By the time the bus reached the end of the line, Julia’s sadness had turned to anger. Instead of going home, she ran into the woods, trying to outrun the rage thudding against her ribs by heading straight for her meditation spot. When she finally slumped down against the old oak tree in the forest, hot tears were running down her face.

“You idiot,” she sobbed. “You silly, stupid cow.”

Mostly, she was angry with *herself* now. How could she have been this naive?

It was high time to get her act together. Julia resolutely wiped the tears from her eyes. Time to say goodbye to all the dreams she’d had about the two of them, because she’d obviously been dreaming in vain. Dreams didn’t come true. Life was not a fairytale.

It was time to grow up.

“*There* you are,” Ms. Gunther called out indignantly from the kitchen when Julia came home that night. “You’re late, young lady. I had no idea if you’d be joining us for dinner. I thought maybe you’d eat at Gaby’s.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” Julia went into the kitchen to hug her mother. “I should have called, but stuff happened and I was distracted. What are we having?”

“Macaroni.” Her mom stroked her head sweetly. “And I made some salad.”

“Tuna salad,” Anne piped up with disdain. “I don’t like tuna.”

“You change your culinary likes and dislikes every week.” Julia rolled her eyes. “How on earth is Mom supposed to keep up with you?”

Anne shrugged. “I’ll put up a list,” she replied donnishly, trying to look as venerable as possible with all of ten years under her belt. Julia grinned impishly at her sister and suddenly Anne erupted in giggles. “Don’t look at me like that! I’m just a fussy eater. Gran always says so, too.”

“We’ll visit Grandma this weekend, so maybe you should give me that list soon,” their mom admonished her with a chuckle. “So I can let the poor woman know what food to steer clear of when she’s cooking for us.”

They sat down at the table. Julia loved the small household she was a part of. Even though she missed her dad sometimes, it was much better for her mom that he lived somewhere else now. The tense atmosphere that had pervaded the house in the years before their divorce was gone for good. Their mother had started a new and better life.

Julia’s gran lived in Eicht, close to the suburbs of Birkensiedlung. Her mother’s mother was like a second parent. Her grandpa had passed away a few years ago, leaving his wife by herself. When he had still been alive, Julia had visited her grandparents every Sunday

afternoon to play songs for them. She loved their antique piano. At home, she only had a keyboard to practice on.

She used her Yamaha to write songs in her room, including the song she'd written for her finals in Music Ed – and secretly, she'd written it with Michael in mind. He had never been far from her thoughts when she composed it. Every time she added a new line of melody to it, she imagined playing it in front of an audience of students in the large auditorium at school. In her fantasies, an enraptured Michael had always been in the front row, gazing up at her in admiration.

In reality, he hadn't even been there.

Julia munched on a bite of tuna salad, trying to fend off the memory of Michael's handsome face and green eyes. She had to stop thinking about him. He wasn't handsome at all. He was a low-life bastard who used innocent girls like Kleenex, and she'd been too blind to recognize him for what he really was.

"Julia!" Her mother's voice snapped her out of her inner rant. "Are – are you *crying*, sweetie?"

Startled, she looked up, wiping away a few tears rolling down her face. Anne gaped at her from across the table in distress.

Smiling feebly, Julia rubbed her cheeks once more. "Sorry. It's just... I'm feeling a bit lost. School has ended, everyone's leaving, my life will never be the same... it all feels so final," she lied.

"Well, Gaby isn't going anywhere, right?" Ms. Gunther put a loving hand on her daughter's arm. "She'll be here for you. And what about Axel and Florian? They're going to college at Salzburg University too. Your old friends will still be around, won't they?"

Julia smiled. Her mom was sweet, and more importantly, she was right. The people who really cared about her would be here for her. Chances were, her life would be better now that she wasn't just focused on Michael. Up till now, she had never taken notice of all the *other* cool guys in her hometown.

Time to open her eyes to new possibilities and stop throwing herself a pity party.

When Julia emerged from her bedroom after donning new jeans and a T-shirt later that evening, she was fully prepared to make her life take a one-eighty spin. It was a beautiful evening and she was going to enjoy her friends' company at O'Malley's, their favorite pub.

"Julia," Anne called her from the room next door. "Will you read me a story?" Her sister tried to sound like a toddler on purpose. Nowadays, Anne claimed she was *way* too grown-up to be read to, but she also said Julia was the exception to the rule because her big sister was just too good at reading fairytales.

"I'm coming!" With a smile, Julia entered the room. She sat down on the edge of the bed, combing her fingers through Anne's hair. Her baby sister was mock-sucking her thumb, clutching a cuddly toy under one arm and batting her eyelashes at Julia while pushing her storybook about the enchanted forest toward her.

"The *Prince of Trees*," Julia intoned, opening the book at chapter four. She didn't even have to look – she knew it by heart. Her grandmother had always read her stories from this book, and when Anne was born, Gran had gifted her the book. "It's your turn to read fairytales to your little sister," she'd said.

The storybook was chock-full of Austrian legends, fairytales and traditions from ancient times. One part was even dedicated to folklore that pre-dated Christianity – pages full of descriptions of dark creatures of the Alps, living in forests and mountains. The *Krampus* was the wild spirit of the forest who taught young men to survive on their own. Only after the church had established their rule in the country of Austria had the *Krampus* been turned into an evil monster, taking naughty kids away to his lair the evening before Saint Nicholas Day.

Next to that, the book also featured modern fairytales. Chapter four about the Prince of the Forest had always been Julia's favorite,

and Anne liked it just as much. In her best storyteller's voice, Julia recounted the story of the young prince who fell in love with a fairy living in the forest. The fairy princess would sit down on the branch of his favorite tree whenever she needed to take a rest from flying. Anne glanced over her shoulder to look at the beautiful illustrations in the book. When Julia had reached the end of the story, Anne crawled into her lap and flung her arms around her big sister. "You know, I don't feel like growing up that much," she confessed in a small voice.

"Why not, sweetheart?" Julia caressed Anne's dark-blond hair. Her sister was going to a new school after summer as well. Her time at elementary school was over.

Anne shrugged her thin shoulders. "You're a grown-up now too, and you don't look as happy as you used to. Sometimes, it's like you don't believe in fairytales anymore."

Julia bit her lip to stop herself from making a tart remark. What was the point in telling Anne that fairytales didn't come true? No need to bother a little girl with her own embitterment. "You're right, I don't feel that happy right now. I've run into a few too many big, bad wolves lately."

"Oh. In the forest, you mean?" Anne asked half-jokingly, looking up at Julia with big, blue eyes.

Julia couldn't help smiling. "No, not in the forest. In the dark streets of Savage Salzburg."

Anne giggled. "Are you sure you want to go out tonight, then?"

"Sure. Axel and Gaby will defend me if we run into more wolves or *Krampus*-monsters."

"But Axel wears *glasses*," Anne objected, as though her cousin's bad eyesight ruled him out of a job as reliable defender.

"Well, Gaby doesn't."

"True." Anne nodded solemnly. She was always a bit intimidated by Gaby and her black outfits whenever Julia's best friend came over.

Apparently, being a Goth made her a good protector in Anne's books.

"So, I'm leaving." Julia got up. "See you tomorrow morning."

"Don't stay out too late," Anne said, suddenly sounding too motherly for her age.

Julia chuckled. "I won't." She bounced down the stairs, almost bounding into her mom in the hallway when she stepped out of the kitchen.

"Do you have the house key?" Ms. Gunther asked. "I'm turning in early tonight, so I'm locking the door before you come home."

"Check. And my travel card, and my wallet, and my cell phone, and my pepper spray, and my very best mood."

Julia pressed a kiss to her mother's forehead and walked out the door whistling a tune. Still humming, she strolled down her street and onto the Birkenstrasse leading to the bus stop. The bus wasn't there yet, so she sat down on the bench inside the shelter. The half moon illuminated the night sky, the trees in the forest across the bus stop whispering mysteriously in the summer breeze. For just a moment, it reminded her of the fairytale she'd just read to Anne. Almost inaudibly, she muttered: "Hello, my prince. How are you doing?"

Wouldn't it be fantastic to fly around on fairy wings, looking at the earth from above? She'd sit down in a treetop and watch the world go by, waiting until the chaos and madness of humanity's hustle and bustle faded away and the era of the nature spirits dawned on earth. She'd end up with a handsome, mysterious hermit for a lover who lived in a house deep in the forest, writing poems about the trees, the flowers and his love for her every day.

In the years past, she'd observed Michael for hours on end during the mind-numbingly dull maths and physics classes she had to sit through. She'd made the best out of them by watching Michael, seated two rows in front of her to the left. Sometimes, he'd sketch in his notebook while Mr. Brunner was pouring his soul into explaining yet

another complicated quadratic equation, and she'd always wondered what it was that he was drawing. One day, Michael had accidentally left the notebook on his desk, and she'd peeked into his notes to look at his doodles. The last few pages were littered with drawings of trees and flowers, and that had made her happy.

Maybe she'd read too much into it.

In the distance, she could see the bus's headlights approach. Julia got her travel card from her bag to show to the driver. As she was boarding, her phone buzzed in her pocket.

"Hey, Axel," she answered it. "What's up?"

"Are you there yet?"

"No, I'm just getting on the bus. I'll be there in twenty."

"I'll be there in a half hour. Florian is coming too, he says he's feeling better."

"Great! I'll see you guys in a bit."

Julia clicked off and rooted around in her bag to get her MP3 player. The bus slowly began to fill up. At every stop, more teenagers got on, all of them dressed up for a night on the town. She smiled – it was a good idea to get out of her slump and hang out at the pub with her friends all night. Sooner or later, she'd inevitably bump into Michael again, but at least she wouldn't have to face him alone.

"Okay, who wants beer?" Tamara asked, sliding off her bar stool. Gaby's sister was getting the next round. She patted the leather of the seat and nudged Julia. "Here, you can have my stool. You deserve a seat."

Florian and Axel shot curious glances at Julia. They'd just walked in, missing the entire conversation between Julia, Gaby and Tamara about Julia's nasty encounter with Michael that afternoon.

"I deserve a beer," Florian added. "After surviving this terrible stomach flu that had me eating through a straw for four days, I could do with a nice drink."

“Yeah, that sounds like you’re fully prepared to hold your liquor,” Axel grinned. “Make sure you don’t barf all over me, okay?”

Gaby joined her sister to help her with the drinks, and Florian grabbed the stool next to Julia. “So, what happened to you? Why are you getting a pity seat?”

“Oh, just – crap. With men.”

“You wanna talk about it?” Axel said. “What man broke your heart?”

“Michael Kolbe,” Julia mumbled, not feeling very forthcoming.

“*Kolbe*? That uber-dickhead?” Florian exclaimed.

“Hey, can you keep the volume down?” Julia shushed him uneasily. “Half the people in this pub celebrate his every move.” In a soft voice, she recounted the short version of her running into Michael to the guys, outrage written on their faces when she finished.

“He only preys on the innocent,” Florian said scornfully.

“Gee, thanks.” Despite Florian’s tactless words, Julia couldn’t help cracking a smile. He was undiplomatic, but he was also right, actually.

“Maybe we should put up Michael’s picture on the dart board,” Axel suggested. “So we can throw darts at his stupid face all night.”

“What a *splendid* idea for a game,” Florian agreed. “We’ll call it Kill Kolbe. Who knows, it might catch on. We could start a real O’Malley’s trend here.”

In the meantime, Gaby and Tamara had returned with a tray full of drinks, proposing a toast to the start of the summer vacation. “Here’s hoping the people who hurt us in the past all drop dead,” Gaby wished vindictively, shooting a wicked grin at Julia.

Julia grinned back, clinking her glass against Gaby’s drink. As she expected, it felt good to be out and about. She felt stronger in the company of her friends. On the other hand, she was more than glad not to have run into Michael by the time they left the pub at eleven.