In the Evil Day

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1

JOHANNESBURG ...

NIEMAND CAME in at 2 p.m., stripped, put on shorts, went to the empty room, did the weights routine, ran on the treadmill for an hour. He hated the treadmill, had to steel his mind to endure it, blank out. Running was something you did outdoors. But outdoors had become trouble, like being attacked by three men, one with a nail-studded piece of wood. The trouble had cut both ways: several of his attackers he had kissed off quickly.

Still, you could not pass into the trance-like state when you had to break off from running to fight and kill people. So, resentfully, he had given up running outside.

Niemand didn't get any pleasure from killing. Some people did. In the Zambesi Valley in the early days, and then in Mozambique and Angola and Sierra Leone and other places, he had seen men in killing frenzies, shooting anyone—young old, female, male, shooting chickens and dogs and cows and pigs and goats.

In command, he had dealt with soldiers for this kind of behaviour. The first was Barends, the white corporal the men had called *Pielstyf* because he liked to display his erection when drunk. Niemand had executed him with two shots, upwards into the base of his skull, come up behind him when he was firing his LMG into a crowded bus. The military court found the action justified in that Barends had twice failed to obey a lawful command and posed a threat to discipline in a combat situation.

The second man was a black soldier, a Zulu trained by white instructors, a veteran killer of African National Congress supporters in Natal, in love with blood and the hammer of automatic fire. In Sierra Leone, on patrol in the late afternoon, the Zulu had shot a child, a girl, and then shot the old woman with her, the child's grandmother perhaps, but it could have been her mother, the women aged so quickly. Niemand had him tied to a tree, a poor specimen of a tree, had the villagers gathered. He told the interpreter to apologise for what had happened, then he dispatched the Zulu with a handgun, one shot, close range, there was no other sensible way. The man looked him in the eyes, didn't blink, didn't plead, even when the muzzle was almost touching his left eye. There was no military court to face this time. Niemand had become a mercenary by then, saving the sum of things for pay, and his employers didn't give a shit about a man killed unless you wanted him replaced: one less pay packet.

The third time was at a roadblock. A fellow-mercenary called Powell, a redheaded Englishman, a Yorkshireman, a deserter from two armies, had for no good reason opened fire on three men in a car, two white journalists and their black driver. He killed the driver outright and wounded one of the white men. When Niemand arrived, Powell told him he was going to execute the survivors, blame it on rebels. Niemand argued with him while the unhurt journalist tried to stop his friend's bleeding. Powell wouldn't listen, high as a kite, pupils like saucers, put his pistol to the man's head. Niemand stood back, took one swing with his rifle, held by the barrel, broke Powell's freckled neck. He drove the journalists to the hospital.

Niemand showered under the hosepipe he had run from the rainwater tank on the roof when the water was cut off. Then he lay down on the hard bed, fell asleep thinking about all the other killings, the ones that were the means to the ends. Other people's ends.

The alarm was set for 5.30 p.m. but he woke before it sounded, showered again, dressed in his uniform of denims, T-shirt, gun rig, loose cotton jacket, left the building by the stairs. The lift didn't work but even when it did, no one used it except as a lavatory or to shoot up. He walked with his right hand inside his coat, the .38 shrouded-hammer Colt out of its clip above his left hip. He stayed close to the

inside wall. That way, you bumped head-on into dangerous men coming up. They always hugged the inside wall. And if you encountered one of them, then the quickest man won.

Niemand didn't doubt for one instant that he would be the quickest.

The car was waiting at the kerb, engine running, an old Mercedes, dents everywhere, rust at the bottom of the doors, no hubcaps. The driver was smoking a cigarette, looking around at the street. It was crowded, a third-world street full of shouting hawkers, idlers, street boys, garishly made-up prostitutes, black illegal immigrants from all over Africa the locals called *maKwerekwere*, interlopers who eyed their surroundings warily. This was the fringe of the old business district of Johannesburg, Hillbrow, a suburb long abandoned by all the whites who could afford to move to more secure areas. Not secure areas, only less dangerous areas. Nowhere was secure, not even buildings with dogs and razor wire and four kinds of alarms and round-the-clock security.

It had never occurred to Niemand to move. He had no possessions he valued, had been looking after himself since he was 15, didn't care where he lived. He couldn't sleep for more than a few hours unless he was physically exhausted, what did it matter where he slept?

Zeke saw him coming, reached across and unlocked the door. Niemand got in.

'Rosebank,' he said.

'You always look so fucken clean,' said Zeke. He took the vehicle into the street. No one driving the car would mistake it for an old Mercedes. Which it wasn't, except for the body. The driver's full name was Ezekiel Mkane. His father had been a policeman, a servant of the apartheid state, and Zeke had grown up in a police compound, a member of a client class, no respect from whites, utter loathing and contempt from blacks. A smart boy, good at languages, a reader, Zeke had nowhere to go. He joined the army, put in sixteen years, took in three bullets, two exited, one extracted, and shrapnel, some bits still there.

'That's because I'm white,' said Niemand. He had known Zeke for a long time.

'You're not all that white,' said Mkane. 'Bit of ancestral tan.'

'That's the Greek part of me. The Afrikaner part's pure white. You kaffirs get cheekier every day.'

'Ja, baas. But we're in charge now.'

'We? Forget it. Money's in charge. Took me a long time to understand that. Money's always in charge.'

Niemand's mobile rang. It was Christa, who ran the office. 'After Mrs Shawn,' she said, 'Jan Smuts, flight 701, arriving 8.45 p.m., a Mr Delamotte and his personal assistant, whatever that fucken means.'

'His travelling screw, that's what it means,' Niemand said.

'Ja, well, at the British Airways desk. To the Plaza, Sandton. He had a bad experience in a taxi last time he was here.'

Niemand repeated the details.

'Right,' said Christa. 'Then it's two restaurant pick-ups, both late. They've got your number. Zeke's due to knock off at 11. Can he stay on? Coupla hours.'

They were out of the inner city, in dense traffic heading for the northern suburbs. 'In a hurry tonight?' Niemand said to Zeke. 'Couple of hours, probably.'

'Some people have plans, you know.'

'What about you?'

'Double time?'

'Double time.'

Zeke raised a thumb. He saw a gap and put his foot down. The Mercedes responded like a Porsche.

Mrs Shawn was waiting with a shopping centre security guard. She was about forty, pretty, too much sun on her skin, slightly tipsy, a flush on the prominent cheekbones. She'd had a long lunch, gone shopping. Probably had a swim before lunch, Niemand thought, a swim and a lie in the sun. The guard put her purchases into the boot, four bags, and she gave him several notes.

'This *smells* like a new car,' she said as they queued to get into the early evening traffic on Corlett Drive. She was English, Yorkshire. Niemand knew the accent from the old days, the Rhodesia days. Lots of people from Yorkshire in Rhodesia.

'It is a new car,' said Niemand. 'In an old body.'

'God,' she said, 'that's how I feel.'

Niemand smiled, didn't say anything. He could feel that she wanted to flirt. They often did, these rich women, but it was bad for business. He'd screwed a few in the beginning but no good came of it. One took to phoning six times a day, then for some reason confessed to her husband when Niemand wouldn't take the calls. They'd lost the company's business, at least twenty thousand rand a year, and he'd narrowly escaped being fired. That was too much to pay for a fuck you couldn't even remember.

'People down the street got hit two weeks ago,' she said. 'The car got in behind them before the security gate could close. Three men. Fortunately, they settled for money. He had a few thousand in his safe.'

'Lucky,' said Niemand. 'Mostly it's your money and your life.' He switched on the thin fibre-optic rear-view screen in the roof of the car, looked up. It was providing a 120-degree view of the road behind but it could cover 160 degrees.

'Wow,' said Mrs Shawn. 'That's technology. My husband'd crave that.'

'When we get there,' said Niemand, 'we want to be inside quickly. How does it open?'

'Remote,' she said. 'You punch in the code.'

'How far away?'

'You have to be at the gates.'

'Put in the code now.'

Mrs Shawn searched in her bag, found a device. 'I can't see,' she said. She was too vain to put on her reading glasses, held the control close to her face and tentatively pressed soft buttons.

'I *think* I've done it,' she said.

Zeke turned his head to Niemand, who kept his eyes on the rear view screen.

The house was in a leafy street in Saxonwold, a rich part of the city. It was one of four large mock-Georgian houses built on land carved from the grounds of a mansion. The perimeter walls were three metres high, topped with razor wire. As Zeke drew up in front of the steel gates, Niemand opened his door.

'Open them,' said Niemand. 'Close as soon as you're in, Mrs Shawn.'

'It's very fast,' she said.

'Me too.'

Niemand was out, on the edge of the kerb, looking around. Early summer Highveld dusk, fresh-smelling, hint of jacaranda blossom in a broad street, no traffic, a calm street, a stockbrokers' street, a place to come home to, have a swim, pour a big scotch, shed the cares of the day. There was a sharp sound, the gates unmated, and Zeke drove into the driveway, a walled corridor leading to the doors of a three-car garage.

Niemand, walking backwards, got inside just before the gates met.

On the driver's side, a 14-inch security monitor was mounted against the wall under a small roof. Mrs Shawn handed Zeke another remote control. With Niemand leaning against the car, they went on a video tour of the house, room by room, two-camera vision. It was furnished in a stark style, steel louvre internal shutters instead of curtains, not many places to hide. Beside the monitor a green light glowed. It meant that no window and no door, internal or external, had been opened or closed since the alarm was activated.

'Looks okay,' said Niemand. 'Let's see the garage.'

There was one vehicle in it, a black Jeep four-wheel-drive. A camera at floor level showed no one hiding underneath it.

Niemand gestured.

Mrs Shawn used the remote.

The left hand door rose. Pistol out, held at waist level in front of his body, Niemand went in, looked into the Jeep, waved to Zeke. He parked behind the Jeep, and the garage door descended. Zeke took the short-barrel, pistol-handled automatic shotgun out of its clips under the driver's seat.

Mrs Shawn unlocked the steel door into the house with a card and a key.

Niemand went first, Zeke behind him.

They were in a hallway painted in tones of grey, mulberry carpet, a single painting under a downlight, a print, Cezanne. Niemand liked paintings, even paintings he didn't understand. He bought art books

sometimes, threw them out after a while.

Mrs Shawn disarmed the alarm system.

'Wait here,' said Niemand.

She shook her head vigorously. 'No, I don't want to be on my own.'

Niemand in front, they went into a passage, then into every room. He opened every cupboard, every wardrobe, Zeke covering him. The beds were all box, no way to hide under them.

In the sitting room, for the second time, Niemand said, 'You can relax, Mrs Shawn.'

He holstered the pistol, didn't feel relaxed.

She went into the kitchen and came back holding a bottle of champagne, Veuve Clicquot, and a flute, a crystal flute. 'I'm having a glass of bubbly,' she said. 'This all makes me so tense. There's everything else. Beer, scotch, whatever.'

The men shook their heads. 'You're expecting Mr Shawn when?' said Niemand.

She brought her watch up to her face. 'Any time now, any time. Can you get the top of this off for me?' She held out the bottle to Niemand. He took it and offered it to Zeke, who put the shotgun on a chair.

'He does champagne,' Niemand said. 'I do beer bottles. With my teeth.'

Mrs Shawn smiled, a wary smile, uncertain of Niemand's drift, whether she'd been wrong in automatically asking the white man. Zeke stripped off the foil, removed the cage, wriggled the cork out slowly, no bang, just a whimper of gas, poured.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Shawn. 'You are an expert.'

Zeke smiled and took the bottle into the kitchen.

Mrs Shawn drank half the glass. 'Jesus, that's better,' she said. 'Let's sit.'

They sat on the leather chairs. Zeke came out of the kitchen. 'Calls to make,' he said. He left the room, closed the door. Mrs Shawn knocked back the rest of her glass, went into the kitchen. Niemand heard a cupboard open, close. Silence. She came back with a full glass and the bottle.

'Well,' said Mrs Shawn, sitting, smiling the smile, crossing her legs. Niemand knew the coke smile. He looked at her legs. They were brown legs, filling out in the thighs, the feet in soft-looking shoes. 'Home at last,' she said. 'You're very professional…what do I call you?'

'Mike,' said Niemand. He held her eyes, smiled, looked at his watch. He had a bad feeling about this house, the kind of feeling that had sometimes come over him on patrol, brought on by nothing in particular. 'The houses next door, you know the people?'

She drank. 'Well, we're the longest survivors in the row here. What, two months, just under. Can you believe that?' She closed her eyes, stubby eyelashes. 'I was so naive when we came. I mean, I thought it'd be like Malaysia. I lived there with my first husband, we had this lovely house in KL—the poor don't bother you there. Jesus, what a shock I got. I hate this fucking country, I'd be back in the UK tomorrow…'

Niemand was already tired of listening to her. He was forced to listen to people like her every day. To some people, he called his business Parasite Protection.

'…Bloody Brett told me it was going to be for two or three weeks. Then people are buggering him around, the deal falls through, next thing…'

'Don't know the neighbours?' Niemand said.

She blinked, had trouble adjusting. 'Well, I see the people on that side every now and then.' She gestured with a thumb to the left. 'To wave to. They're Americans. With live-in security. An Israeli. He used to be one of the Prime Minister's bodyguards. Christ knows what that costs.'

'The other side?'

'Empty. They left a few weeks ago. Only here for a few months. Lucky them.' A phone rang, in two places. She drained her glass, went to the kitchen.

There was something wrong here.

Niemand went into the passage, looked up and down, went into the dining room, a formal dining room with a big blond table and ten chairs. Zeke was on his mobile, half-sitting on the table. He looked at Niemand, raised an eyebrow. Niemand shrugged, went back to the sitting room.

Mrs Shawn was coming out of the kitchen, glass refilled.

'My husband,' she said. 'He'll be here in a minute. He's going to London tomorrow. Won't take me. Sometimes I think he'd like to see me murdered.'

Niemand felt some of his feeling go away, went out to escort the husband in. The driveway and street outside were floodlit, bright as day, and as the man drove the Audi past him, he saw a chubby face.

In the garage, the man got out, briefcase in his left hand, looked at his watch. He was short and paunchy and even an expensive suit didn't improve that.

'Just you?' he said.

Niemand shook his head. 'My partner's inside.'

The man looked at him. He'd been drinking, face flushed. 'What colour's he?'

'Black.'

'No blacks in the house. Don't trust any black.' He pointed at the floor. 'Next time, he waits here.'

This man should be allowed to die violently, thought Niemand. He didn't say anything, walked to the door into the house and waited.

The man came over and opened the door. Niemand went in first, went through the hall, into the sitting room. The woman was standing in the kitchen doorway, champagne flute in hand. Zeke was sitting in a leather chair, the shotgun on his thighs.

Brett Shawn dropped the briefcase on a chair, was taking off his jacket, didn't look at his wife, eyes on Zeke, threw the expensive garment sideways, careless of where it fell, walked to the middle of the room, made a stand-up sign to Zeke, palm upwards, short fingers held together, flicking urgently.

'Up,' he said. 'On your bike. Don't pay a bloody fortune to have people sit on my bloody furniture.'

Zeke's expression didn't change. He stood, weapon at the end of a slack arm, looked at Niemand. Niemand nodded at Mrs Shawn.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Thank you both.'

Brett Shawn went into the passage first, Zeke behind him. Shawn was at the door to the hall, had his hand on the doorhandle, when the hair on the back of Niemand's skull pricked. He looked up, saw something on the ceiling behind him, something at the edge of his

vision, a dark line not there before, shouted Zeke's name, spinning around, finding the pistol at his waist, throwing himself away from the line of sight, hitting the floor, rolling into position.

The man in the ceiling pushed open the inspection hatch, fired a pumpgun, hit Shawn in the side of his belly as he turned around, in the pinstriped shirt distended over the sagging gut, almost cut him in half, fired again. Zeke raised his shotgun and fired at the ceiling without turning, just his head tilted backwards, deafening noise in the corridor. Then Zeke's head blew apart, a balloon of blood and bone and pink and grey material exploding.

Niemand had the .38 out, was about to fire into the roof behind the inspection hatch, didn't.

Waited.

Silence.

A noise overhead, a bumping sound.

Waited.

A shortened shotgun dropped into the passage. Then a bare arm and a shoulder in a T-shirt fell through the hatch. A dark hand dangled.

Niemand registered the voice of Mrs Shawn screaming. He paid no attention, reached forward, got Zeke's shotgun, ran his hand over his friend's head, smeared his own throat and chest with Zeke's blood, lay back and looked at the hatch.

Mrs Shawn stopped screaming.

Behind him, the door to the sitting room opened. Niemand closed his eyes.

Mrs Shawn screamed again, slammed the door.

Niemand lay on the mulberry carpet, shotgun at his side, eyes closed, looking through his lashes at the hatch.

Nothing. Just blood running down the bare arm, down the fingers, dripping.

Mrs Shawn was shouting. She was on the telephone. She'd got through to someone. Niemand couldn't make out the words.

They'd been in the ceiling all the time. They'd come via the empty house next door, probably bridged the gap between the roofs with a ladder.

Niemand waited. His sight was going fuzzy. No sound from above.

Dead or gone, he thought.

He tensed his shoulder muscles, readied himself to get up.

A scraping noise.

The gunman's body fell through the hatch, landed in front of him, just missed his feet, blood going everywhere.

He'd been pushed.

Niemand didn't move, didn't breathe.

The other person in the ceiling didn't have a firearm, his instinct told him that. And the person was running out of time: the rest of the team would be close now, waiting to have the gates opened for them. If it didn't happen soon, they would probably desert him.

Seen through his lashes, the hatch was just a black square.

Nothing happened.

Niemand heard the door to the sitting room open.

Mrs Shawn didn't scream this time, she said, in a small voice, a child's voice, 'Oh, Jesus, God, are you all dead?'

Niemand was looking at the hatch through his lashes.

Nothing.

Feet first.

The black man came out of the hole feet first, just stepped into air, dropped from the roof like an acrobat, long butcher's knife held to his chest.

Mrs Shawn screamed, high-pitched, the scream of steel meeting steel at great speed.

The man landed feet astride his partner's body, a slightly built man, perfectly balanced, as if he'd jumped from a chair, knife hand down, the blade pointed at Mrs Shawn.

'Shut up, bitch,' he said.

He looked at Niemand lying on the floor, didn't change his grip on the knife, took a step forward, bent at the waist, took his arm back to put the blade into Niemand's groin, sever the femoral artery.

'No!' Mrs Shawn, the abrading metal shriek.

Niemand opened his eyes, raised the shotgun, pulled the trigger, heard the hammer fall.

Nothing. Shell malfunction, one in five thousand chance.

The man lunged.

Niemand brought his right leg up, kicked as hard as he could, his shin just below the knee made contact with the man's crotch, a shout of pain, he saw the knife hand move away, sat up, braced himself on his left hand, hooked his left knee around the man's right calf, rolled savagely to the left, right knee pressing in the man's upper thigh.

He felt the joint give, tendons, cartilage tearing, saw the man hit the wall with his shoulder, head turning sideways, mouth open and twisted in pain and surprise, saw the teeth and the furred tongue, the knife hand coming around, the knife huge, shining. Pain in his shoulder. He grabbed for the man's wrist with his left hand, clubbed at his head with the shotgun, laid the short barrel across his jaw and his ear, pulled the weapon back…

The shotgun went off, a shocking concussion. Niemand hadn't realised he'd pulled the trigger.

For a second, they were frozen, two men, one black, one white, legs twisted and locked together, faces close, looking into each other's eyes.

He's strong, Niemand thought.

The man got his right hand on the shotgun barrel, had the advantage of pushing. Niemand felt the strength leaving his left arm, he was going to lose this, he wasn't the quickest this time, he could see the knife blade, see his blood on it.

No. He couldn't die here, in this bastard's house, in the service of this English prick.

He let his right arm go slack, caught the black man by surprise, pushed the shotgun barrel at him, pulled the trigger.

It worked. Eyes closed against the muzzle flash, he saw its furnace flame through his lids, felt it burn his face, felt the man go limp, felt hot liquid in his mouth and his eyes and up his nostrils.

After a time, ears ringing, he pushed the body away and raised his shoulders from the darkening mulberry carpet.

'Mrs Shawn?'

No reply.

He got to his knees.

She was on her back, one leg folded under her, one outstretched.

He looked at her and knew she was dead. He didn't need to feel for a pulse. He did.

She was dead. He'd shot her in the chest. When the man was on him and he'd pulled the trigger he'd shot Mrs Shawn.

She would have been trying to help him. He remembered her shout. She'd shouted and then she would have been trying to help him.

He got up, went into the kitchen, wiped Zeke's shotgun, went back and put it into his friend's hands. He had to bend them, rearrange him. He wanted to kiss Zeke goodbye, kiss him on what remained of his face, but he didn't. Zeke wouldn't have wanted that.

Then, quickly, he kissed Zeke's throat. It was still warm.

He rang Christa, had a look around, found the coke stash, opened Brett Shawn's big briefcase, a small suitcase.

A large yellow envelope holding three stacks of American $100 bills, perhaps $20,000. Three yellow envelopes, papers, two telephone books of papers. A video cassette with a piece of paper taped to it, letters, numbers written in a slanty hand.

Niemand took the envelopes and the cassette and went out to the Mercedes, Colt in his hand. No sign of the intruders' friends or the Israeli next door. He put the stolen goods in the safe box under the floor. Then he went back inside and did a line of coke while he waited, two lines. He thought it was a weakness to use drugs, could take them or leave them, but he couldn't bear the idea of wasting coke on the police.

He was flushing the rest down the sink when the telephone rang.

He let it ring, dried his hands, then he couldn't bear it and picked it up. Long-distance call.

'Shawn?'

'Mr Shawn's had an accident. He's dead.'

A silence.

'And you are?' An accent. German?

Niemand gave it some thought. 'An employee,' he said.

'Shawn had some papers. And a tape. You have them?'

'Yes.'

'I assume you'll be bringing them out?'

More thought. ‘What’s it worth?’ Niemand said.

‘For the London delivery, the agreed sum. Ten thousand pounds. And expenses. Return airfares and so on. Say another five thousand.’

‘Twenty thousand,’ said Niemand. ‘And expenses.’

‘Done. When you get to London, this is what you do…’

He should have asked for more.

2

… HAMBURG …

TILDERS RANG just before four. Anselm was on the balcony, smoking, looking at the choppy lake, the Aussen-Alster, massaging the lifeless fingers of his left hand, thinking about his brother and money, about how short the summers were becoming, shorter every year. Beate tapped on the glass door, offered the cordless telephone.

Anselm flicked the cigarette, went to the door and took the phone.

'Got him,' said Tilders.

'Yes?' said Anselm. Tilders was talking about a man called Serrano. 'Where?'

'*Hauptbahnhof*, 7.10. On the *Schnellzug* from Cologne.'

'Train? This boy?'

'Yes. Three of them now.'

'How's that?'

'There's a woman. Otto says the muscle went out and bought a case and she's carrying it.'

Serrano's bodyguard was a Hungarian called Zander, also known as Sanders, Sweetman, Kendall. These were just the names they knew.

'Call back in five,' said Anselm. 'I've got to consult the client.'

He went to his desk and rang O'Malley in England. O'Malley wasn't in, would be contacted and told to ring immediately. Anselm went back to the balcony, lit another Camel, watched the ferry docking. The day was darkening now and rain was in the air. Above

the sturdy craft, a mob of gulls hovered, jostling black-eyed predators eyeing the boat as if it contained edible things, which it did. He had a dim memory of being taken on his first ferry ride on the Alster, on the day the *schwanenvater* brought out the swans from their winter refuge. The man chugged out of a canal in his little boat towing a boom. Behind it were hundreds of swans and, in the open water, pairs began to peel off to seek out their canals. For years, Anselm thought this happened every day, every day a man brought the swans out, the Pied Piper of swans.

He heard the door open behind him.

'Herr Anselm?'

The pale bookkeeper. Could an approach be more obsequious? What made some people so timid? History, Anselm thought, history. He turned. 'Herr Brinkman.'

'May I raise a matter, Herr Anselm?' Brinkman bit his lower lip. Some colour came into it.

'Raise it to the skies.'

Brinkman looked around for eavesdroppers, spoke in an even lower voice. 'I don't like to bring this up, Herr Anselm, but you are the senior person here. Herr Baader does not seem to grasp the urgency. The landlord is making serious threats about the arrears. And there are other problems.'

'He'll be back soon. I'll impress the urgency of this on him,' said Anselm.

Baader owned the business. He was in the West Indies on honeymoon. Honeymoon number four, was it five?

'There is more,' said Brinkman.

'Yes?'

Brinkman moved his head from side to side, bit his lower lip.

'What is it?'

'Herr Baader wants me to charge certain expenses to the firm which we cannot justify as business expenditure. I could go to jail.'

Anselm wasn't in the least surprised. 'Have you mentioned your concerns to him?'

Brinkman nodded. 'He doesn't hear me.'

'I'll talk to him.'

'Herr Anselm, Herr Baader interferes in the payments.'

'How?'

'He signs some cheques. Others don't come back to me.'

'I'll talk to him. I promise.'

Duty done, fearful, Brinkman nodded. Anselm turned back to the window and thought about Baader and his lusts, his juggling of the accounts.

The tap on the glass. Beate with the cordless, again.

It was O'Malley. He whistled when Anselm told him about Serrano.

'You're sure it's his case she's carrying, boyo?'

'Yes,' said Anselm. Tilders didn't say yes when he meant, I think so. He had trained Otto and Baader had trained him and Baader had been properly trained at everything except probity in accounting.

'Not socks and shirts and the dirty underpants?' said O'Malley.

'Could be hand-carved dildos and old copies of *Vatican News* for all we know.'

'Shit,' said O'Malley. 'John, I'm desperate on this bastard. We need a look, just a quick look. Minutes.'

'Take a look,' said Anselm. 'Feel free. You have the time and place. Our work is done.'

'John, John.'

'Not our usual line of work,' said Anselm. 'You know that.'

'Nonsense, I know Baader would do it.'

He would too, thought Anselm. 'I don't know that. Ring him on his mobile.'

'Listen, you can find someone to do it, John.'

'Even if I could, these things come home to you.'

'Ten grand.'

'What do you want for ten grand?'

He told Anselm, who sighed. 'That's all? Take on a bodyguard for ten grand? The prick may take his job seriously. I am of the absolutely not opinion.'

'Twelve.'

Anselm thought about it. He knew they shouldn't get involved in things like this. But there were salaries to be paid, including his. He

knew someone who might be able to arrange it for a thousand, fifteen hundred dollars. 'No,' he said.

'Twelve, that's it.'

'Fifteen, win or lose.'

O'Malley's turn to sigh. 'Jesus, you're hard.'

Anselm pulled a face. He could have got twenty, more. He disconnected and rang Tilders. 'There's something we have to do.'

'Yes,' said Tilders. 'What?'

'What kind of case did Zander buy?'

'Aluminium photographer's case.'

Anselm was silent for so long that Tilders thought the line had died. 'John?'

'Tell Otto to buy one. The same. Exactly.'

It took a call to the locksmith and four more calls, twenty minutes on the phone.

3

… HAMBURG …

THE *SCHNELLZUG* slid into the huge vaulted station, punctual to the second by the *Hauptbahnhof*'s great clock. Zander, the bodyguard, appeared first, blocked the doorway of his sleek carriage and didn't give a damn, looked around, took his time. He was slight for someone in his line of work, blond and elegant in a dark suit, jacket unbuttoned. When he was satisfied, he moved to his left and Serrano stepped onto the platform. He too was in a dark suit but there was nothing elegant about him. He was short and podgy, a sheen on his face, hair that looked lacquered, and a roll of fat over his collar. A laptop computer case was slung over his shoulder.

Next off was a middle-aged businessman, a man with a pinched and unhappy face who raised his head and sniffed the stale station air. After him came an elderly woman, an embalmed face, every detail of her attire perfect, then a family of four, the parents first. Once *Gastarbeiter* from Anatolia, Anselm thought, now wealthy. Their teenage boy and girl followed, citizens of nowhere and everywhere. The pair were listening to music on headphones, moving their heads like sufferers from some exotic ailment.

A woman was in the doorway. She was 30, perhaps, in black, pants, sensible heels, dark hair scraped back, charcoal lipstick. Her face was severe, sharp planes, not unattractive.

'The woman,' said Tilders. He had a mobile to his face, a long, earnest philosopher's face, a face made for pondering.

Anselm half turned, sipped some *Apfelkorn* from the small bottle, swilled it around his mouth, felt the soft burn of the alcohol. He was on his second one. He was scared of a panic attack and drink seemed to help keep them away. He drank too much anyway, didn't care except in the pre-dawn hours, the badlands of the night. The woman was carrying an aluminium case in her left hand, carrying it easily.

'From the East,' said Tilders.

'Sure it's just three?'

'Don't blame me,' said Tilders. 'This is not our kind of work. Is it on?'

Anselm drained the tiny bottle. 'Yes,' he said. 'Blame's all mine.'

Tilders spoke into his mobile. They followed the woman and Serrano and his bodyguard down the platform towards the escalator that led to the concourse. The woman kept a steady distance behind the men, people between them. On the crowded escalator, Zander looked back once, just a casual glance. Serrano had his head down, a man not interested in his surroundings, standing in the lee of his hired shield.

When they reached the concourse, Zander paused, looked around again, then went right, towards the Kirchenallee exit. The woman didn't hesitate when she reached the concourse, turned right too, walking briskly.

The concourse was crowded, workers and shoppers, travellers, youths on skates, buskers, beggars, petty criminals, pimps, whores, hustlers.

Zander and Serrano were almost at the exit. Zander looked around again. The woman had been blocked by a group of schoolchildren on an excursion. She was ten metres behind them.

'Getting late,' said Anselm. This wasn't going to work, he was sure of it.

'*Scheisse*,' said Tilders.

From nowhere came the gypsy boy, moving through the crowd at a half-run, twisting around people, a wiry child in a drab anorak, tousled black hair, ran straight into the woman, bumped her in the ribcage with his shoulder, hard, bumped her again as she went back. She fell down, hit the ground heavily, but held onto the case.

Without hesitation, the boy stomped on her hand with a heavy Doc Martens boot, thick-soled. She screamed in pain, opened her hand. He grabbed the aluminium case with his left hand but she hooked an arm around his left leg.

The boy kicked her in the neck, stooped and punched her in the mouth, between the breasts, one, two, his right hand, a fist like a small bag of marbles. The woman fell back, no heart for hanging on. He was off, running for the exit.

No one did anything. People didn't want to get involved in these things. They happened all the time and it was dangerous to tackle the thieves. Even young children sometimes produced knives, slashed wildly. Recently, a man had been stabbed in the groin, twice, died in the ambulance. A father of three.

But Zander was suddenly there, running smoothly, going around people like a fish. The boy's start wasn't big enough, the woman had been too close to Zander, it had taken too long to get the case away from her.

'*Scheisse*,' said Tilders again.

Then someone in the crowd seemed to stumble, bumping a long-haired man into Zander's path. The man went to one knee. Zander tried to avoid him but he couldn't. His left leg made contact with the man. He lost his balance, fell sideways, bounced off the ground, came to his feet like a marionette pulled up by strings.

It was too late. The boy was gone, the crowd closed behind him. Zander paused, uncertain, looked back. Serrano had joined the woman, outrage and desperation on his face, both arms in the air. Zander got the message, turned to take off after the boy again, realised it was hopeless, stopped and walked back to Serrano. Serrano was enraged. Anselm could see spit leave his mouth, see Zander recoil. Neither of them looked at the woman, she'd failed them.

Two policemen arrived, one talking into his throat mike. The woman was on her feet, nose bleeding a little, blood black in the artificial light, her right hand massaging her breastbone. Her hair had come loose and she had to brush it back with her left hand. She looked much younger, like a teenager.

A third policeman appeared, told the crowd to get moving, the excitement was over.

The woman was telling her story to the two cops. They were shaking their heads.

Anselm looked at Tilders, who was looking at his watch. Anselm felt the inner trembling, a bad sign. He went over to the newspaper kiosk, bought an *Abendblatt*. The economy was slowing, the metal-workers' union was making threats, another political bribery scandal in the making. He went back, stood behind Tilders.

'How long?'

'Five minutes.'

Serrano and Zander were arguing, the short man's hands moving, Zander tossing his head, arms slack at his sides. Serrano made a dismissive gesture, final.

Anselm said, 'I think we're at the limit here.'

A tall man was coming through the crowd, a man wearing a cap, a blue-collar worker by his appearance. The throng parted for him. In one hand, he had the gypsy boy by the scruff of the neck, in the other, he had the photographer's case, held up as if weightless.

The woman and the policemen went towards them. When they were a few metres away, the boy squirmed like a cat, turned towards his captor, stamped on his left instep, punched him in the stomach. The man's face contorted, he lost his grip on his captive and the boy was gone, flying back the way he had first fled.

'What can you do?' said the man to the woman. 'The scum are taking over the whole world. Is this yours?'

Serrano came up behind the woman. He was flushed, had money in his hand, notes, a wad, offered it. The man in the cap shrugged, uncertain. 'It's not necessary,' he said. 'It's a citizen's duty.'

'Many thanks,' said Serrano, taking the case. 'Take the money. You deserve it.'

The man took the money, looked at it, put it in his hip pocket. 'I'll buy the children something,' he said. He turned and walked back the way he'd come, limping a little from the stomp.

Tilders went on his way. Anselm forced himself to take his time leaving, found the car parked in a no-standing zone, engine running.

In Mittelweg, Fat Otto, the man who had bumped the innocent commuter into Zander's path, said, 'Kid's something, isn't he? Deserves a bonus.'

'Deserves to be jailed now before he's even more dangerous,' said Anselm.

His mobile rang. Tilders, the expressionless tone. 'They got about fifty pages. Out of two hundred, they guess.'

'That's good. Get it printed.'

'The reason it took three to transport the case,' said Tilders, 'is probably the diamonds.'

'Ah.'

Anselm took out his mobile and rang Bowden International. O'Malley was in this time. 'About fifty pages. Out of perhaps two hundred.'

'Good on you. As much as could be expected. I'll send someone.'

This is the moment, Anselm thought. 'We'll need the account settled in full on delivery,' he said. 'Including bonus.'

'What's this? We don't pay our bills?'

Anselm closed his eyes. He'd never wanted anything to do with the money side. 'No offence. Things are a little tight. You know how it goes.'

A pause. 'Give our man the invoice. He'll give you a cheque.' Pause. 'Accept our cheque, *compadre*?'

'With deep and grovelling gratitude.'

Anselm put the phone away, relieved. They were sitting in the traffic. 'Any takers for a drink?' he said. Fat Otto looked at him, eye flick.

'I'm offering to buy you lot a drink,' Anselm said. He knew what the man was thinking. 'Grasp the idea, can you?'

They went to the place on Sierichstrasse. He'd been there alone a few times, sat in the dark corner, fighting his fear of being in public, his paranoia about people, about the knowingness he saw in the eyes of strangers.