



**Manuela Golz**  
**STURMVÖGEL**  
**(Like Birds Tossed by the Storm)**

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She was so very grateful for her life. It was almost a miracle that it had lasted as long as it had.

Emmy sat on her balcony, observing two mockingbirds stealing nesting material from each other. If you keep going like this, neither of you will ever finish. The great tits were so much smarter, flying in and out of the little bird house she had placed on one of her flower boxes. She admired those small animals for the ability to fold in their wings just at the right moment and disappear in the bird house with a popping sound.

The sun already gave off a surprising amount of warmth, and Emmy thought to herself: What if we didn't count our lives in years but in summers? She had been blessed with eighty-six summers.

Not a year passed without friends dying, acquaintances, neighbours, much of them younger than Emmy. If I live much longer, I'll be alone at my own funeral. She felt her strength waning. It was increasingly difficult to walk up the stairs; by the first-floor landing at the latest she was always puffing like a steam engine. The nights were short, her sleep splintering into countless small fragments. More and more, her eyes would fall shut during the day because she was so tired. She would then sleep, only a few minutes, but deeply. She knew that her oldest daughter Hilde was annoyed by these small absences. 'You're doing that on purpose, Mum. Just to demonstrate how much I bore you,' Hilde had said to her the other day.

Emmy lived the way she wanted to. She loved her two-bedroom flat in Berlin-Tegel, which had been her home for over half a century now, and nobody was going to tell her what to do. She listened to the radio, called her friend Marianne in Munich or did crossword puzzles as well as her eyesight permitted. Which might lead to the canine tooth of a boar becoming the canine tooth of a door, and Emmy would wonder about the odd question. But as a rule, she didn't care all that much about getting the correct solution. A SOUL would turn FOUL, a TAN gained some weight to become a TON, and the superpower with three letters turned out to be a UFO. So what. In winter, she would often just not get out of her nightgown but drag her feather duvet to the couch in the living room, get comfortable in front of the wide-open balcony door, and patiently wait for visitors to the bird feeder.

On these lazy days, Emmy would sip her Herva - herb lemonade with a spritz of Mosel wine - eat cheese by the chunk, spit tangerine pips onto the balcony, and in the evening enjoy a bar of chocolate. Piece by piece, slowly sucking on it, not chewing.

Emmy's daughter Hilde did what she could to make her mother feel comfortable. She provided Emmy with vitamin pills, heated slippers, garlic capsules, micronutrients from the health food shop, a cherry pit bag and countless bottles of heart tonic.

'Do you really think the garlic capsules will fend off the Grim Reaper?'

'Mum, garlic capsules don't give off any smell.'

'Oh good, that means they won't prevent him from coming to get me,' Emmy said with a wink.

Hilde did not find this funny at all. 'What do you mean, "coming to get me"? One shouldn't joke about these things.'

'I'm not joking. It's quite normal. Every life ends at some point. So will mine.'

'But Mum, I need you.'

'Hilde, you are over sixty. By now you should be able to tie your own shoelaces,' she had retorted, laughing.

'Could you please stop making fun of me?'

Emmy placed a hand on her arm in a placating gesture. 'Yes, yes, alright, my child,'

A few weeks ago, she had been found unconscious at a bus stop, which had made Hilde even more worried. She immediately asked her husband to pull some strings and had arranged an appointment for Emmy with the famous Professor Mattheis at the Steglitz Clinic.

'Why should I waste my valuable time with a doctor?' Emmy asked.

'Others would be happy for a chance to see Professor Mattheis.'

'I'm not others.'

'Mum, he is a leading expert in his field. He will find out what's wrong with you!'

'That's really nice for him, but you know, don't you: I prefer seeing a doctor only once it's feet first for me.'

'Stop making such a fuss. There are patients who would die for an appointment with Professor Mattheis.'

'Good God, what a sad life that must be, dying to get a doctor's appointment! I could think of better things to do. Like, a cup of coffee with Black Forest Gateau.'

'Can't you do something just for my sake, for once?'

The next morning Emmy had called Marianne and complained about Hilde's tender loving care. Eventually she had given in and had endured all sorts of examinations in order to calm Hilde down. And even though Emmy was not privately insured, Hilde managed to arrange for the final consultation to be with the great man himself.

Today was the day. Emmy went to the clinic at the appointed time. The long corridor outside Professor Mattheis' office, where a nurse had dropped her off, was surprisingly quiet. At one end there was a pane of frosted glass, revealing the

occasional shadow rushing past on the other side, at the other end a lift and next to that, a door of clear glass opening directly into the stairwell. Mounted to the wall and the door were signs, just to make sure even idiots would get it: *Stairs* and again, *Stairs*.

Emmy sat down on one of the few chairs when that door opened. A young man appeared and rushed down the corridor. Although Emmy didn't say anything, he lifted his hand and called out, already with his back to her: 'I'll be with you in a moment!' and disappeared in his room.

There was a painting on the wall next to the doctor's office. It required some imagination, but in the upper half Emmy could make out flying goldfish and blood-red seagulls powered by rockets, shooting towards a blue sun. The colour combination made her retina shudder. Three broad strokes were painted diagonally across the picture. A small card next to it proclaimed the title: *Within me*. Emmy thought: without me.

The door opened, and Emmy was called in. By the time she had got up and closed the door behind her, the young man was already back behind his desk. 'Have a seat,' he told Emmy without even looking at her. She remained standing and scrutinised the man opposite her. He was really remarkably young, stared at a computer monitor and every now and then hit a key. Expressionless, pale green eyes were located in the middle of a slightly asymmetrical baby face.

'Isn't Professor Mattheis in today?' Emmy asked.

'I am Professor Mattheis.'

Emmy gave a short laugh.

'What's so funny about that?' he asked, his eyes still glued to his screen.

'My apologies, but you're different to what I imagined.'

He looked up for the first time. 'What do you mean, *different*?'

'Older. Much older.'

He gave her a blank look. 'I am almost forty, Ms Seidlitz.'

'Exactly. Also, I had expected a professor to be courteous, polite, and showing respect for the elders.' He was about to respond, but Emmy waved her hand to shut him up. 'You know, young man, perhaps I have seen too many films about Ferdinand Sauerbruch, but I for example am used to being greeted with "hello, how are you".'

The doctor's face registered genuine surprise. 'Didn't I say that?'

'No. You just called out, "Ms Seidlitz".'

'I must have been distracted,' Professor Mattheis said in an apologetic tone.

'Then let's hope that you are no longer distracted,' Emmy said, thinking to herself, I can't imagine that somebody so young should be able to understand me. He had the charisma of a field mouse scurrying past you on a path. Emmy sat down on the visitor's chair. Professor Mattheis opened her file to study the findings.

There was a yucca plant on the windowsill, completely dry, leading a dire existence

directly above the radiator. Probably exiled from downstairs in winter. I hope he treats his patients better than this, Emmy thought as she looked at the dead plant, full of empathy. Why did humans put so much trust in doctors anyway? Emmy wouldn't entrust this professor doctor with a cactus.

'So, Ms Seidlitz. It is as we had feared, given the results of the first electrocardiogram...'

'Why "we"?' Emmy asked. 'I had not feared anything. Anyone who has made it past two world wars and is teetering towards their eighty-seventh birthday has lost all sense of fear.' Nice, though, that this stripling claimed to be afraid for her, even if that was hard to believe, given his bad manners.

Professor Mattheis cleared his throat. 'The long-term ECG confirms that you have a pronounced sinus bradycardia. The QRX complex is very narrow, with a frequency of only approximately forty so that the AV node has to compensate. There are also some premature supraventricular contractions. Do you have dizzy spells or difficulty breathing sometimes?'

'Yes to both,' said Emmy, who hadn't understood a word apart from 'dizzy' and 'difficulty breathing.'

'This indicates the need for a pacemaker.'

'A what?'

'A pacemaker. For your heart.' Professor Mattheis shuffled the loose bits of paper back into her file. Then he opened a large diary, leafed forwards and back again and finally tapped a date with his index finger. 'Here. An appointment in two weeks. Inpatient treatment, three days,' he said.

My goodness, he is incapable of talking in complete sentences, Emmy thought. 'So what do I actually have?' she asked impatiently.

'As I said, you have a pronounced sinus bradycardia,' Professor Mattheis repeated and produced a pen from the pocket of his coat in order to note down the appointment.

'Good God, how am I supposed to know what a sinus-whatever is?' Her tone was sharp.

Professor Mattheis looked up from his papers, irritated. 'I thought the colleague who did the long-term ECG explained that to you.'

'No, he did not. He was just as monosyllabic as you. That seems to be a prerequisite to be hired at this clinic: talk as little as possible, least of all with the patients.'

Mattheis shook his head. 'Please, Ms Seidlitz, you are exaggerating.' He opened Emmy's file again, extracted the ECG strip and used his expensive ballpoint to trace a jagged line. 'Your heart is beating too slowly - you can see that here. That's as if your car was running only on two pistons instead of six,' he explained.

'Well, I've been around for a while and done my share of driving, to stay within the imagery. Isn't it normal that the engine becomes weaker?'

He showed the hint of a smile. 'True. But we can do something to address that. Give you a pacemaker. Whenever the heart slows down, it gives an impulse, and it returns to beating the way it should.'

Emmy smiled. 'Young man, whatever should I die of if my heart isn't allowed to stop? I am almost eighty-seven and have had a good life. With ups and downs, like everyone else, but overall a really good one. I have the feeling I have reached the end of a long journey. What else would I want?'

Mattheis tilted his head and furrowed his brow. 'Are you not well? Overall, you seem to be quite fit and mentally active. Are you tired of life?'

'If you put it like that: yes. It's not that I want to die, but I am fairly sure that is a biological necessity. It's in the nature of things. But spring is not a good time to die.'

'Is that so. What season would be better?'

'Winter. The nights are long and dark. You don't lose so much of the day. You know what I mean?'

Professor Mattheis studied Emmy thoughtfully.

'What? Have I suddenly grown a third eye, or why are you looking at me like that?'

'You would like to die in winter?'

Emmy gave a small shrug. 'Sure, why not?'

The doctor looked at her for a long moment.

'Say, are you trying to read my mind? Have you given up speaking altogether?'

'No, no, Ms Seidlitz. I am just wondering whether I should introduce you to another expert.'

'A child prodigy like yourself?' She smiled.

'No. This colleague is getting ready for retirement. He is very experienced.'

'Is he now. And who might he be?'

'Professor Gotthilf von Sack.'

Emmy laughed out loud. 'His name is Gotthilf von Sack? You're making that up, aren't you?'

The doctor's young face was inscrutable. 'No. Mr von Sack is a psychiatrist,' he explained.

Emmy grinned. 'That's what you think of me - I need a shrink? Too funny. I might die right here, suffocating with suppressed laughter.'

'Dr von Sack will listen to you.'

'Right. Listening is not your forte. You're more the hands-on type, surgery and so forth.'

Mattheis raised his hands in a soothing gesture. 'Please, Ms Seidlitz, this is a routine procedure. We give you a pacemaker and you can reach one hundred years.'

'Why on earth? What should the next thirteen years offer that I have not yet experienced?'

'Don't you want to see your grandchildren grow up?' Mattheis asked.

'They are almost as old as you.'

The doctor frowned. 'And your great-grandchildren?'

'Don't have any.'

Professor Mattheis made one last attempt. 'Ms Seidlitz, a pacemaker won't bother you. You won't even feel it. But it will make your heart beat normally again. It would be so easy to save you.'

Emmy looked at him questioningly. 'Save me? From what?'

'From death,' Mattheis said. Emmy laughed again. This professor was obviously too big for his boots. A madman dressed up as a doctor. He wanted to save her from death. Eternal life, no thank you.

'Other patients would be pleased to get this kind of news from me,' Professor Mattheis said, an almost pleading note in his voice.

Emmy smiled. 'Then take these news to someone else.' She got up.

The doctor sighed. 'I'm just trying to help you, Ms Seidlitz.'

'I believe you. But who says I have to accept your help?'

Emmy walked to the door, pressed down the handle and turned once more. 'Help your plants, professor, they need it more than I.' And with that, she left the room.

## 2

December 1911

Emmy remembered the old island doctor from her childhood well. He smelled of camphor and put on a strict demeanour but was actually gentle and wise. Like all children, Emmy was afraid of the wooden spatula in her mouth, fearing she would have to throw up. Countless throats, cherry-red from inflammation, retched their *aaahs* at the good doctor. He knew the people, their worries and cares. He splinted broken legs and recommended covering wounds with cloth soaked in herbal tinctures. He suggested people eat more fruit and vegetables, counselled against too much pickled cabbage and forbid the sailors to imbibe any rum before unloading the ships. He told people to put linen cloth on the straw beds and not to let the smoke from the kitchen stove invade the entire house. He handed out sage pastils and fennel tea. But the old doctor's most important remedy was listening, consoling and doling out loving reproaches. Beyond that, he tried to interfere as little as possible with natural healing processes. He also treated the injuries men suffered from fights over a woman. He himself had neither wife nor children, seeing that he was on the road day and night, either by foot or on his cart, to take care of his patients and to lead them onto the straight and narrow. The island doctor was always on duty. Except for Christmas Eve. That's when he sat in his practice, all by himself, drank

rum and ate his way through the mountains of sugar biscuits and brown cake he had received as presents. Oh, how the world had changed.

Emmy's family had lived on the small island in the North Sea ever since anyone could remember. Her father had inherited the farm; he owned cattle and some land, and they didn't have to go hungry. But they could hardly ever afford anything that went beyond the bare necessities. Christmas was such a rare exception, and the first celebration she could remember was in 1911. She was four years old then, and for the first time in her life she was allowed to accompany her father down to the harbour. The harbour - for children that was a place shrouded in legend, where everything seemed possible and where a girl like Emmy would not normally be admitted. But exceptions were made on exceptional days, and Christmas Eve was such a day. Emmy recalled exactly how excited she'd felt early in the morning.

'Wrap up warm, my girl,' her father had said, a pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth. A real islander never left the house without his pipe.

When they set out, there was a half-moon in the sky, announcing a neap tide with a minimal tidal range. The walk was fun because the ditches alongside the polders were frozen solid. Her father had greased a pair of old wooden clogs, which Emmy used to skate along the ice for long stretches. That way she didn't feel cold when, after a good hour, they reached the dyke in front of the harbour and it started to snow. Emmy clambered up the dyke's crown and, upon seeing a steamboat, stopped dead in her tracks.

'That thing is almost as high as our house,' she said, awe-struck.

'That thing is a boat,' said Andries, who like her had stopped.

'But where are the sails?' Emmy asked, studying the stranger on the pier. The ships depicted on the blue tiles back home in the *Pesel*, the front room, all had large white sails.

'The steam ships don't have sails any more,' her father explained. Like so many of the men on the island, Andries went out whale-hunting on massive three-mast ships and was not yet convinced that these steam-powered boats were a good idea. He was all the more surprised to hear that by now they even managed to cross the big pond, all the way to America.

Andries and Emmy walked down to the wooden pier. But Emmy was not allowed to go on board. A woman on board a ship, no matter what age, that was something the sailors would never allow - not even at Christmas.

'Wait here,' Andries said. He walked up the broad gangway, which was fastened with hawsers, to talk to the harbourmaster, who was in the process of distributing the loading instructions. The blue Peter had already been hoisted, signalling to everyone far and wide that the ship would soon cast off. A group of coal heavers came towards Andries, their hands and faces glistening black. They had been taking tons of coal from the ship's windowless bunkers to the boiler room.

After a while Andries returned to his daughter, carrying a small wooden box on his shoulder and supporting it with one hand. In the other hand, he carried a net and in that, a block of ash wood - the Yule log.

'Off we go,' Andries said and led the way with big strides. But Emmy couldn't tear herself away from the spectacle in the harbour. One wheelbarrow after another was being pushed across the gangway, and freight was lifted by rope winches. The boat belched steam in mighty puffs, voices flew back and forth across the pier. Carts stood ready to load the goods, and a wooden lifting crane was turning, operated by an unseen hand. Moored on the other side of the harbour was a shallow two-masted ship, the so-called smack, waiting to take the sailors back to Amsterdam in spring at the latest, from where they would set out on the Great Voyage.

'Emmy! Come on!' her father called. She ran after him. As she reached the bend leading to the harbour gate, the coal heavers were pushing a black, four-wheeled monster past them, heading for the mooring space. A man sat inside the steel creature, turning a wheel.

Emmy's eyes grew huge. 'What is that?' she asked.

'An automobile.'

'An automobile,' Emmy repeated quietly, watching the men. She couldn't make heads or tails of it. 'What can it do?'

'It can drive. On its own,' Andries said.

'On its own?' Emmy asked in disbelief. 'But how does it know where to go?'

Her father smiled. 'The automobile doesn't know that. But hopefully the man sitting inside does. He turns the steering wheel, and then the tyres get pointed in the direction they driver wants to go.'

Surely, he was spinning yarn again. After all, her father kept coming up with stories. Still, Emmy began to think about how one could move something in the right direction without reins or harness.

She followed her father. Andries lifted his daughter across a fence on the polder they had come on, and they walked side by side in silence. Only when their farm came into view, Emmy asked, 'What does one need an automobile for?'

'I don't know either what it's supposed to be good for,' her father growled. 'They brought this thing to our island last year, but it doesn't turn out to be useful for anything. So they're taking it back to the mainland. I don't know anyone who needs an automobile. It can't even pull a plough! It's far too heavy to move across the marshes. It sinks into the ground even in dried-out polders. It can't cross ditches, can't take a large load of peat or transport a sick animal - the loading hatches are far too small for all of that. It's another new-fangled invention that won't last.' Andries stopped himself. He'd been wrong before, about steamboats. He cleared his throat. 'Perhaps it's useful in the city. But surely not around here.'

Emmy nodded, convinced that she'd seen an automobile for the first and last time in her life.

Andries was content. Besides the blessed Yule log, he'd managed to buy a bag of sugar, some flour and prunes from the harbourmaster. To celebrate the day, Emmy's mother Janne - like all the other mothers - would clandestinely place a saucer with brown cake on the windowsill and claim that Baby Jesus had brought it. It was a highlight for the children when that cake contained a prune, sweet and soft. Emmy's little sister Rieke couldn't get enough of that.

Emmy loved, above all, the *Kenkenboom*, the wooden structure with evergreen ivy, which represented the hope that the coming spring would be a good one. She only learned much later that the *Kenkenboom* was simply a substitute for a real fir tree, which did not exist on the island.

That evening they all sat together for coffee and sugar biscuits. To be on the safe side, they also put a small bowl of sweet gruel in the attic for the house elf, just in case it still existed. They did not go to church - there was no Christmas Eve mass on the island. Instead, Emmy's father lit the Yule log, which remained in the fireplace until the Twelfth Day of Christmas. After that, its ash was scattered on the fields. That, too, was done to invite good luck and to put Freya, the goddess of love and fertility, in a good mood. It seemed to work: on the island, a woman bore on average six children. Andries and Janne had two, with a third on the way. A small piece of the Yule log was saved so as to light the new one next year, and so on, year after year.

The most important on Christmas Eve was for everything to calm down when dusk descended. Once darkness fully enveloped house, fields and sea, people only spoke in whispers. And at some point, when calm had turned to complete silence and this special silence asked for everyone to pause, they lit the candles on the *Kenkenboom* and the father whispered, '*Nü as at halig.*' Now it is holy. They all watched reverently as the candles burned, feeling as if in this hour, all wounds could be healed.

3

April 1994

Hilde pressed the first speed-dial button on her phone. This was where she'd saved Emmy's number, not her husband's office or that of her oldest son, no, this top-priority position belonged to her mother. She was her problem child now, who else was taking care of her? Her own siblings were always oh so busy and pretended it was only natural that she, the oldest, assumed this role. Otto often thought of his mother but rarely had the time to visit her because he was always busy with God knows what, and Tessa did visit regularly but never lifted a finger to help in the house.

Otto and Tessa seemed to think that just because Hilde had no job, she had the time to take care of everything. Or perhaps it had been a mistake to write

phrases such as 'Honouring mother and father is a duty to be remembered for all your life' into autograph books.

Emmy did not answer. Where on earth was she? Her appointment with Professor Mattheis had been in the morning; she should have been home long ago. Hilde wanted to know every little detail about her mother's day, what she was doing, how she was sleeping, what she ate and whether she drank enough. She had suggested Emmy call her every morning and evening, to which Emmy had responded: 'That's quite enough. I am not your child; I am your mother.'

Finally, the answering machine came on. 'I'm not here. Leave a message if you want. But only if it's a good one.'

'Hi Mum, it's me, Hilde. How are you doing? What did Professor Mattheis say? Did he take blood? Did he say anything about medication? Please call me back. Love you.'

Hilde hung up and went to the living room, where she straightened the sofa cushions and karate-chopped each one. Then she took a flower vase to the kitchen to empty it. Günter had sent her an Interflora bouquet, a boring combination of carnations, freesias and stinking hyacinths. The enclosed folding card had said, 'All the best, my darling, your Günni.' She had been hoping until the last moment that her husband would finish his business trip to New York a few days early and come home for their fortieth wedding anniversary, which was also her sixty-first birthday. But he hadn't come. For Günter, these dates had come out of the blue.

'What, it's forty years already?' he had asked on the phone. 'Unbelievable how time flies. Sweetheart, we will celebrate when I get back!'

Hilde folded the bouquet over and stuffed it into the bin. Well, at least these days he remembered to send real flowers. It used to be that she had found a 20 Deutschmark note stuck to the mirror cupboard upon which he had written, using the kids' crayons: '*For flowers, my Pip.*' It had always taken her half a bottle of Windolene to get the mirror clean again.

The phone rang. That'll be mother, she thought and hurried to pick up. 'Hello? Mum?'

'Indeed. Dutifully reporting that everything is okay.' Emmy's voice sounded amused.

'So they didn't find anything?'

'No, the professor said that everything is okay and that I can look forward to many more years.'

'That means he's not going to do anything? No medication?'

'No medication.'

Her mother couldn't see it, but still Hilde shook her head, displeased. 'But why did you faint then?'

'Seems that was just a moment of being unwell, tiredness. Nothing anyone would die of,' Emmy said.

'But still. I'm worried, after all...'

'No, my Big One. Don't worry, all is good,' Emmy interrupted her before she could go on. 'You know, ill weeds grow apace. Speaking of weeds - is Günter back yet?'

Hilde only managed a weary smile at her mother's joke. Emmy had never thought much of Günter, but what was she supposed to do? She was still happy with him, even after forty years. Sometimes more, sometimes less. He gave her what she had been looking for: a nice home, a secure life and two sons who had turned out well. And over the years, Günter had shown her the world. Paris, Rome, Bangkok, Australia, the Caribbean and not to forget, Tokyo!

But Emmy thought it had been fundamentally wrong that Hilde had, early on, hitched her fortunes to a man. 'These days, that's not necessary any more. You can have children later. First go and learn something you enjoy, study if you like. You have the freedom to decide against the position of an unpaid housekeeper,' she had said with a wink.

But Hilde did not mind a traditional distribution of roles. 'I enjoy keeping house, and I like to cook.'

'In a marriage like that you will never really be free, my child,' Emmy had warned her daughter.

But Hilde had simply replied, 'If everyone fills the role meant for them, they both end up happy. Also, I want to be able to afford nice things. How is that supposed to work without having a husband?' Hilde certainly did not want to live like her mother, in two small rooms in Berlin-Tegel, on a meagre salary bolstered by a tiny widow's pension. She wanted to be someone, wanted to feel important and stand next to a man who wielded influence. She was the first girl in her family with a high school diploma, that was enough for her; it was an achievement no one could take from her.

Emmy had been incredibly proud of her daughter and had tried to get her to take up a professional education. But Hilde's plan stood firm. 'I am going to get married and have children. I don't need an education for that. Nature has given us the capacity to care and the unconditional love a mother needs,' she had crowed. And anyway, she'd been convinced that behind every strong man there stood a strong woman, and she wanted to be that strong woman. And so it came about that on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Hilde married the oldest son of the builder's merchant Eduard Heinke.

What did her mother know? It was a sensational match! Günter was handsome, charming and witty and worshipped the ground she walked on. Hilde recalled how jealousy had almost killed her girlfriends when Günter had given her permission to get her driver's licence and even to drive around in his sky-blue VW Beetle. It had felt so easy, so free. Freer than a life as a spinster could ever have been. The boys were born, and as a full-time mother she could focus entirely on their upbringing, she was always there for them and paved the ground for a good start to life. Both of them were successful businessmen living abroad. Hilde and her

husband were still having sex, she had a gold credit card to allow her to shop for her heart's delight. Staff in the delicatessen department at the famous *KaDeWe*, Berlin's equivalent to Harrod's, greeted her by name, and the wine dealer cried tears of joy whenever he saw Hilde even just approaching his shop. She had almost made it. She was happy and hoped that her father-in-law would not end up blowing all of their inheritance at the luxury residency for seniors in Grunewald. And then the land registry would show *their* names at first position for the apartment in the elite Westend. This life, precisely, was her dream. What was wrong with that?

'No, Günter is still in New York, Mum.'

'Hilde, say, have you been in my cellar?' Emmy suddenly changed the subject.

Hilde swallowed. Yes, she had been in the cellar. Without giving her mother advance notice. She didn't say anything.

'Hilde?'

She racked her brain for an answer. She had only wanted to get a bit of an overview so that, in case the worst happened, she and her siblings would not be taken completely by surprise. After all, her mother's cellar had an upper and a lower part and was the perfect place to amass vast quantities of useless stuff. Hilde knew of some old people where clearing out the cellar had taken longer than clearing out the flat. So what should she tell her mother? We're doing some tidying up now so that there's less to do when you die?

'Hello? Child, are you still there?'

'Yes.' Hilde cleared her throat. 'I... I was looking for the garden benches.'

'The garden benches?' Emmy repeated, surprised. 'What do you want with those? And in any case, they're in the upper cellar, you can't miss them. But I have the impression that someone has gone all the way down. The trapdoor to the lower cellar was cleared of stuff.'

'Mum, why are you still going down there anyway? What if you fall and break...'

'Oh fiddlesticks!' Emmy interrupted her. 'Don't change the subject. What were you doing in my cellar?'

Hilde bit her lip. She knew that her mother couldn't stand other people meddling with her affairs. 'It is possible that I lifted the trapdoor a bit. Just since I was already down there,' she said, subdued.

'I don't see what right you have to check my cellar,' Emmy reprimanded her sharply. 'I am old, but I am not senile. If you're looking for something, ask me first, do you hear?'

Her mother's anger was audible. Could she still dare mention the surprising find she'd made?

'Say, Mum...'

'Wait, I'm not finished. I do not want you to go through my things, no matter where they are. Do you understand?'

'I did not go through your things! And even if - nobody would notice. It's a complete mess down there.' Hilde's protest sounded weak.

That's because it's a cellar, not a living room, Emmy thought and said nothing.

Hilde wondered: what if her mother had forgotten about the files down there? On a shelf she had seen a few files and randomly picked one that said 'Potsdam'. She had opened it and at first thought that what she saw was part of a dress pattern. But by now she'd realised that it was part of a cadastral map. She'd also found an excerpt from a land registry and a yellowing sales agreement. What was this doing down here? What did these documents mean?

'Mum, if it's all useless stuff, then we, I mean, Tessa, Otto and I might as well clear out some of it...'

'There will be no clearing out of anything, and certainly not without me!'

'No, of course not, you'll join us,' Hilde conceded. 'Perhaps we can all get together to tidy up. Otto knows his way around... junk.'

'Okay,' Emmy growled. 'I'll think about it. It's true, quite a lot has accumulated over the years. Isn't there also this old chest of drawers?'

'I think so, Mum. I didn't look all that closely.'

Emmy's anger seemed to evaporate, and Hilde exhaled in relief. What if her mother really thought that everything piling up down there was junk? If she didn't know anything about the files, which might hide a true treasure? Emmy had had such rudimentary schooling; she didn't have the intellectual capacity to understand such complex things. Someone had to shed a light on all this.