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**The Letter**

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240 pages

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## **Chapter 1**

It was May 26, when I received the letter. It was one of those days that couldn't seem to decide if it wanted to give the sun a chance or not. It was the day my life was turned upside down.

The letter arrived in one of those ordinary, stark white envelopes that you can buy in a box of twenty at any post office. A handwritten address was scrawled across it, which normally wouldn't have drawn my attention. However, this time it did, because it was the wrong one. The letter was addressed to:

Marie Kluge  
15 Rue Visconti  
75006 Paris, France

I laughed. Was this some kind of joke? I had never lived in Paris and could only conjure up a few foggy memories of the city, which I had once visited as a child with my parents. Maybe the letter wasn't meant for me? My name wasn't all that uncommon, so perhaps I had a Doppelgänger out there, who just happened to have moved to France. But then how did the post office have my address in Hamburg? I flipped the envelope over. It had been sent by Christine Hausmann. Christine Hausmann, hmm.

It took me a moment to recall an old school friend of mine, whom I hadn't seen for at least fifteen years. Could it be her? According to the return address, she was now living in Berlin. The stamp showed a picture of the Berlin Gendarmenmarkt, but the cancellation stamp was illegible.

Still a little amused, I walked into the kitchen. Contrary to my customary practice, I opened the letter neatly with a knife, not with my fingers. I pulled out a sheet of white stationery with a simple border running around its edges. I unfolded it and started to read. And with each line, each sentence, and each word that I read, I began to imperceptibly move away from a life that I had found as normal until now. The letter read as follows:

*Dear Marie,*

*It has been a long time since we were last in touch. But you know how it goes: job, family, the countless small and large responsibilities, and suddenly whoops! An entire six months have slipped by. How are you and Victor doing? Have you both recovered from the incident? I admire your strength. During that difficult time, I can't count how many times my thoughts turned to us as kids, playing behind the old farmstead. Can you still remember where we used to hide? I bet our chalk drawings are still back there on the wall. Do you think the farmer is still around?*

*Good grief, I didn't mean to turn so nostalgic. I sometimes have a feeling that in your mid-thirties, the clocks start running backwards. Above all, when you have children. David and Amelie are worth their weight in gold. Amelie started walking a few months back, and David is such a clever little boy that we're thinking about*



*starting him in school this year. No idea where he gets that from! How are you doing in Paris? What a stunning city! How are the exhibits going? We need to get together soon.*

*Come to Berlin - we'd love to have you!*

*Hugs,  
Christine*

*P.S. I'm supposed to tell you hello for Yvonne. I happened to run into her, when I was visiting my parents.*

My mouth was dry. I swallowed. This wasn't funny anymore. Everything in the letter was strangely familiar and yet completely off. Christine and I had been friends when we were little, and we had gone to school together. But after that, we had parted ways and not stayed in touch. There was only one thing I knew for certain: She didn't live in Berlin, but was still in our hometown in Lower Saxony. My mother had told me that she had gotten married and had a little boy. I knew nothing about a girl. What did she mean by "incident" and "difficult time"? What exhibits in Paris? I worked as a freelance journalist in Hamburg. And who the hell was Victor? Was she possibly playing some kind of sick joke on me? On the other hand, why would she? But the worst part of it all - what sent a chill down my spine - was that Yvonne had been dead for the past three years. She had been killed in a car accident. Back at the time, I had thought about going to the funeral. What was going on here?

I heard the apartment door close, and Johanna stepped into the kitchen. This was the woman I had been in love with for the past two years and with whom I had been living for a year. Now she was standing there, staring at me in astonishment.

"Why do you look like that? You're all pale. Do you feel sick?"

I don't know why I didn't tell her about the letter. Something here was so off that I simply didn't feel up to it. More than that: I was afraid. I mumbled something about circulation and low blood sugar, and Johanna left it at that, though she did throw a skeptical sideways glance at the envelope I was still holding. In her usual cheerful manner, she chattered away, talking about her new building project and the latest gossip at the agency.

Johanna was an architect. I had met her two years ago during an interview, which focused on the topic of "Coming Out in the Workplace." I had been given the task of doing the research for this piece for a small daily newspaper. This actually wasn't your typical content for a predominantly conservative readership, but it fit into the current political debate. Except for an innocent crush during adolescence, homosexuality hadn't been a topic of personal interest. I had just separated from my previous boyfriend, Stefan, and besides all the pangs of separation, I was enjoying my newly won freedom. Johanna took that from me in the span of three sentences: "I love women. I love the way they talk, the way they smell, the way they feel. Have you ever kissed a woman?" She had dimples and a crooked incisor. That evening was my first time.

I spent the rest of the day deeply unsettled. Johanna noticed, but she didn't say anything. That was her way: to wait and keep the peace until you finally brought up the problem. Whenever I was upset at her, this would make me furious, but now I was actually grateful. I simply didn't know what I was supposed to do. Tear up the letter and file it under the "you don't have to be able to explain everything" category? Or check it out? The thought of that gave me the creeps. By evening, I decided to call my mother.

"Sweetheart, how are you doing?" she greeted me. She'll probably still call me this twenty years from now. It helped to hear her familiar voice. I tried to chat like everything was normal - about work, weekend plans, the weather. "What's wrong?" she asked abruptly.

I was a bad actress. Or simply too upset. I swallowed and asked if she had recently heard anything from Christine.

“You mean your old school friend, Christine? We occasionally run into each other. She sometimes has her little boy with her. By now, he’s got to be - let me think - about five. Why?”

“Do you know if she has another child. Maybe a daughter?”

“No, I’m sure I would have heard about that. How’d you get that idea?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I answered truthfully. “Have you ever talked about me?” I added.

“Well, you know how it is,” she replied. “You say hello, chat a bit about something like the weather, and then keep going. Christine asks about you from time to time. I told her that you’re working in Hamburg as a journalist. She was happy about that.”

The chat with my mother didn’t reveal anything new, nothing that indicated why Christine would write me such a letter. It then occurred to me that the two of us were friends on Facebook, and I decided to take a look through her profile. After spending half an hour going through baby photos and pointless comments, I was still in the dark. There were numerous posts about little David, but nothing about a daughter named Amelie appeared anywhere. Only one thing puzzled me: Almost exactly two years ago, the veritable barrage of posts broke off for about two or three months. During this time, she had posted just one thing, a song, on her profile: La valse d’Amélie. Without explanation. I stared at the screen, baffled, while I listened to the melancholy piano composition. I suddenly jumped as I felt a hand on my shoulder. Johanna was standing behind me. She must have been there for a while, although I hadn’t noticed her. She studied me closely. “Do you now want to tell me what’s going on?”

After a brief hesitation, I pulled out the letter, which I had hidden in my desk drawer. I handed it to her, without a word. She glanced at me briefly, opened the letter, and began to read. She read it a second time and flipped the envelope over to the side with the address:

Marie Kluge  
15 Rue Visconti  
75006 Paris, France

By this point, I knew it by heart.

“What does this mean?” she asked.

“If I knew,” I replied, “I wouldn’t be sitting here like this.”

“Who is Christine?”

“An old school friend, whom I haven’t heard from in ages. I only know one thing for sure: She doesn’t live in Berlin or have a daughter. She lives in the same town as my parents. Mama runs into her from time to time. I have no idea why she would send me something like this. Besides that” - I swallowed - “Besides that, the Yvonne mentioned here died three years ago in a car accident.”

Johanna sat down beside me and was quiet for a few minutes, as she examined the letter from all sides. She then put her arm around my shoulders and gazed at me: “Someone must be playing a dumb joke. An unbelievably tasteless, idiotic joke.”

“And the Paris address? The hiding place and all of those childhood secrets that only Christine and I could know about?” I murmured.

“You can always find out stuff. And you can forge a letter like this. Who’s to say the mail carrier actually delivered it? Maybe someone forged the postage mark and simply left it in the mailbox.” She fell silent and looked at me searchingly: “The question is who and why?”

## Chapter 2

Johanna advised me to not place too much importance on the incident, but this was hard for me. For some reason, the letter with its uncanny overtones really bothered me.

“Just call her!”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. How should I explain it to her?”

“If she’s involved, she’ll know what you’re talking about.”

“And then? Do you think she’s gone to all the trouble with this letter just to explain everything calmly to to me on the phone?”

“Maybe all she wants is your attention.”

“But why? She could have achieved this more easily. Besides that, I just can’t imagine that she had something to do with this.”

“I don’t know either, darling. Maybe you should go see her and get to the bottom of it.”

And that is exactly what I did.

My parents were rather surprised when I simply showed up at their house. I normally only come for a visit a couple of times a year, for special occasions. However, they were happy to see me anyway. “It’s so nice to see you, sweetheart.” My mother hugged me, while my father smiled from his spot in the doorway. I felt a twinge of guilt that I was actually only here for the one reason. You should visit your parents more often, just because.

“Come on in,” my father urged. “The coffee’s brewing. Did you have a good drive?”

I nodded. It was all so very familiar. The scent of freshly laundered sheets, the plush couch upholstery, the old photographs hanging on the wall. Although I know them inside and out, I take the time to look at them whenever I’m back here. And soon, I’m bathing blissfully in memories from my childhood and family vacations.

“How are things going in Hamburg?” my father asked, once we were comfortably sipping our coffee.

“Great. There’s nothing really new going on. Johanna is swamped with work again. Her agency is bidding on a new building project.”

“I bet she is,” my mother responded, concernedly. “She didn’t pick the easiest profession out there. I keep hearing about how architects have to fight for jobs. I hope it isn’t too much for Johanna.”

“No, I don’t think so. She enjoys it. And they’ve been successful as an agency. It’s just that there are times when things get more stressful.”

“And what about you?” my father inquired.

“So far, so good. I have enough gigs for the time being. There aren’t any huge stories right now, but it’s never boring. “

“I keep waiting to hear that you’ve uncovered some major scandal. A political debacle or corrupt politicians. That would be quite something.” My father grinned.

I had to laugh. “Oh, Papa, you watch too many crime shows. I spend most of my time writing for the regional media. There aren’t that many spectacular stories out there.”

“Pity. But you probably wouldn’t be allowed to tell us, even if you were working on a shady story. We’d have to wait to read about it in the newspaper.” My father winked at me.

He had used the word “shady.” One of those expressions that nobody besides him really used. But in this instance, he hit the bull’s eye: Yes, I was working on a relatively shady matter. Perhaps I was even deeply

entangled in it.

Before my drive out here, I had contacted Christine via Facebook to tell her that I would love to come by for a visit. Her response was surprised, but also cheerful: “Hi, Marie, it’s great to hear from you. Of course, come on by! I am on vacation right now, so just drop by whenever you like.” It had sounded relatively normal, but this made it all the more clear that I needed to talk to her in person.

So, I set off late morning the next day to go see her. I felt nervous as I pressed the doorbell. It took a few minutes before the door opened. Two dark brown eyes at about the height of my belly button were focused on me. This had to be David. I relaxed a little and smiled. “Hello, you have to be David.”

Without a word, he opened the door wider for me, and in the background, I could hear Christine’s voice:

“Hello, Marie, come in! It’s so nice to have you here!” She walked up to me, her arms extended.

That was Christine, as warm, loud and cheerful as ever. And yet I thought: “My God, she looks old.”

Fine silver strands were sprinkled throughout her hair, and the skin around her eyes was lightly creased. But above all, it was the look in her eyes that made this impression on me: There was nothing left of her carefree demeanor. I thought about the freckled girl who had beaten the boys in our class at arm wrestling, my friend from high school who shaved off her long curls whenever the whim struck her, the high school graduate who fell hopelessly in love with a student teacher at our school. Tim. She married him later, too. Everything seemed so close, and yet fifteen years had passed since then.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” I lied. Why did I do that? She laughed.

“You have.” She grinned at me. And there it was again, the old familiarity.

Her house was bright, spacious and nicely furnished. A comfortable couch in front of a large picture window with a view of the garden was calling my name. I took a seat, while David eyed me watchfully from a safe distance. Clattering around in the kitchen, Christine provided a loud, running commentary to bring me up to date on the most important highlights of the past fifteen years. She then joined me, and over the next two hours, we forgot about time and space. One anecdote followed the next, and we laughed as if only a couple of weeks had passed since the last time we had gotten together.

“And everything between you and Johanna is going well?” she asked eventually.

“Absolutely. We’ve been living together for the past year, and we’re still talking to each other.” I winked at her.

“I never would have thought you’d end up falling in love with a woman. But why not?”

“Yeah, why not? It’s just the way it happened. Fortunately.”

Christine sighed dramatically. “I’m probably the only one around who has stayed with the same man since she was eighteen.”

“Do you sometimes risk looking around?”

“Honestly, no.” Christine grinned. “Once you’re a mommy, your priorities change. And time has been good to Tim. Let’s just say, he puts forth the effort.” We laughed.

A quiet voice suddenly interrupted us. David had managed to creep up behind us without our noticing.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem that he had caught much of our conversation. “Mama,” he asked with a serious look on his face, “how do the birds know which way to fly when they go south for the winter?” He had just been outside, playing in the garden.

“They follow their instinct,” Christine answered.

“What is instinct?” her son replied.

Christine patiently tousled his hair. “Sweetheart, we’ll look it up together later online, okay? Right now, I’m talking with my old friend Marie.”

David shot me a quick glance and retreated without another word to the garden. Christine sighed and gave me an expressive look. "He is such a clever little boy. No idea where he gets that from."

I gave a start. These were the exact same words that were in the letter, and with this blow, I was reminded of the reason for this visit. I swallowed and asked: "Are you planning to enroll him in school early?"

"Yes, this year already," she replied, laughing. "He has only just turned five, but you've heard for yourself the kinds of questions he asks. And these were some of the more harmless one."

I cleared my throat and nervously fumbled in my pocket. "Christine, I need to ask you something... There's another reason why I'm here today."

"Aha," she commented curiously. "Don't keep me in suspense! Tell me."

With clammy fingers, I pulled out the letter and handed it to her. "Please don't be shocked. I'm not sure what to make of it either."

Christine studied the envelope and read the address on it. She looked up at me in astonishment:

"Somebody's writing looks just like mine... and an address for you in Paris?" She started laughing, but broke off when she caught sight of my serious expression. She pulled the stationery from the envelope, unfolded it, and began to read. The look on her face changed abruptly. She grew terribly pale and turned to me, furious: "What's this?"

She began to cry.

If I had hoped to get some kind of logical clarification from this visit, Christine's emotional reaction destroyed that expectation. It was instantly clear to me that this was the first time she had held the letter in her hands. Even worse: It obviously touched her deeply. She had dropped her head into her hands and was sobbing.

I awkwardly patted her on the back, trying to calm her down: "I'm sorry, Christine. I had no idea that this letter would upset you so much. I have no idea how to explain it. It suddenly turned up in my mailbox in Hamburg two weeks ago. I had hoped that perhaps you had an explanation for it, what it meant... or who might have written something like this."

She slowly lifted her eyes. Her cheerfulness had given way to a deep sadness that alarmed me. She stared past me into space and began to explain in a subdued voice.

"Tim and I wanted a second child. At first, it didn't seem like it was going to work out, and we had almost made our peace with the fact that David was going to be an only child. Around this time, we made plans to move to a bigger city. Tim was interested in a teaching job he had found in Berlin, and I wanted to go back to college. And then suddenly I was pregnant again. Tim and I were ecstatic, but we decided not to tell anyone until the end of the first trimester. Shortly after that, I had a miscarriage. Nobody knew about what happened. Not even the name we were going to give our little one, if it had been a girl: Amelie."

I gulped.

"Please go now," she said, standing up.

"Christine," I said, "I'm just as shocked as you are. And I swear that I had nothing to do with this. Please think about who might have known something. Did you talk to anybody about this?"

"No, definitely not," she replied. "And I don't want anything to do with this. You need to understand that I have closed the door on this chapter once and for all. Please go now." Wiping the tears from her eyes, her face was rigid and closed.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, as I picked up my bag and walked to the door, weak in the knees. Christine didn't follow me.

Right before I shut the front door behind me, I noticed a shadow next to me. David must have followed me, silently. He studied me with the big eyes of a five-year-old and said in a steady voice: "Amelie is doing well."

She doesn't want Mama to cry." He then pushed the door shut. I stared at the dark wood. My head began to throb, as a sharp pain pierced my temples.

## *Chapter 3*

"And what if, she was pretending all along?" I was sitting back in our kitchen in Hamburg, having just told Johanna everything. She continued: "To be honest, it's usually the people you least suspect. How many times have we heard about nondescript people and dutiful taxpayers who spent years hiding some really gruesome crime? Or leading a double life?"

I had propped my head up on my hands. "I simply can't imagine that," I commented quietly. "Christine locking her child in the cellar or hiding body parts in the flower boxes? Unthinkable. And there are still a thousand questions: What about the address in Paris? And who in the world is Victor? A cry for help wouldn't look like this."

"You haven't seen her in fifteen years," Johanna countered. "How would you know if she's nuts or not? Or what about her weird guy. I mean really: What kind of teacher has a fling with a student and ends up as part of such a dumb cliché? Maybe the little boy isn't actually all that gifted, just really troubled."

As awful as these possibilities seemed, I would have gladly believed in them, since they offered at least a halfway reasonable explanation for everything. But I couldn't accept them. Johanna sat down beside me, as she placed her arm around my shoulders. "Or is there somebody out there who wants to put one over on the two of you?"

"I've wondered about that," I mumbled. "But I have no idea who that would be. I don't have any unfinished business with anyone."

"Maybe you don't know that you do," she grinned. "Who knows how many broken hearts and tears have paved your way?"

I smiled wanly. Johanna's attempts at cheering me up weren't doing much good. She pulled me onto her lap and kissed me.

"Hey, try to forget the whole thing. Don't help whoever is behind this reach his goal. Life is much too beautiful to spoil it with gloomy thoughts. And you yourself are much too beautiful!"

She kissed me more passionately. I loved her. Her striking beauty, her iron will, her inexhaustible sense of humor. Like her work, she exuded an aesthetic charisma, which was reflected in each of her designs and models. And she lived and loved the same way as she worked. She wielded an allure that no one could escape. Neither her clients nor I. One kiss, one touch, and I gave in.

I have no idea how long we made love that night. Johanna lay next to me, breathing softly in her sleep. Her arms were flung over her head, and her left breast was exposed. I could still taste our passion on my lips. It tasted like her. When we slept together for the first time, it had been like a revelation. I had never felt sexually unfulfilled in any of my previous relationships, but with Johanna, everything seemed to fade away from one moment to the next. She was inside of me, on top of me, all around me, and I could feel her with every fiber of my body. Her sweat tasted sweet, and her caresses were so unbelievably wonderful that it almost hurt. I sometimes even yearned for her, when she was lying right next to me.

As I watched my girlfriend sleep, it occurred to me how much of a coincidence our meeting actually had been. One of the journalists with good contacts in the lesbian community was supposed to have written the article for which I interviewed Johanna. I had jumped in when she got sick. Voilà, the fortunate coincidences of life. Or the less fortunate, if you considered Christine and her Berlin plans, how the unexpected pregnancy had thwarted her plans. Happenstance? Fate?

I suddenly felt hot and cold. Paris? How could I have forgotten? Chance had almost sent me there as well. During my basic studies, I had been good friends with a gay classmate: André. We had both come to Hamburg from small towns in Lower Saxony and had the same sense of humor. He loved to gossip and hauled me around to several testosterone-heavy parties. After our fourth semester, he moved to Paris and never returned. I could still see the postcard that sat for weeks on my desk. The obligatory Eiffel Tower was on the front, only three sentences on the back:

*Ma chérie,*

*Whatever you are currently doing, drop it and come straight to Paris! The cité de l'amour is a dream that must be dreamed. Forget Hamburg, and come visit me.*

*Kisses, André*

I had grinned. Typical André. The out-of-touch high flyer, who walked away from his scholarship for a few breathy, French declarations of love. That's what I thought back then, although I planned to go see him anyway. But the qualifying exams came first, then a holiday job, and at some point, the card vanished into the depths of my desk. That's what happened. The college years were intense, the friendships fleeting. Johanna whiffled peacefully in her sleep. She would have called me crazy for placing any weight on this story. My goodness, everyone wanted to go to Paris! That was nothing unusual. And yet I had a dull ache in my stomach. Should I tell her about this? I decided against it, so I lay back down and eventually fell asleep. We avoided the topic for the next few days. You could have almost said that things returned to normal. I had a fairly large number of commissions, and Johanna was working on a critical presentation for her agency. They were competing for the construction contract on a major project, and each of them - as is customary in that profession - had to be involved in it. This meant that she left the apartment at 7 in the morning and returned home at some point at night. This left no time for anything out of the ordinary. I was almost happy about that. ...]

## **Part II** **Chapter 3**

30 Rue de Seine, Saint-Germain-de-Prés. Laurent had jotted the address down for me on a piece of paper. It felt damp, since my hands were sweating. The closer I got to my destination, the more nervous I became. To calm my nerves, I took a short walk along the Seine, crossed the Pont du Carrousel near the Louvre, and strolled through Saint-Germain-de-Prés, the old artist and writers' quarter. At some other time, I would have been fascinated by the thought that Simone de Beauvoir, Camus and Sartre had sat and drank coffee here, as they argued about existence and freedom. Today I had to force myself to even look to the left and the right. One gallery after the other lined the lanes, and culture-loving tourists wandered around with city maps glued to their faces.

I turned down the Rue de Seine. Somewhat larger than the other streets, it was understandably busier along here. Cars were honking, and a man who was talking wildly into his phone almost crashed into me. He murmured "Pardon" as he hurried on. Suddenly I found myself in front of Number 30: Galerie Dupont. My heart was pounding like mad. I took a deep breath and opened the door. A calming coolness enveloped me. A large, airy space in stark white opened in front of me. Contemporary works hung far apart along the walls. A

radio was playing quietly in the background. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my arm. I stepped back in surprise. An old woman with snow-white hair was sitting next to the door. In my blind excitement, I simply hadn't noticed her when I walked in. She smiled at me blissfully and said in French: "There you are, Marie." I came close to stumbling backwards out the door again. At that very moment, I heard steps hurrying toward us and a deep masculine voice: "Maman, leave the woman alone. You know that's not..." I slowly lifted my gaze. A tall, strikingly handsome man with dark, penetrating eyes was standing in front of me: Victor Dupont. I recognized him immediately. He looked like the man in the photo, the only exception being that his hair was now cut short. He faltered and looked at me, before blushing and saying with a wide grin: "Please excuse my mother. She gets a little confused sometimes." He bent down and spoke softly to her: "Maman, the woman's name isn't Marie. She..." "But it is," I interrupted him, tonelessly. "My name is Marie. Marie Kluge." I then tore open the door and dashed down the street, panic stricken. I ran like a lunatic, and people stared after me as I rushed by. I didn't stop until three streets later. Breathing heavily, I propped my hands on my knees. My heart was hammering against my rib cage. Slowly, very slowly, I calmed back down and began to make out the outlines of my surroundings. "You're crazy," I wheezed. "Totally crazy." I heard a man's voice behind me: "Marie, wait... please, wait!" Panting, Victor came to a stop in front of me. "Why are you running after me?" I accused him. "Why are you running away from me?" he responded with a laugh. When I didn't reply, he added in almost flawless German: "Please forgive me. We don't know each other, and I don't mean to be a bother. But it's not every day that a woman runs away from me." Phony. We gazed at each other for a moment, then he held out his hand. "I'm Victor. May I call you by your first name?" Instead of answering, I asked: "Why did your mother call me Marie?" "Oh, that," he said, laughing again. "Did she frighten you a little? Since the dementia set in, she talks about a Marie, almost every day. I have no idea why, maybe an old childhood friend. What a coincidence that Marie happens to be your name, as well!" I gulped. "I'm sorry," he added. "Maman is really quite harmless. She likes to sit with me in the gallery and smile at the visitors." "Why is your German so good?" "I spent a couple of years studying in Berlin - art and museum management, as you can probably imagine without too much trouble. I had a great time back then. I'm just happy if my language skills don't get completely rusty." "You speak perfectly." "Thank you. I only use my French accent to attract the attention of pretty women." He grinned cheekily. "My German one works well for that, too," I replied drily. The ice was broken. "May I make amends for the shock by inviting you to have an espresso in the gallery?" Victor asked. I hesitated for a moment and then nodded. We walked back together, like a couple who has just made amends. His mother smiled as we opened the door, but she didn't say anything. Victor led me through the gallery, showed me the exhibit pieces, and explained how it had all come together. "At the beginning, it was a pretty hard, uphill battle. I was right out of college, and I actually should have gotten more experience working in other museums and galleries. Instead, I made up my mind to open my



own place right away. I set off with a small amount of savings and a fat credit line from the bank. The fact that it is going so well now is mainly due to good friends and a lot of good luck.”

While Victor was telling me all this, I watched him surreptitiously. It was as if the photo I had found in the white envelope a few months ago had come to life. Unbelievably and frighteningly so. And yet at the same time, it all felt real and natural, in some inexplicable way. Almost familiar. It is in moments like this that you wish you could pinch yourself. I felt a strong urge to touch his arm, to assure myself that I wasn't really dreaming.

A customer stepped into the gallery, and Victor said: “Excuse me for one moment, please.”

As he gave his sales pitch, I ambled from one picture to the next. I occasionally glanced furtively over at his mother, who was still sitting placidly next to the entrance. Victor had brought her a cup of tea, and she was humming contentedly, as she sipped on it. Suddenly she smiled at me. I felt like I had been caught, and I quickly looked the other way. Victor returned right then and said: “We're having an opening here tomorrow evening. Would you like to come?”

I paused. “May I bring my friend along?” I finally asked.

He frowned briefly, but hurried to say: “Of course, why not.”

“He's gay,” I added, without knowing why I brought that up.