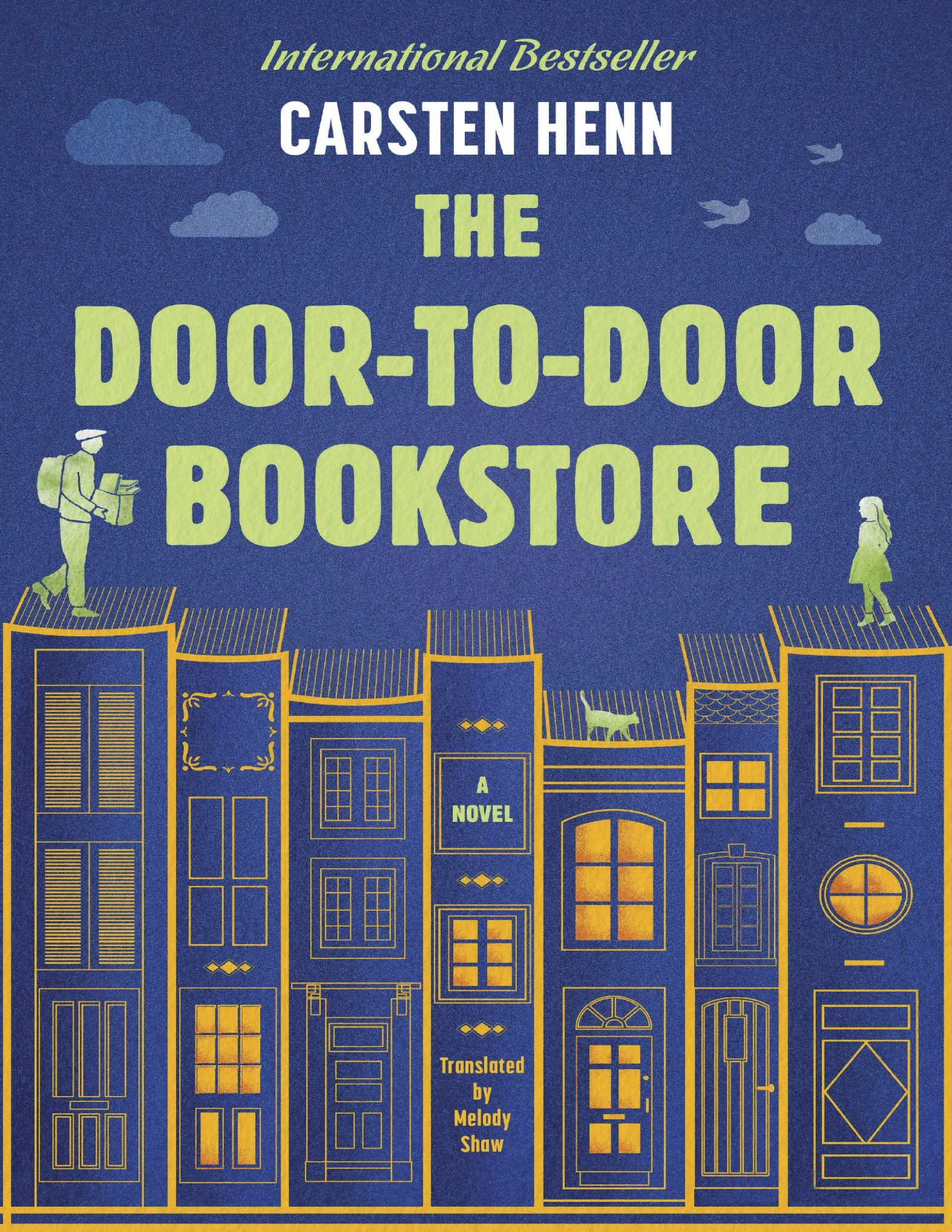
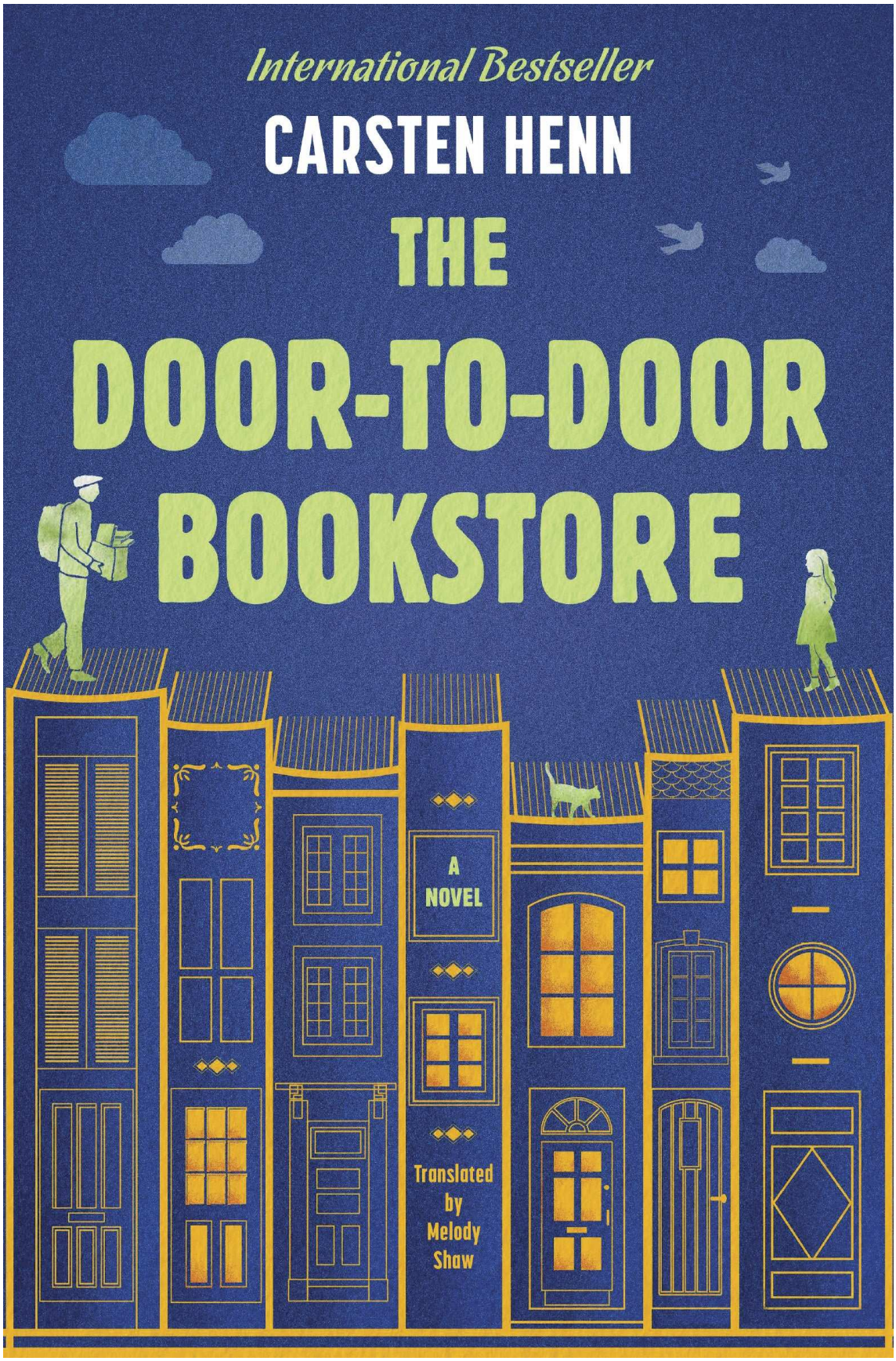
International Bestseller

CARSTEN HENN

THE DOOR-TO-DOOR BOOKSTORE




International Bestseller
CARSTEN HENN
THE
DOOR-TO-DOOR
BOOKSTORE
A
NOVEL
Translated
by
Melody
Shaw

“The feel-good novel for all book lovers.”

—*DER Spiegel* (online)

“Henn’s novel is a declaration of love for the written word, a cheerful, fast-reading feel-good book for in between.”

—*Westfalen-Blatt*

“A book to snuggle up with, a book that warms and gives confidence. Just the thing for anyone who knows how important a good book can be.”

—*Brigitte*

“This is a feel-good book that caresses the soul and conveys the beautiful message of books that make you happy.”

—*Ruhr Nachrichten*

Carsten Henn

The Door-to-Door Bookstore

A Novel

English translation by Melody Shaw

For booksellers everywhere: in times of crisis they provide us with food for the soul.

Carsten Henn has worked as a radio presenter and a wine and restaurant journalist and has published a number of successful novels. He lives in Germany.

Contents

“A novel is like a bow, and the violin that produces the sound is the reader’s soul.”

—Stendhal

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A Man for All Seasons

IT HAS BEEN SAID that books find their own readers—but sometimes they need someone to show them the way. Living proof of this could be found at a bookshop in southern Germany, that went by the name of the City Gate. Admittedly, the name was an unusual choice, since the actual city gate—or at least what remained of it, which even locals often mistook for an avant-garde artwork—stood a good three streets away.

It was a very old bookshop, constructed and extended time and again over numerous historical periods. Extravagant architectural ornament and stucco rubbed shoulders with unadorned right angles. The glorious juxtaposition of the old and the new, the flamboyant and the restrained, which characterized the building's exterior also continued into its interior. Red plastic stands of CDs and DVDs stood next to frosted metal shelves of mangas; these in turn took their place next to globes displayed in polished glass cases, or elegant wooden shelves of books. Customers could find board games, stationery, tea, and even chocolate—a recent addition—for sale. The labyrinthine room was dominated by a heavy, dark counter known to employees simply as the Altar. It looked like a relic from the Baroque period: carvings on the front depicted a rural scene of a hunting party astride magnificent steeds, a pack of wiry dogs alongside, in pursuit of a group of wild boar.

Inside, one late summer's day, the question that is the raison d'être of every bookshop was being asked: "Can you recommend a good book?" The questioner, Ursel Schäfer, knew exactly what constituted a good book. Firstly, it must be gripping enough to keep her awake in bed reading until her eyes drooped shut. Secondly, it must contain at least three, preferably four, points at which she was moved to tears. Thirdly, it must have no less than three hundred pages, but no more than three hundred and eighty, and fourthly, the cover must never be green. Books with green covers were not to be trusted—bitter experience had taught her this on several occasions.

"Certainly," replied Sabine Gruber, who had been manager at the City Gate for the past three years. "What kinds of books do you enjoy reading?"

Ursel Schäfer did not wish to say. She wanted Sabine Gruber to know; after all, as a bookseller, she was surely naturally endowed with a certain level of clairvoyant skill.

"Give me three keywords, and I'll find just the right one to suit you. Romance? Rural? Cozy? Yes?"

"I wonder—is Mr. Kollhoff here?" asked Ursel Schäfer, her tone uneasy. "He always knows what I like. He knows what everyone likes."

"No, I'm afraid he's not here today. Mr. Kollhoff only works for us occasionally now."

"What a shame."

"Never mind, I have something for you. A family saga, set in Cornwall. Look, the cover art shows the family's stately manor and grounds."

"It's green." Ursel Schäfer stared at Sabine Gruber in reproach. "Bright green!"

"That's because the story is set on the Earl of Durnborough's grand estate. It's had very good reviews!"

The heavy front door opened stiffly, setting the little copper bell above it tinkling brightly. Carl Kollhoff folded his umbrella, gave it his habitual shake, and placed it in the stand. His gaze scanned the bookshop he called home, on the lookout for new literary arrivals awaiting an introduction to his customers. He'd always likened himself to a beachcomber, who needed only a single glance to spy a hoard of treasures ready to be seized and freed from the grainy sand. As his gaze lit upon Ursel Schäfer, however, the treasures were forgotten in an instant. She threw him a warm smile, as though he were an amalgam of all the charming men she'd fallen in love with in the pages of the books he'd recommended over the years. In reality, Carl resembled none of those characters. He'd once had a small paunch, but over the years it had receded, much like the hair on his head, as though they'd entered into a pact to disappear together. Now, at age seventy-two, he was lean, but continued to wear his old, now-oversize clothes. His former boss, Sabine's father, had told him he'd begun to look as though his only source of nourishment was the words in his books, which were notoriously low in carbohydrates. "But rich in substance," Carl had always responded.

Carl wore rugged, heavy shoes of thick black leather with soles solid enough to last a lifetime. Good socks were also essential, in his opinion. These he combined with olive green overalls, and a matching collared jacket.

On his head, he wore a narrow-brimmed fisherman's hat, to protect his eyes from rain and bright sunshine. He never took it off, even indoors, other than to sleep. Somehow, he felt less than fully clothed without it. Nor was he ever seen without his glasses, the frames bought from an antique shop decades ago. Behind them peered shrewd eyes which bore signs of a lifetime of reading too long in poor light.

"Ms. Schäfer, how lovely to see you," he said, stepping toward Ursel Schäfer just as she took a step toward him, and away from Sabine Gruber. "May I recommend a book that would make ideal bedtime reading?"

"I so enjoyed the last one, especially when they gazed into each other's eyes at the end. A kiss would have been even better, to seal the deal, but on this occasion I'll settle for a gaze."

"It was almost more intense than a kiss, don't you think? Some gazes can be."

"Not when I'm doing the kissing!" For a moment, Ursel Schäfer felt deliciously wicked—a rare occurrence for her nowadays.

"This book," said Carl, taking one from the pile next to the till, "has been waiting for you since the moment it was unpacked. Set in Provence, and every word scented with lavender."

"Oh, Bordeaux-red books are the best! Does it end with a kiss?"

"Have I ever given an ending away?"

"No!" She pouted, but took the book from his hand.

Carl would never dream of recommending a novel without a happy end to her, but on no account would he rob Ursel Schäfer of the tiny thrill of wondering whether this one would be different.

"I'm so glad there are books in the world," she said. "I hope that's one thing that never changes! So many things do, and it happens so fast. Everyone pays with plastic money now. People give me such odd looks whenever I count out the right change at the till!"

"The written word will always remain, Ms. Schäfer; sometimes there is simply no better form of expression. Print is the best preserving agent for thoughts and stories; it keeps them fresh for centuries."

With a warm smile of farewell, Carl Kollhoff stepped through a door covered with advertising posters into a room that served as both stockroom and office for the bookshop. Inside was a desk

barely visible under stacks of books and an old computer monitor framed with yellow Post-its. An enormous calendar covered in red pen dominated the wall.

As always, his book orders were waiting in a black plastic crate in the darkest corner of the room. In former times, their place had been on the desk, but since Sabine had taken the bookshop over from her father, the crate had migrated a little farther each day toward the least accessible corner. In tandem with its migration, the crate's contents had gradually reduced. Few people needed book delivery these days, and every year, their number continued to dwindle.

"Hiya, Mr. Kollhoff! What did you make of the game? That was never a penalty! The ref must've been blind!"

Leon, the new work experience lad, exited the tiny staff toilet, followed by a cloud of cigarette smoke. Anyone else would have known it was utterly useless asking Carl such a question. He never watched the news, never listened to the radio, never read a newspaper. He would have been the first to admit that he had lost touch with the world. It had been a deliberate decision, once all the reports of incompetent state leaders, ice cap melt, and suffering refugees had begun to sadden him more than the most tragic literary family saga ever could. It had been a form of self-preservation, even though his world had shrunk as a result. The world he now inhabited measured no more than two-by-two kilometers, and he patrolled its borders every day.

"Have you read J. L. Carr's fantastic book about football?" asked Carl, preferring to ask a question than to take sides on an issue of referee competence.

"Is it about our club?"

"No, it's about the Steeple Sinderby Wanderers."

"Never heard of them. Don't read books anyway. Only if I have to. In school. Even then, I try to watch the film instead." Leon grinned, as if this was a cunning way to make a fool of his teacher, rather than himself.

"Then why are you doing work experience here?"

"My sister did the same. Three years ago. We live around the corner—it's a short walk to get here."

Leon was to work at the bookshop for two weeks, as was customary for most students in Germany. He neglected to mention that anyone who failed to find a work experience place was forced to spend the allotted two weeks helping the caretaker, who would use the time, and a selection of suitably humiliating tasks, to take his revenge on the whole school body—as represented by the work experience students—for all the graffitied walls, old chewing gum stuck under desks, and discarded half-eaten packed lunches.

"Does your sister enjoy reading?"

"After she came here, sure. But that won't happen to me!"

Carl smiled. He knew exactly why Leon's sister had taken to reading. His former boss, Gustav Gruber, now a resident at the Münsterblick care home, had known exactly what to do with reluctant readers like Leon and his sister. He would set them to dusting each individual plastic-wrapped greeting card, one by one. The student in question was guaranteed—out of sheer despair at the tedium—to reach for the nearest book, which of course had been strategically deposited within easy reach by Gruber himself. Gustav Gruber had converted them all. He had always been good with children. To Carl, children had always been unfathomable creatures, even back when he himself had been one. And the further he left his own childhood behind, the more strange and peculiar they seemed to him.

Old Gruber had tempted Leon's sister with a novel in which a young woman falls in love with a vampire. For Leon, clearly brimming with raging hormones, Gruber would have left out a book

with a beautiful teenage girl on the cover, and large-print pages. “It’s important *that* they read, not *what* they read,” old Gruber had always said. Carl couldn’t quite endorse that view for all books: the ideas found between the covers of some were worse than poison, but more often than not, there was healing to be found on the page, sometimes even for ailments the reader hadn’t realized they were suffering from.

With great care, Carl pulled the crate out from its corner. There were only three books lying forlornly inside. He took out brown paper and string to pack each book individually, as though it were a gift. Sabine Gruber had told him on numerous occasions he shouldn’t bother, and to spare the expense, but Carl insisted. His customers would expect it. In a reflex action Carl was entirely unaware of, his hand stroked each cover before wrapping the books in the thick paper.

Finally, he picked up his olive green army backpack: marked with all the wear and tear of Bundeswehr use, but still in good condition thanks to Carl’s care. Although it was empty, the fall of its cloth clearly indicated emptiness was not its natural form. He gently lowered the books between the heavy folds of the backpack, which he had lined with a soft blanket, as though he was carrying tiny puppies to their new owners. He arranged the three books in the backpack with the smallest resting farthest away, while the largest nestled next to his back, where it would not be compromised by the curve of the backpack.

As he was leaving, he paused, then turned to Leon. “Please would you dust the greeting cards? Ms. Gruber would like that. Best to bring them in here, then you can work in peace. I’ve always done it at the desk.” Whisking Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* from the shelf where he’d spied it earlier, he laid it on the desk. The football pitch was a luscious shade of green—Ursel Schäfer wouldn’t have given it a second glance.

* * *

Carl called it his round, although it resembled more of a polygon around the city center, without right angles or symmetry. The path traced by the ruins of the old city wall, standing like stumps of teeth in an old man’s gums, was the boundary of his world. For thirty-four years, he had not set foot outside it; everything he needed in life lay within its borders.

Carl Kollhoff spent a lot of time walking, and he spent as much time thinking as he did walking. Only when he was walking could he think clearly; perhaps his footsteps on the cobbled streets were the one thing that could set his thoughts in motion.

A person walking at ground level might not notice it, but every pigeon and every sparrow knew the city was circular. Every old house and alleyway was oriented toward the minster, the cathedral which rose majestically in the center. If the city had been part of a model railway, you would say the minster had been built to the wrong scale. It dated from the short period in which the city had become very rich, a period that had come swiftly to an end before the minster could be completed, leaving one of the towers truncated still.

The houses stood reverentially around the minster; some of the older roofs even leaned at a deferential angle. They kept a respectful distance from the main entrance, allowing space for the largest and most beautiful square in the city: Münsterplatz.

As Carl stepped into the square, the feeling crept over him, as it had on previous occasions, that he was being watched, like a deer in a clearing, standing helplessly in the hunter’s sights. He had to smile—in no other respect could he have been accused of resemblance to a deer. The aroma of the city was at its most intense in Münsterplatz. In the seventeenth century, the city had been besieged, and according to local legend, a baker had created the sugared wheel: a doughnut in the shape of a spoked wheel, filled with chocolate cream and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

He took it to the besieging army, an edible message that they should leave. In reality, the calorie-dense confection had not been invented for a further two hundred years, a fact backed by documentary evidence, but the old story continued to thrive, and the city's visitors were eager to believe it.

Every day, Carl trod the exact same cobblestones of Münsterplatz in slow, even paces. If there was ever a person in the way, he would wait, increasing his stride afterward to regain the lost time. He had mapped out his route across the square so carefully that it could even be followed on market days. He had also ensured it traced a course that maximized his distance from the square's four bakeries, since he could no longer stomach the smell of the hot, greasy sugared wheels.

He turned into Beethovenstrasse, which in honesty was no more than an alley, not at all worthy of the great composer. An entire district had been named after famous composers, courtesy of an employee at the planning office who had wanted to make his own mark. The widest street had been reserved for Schubert, the employee's personal favorite.

Although Carl Kollhoff was not aware of it, he stood at that moment at the exact center of his world. It was bordered on two sides by tram lines, the 18 and the 57. (In fact, the city only had seven tram routes, but it had been felt that higher numbers would add a nice metropolitan air, at least to its public transportation.) On another side was the fast road from the north, and on the fourth was the river, which for most of the year was content to burble picturesquely, and only surged to high water for a few days in the spring, rising to emit a modest roar, like a lion cub with underdeveloped vocal cords.

His first call of the day took him into a lane by the name of Salierigasse, to the home of Christian von Hohenesch. A pedestrian hurrying by would not have noticed the dark stone villa's grandeur: it stood a step back from the other buildings, crouching like a hunched black swan waiting for its moment to spread magnificent wings. Behind it lay gardens bordered by a square of gigantic oak trees, with three benches positioned to enable Christian von Hohenesch to read with the sun falling on his book at any time of day.

Carl was aware that Hohenesch possessed enormous wealth, but not that he was the richest man in the city. No one knew, least of all Hohenesch himself, who never compared himself with others. His family had made their fortune generations ago in the tanning trade by the river, and succeeded in not losing it again during the industrial revolution. Christian von Hohenesch had no need to work; he allowed his shares and investments to work for him. He simply managed his wealth managers. A housekeeper came once a day to cook and clean the few occupied rooms; a gardener came once a week to trim the hedges and maintain the sun's passage to his books; a caretaker service visited once a month; and from Monday to Friday, Carl came with a new book, which Christian von Hohenesch had usually finished reading by the following day. As far as Carl knew, Hohenesch had not stepped beyond the borders of his kingdom in an eternity.

Carl pulled on the copper rod by the door, and a bell rang a low note in the villa's interior. As usual, there was a pause while the householder walked the long, dark corridor; then the heavy door creaked open, just a crack. Christian von Hohenesch never stepped outside. He was a handsome man: tall, dark-haired, with sculpted cheekbones, a striking chin, and a sadness that settled over his features like fine gray dust. As always, he wore a dark blue double-breasted suit with a fresh white orchid in the buttonhole, and his black leather shoes shone as if he was dressed for the Opera Ball. Hohenesch was much younger than his clothing suggested: barely thirty-seven years old—but he had worn suits since early childhood, and they felt as natural to him as jeans did to others.

“Mr. Kollhoff, you’re late. We had agreed a quarter past seven,” said Hohenesch by way of greeting.

Carl bowed his head in acknowledgment, then carefully reached for his backpack. “I’ve brought your new book.” He straightened the string’s bow, which had shifted on the journey.

“I hope it lives up to your recommendation.” Hohenesch took the book, but did not unwrap it. It was a novel about Alexander the Great, set during his time under Aristotle’s instruction. Hohenesch read only philosophical works.

He handed Carl a tip, calculated according to the book’s weight, which he had researched in advance. “Please be punctual again next time. Punctuality is the politeness of kings.”

“Of course. Enjoy your evening.”

“Yes, I hope yours is equally pleasant, naturally.”

Christian von Hohenesch closed the solid wooden door, and the villa once more appeared deserted.

The master of the house would have loved to discuss books and authors in depth with Carl, whom he regarded as an educated, well-mannered man, and a kindred spirit. But with the passage of time, the words of invitation had escaped him. Perhaps he had lost them among the many rooms in his grand home.

* * *

Carl took his leave of Christian von Hohenesch—yet in his mind, it was another person altogether he left behind. Everywhere in the real world, Carl saw reflections of novels. To him, the city was populated with characters from books, even if those characters lived in quite different times, or far-off lands. To Carl, the moment Christian von Hohenesch had first opened the heavy door of his villa, he had stepped out from the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. Carl was now bidding farewell to Pemberley in eighteenth-century Derbyshire, and to its owner, Fitzwilliam Darcy, who, despite his impeccable manners, could at times appear harsh and arrogant.

Carl’s inability to remember any name, unless it belonged to a book character, had begun during his school days, when so many of his classmates had given their teachers nicknames, most of them unflattering: Loobrush, Prince Morphine, or Spitty. Carl had given them different names: Odysseus, Tristan, or Gulliver. Unlike his classmates, when he graduated high school with his Abitur qualification and the offer of an apprenticeship at the bookshop, his habit of assigning nicknames had persisted. The young lad slouching along in a threadbare uniform every day as Carl made his way to the bookshop became the Good Soldier Schwejk. The greengrocer who sold him apples transformed into the wicked queen from *Snow White*—mercifully, she refrained from poisoning her fruit. At some point, Carl had realized that his city was full of literary figures; every inhabitant had their literary counterpart. In the years that followed, he met Sherlock Holmes, head of the murder squad in the city police; he even met Lady Chatterley, who often opened her door wearing a flimsy robe, and for whom he developed a slight crush as a young man. Sadly, she left the city with Adso of Melk. Captain Ahab obsessed over an enormous mole which wreaked havoc in his garden, and which he consistently failed to hunt down. Carl delivered books about South America to Walter Faber, a chronically ill engineer, right up until his death. And in an apartment building that had once been a prison, the Count of Monte Cristo lived behind barred windows, a feature which the new owners had on a whim decided to retain.

He found that a suitable literary name always occurred to him long before he succeeded in memorizing the real one. It was as though his memory wished to prevent him from burdening it

with anything so profane. From the moment he selected a name, he ceased to see the real one. On their way from his retina to his brain, the letters of *Christian von Hohenesch* would be miraculously transposed into *Mr. Darcy*, entirely without Carl's awareness. Only in very particular situations would his mind relent and provide a real name—and these days there were precious few it needed to recall.

Carl's route through the winding alleyways next took him to a literary figure with a fate far bleaker than that of the Pemberley gentleman whose story concluded with a happy marriage.

His client was waiting behind the door, peering through the spyhole at the few passersby in the street beyond. No one came here for a stroll. No one came to admire the buildings; the handsome architecture stopped several streets away. In this part of the old city, pedestrians increased their pace, as though they could not bear the oppressive narrowness of the street, with its gables looming overhead, threatening to close ranks and block out the daylight.

The slender young woman behind the spyhole knew at what time Carl would arrive. She also knew that it was foolish to spend long minutes peering through the door, instead of waiting in the living room for the doorbell, but she was unable to tear herself away. Andrea Cremmen brushed a lock of blond hair behind her ear and tugged her dress straight. From the time she started kindergarten she had always been the prettiest girl in the room, a quality which had earned her both affection and envy—and an early marriage to Matthias, a man with a promising career in the insurance industry, who worked long hours in the evening and on weekends to give them a comfortable life. Andrea herself was a trained nurse, but now worked half days at a small doctor's surgery, where she had been put behind the reception desk, because the sight of her calmed and lightened the spirits of the patients. No one had needed to tell Andrea to smile; she did so quite naturally—it was part and parcel of being pretty. A pretty person who doesn't smile looks arrogant, so she smiled all day.

She had never dared to look anything other than perfect. What would happen then? What would others see in her? But Carl Kollhoff seemed like a man to whom she could show her unsmiling face. He would find the right words to describe what appeared there. Andrea knew that he chose his words as carefully as a perfumier selecting ingredients for an expensive scent. She let her smile drop, and pulled the lock of hair forward, permitting herself a few strands of disarray.

Spotting Carl in the street, she tucked the strands swiftly back behind her ear again.

Carl rang the bell, and waited. He knew Andrea Cremmen always took a little time to open the door, and was always slightly breathless—but she always wore a smile of pleasure.

A key rattled in the lock, then the door opened.

"Mr. Kollhoff, you're early today! I hadn't expected you yet. I must look in a terrible state." She ran her fingers through her glossy hair, styled to perfectly complement her elegant dress in a red rose print.

Carl found her bewitching, and yet the sight of her always made him feel a little sad too. Behind all her beauty lay something he could not quite put a finger on—but it had something to do with the package he now handed to her: one of the books Andrea Cremmen loved so well. The book's weight was perfectly acceptable (Carl liked books to have the appropriate weight: heavier than a bar of chocolate, lighter than a liter of milk); it was the weight of the contents that gave Carl concern.

"Is it a good one?" she asked, pulling the string on the packing paper straight.

"From what I've heard, *The Shadow Rose* lives up to the author's other works."

"Highly dramatic?"

Now it was Carl's turn to smile. There was an unspoken agreement between them: when he brought her a book, it was always dramatic, with a tragic end. In the past, he had occasionally recommended books with a happy end, but she had never enjoyed them. She found they bore no relation to reality. Andrea Cremmen loved novels in which the female protagonist suffered and either died or was left unhappy and alone at the end. Open endings were only acceptable if they held out the possibility of one or the other.

"As always, I retain my right to silence," said Carl. "How did you like the last novel?"

Andrea Cremmen took a deep breath and shook her head. "It was so sad! She walks into the water at the end... Why didn't you warn me?" She gave a playful pout.

"I can't possibly do that."

In the past he had packed her books in bright, cheerful gift wrap, but after a while that had felt disingenuous.

"Will you bring me another next week? I've heard about a novel where it's night all the time—it takes place in Greenland in the winter. And the main character has lost her child. Do you know it? I thought it sounded good."

Carl had heard of the book. He'd hoped Andrea Cremmen hadn't.

"I'll bring it." Carl didn't say he'd bring it gladly, because that would have been untrue.

"Can you interest me in anything else?"

"There's a crime story set right here in this city; it's only just been published. I've not read it yet, but I hear it's very funny."

Andrea Cremmen waved the suggestion aside. "Do you think I'd enjoy it?"

Carl made a point of never lying. Send a lie out into the world, and you can never retrieve it. "No."

"I don't think so either."

"But it might make you laugh. And you have a beautiful laugh—I hope that's not too forward of me. I'm sure you've heard what Charlie Chaplin said, 'A day without laughter is a day wasted.' We have so few days on this earth, we can't afford to lose any." He'd never said anything like this to her before. Perhaps he'd sensed her unhappiness was greater than usual today? Carl didn't know. Sometimes his mouth just went ahead and said things without consulting his head.

Andrea Cremmen was no longer smiling. Her lower lip trembled slightly. "You've saved my day, thank you!" The door closed abruptly.

Carl watched the door close, not on Andrea Cremmen but on Effi Briest: a sorrowful young woman, married too young, whose sad fate was every bit as tragic as that of the numerous heroines in the books Andrea Cremmen ordered. Carl wished he could do more for her than deliver books that proved others can suffer too, but without any guidance on how to end the suffering.

Behind the door, Andrea Cremmen suppressed her tears. She longed to tell him what had happened that day, but that would have entailed reliving it, which was more than she could face. She unwrapped the package with trembling hands and had begun reading the book before she left the hallway. One of the characters had taken their own life by the end of page one.

Carl had taken no more than a few steps when he heard a soft mew beside him. Looking down, he saw a gaunt, three-legged cat looking up at him, its fur scruffy, its ears notched from numerous battles. Carl had no idea whether it was male or female, or where its home was, if indeed it had one. But they were good friends, nonetheless. While others had house cats, Carl had a street cat.

“Hello, Dog,” he said and smiled. He’d given the cat this name because it behaved like one: sniffing at everything as it walked, and marking its territory. Dog never purred; it growled. When Carl arrived at a customer’s door, Dog never sat—it lay down. It could lie down anywhere, even on the narrowest of steps.

Dog pressed itself against Carl’s leg, then ran ahead, turning with a look of impatience. The animal was intelligent enough to guess there would be something to eat at Carl’s third delivery of the day. Four streets away, near the Elisenbrunnen fountain, lived an old woman who was the exact opposite of Effi Briest: high-spirited, cheerful, and always dressed in colorful clothing. More often than not, he would find her wearing mismatched socks or shoes, or with one strap of her overalls hanging down over her shoulder. Her apartment was full of belongings stacked like mountains, with narrow paths like valleys running between. The old woman reminded Carl of a character in a children’s story: a wild young girl who shaped her world as she pleased. This older version of the girl, however, never set foot into the real world; she was afraid of open sky.

A little over seven years ago, she had just spent a beautiful summer’s day with her husband in their garden, sitting in the shade of a walnut tree, when a storm had blown in, with rain and wind, but most of all with violent force. They had already returned to the house when they realized they had left their bins on the street—an act of negligence guaranteed to cause complaint among the neighbors. Her husband had gone out in the storm, despite her attempts to prevent him. *It won’t take a minute*, he’d said. *I’ll be right back.* At exactly that moment, a tile had come loose from their own roof, and had been rapidly transformed by the wind into a missile his head could not withstand.

Since then, she hadn’t cared what the neighbors thought. And since then, she had never stepped out of doors.

When she opened the door, she would never say “Good evening, Mr. Kollhoff,” “Hello,” or “How lovely to see you.” Instead, she would greet him with “Wooldouse,” “He was a used cat dealer,” or “Glass roots.” Today, when he rang the bell, she exclaimed “Frogiveness.”

It was then Carl’s task to invent a plausible impromptu definition.

“*Frogiveness*, derived from *frog-I’ve-ness*, denotes the path toward recognizing the innermost core of the self. The concept references the fairy tale *The Frog Prince*, which appears as the first tale in *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. Behind the concept of frogiveness lies the hypothesis that each person has an inner frog which they must transform with love—a kiss, in the fairy tale—into a handsome prince. The theory first appears in literature in 1923 in Sigmund Freud’s work *The Id, the Frog, and the SuperFrog*.”

Mrs. Longstocking offered him a cherry bonbon by way of reward. A less apt definition would have received a lemon bonbon. In return, he handed her the book she had ordered. As always, he had drawn a large red rose on her packing paper. Mrs. Longstocking read everything, from classic adventure stories to science fiction to humor: anything, provided the content was light—nothing that could drag her back into the depths of reality.

“The day after tomorrow, I’ll have another word for you,” she said. “It’s a particularly hard nut to crack.” Bending down to Dog, she offered something from her pocket. It was swallowed in one gulp before she even had time to close the door.

Although Carl’s backpack was now empty, he had one more call to make. Every visit to this next client was a pleasure: he had the warmest baritone voice Carl had ever heard. If a sofa could be covered with the sound of a voice, only this man’s would do. To Carl Kollhoff, he was from Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*: the young Michael Berg, who falls in love with a woman twenty years his senior and begins to regularly read aloud to her. In the case of Carl’s client, the

audience were the workers at a cigar factory which had been built a few years earlier, the only one in the region. The management had provided a budget for someone to read aloud from books through the working day, as was the practice in Cuba. The whole thing was predominantly a marketing stunt, and the Reader earned very little from it, but he was so devoted to his work that he constantly wore a scarf around his neck to warm his vocal cords. To protect his voice, he rarely spoke outside the cigar factory, so Carl had been more than a little surprised to receive a private phone call asking him to deliver not a book, but a brand of throat pastilles only available from the pharmacy next to the bookshop. The Reader did not wish to venture out onto the streets, where a wave of flu was currently sweeping the city. Out of the same precaution, his door opened by the smallest possible crack to receive the package, and give Carl both a grateful smile and the payment, together with generous tip (which Carl would have preferred to refuse, since he knew how little the Reader earned). The Reader took a pastille from the tin, and swiftly closed the door to his rented apartment within a housing block that was so austere, the builders had clearly spared all expense on anything that might give the exterior any sense of beauty or love. It was as utilitarian as a cage for battery hens.

* * *

Carl always felt sad when his backpack was empty: all that was left now was the homeward stretch. Not that he disliked his home, but Dog never followed him there, and there was no other living thing waiting behind the door of his apartment to press against his legs and look expectantly at him when it wanted to be stroked. The final leg of his round took him through the city cemetery. It was over two hundred years old, with a large statue of the grim reaper at its center, a knowing smile carved into the face of its bony skull. Somehow, the familiarity with the eventual destination of his life's path took away the fear for Carl, and he found the cemetery's beauty calming.

The plate next to Carl's doorbell read E. T. A. Kollhoff. This was not entirely untrue, since the surname was correct. Carl had always admired the author E. T. A. Hoffmann, on account of his initials. How many people had three, aside from J. R. R. Tolkien, or C. P. E. Bach? Three initials signified something special; a great deal could be concealed behind three. They had the air of holding a great secret, such as why their owner did not fully write out any of the names.

Occasionally, letters would be returned, if a new postman failed to identify Carl as the man behind those initials. He saw no reason to alter the nameplate. At seventy-two years old, he no longer received much post in any case. The post he did receive was never grounds for joy, so it was welcome to take another turn in the sorting office.

Carl's apartment had too many rooms. Four in all, plus a small kitchen, a windowless room with a bath, and another with a toilet. Sometimes he looked on them like flower beds in which nothing had grown. Two of the rooms had been intended for his children: one would have been a room for a girl, with its window to the green inner courtyard; the other for his son, looking out over the street, where he could watch the cars going by. But Carl had never found his very own Mrs. Kollhoff, so never had children. He had kept the apartment regardless. In all the decades, the rent had never been increased; it had probably been forgotten.

Now he lived with his paper family, kept in cabinets behind frosted glass doors to protect them from light and dust: books needing to be read over and over, just like pearls that need to be worn to make them more beautiful, or animals needing to be stroked to feel loved. Sometimes it seemed to Carl that each word was a cell of his own body; it was at that point he knew that with the years of reading he had absorbed them into himself.

Carl understood people who collected books like others collected stamps: people who loved to let their gaze wander along book spines, who gathered books around themselves like a community of close friends. Inside books lived the characters to whom they felt a connection, with destinies unfolding in which they shared, or wished they could.

Carl hung his green jacket on the hook behind the door, with his backpack alongside, and pulled them straight. Then he went into the little kitchen to sit at the Formica table with a slice of black bread spread with butter and salt, a glass of sauerkraut juice, and a green apple, quartered.

The apartment had been advertised as “with balcony.” This consisted of a cast-iron balustrade in front of the French windows beside which his old armchair sat. On the chair lay a book with a till receipt tucked inside as a bookmark. From this vantage point, he could watch the old city, keeping a lookout for any of his clients passing by, or Dog leaping across the rooftops—which it never yet had. Carl always read until ten on the dot, then washed and went to bed. As the cover settled over him, he felt wrapped in the comforting assurance that the next day would bring a new selection of very special books to deliver to his very special clients.

2

The Stranger

YET AGAIN, CARL WOKE feeling like a book with missing pages. The sensation had been growing over the past few months, and it crossed his mind that perhaps there was not much paper left between the covers of his life story.

He brewed coffee in the kitchen. Warmth spread through his sleep-cold fingers wrapped around the porcelain of the cup. A sliver of cheer accompanied the warmth, slowly expanding and spreading little by little through his body like a gentle wave. He only ever used fine porcelain cups, even though they were more expensive and broke more easily; he couldn't feel anything through the thick sides of a mug.

The day rushed by like a grainy black-and-white film populated with shadowy figures performing dimly recognizable actions. Only when the bell above the door of the bookshop announced Carl Kollhoff's arrival at six thirty did color flood into his life.

Sabine Gruber stood behind the counter like a soldier at a barricade, deliberately stationed on a spot that would prevent any customer from seeing the gold-framed newspaper article on the wall behind her. Accompanied by a half-page photo, it was a piece on Carl's unusual book delivery service. There had even been a TV program. After its broadcast, a lot of people started ordering books for personal delivery. The novelty had soon worn off when the customers had realized that, at heart, they were TV viewers, not book readers.

There were two books in Carl's crate today. Slim volumes, yet they felt heavy to Carl as he strapped them into his backpack.

Leon was squatting on the carpet next to the stand of undusted greeting cards, staring fixedly at his phone. *Fever Pitch* lay unopened on the table: Nick Hornby's words were clearly struggling to be heard above the clamor of voices on the world wide web.

"Off on the beat again?" asked Leon, without looking up from the screen.

"I'm not a police officer," replied Carl. "I deliver books. The only crime I'm likely to discover would be their contents."

"Don't you get bored?" Leon still didn't look up. Carl had the distinct impression the lad wasn't interested in an answer, but when asked a question, Carl always replied with a response as honest as it was appropriate.

"I'm like a clock hand. You might think the hand is unhappy, always covering the same ground, always returning to where it started, but the opposite is true. It appreciates the certainty of its path and destination, the security that it cannot go in the wrong direction, that it will always be useful and precise." Carl stared at Leon, who still did not return his gaze.

"Okay, I get it," he said.

Pulling his jacket collar straight, Carl stepped outside with a feeling of warmth at the task ahead. He could not know that today, a different task would arise: a task much weightier than a bulging backpack.

It was the kind of autumn day that still dreamed of summer. Münsterplatz was bathed in evening sunlight, its old walls looking young again, the old city gleaming like a new build.

The moment Carl Kollhoff's feet touched the cobblestones, polished smooth by innumerable