

# Ludwig

**Jana Antonissen**

## An extract

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**Translator** Kristen Gehrman

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## Prologue

It's not the question that bothers me, barely concealed blackmail, but rather his casual mention of Ludwig's return. For Bastian Fischerbach, the star reporter who was trailing us like a bloodhound at the time, it goes without saying that I have known for a long time. As a former confidant, I probably know more than that. Fischerbach asks if I would be willing to speak five years later, a step ahead of the reopened investigation, to clear my name.

Of course, he emails me on the day of my second test. Two times two dashes. Misfortune rarely comes alone.

Ludwig is back, and I had no clue. I don't even know if I should be happy, scared or just angry. Ludwig is back, and the door I thought I had closed is being kicked open. Ludwig's shadow smothers me, warns me that the long tentacles of the past will not simply withdraw.

Ludwig is back, and I hesitate: how guilty do you have to be to remain silent? What is the difference between keeping something to myself and hiding it?

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It all started at Orphée, the trendy gallery on Avenue Louise that Katja had dragged me to. Judging by the number of civil servants present and the generous amounts of champagne, the exhibition on depleted resources was heavily subsidised. Like the other gallery goers, Katja pretended it was a privilege to spend this Friday evening in a concrete hall surrounded by melted plastic objects. The minimal lighting made flattering selfies with the artwork—one of the main reasons for coming in the end—impossible. But there was another motivation for attending the vernissage. The number one topic of conversation on that April evening in 2019 was the presence of Ludwig von Sachsenheim, the German cult director. A friend of Katja's whispered to us that there was an actress who, as part of her audition, had had to spend an entire week in a mouldy shack in the woods. She didn't get the part.

At first, I didn't understand what made this man, who was neither tall nor short, neither handsome nor ugly, so special, until he suddenly looked me straight in the eye.

If you asked my father, only the feeble-minded and insecure are susceptible to characters like Ludwig. After the curtain fell on Ludwig and his Neue Gesellschaft, all my father seemed to care about were the outstanding payments. Surely, I hadn't invested all those months, all that effort into this project, this incomprehensible experiment that would never see the light of day? All that

funding, all those generous donations, they couldn't possibly be gone? Why didn't I speak up, didn't I want to be compensated?

What exactly had been so over-the-line about the NG – so bad that Ludwig was being sued – seemed to be least of my father's concerns.

That money was the last thing on my mind. What I found much worse were the passionless messages or the lack of any messages at all.

Consumed by my longing for the red velvet, the endless nights, the scent of sacred smoke at Die Perle, the old vaudeville theatre in the heart of Berlin that Ludwig had renamed his headquarters, I was scrolling through my chat history when it happened. For a split second, "online" appeared under Ludwig's name. My heart stopped. Was the whole pre-trial detention a lie? Was all the speculation just an orchestrated stunt?

What I would have given to return, even if Ludwig really was in custody. For me, the experiment didn't even need to be carried out. More than anything, I wanted to rejoin the group.

I blinked, and the indication of Ludwig's presence disappeared. Did I really just see what I thought I saw, or had it all been a moment of bewilderment, a hallucination, wishful thinking perhaps?

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## 1

"Don't worry, it's very intimate," Ali had said as he emptied the bottom of his dirty martini, "just the four of us, my old friend Yasmin and a classmate of hers."

"It really helps the vibe if women are in the majority," said Lea, another old friend of Ali's, as she briefly touched my thigh under the table. Lea was wearing a tight-fitting top and low-rise jeans with a T-string sticking out.

"I was nervous the first time too," Lea's friend Anders added rather bluntly, as if he felt obliged to say something.

It must have been late August, because I remember that the evening sun on the terrace was oppressively hot, stifling, as the end of the Berlin summer always is. After weeks of subtropical temperatures, we longed for cooler weather, but that heralded eight months of winter, so voicing this desire aloud was considered a faux pas.

The preparations for the Neue Gesellschaft experiment were in a quiet interim period. We had not been summoned for one of those treacherously addictive enlightenment ceremonies for a long time. Ludwig seemed satisfied. The overconfidence of having recruited three top candidates – a fearless police chief, an expensive dominatrix of a certain age and a transsexual footballer – hadn't completely left me. In other words, the premiere seemed far away, far enough to slip out of the headquarters on such a beautiful evening as this.

I was the last to join the NG. Shortly before that, Ludwig had announced that his company was complete and that new members would only get in the way. It gave me a special status that I both enjoyed and suffered from. Of course, I would have preferred to have worked for the NG from the beginning, like most of the NG members, like Ali, Szerena and Sascha. That summer's eve, I had been with the NG for about six months, which meant that Ali and I had been sleeping together for about as long. Although we didn't act like a couple, everyone in the NG knew about us.

It was written in the stars that I would be attracted to Ali. Of course, there was that combination of jawline and cheeky grin, but it was more than that. I'm sure there's something Freudian to be said about it, but in hindsight, he reminded me of Dean. That's to

say that, in terms of slyness, Ali could certainly measure up to Dean, if not surpass him. Because Ali immediately understood that it was a double role: that apart from trophy or prey I was also predator.

"The experiment," Ali quoted Ludwig somewhat derisively, "is the key to sovereignty." Only to add that we were expected in a hotel suite behind Savigny Platz in half an hour. It wasn't until then that I realised that the drinks with this slyly grinning couple that had been introduced to me that evening were just a warm-up. I could have guessed as much when Ali rather explicitly complimented Lea on her outfit. But he was often flirtatious in my presence; such was our dynamic.

For as sex-positive as he'd seemed on that sun-drenched terrace, he would reveal himself to be incredibly sexist during the test run, the dress rehearsal for our experiment. It just depended on who he had in front of him. Perhaps Ali was the most capable NG member of us all.

I resented the fact that I was the only one who was not informed about the course of the evening. Not because I objected to being overwhelmed like this, not even because I felt excluded. Mostly, I was annoyed by the fact that I had shown up wearing a pair of washed-out panties. But soon enough, my irritation turned into excitement. It had been months since I had experienced Berlin from outside the walls of the old vaudeville theatre, our headquarters. And what could be more Berlin than attending a private sex party on a Tuesday evening?

The hotel receptionist, a scrawny man with hair doused in brilliantine, nodded politely to us, as if it were the most normal thing in the world for four clearly tipsy twenty-somethings to check in as visitors to the suite at midnight. Perhaps that was just the way things went in this establishment, where the lounge looked like a film set, a budget-limited interpretation of a Japanese hotel lobby around the turn of the millennium. Even in the pink light, you could see that the pale herringbone parquet was actually laminate and the chaises longues weren't leather, but plastic. The lift was bathed in a neon red glow; generic house music played in the background. No one said a word. I had to do my best to suppress a nervous fit of laughter. Upon entering, I was hit by a warm, clammy stream of air.

"I've already run a bath," Yasmin said by way of greeting.

Like Lea, her low-rise trousers highlighted her sculpted midriff, a trait that all of Ali's old girlfriends seemed to share. She too was wearing a thong, one that, I saw when she turned around, came together in a heart-shaped gemstone.

The dim twilight reminded me of an exotic plant conservatory. There was the same sultry, earthy scent, presumably coming from the lilies on the nightstand. Attached to the neatly made king-size bed, suspended by a white ebony construction, was a bathtub. Everything, from the bed and the bath to the nightstand and coffee table, was shiny and undulating, with rounded corners.

The surreal feeling from the lobby persisted, though this suite looked more like a 1960s vision of the future, one of those early sci-fi films where what's left of humanity spins through the universe in shiny capsules.

I sat down next to Yasmin on the sofa and let someone pour a glass of sparkling wine for me, even though I actually felt a bit dizzy. On an unfolded towel, I recognised the Magic Wand and the Satisfyer, alongside dildos and plugs in different colours and sizes. I took a passion fruit from the bowl. Anders watched greedily as I sucked out the sweet and sour jelly with its seeds. A much too vivid image of him panting and sweating on top of me flashed through my mind.

I jumped up and hurried into the hallway where I fished my phone out of my coat pocket. My throat tightened when Szerena's name appeared three times on my screen.

*I take that as a no,* was her last message.

*Need to relax, want to come by again?* two hours earlier.

*Glad I can count on you,* three hours ago.

In my early days, I had mistaken Szerena's coldness for regret after our one night together, as if it were a slip-up she would rather not be reminded of. If I had known the door was still a tiny bit open, I wouldn't have become so eagerly involved with Ali, or at least that's what I told myself.

Her timing for this attempt at rapprochement was obviously no coincidence. The fact that she knew exactly where I was at the time became evident when she blamed me for being stuck in a worn-out story. She did have a point. With Ali, and with just about every man before him, I had hardly asked myself if I was really interested.

I let my body do the work. My back arched, my chin tilted, the corners of my mouth turned up until an embarrassingly false surprise spread across my face.

Szerena, on the other hand, had truly taken me by surprise. When, after Sascha's enlightenment ceremony—the first I had experienced in the NG, and what a ceremony it was—she suggested I spend the night at her place, I didn't think anything of it. But as I sank exhausted into the darkness, I felt the arm that she had wrapped around me slowly slip away. It took a moment for me to realise that the light, not unpleasant tingling was being caused by Szerena's fingers. They danced over my lower body, strategically alternating between caressing and applying pressure. Only when I heard her breathing become heavier did I understand what was happening.

I thought Szerena was just being generous those first few days, wanting to show me the ropes in the NG.

A sharp, electric shock in my lower abdomen elicited a completely genuine scream. Szerena had turned me over decisively and was sitting on top of me. The slanting moonlight gave her eyes an almost otherworldly gleam. When she brought her head down to my thighs, I stopped her.

"You're my boss now, right?" I asked as Szerena slid two fingers inside me.

"Yeah," she chuckled, then began to gently suck on my clitoris.

"Isn't that..." But then Szerena inserted a third finger, and all words escaped me.

"Let Szerena stew in her own soup," Ali whispered in my ear as he took my phone out of my hands and led me back to the sitting area, where it had become very quiet. He began to kiss me with abandon.

Approving murmurs rose from the group, immediately followed by the wet sounds of lips and tongues sliding over each other.

Before I knew it, I was sprawled out like a starfish on the big bed. Hands everywhere, tongues, wet openings, warm, throbbing bodies. I greedily accepted what was offered to me. This, I thought at the time, is life. This is freedom.

As if unrestrained sex has anything to do with freedom. Surrendering to your desires or letting others indulge theirs on you seems liberating, but in the end it's mostly oppressive.

Desire stems from deficiency, Ludwig would point out during one of his enlightening lectures, which one I no longer remember. We were our desire, and therefore our deficiency. Moreover, lust was a tyrant. If you let it guide you, you would run forever, never would you be able to keep up with it.

Lea attacked me with the Magic Wand. A warm tingling sensation started at the tips of my toes and climbed up my convulsing calves, knees and thighs until everything contracted

to the point that my pelvic floor muscles had no choice but to expel Ali. I squirted against his neck and chest; a stream trickled down from his chin.

There was cheering, clapping, whistling on fingers, as if someone had just scored a magnificent goal. A languid satisfaction, as if I had set my team on the path to victory.

“Have you ever heard of the sleeping serpent?” Szerena had asked during our night together as she wiped her chin with the back of her hand.

Not yet able to speak, I shook my head in confusion.

“In kundalini, the serpent is a life force coiled at the base of our spine that can be awakened through yoga, meditation, or sex. Judging by...” She looked at me with a frown that seemed to waver between mockery and genuine concern and licked the last drop from her lips. “...judging by your physical response, your serpent seems wide awake. Only I have to wonder... You need the right mindset for such an awakening. Otherwise, if you don’t put in the necessary mental work, so to speak, that power can be quite destructive. It’s good to be in touch with your sexual energy, but...” Szerena said as her gaze slid over my still-tingling body, “you’d better be careful with it.”

She leaned over me in a way that was unexpectedly sisterly, motherly even, and tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

“Remember that shaman who was at the headquarters recently? He put it this way: the shadow of everyone you ever sleep with sticks with you on the other side.”

In one fluid motion, she kissed my forehead, turned off the night light and nestled up beside me on the mattress, her head under my armpit, her arm around my waist.

“Most people you really don’t want to be stuck with forever,” she sighed in the dark, “they curse you.”

A calm silence had descended upon us. In a few short hours, a laundry list of obligations awaited us, each one more urgent than the last, but now my limbs felt heavy, and my thoughts slowed. Just before I drifted off to sleep, I heard Szerena say something.

“Unfortunately, there are men like that everywhere. Even here, in the NG.”

At the time, I thought Szerena understood the impossible gap that my confining cravings needed to fill. She understood me. If we had met under different circumstances, I sometimes dare to think, it might have worked. But I only knew Szerena as she was in the NG, and I will probably never know to what extent her actions could be attributed to her or Ludwig.

Ali didn’t really get me. Or – and this is a nasty thought – he got me too damn well.

When, after what seemed like an eternity, Lea released me from her vibrator, I saw Yasmin and Ali in the corner next to the bed, completely absorbed in each other. Their sinewy, olive-coloured limbs seemed to flow over into one another. They could have been brother and sister, they looked so alike.

For a moment, I was filled with an unknown excitement, but that changed when I noticed the immaculate synchronisation of their movements. Here was a skilled duo at work. Why did I know nothing about this?

And immediately all those self-serving questions again that I clung to in hopes of becoming freer. More dignified. Thorough suspicion and healthy distrust—*ach Ludwig*—that’s the only appropriate attitude towards our own sentiments. Hadn’t I learned anything from my six months with the NG?

Maybe I should just join them. Maybe we could—Something hard, warm and wet pressed against my tailbone. I turned around. Anders was rubbing his sweaty lower body against me, his reddened face greedy with desire, *bête*. He leaned forward. I turned my face away, and his lips landed on my neck. His little-blue-pill-powered erection jabbed at my lower abdomen. He took my hands, placing first the right, then the left on his member. Indeed, one

hand was not enough to grip the thing; it was the fleshiest cock I had ever held. In a sudden wave of revulsion, I retracted my hands. Like a coil wound too tight, his member barely gave way.

Still grinning, Anders pushed me down onto the bed.

I let him, surrendering to the path of least resistance. I could barely feel him, which was strange given the size of his monster. I was enveloped in a woolly sense of indifference, and it was not entirely unpleasant. The nonsense he breathed into my ear was background noise, *white noise*, and the duvet, I noticed, was not smooth, but had a herringbone pattern, a detail that for some reason seemed to matter.

Sex is neither good nor bad, liberating nor restrictive. But sex is rarely just sex, the motivation for it rarely pure. Of course, pleasure plays a fairly significant role, but people also sleep with each other out of habit, boredom, revenge, remorse, you name it. In all its disorder, sex is above all a pressure cooker, an efficient way to understand someone better, and thus gain more insight into yourself. But unfortunately, the latter still isn't on the agenda. What was I thinking, that I could just defy nature? Isn't carelessness with protection just another form of debauchery? It's my own fault.

It took me a while to realise that I was lying with my head in Ali's lap while Yasmin stroked my hair. The clinking of metal, loud sniffing, the smacking of lips.

"What joy," Ali crowed as he held the tip of a fully packed key under my nose.

He did look terribly happy.

I sniffed it all in at once, closed my eyes and let myself sink back with an undoubtedly silly grin on my face.

"*Girlsrunde*," muttered one of the two T-string wearers, and she pulled me up. From behind, she inserted one end of the double dildo into me, the other into herself.

The thing started to vibrate as she thrust her hands back and forth on my hips. Small shock waves rippled through me, making me wince with pleasure. Just barely alert enough, I threw my head back and arched my lower back.

In dark moments over the past few years, it has sometimes crossed my mind that the game of seduction was, in fact, my only real talent. Being charming, but also assertive. A little provocative, but never too much. Be beautiful, be cooperative. That last one is important: follow the majority, don't ask too many questions. When everything else failed, at least there was this, a warm winter coat waiting for me at the back of the wardrobe.

And as I collected climax after climax for the group gathered in the suite, I had to think of Dean, who had let me take out my vibrator during a video call but felt insulted when I asked him to free that same Rabbit from its box during sex. Of Katja, who would undoubtedly have loved this whole scene, but whom I couldn't call afterwards to dissect it all together. Of my father, who would probably disinherit me if he saw me like this. Of my mother, who had fortunately been spared the opportunity to see me like this.

Then Ali offered me another key, and I stopped thinking. I transcended myself; the group had given me wings. I felt incredible. I felt good. I was just a body, a warm-blooded body.

Isn't that what we all ultimately long for? To return to that snug primal state, the cursed womb, the unthinking existence.

Ludwig understood this better than anyone, of course. He had recognised the deficiency in each of us, the poignant desires of which we were barely aware. Essentially, we at the Neue Gesellschaft – so eagerly pursuing boundlessness – had all been motherless.