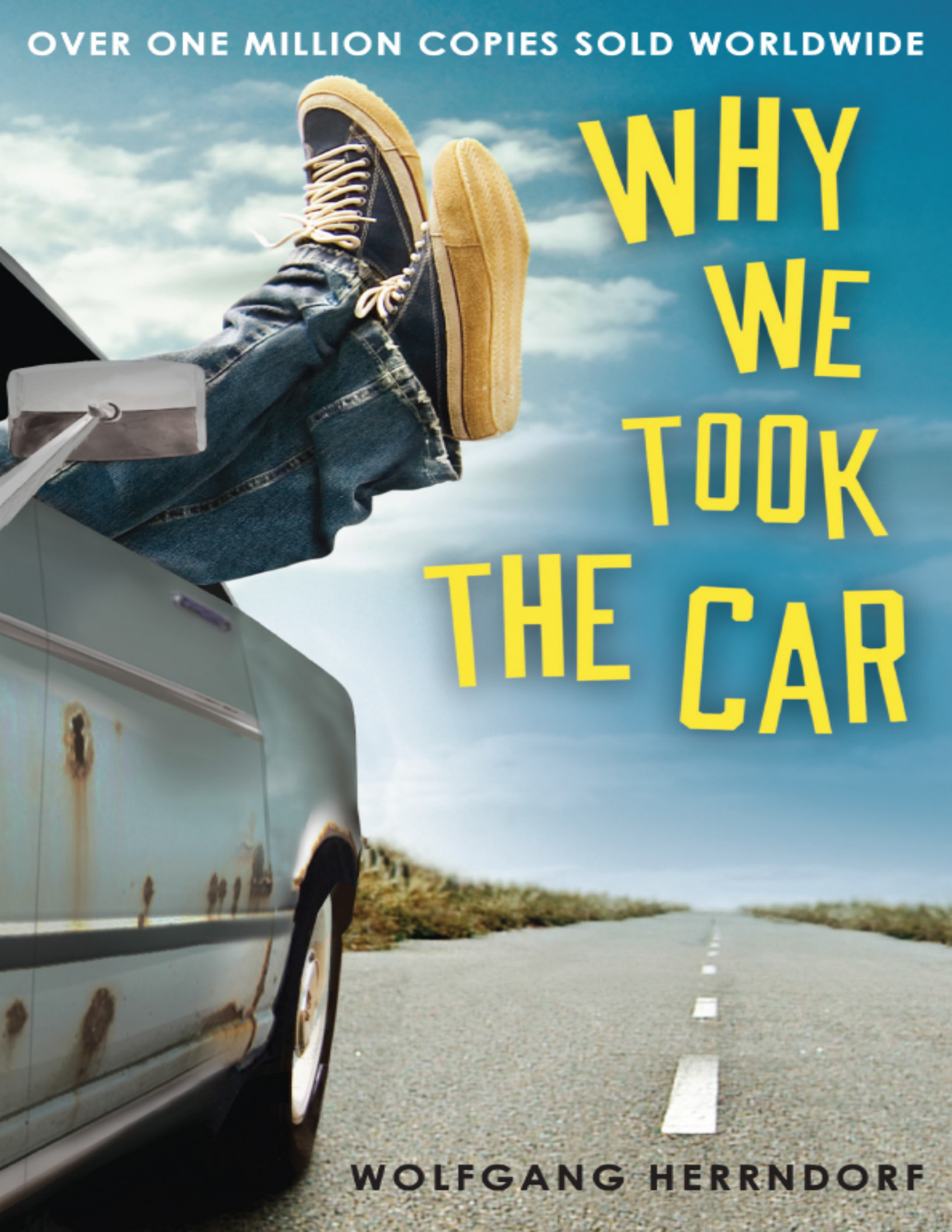


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**WHY
WE
TOOK
THE CAR**

WOLFGANG HERRNDORF

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**WHY
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WOLFGANG HERRNDORF

TRANSLATED BY TIM MOHR

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TO MY FRIENDS

CHAPTER ONE

The first thing is the smell of blood and coffee. The coffee machine is sitting over on the table, and the blood is in my shoes. And if I'm being completely honest, I have to admit it's not just blood. When the old guy said "fourteen," I pissed my pants. I'd been sitting there slumped in the chair, not moving. I was dizzy. I tried to look the way I imagined Tschick would look if someone said "fourteen" to him, and then I got so scared I pissed myself. Mike Klingenberg, hero. I have no idea why I'm freaking out now. It was clear the whole time that it would end this way. And you can be sure Tschick wouldn't piss his pants.

Where is Tschick, anyway? I'd last seen him on the side of the autobahn, hopping into the bushes on one leg. But I figure they must have caught him too. You're not going to get far on one leg. Obviously I can't ask the police where he is. Better not bring it up at all in case they hadn't seen him. Maybe they really hadn't seen him. There's no way they're going to find out about him from me. Even if they torture me. Though I don't think German police are allowed to torture people. They only do that on TV. And in Turkey.

But sitting in your own piss and blood in a highway police station and answering questions about your parents isn't exactly the greatest thing ever. In fact, maybe getting tortured would be preferable — at least then I'd have an excuse for freaking out.

The best thing to do is to keep your mouth shut. That's what Tschick said. And that's exactly how I see it too. Especially now, when it doesn't matter anyway. Nothing

matters to me at this point. Well, almost nothing. Tatiana Cosic still matters to me, of course. Despite the fact that I haven't thought about her in quite a while now. But as I'm sitting there in the chair and the autobahn is rushing past outside and the older policeman has spent the last five minutes fumbling around with the coffee machine, filling it with water and emptying it out again, flipping the power switch on and off, and looking at the bottom of the machine, when it's obvious to any moron that the extension cord isn't plugged in, I find myself thinking about Tatiana. Even though she had nothing to do with the whole thing. Is what I'm saying here hard to follow? Yeah, well, sorry. I'll try again later. Tatiana isn't even part of the story. The prettiest girl in the world isn't part of the story. Throughout the entire trip, I'd imagined that she could see us. How we'd gazed out from the high point of that field of grain. How we'd stood on top of that mountain of trash with our bundle of plastic hoses, like the last idiots left on Earth ... I'd always imagined Tatiana was standing behind us, seeing what we saw, smiling when we smiled. But now I'm happy that I only imagined that.

The policeman pulls a green paper towel out of a dispenser and hands it to me. What am I supposed to do with it? Wipe the floor? He grabs his nose with two fingers and looks at me. Aha. Blow my nose. I blow my nose and he smiles helpfully. I guess I can forget about the whole torture thing. But where should I put the paper towel now? I scan the room. The entire floor of the station is covered with gray linoleum, exactly the same stuff as in the hallways of our school gymnasium. It smells a bit similar too. Piss, sweat, and linoleum. I picture Mr. Wolkow, our gym teacher, sprinting down the hall in his tracksuit, with seventy years of workouts behind him: "Let's go, people, hop to it!" The sound of his footsteps smacking the floor, distant giggles from the girls' locker room, Wolkow turning to look in that direction. I picture the tall windows, the

bleachers, the rings that never get used dangling from the ceiling. I picture Natalie and Lena and Kimberley coming in through the side entrance of the gym. And Tatiana in her green sweats. I picture their blurry reflections on the floor of the gym, the sparkly pants the girls all wear these days, their tops. And how lately half of them show up for gym in thick wool sweaters and another couple have doctor's notes. Hagecius Junior High School, Berlin, eighth grade.

"I thought it was fifteen," I say, and the policeman shakes his head.

"Nope, fourteen. What's with the coffee machine, Horst?"

"It's broken," says Horst.

I want to talk to my lawyer.

That's the sentence I probably need to say. It's the right sentence in the right situation, as everybody knows from watching TV. And it's easy to say: I want to talk to my lawyer. But they'd probably die laughing. Here's the problem: I have no idea what this sentence means. If I say I want to talk to my lawyer and they ask me, "*Who* do you want to talk to? *Your* lawyer?" what am I supposed to answer? I've never seen a lawyer in my life, and I don't even know what I need one for. I don't know if there's a difference between a lawyer and an attorney. Or an attorney general. I guess they're like judges except on my side. I guess they know a lot more about the law than I do. But I guess pretty much everyone in the room knows more about the law than I do. First and foremost the policemen. And I could ask them. But I'll bet that if I ask the younger one if I could use some kind of lawyer right about now, he'll just turn to his partner and yell, "Hey, Horst! Horsty! Get a load of this. Our hero here wants to know if he needs a lawyer! Bleeding all over the floor, pissing himself like a champ, and wants to talk to *his lawyer!*" Ha, ha, ha. They'd laugh themselves silly. And I figure I'm bad enough off as it is. No reason to make an even bigger ass of myself. What's done is done. Nothing else is going to happen now. And a

lawyer can't change that. Whether or not we caused some bad shit is a question only a lunatic would try to argue. What am I supposed to say? That I spent the entire week lying next to the pool, just ask the cleaning lady? That all those pig parts must have just fallen from the sky like rain? There's really not much more I can do. I could pray in the direction of Mecca, and I could take a crap in my pants, but otherwise there aren't many options left.

The younger officer, who actually looks like a nice guy, shakes his head again and says, "Fifteen? No way. Fourteen. You're criminally accountable at fourteen."

I should probably have feelings of guilt at this point, remorse and all that, but to be honest I don't feel a thing. I'm just unbelievably dizzy. I reach down and scratch my calf, except that down where my calf used to be, nothing's there. My hand is streaked with violet red slime when I pull it back up. That's not *my* blood, I'd said earlier when they asked. There was enough other slime in the street for them to worry about — and I really didn't think it was my blood. But if it isn't my blood, I ask myself now, where is my calf?

I lift my pant leg and look down. I have exactly one second to think. If I had to watch this in a movie, I think to myself, I would definitely throw up. And sure enough I'm getting sick now, in this oddly calming highway police station. For a split second I see my reflection on the linoleum floor coming toward me, then it smacks into me and I'm out.

CHAPTER TWO

The doctor opens and closes his mouth like a carp. It takes a few seconds before words come out. The doctor is yelling. Why is the doctor yelling? He yells at the small woman. Then someone in a uniform steps in, a blue uniform. A policeman, one I don't know yet. The cop shouts at the doctor. How do I even know he's a doctor? He's wearing a white coat. So I guess he could also be a baker. But in the pocket of the coat is a metal flashlight and some kind of listening device. What would a baker need something like that for — to listen for a heartbeat in a bread roll? It's got to be a doctor. And this doctor is pointing at my head now and shouting. I feel around under the sheet where my legs are. They're bare. Don't feel like they're covered in piss or blood anymore. Where am I?

I'm lying on my back. Above me everything is yellow. Glance to the side: big dark window. Other side: white plastic curtain. A hospital, I'd say. The doctor would make sense then too. And, oh yeah, the small woman is also wearing scrubs and carrying a notebook. What hospital — Charité? No, no. I have no idea. I'm not in Berlin. I'll have to ask, I think to myself, but nobody is paying any attention to me. The policeman doesn't like the way the doctor is shouting at him, and he's shouting back. But the doctor just shouts even louder, and interestingly enough you can see who is calling the shots here. The doctor apparently has the authority, not the policeman. I'm worn out and also somehow happy and tired; it feels as if I'm bursting from within with happiness, and I fall back to sleep without

saying a single word. The happiness, I find out later, is called Valium. It's administered with big needles.

When I next wake up, it's all bright. The sun is shining in the big window. Something is scratching at the soles of my feet. Aha, a doctor, a different one, and he has another nurse with him. No police. The only unpleasant thing is the doctor scratching at my feet. Why is he doing that?

"He's awake," says the nurse. Not exactly a genius.

"Ah, aha," says the doctor looking at me. "And how do you feel?"

I want to say something, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Pfff."

"How do you feel? Do you know your name?"

"Pfff-fay?"

What the hell kind of question is that? Do they think I'm crazy or something? I look at the doctor and he looks at me; then he leans over me and shines a flashlight in my eyes. Is this an interrogation? Am I supposed to confess my name? Is this the torture hospital? And if it is, could he just stop lifting up my eyelids for a second and at least pretend he's interested in my answer? Of course, I don't answer anyway. Because, while I'm deciding whether I should say Mike Klingenberg or just Mike or Klinge or Attila the Hun — that's what my father says whenever he's stressed, when he's gotten nothing but bad news all day; he drinks two shots of Jägermeister and answers the phone as Attila the Hun — I mean, as I'm deciding whether to say anything at all or to skip it altogether given the situation, the doctor starts saying something about "four of these" and "three of these" and I pass out again.

CHAPTER THREE

There's a lot of things you can say about hospitals, but you can't say they're not nice. I always love being in the hospital. You do nothing all day long, and then the nurses come in. They're all super young and super friendly. And they wear those thin white outfits that I love because you can always see what kind of underwear they have on underneath. Just why I think that's so cool, I'm not sure. Because if they wore those outfits on the street, I'd think it was stupid. But inside a hospital it's great. I think so, anyway. It's a little like those mafia movies, when there's a long silence before one gangster answers another, and they just stare at each other. "Hey!" A minute of silence. "Look me in the eyes!" Five minutes of silence. In regular life that would be stupid. But when you're in the mafia, it's not.

My favorite nurse is from Lebanon and is named Hanna. Hanna has short dark hair and wears normal underwear. And that's cool: *normal underwear*. Other kinds of underwear always look a bit sad. On most people. If you don't have Megan Fox's body, it can look a little desperate. I don't know. Maybe I'm weird, but I like normal underwear.

Hanna is actually still studying to be a nurse. This is her residency or whatever. Before she comes into my room she always pokes her head around the corner and then taps on the door frame with two fingers. Which I think is very thoughtful. And she comes up with a new name for me every day. First I was Mike, then Mikey, then Mikeypikey — which I thought sounded like some old Finnish name. But

that wasn't the end. I was Michael Schumacher and Attila the Hun, then pig killer, and finally *the sick bunny*. For that alone I'd love to stay here in the hospital for a year.

Hanna changes my bandages every day. It hurts pretty bad, and I can see from the look on her face that it hurts her to cause me pain too.

"The most important thing is for you to be comfortable," she always says when she's finished. And then I always say I'm going to marry her one day or whatever. Unfortunately she already has a boyfriend. Sometimes she just comes by and sits on the side of my bed because I don't really get any other visitors, and we have great conversations. Real adult conversations. It's so much easier to talk with women like Hanna than with girls my age. If anyone can tell me why that is, I'd love to hear it, because I sure can't figure it out.

CHAPTER FOUR

The doctor is less talkative. “It’s just a piece of flesh,” he says. “Muscle,” he says. “No big deal, it’ll grow back, there’ll just be a little indentation or scarring,” he says. “It’ll look sexy.” And he says this every day. Every day he looks at the bandages and tells me the same thing — there’ll be a scar, that it’s no big deal, that it’ll look as if I fought in a war. “As if you’ve been to war, young man, and women like that,” he says, and he says it in a way that’s supposed to sound somehow profound. But I don’t understand whatever the deep meaning is. Then he winks at me, and I usually wink back even though I don’t understand. The man has helped me out, after all, so I can help him out too.

Later on, our conversations improve, mostly because they become more serious. Though actually it’s just one conversation. Once I’m able to limp around, he takes me to his office — which, oddly enough, has only a desk and no medical devices — and we sit across the desk from each other like a couple of CEOs closing a deal. On the desk is a plastic model of a human torso with removable organs. The large intestine looks like a brain, and the paint on the stomach is peeling.

“I need to talk to you,” says the doctor, which has got to be the stupidest beginning to a conversation that I can possibly imagine. I wait for him to start talking, but unfortunately when someone begins a conversation that way they never start talking right away — somehow *I need to talk to you* and not talking always go together. The

doctor stares at me and then drops his gaze and opens a green folder. He doesn't throw it open; he carefully opens it the way I imagine he would peel open the stomach of a patient on the operating table. Cautiously, deftly, very seriously. The man is a surgeon after all. Congratulations on that, by the way, I'm sure someone's real proud.

What comes next is less interesting. Basically he wants to know how I got my head injury. Also where I got my other injuries — from the autobahn, as I had already explained, okay, okay, he knew that already. But the head injury, yeah, well, I fell off my chair at the police station.

The doctor puts the fingers of his hands together. Yes, that's what it says in the report: Fell from chair. At the police station.

He nods. Yes.

I nod too.

"It's just us here," he says after a pause.

"I see that," I say like an idiot, and wink first at the doctor and then for good measure at the plastic torso.

"You don't have to be worried about saying anything here. I'm your doctor, and that means our conversations are completely confidential."

"Okay," I say. He'd said something similar to me a few days before, and now I understand. The man is sworn to secrecy and he wants me to tell him something that he can keep secret. But what? How unbelievably cool it is to piss your pants out of fear?

"It's not just a question of misconduct. It's also a question of negligence. They shouldn't have taken you at your word, do you understand? They should have examined you and called a doctor immediately. Do you know how critical your condition was? And you say you *fell off the chair*?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but doctors are a skeptical bunch. I mean, they wanted something from you. And as your attending doctor ..."

Yeah, yeah. For God's sake. Confidentiality. I get it. What does he want to know? How someone falls off a chair? Sideways, down, and plop. He shakes his head for a long time; then he makes a small gesture with his hand — and suddenly I understand what he's trying to figure out. My God, I'm so slow sometimes. So damn embarrassing. Why didn't he just ask?

"No, no!" I shout, waving my hands wildly in the air like I'm swatting a swarm of flies. "It was all legit! I was sitting in the chair and I lifted up my pant leg to look at it, and when I did I got all dizzy and fell over. There were no *external factors*." Good phrase. Learned it from a police show.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, yes. The police were actually really nice. They gave me a glass of water and tissues. I just got dizzy and fell over." I straighten myself up in front of the desk and then demonstrate like a talented actor, twice letting myself slump to the right until I nearly fall over.

"Very well," says the doctor slowly.

He scribbles something on a piece of paper.

"I just wanted to know. It was still irresponsible. The blood loss ... they really should have ... and it did look suspicious."

He closes the green folder and looks at me for a long time. "I don't know, maybe it's none of my business, but I'd really be interested to know — though you don't have to answer if you don't want to. But what did you want — or where were you trying to go?"

"I have no idea."

"Like I said, you don't have to answer. I'm only asking out of curiosity."

"I would tell you, but if I did, you wouldn't believe me anyway. I'm pretty sure."

"I'd believe you," he says with a friendly smile. My buddy.

"It's stupid."

“What’s stupid?”

“It’s just ... well, we were trying to go to Wallachia. See, I told you you’d think it was stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid, I just don’t understand. *Where* were you trying to go?”

“Wallachia.”

“And where is that supposed to be?”

He looks at me curiously, and I can tell I’m turning red. We’re not going to delve any deeper into this. We shake each other’s hands like grown men, signaling an end to the conversation, and I’m somehow happy that I didn’t have to push the bounds of his confidentiality.

CHAPTER FIVE

I've never had any nicknames. In school, I mean. Or anywhere else, for that matter. My name is Mike Klingenberg. Mike. Not Mikey or Klinge or anything like that. Always just Mike. Except in the sixth grade, when I was briefly known as Psycho. Not like that's the greatest thing either, being called Psycho. But it didn't last long and then I was back to being Mike again.

When someone doesn't have any nicknames, it's for one of two reasons. Either you're incredibly boring and don't get any because of that, or you don't have any friends. If I had to decide between one or the other, I'd have to say I'd rather have no friends than be incredibly boring. I mean, if you're boring you won't have any friends anyway, or you'll only have friends who are even more boring than you are.

But there is one other possibility: You could be boring *and* have no friends. And I'm afraid that's my problem. At least since Paul moved away. Paul had been my friend since kindergarten, and we used to hang out almost every day — until his dumbass mother decided she wanted to live out in the country.

That was about the time I started junior high, and it didn't make things any easier. I hardly saw Paul at all after that. His new place was half a world away, at the last stop of one of the subway lines and then six more kilometers by bike from there. And Paul changed out there. His parents split up and he went nuts. I mean really crazy. Paul basically lives in the forest with his mother and just lies around brooding. He always had a tendency to do that

anyway. You really had to push him to do anything. But out there in the middle of nowhere, there's nobody to push him, so he just stew. If I remember right, I visited him three times out there. He was so depressed every time that I never wanted to go again. Paul showed me the house, the yard, the woods, and a hunting blind in the woods where he'd sit and watch animals. Except, of course, that there were no animals. Every few hours a sparrow flew by. And he jotted down notes about that. It was early in the year, right when *Grand Theft Auto IV* came out, though Paul wasn't interested in that kind of thing anymore. Nothing interested him except wild critters. I had to spend an entire day up in a tree, and then the whole thing just became too idiotic for me. Once I also secretly flipped through his notebook to see what else was in it — because there was a lot in it. Things about his mother, things written in some kind of secret code, drawings of naked women — terrible drawings. Nothing against naked women. Naked women are awesome. But these drawings were not awesome. They were just messed up. And between the sketches, in calligraphy, observations about animals and the weather. At some point he'd written that he'd seen wild boars and lynxes and wolves. There was a question mark next to the word *wolves*, and I said to him, "This is the outskirts of Berlin — lynxes and wolves, are you sure?" And he grabbed the book out of my hand and looked at me as if *I* was the crazy one. After that we didn't see each other very often. That was three years ago. And he'd once been my best friend.

I didn't get to know anybody in junior high at first. I'm not exactly great at getting to know people. And I never saw it as a major problem. Until Tatiana Cosic showed up. Or at least until I noticed her. She'd been in my class the whole time. I just never noticed her until the seventh grade. No idea why. But in seventh grade she suddenly popped up on my radar — and that's when all my misery

began. I guess at this point I should probably describe Tatiana. Because otherwise the rest of the story won't make sense.

Tatiana's first name is Tatiana and her last name is Cosic. She's fourteen years old and her parents' last name is also Cosic. I don't know what their first names are. They're from Serbia or Croatia, you can tell from their last name, and they live in a white apartment building with lots of windows. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

I could blather on about her for ages, but the surprising thing is that I actually have no idea what I'm talking about. I don't know Tatiana at all. I know the things that anyone in her class would know about her. I know what she looks like, what her name is, and that she's good at sports and English. And so on. I know how tall she is because of the physical exams they gave us on health day. I found out where she lives from the phone book. And other than that, I know basically nothing. Obviously I could describe exactly what she looks like and how her voice sounds and what color her hair is and everything. But that seems to me unnecessary. I mean, everyone can imagine what she looks like: she looks great. Her voice sounds great too. She's just great all around.

CHAPTER SIX

I guess I never explained why they called me Psycho. Because, as I mentioned, I was known as Psycho for a while. No idea what the point was. I mean, obviously I know it was supposed to suggest that I had a screw loose. But as far as I'm concerned, there were several other people who deserved the name more than I did. Frank could have been called Psycho, or Stobke, with his lighter. They're both way crazier than I am. Or the Nazi. But then again, the Nazi was already called Nazi, so he didn't need another name. And of course there was a reason that I got the name instead of anyone else. It was the result of an assignment in Mr. Schuermann's German class, sixth grade, a word prompt story. In case you don't know what a word prompt story is, it goes like this: You get four words, like "zoo,"

"ape,"

"zookeeper," and "hat," and you have to write a story that includes all of the words. Real original. Totally moronic.

The words Mr. Schuermann thought up were "vacation,"

"water,"

"rescue," and "God." Which was definitely more difficult than zoo and ape. The main difficulty was God, obviously.

We only had ethics classes, not religion, and there were sixteen kids registered as atheists in the class, including me. Even the Protestants in the class didn't really believe in God. I don't think. At least, not the way people who *really* believe in God believe. People who don't want to harm even an ant, or who are happy when someone dies