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Elisabeth Herrmann

The Cleaner

She finds the traces of truth.

Crime novel

List

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Signs of an agonisingly slow death, pools of blood, hands desperately searching for a hold. Judith Kepler has seen it all. She is a crime scene specialist. She turns crime scenes back into habitable spaces. She is a cleaner.

It is at the home of a woman who has been brutally murdered that she is suddenly confronted with her own past. The murder victim knew Judith's secret. As a child she was sent to an orphanage under mysterious circumstances. Parentage unknown. And the East German secret police was always there, in the background. When Judith begins to ask questions, she becomes the target of some powerful enemies. And nothing will ever be the same again.



Elisabeth Herrmann is one of the most exciting voices of our time. Lively and atmospheric – her writing style enthuses crime novel readers since the publication of *The Sitter* in 2005, which is currently being filmed.

With *The Cleaner*, the author now presents a suspense novel with a very unusual protagonist. The author lives in Berlin with her daughter.

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION

By Isabel Cole

It starts in the living room. The armchair across from the couch set is soaked in black blood. The woman must have sat there for some time, badly hurt, bleeding from a deep wound, before she managed to scramble to her feet. One last, vain attempt to stave off the inevitable; she comes only as far as the balcony door. Maybe she wants to get out, flee, jump. The flight instinct is irrational. On the light laminate floor the dried blood is smeared by bare soles and heavy shoes. He overtakes her, drags her back and hurls her across the room to the windows.

Judith whirls around. He must be angry. Very angry. The situation is slipping from his grasp, out of his control. He isn't getting what he wants, though he'd almost had it. He points the gun at his victim. He aims. He fires. Once. Twice. There's a bullet hole in the window. And in the wall between the windowsill and the radiator. He misses. Is he toying with her?

Borg falls to the ground. Gets up again. Drags herself through the door into the bedroom, her wounded body grazing the doorframe. She tries to close the door. In vain. He kicks it open. Raises his gun. Shoots. Once. Twice. Shoulder and arm. Ragged bloodstains on the wallpaper. But Borg is still alive. Why can't he shoot to kill? Is he talking to her? Yelling at her? She slides down the wall, followed by a wide, rust-red stain. She doesn't give up. Crawls onward. He stands over her, gun at the ready. Hits her, kicks at her. She doubles up, flounders across the cheap chenille carpet toward the bed, seeking shelter instinctively, in panic, and he watches her in her death throes, then lifts his gun one last time.

White chalk marks showed the position of the corpse between the wardrobe with its mirrored doors and the double bed. A dried pool of blood with a cloud-like silhouette where her head lay. Judith got down on her knees. She found the entry channel and the scratches from the tools the police used to get the bullet out of the floor. The crumbs scattered all around were the remnants of cerebral matter. Borg had been shot at close range.

Dizzy, Judith got up and staggered to the window. She wrenched it open, leaned out and sucked the warm, heavy air into her lungs. Something crunched under her shoes; she hoped that wasn't bone fragments or bits of the ear canal.



“It’s a job. That’s all it is.”

Dombrowski’s voice echoed in her ears as if he were standing right next to her. She remembered blood. Blood everywhere. Rivers of blood, sloshing knee-deep in the bathtub, on the tiles, on the floor.

“The stuff is pretty damn hard to get out.”

There had been four of them. One after the other, they’d left the room until she was the only one left. In the afternoon Dombrowski showed up again to see the results. A gleaming white bathroom with black tile seams.

“They’re porous, kid, no one uses scouring powder on that. What dissolves protein compounds?”

“Five-percent hydrogen peroxide solution or chlorine bleach.”

“And why aren’t you using chlorine?”

“Because there isn’t any left.”

He grumbled, “Where are the others?”

She shrugged. Dombrowski looked around the training room where, with great theatrical relish, he’d splashed around buckets of pigs’ blood that morning. This was where he tested them. This was where he saw who had the makings of a disinfectant, an exterminator or a crime scene cleaner. The room looked as good as new. Except for the tile seams.

“Couldn’t stand the sight of blood, huh?”

That was before Dombrowski had had his bypasses. He offered her a filterless cigarette. She took off her goggles. Then they sat side by side on the edge of the bathtub and smoked in silence for a while.

“And you?” he broke his silence. “How come you can?”

He was the first person to ask her that. Judith nudged the cleaning bucket at her feet a touch to the right, flicked the ash into the water and shrugged her shoulders again.

She was clean. After her last rehab she’d started off at a moving company that employed former addicts, one of many untrained workers struggling to find their way back into a world with alarm clocks, working hours and agreements that had to be kept. But the way back was a dead end. No one wanted her on the regular job market. It took just one glance at her résumé to see the system of failure in the succession of desperate, abortive beginnings. By your early 30s you’d used up all your credit. Hearing a rumor that Dombrowski was looking for people for a special



training course and not finding them, she'd registered for the test. In terse words he'd explained what the deal was: transforming the horrible into the bearable.

Dombrowski looked down at his powerful moving man's hands.

"Death isn't sleep's cousin. And it sure isn't ash and dust. It's rot, decay and decomposition. It wafts around for a while, and then something new comes along. Nothing is ever really lost on this earth. Once you know that, this can even be more than a job." He got up. "You can work for me, if you want."

Nothing is ever really lost.

Maybe that would have been the right answer to Kai's question. Maybe she should have told him that the difference between getting up in the morning and sleeping in was as big as the difference between everything and nothing. And that every day she struggled against the void anew and still hadn't figured out why the struggle was supposed to be worth it.

From the bedroom she could see her own apartment. The moon already hung in the pale evening sky. She banished all thoughts of dark spots in the countryside for stargazing and studied the building across the way. On one of the many yellow balconies a man was watering flowers. Two stories below him someone lit his smoldering barbecue. Children played between the parked cars. Stop and go traffic on the highway. Hertha Berlin had won, and lots of drivers were honking and wildly waving their blue and white scarves out the open windows. On the eighth floor of the purple building an apartment had to be cleaned so that someone else could move in two days later. Such was life: Troy without a memory.

The garbage bags stood in the middle of the room, half-full and somehow exhausted-looking. Vacant hooks on the coat-rack, no shoes, no doormat. Probably Fricke had already stuffed all the personal belongings into the garbage bags, everything the police and the forensics people had left.

Black traces of soot still clung everywhere, on door jambs, walls, light switches, doorknobs. Curd soap was the best remedy for that. She raised her hand and cautiously brushed one dark, smudged spot. Beneath the soot was the red imprint of a hand.

The armchair in the living room couldn't be salvaged, Fricke would have to take care of that. No need for a thickening agent; the blood had long since dried. Chlorine, magnesium oxide and gasoline would do for the walls and the carpet.



Pumice, sodium carbonate and chrome polish for the bathroom and the kitchen, maybe sewing machine oil if the tile seams darkened and a uniform appearance was called for. Oil was also good for adhesive left from the seals. Maybe another bottle of rubbing alcohol just in case. She'd bring the trolley so she wouldn't have to go downstairs more than once.

A pair of slippers lay under the bed. Fricke must have overlooked them. Judith knelt down, about to reach for them, and hesitated. Pink terry cloth slippers, placed exactly in the middle, lined up with millimeter precision. With a shake of her head she took them and carried them to the garbage bags in the hall. Then she inspected all the closets again. They were empty. In the bathroom a towel hung on the door, black smudges of soot showing that the forensics people had used it to dry their hands. Hastily-shed disposable gloves and the paper from adhesive films filled the wastebasket. The medicine cabinet was sealed. Judith tore the sticker and examined the contents. Nothing special except for four tins of Florena cream, smeared where the forensics people had stirred it up. She threw everything in the wastebasket, including the two rolls of toilet paper stacked up on the toilet tank. Again she hesitated. There was no roll in the holder. Instead, someone had torn the paper off piece by piece and stacked it up carefully on the toilet tank. All the edges lined up. A quirk that had nothing to do with thrift.

Judith looked at her watch. Time to call it quits. Tomorrow was another day. She grabbed the wastebasket and emptied it into one of the bags. Then she called the elevator, dragged the garbage bags inside and pressed the button for the ground floor. The hell with Fricke. He was probably already enjoying his after-work beer. The thought of a cool drink made her throat seem even drier. A bag toppled over. A neat little stack of linens tumbled out. Boil-proof cotton, ribbed, ironed. A whiff of lavender filled her nostrils. The elevator juddered into motion.

She gazed at the blue plastic bags as if they might suddenly turn into something else – no, as though this image would lead her to a different one, image after image, door after door, and suddenly Judith saw it in front of her, and the smell of lavender and floor wax filled her nostrils. Sun shone through a high window onto the floor. The shadow of its casements traced a huge cross.

The elevator doors parted before Judith like a steel curtain.

“Hello?”



She started. The dog's mistress was standing in front of her; Peppi whined on the leash.

"I expect you'll clear that away?"

Behind the woman's back a courier appeared, but warned by her sharp voice he didn't even think of addressing her. He frowned at the mind-boggling number of mailboxes, sighed, and began reading name after name.

Judith stared at the toppled garbage bag. Finally she squatted down and gathered everything up. Dishcloths, pillowcases, sweaters. A TV guide, open, as if in mockery, to the page with today's listings. Used cosmetics. Meanwhile Peppi's mistress pressed the button to keep the doors open and surveyed Judith's work with a stern gaze. Hopefully the old lady was just as good about cleaning up after her dog. He probably had the runs, considering how often she walked him.

Judith dragged the bags into the lobby. She took out her pocketknife and started scraping off the seal from Borg's mailbox.

"Excuse me," said the courier. He was dressed in green, sweating and clearly in a hurry. "I'm looking for Christina Borg."

Judith lowered the knife. "Yes?"

"Is that you?"

He turned toward her, relieved, and took a large envelope out of his bag. She raised her hand defensively.

"Christina Borg is..." She broke off. A light brown envelope. "...isn't living here anymore."

"This is an express delivery."

He held out the letter to her so she could see how urgent it was. Judith reached for it hesitantly. It was addressed by hand, in ink, with an old-fashioned meticulousness reminiscent of long-ago office clerks. Turning the envelope over, she breathed in sharply. She stared at the sender in disbelief. *Yuri Gagarin Children's Home, Strasse der Jugend 14, Sassnitz 2355*. Printed on, genuine. An original – she almost expected East German stamps. But the stamps and the postmark were new. The letter had taken three days, a long time for an express delivery.

"For Christina Borg?"

That was impossible. That just couldn't be.

"Yes. Isn't she there?"



The courier clearly took Judith for an expert on Borg. And in a way that was true.

“No. And she’s not coming back.”

“It’ll be returned to the sender, then.”

He held out his hand, but Judith hesitated.

“The sender doesn’t exist anymore. That home was closed after the Wall came down.” And a good thing, too. It no longer existed. For Judith either. But now this letter had fallen into her hands. And suddenly she realized what had puzzled her in the apartment and in the elevator. The slippers. The toilet paper. The linens, all the edges lined up.

“I can forward it, though.”

The courier scratched the back of his head. “It’s registered mail.”

“With a return receipt?” asked Judith. “Then you do have the sender.”

“No, no receipt.” The man looked at his watch. “I have to get going. So what are we going to do?”

“We” sounded good. Judith unhooked the key ring from her belt and opened Borg’s mailbox. It was empty.

“Give it to me. I’ll take care of it.”

The courier glanced at the mailbox nameplate. The fact that Judith had the key seemed to inspire his confidence.

“All right. Sign here, please.”

He took a clipboard out of his bag. Judith scrawled something unidentifiable in the name column.

“Have a nice evening,” she said.

The man nodded, relieved, and left the building, crepe soles squeaking. Judith gazed at the envelope. Sassnitz. Seagulls. Ships. The wide world, the provincial claustrophobia. A harbor town in the far north of the country. The ferries to Malmö, Ystad and Trelleborg. Narrow lanes, decaying houses. The seafood restaurant. The fish cannery. The train from West Germany. The train station. The cellar. The darkness. Cold hell.

So long ago.