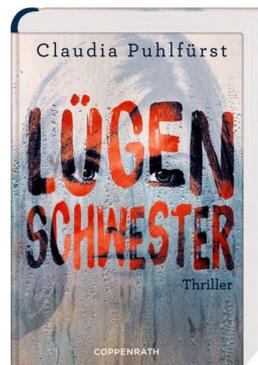


Exerpt of ***Sister Lies*** by Claudia Puhlfürst



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There was a new photo on the fridge door. Or rather, a photo from last year, which wasn't there yesterday. Sarah looked at her sister's face. Katharina's blonde hair seemed to float around her head like a starburst, and in the background the red evening sun was burning a hole in the sea. Kat was wearing her mischievous expression. Both hands were making peace signs beside her ears.

Autumn holiday. Last year, on the beach in Rethymno. Mum had booked two weeks in a five-star hotel in Crete. The trip was a reward for Kat's successful year abroad.

Sarah shut her eyes for a moment and let the images come back to her: the home of Zeus, the father of the gods: heat, foam-crested waves, the screech of seagulls, the smell of sun lotion. Katharina always used to use nut oil because she liked the smell so much. Even if it didn't have any UV protection.

Katharina always uses nut oil, Sarah corrected herself. Present tense. I have to be careful what I think and say. They'll use all this against me.

Sarah dropped the spoon back into the bowl in front of her and turned her eyes away from the photo. The cornflakes kept swelling up in her mouth. She could hear Mum banging about upstairs. For a few days now, her mother had avoided being in the kitchen while Sarah was having breakfast. When Sarah tried to swallow the half-chewed cornflakes, they seemed to want to stick like a lump in her throat. What if she choked to death on them? Would Mum come down and help her in time? Or, later, when she came down to find her daughter dead in the kitchen, would she just make a face and then call the ambulance – for form's sake – with a sense of relief? But the cornflakes went down after all.

The morning sun was streaming in from outside, and even with the windows closed you could hear the joyful twittering of birds. Sarah rubbed her eyes. She had hardly slept at night for a week now, and she had already got used to the tiredness catching up with her during the morning, usually in some boring lesson – usually right when she could least afford it, like when the teacher had just asked a *very important* question and was looking around the room.

Sarah's eyes were drawn back to the holiday photo as if they were being remote-controlled. Kat seemed to be winking at her. Sarah didn't want to think too hard about why Mum had stuck that picture up there. Right opposite her chair, so she couldn't help but look at it while she was eating.

It was quiet outside now. As if something sinister had frightened the little birds. The noise upstairs had stopped as well. The morning was holding its breath; there was only the too-loud tick of the kitchen clock.

The shrill noise of the doorbell made Sarah jump, and the spoon landed in her half-full bowl with a little splash. She looked towards the hallway and then up at the ceiling. Wasn't Mum going to come down and open the door? She seemed to be hoping the visitor would go away if nothing stirred inside the house, but it was no use. The bell rang again, and this time she hurried downstairs and along the hall. Sarah looked at the photo of her elder sister and then at the kitchen door. She could hear voices. A man and a woman. And she recognised them both.

What are they doing here again? This early in the morning?

Mum muttered a response to their greeting, then footsteps approached and the kitchen door swung open. Instead of the two officers she was expecting, there were three. The little fat one with the moustache was new.

"Good morning, Sarah." The woman waited for a reply, but Sarah's mouth stayed shut. Her throat was suddenly bone dry, and she swallowed twice and reached for her lukewarm cocoa.

The scene was like one of these modern plays. Five silent people in a shiny, polished kitchen, surrounded by an ominous exhaustion that lay over them like a heavy, damp coat, taking their breath away. Sarah had the feeling the seconds were stretching out into minutes. The woman's next words cut through the silence.

"We're going to have to ask your daughter some more questions."

Why do you have to question my child? Do you still think she's got something to do with her sister's disappearance?

Sarah silently moved her arms off the table and laced her fingers under the table top. She couldn't let anyone see how nervous she was. Mum hesitated imperceptibly before nodding. "Down at the station." The policewoman with the short, black hair gave Sarah a hard, tight-lipped stare. Her eyes flashed.

Her name was Schuster, or rather, DS Schuster. DS was the abbreviation for Detective Superintendent. It wasn't the first time she had wanted to talk to Sarah. The policewoman with the cropped hair and her quiet colleague had already questioned Sarah about Kat's disappearance several times. But *she* had always been the one in charge. DS Schuster seemed to be a real pro, steadily putting on pressure, while her colleague was the sympathetic one. Now he was standing there, saying nothing, waiting for a reaction from mother and daughter.

"May we take your daughter with us? We'll bring her back when we're done."

Can't you do it here? Can I come with her? Why wasn't Mum asking those questions?

Tiredness came over Sarah like a cloud passing suddenly across the sun. She had been chatting online until after midnight, and then surfing the net for another hour after that. Just to distract herself. From this terrible suspicion, from thoughts of her missing sister. But none of it had done any good. Even after she had switched off the light and pulled the covers up to her chin, she couldn't sleep. Healing sleep had not come to her for seven days now. With the pillow scrunched up under head, her thoughts buzzed round and round like angry wasps, bumping loudly into the walls of her skull. Sarah suppressed a yawn.

"Mrs Gessum?" the DS sounded impatient.

I don't want you to. Sarah's staying here. You're welcome to ask your questions in front of me.

Mum's mouth stayed closed. She was pressing her lips together so firmly that the colour had drained from them. And try as she might, Sarah couldn't catch her eye. Mum looked out of the window, then shut her eyes, as if trying to block out the reality of these two police officers with their expectant expressions. Sometime in the past few days she had given up defending Sarah. At first with resignation because of her apparent stubbornness, as she had called it, then with increasing anger, and now with mistrust.

Help me all the same! Sarah wanted to shout at her mother. I need you now more than ever!

But it was as if her mouth was sewn shut, her throat tight, and she couldn't get a word out however hard she tried. And Dad, who would surely have stood by her, had driven home yesterday evening – just for the time being, as he had reassured her.

"Fine." Mum wiped her hands on her pale jeans again and went to the sink. So she was seriously agreeing to these officers taking her fifteen-year-old daughter away for "questioning"?

Getting rid of the daughter who just causes her problems. I hate you!

Sarah put the cup of cocoa, the handle of which she was still clutching, down on the table and looked at the soggy mush in the bowl in front of her.

"Does she need to take anything with her?" Mum had turned her back to them and was clattering about in the sink. Gerda, who had just come in, was standing in the room wringing her hands, a distraught look on her face.

"No." DS Schuster had taken a step closer and was now waiting for Sarah to get up. *If she touches me I'll scream.*

"A jacket maybe. It cools down quickly in the evening."

Evening? How long were they planning to keep her at the station?

"Alright."

Sarah stared at her mother's back and swallowed hard. *Alright? Isn't there anything else you can say?* She cleared her throat. "Can I call Dad?"

"Later. We've got to get going."

"What about a lawyer?" Sarah looked to her mother for help, but she said nothing.

"You don't need one. We're only questioning you, and your mother has agreed to it." DS Schuster turned briefly to Mum. "In the meantime, my colleague will discuss the current situation with you."

The police woman stretched her arm out towards Sarah. Her face took on a baffled expression as Sarah suddenly leapt up and pushed past her towards the door. "I'll get my jacket." Sarah hurried upstairs. She had to pocket her phone before her two guards took her away.

Since Mum didn't seem to want to help her any more, she would have to look for support elsewhere.

"Right then, Sarah." Detective Superintendent Schuster held open the door to the interview room for Sarah and motioned her to step inside.

"Unfortunately you haven't been very talkative so far. But avoiding our questions isn't going to get us anywhere." She pulled out a chair. "You know how this works. Sit down, please."

Her quiet colleague followed her as if he was on a lead. The first time they met, he had introduced himself as Fredersen. Just a surname. No rank, nothing.

"Come on. Dawdling isn't going to make things any better."

That didn't sound good. The two of them hadn't said anything the whole time they were in the car. What did they *want* from her? The policewoman had now put a hand on Sarah's back and was pushing her gently but firmly towards the table. Sarah sniffed and sat down. She had to distract herself. These investigators mustn't see she was afraid. *Terrified*, if she was honest.

"We don't want to do anything to hurt you." DS Schuster's colleague spoke in a staccato voice. A deep voice would probably have sounded more trustworthy, but unfortunately he didn't have one of those. "It's just a few more questions. If you tell us the truth, you'll be back home in no time, Sarah." Right. And you're Santa Claus. Schuster, who had been fumbling about with some kind of machine in the background, stood up and came over to the table.

"Ready, Lars."

So Frederson's first name was Lars. Like the Little Polar Bear in the children's books. Sarah decided she was going to imagine the officer as a polar bear from now on. That would give her something else to think about. And his colleague wasn't going to be the "Snow Queen" any more; she would be Incy Wincy Spider. She might be really nice in reality, but the ugly name distracted Sarah from her fears about her sister. And from the fear that what she had done would come out.

"We're recording everything." The spider sat down heavily beside her colleague. "But of course you know that already."

Right. It's not the first time I've been here. Though Mum had been with her when she was questioned the day before. Were they even allowed to interview a minor on her own? It looked like they were. And after all, her mother had agreed, and the officers had promised to take her home when they were done.

Whenever that might be.

"Can you think why you might be here again today?" Lars Fredersen put on a fatherly expression. Or his idea of one. Sarah stared straight ahead, making the officer's dark brown jacket into a blur, and imagined she was on the beach in Rethymno. A time when everything had still been right with the world. She felt the heat of the midday sun burning her shoulders. The waves crashed in front of her. Katharina was sitting cross-legged on a towel, typing something on her smartphone. As usual, she was posting everything that happened, no

matter how trivial, on Facebook and Twitter. Sarah didn't agree with that. She didn't think the world needed to know what she'd had for lunch, which music she liked or what book she was reading.

"Sarah? We'd like to uncover the truth together with you." Fredersen's voice still sounded sympathetic. The spider would probably weigh in any minute now and threaten consequences if she didn't talk.

"Uncovering the truth" together with me. So you think I've been lying so far. Sarah tried to beam herself back onto the sandy beach. They should just get on with it and tell her what they'd found out. There must be a reason why she was sitting here again. She had nothing to say.

"Don't make it any worse. You need to cooperate with us, Sarah." Another attempt. The officer probably thought she'd be more cooperative if he said her name at the end of every other sentence. Sarah, Sarah. There was a stain on his striped shirt. It looked like egg. Sarah turned her head away. Polar Bear wasn't right for Fredersen. Little Lars was cute and clumsy. A lovable little fellow. This guy was just annoying.

"Listen to me." Schuster was leaning forward and speaking quietly. Sarah could feel the blue eyes staring at her as the officer went on speaking. "In case you're thinking we'll take you home if you stay silent, let me tell you you're wrong. You're going to stay here until we've talked about everything. So, answer the question, please. Why do you think you're here?" Sarah's stomach tied itself in knots. Something must have happened since yesterday evening.

"I have no idea."

"Remember the people from forensics came back to your house on Friday?" Fredersen had weighed in on the proceedings in his concerned voice again.

"I was at school."

"That wasn't what he asked." Schuster's voice was still quiet. "Do you remember?"

"Yes." *Of course* she remembered. Mum had looked at her so weirdly as she was telling her about the return visit from the police. Quizzical. And somehow disappointed. Her lower lip had quivered.

"You see, Sarah." That was Fredersen again. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the egg-yolk stain on his shirt. "Our colleagues went through your sister's room again. Can you think what they might have been looking for?"

"No idea" How should I know? Clothes? Personal records? Kat's phone? And why are they asking me about it?

Of course she had an idea – she wasn't stupid. Particularly as it had been forensics. On TV they always pored over things looking for fibres, fingerprints or bodily fluids. "Well, then we'll tell you." The Detective Superintendent sat up straight again and laid her folded hands on the table in front of her. "The officers found blood. And not just a few drops." Her voice was getting louder and louder. "A lot of blood. In your sister's room, on the stairs, in the hallway! Somebody had tried to get rid of it, but they weren't thorough enough! Forensics can detect even the slightest trace. And now I want to know if you can tell us why it was there."

Sarah tried desperately to suppress the trembling that threatened to overtake her whole body. As her eyes filled with tears, she quickly looked down at the scratched surface of the table.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, but it was your sister's blood." Shuster leaned back in her chair – now quite calm again.

"Do you have an explanation for how it could have got there?" Fredersen was trying the sympathetic routine again.

But Sarah could only think of one thing: how frightened she was for Katharina. If forensics had found blood, then something really bad must have happened to her sister.

"Maybe Kat cut herself?" Her voice sounded like a small child's, and Sarah cursed herself for her weakness.

"With that much blood, it must have been a deep cut. Or do you know anything about a possible injury?" Sarah shook her head and swallowed down the bitter taste in her mouth. One of the scratches on the table looked like an arrow pointing at her. "I need the toilet."

"Of course." Was Schuster's tone scornful now?

“Do you have anything to do with your sister’s disappearance? Either way, you know more than you’re telling us. Your behaviour since Katharina went missing clearly indicates that.” She was sunk. “I’m desperate for the loo. Really.” A quick, imploring glance at Fredersen. They couldn’t leave her to stew here! Didn’t that count as torture, when you didn’t let someone go to the toilet? Particularly when that person was a minor? Fredersen seemed to be thinking something similar. He got up. “Petra will go with you.” Petra? The poison spider had a first name? The Detective Superintendent quickly got up as well and waited for Sarah to stand. “Come with me.” She nodded to her colleague. “We’ll be back in a minute.” The hallway smelled of disinfectant. There were unidentifiable streaks on the Lino. Schuster surely wouldn’t go all the way to the cubicle with her, would she? The few minutes alone were her only hope of rescue.

“It’s just there.” The officer pointed to the door sign and waited for Sarah to open the door. Then she squeezed into the small room with her. “I’ll wait here.”

Sarah stumbled through the open toilet door into the cramped cubicle, snapped the lock shut and pulled her phone out of her back pocket before audibly lifting the lid, pulling her trousers down and sitting down with a groan. She had to distract the DS with toilet noises.

Luckily her phone was always on silent. As her fingers darted across the screen, she listened for noises outside. Did Schuster suspect anything?

BEING INTERROGATED AT THE POLICE STATION. CALL MY DAD.

Now the toilet door squeaked. The spider was coming closer.

“Do you need much longer? I’m not hearing anything!”

Sarah typed CAN’T DO THIS ANY MORE and called out: “Nearly done!” At the moment the phone vibrated to confirm the message had been sent, she pulled the flush.