Bettina Maass-Muenster

The Curse
Die if you dare!

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For you.

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Emily Watson breathed a sigh of relief as the school gong loudly announced the end of the lesson and watched as her English class noisily stood up and left the room.
A shy girl with long blond hair brought up the rear, turned around in the door again and said: “Goodbye, Miss Watson.”
Emily smiled at her and watched her laughing and joining her friends.
Silence at last.
She let the sudden calm in the room affect her and took a deep breath in and out. Outside the window, New York’s traffic billowed, a constant, never-ending background noise. It had become so flesh and blood to Emily in the six years she had been living in the Big Apple that she barely noticed it.
The noise, the car horns and sirens were part of the city, formed its heartbeat. Those who lived in New York and loved the city adapted to this heartbeat, moved in its rhythm and danced to its beat.

Her love for the city had not only led Emily to teach her offspring years ago. Her hobby also took her into the bowels of the metropolis and she had published her third New York crime novel only a few months ago. Currently, she was already working feverishly on the fourth volume and was completely integrated into this work.

At the age of twenty-one, she had come to the city to leave behind the legacy of her childhood in England and find a new home here. The shattered relationship with her mother

and broken friendships ... all this receded into the background in New York and no longer had any value. Besides, no one here asked her questions about her family and the past she couldn't answer. She had come to New York as a blank sheet of white paper and had begun to write her own story.

Her old life in England had gradually faded. The dark memories sank into nothingness, were whitewashed by the magnificence of Big Apple and its dispersion.

Emily's childhood had been different from that of other children. She hardly had any family, looked enviously at the parties and family celebrations of her classmates. Her relatives had all died early. Emily, as far back as she could remember, had only ever had her parents until her father also died a sudden and unexpected death when she was still a child. To this day, Emily refused to believe that it had been suicide.

'*What happened to your father?*'

'*Why did all your relatives die so early?*'

She didn't know the answers to these and other questions herself, neither in her childhood nor today, because Mrs Watson had evaded an explanation for so long that her daughter finally got tired of asking. She didn't know whether a series of unfortunate accidents had befallen the family, or whether there was a mysterious illness going around that her mother was determined not to tell her about. The rumor mill was simmering, and Emily was just as smart as everyone else and didn't know anything.

As if this life full of unanswered questions wasn't enough, she was kept at home almost like in a prison. Every step, every breath she took was guarded with argus eyes by her mother. It was overwhelming and inexorably crumbled the façade of her healthy family life. At first, it was just fine

cracks that were easy to ignore. Small quarrels that hardly hurt. The older she became, the more vehement her attempts to break out of this cocoon became. The mother-daughter relationship got into trouble, broke up. Until she could no longer stand it and fled, right after graduating from school. The Atlantic seemed just big enough to escape her mother's control and to have enough room to breathe freely. The contact broke off.

Here in New York Emily had found a new home. She had studied and created her own universe in which she lived predominantly alone and withdrawn. Trusting other people was difficult for her. Nevertheless, she had found two friends at New York University with whom she still met regularly today. Meredith and Becky had taught her to have fun, to enjoy life, and she was very grateful for that.
All other contacts remained on a purely professional level, either in the high school staff room or at the publishing house that helped her publish her crime novels.
Her best friend was Meredith. From the very beginning, they had been on the same wavelength and had built up an intimate connection that developed by itself. Meredith had also studied teaching and worked at a high school in Brooklyn. After what she said about her work, Emily was happy to have found a job in Manhattan. Her friend was a teacher with heart and soul and had the big dream of teaching at a private school in time to escape from the environment of social hotspots. Emily's goal was another: she wanted to see her crime novels on the bestseller lists. Writing was her great passion, but there was still a long way to go. One more reason for her to put her heart and soul into her current book project.

Emily came home in the early afternoon and hung her jacket exhausted on the coat hook next to the door. She lived in a small apartment in an old, dirty brick building in the heart of Queens, which was in urgent need of renovation. She had made the most of the interior of her apartment: thick, soft carpets lay all over the worn linoleum, the sand-colored sofa was stocked with bright cushions, and clean curtains hung from the freshly cleaned windows. In the middle of the living room, half a meter from the back of the sofa, stood a room divider - an oversized shelf without a back wall, in whose open compartments there were tons of books, boxes and knick-knacks. Beyond this artificial wall, Emily had created a small office. A large desk with a black metal base and a heavy glass plate stood against the wall by the window, so that she could watch the hustle and bustle on New York's streets while writing.
On the side above the desk hung a shelf on the wall, where she kept all her school documents. Her book notes, on the other hand, formed a colorful hodgepodge in two compartments of the open space divider. Despite the thousand little things and figures that encouraged each of the rare visitors to her apartment to a fascinating treasure hunt, everything had its fixed place and an immovable order.

With a freshly cooked cup of coffee, she sat down in the cozy leather desk chair. Outside it was raining cats and dogs. The drops ran down the windowpane in irregular paths, blurring their view of the city. Emily was turning on her computer, sipping hot coffee, and was about to start writing her book when the ringing of the phone ripped her out of her thoughts. Annoyed, she leaned over the desk and

picked up the receiver, which was standing in a corner of the table.
“Yes, please?”
“This is Edward Caine of Caine und Partner, lawyers in London. Am I talking to Miss Emily Watson?”
The familiar English accent made her shudder. It had been a long time since she had heard or spoken British English. Nervously, she stood up, clamped the receiver under her ear and crossed her arms in front of her chest. With a wildly beating heart, she replied hoarsely: “Yes, that’s me. What can I do for you?”
“Well, actually I think I can do something for you, Miss Watson. I represent your mother, Misses Erica Watson.”
Emily’s blood froze in her veins.
Six years.
For so long there was radio silence between the two women. Six years without phone calls, letters or Christmas cards.
Why was she now called by her lawyer?
“Is there something wrong with my mother?”
Silence.
It expanded, strangely surreal.
Emily could literally hear the solicitor looking for the right words. Eventually, she couldn’t take it any longer and decided to help him out.
“Is my mother ill?”
“No, she’s not ill. Miss Watson, your mother passed away the day before yesterday. I’m very sorry.”
Deadly silence suddenly descended on the small apartment. Even the street noise seemed to have fallen silent, and the rain hardly dared to knock on the window. Emily didn’t even hear the ticking of the little clock that stood in the middle of her glass table.

“How did it happen?”
It was little more than a whisper. Her throat was dried out. She wanted to grab her cup of coffee, but then couldn’t manage to take a sip. Drinking at all suddenly seemed totally wrong to her. Her mother was dead. She couldn’t just have a drink. That being said... Hadn’t the moment arrived to burst into tears and desperately put away the phone?
She felt dull, empty.
“Eh... Excuse me? Sorry, I didn’t understand you. Could you repeat that again?”
Mr Caine had said something, but it had passed her by unheard.
“The cause of death has not yet been clearly determined. A neighbor found your mother in the late evening hours when she hadn’t turned up to an appointment. So far, heart failure has been assumed. The postmortem will possibly find more conclusive evidence.”
“Okay,” Emily replied tonelessly.
“Miss Watson, the autopsy will probably be done in the next few days. I can fax the result to you or send it by post if you want.”
“That won’t be necessary. I’ll come to London myself.”
It was out before she had thought about it. But when she realized the significance of the statement, it really did seem like the right thing to do. Her mother’s affairs had to be settled. Certainly, there was a will. In addition, it had to be clarified what should happen to the belongings of Erica Watson.
Emily had no idea what she would encounter. And worst of all, she was alone. Apart from her mother, there had been no other relatives. She didn’t have any friends in England, and there was no man in her life on whose

support she could have relied. She couldn't even say with certainty that she wanted to fly to England. Nor did she feel any grief. Rather, she believed that this was something that was usually done in such a situation.
"Are you sure you can get here so quickly?"
"I'm a teacher. Another colleague will stand in for me. Please give me your exact address and phone number. I will contact you as soon as I'll be in London. Oh, and one more thing: Is my mother's address still up-to-date, or has she moved? We haven't had any contact for years, so ..."
"She was still living in the old cottage. That's where she was found - in the kitchen."
Emily felt herself getting sick, ended the conversation and fled to the bathroom to vomit.

The following evening, it was a Wednesday, Emily and her friend Meredith were sitting in their favorite Italian 'Amore'. Exhausted, Emily sipped on her Campari-Orange. Her friend swung her bright red curls backwards and once again shook her head.
"Your mother was only in her mid-fifties! You don't just drop dead at that age! Have they already ruled out suicide?"
"The solicitor hasn't said anything yet. Only that they currently assume a cardiac arrest. But the heart always stops at death, doesn't it? Therefore, you can't take this statement too seriously!"
After Meredith's sceptical look she added: "Yes, *I know* this is a medical diagnosis. I was only saying that."
She sighed and didn't even let herself be cheered up by the big pizza that was placed in front of her nose at that moment: Fungi, extra spicy, with artichoke hearts.

“Enjoy it, dear. Who knows if you’ll find decent food in England!”
Her friend smiled tiredly. “I’ll probably have to make a tour of the local restaurants myself, as there’s hardly anybody to welcome me.”
“Why not? You’ll have had girlfriends in your youth. A gang of neighboring girls or something like that.”
Sadly, Emily shook her head. “My family was always shunned in a way. The fact that my name is Watson was the ultimate contact killer and nipped all friendships in the bud. Rumors were going around all the time. Why my family members died so young and things like that. Unfortunately, my parents didn’t tell me anything about it. They probably hoped it would go away by keeping quiet. I don’t know how many times they told me not to worry about it. Easier said than done, if you have the whispering of others in your ears all the time and are looked at like a leper. Sometimes I had the feeling that the other children were afraid of me, as were their parents. We were outsiders, and there was nothing I could do about it.”
Listlessly, she poked around in a mushroom. The memories didn’t exactly increase her motivation to fly to England.
Meredith took a sip of her wine and looked at Emily exploring.
“What do you think why it was like that?”
“I have no idea. All I know is that all my relatives died quite early. And then my father died, too. I was just eight years old. He supposedly committed suicide. That was the icing on the cake. People got very excited talking about what terrible illnesses could have killed my relatives and what probably drove my father to his death. I never found out what was actually behind it. I begged my mother to tell

me, once and again. I knew she knew the real background. I could see it in her eyes. Her whole behavior ... she knew what was going on. Her silence has destroyed our relationship. I just couldn't get close to her. She was like a wall."
"Maybe you'll find out more about it when you fly there."
"Yes, maybe. The funny thing is... I don't feel anything. No grief. I threw up yesterday after the solicitor's call, but apart from that... My mother died. Shouldn't I be sad? Even though we were no longer in contact? But I feel nothing, except quite a reluctance to get on this plane tomorrow."
Meredith looked at her friend lovingly. "Sweetheart, you're still in shock. The grief will certainly come. Everything takes time."
Emily shrugged her shoulders and finally enjoyed her pizza. Brooding didn't get her anywhere. She wanted to get everything done as quickly as possible and then return to New York. The last thing she wanted was to open old wounds.

Two hours later, the two women said goodbye to each other outside the restaurant.
"And you're sure you don't want me to go with you?"
"I don't know how long it will take and what exactly will have to be done. But I'll call you in between, okay?"
"Definitely when you've arrived, do you hear me? I want to be sure you're doing well."
After a warm hug, Emily sneaked home lost in thought.