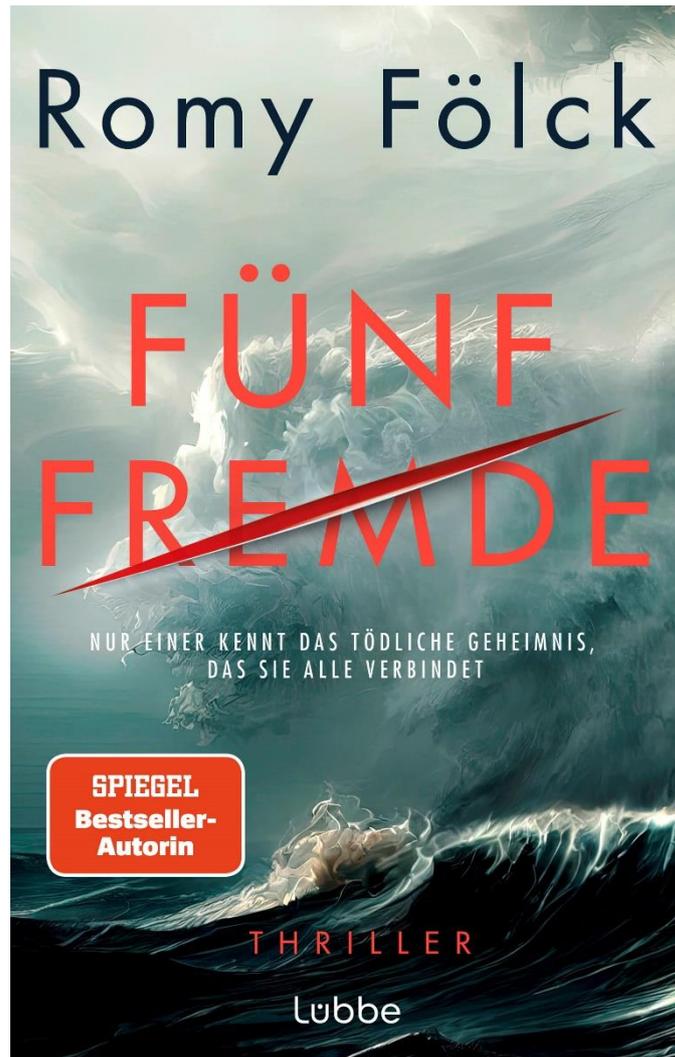


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FIVE STRANGERS

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



Thriller

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PROLOGUE

CHARLOTTE HAHNEL

Neuwerk Island, 31 August 1995

Darkness gives way to light, night to day, despair to fresh hope. Not long after sunrise, Charlotte is back on her feet. She has slept badly again, just like the previous eight nights. Whenever she dozes off, she gets caught in strange dreams, chasing after shapes, running from dark shadows. She rubs her tired eyes and makes herself a strong coffee in the deserted kitchen of the school residential centre. Black, with a little sugar. She drinks it far too hot, but she doesn't want to lose a minute of the day. At the door she pulls on her wellingtons and a waterproof, because showers have fallen on the island in the night. For hours, while waiting for sleep, she listened to the rain drumming against the window of the little staff room and to the noises an empty building makes at night. Only a week ago the place had been full of people. Two school classes and their teachers had spent wonderful days here on Neuwerk.

Until that night.

Until the unspeakable happened.

Charlotte shivers as she takes her first steps outside. Since the two children vanished, she can't seem to get warm at all.

"It's not your fault," the headteacher at her school said. "You did everything by the book."

Whenever she recalls those words – which is often – they make her feel slightly sick. The two pupils were in her care. Yes, they slipped out of the dormitory in secret during the night. But there's no getting away from it – she and her colleagues had been entrusted with supervising the children, and with that came responsibility.

After three days of fruitless searching, everyone left. The parents of the missing children stayed a few days longer, but they left yesterday too, because no one believes the missing children, Isa and Janosch, can still be found on Neuwerk. Only Charlotte has stayed, walking the island every day on foot, looking for any trace of Isa and Janosch.

She climbs up onto the dyke and heads east along the salt marshes that link land and sea. Geese cackle hoarsely. A few hares take off in long bounds and vanish into the lush green. An idyllic strip of land in the Wadden Sea, which has always meant pure happiness to Charlotte and which, for eight days now, has brought her greatest misery.

For days the police combed every corner of the island for the children. Day and night officers from Hamburg's riot police scoured the three square kilometres. Even the Lower Saxony authorities lent assistance. They searched every yard, house, stable, and shed on the island, police and residents together. In the end the search for the two teenagers was called off, because there was simply nowhere left to look. If they went swimming at night and drowned, the sea might give them back one day. If they set off alone across the mudflats and were caught by the tide, perhaps not even that. Off Neuwerk and Scharhörn, plenty of sailors have drowned. The bodies of the poor souls who washed ashore lie now in the cemetery of the nameless. The others are on the seabed.

Charlotte clenches her teeth and quickens her pace. She is heading towards the Ostbake, one of the island's historic structures and landmarks. It dates back to the seventeenth century and was built to help the captains of the buoy-laying boats find their bearings on the Elbe. Charlotte could reel off more background information, the kind she gave the pupils when she took them to visit the beacon. What she never told them was that this seamark is, for her, an almost magical place, something that stirs her, deep inside. She looks up at the round top of the so-called Klappmützenbake. The wooden structure, over twenty-seven metres tall,

rises high above the island. Seagulls circle overhead, throwing their harsh cries down at the lone figure below. Charlotte always stands here for a long time, staring out to sea, breathing the clear air, hoping for an answer.

Where are you? she asks silently. As she does every day.

Sea fog drifts in from the distance over the water like a white wall. Minutes later, thick banks of it reach the island like an army of translucent riders. It wraps the land around her so quickly and closes down the view so rapidly that she can't even start back. From the Elbe estuary she hears the foghorn of a ship.

It is as if she's the only person on the island, alone out here with the dead – a frightening scenario. Charlotte takes a deep breath and sets off, concentrating on the crest of the dyke beneath her boots. But she can't see what's ahead, she can only feel her way forward. She no longer has any sense of distance. Has she walked ten metres, or fifty? The fog blinds her, but it muffles almost every sound too. Surely there must be other walkers out. The woman who takes her dog out in the mornings. The older couple she always has a brief chat with. But there's no one out here in the fog. Everyone else probably knew it was coming, and that a walk would be impossible.

Carefully she inches on, sweat gathering under her waterproof. What if she strays off the path and walks straight into the sea? How far away is the water? Is it low tide or high water on the flats? She can't remember.

What if she got lost here herself, on Neuwerk, now? Would her headteacher still be so understanding of her stubbornness then? She is, after all, the only one who didn't take the ferry back to the mainland. After the disappearance of the two teenagers, and the grinding days of searching, the pupils and staff just wanted to go home. Charlotte understood that. But once the last police operation was called off, she asked to be allowed to stay. She won't leave until she finds out what happened to the two young people in her care, even if she has to spend the autumn here. And that's no picnic on this tiny scrap of land in the Wadden Sea, with less than thirty inhabitants.

She must have gone almost the whole way round the island. Has she already passed the cemetery of the nameless? What can she use as a guide?

The houses. At some point, following the dyke, she'll reach the hotels and restaurants. They've put benches up there, a landmark. For a moment she thinks the fog is thinning, and that she can make out the salt marshes and the sea. But it's an illusion. The thick breath of the sea closes around her again.

Then, over there. Charlotte can make out something in the murk. A red speck in the fog, growing clearer by the second. She can't tell what, or who, it is, but she starts running as fast as she can. A small figure gradually emerges from the haze. Her breath catches as she recognises her.

"ISA!" She's almost sprinting now. Is it really Isa, in her red raincoat? The girl who has been missing for eight days, here on the dyke? Charlotte wipes the moisture from her eyes. Is this real, or is she hallucinating?

"Isa?" She reaches her and puts her hands on the girl's narrow shoulders. The figure looks at her without a word. Her eyes are open, but they seem to look straight through her.

"Isa? It's me, Charlotte Hahnel."

The girl doesn't react. A tear runs down her cheek, or is it just a droplet, the moisture from the fog?

"Isa, are you all right?" Charlotte crouches in front of her and looks up. Her heart is hammering. "Where's Janosch?" she asks. "Is he with you?"

The girl doesn't answer. She stares into the fog as if she can't hear her. Charlotte stands again and takes her hands. They are ice-cold, like the pale fingers of a corpse.

"JANOSCH!" Charlotte screams, turning this way and that, shouting the boy's name over and over, but she doesn't let go of Isa, who still shows no sign of life. Janosch remains invisible, and the thick fog smothers every sound.

"You're frozen through." Charlotte pulls off the girl's raincoat, which drops to the ground like a bright red skin. She rubs Isa's hands until they feel a little warmer and some colour returns.

“Where have you been all this time?” she asks again.

The missing girl looks her in the eye, but says nothing.

“If you know where Janosch is, you have to tell me.” The girl stares at her, motionless, almost as though unbelieving. No reaction.

“Please. Say something.”

Isa stands there with her arms hanging limp, tracking every movement Charlotte makes in her agitation. Charlotte gets her to one of the staff rooms, and tucks her into bed with a hot-water bottle. She considers locking the door so the girl can’t disappear again, but leaves it open. Isa is back. Now they just need to find the boy.

Charlotte reaches the office on the ground floor, goes to the landline, lifts the receiver. The dial tone drills into her ear. Who should she tell first, that one of the children has turned up? The police, the parents, the education authority?

She calls Ole Lundt, the hotel owner who is also the island’s elected representative. He has his fingers in every pie here, and he’s the head of the volunteer fire brigade too. Lundt needs to put a new search party together immediately. If Isa is back, Janosch can’t be far away. Every available person on Neuwerk needs to head out one more time. After that, Charlotte calls the Hamburg police missing persons contact, who promises to send a helicopter to take the girl to the nearest hospital, and officers to Neuwerk for the renewed search. Only then does Charlotte call the headteacher back in Hamburg to tell him that one of the missing pupils has returned alive and, it seems, unhurt. Impatiently she waits out the flood of relief and the empty phrases, which bounce off her. Yes, suddenly they’re all grateful she stayed and believed the children could be found. She ends the call at last, lips pressed tight. No time to lose.

In the kitchen by the back door, Charlotte puts the kettle on and fills a teapot, and sets out two cups, honey, and a few rusks from her breakfast on a tray. Then she carries it upstairs to the room where she put Isa to bed.

She goes in and starts, because the girl is standing at the window and doesn’t react when Charlotte sets the tray down on the table with a clatter.

“Isa? What is it?”

Charlotte comes up behind her. Has Isa seen something outside? The fog has almost completely lifted. Together they look out over the forecourt of the centre towards the floodgates that mark the entrance to the Turmwurt, the cluster of buildings surrounded by its own extra dyke. But there's no one to be seen out there this morning.

What has Isa been through these last few days? Where has she been? What happened to Janosch, that he isn't with her? Questions on questions, which Charlotte would love to ask, but she doesn't want to overwhelm her.

"Here, I brought you tea. And some rusks. It's all I've got, I'm afraid. But I can go to the island shop and get something, if you want." Gently she takes the girl's arms and turns her towards her. "We'll get you off this island today. If you're frightened of someone, you won't have to be any more. I'll stay with you until the helicopter lands."

Isa starts to tremble, her whole body shaking. Charlotte guides her back to the bed and wraps a wool blanket around her slight frame. The girl sits there, staring at the floor, still not saying a word. Her arms rest on her knees.

"Are you hurt?" Charlotte steps closer, crouches beside her, and points to Isa's left wrist.

The skin there is red and swollen. Isa covers the spot with her other hand, but Charlotte gently moves it away. A burn, she thinks. But it doesn't look accidental – it has a shape. A twisted pattern, a spiral.

The girl snatches her arm back and hides it. Charlotte will point it out to the paramedics later.

Suddenly voices rise in the building. Someone calls Charlotte's name. She starts to leave the staff room to tell them where she is. Then she feels a cold hand in hers. Isa grips her tight and looks up at her, eyes wide with fear. Her mouth is open, as if she wants to speak, but she stays silent.

[...]

CHAPTER 2

SINJE BIANCHI

Rome, Trastevere, 9 October 2025

The fan with the big floral pattern was kitsch, but wonderfully practical. At first, when Giancarlo brought it back from one of his trips to Asia, she'd meant to throw it out. Then it disappeared into a cupboard. Since her menopause symptoms started, Sinje was quietly grateful it now sat within reach beside her desk. She enjoyed the faint draught as she fanned herself. The day had begun blustery. Then the sun asserted itself and the outside temperature shot up to something like summer. Only a small breeze made the curtain at the terrace door billow, then fall still again.

Sinje put the fan down and drank a few thirsty gulps of water. It was warm in the flat because she hadn't drawn the heavy curtains this morning, something she never did in autumn. When the days grew shorter, she wanted to savour every hour of daylight. She got up and checked the thermometer by the terrace door. Twenty-six degrees in the shade, and it was early October. She dropped back into the wicker chair, exhausted, and leaned against the cushion. On the screen, the cursor blinked, as if waiting for its next instruction.

Should she revise the next scene as well, or take a break? She was aware of a dull hunger, but what was she meant to eat? There was nothing in the place except olives and an out-of-date bag of crisps. Once again

she'd forgotten to shop, so absorbed in her text these last few days that she didn't even have bread in the house. Should she nip down to the bar and get a couple of *tramezzini*?

A dull bang sounded in the distance. Startled pigeons flew off the roof opposite. She closed the laptop. Enough for today. The cannon went off every day at exactly noon from the Gianicolo, the hill above Trastevere. It was a local ritual introduced by one of the popes at the end of the nineteenth century, so that all the churches would ring their bells at the same time. For Sinje, it was the signal to go and find lunch, after working almost the whole night.

She slipped into her silver thong sandals, fixed her tousled hair in the mirror as best she could, added a touch of lipstick so she looked vaguely fit to be seen, and left the attic *appartamento* Giancarlo had left her when he died. She was still grateful to her late husband for it, not only for making it possible for her to move to this beautiful world city in the early 2000s, but also because he'd quietly provided for her future before leaving her here on her own. It meant that, as a freelance journalist, she always had a roof over her head, even when things got tight. Since the pandemic, commissions didn't land on her desk as often, and she'd had to ration her savings.

And the book she was working on day and night was meant to bring in enough to see her through her old age. True crime was the latest craze on the crime market, and if her book turned out to be the hit she imagined, another book or two surely wouldn't be out of the question. She was convinced that once it was published, a few of her old colleagues would remember her and get in touch, hoping for a slice of the cake. She'd wrap them round her little finger. What her book needed was good press.

In the bar next door, the barman, Alessio, handed her an *espresso doppio* and two *tramezzini*, white-bread slices, one with tuna and egg, one with cheese and ham. She stood at the counter beside him and let herself be drawn into a bit of small talk. Sometimes she thought he was flirting with her. But he did that all day long. Whether it was her or other women, Alessio made them all feel wanted. Maybe that was why the bar drew so many single women. In her early forties, Sinje felt she was still on the

market. Why not go out with a younger man? There was no one to talk her out of it but herself.

As she ate, she soaked up the lively buzz of the street. Only then did she realise she hadn't been outside in days. Alessio complained about the crowds of tourists still pressing through the narrow lane, even now, in October. She decided not to point out that his tiny bar lived off holiday money. He was interrupted by a businessman in suit trousers and Birkenstock sandals and turned to the new customer.

Sinje looked up when she suddenly heard a familiar language. A young German couple on the other side of the street were talking animatedly about the eye-watering prices in the Italian capital. Sinje enjoyed hearing her mother tongue, even if she preferred to keep her distance from Germans here in Rome. The couple took out water bottles and filled them at the drinking fountain set into the wall opposite. The young woman glanced up, shading her eyes against the sun.

"Didn't you say it would only be twenty degrees today?" she asked her partner, accusingly. He shrugged. So what? But she was right. This week it was easily three or four degrees warmer than usual for October. The heat hung in the lane. Even Rome wasn't spared the climate crisis.

Sinje took the last bite and waved to Alessio for another espresso. Somewhere children were laughing, their mother shouting at them because they wouldn't behave. Then a Vespa rattled down the alley. Rome's soundtrack, the one Sinje loved, and would never swap for the frantic noise of German cities. A *ping* on her smartphone pulled her back to her own concerns. She'd set up various Google Alerts. This time it was the keyword "Neuwerk". She read the notification and felt a growing thrill which, the further she read, tipped into unease.

She rummaged for cash in her trouser pocket, threw a note on the counter (Alessio was distracted by a pretty Italian woman), and hurried out. She took the stairs two at a time, fumbling to get the key into the lock, and flipped open her laptop. The message was waiting there too, the same one that had sent her racing upstairs. She skimmed the whole text, thinking hard. Then she read the headline again and made a decision.

NEUWERK DRAMA: Thirty years later, bereaved parents visit the island and the school residential centre where their son vanished without a trace in 1995.

There was only one way to get more information. She had to go there.

She booked a flight to Hamburg, a train ticket to Cuxhaven, and two hotel rooms, one in Cuxhaven, another on Neuwerk. In the bedroom she pulled her wheeled suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe and packed long trousers and warm jumpers, sturdy shoes, her bright scarf, and her padded waterproof. Where she'd be spending the next few days, it was turning decidedly chilly and unpleasant. And she knew she didn't just need weatherproof clothing; she needed a kind of armour for her nerves. When she pulled the flat door shut behind her and got into the taxi, dark clouds had gathered over Trastevere, like a bad omen.



SINJE BIANCHI
Ferry to Neuwerk, 10 October 2025

Sinje swallowed the bitter saliva and felt the pressure in her abdomen, and the nausea, ease at last. She was unspeakably relieved. Ever since the stranger gave her the ginger, which she was still chewing, her stomach had gradually settled. Without that kind gesture she probably wouldn't have got through the choppy crossing quite so unscathed. She'd been wondering whether she ought to get a plastic bag out of her handbag, when the woman beside her had pressed the piece of ginger root into her palm. Sinje shot her a quick look.

The woman seemed lost in thought. Deep lines were etched around her mouth, making her look older than she probably was. Mid-forties, Sinje thought, maybe younger, maybe older. Once you were past forty, the last

few years mattered. Anyone who'd run their body and soul into the ground began to look older sooner than someone who'd lived an easy life. Then again, maybe it was mostly down to genes, and all the anti-ageing products, and lifestyle, were wildly overrated. The woman's tired eyes suggested months of stress, the dark circles under them spoke of little sleep. She was dressed in navy and black, head to toe. A bit of colour might have suited her. She had a few grey hairs at her temples and clearly didn't dye her hair. Sinje herself was blonde, with no grey hairs yet. What sort of work did this woman do? What sort of life did she have? Sinje had always been curious. With strangers she found herself looking for some small clue, anything that gave them away.

But this one was hard to place, and that intrigued her. At first glance you couldn't tell much about her, because she didn't push herself forward. In a crowd she'd go unnoticed. And yet those eyes behind the huge dark-framed glasses seemed to take in everything around her, even though she looked absent again the moment she turned to the window. Attractive, no question, but not in a showy way. A woman in her prime who didn't play up any of her advantages. Her slim figure was hidden under loose clothes. Sinje had noticed the narrow, well-kept hand that offered her the ginger. She looked away when the other woman suddenly met her gaze. But it was long enough to catch the hard set of her face, and a kind of determination that raised goosebumps on Sinje's arms.

What was bringing her to Neuwerk? She had a fairly large suitcase too, so she wasn't just going for the weekend. A holiday at this time of year on a small North Sea island was something people did only if they were after solitude, or if they were running from something, or someone. Sinje wouldn't find out her reason unless she asked outright, and today she wasn't in the mood for small talk.

She took a napkin and spat the fibrous bit of ginger into it. Chewing it was revolting, even though she usually liked ginger tea. Still, it had calmed her stomach almost at once. A little miracle cure – she'd have to remember that, even if she had no intention of coming back to Neuwerk, or any other North Sea island, after this trip. Already she found herself longing for Rome's autumn cosiness, for her snug attic flat, for the cooing pigeons and the sound of the street below. And for Alessio, who would be

flirting with other women right now, guaranteed. For her, even if he forgot her the moment she left the bar, he was the epitome of a young, attractive Italian man. And if she had one wish left in this life, it would be this, a few good years with a man like him. Time was racing by. She wanted to enjoy her forties, properly, with everything that went with them. But first she had to clear something up on this tiny island, something that would, she hoped, bring her book the attention it needed. She'd never shied away from a challenge, and she certainly wasn't about to start now. She would ask the right people the right questions, then get straight back on the ferry to Cuxhaven. From there, to Hamburg Airport and the next flight back to Rome.

Suddenly there was a violent jolt. The ship shuddered and stopped. The engine cut out briefly. Everyone in the lounge flinched, then, a few seconds later, when nothing else had happened, relaxing again. Sinje saw the woman opposite stand up to watch through the huge window.

"She's run aground," the woman who had given her the ginger said quietly, as if to herself.

Sinje got to her feet too, like the other passengers craning to look. The island felt close enough to touch now, the jetty already in sight. But the ferry wasn't moving; it was clearly stuck. The engine revved hard. Outside, churned-up water bubbled and slapped against the glass.

"What happens now?" Sinje asked, and heard herself how rough and unfamiliar her German sounded.

"The ferry will try to free herself. Probably a sandbank," the other woman replied.

"But how does that happen? Isn't there a fixed route?"

"Yes, of course. But out here everything shifts. The channels silt up again and again." A deep crease appeared between her eyebrows. "Since all that sludge from the Elbe dredging started being dumped behind Scharhörn as well, the ferries keep ending up stuck on sandbanks." She shook her head, angry.

"And Scharhörn is...?"

"An uninhabited island next to Neuwerk. There's only a bird warden living there, with thousands of birds in the nature reserve." She

sucked in air through her teeth. “The perfect place to dump the toxic spoil from Hamburg Harbour.”

The man who’d been sitting in the corner with his laptop walked past them. “I’m going up to have a look,” he said.

“I’m coming with you. Can I leave my suitcase here?” the woman opposite asked. Sinje was about to nod, then realised the question wasn’t for her at all, but for the woman behind the counter.

“Go on. I’ll keep an eye on it,” the waitress said, putting something away in a cupboard.

Sinje took her things up on deck. They’d be getting off the ferry any minute anyway. Whatever happened next, she wanted to see it. On the sun deck, where you could sit for the whole crossing in good weather, a few passengers stood scattered about, collars turned up, hats pulled on. The wind whipped in gusts over the open space, but at least it was dry. Sinje wrapped her scarf tighter so it didn’t blow away, came off the stairwell, and stepped out onto the open deck where the others were gathered. She gripped the rail, not quite as steady at sea as her neighbour, who watched everything with sharp attention. Several crewmen in uniform were leaning over the rail at the front, pushing long poles down into the mud beside the ferry, trying to help the ship free itself with sheer muscle. The engine let out a dull roar, churning up water and sludge beside them. The onlookers watched with the sort of interest that suggested this wasn’t the first time.

Sinje put her luggage on one of the benches in the middle of the deck, went to the rail, and leaned over the metal barrier to get a better view of what was happening below. Behind her the engine howled, the propeller throwing fountains of water into the sea. They were still stuck, not moving a metre. They couldn’t reach the island, and the islanders, already waiting with a tractor at the jetty, couldn’t reach them. Only about a hundred metres separated them from setting foot on land. For minutes Sinje watched the machines fight the sucking mud of the sandbank they’d run onto. The bubbling water and the crew’s tense shouts underlined how close-run it was. Maybe she could use this incident in her book.

Then she felt a shudder run through the hull, like a last heave before release. Slowly, the ferry began to move again.

Sinje was just about to straighten up when someone bumped into her from behind. She windmilled her arms, but grabbed at nothing. Then she lost her balance. Gravity dragged her downwards, a grey wall of water rushed at her, and the next moment her body seized in the icy cold of the sea.

I'm going to die, she thought, as the water slammed over her.

Shock. For a few seconds she couldn't move. She sank. Then her mind fought back against the paralysis. She began to paddle until her head broke the surface. "Hel... p!" she screamed, gulped salty water, and coughed until bile came up. Her vision swam. Sinje blinked hard, trying to make things out. Had anyone seen her go over? She could see the rail. Were there heads up there, or was that just hope? Then the realisation hit her, ice-cold. The ship was moving. They were leaving her behind. "Hel..." Another wave broke over her, muddy water in her mouth. She fought her way up again, spat and gagged until she could breathe.

Her strength was already fading, her clothes dragging her down like lead. How long could she fight the cold water's pull? Could she make it to the island? She thrashed her arms to keep moving, trying to stay alongside the ferry. And in that moment she understood: alone, she wouldn't reach the nearby shore. So close, and yet impossibly far. She paddled, swallowed water, fought the swell of the waves and the cold, but she was losing it.

I'm going to die, Sinje thought again.

Images tore past. Her husband's face, younger. Her friend Eleonore laughing. Then the view from her roof terrace down to the street, and finally Alessio's beautiful face. Her arms stopped obeying her. One last searching look upwards, at the wall of the ferry sliding past her. The ship kept going. They were simply letting her drown.

[END OF SAMPLE]