

TAXI

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Trials

Sophia DeLuna

Taxi - Trials

By
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As always, I want to say thank you to my wonderful friend and editor, Agota.
You are the best!

Taxi - Trials

"She's staring at me," said Ulrike, unable to concentrate on her lover's gentle wake-up treatment.

Casting a quick glance at her Norwegian Forest Cat, Tabitha, who was sitting on the chest of drawers, Carmen grinned and said, "She's just admiring your beauty," and she went on placing soft kisses on Ulrike's neck and shoulders.

Ulrike snorted. "To me she looks rather as if she is pondering which part of my body she should scratch to pieces next."

"She would never do that," protested Carmen, her brown eyes sparkling, "She is a very gentle cat."

"Gentle my ass!" said Ulrike, "She's already done it twice!"

Disengaging herself from Ulrike, Carmen sat up and exclaimed, "I have already told you that the first time was a misunderstanding," referring to the first night Ulrike had spent at Carmen's place, when Ulrike had been rudely awakened by a slap in the face with extended claws. She still bore the now faded scratch marks of that encounter. "She wasn't used to someone lying on her side of the bed and was scared when she jumped up and a stranger was there. And the second time was your fault."

Turning onto her side to face her partner, and propping herself up on her elbow, Ulrike said, "And I've told you that it is hardly my fault that I didn't see her in the dark," defending herself for the time when Tabitha had attacked her as she went to the loo at night, and fumbling for the light switch, had accidentally touched Tabitha who was lying on her scratch tree next to the switch.

"Well, it wasn't her fault either. You probably woke her up and she thought you were attacking her," countered Carmen, underlining her words with gestures, as was her habit.

"Yeah, well," muttered Ulrike, "Always attack first and think later. Are you really sure she is female?"

"She is as much a female as you are," said Carmen, a smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Squinting at Carmen, Ulrike asked mock-seriously, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I just say, boxer shorts," said Carmen dryly.

"It's not my fault that they are incapable of producing comfortable women's underwear!" said Ulrike with a shrug. "I'm already compromising by wearing boxer shorts instead of men's briefs when I'm with you."

"*Madre de Dios!* You are soo considerate," said Carmen mockingly, and playfully throwing a pillow at Ulrike, she swung her legs out of bed and said, "I'll make breakfast."

Chuckling, Ulrike pressed the pillow to her face and inhaled deeply, relishing in her partner's scent. God, she loved this woman!

Then, finally letting go of the pillow, she got up as well, giving the chest of drawers a wide berth, on which Tabitha was still sitting and watching her every move. "I'm sorry for causing you so much inconvenience," said Ulrike, surprising herself by actually meaning it. She still thought that Tabitha was a terribly spoilt little madam, and an aggressive one at that, but on some level Ulrike felt sympathy for the grey Norwegian. She had been Carmen's priority for eight years after all, and now coming second, at least some of the time, was certainly not easy. Grabbing her shorts from the chair and a fresh T-shirt and boxer shorts from the bag she had put at the foot of the bed the previous night, Ulrike headed for the bathroom, thinking how very practical it was that Carmen's and her habits complemented

each other so well; herself being used to getting ready before breakfast while Carmen always showered afterwards.

During the first two weeks after Carmen's stay at the hospital, they had shared the bathtub several times. It had been rather cramped in the small tub, not to say a bit awkward as Carmen had to place her leg on the rim with a plastic bag around her cast. Nonetheless it had been a lot of fun as well. However, now that Carmen no longer needed help getting in and out of the tub, they both preferred showering individually.

As Ulrike crossed the small hallway, she heard the radio from the kitchen, and she smiled when Carmen started to hum with the melody. Carmen loved singing, and Ulrike thought she had a beautiful voice, even though her partner generally dismissed her compliments, often insisting that as her lover she was biased. Actually, Carmen dismissed most of her compliments. And while Ulrike found that somewhat annoying, she admired Carmen's modesty, as she disliked people who were full of themselves. So she graciously overlooked Carmen's insecurities, whilst secretly hoping that someday she could convince her that there was no need for it.

While she showered, Ulrike thought about how well she and Carmen seemed to suit each other in many regards.

Seven weeks had passed since they first met, and so far, it looked as if in Carmen she had finally found a partner with whom she could spend the rest of her life. Granted, she had thought that about her last partner as well, but Carmen wasn't like Gitti, she was actually rather different. Not just in looks, but also with regards to temperament and character. And although Ulrike hadn't had much trouble talking to her as her passenger, she would never have dreamed that a gorgeous looking lady like Carmen might be interested in her.

While she shampooed her hair, Ulrike thought, smiling, that the fates had truly been kind to her that day, as she had just decided to call it a day when Carmen waved down her Taxi. What a coincidence that her last fare had taken her to that area at that particular time. And then Carmen leaving her the labrys pendant and a note with her number, even though it wasn't something she had ever done before, as she had explained to Ulrike later. And when they finally got to know each other, the temperamental Argentinian beauty had conquered her heart in such a short period of time; it was still a marvel to Ulrike. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps it had been an advantage that they had been forced to take it slowly, although she could still throttle José for his reckless driving. He had only been released from hospital last Monday, and up until now Ulrike had refused to see him, even when she had driven Carmen to the hospital to visit her beloved brother; and the first few times she had even accompanied Carmen to his room to make sure she got there safely on her crutches. Carmen thought Ulrike was being ridiculous, but Ulrike couldn't help it. She was anal when it came to driving style. And since she had learned that José and the maniac who cut in on her on that very same day was one and the same person, she knew it would cost her an effort not to lose her manners when confronted with the guy who landed Carmen in hospital – and before that almost the three of them, for that matter.

Unfortunately, it was inevitable that she would meet him today. It was Carmen's mother's birthday, and she had been invited. She did look forward to meeting Carmen's parents. She had met her mother twice at the hospital, and even if it had been very briefly, she had got the impression that Frau Bauer was a very charming lady. Yet, she could have done without meeting José; and even though she realised she was being mean, she wished he had stayed in hospital a week longer just so she wouldn't have to face him – but, alas!, her wishes would not be granted. Thus, she was going to be forced to be polite towards him, and she hoped she would manage. It was going to be a trial.

Sighing, Ulrike stepped out of the shower and towelled herself. It was already beautifully warm and Ulrike was glad that she would only need to wear shorts and a T-shirt. However, she was less happy about her hair, she found as she looked at the tangled dark-blond mess in

the mirror. Nonetheless, a smile flashed over her face as she reached for the brush.

Last week Carmen had surprised her by having cleared space for her on the shelf over the washbasin and having already put there everything Ulrike usually brought. The gesture had shown Ulrike that Carmen was as serious about their relationship as she was.

Now, as Ulrike was brushing her hair, trying to manage to arrange it so it wouldn't bother her, she decided that she would pay a visit to Renato's hair salon on Tuesday. He should return this weekend, and if she wasn't mistaken, Tuesday would be the first day he opened after his holiday. She just couldn't stand this hairdo any longer. It was still too short for a pony tail – not that she would want a pony tail; she would feel ridiculous. But neither did she want her hair falling into her face. No, she definitely had to get rid of this mop. Annoyed, she brushed her hair back and reached for Carmen's tin of hairspray.

After a violent sneezing and coughing fit, she noted even more annoyed that one strand had defied the treatment and was dangling provocatively in front of her right eye. Clenching her teeth, Ulrike squinted at the offensive strand in the mirror. Then her glance drifted towards Carmen's nail scissors, and with sudden determination she grasped the scissors and cut the strand of hair to a less bothersome length.

Meanwhile Carmen had set the breakfast table on the balcony and was waiting for Ulrike to appear. With a frown, she rearranged the plate with the cold cuts yet again; and leaning back to survey the display, she finally nodded to herself, a contented smile on her face. She wondered what was taking her partner so long. She was usually rather quick with her morning shower. Her efficiency and practicality were traits that Carmen admired the most. Though, thinking about it, she loved her strength just as much ... Closing her eyes, Carmen relished in the memory of how safe and secure she always felt when she was lying in Ulrike's arms. And those hands ... dreamily, Carmen thought back to the first day they met.

Ulrike's strong hands on the steering wheel had caught her attention before she had even truly looked at her face. However, once she dared to look at Ulrike in the rear-view mirror and caught her watching her with her piercing green eyes, she had been mesmerised. At that point, she hadn't known that Ulrike was a lesbian, but when she saw the rainbow sticker on the dashboard, her heart had skipped a beat. Of course, the taxi could have belonged to someone else, or she could have had the rainbow sticker just because it was pretty. But Carmen secretly studied her driver with the short hair, her visible muscles that showed that she was working out, her rather masculine choice of clothes and her short fingernails ... and those strong hands that indicated that she didn't shy away from hard work. Sure, nowadays, there were a lot straight women who looked like that, but all those signs combined plus the fact that Ulrike seemed to watch her in the mirror, caused Carmen to think that there might be hope that this fascinating woman shared her romantic interest. And although her heart fluttered from nervousness, she had dared to make the first move by leaving the labrys pendant she had just bought for herself and a note with her number in the taxi. Initially she had wanted to give the little bag to Ulrike as a tip, but then she had chickened out and just left the bag behind, hoping that Ulrike would find it. And afterwards, once she was safely inside the building in which she lived, she had leaned against the wall next to the elevator, all shaky from her own courageous move.

When Ulrike finally stepped out of the bathroom, the smell of fresh coffee greeted her. "Mmmh," she hummed in appreciation, and forgotten were all her frustrations. With a smile on her face, she headed for the balcony, where Carmen had arranged breakfast.

"Ahh, what a fantastic day!" exclaimed Ulrike as she stepped onto the balcony.

The weather was gorgeous on this hot August summer day, the air was filled with the

sweet fragrance of the blossoming lime trees, and since it was Saturday and still early, there was only little traffic noise coming from the *Ku'damm* and the autobahn.

Kissing Carmen on the cheek, Ulrike carefully walked around the chair on which Tabitha was sitting with a regal air, and sat down opposite Carmen with a contented sigh.

"The forecast is that it's going to be 35°C today, and 38°C tomorrow," said Carmen.

"Awesome!" said Ulrike and took a fresh bread roll from the basket.

"Yes," agreed Carmen, "Finally a summer in which I don't crave to be somewhere in the south."

Having cut the bread roll open, Ulrike looked at the lovingly prepared breakfast in front of her. It was a typical Berlin breakfast but Carmen always made it appear as if she were catering for a party. All on the matching dinnerware with the 'rooster and hen' design that Ulrike so loved, there was a plate with a variety of cold cuts, another with different sorts of cheeses, soft boiled eggs in egg cups, and there were even little hearts of butter arranged on a plate. And to top it off there was freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee, and of course the fresh bread rolls that Frau Krüger, Carmen's neighbour, usually brought in the mornings in a bag which she hung on the door-knob. Carmen in turn often made a bit more dinner or lunch and shared it with Frau Krüger for which the old lady was very grateful. Frau Krüger was one of the few people who knew about Carmen's relationship with Ulrike, and she didn't mind it; her response having been that 'she had seen weirder things in her life'. Thus whenever she knew that Ulrike stayed the night, she brought two extra bread rolls. Ulrike liked Frau Krüger, and she had given the old woman her number so that she may call her whenever she needed a ride.

Her gaze still fixed on the table, Ulrike said, "My, you are spoiling me."

Carmen chuckled. "It's just an ordinary breakfast."

"Ha, this is what I love about you," said Ulrike as she looked at her partner, "You call this 5-star buffet ordinary."

Laughing, Carmen said, "This isn't a 5-star buffet, Ulli. There isn't even anything special about it; it really is rather ordinary. But I'm glad you like it."

"I love it," said Ulrike, and reaching for the butter, she shook her head and asked amazed, "Where did you get these butter hearts?"

Taking a sip of coffee, Carmen said, "Nowhere, I just cut them out with a biscuit cutter."

"*Du bist echt spitze!*" Ulrike voiced her admiration.

Carmen shrugged her shoulders as she fed a piece of Prague ham to Tabitha. "What can I say, you inspire me."

Raising an eyebrow over the spoiling of the cat, Ulrike put the last slice of ham on her bread roll before Carmen could feed that to the cat as well.

Still occupied with feeding her cat little pieces of ham, Carmen went on, "I've always loved cooking and baking and arranging things nicely. But it's so much more fun when there's someone who appreciates the results – apart from Frau Krüger, that is."

"Frau Krüger is *dufte*," said Ulrike, praising the neighbour, "Although I'm wondering how she always figures out when I'm staying the night." Suddenly, she grinned and said, "I hope it's not because your walls are too thin."

Chuckling, Carmen said, "No, it's because I tell her." Sobering, she looked at Ulrike and said blushing, "Though she did put in one more bread roll today. And – I forgot to mention this – yesterday she asked me to tell you to drink buttermilk to enhance your stamina."

Ulrike almost choked on a sip of coffee that went down the wrong way.

"At the time I didn't know what she meant. I thought you might have chatted with her about putting together your mother's new furniture. But now you've got me wondering..."

"Uh, no, I haven't told her about my mother's furniture," said Ulrike.

"Then maybe you were right about the thin walls."

"Oh boy! Do you think she minds?"

Shaking her head, Carmen grinned and said, "If she minded, she wouldn't have recommended you drinking buttermilk."

"True," agreed Ulrike grinning as well. Taking a bite of her bread roll, she suddenly stopped chewing, and with her mouth still full she asked, "Do you think I should drink buttermilk?"

Carmen laughed, and while she removed the shell from the top of her egg, she replied, "I don't think you're lacking stamina, if that's what you mean. But perhaps Frau Krüger thinks I'm going to wear you out if you don't take preventative measures."

"Well," said Ulrike with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "Considering that you're getting back to top form now ... Maybe I should take her advice."

Chuckling, Carmen said, "I don't think I've ever been as fit as you are, Ulli, and I'll probably never be."

"Ah, don't confuse strength and stamina," said Ulrike, "I may be stronger, but I haven't been focussing my training on endurance as you have."

Carmen shrugged. "I haven't specifically trained for endurance. I just prefer swimming over body building."

"I like swimming as well, but nothing beats the feel of lifting a proper dumbbell, straining your muscles to the limit," said Ulrike dreamily while flexing her biceps.

Shaking her head, Carmen smiled and said, "And you are wondering about Tabitha's not-so-lady-like behaviour ... Tsk!"

Ulrike grinned as she chewed, thinking that Carmen might actually have a point, and once she had swallowed, she said, "Well, maybe we are more alike than I care to admit; but at least I'm not aggressive."

A blackbird was about to land on the balcony rail, but when it spotted Tabitha it flew up immediately with great clamour. Ulrike could have sworn she saw the Norwegian grinning smugly for having scared the bird.

Placing her cup on the saucer, Carmen looked at Ulrike for a moment before she said, "The way you talk about my brother is not exactly kind either."

Ulrike's face darkened and she turned her gaze from Tabitha to Carmen. "His reckless driving at the wheel of his macho car landed you in hospital."

"It did not, Ulli," said Carmen annoyed. "How often do I have to tell you that it was an accident caused by oil on the road? He didn't even exceed the speed limit."

Lighting a cigarette, Ulrike said, "If he was driving as he did when he cut in on me on the day we met, there was neither oil nor high speed needed to cause an accident. It was only my quick reaction that kept me from smashing into him, Carmen."

"Look," said Carmen, "I do agree that his driving style is a bit too passionate sometimes." Ulrike snorted at the understatement, but Carmen went on, "Regardless, Ulrike, he is my brother and I love him. And he is a very capable businessman who is doing a great job as my father's partner, and he is a really charming guy. You shouldn't only judge him by his driving style."

"Oh, it's not just his driving style; with that photo on your desk I can imagine him just fine," said Ulrike, "The typical charismatic Argentinian macho - straight women probably drool over him."

"Why do you always revert to stereotypes when it comes to José?" asked Carmen, gesticulating exasperatedly before lighting a cigarette herself. "I've never seen you doing it in relation to any other person, and it does not suit you at all."

Taking a deep breath, Ulrike said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to be a bitch. I just hate people who drive as if they owned the road."

"You're just jealous that he drives a better car than you," said Carmen, teasing.

Ulrike snorted. "A red painted Italian tin can is hardly better than solid German quality."

Raising her eyebrow, Carmen asked, "Stereotypes yet again?" and not waiting for a reply,

she counted with her fingers, "The Ferrari is faster than your Daimler. It has more hp. It cost about ten times as much. It sounds terrific and looks gorgeous."

With raised eyebrows and a superior grin, Ulrike countered slowly, "My Daimler has a mileage of almost 500 000 kilometres. The engine is still running like a charm, and overall the car is still in a good condition with no rust at all. Show me a Ferrari Testarossa with that mileage in a similar condition."

Making a face, Carmen argued, "A Ferrari is not a taxi, it's not meant to drive half a million kilometres."

"That's true," agreed Ulrike. "I just wanted to prove to you that - to me - a Ferrari is definitely not better and certainly no cause for jealousy."

"All right, I believe you," said Carmen. "Nevertheless, I hope you will behave yourself at my parents' place."

Watching the grey Norwegian as she jumped off the chair, arched and then lay down, languidly stretching herself out on the balcony floor, Ulrike sighed and said, "I'll do my best," and changing the subject, she asked, "Say, do you have any idea what I could get your mother for her birthday?"

"You don't really have to buy anything," said Carmen. "The presents I bought can be from the both of us."

"I don't know," said Ulrike, "I'd rather give her something I chose myself. As I couldn't come up with anything better, I thought I'd give her the mandatory bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine. But since you mentioned the other day that your father is a connoisseur of wine, I thought that it wasn't such a great idea after all."

"Indeed, that's not a great idea," agreed Carmen, "Not even I would attempt to take wine. My father has quite a collection of exquisite wines in his cellar, and he's very particular about it."

"Well," asked Ulrike, "Do you know what else I could buy?"

Looking thoughtful for a moment, Carmen's face finally lit up and she proposed, "Why don't we go shopping together?"

"*Knorke!*" Ulrike voiced her agreement, "That's even better. Where should we go?"

"To the *KaDeWe* of course," said Carmen.

Ulrike's face fell. She should have guessed that Carmen would want to drag her to the luxury temple. After all, she was wearing the reminder of Carmen's exquisite taste on a chain around her neck. And sometimes Carmen would wear the very same labrys pendant, as she had bought an identical one for herself. And Ulrike knew that it wasn't only jewellery Carmen bought at the *KaDeWe*. Carmen simply loved shopping, especially at exquisite stores. "I had been thinking of *Karstadt* or *Wertheim*," she suggested two somewhat lesser expensive department stores.

"I rarely go there," said Carmen dismissively, "I wouldn't know where to look. The *KaDeWe* I know like the back of my hand, and I'm sure we'll find something nice there that's within your budget."

Making a face, Ulrike said, "I'm not a charity case, thank you very much. It's just that I don't like spending more money on the very same item just because it comes with a plastic bag that has the *KaDeWe* logo printed on it."

"It's not just the bag; it's also the service and the convenience. You can find everything you desire there."

Ulrike grinned, "I bet they don't have frozen pizza."

Shuddering from disgust, Carmen countered, "Actually, I think they do."

Taking a sip of orange juice, Ulrike raised her eyes in surprise. "If they do, it's probably from some gourmet brand and costs over 5 DM."

"Probably," agreed Carmen, and they both laughed.

"*Na gut, von mir aus*," Ulrike relented, "We'll go to your beloved *KaDeWe*."

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Having cleared the table and done the dishes, Ulrike thought she'd find Carmen ready and waiting. The door to the bathroom was open and the light was on, but Carmen wasn't there. She wasn't in the living room either, so Ulrike peeked into the bedroom and found Carmen standing in her underwear in front of her extensive wardrobe. "You aren't ready yet?" she asked in surprise, and walked over to her partner. Hugging her from behind, she nuzzled her long dark brown locks, inhaling the fresh scent of Carmen's shampoo. And as she let her hands glide over her partner's curvaceous body, she wished that they could cancel the party and stay home. It would certainly be a lot more fun. In fact, she could think of several things they hadn't tried yet, and she imagined that Carmen would certainly enjoy the adventure.

"I don't know what to wear," said Carmen absentmindedly.

Halting for a moment to get herself back into the present, it took Ulrike a few seconds to catch up to Carmen's statement. When she finally did, she asked incredulously, "Wow, you've got a three-metre wardrobe and you can't find anything to wear?" and knowing that she had to postpone her sweet fantasies, she let go of her partner.

"I can't wear high heels yet, so I can't wear a dress," explained Carmen.

"Then wear pants," said Ulrike, not at all understanding the problem. She wouldn't be caught dead in a dress, and high heels ... she had tried the high heels of her girlfriend as a teenager ... after just two or three steps she stumbled and fell, twisting her ankle and spraining her wrist in the process. After that, she had decided that high heels were definitely not for her, and although she found women in high heels rather sexy, she couldn't help but wonder why anyone would want to walk around in such torture devices. It just didn't seem healthy.

"I don't have that many pants," argued Carmen.

"Great! Then the choice should be even easier," countered Ulrike and flopped down on the bed.

Levelling an exasperated glare at Ulrike, Carmen shook her head and said, gesticulating, "You just don't understand these things."

Grinning, Ulrike admitted, "True. I don't."

About half an hour later, Carmen was finally ready to go.

"You look gorgeous!" said Ulrike as Carmen took a last quick look in the mirror in the hallway.

Smiling at the compliment, Carmen still shook her head, "I do not. In the red dress I would look gorgeous."

"Nope," countered Ulrike, "In the red dress you look delicious."

Carmen laughed. "You're incorrigible."

As they were riding the lift down to the ground level, Carmen asked, "By the way, what are *you* going to wear this afternoon?"

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike glanced down at her front and then turned her gaze back to Carmen. Before she could say anything, Carmen remarked, "Please, don't tell me you were planning on wearing *these*!"

"Why not?" asked Ulrike.

"They are men's clothes!" Carmen stated in a voice that portrayed her annoyance at having to state the obvious. Sometimes she truly couldn't fathom why Ulrike was behaving as if she were dumb, especially when it came to fashion.

"Um, no, the shorts are actually unisex, if I remember correctly."

"It doesn't matter," said Carmen, "They look like men's shorts."

"You've never complained about my clothes - except for the boxer shorts," said Ulrike surprised.

"I do not complain about your clothes, Ulli. As long as we're in private you can wear whatever you like, and I actually find it rather attractive on you - except for the boxers. But we're going to see my parents and I'd rather you wear appropriate clothes."

"Wow, I didn't know an invitation to your mother's birthday included a certain dress code," said Ulrike as she pushed the lift door open and held it open for Carmen to exit.

Rolling her eyes, Carmen walked past Ulrike and headed for the front door.

Strolling through the luxurious departments of the *KaDeWe*, Ulrike wondered what on earth had possessed her to agree shopping here. Sure, the luxury temple with its magnificent entrance hall was a feast for the eyes, but considering buying anything here seemed ridiculous to Ulrike. The only times she came here was when her aunt came for a visit.

Since Ulrike and her brother Norbert had been children, her mother had taken them to the restaurant 'Silberterrasse' whenever *Tante* Hedwig and *Onkel* Herbert visited. Nevertheless, neither her aunt nor her mother used to buy anything here. They contented themselves with a stroll through the departments, enjoying just marvelling at all the luxury items while *Onkel* Herbert took the children to the nearby zoo. The ritual had continued even when Ulrike and Norbert were long grown up, though her brother stopped accompanying them to the zoo when he was 17. To the restaurant, however, he would still come even after *Onkel* Herbert died. No wonder, thought Ulrike, her brother would never pass on the opportunity of a free meal.

"Look at these," Carmen roused Ulrike from her musings, presenting her with a pair of very feminine looking slacks.

Shrugging her shoulders, Ulrike said, "I don't think the colour suits you, but if you like them..." She wondered why Carmen would even stop in the clothes department. "*Gosh, I hope she doesn't mean to suggest buying clothes as a birthday present for her mother,*" Ulrike mused.

"I wasn't thinking of me, Ulli. I think they would suit *you* very well."

Ulrike's eyebrows shot up. "Me?! Are you kidding? I'm not going to wear anything with flowers on it."

"All right," said Carmen, rolling her eyes, "How about these," she pointed at a pair of pink summer pants.

"I'm not going to wear pink either," Ulrike stated adamantly. Didn't Carmen know by now that she wouldn't wear pink if her life depended on it? She was sure she had mentioned it more than once.

"Gosh, you are hard to please," said Carmen while she browsed through the slacks on the rack. "But look, they come in blue as well," and she pulled the hanger from the rack and presented the slacks to Ulrike.

"They don't have proper pockets," Ulrike pointed out. What was going on here anyway? Was her partner seriously trying to get her to buy a new outfit?

"Why on earth do you need pockets?" asked Carmen, truly not understanding why Ulrike was being so picky. To her these slacks looked perfectly fine, and she thought they would suit Ulrike just nicely.

"For my wallet and my keys," Ulrike responded, feeling as if she were stating the obvious.

"You won't find a proper pair of pants with pockets big enough for your enormous bunch of keys."

"They fit in mine," Ulrike said, pulling her bunch of keys from her pocket to prove it.

"Yeah, but they are men's shorts," said Carmen with a dismissive gesture.

"No, they are unisex, as I've told you already," argued Ulrike. "Look, it's almost noon and I still don't have a birthday present for your mother. Why don't you just let me wear my things and find me a present for your mother instead?"

Carmen, however, wouldn't budge. And thus, half an hour later, they left the women's wear department with a large *KaDeWe* bag, which contained a tank top in khaki, a short sleeved shirt and a pair of slacks in beige, and a gold-coloured belt.

Bemused, Ulrike wondered how Carmen had managed to persuade her to buy the belt. Although, she did still remember all too vividly how Carmen had brought her the belt to her changing cubicle. Of course, Ulrike had refused to wear anything like that, but Carmen had stood there in front of the cubicle, her hands braced on either side, looking at her with those captivating brown eyes and told her in a sultry voice how hot she looked in the new outfit. Whenever Carmen used that particular voice on her, it sent warm shivers down Ulrike's body. However, at that moment under the given circumstances she had felt rather like a trapped rabbit. And then Carmen had surprised her by joining her in the cubicle and drawing the curtain. Then, surprising Ulrike even more, she had started to show her appreciation with a sensual kiss. Carmen had already half undressed her when Ulrike finally came to her senses as she heard voices from the adjacent cubicle. Carmen said she didn't mind, but Ulrike did, and to escape her lover's grasp, she had agreed to buy the damn belt if Carmen agreed to postpone their adventure till they got home.

Now, Ulrike wondered if Carmen had planned this all along. And while Carmen led her through the vast labyrinth of departments, Ulrike surmised that she would have to work on her defences.

"What do you want in the chinaware department?" asked Ulrike as Carmen slowed down and looked around. Getting almost everything she needed for her flat at IKEA's, Ulrike had hardly ever been in any department store's chinaware department, and she wondered why Carmen would drag her here.

"You'll see," said Carmen, smiling. "Ah, there they are!" And she breezed towards a shelf on which an assortment of porcelain items with a rose design were displayed.

Even though Ulrike would never have bought anything like this for herself, she did think that the items with the yellow roses looked rather pretty. She was pleasantly surprised, when Carmen told her that her mother loved yellow roses. She had numerous varieties of yellow roses in her garden and she already had many pieces of china with the yellow rose design. Carmen had bought the confectionery dish on foot and a silk scarf for her mother, and she thought that the little porcelain box would be a nice addition to her mother's collection.

Picking up the little box, Ulrike mused, "Hm ... It's pretty, but she'll know that you chose it. I would never think of buying anything like this."

"What does it matter who chose the gift as long as it's pretty?" asked Carmen.

"Perhaps it doesn't," said Ulrike, looking ponderingly at the little box. "But I'd rather buy something practical."

Carmen looked at Ulrike, deadpan. "My mother has no use for tools."

Rolling her eyes, Ulrike explained that she wasn't thinking of tools. "Didn't you say that the gorgeous paintings in your flat are your mother's creation? Does she still paint?"

"Yes, she does," said Carmen absentmindedly while she was looking at a candle holder of the same pattern. "I think I'll get her this for Christmas. It's beautifully made."

"If she is still painting, couldn't she use something like paint or brushes?" Ulrike mused that if she was going to an effort with the gift choosing, she would really rather be true to herself and buy something of her own choice. A present that would let Carmen's mother know that she had given it some thought, a gift that would be more meaningful somehow.

"She has everything she needs," said Carmen as she put back the candle holder.

"You can never have enough paint as a painter," argued Ulrike, liking her idea more and more. "What kind of paint does she use - acrylics or oil?"

"I've got no idea," said Carmen. "But I'm sure she would love the little box."

Sighing, Ulrike said, "Okay, I'll take the box, but I'd like to have a look at the artists' supply department if there is one here."

#

As they were finally driving to Carmen's parents' place in *Nikolassee*, Ulrike became increasingly nervous at the prospect of meeting Carmen's family. She still didn't fancy meeting José, and she hadn't yet met Carmen's father either. She had seen pictures of both, and Helmut Bauer looked like a kind enough fellow with his almost white hair and the laugh lines around his eyes. The laugh lines seemed to run in the family, as Carmen and her mother had them as well. It was a feature Ulrike found exceedingly attractive. Nonetheless, she wondered how the family would react to her as Carmen's partner, and she started to worry if buying the acrylic paint tubes in the wooden box had been such a great idea after all. Perhaps Carmen was right and she was being too practical. Perhaps Carmen's mother would indeed rather like something pretty. The few times she had seen Maria Bauer, she had looked quite fashionable. Well, she had bought the little porcelain box as well, so perhaps she shouldn't worry too much. To distract herself from her growing anxiety, she asked Carmen, "Are you looking forward to going back to work on Monday?"

Carmen sighed, and turning towards Ulrike, she said, "It's a pity that I had to spend most of the holidays in a cast, but yes, I'm looking forward to seeing my pupils again and to meeting the new ones." Carmen was truly glad for the distraction, as her apprehension of presenting her partner to her family was growing to rather uncomfortable proportions. It was the first time she was taking a female partner to visit her parents, and even though they had come to terms with her being a lesbian, she just wasn't sure how they would react.

"How many new classes will you be teaching?" asked Ulrike while she changed into the fast lane to overtake a car that attempted to park.

"Just one French class," said Carmen, "The two Spanish classes from last year are continuing."

"French? Didn't you have an English class?"

"Yes, but I won't teach English this year. They needed someone for French."

"I didn't know you taught French as well," said Ulrike with an admiring glance at her partner.

Smiling, Carmen said, "I haven't for the last three years. It's going to take some effort teaching it again, but it's a nice challenge, and it's only a junior class. I've taught English for over 20 years now, it's okay to take a break from it and take a French class for a change."

"I could never be a teacher," said Ulrike, "Too much work and no thanks for all your efforts; instead you have to cope with a bunch of annoying pubescent teenagers."

Carmen laughed. "At least I don't have to clean my car of vomit," she countered, referring to an incident Ulrike had told her about only a few days earlier.

Screwing up her face, Ulrike said, "It was the first time someone puked in my taxi in over 20 years! Up until then I had been truly lucky ... well, except for the two times I had to clean it from blood stains and the occasional chocolate or ice cream stains ... and the occasional chewing gum." Glancing at Carmen she concluded deadpan, "Needless to say, I hate driving kids!"

Laughing, Carmen said, "No, you're not a kids' person that much is obvious."

Ulrike smiled, and placing her right hand on Carmen's hand, she said, "But I'm glad that you are."

Changing lanes again, Ulrike slowed down in order to turn into the lane leading to their destination. It was a very green area, with lush gardens and trees lining the streets; and it was also one of the most expensive areas of Berlin. The street on which Carmen's parents lived was an old street, and, while they slowly rattled over the cobblestones, Ulrike thought that it was also a very beautiful street, with all the old mansions, the big gardens and the huge old trees.

"It's over there," said Carmen, pointing at a mansion on the left. "You can park behind..."

"José's car, I suppose," said Ulrike, the tone of her voice as well as her face clearly showing what she thought of José's new acquisition.

"Probably," said Carmen, while Ulrike manoeuvred her taxi behind the yellow sports car. "He didn't tell me that he was going to buy a Lamborghini Diablo, but I must say I find it even sexier than the Testarossa. Don't you think it looks gorgeous?"

Rolling her eyes at Carmen, Ulrike stated, "The design maybe pretty, but it should be prohibited to drive a car like that on public roads."

"My you are a grouch!" said Carmen as they got out of the car. And joining Ulrike at the boot, Carmen put a hand on her partner's arm and said, "Please, behave in front of my family, will you?"

Heaving a sigh, Ulrike said, "I'll do my best. Now, these are yours," and she handed Carmen the two bags that contained her birthday presents. Then, taking her own two bags, she closed the boot and followed Carmen to the front gate, a tad irritated as she had to keep her keys in her hands because the damn pockets of the new slacks weren't big enough. At least her wallet fitted into the back pocket after she had emptied it of the change.

The buzzer sounded, signalling that the gate had been unlocked. While Carmen opened the gate, her mother opened the front door and waved. "*Kommt rein, kommt rein, wir warten schon auf euch,*" she asked them to come in, telling them that they were already waiting for them.

"But we are right on time," said Carmen, and embraced her mother, congratulating her, "*¡Feliz cumpleaños, Mamá!*"

As Carmen stepped back, Ulrike took her keys into her left hand with which she also held the bag and congratulated, "*Alles Gute zum Geburtstag, Frau Bauer,*" and she held out her hand for Frau Bauer to shake. Frau Bauer, however, pulled her into a hug instead and said, "Thank you." And as she let go of Ulrike, she said smiling, "But you must call me Maria. You are family now, no?"

Surprised, Ulrike cast a helpless glance at Carmen, taken aback for being offered the familiar 'Du' so soon.

"Yes, you are," said Carmen grinning. She understood Ulrike's confusion, but from that moment on she knew that her mother was going out of her way to prove that she was now accepting the fact that her daughter was a lesbian. And perhaps her attitude was also fuelled by guilt because she had not always been that accepting.

When Carmen finally came out to her parents several years ago, all her fears had been confirmed. Her parents, and especially her mother, had not been able to understand. However, Carmen had by then been confident enough to tell them that if they couldn't accept her as she was, she didn't want to have anything to do with them anymore. Funnily enough, her brother José as well as her grandmother Hertha had accepted her revelation without any problem, and in the following months they did their best to mediate between Carmen and her parents. By the time her parents finally decided that losing their daughter was far worse than her being a lesbian, Carmen's relationship was over, and thus her parents had not really had a chance to prove their change of mind. The subject simply had not come up for years – though, granted, her mother had also stopped nagging Carmen about marriage and having kids, which was a great relief.

"*Danke, Frau ... äh ... Maria,*" stammered Ulrike, still not quite comfortable with being on first name basis.

"Now, come in, the men are waiting on the terrace," said Maria and ushered them through the house and into the large living room with its huge double glass doors that led onto the terrace at the back of the house.

Today, Maria wore her long dark brown hair, streaked with grey, in a low braided bun that looked awfully complicated to Ulrike, but nonetheless very pretty. It reminded her of tango

dancers she had seen on TV, and she wondered if Maria could dance. Carmen could, and she had tried to persuade Ulrike to take lessons, but so far Ulrike had refused. Her opinion was that it was pointless, since they couldn't really go dancing together anywhere anyway; except for maybe at a disco, but for that you didn't need dancing lessons. But she could very well imagine Maria dancing the tango with her husband, as despite her age, it was clearly visible that she was a very passionate woman, just like her daughter. Perhaps, thought Ulrike, perhaps she might ask Carmen to teach her once she was fully recovered. Yes, now that she thought about it, dancing with Carmen in the privacy of her flat - now, that could be rather romantic. However, the romantic feeling left her when she spotted the others on the terrace.

Herr Bauer and José were standing near the grill, talking, and Ulrike immediately noted that they were both wearing shorts very similar to those that Carmen had objected to. And as Maria announced that she'd get the cake from the fridge, Ulrike grasped Carmen's arm and whispered, "How come they're allowed to wear shorts?"

"They are guys," stated Carmen and stepped outside, announcing their arrival and introducing her partner, so that Ulrike had to bite back her retort. She would have a word with Carmen later, she thought. She was already sweating in her newly acquired clothes, and since her partner hadn't even agreed to her buying a pair of shorts in the women's department, she somehow got the feeling that Carmen didn't want her to wear shorts only because she herself would never wear any, and not because her family thought shorts to be improper. And although Maria wore a rather pretty summer dress that looked quite fetching on her well-rounded figure, there was clearly no special dress code expected here.

While Carmen hugged José, telling him how she loved his new car, her father came forward, holding out his hand, and as Ulrike took it, he said, "Welcome to the family."

"Thank you," said Ulrike smiling, relieved as she met his open, smiling gaze.

"I'm Helmut, and this is my son, José," he pointed at the handsome man beside him who now offered his hand as well. Only slightly shorter than his father, José was about Ulrike's height, and with his dark brown eyes, his almost black hair slicked back with gel, his charismatic smile and his dark skin, he looked very much like an exotic gigolo - just as Ulrike had seen him on the photo at Carmen's place.

Despite her effort to remain polite, Ulrike's smile vanished, and when she took José's hand, she couldn't help herself and squeezed it rather forcibly.

"Wow, you're quite strong," said José grinning as Ulrike let go. "Do you work out?"

"Yes, she does," said Carmen grinning nervously, before Ulrike could react. And to get her partner away from her brother, she grasped her arm with, "Come on, let's sit down and give Mamá her gifts."

Glad to get away from José, Ulrike took the gifts from the bags and handed them to Maria who was sitting at the head of the table. Then she sat down next to Carmen, and watched Maria unwrapping her birthday presents while Carmen poured the coffee and Helmut passed around slices of cake.

"Oh, what a lovely scarf," exclaimed Maria as she freed Carmen's gift from the wrapping paper. The confectionery dish followed, and thanking her daughter for the lovely gifts, Maria started to unwrap Ulrike's porcelain box. "Ah, I see my daughter has told you about my yellow rose collection," she said, smiling. "Now, what do we have here?" she said as she picked up the wrapped artists' box. Curiously, she unwrapped the wooden box and opened it; and as she saw what it contained, her eyes lit up and, excitedly clasping her hands together, she exclaimed, "How marvellous! What a wonderful surprise, Ulrike! Thank you!"

Slightly blushing, Ulrike looked nervously down at her Black Forest cake and said, "I wasn't sure if you use acrylics or oil..."

"I use both," said Maria, "But mostly acrylics. Oh, what a wonderful gift!"

"I'm glad you like it," said Ulrike, smiling, glad that she had insisted on buying a gift of her choice as well.

"I love it!" exclaimed Maria.

"I'd have thought you have everything for your painting," said Carmen, visibly surprised that her mother was so delighted with such a mundane gift.

"I do," agreed Maria. "But you can never have enough paint, and it's so nice that Ulrike thought of giving me something for my hobby."

Ulrike grinned, now extremely pleased with herself. "I really like your paintings. And I myself prefer practical over pretty, so I thought I'd get you something useful as well."

"And I thought you'd rather like something pretty," said Carmen a tad miffed. She was very glad that her mother seemed to have no problem with accepting Ulrike, but that she seemed to truly prefer Ulrike's presents over hers was rather a lot to take.

"Oh, Carmen, I do love your gifts as well," said Maria reassuringly. "But look, your father only ever buys me jewellery; he can't seem to help himself," she winked at him, and gently touching his arm, she quickly continued, "Not that I mind - I love jewellery. I love pretty things in general. But it's the first time that someone has appreciated the artist in me. It's not just because it's practical ... José always buys me something 'practical'," she glanced at her son with an exasperated look, "Finally I managed to convince him that I neither need nor want any kitchen utensils as presents, and what did he give me this time - an electric blanket." Shaking her head, she put the artists' box on a side table next to the other gifts.

"You always complain about the cold," José defended himself.

"In winter, José, and outside - definitely not in the house," said Maria, "We've got central heating. And I've certainly never complained about being cold in bed."

Ulrike laughed at José's grimace; seeing Mr I-own-the-road be uncomfortable did give her a wickedly good feeling; and that he had failed to give his mother a present she appreciated enhanced her pleasure even more. Herr Bauer seemed to be amused as well, while Carmen groaned, "Too much information, Mamá!"

"Oh, come on, Carmen," said Maria, "Don't be a prude just because your girlfriend is present. What would you do if *Oma* Hertha was here?"

Carmen let out an even louder groan. She was indeed glad that her grandmother was not coming today.

Seeing Ulrike cast a curious glance at Carmen, Maria explained, "My mother in law is not exactly known for her diplomatic approach."

"That's the understatement of the year!" said José.

"You'll meet her soon enough," said Carmen, already dreading that encounter. As much as she loved her grandmother, she didn't fancy Ulrike experiencing Hertha's sometimes rather blunt behaviour.

Her curiosity piqued, Ulrike swallowed a piece of cake and asked, "Why is she not here today? I hope she isn't ill."

"Oh, no, she's doing fabulously," said Carmen, "She's just been invited to her neighbours' diamond wedding anniversary today."

"Wow," said Ulrike, "That's a rare celebration. I've never known anyone who celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary."

"Well, we're getting closer to it," said Helmut with a loving glance at his wife. "It'll be our 45th anniversary next year."

"How remarkable!" said Ulrike and took a sip of coffee. "Did you meet here or in Argentina, if I may ask?"

"We met in Buenos Aires," said Helmut, and happily launched into telling Ulrike how he had finished his degree in architecture in 1947 and received an offer to go to Argentina. He became friends with the architectural draughtsman of the firm and when he met his beautiful daughter it was love on first sight. 11 years later he returned to Berlin with his wife and two children and founded his own company.

"Admirable!" said Ulrike once Helmut had finished, "It must be hard to live in a foreign

country. I can't imagine ever migrating to another country, even if it was an English speaking one, which is the only other language I could manage at all apart from my rudimentary French."

"Well, things are different today," said Helmut, a sad smile on his face, "I never considered it to be a challenge. To me it was a gift from Heaven. Back then everything would have been easier than living in bombed out Berlin after the war."

Wincing in sympathy, Ulrike said, "Uh, I suppose that's right. I hadn't thought about it like that."

"It's all right. Be glad that you didn't have to experience it. It's not a nice time to remember."

Before her husband could launch into a lengthy discussion about the time of the war and especially the time afterwards, Maria started to recount her own experiences about living in a foreign country.

It hadn't been hard for her language-wise, as she grew up bilingual, and the culture shock wasn't so great either, as with her father being half German they kept many German traditions in her family. She only missed the surrounding natural beauty at first, but since they had moved to *Nikolassee* where they had the large garden with the forest and the lake close by, she rarely felt homesick.

#

The afternoon passed quickly, and Ulrike listened to Maria's and Helmut's tales with interest while contributing one or two of her own. She was surprised how well the afternoon was progressing. The more she chatted with Carmen's parents, the more relaxed she became, and she was glad that she hadn't cancelled the invitation after all.

As Maria took a break to clear the table and to put the empanadas in the oven, Helmut also rose to help her. Ulrike was about to offer her help when she noticed that Carmen and José were talking about the Lamborghini. Completely forgetting about her intended offer, she looked sharply at her partner as she overheard José suggesting to Carmen to take her on a ride the next day.

Ulrike was about to voice her protest, but instead she barely suppressed a yelp as Carmen kicked her leg under the table. Clenching her jaw, she levelled a glare at Carmen that she hoped would tell her that they would have a lot to discuss once they were alone. It wasn't only that she didn't fancy Carmen going for a drive with José the kamikaze driver in his overpowered canary, it was also that she had planned to spend the day with Carmen; after all it was the last day before Carmen had to go back to work. And it was supposed to be a beautifully hot day. Ulrike had thought they might take a drive and have a nice picnic somewhere, maybe at one of the lakes. Or perhaps even a longer drive to some place in the surrounding area. She still felt a bit awkward when driving in the former GDR including the east side of Berlin - too many bad memories, she guessed - but she thought that perhaps Carmen might enjoy the adventure. She had been looking forward to this day, and she couldn't believe that Carmen was going to spoil it by spending it with her brother instead, and without even consulting with her.

Carmen returned Ulrike's glare with a raised eyebrow and a smirk that turned into a wide grin before she turned her attention back to her brother. She knew that Ulrike wouldn't want her to accompany her brother, but she loved sports cars, and she was looking forward to hearing the sounds and feeling the vibrations of the powerful engine of the Lamborghini while it ate away the kilometres at maximum speed. On a Sunday, and with the school holidays ending, there would hopefully be little traffic out of Berlin, and they would be able to get quite far with this new fantastic car, perhaps even as far as Munich. The way back would probably take a lot longer, but by that time, she hoped, even in that direction most of the

holiday traffic should have ceased.

Reigning in her frustration, Ulrike turned back to Maria and Helmut who had just returned to the table. At least with them she didn't have to pretend being polite. And the appreciation of nature was, after all, something Maria and she had in common; however, having borrowed a few books on Argentina from the library after she met Carmen, Ulrike could understand very well that Maria would miss the fabulous natural beauty of her native country.

"Yes, you have to make do with what's possible here," said Maria, smiling. "The gladioli just won't grow as tall as they do in Argentina, and there are no hummingbirds feeding on them; but aside from yellow roses, they are still my favourite flowers."

"They are stunning," said Ulrike appreciatively as she admired the wonderful display of gladioli along the right side of the backyard. And letting her eyes wander over the rest of the skilfully designed garden, she thought that Maria's was indeed one of the most beautiful gardens she had ever seen, and she had seen a lot of gardens, as she often went for a walk in the allotment-garden area close to her home, and she told Maria so.

"Thank you," said Maria, "I just love gardening; it's almost like painting, it just takes longer for the picture to appear in its full glory."

"Indeed," said Ulrike, and lighting a cigarette, she continued, "However, I never had a talent for painting, but I think I would love gardening."

"You don't have a garden, do you?" asked Helmut.

Shaking her head, Ulrike said, "No, I don't even have a balcony, just a small wintergarden."

"You should see it," interrupted Carmen, "It looks like a jungle."

Ulrike grinned. "I just love buying plants. I buy them really small, thinking they would fit just nicely on the window sill in my office, and then they grow huge in no time and I have to put them in the wintergarden."

"You seem to have a talent for gardening then," said Maria.

Ulrike shrugged, "Perhaps, though I don't really do much apart from watering. I think plants just love the conditions. Both, my office and the wintergarden are south side."

"That would probably help," said Maria, "However, a friend of mine has a beautiful flat with all rooms being south side, and she can't even keep a cactus alive for more than a few months. She just has no talent when it comes to plants."

"But her baking skills are excellent," said Carmen.

"That they are, indeed," agreed Maria.

Leaning back, Ulrike relaxed just listening for a while as Carmen and her mother talked about people she didn't know. However, she carefully avoided looking at José, who was talking to his father about some business related matter. Helmut smiled at her as he caught her glance. She really liked Carmen's father, and she returned the smile. Except for José's presence and her far too warm clothes, she was really enjoying this visit.

As Maria got up to get the finished empanadas, Ulrike rose as well; this time offering her help. However, Maria declined, saying that she would manage on her own. And since Carmen was yet again chatting with her brother, Ulrike took off her shirt, and ignoring Carmen's disapproving glance, she draped it over the backrest of her chair and joined Helmut who was placing the *asado* on the grill.

"It's hot today," remarked Helmut as he noted Ulrike in her tank top. "I've been wondering how you and my daughter can bear wearing such formal clothing."

Taking a quick glance at her partner and seeing that she was engrossed in her conversation with José, Ulrike thought that maybe this was the occasion to find out what kind of 'dress code' was really expected here. And leaning towards Helmut, she said in a low voice, "I can't really bear it. But I was told that wearing shorts and a T-shirt wouldn't be appropriate."

Turning towards the grill to hide his amusement, Helmut turned one of the steaks before he said in a conspiratorial voice, "Next time my daughter attempts to turn you into a fashion

plate, you can tell her that I said you're welcome to wear whatever you like to my place."

Grinning, Ulrike said, "Thanks, I'll do that."

Helmut winked at her and as he returned his attention to the *asado*, he asked, "You've got your own taxi business, I hear?"

"Yes," said Ulrike, "A one-woman business."

"Oh?" said Helmut surprised, "So, you're driving all on your own?"

"Yes. I've tried having a second driver once, but it wasn't worth the hassle."

Helmut looked at her thoughtfully. "It must be a lot of work, if you have to make a living from it without any help."

"It is," agreed Ulrike, "I work about 50 hours a week, sometimes more. But I don't mind. I love driving."

Nodding approvingly, Helmut said, "You must be very disciplined then," and he walked over to the table, gesturing Ulrike to follow.

"I guess I am," agreed Ulrike and following his example, she grabbed a serviette and took an empanada from the plate. She was about to return to the grill with Helmut, when Carmen stopped her, asking her to eat at the table.

"It's okay," said Helmut, and reassured Ulrike by putting a hand on her shoulder. "Come on."

As Maria saw Ulrike's reluctance, she added, "In Argentina we always eat empanadas with our hands."

"But we aren't in Argentina, Mamá," argued Carmen, visibly embarrassed as Ulrike followed Helmut with the empanada in her hand.

Grinning at Helmut, Ulrike whispered, "I prefer Argentinian customs."

And as Helmut agreed chuckling, Ulrike looked surprised at José, who got up, and, grabbing an empanada as well, joined them at the grill and said jokingly, "You German ladies go on eating prissy, I'll join the tough guys."

Despite her dislike of José, Ulrike couldn't help but join the others in their laughter. For some reason she found it rather flattering to be considered a 'tough guy'. And she felt a great sense of relief over being so easily accepted into the family.

Carmen had glared at José at first, but when all the others broke into laughter, she finally gave in and laughed as well. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so anxious about presenting her partner to her family. Obviously they had really come to terms with her sexuality. It surely seemed as though they had no problem whatsoever with Ulrike. They even sided with Ulrike instead of her. Unnoticed by the others, Carmen shook her head as she cut her empanada. She would never have dreamed of such an outcome; and as yet she wasn't sure if she liked it. Everyone loved Ulrike, and Carmen was happy for her partner, no question there. But somehow Carmen felt a bit as if she had been thrown on the scrap heap.

"She's a lovely person, your Ulrike," said Maria.

Forcing a smile, Carmen replied, "I'm glad you like her." And she glumly finished her empanada while her mother went on praising Ulrike as if she were a gift from God. And when her mother remarked that it was a pity that the two of them couldn't have children, Carmen reached for the bottle of wine to pour herself a third glass, unsure if she could take any more of this without getting as drunk as a skunk.

Ulrike was watching Helmut check the steaks, still trying to avoid looking at José, when he suddenly touched her arm and asked, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Tensing, Ulrike reminded herself to remain polite, and with her gaze still fixed on the grill she said, "Sure."

Running a hand over his gelled hair, José said, "You looked a bit pissed there earlier. Do you have any problem with me taking my sister for a drive?"

Surprised at his straightforwardness, Ulrike hesitated. Should she be just as honest? Would Carmen be mad at her if she told José what she thought about him and his driving

style, and that he was ruining the day for her - a beautiful summer day that she had planned to spend with Carmen?

Before she could decide on a course of action, José went on, "Carmen told me that you're not particularly fond of me, and I'm sorry that you seem to have got the impression that I would recklessly endanger my sister. I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth. I love my sister dearly and believe me I have cursed myself to hell and back for landing her in hospital. Nonetheless, there really wasn't anything I could have done to prevent it." And reacting to Helmut's disbelieving growl, he repeated, "There really wasn't, Papa."

Finally turning towards José and looking directly into his eyes, Ulrike asked, "Did you drive in the same way as you did when you cut in on me earlier that day?"

Wincing under Ulrike's piercing stare, José pulled a contrite face and said, "I'm truly sorry about that, really. I was in a hurry. And to answer your question, no, I didn't 'drive like that'. We weren't in any hurry and I was even driving below the speed limit because the streets were still wet. Look, I am a passionate driver, all right, but I'm not suicidal. And I stress again that I would never endanger my sister."

Considering all he had said, Ulrike grudgingly had to admit that he did seem responsible enough to trust him - at least when driving his sister. She had also noted that, just like her, he had not touched the wine and was drinking water. Nonetheless, it was still bothering her that he would be taking Carmen for a drive the next day, and she asked, "All right, but couldn't you go for a drive another day?"

José shrugged. "Normally I'd say, yes, but I'm going to Buenos Aires to work on a partner project this coming Thursday, and I won't be back before October, maybe even November. And I don't need to tell you that by then the road conditions won't be as ideal anymore."

Ulrike breathed a heavy sigh. Now she really could no longer hold a grudge towards José, nor could she refuse to give her approval, without coming across like a possessive, overprotective asshole. And kissing good bye to her lovely day with Carmen, she finally agreed to their plans. However, she did let José know in no uncertain terms that she expected him to bring Carmen back safe and sound.

#

As they were driving home a few hours later, Ulrike felt so elated and relieved that she happily chatted away about the great time she had had and how fabulous she found Carmen's parents. She had even, albeit grudgingly, come to accept José as being a nice guy.

Carmen smiled weakly at that. She knew she should be delighted; after all, she had been nagging Ulrike about accepting her brother for weeks. Why couldn't she feel any happiness at all? Instead she only felt a numb emptiness inside her that she couldn't really explain.

Ulrike didn't notice her partner's pensive mood, and she went on chatting excitedly. "... and I'm so glad that your mother liked my gift. I was rather doubtful if she would appreciate the paints. I thought perhaps she would find it silly. But she loved it, she really loved it. Gosh, I can't tell you how relieved I was..."

Carmen didn't respond. And Ulrike didn't seem to expect a response anyway, she had already moved onto the next subject. And Carmen only listened half-heartedly while the numb emptiness grew inside of her, pulling her thoughts into a void of darkness.

As she turned into *Henriettenplatz*, Ulrike finally noticed Carmen's quietness. Casting a glance at her, she thought that her partner looked awfully tired and also, probably had a few too many. Smiling indulgently, she decided to be considerate and halted in front of Carmen's apartment block and suggested, "You know what? You look tired. How about I just drop you off and I'll catch up with you tomorrow night?"

"You don't want to come up?" asked Carmen surprised.

Placing her hand on Carmen's knee, Ulrike said softly, "It's not that I don't want to, but it's

going to take ages to find a parking place, and you look as if you're going to fall asleep any minute. And José will be picking you up at eight in the morning, so we wouldn't have much time for fun then either."

"You aren't making a fuss about me going on a drive with José?" Carmen's feeling of surprise grew by the minute.

Shaking her head, Ulrike said with a smirk, "I told him that if he didn't bring you back safe and sound I'll put his cojones on the *asado* grill and make him eat them."

Carmen's jaw dropped. "You did not!"

Her smirk turning into a grin, Ulrike said, "Yep, sure did. And your father agreed with me and said he wouldn't stop me. Judging by José's face, he got the message, so I will trust him - for now."

Carmen looked down at her hands in her lap. The numb emptiness had been replaced by a dull ache inside her chest, and she was fighting back the tears that were threatening to spill over.

Ulrike gently caressed Carmen's hair off her face and said softly, "You are tired, *Liebling*. It's been a long exciting day. Go to bed, hm? You need your beauty sleep."

Carmen nodded and fumbled for the lock of the safety belt.

"Come on, I'll help you," said Ulrike, and while she freed her partner from the belt, Carmen grasped her handbag from between her feet, not even looking at Ulrike.

Ulrike was about to release her own safety belt in order to lean over and kiss Carmen good night, but Carmen didn't notice and reached for the door handle.

"Gosh, you must be awfully tired," said Ulrike as Carmen opened the door. "Call me tomorrow after your trip, will you?" she called as Carmen got out without a word.

Carmen only replied something unintelligible before she slammed the door shut.

Ulrike graciously interpreted Carmen's mumbling as an affirmation, and as she watched Carmen walk towards the entrance of the building, she wondered why her partner was so unusually tired. Normally Ulrike was the one who fell asleep first. And as soon as Carmen was out of sight, Ulrike drove off, hoping that her partner wasn't coming down with something. However, she was so elated remembering the events of the afternoon and musing over how well everything had turned out, she didn't dwell on Carmen's tiredness. Instead she drove home, happily reliving the afternoon moment for moment.

To be continued ...

Recipe Empanadas:



Ingredients:

Filling:

200g minced beef (or veal, or chicken)
2 chopped hard-boiled eggs
3tbsps. lard (or 30g Speck)
1 hand full of chopped black olives (or stuffed green ones if you prefer)
(Optional: 1 hand full of raisins)
1 chopped onion
2 cloves of garlic
½ tsp. paprika powder
Salt, pepper, sugar, marjoram (or oregano)

Dough:

250g flour
150 ml milk
100g butter
Salt, sugar
(Optional: yolk of 1 egg)

Filling:

Heat the lard. Sauté the onions in the lard. Add garlic and minced meat. When the meat loses its red colour, add the rest of the olives, raisins and spices, and adjust spicing according to your taste. When the meat is slightly browned, set it aside and mix in the chopped hard-boiled eggs. Then let everything cool down.

Dough:

Mix the flour with the salt and sugar and alternately add warmed milk and warmed butter. Let the dough rest for at least half an hour.

Roll out the dough and cut into circles (size of a dessert plate).

Put filling on half of the slices (ca. 1-2 tbsps. on each), moisten the edges with water, fold over the other half, and press the edges together.

(Optional: Brush the top of the empanadas with egg yolk.)

Put the empanadas in the preheated oven (200°C) till they are golden brown (ca. 15-20m).

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