

TAXI

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Tactics

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Taxi - Tactics

By
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I want to thank my editor as well as my mother and my friends Patti and Jane for their invaluable input. I can't express in words how very much you all mean to me.

Taxi - Tactics

Carmen and Ulrike were standing amongst a throng of people who were all waiting for loved ones and relatives to exit the customs area of the airport.

"There he is!" exclaimed Carmen, and waving to José, she grabbed Ulrike's arm and dragged her through the crowd in order to reach her brother.

José was struggling with a huge travel bag and two extra-large suitcases, one of which seemed to have a damaged wheel and he finally gave up pulling it and picked it up. Despite his struggles, a huge smile graced his sun tanned face as he spotted his sister and her partner.

Carmen marvelled with envy how her brother managed to look drop-dead gorgeous as if prepared for a photo shoot, while in reality he had just stepped out of a plane after an over 20-hour long-distance flight! She always felt like a grubby mess after such a long flight, and it usually took her several days to get over the jet lag.

"Hey *Schwesterherz!*"

Carmen yelped as José dropped his luggage, picked her up and swirled her around. She was about to protest, when he set her down and commented with a raise of his eyebrow, "Have you gained weight?" Not waiting for a reply, he turned to Ulrike and shook her hand with a firm grip. "Hi Ulli. Thanks for the chauffeur service," he said grinning and picked up his travel bag.

"No problem," Ulrike waved it off, and pointed at his suitcases, "Do you need help with these?"

"Yeah, that would be nice, actually. The wretched wheel isn't working properly on this one," he picked up the larger one of the suitcases, "If you'd take the other one that would be really great."

"Gosh, this is heavy!" said Ulrike as she started to wheel the suitcase, "What have you got in there? Rocks?"

José laughed, "Nah, just the obligatory gifts from the relatives and of course a stack of dulce de leche, dulce de membrillo and other things you can't get here."

"I really don't know why you must buy that terrible tinned stuff," commented Carmen.

"Because unlike you I don't fancy standing in the kitchen for ages to prepare it myself," countered José, "Not even the relatives do that, by the way."

"Aunt Mariana and Aunt Carla do," protested Carmen.

Shaking his head, José said, "No, they don't, not anymore." He stopped and put the suitcase down to pick it up with his left hand, "Boy, Father's wine bottles and the books and gifts they got for you aren't particularly light weight either. Though luckily they're not as heavy as you are," he joked and carried on heading for the exit.

Carmen followed with a frown on her face. Yes, she had probably gained a bit of weight, but was it really so much that José would notice just by lifting her up? It wasn't as if he was doing it on a regular basis, so how could he really compare anyway? And it was autumn and she was wearing heavy clothes. How could he have known that it wasn't just the clothes? Ulrike lifted her far more often and she frequently saw her without clothes and she hadn't mentioned anything.

"Boy, am I glad to be back in Berlin," said José as he caught up to Ulrike.

"Really?" she asked, "Was it that bad? You certainly don't look like if you have suffered."

"Oh, no, it wasn't bad at all," said José, "Work was a bit challenging, but it was okay. Otherwise it was great. I love Argentina, but I'm looking forward to driving my own car and living in my own flat without having to worry about relatives pestering me about this and that all the time."

Ulrike chuckled, "Now, that I can understand!"

As they stepped out into the cold autumn air, José shivered, "Ugh, the dreadful cold here was the only thing I did not miss at all!"

"I wouldn't miss that either," said Ulrike, "But I've timed the heater, so at least the car will be

warm."

Once they were all seated in the taxi, José remarked from the back seat, "So, now that I'm back, you'll leave, I heard..."

"Yeah," joked Ulrike, "The streets of Berlin will be getting dangerous now that you're back, so we thought we'd rather escape to a safer place."

José laughed. "Have you both got some time now? I'd like to invite you for lunch."

"I haven't planned anything for today," said Ulrike, "Have you?" she asked Carmen.

"Frau Krüger is coming for coffee but lunch sounds fine. Where would you like to go?"

"I don't really care as long as it's not a steakhouse," said José.

Ulrike chuckled, "Fed up with asado now?"

"Not really," said José, "Only my taste buds' memory needs to fade before I can enjoy a steak here again. It just can't compare with the real thing."

"I see," said Ulrike, "How about Italian?"

The others agreed, so Ulrike drove them to a pizzeria near José's place.

After the previous night, she was still feeling a little tired and edgy, even though she did her best not to show it. Normally, she slept like a log, especially after a good lovemaking; however, she still wasn't used to the noise the hedgehog made at night. She had built him a huge play pen in the wintergarden, but that muffled the noise only marginally, thus, she had learnt to shut the bedroom door. However, the previous night she had forgotten to close it after Carmen had left, and only after an hour of tossing and turning, unsuccessfully trying to fall asleep despite the noise, had she finally dragged herself out of bed and closed the door. And although the hedgehog's sounds were barely audible then, they had carried into her dreams. Pinned to the ground, in what way she couldn't remember, she was tortured by hundreds of hedgehogs slurping and munching and scratching right next to her head, keeping her from falling asleep. When the alarm finally woke her from her nightmare, she breathed a long sigh of relief but she felt exhausted as if she hadn't slept for three nights in a row. She was very much looking forward to the trip with Carmen. Finally some peace and quiet during the night!

#

At the restaurant, once the waiter had brought their drinks and taken their meal orders, José said, "Aunt Carla and the other relatives as well, were bitterly complaining that they haven't seen you in ages."

"I was there last year!" protested Carmen, laughing.

José grinned. "Well, you know for them that's ages. They want to know when you're finally coming for a visit again."

"I don't know," said Carmen pensively, "It's going to be difficult now."

"Why?" asked Ulrike, "I'd love to see Argentina."

Carmen cringed, and while she was helplessly searching for words, José explained, "They don't know about you."

"Oh," was all Ulrike could say. She had daydreamt of visiting Argentina with Carmen, of seeing where her partner had grown up and discovering the beauty of the country together with her. But now the chances of those dreams coming true suddenly seemed to have diminished to zero. So, she would be a secret for Carmen's family as well. Somehow, this was not what she had envisioned for their relationship, and she wasn't sure if she could cope with all this secrecy.

"It was already difficult to get my parents to accept me as I am," Carmen tried to explain, "It would be even worse with the rest of the family. They are very old fashioned in their views."

"I tried to sound them out about the subject," said José, "The only one who wasn't appalled by the idea was young Diego."

"There's hope for future generations," said Carmen and raised her wine glass, inwardly applauding her cousin's 19-year old son.

"I'm not so sure," said José, "His reasoning was that he thought it was pretty hot to watch lesbian porn."

Ulrike growled but she managed to bite back a nasty comment by taking a sip of her mineral water to occupy her mouth otherwise.

Carmen buried her face in her hands and shook her head.

"Well," said José, "I guess you better prepare yourself. Alicia and Ricardo are planning to come here next year."

"My cousin and her husband," Carmen clarified for Ulrike and fell silent again.

"Will they be staying at your place?" Ulrike asked Carmen.

Carmen shook her head. "No, the relatives always stay at my parents'. They've got more space and my mother doesn't work, so she has plenty of time to entertain them."

Somewhat relieved, Ulrike asked, "For how long are they going to stay?"

"About four weeks, I guess," said José, "Ricardo is planning to take all his annual leave."

Ulrike had noticed how the subject seemed to make her partner uncomfortable. Not wanting to be the reason for Carmen's discomfort, she discreetly reached for Carmen's hand under the table and gave it an encouraging squeeze. And with a smile she said, "Don't worry. I'm sure we'll manage."

The waiter came with their meals, and Carmen wondered when Ulrike would finally have enough of all the secrecy to which she was so obviously not used. Thinking of Else's somewhat elitist views, Carmen was curious and asked, "Did you never have any problems with your family? I mean with regards to accepting that you are a lesbian."

Looking up from her pizza, Ulrike said, "No. Never."

"What did they say when you came out to them?" Carmen wanted to know.

"I never really 'came out' to anyone," said Ulrike, "My first girlfriend had been my best friend since primary school. She was at our place almost every day, including the weekends. She had five siblings, so her parents were rather relieved that they had one less mouth to feed; she even visited my aunt and uncle with us in the holidays. That didn't change after we discovered that being intimate was rather fun. We didn't go around announcing 'hey, we've slept together', and no one asked. It was none of their business."

"And your mother never bothered you about finding a boyfriend?" Carmen asked amazed.

"My mother bothered and still bothers me about a lot of things, but finding a boyfriend was never among them," said Ulrike chuckling. "She never bothered Nobbi about finding a girlfriend either, and he's been single most of his life, so far."

"Boy, you're lucky," said José, enviously. He hadn't even dared introducing any of his girlfriends to his parents after they had voiced their disapproval in front of his very first sweetheart. The girl didn't take too kindly to his parents' comments and left him right away. Of all the girlfriends he had had since then, he knew that his parents would not approve, thus he spared the women and himself the embarrassment of introducing them. So far none of his relationships had lasted longer than a few months anyway, thus the issue hadn't been too difficult to avoid.

"Yes, you really are lucky," agreed Carmen.

Ulrike shrugged, "I don't know. None of my girlfriends and partners ever had a problem with regards to that. So, for me it is actually pretty strange that your family is giving you such trouble."

"Speaking of trouble," said José, remembering Carmen's concern about her colleague, and turned to his sister, "Did Frau Weber say anything after all?"

Carmen shook her head, "No, at least not yet. She was still sick when the holidays started, so I haven't seen her or talked to her since we saw her at the opera."

"I really don't think you've got much to worry about," said Ulrike, "She has probably forgotten all about it already, and even if not, you've made it perfectly clear that I'm just 'a friend of yours'." Ulrike was still chewing on this introduction even though she did understand Carmen's reasons a little better now and had agreed to her terms.

"I hope you are right," sighed Carmen and excused herself for a minute.

Once his sister was out of sight, José picked up his glass of wine, but before he raised it to his mouth, he asked Ulrike, "So, where are you going apart from visiting your aunt?" He knew from

Carmen that Ulrike refused to tell her where they would stay during their upcoming trip, and insisted on surprising Carmen. He had congratulated his sister for having regained her adventurous spirit; however, Carmen had been very sceptical. She didn't like the fact that she didn't know where they would stay and she feared that Ulrike's taste might not exactly match hers. José had hoped he could help his sister by catching Ulrike unawares. However, when he took a sip of his wine Ulrike's grin told him that she had seen through his ruse.

"Nice try, but I'm not going to tell you either. It's a surprise, and I'm sure she'll love it."

"I wouldn't be so sure. My sister can be rather picky. However, if you let me in on it, I believe I can tell you whether she'll really love it or not," he countered.

Shaking her head, Ulrike said, "Look, it's not some cheap motel, I can tell you that much. So, even if she doesn't love it, she certainly won't hate it. And, as you probably know, I had to compromise too. I'm not fond of driving such a long distance in that sardine tin of hers, be it ever so fashionable; but it was her condition and I accepted."

"That's fair enough, I guess," said José. "Though I hope she'll be fonder of the hotel you chose than you are of her car."

Ulrike raised her eyebrows. "I appreciate the sentiment; however, we're certainly going to spend more time in the car than at the hotel, at least in a conscious state, so even if she doesn't like it, she'll get the better deal."

José laughed, "I know why my father is so fond of you - you think like a business man! I'm just not so sure if you can apply that view to a relationship - especially when it comes to my sister."

"We'll see," said Ulrike grinning as Carmen returned to the table.

"What will you see?" asked Carmen as she sat down.

"We'll see if you agree. You know, your brother thinks we should take the Daimler because we will never fit both our luggage in the Alfa."

Carmen's left eyebrow rose and her lips turned into a lopsided smirk, "My brother would never prefer a clunky old ivory coloured steel box with the appeal of a panzer over a classy red sports car."

"She's right," acknowledged José grinning.

Ulrike chuckled. "Well, I had to try."

The waiter brought their desserts and they enjoyed some amiable chatter until Carmen looked at her watch and said, "I guess we'll have to leave now."

"When does Frau Krüger come over?" Ulrike wanted to know.

"At three, but I would like to change and prepare everything in time."

"Uh, would you like to have your presents today or shall I keep them till you return from your trip?" asked José.

Carmen's face lit up, "Oh, if you don't mind, you could come over in the evening, let's say around six. Then I could take one of the books with me."

"All right, no problem," said José and called over to the waiter to request the bill.

#

Once they had taken José home and were heading for Carmen's place, Carmen asked, "Are you looking forward to tomorrow?"

"Very much," said Ulrike, gently touching Carmen's thigh as she stopped at a red light.

"Are you terribly annoyed that I want to take the Alfa?"

"Nah, not terribly," said Ulrike.

"Good," said Carmen smiling. She didn't mind driving around in a taxi while they were in Berlin, but on a holiday she really preferred looks over practicality. She dearly hoped that Ulrike knew her enough by now to not surprise her with a stay at some grubby old guesthouse.

The car behind them honked, interrupting Carmen's musings. "It's green," she pointed out when Ulrike didn't react.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," said Ulrike who hadn't paid attention, and driving on, she asked, "Do you think I could take a short nap at your place before Frau Krüger comes over?"

"Sure," said Carmen, "I'm sorry I didn't shut the bedroom door. I will try to remember next time."

"It's not your fault," reassured Ulrike, "I really don't know why it affects me so much; usually I'm not this easily bothered by noise."

"True," said Carmen, "You slept peacefully through the opera and you didn't even wake up when Tabitha knocked the dish drainer off the sink the other night. The clash probably woke the whole house."

Ulrike chuckled, "I really didn't hear a thing. I must have been dead asleep."

"It is unfathomable to me how you could be so fast asleep that you didn't hear that," said Carmen, "But I can imagine why you are affected by Tapsi's sounds."

"Really? Why?"

"Maternal instinct," said Carmen grinning.

"Pfft, that's ridiculous! He isn't my baby!" protested Ulrike as she halted to back into a free parking bay.

"Of course not. But you have taken responsibility for him, and you care about his wellbeing. I think that it is a similar process in the brain like with a mother who will hear the faintest noise of her baby. Tapsi is helpless without your care, just like a baby. So, your brain probably considers his sounds relevant, while on the other hand it obviously regards music and the noise of kitchen clatter as not important enough to wake you."

"Hm," pondered Ulrike, as they headed for Carmen's place, "You may have a point."

Opening the entrance door, Carmen said, "I think it's rather cute that you care for him so much. It's nice to see a softer side of you. It makes you seem a little less tough." As Ulrike raised an eyebrow, she quickly added, "Not that I mind you being tough - on the contrary. I find your toughness very sexy."

"Do you?" asked Ulrike and followed Carmen into the lift.

"Uh huh," acknowledged Carmen and turned to Ulrike with a salacious grin, "Maybe I could lie down with you for a bit..."

"You don't sound tired," said Ulrike, feigning ignorance.

"Oh, I am not, but perhaps I can help you wake up," purred Carmen.

Trying to keep a straight face, but not entirely succeeding, Ulrike said, "Hmm, I'm not sure that's possible; how are you planning to accomplish that?"

Grabbing Ulrike's Jacket, Carmen walked backwards, dragging Ulrike out of the lift. "Let me show you."

Suddenly, Ulrike froze, and staring in the direction of Carmen's flat, she cleared her throat.

"What's wrong?" asked Carmen and turned to see what Ulrike was looking at. As soon as she did so, she froze as well, the colour draining from her face, and she breathed in shock, "Tanja!"

Her pupil's face flushed and she stammered embarrassed, "Uh, *guten Tag*, Frau Bauer. Your neighbour told me that you'd be home soon, and she asked me to tell you that she'll be back for coffee."

Ulrike stuck her hands in her pockets and remained silent, not sure how to react. This time, Carmen could obviously not introduce her as 'a friend of hers', and she was curious as to how her partner was going to deal with the situation.

"Why are you here?" asked Carmen. Her discomfort was still very obvious and she realised that she was being rude to her favourite pupil. Under normal circumstances, she would have been delighted to see Tanja, and she would have asked her in. However, after what Tanja had just witnessed, Carmen was not sure if that would be appropriate. On the other hand, she couldn't let her pupil go without asking her to keep what she had witnessed to herself. Some sort of discussion was definitely in order, regardless of why Tanja had come in the first place, so before Tanja could answer, she waved her hand and said, "You can tell me inside," and she stepped past Tanja to unlock the door to her flat.

Tanja looked uncomfortably from Carmen to Ulrike and back, but when Carmen asked her to come in and Ulrike gestured her with a smile on her face to go ahead, she picked up her bag and entered.

When they had all doffed their jackets, Carmen led them into the living room and said, "I'll make some coffee. Would you like some orange juice as always, Tanja?"

"Yes, please," said Tanja shyly.

Ulrike raised her eyebrows as Carmen quickly turned and headed for the kitchen, leaving her and the girl sitting on the sofa without any further comments. She still hadn't introduced them to each other, and Ulrike shook her head with a lopsided smirk at her partner's unusual lack of manners. "I'm Ulrike Hoffmann," she introduced herself to the girl and offered her hand.

The girl hesitantly shook Ulrike's hand, "I'm Tanja Lorenz."

"Nice to meet you, Tanja. You're a pupil of Frau Bauer's, I assume?"

Tanja nodded, "Yes. And you are ... I mean, Frau Bauer and you..." she stopped and blushed in embarrassment.

Ulrike grinned and lit a cigarette, "You'd better ask Frau Bauer. I don't want to get reprimanded for giving you an inappropriate answer."

Carmen nervously waited for the coffee to run through. She could hear that Ulrike and Tanja were talking, but with the gurgling of the coffee machine she couldn't make out any specific words. She prayed to God that her partner wouldn't make things worse. Although, how Ulrike could make the situation worse than it already was, she didn't know. She only knew that her worst nightmare had just become reality, and she had no idea how to deal with it. She had often played through similar scenarios in her head, and not one of her approaches had resulted in a positive outcome.

She had baked a cake in the morning. *Perhaps I should prepare some whipped cream and offer it to Tanja and Ulrike*, thought Carmen, and decided to latch onto the opportunity to postpone the inevitable.

"Can I have one?" Tanja asked and pointed at the cigarettes.

Hesitating, Ulrike asked, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Shaking her head, Ulrike said, "In that case, sorry but no. You don't want to get your teacher into trouble, do you?"

The girl looked down at her hands and shook her head, causing her long dark hair to fall forward and obscure her pretty face. "No."

Why on earth did she come here? It's the autumn holidays, for Christ's sake! Carmen thought desperately as she put the coffee pot on the tray. She would never have thought that a pupil would visit her during the holidays. Hell, she wouldn't have thought that a pupil would wait in front of her door even on a school day. That Ulrike would try to get into the house despite Carmen not opening the door was one thing, but she certainly hadn't reckoned that one of her pupils would dare to invade her privacy in such a way - especially not Tanja.

Tanja was such a polite girl. She often visited her, mainly to practise Spanish conversation, but they always made the appointment at school. She had never called on her unannounced. And it was Monday. Mondays Tanja usually went to dance studio, which would correspond with the bag she had with her ... and as far as Carmen knew it was in the afternoon. It was the reason why Carmen had scheduled her dance class to be on Wednesdays even though Mondays would have matched her lesson plan better. Realising this, Carmen looked at the clock - almost three o'clock - and she suddenly wondered if Tanja was in some sort of trouble. *Why else would she voluntarily miss a dance class?*

"May I help you?"

Carmen almost dropped the knife she had been holding in order to cut the cake.

"I'm sorry, Frau Bauer," said Tanja, "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right," reassured Carmen, forcing a smile, "You could take the coffee pot and the orange juice into the living room, if you like."

"Okay," said the girl, and brushing her long hair to the back, she grasped the items from the counter.

"I thought you might like some apple cake," said Carmen, "I baked it this morning."

"Uh," Tanja gulped and blushed. "I'm sorry, but I don't really feel like eating."

Furrowing her brows in concern, Carmen asked, "Are you unwell?"

"Yes, uh, no, um I'm not sick or anything, I uh..." stammered Tanja and paused.

Seeing the girl's embarrassment, Carmen slipped into her teacher's persona and pointing at the tray on the counter and the items in Tanja's hands she said with an encouraging smile, "Let's get these into the living room first, hm?"

"Okay," said Tanja with a relieved sigh and left the kitchen.

All right, no cake, thought Carmen, and quickly put the bowl of whipped cream in the fridge. She should probably refrain from cake and especially whipped cream anyway or she'd never lose weight. She wondered what was wrong with Tanja and she desperately hoped that her pupil's uneasiness was not a result of what she had witnessed.

Steeling herself, she finally picked up the tray and headed for the living room.

#

When they were all finally settled, Carmen asked into the awkward silence, "Now, Tanja, what brought you to me?"

When the girl blushed and cast a quick glance at Ulrike and Carmen, Ulrike asked, "Shall I leave?" thinking that the girl might be uncomfortable talking in front of a stranger.

Carmen glared at her partner and shook her head almost invisibly.

Sighing heavily, Tanja shrugged and said, "I don't mind if you stay. Frau Bauer probably won't believe me now anyway."

"You have never given me any reason to distrust you," said Carmen gently, "Why would I not believe you?"

"Because..." Tanja hesitated, and heaving a frustrated sigh she blurted, "*Verdammt!* Because I came to you because I trust you and I thought that you wouldn't judge me and that I could tell you and maybe ask you for advice ... but ... but now I feel like a freaking clairvoyant, and you will think I spied on you or something ... but I swear I didn't know. I swear it, Frau Bauer, I didn't know." With a look of utter despair Tanja looked straight at Carmen, tears streaming down her face. When Carmen blinked in confusion, Tanja buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Ulrike shrugged her shoulders in a helpless gesture. Tanja wasn't her pupil and she wasn't sure if the girl would appreciate a comforting gesture from her.

Quickly, Carmen got up and sat down next to Tanja. Wrapping an arm around the girl's shoulders, she said softly, "I'm not sure I understand what you are talking about, but I can promise you that I won't judge you, Tanja. And I will do my best to help you if I can."

"I swear I didn't spy on you," sobbed the girl.

"I believe you, Tanja," said Carmen, "Would you please enlighten me as to what you are talking about? I really can't make sense of what you are saying."

"I want to go to another dance studio, and I thought maybe you could talk to my parents."

Surprised, Carmen asked, "Why do you want to change? I thought you were quite happy with your dance studio."

"I was ... I am ... it's not the studio, really."

"But?"

"Roger Friedrich, my dance partner."

When Tanja didn't elaborate, Carmen asked, "What is the problem with him? Didn't you say he is a good dancer?"

"He is, but he ... he saw me and Jacqueline ... and now he threatens to tell my parents if I don't

sleep with him."

Carmen sucked in a breath. That was unexpected. She hadn't known that Tanja was a lesbian. Tanja had told her of her friend Jacqueline, who went to the same dance studio, but she never would have guessed that they were more than friends. As their daughter's teacher, she knew Tanja's parents, and from what she gathered, she could very well imagine that they would not take this revelation too kindly. Well, she certainly didn't need to worry about Tanja revealing her secret now, she thought sardonically.

"*Verdammtes Schwein!*" cursed Ulrike furiously. "You should report him to the police!"

"No!" cried Tanja, "Then my parents will find out."

"Not necessarily," said Carmen, "It's your word against his. You could simply say that it is not true."

Tanja shook her head. "His father is a chief prosecutor and he's my father's golf partner. When I told Roger that I would deny it, he said, 'Whom are they going to believe - a perverted lesbian slut or the son of a chief prosecutor?' No one would believe me."

"Bastard!" cursed Ulrike while Carmen sucked in a breath, her mind reeling from shock; and unable to think of anything encouraging to say, she just squeezed Tanja's shoulders in a helpless gesture.

"Will you talk to my parents, please?" asked Tanja desperately. "You could tell them that you heard of a dance studio that would nurture my talents better than my current one."

"But I don't know any better dance studio, Tanja."

"You really shouldn't be forced to change," said Ulrike, "He is the one who should leave."

"Yeah, but he would never do that," said Tanja.

Since her partner still seemed at a loss for words, Ulrike continued expressing her thoughts, "You said your parents are acquainted." When Tanja nodded, Ulrike asked, "Then how will it help you to change studios. Aren't you going to meet him elsewhere too?"

Tanja shrugged, "Probably. He lives in the same street."

"*Scheiße!*" cursed Ulrike, and lighting another cigarette she forcefully exhaled the smoke and said, "Then it really won't matter whether you leave that dance studio. He's a freaking bastard and he'll continue his blackmailing even if you leave. In fact, it would probably make things worse because it would prove to him that he has power over you."

Breaking into tears again, Tanja sobbed, "I don't know what to do."

Coming out of her stupor, Carmen hugged Tanja reassuringly and said, "Don't worry. I will talk to your parents. I will think of something." Though what she could tell them to get her pupil out of this mess, she didn't know, and she silently prayed to God that He may help her find a solution - and quickly. Handing Tanja a tissue, she asked, "When will your parents be home?"

Blowing her nose, Tanja sniffled, "Not before seven."

"All right, I will call around seven thirty then," said Carmen, and looking at her watch, she realised dismayed that it was almost three and she hadn't yet set the table for Frau Krüger's visit. "I am sorry, Tanja, but I will have to let you go now; my neighbour will be here soon." However, not wanting to send her pupil home in her still upset state, she asked, "Ulrike, I know you are tired, but would you be so kind and drive Tanja home?"

"Sure," said Ulrike, "I have to get my travel bag anyway. I might take a nap before I return."

#

"You're a taxi driver?" asked Tanja as Ulrike opened the passenger's door for her.

"Yep. With heart and soul," said Ulrike, grinning proudly.

"Cool," said Tanja and climbed in.

Ulrike settled into the driver's seat, and asking for Tanja's address, she backed out of the parking bay and headed for the address Tanja gave her. It wasn't far, only about ten minutes to drive, and glancing at the silent girl next to her, Ulrike thought about how difficult the conversation with Tanja's parents was going to be for Carmen. Damn, Carmen was already afraid that her own

sexuality might come out ... Ulrike didn't even want to think about what this new situation could do to her partner's self-esteem if it were to escalate. Changing dance studios was certainly not going to be a solution, that much, she thought, she had sufficiently pointed out. But what else could Carmen do for the girl? *God, she must be beside herself with worry*, thought Ulrike. *And all because of that goddamned bastard! He should be the one worrying, the son of a bitch! Too bad that the girl doesn't want to involve the police ... Someone should teach that bloody asshole a lesson!*

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Ulrike, and she asked, "When does Roger normally finish at the dance studio?"

"Not before five. He helps with the beginners' class. They don't have enough boys. Why?"

"Hmm," hummed Ulrike, "I might have an idea, if you don't mind me interfering."

"What sort of idea?"

"Do you know Tango & Cash?" asked Ulrike.

"Uh ... will I get into trouble if I say I do?"

Ah, right, thought Ulrike, *it's for 16+*. Grinning, she turned to Tanja and said, "My lips are sealed."

"OK, so what has your idea got to do with Tango & Cash?"

"Well, I was thinking of their unconventional methods to deal with scumbags..."

"Um ... but they are cops and they are men, and it's just a movie..." argued Tanja

"Details, details," said Ulrike, and turning into a side street she parked the car and went on, "Let me make a few phone calls, and I'll tell you if I can make it work. You've got a little time, don't you?"

"Sure, I don't have to be home before eight."

"Good. You just stay here, I'll be right back."

Heading for the telephone booth at the corner, Ulrike pulled out her wallet and searched for the piece of paper on which she kept important phone numbers.

"Axel? It's me, Ulrike."

Hi Ulli, what's up?"

"Listen, I need your help; when do you start work today?"

"At five as usual. Why, what do you need?"

"Damn, could you get your partner to hang in an hour longer or so?"

"Probably."

"Great, here's the problem..." Ulrike quickly explained what had happened and what she had in mind, "I haven't contrived a detailed plan, yet, but if you're game, I'll let you know as soon as possible."

"Well, I'm certainly game teaching that prick a lesson!"

"Awesome! Let me just call a few others to help, and I'll get back to you in about 10-15 minutes."

"Okay. I'll try to reach Mehmet in the meantime. He's the one that teaches Taekwondo on Monday evenings. He might be willing to help too."

"Excellent. Talk to you later."

Slowly, an idea was forming in Ulrike's mind, and she dialled Kalle's number next, hoping that he was back from the dentist and not too badly incapacitated after getting his new dental bridge. Ulrike cringed at the thought. She hadn't been to the dentist in over a year, and although she didn't have any problems, she thought she should probably go for a check-up sometime soon.

"Tach Kalle, it's me. How did the dentist appointment go?"

"Tachchen Ulli! It was okay, thanks. Finally, I can eat normally again. But I have a feeling that's not really why you called..."

"True. I've got a problem here, and I'd like to ask for your help if you are up to it..."

When Ulrike had explained what had happened and what she was planning to do about it, Kalle said, *"Sounds a bit extreme, but the boy certainly needs to be taught a lesson. So, yeah, you can count me in."*

"Great!"

"But I wouldn't involve the girl in this, Ulli. I mean how old she is? 15? 16?"

"15."

"Then don't involve her. Don't even tell her about your plan, Ulli. She's too young for this sort of shit. It's not quite legal you know, and the less she knows about it the better it is, for her as well as for us."

"But I need her to show me who Roger is. I've got no idea what the asshole looks like."

Thinking for a moment, Kalle said, "Ask her if she has a photo of him. If she doesn't, let her describe him, but don't tell her anything else. Just reassure her that we'll talk to him, and take her home."

"Okay, I can do that."

"Good. Now, if you want to bring in Renato as well, you better get cracking, so we can figure out when and where to meet."

"Yeah, I'll first ask her where that dance studio is, then, if Renato is game, I can tell him right away where to meet; and then I'll call you back."

"Sounds like a plan. Talk to you later then."

#

Meanwhile, Frau Krüger decided she had had enough of Carmen's apologies and worrying and explanations, and in her typical Berlin tongue she said, *"Frollein Carmen, will you stop it already! I may be old but I'm not senile yet. I've told you I had cats before. How often do you want me to assure you that it won't be a problem to care for Tabitha? But this isn't about the cat, is it? It's about the girl who was here earlier, isn't it? Has she been up to mischief, the little one?"*

"I'm sorry, Frau Krüger," said Carmen, and when her neighbour looked at her sternly for apologising yet again, she almost blurted out another apology but she caught herself and went on, "I didn't mean to annoy you. Yes, I am worried about the girl, but I cannot talk about it. I need to help her, but I don't yet know how; and I need to find a solution today."

Getting up, Frau Krüger said, "Then why are you wasting your time with me? Surely, helping the girl is more important than asking me for the umpteenth time if I really don't mind caring for your cat." Carmen rose from her chair and wanted to stop Frau Krüger but the old lady would have none of it. She grasped Carmen's arms and gently but determinedly forced her back onto her chair. "No, my dear, you stay here. You're a veritable nervous wreck. You need to set priorities and stop worrying. Relax and look at the problem from different angles and you'll find a solution, I'm sure of it." And patting Carmen's shoulder, she finished, "Thank you for the coffee and the cake; it was delicious, as usual. Now, I'll leave you to your problem solving, and don't worry, I'll let myself out, and I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"All right, Frau Krüger, thank you," was all Carmen could say before her neighbour disappeared into the hallway; and when a few seconds later Carmen heard the door open and shut again, she heaved a deep sigh.

*"Now what?" she asked herself. She still had several hours before she would have to call Tanja's parents, but she just couldn't figure out what best to tell them. Ulrike did have a point when she noted that leaving the dance studio wouldn't help Tanja if Roger was living in the neighbourhood, especially since their parents were acquainted. And Tanja was terrified of her parents' finding out about her being a lesbian, so telling them the truth was out of the question. But she had promised Tanja that she would help and had reassured her that she would find a solution. *What the hell got into me to make such a promise?!* Carmen cursed herself inwardly. *How can I help her when I can't even manage to tell my own family about me and Ulli?* "Hm ... Look at the problem from a different angle, she said," Carmen muttered to herself. "Perhaps I don't even have to call Tanja's parents. Wouldn't it be more logical to talk to Roger's parents? I wouldn't even have to tell them Tanja's name." She got up and went over to her desk. "Let's see, Tanja said Friedrich was his name. Not exactly a rare name, but she said they are neighbours," and taking the A-K telephone book, she started searching. A few seconds later, she halted her finger at one of the names. "Dr. jur. A.*

Friedrich, same street as Tanja's; that must be Roger's father."

Reaching for a pack of cigarettes, Carmen noticed that her hand was trembling, and it took her several tries to fumble a cigarette from the pack and light it. Taking a deep drag, she leant back in her chair and closed her eyes. *Relax*, she thought, *this is not about me, it's not even about Tanja, it's about Roger and what he has done. Surely, his parents don't want their son to end up with a criminal record for blackmail and attempted rape; so, talking to them will solve Tanja's problem without even mentioning her.*

After a few minutes of thinking about how best to approach the subject with Roger's parents, Carmen finally reached for the telephone receiver and dialled the number she found in the phone book.

"Friedrich," a woman's voice answered.

"Guten Tag. My name is Bauer. Am I talking to Roger's mother?"

"Yes. Are you one of his teachers?"

"I am a teacher but not of your son's."

"Then why are you calling?" asked Frau Friedrich a bit testily, *"Is it about the sponsoring of the school's dance competition? Don't tell me you need even more money, I would say we have been more than generous with our contribution."*

"No, it's not about money at all," said Carmen. "Listen, I am calling in a very serious matter regarding your son, but I would rather not discuss this on the phone. Could I talk to you and your husband face to face?"

"He isn't failing his exams is he?"

"This is not about his exams, but it is a very serious and urgent matter."

"Huh. I have no idea what you are talking about, but let me see," said Frau Friedrich and shortly after she went on, *"You could come on Wednesday at five in the afternoon."*

"I'm sorry, but the matter can't be delayed and I will be on a holiday as from tomorrow, so it would have to be today."

"How inconvenient," lamented Frau Friedrich and sighed. *"Well if you really must see us today, you will have to be quick. My husband should be home any minute, but we will go out for dinner in about an hour and a half; so if you really must come it would have to be before that."*

"All right, thank you," said Carmen, "I will be at your place in about 30 minutes."

"All right," said Frau Friedrich, and once they had said their good byes Carmen hung up and leant back in her chair with a heavy sigh. "This is not going to be a walk in the park," she muttered to herself and taking a deep breath she put her hands on the armrests and pushed herself up.

By the time she reached the Friedrichs' address, Carmen had finally managed to calm her troubled emotions, so when she walked up the path to the luxury villa she was in her full teacher's mode.

Frau Friedrich was expecting her at the door, wearing an exquisite long-sleeved little black dress and unostentatious but nonetheless expensive jewellery.

Holding out her hand, Carmen introduced herself, glad that she had decided to quickly change her outfit before she left. Her camel coloured cashmere costume and the Italian designer heels could certainly keep up with Frau Friedrich's attire with regards to style as well as price.

With an appraising look, Frau Friedrich shook Carmen's hand and asked her to come in.

Carmen followed her through a long hallway, appreciatively glancing at the antique furniture and gold framed paintings. She wondered whether the Monet at the end of the hallway was an original or if the subtle wire she had spotted behind the painting was rather to protect the gilded frame. *Maybe both*, she thought, as she entered the spacious living room and felt as if she had just stepped into a museum in which the leather couch and oversized TV looked rather out of place.

Herr Dr Friedrich was standing at an antique serving trolley, holding a cognac glass. Like his wife, he was already dressed to go out for dinner. Once his wife had introduced them he asked, "May I offer you a cognac?"

"No, thank you. No alcohol," said Carmen. "I will have to drive home."

"Ah, one cognac is allowed, but you take no chances - that's commendable," said Herr Friedrich and offered, "A glass of water?"

"Yes, please," said Carmen, and once she had taken the offered glass she followed the Friedrichs to the nearby table.

"Now, what can I do for you?" asked Herr Friedrich.

"It is about your son," Carmen began.

The Friedrichs listened politely as Carmen explained the issue, and as she took a break, Herr Friedrich asked, "And this girl, whose name you don't want to disclose, told you that my son did that to her?"

"Yes," said Carmen, "And I would rather you appeal to his conscience than involving the authorities and cause the girl further trauma."

"And you never thought she might be lying to you?" asked Herr Friedrich.

"No. I know her very well, and she was visibly distraught," explained Carmen.

"Then she must be a good actress," said Herr Friedrich, and before Carmen could argue he went on, "See, my son has more than enough girlfriends. The girls practically throw themselves at him. There is certainly no need for him to blackmail a girl into sleeping with him. Perhaps she just wanted to get back to him because he wasn't interested in her."

Biting back a nasty comment, Carmen started, "Herr Friedrich..."

"Doktor Friedrich," Herr Dr Friedrich corrected.

"Herr Doktor Friedrich," Carmen repeated icily, "I can assure you that this is not the case. Whichever reason your son had for resorting to criminal behaviour..."

"My son did certainly not resort to criminal behaviour, Frau Bauer."

"Oberstudienrätin," Carmen corrected, thinking that since he seemed to be so keen on titles he should use hers as well. "If you are unwilling to talk to your son, I will have no choice but to report it to the appropriate authorities." Of course, Carmen had no such intention, but she hoped that the Friedrichs wouldn't call her bluff; and they didn't.

Frau Friedrich remained silent but the down-her-nose look she had worn in the beginning had changed into an expression of concern. However, her husband had other means to react to threats...

"You would be ill advised to do so, Frau Oberstudienrätin," said Herr Friedrich coldly, "Because if you do that, you will lose, and I will sue you for libel on top of it." And getting up he said, "Now, if you'll excuse me; my wife will show you out."

"If you want my advice," said Frau Friedrich as she opened the door for Carmen, "If you want to help the girl you'll have to find other ways than threatening my husband. He does not take kindly to that, and he always wins."

"What if you talk to your son?" asked Carmen.

Frau Friedrich smiled sadly, "My son has long stopped listening to what I say, Frau Oberstudienrätin."

Carmen nodded. "Thank you, Frau Friedrich. Good bye."

"Damn, now I'm back to square one," Carmen muttered to herself as she drove back home. "I just wasted my time with this arrogant human being."

#

Ulrike and Kalle were standing at Kalle's taxi, their eyes fixed on the entrance of the dance studio.

"Thank God Mehmet had the presence of mind to think of those stickers to cover our name tags and license numbers. I'd never have thought of that!" said Kalle.

Ulrike casually leant back against the car, taking a drag of her cigarette. She felt calm and excited at the same time, and there was no trace left of the tiredness she had experienced all day.

"Yeah, he saved our butt with that one."

"Do you think you'll recognise him?" asked Kalle as a group of teenagers emerged from the dance studio.

"Yeah, that dance competition photo was pretty huge."

"They must be very proud of their daughter."

"Probably," said Ulrike, "But what's it worth if they can't accept her for who she is? She can't even ask them to take that photo off because she can't tell them what a piece of crap Roger is, so his smug visage will grin down at her from above the mantelpiece until she wins a bigger competition with someone else."

"Damn, that sucks!"

"Yeah. *Verdammt Hurensohn!*" cursed Ulrike.

"Well, although I agree with you that he's a damned son of bitch, it's not his fault that her parents are stuck in the middle ages with their views."

Ulrike shrugged. "I guess not, but if it wasn't for his fucking blackmail, Tanja wouldn't have to face this problem."

"That's true," admitted Kalle.

"There he comes!" said Ulrike and pointed at a handsome looking brown-haired boy who had just stepped out of the dance studio, surrounded by a group of girls. "Bloody macho," spat Ulrike, disgusted, before she headed for her own taxi.

"*Juten Tach,*" greeted Kalle. "Are you Roger Sauer?"

"Yeah, why?" asked Roger. A girl on each arm, he cast a sceptical look at Kalle.

"Your father sent me," explained Kalle, his facial expression serious. "Your mother is in hospital, and he asked me to come and fetch you to take you there."

"Shit! What happened to her?" asked Roger, letting go of the girls and grasping his bag from one of the girl's hands.

Shrugging, Kalle said, "I don't know. He didn't tell me. However, he did sound urgent on the phone. So, are you coming?"

"Of course," said Roger and followed Kalle.

"I hope your mum will be all right!" "Tell her to get well soon!" the girls called after him.

As Kalle merged into the rush-hour traffic, Ulrike mumbled to herself, "Subject hooked; phase one successfully accomplished." Grinning, she put the automatic into drive and followed.

Some distance away from the dance studio, Kalle halted at a corner and Ulrike watched Axel and his friend, Mehmet get in on both sides of Roger. "Phase two initiated," Ulrike said to herself, "I hope he'll pee his pants ... or maybe not ... at least not yet, or poor Kalle will have to clean up the mess."

Her next stop was going to be at another corner, about five minutes away, to pick up Renato. When Tanja had told her the address of the dance studio, Ulrike knew that it was difficult to get a parking space there at the best of times; finding spaces for five cars in order to wait for Roger was next to impossible. Thus, Ulrike had adjusted her plan accordingly, and she actually liked that plan even better.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Roger when Axel told him to scoot.

"No worries," said Kalle coolly, "They're friends of your father's. I'm to take them to the hospital as well."

With a side glance at Mehmet, Roger said a tad concerned, "My father doesn't have Turks as friends. This doesn't feel right." As Mehmet raised an eyebrow at him, Roger gulped and looked away.

"Ah, but it feels right to you when you blackmail a girl into sleeping with you?" asked Kalle, looking at Roger through the rear-view mirror.

Roger flinched, but quickly retorted, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Kalle shrugged, "That's okay. You've got time to think about it; and if you can't figure it out till

we reach our destination, I'm sure we can help you refresh your memory."

Roger gulped yet again when he averted his gaze from the mirror and saw Mehmet flashing him a toothy grin.

Ulrike had been right, thought Kalle; it didn't take much to scare the bully shitless. He had expected him to pick up more of a fight once he figured that he had been fooled; and maybe he would have if not for Mehmet. Kalle smirked and shook his head slightly as he watched the boy, who still looked defiant but remained quiet and kept glancing towards Mehmet. *Interesting*, thought Kalle. Having several Turkish friends himself, he would never have thought that the kid would be frightened by the sheer presence of a Turk, especially since Mehmet looked perfectly harmless and had neither said nor done anything to threaten the boy. *Guess that with a chief prosecutor as a father he only gets to hear about the criminals and doesn't come much in contact with the nice guys*, mused Kalle. *Probably lives in a posh area too with small foreigner percentage*. It would be a pity to strengthen the boy's fear of foreigners, but if he didn't cooperate, Mehmet might become a valuable asset in 'persuading' him to leave Tanja alone.

When Ulrike neared the appointed meeting place, she slowed down and smiled as she spotted Renato's grey Fiat Croma. She honked twice and, checking the traffic behind her, she stopped next to him.

When he opened the door, Ulrike said, "Hi Renato, I'm so glad you..." she stopped and did a double take as he slid into the passenger's seat.

"What?" asked Renato.

"Uh ... where did you dig out those clothes?" She certainly hadn't expected her usually impeccably and fashionably dressed friend to show up looking like an Italian migrant who had just stepped out of a 1950s B-movie, including the traditional Italian coppola and a fake moustache.

Renato grinned. "They belonged to my grandfather. I've occasionally worn them to fancy-dress parties."

Raising an eyebrow, Ulrike said deadpan, "How original." And she drove on to catch up with Kalle and the others.

"Eh, it's more original than showing up in your everyday clothes saying you're a lesbian - at a costume party with only lesbian participants!"

Ulrike laughed. Boy, Gitti had been mad at her for showing up without costume at that party - the only fancy-dress party her ex-partner had ever dragged her to, as after that performance she had never tried again to involve Ulrike. "What can I say? I hate fancy-dress parties."

"So do I," said Renato, "But this time I thought it might be a nice addition to our plan. And it's a nice disguise. Wouldn't want Mr prosecutor's son to recognise me, after all. I've got a reputation to lose, you know."

"Do you now?" teased Ulrike but immediately went on, "Seriously, though. I intend to make sure that the asshole won't dare tell his father."

"And how are you intending to accomplish that?"

Ulrike reached into the door pocket and pulled out a small gun.

"Whoa! You're not planning to shoot him, are you?"

"Hell no! It's just a gas pistol. But with his fingerprints on it, it will serve to ensure that he'll keep the promises he'll give us, or else he'll be charged for assaulting a taxi driver."

"Ahh, clever," said Renato.

They had long left the more affluent areas of Berlin with their magnificent boulevards, touristy shopping centres and expensive boutiques. Roger was visibly getting increasingly scared as they drove through dirty looking streets with old five to six storeyed tenant buildings in desolate condition, the facades blackened from decades of soot and exhaust, occasionally 'embellished' with advertising posters, tags and graffiti. Linens with protest slogans hung from various curtainless windows; and the names of the shops and restaurants revealed the predominantly foreign population.

"Where are we going?" asked Roger, his voice breaking.

"We're almost there," said Kalle jovially.

Turning left into a side street, Kalle drove another few hundred metres before he pulled into the driveway of an obviously deserted factory site. He manoeuvred the taxi around a pile of rubble and pieces of machinery to the back of the building and halted. Surrounded by high walls on three sides and the large derelict factory building with its broken windows on the right the old loading area looked anything but welcoming.

When Kalle stopped but didn't show any inclination of exiting and instead cranked down the window and lit a cigarette, Roger asked, "What now?"

"Now, we wait," said Kalle and comfortably leant back.

#

"Initiating phase three," said Ulrike as she pulled into the driveway of the old factory.

"What?" asked Renato.

"Hm? Oh, just saying that we're now starting phase three of my plan," said Ulrike.

"Ah. How many phases does your plan have?"

"Three," said Ulrike, and looking around the factory site, she furrowed her brow and noted, "They're not here yet? That's odd."

"Perhaps they are at the back of the building?" asked Renato and pointed to the passage at the left side of the factory.

"Hm ... let's check it out."

"Here they come," announced Kalle, and putting out his cigarette he opened the door and got out.

Axel and Mehmet exited too and gestured Roger to join them, while Ulrike halted parallel to Kalle's taxi, leaving a few metres between them.

Roger hesitantly got out on Axel's side, obviously more comfortable with the taxi between him and the others. However, Axel shook his head and told him to move to the other side.

When they finally all stood between the two taxis, Ulrike folded her arms and inspected Roger up and down. "So, you're the guy who needs to threaten girls into sleeping with him. You don't look that ugly, how come you can't get a girlfriend without blackmailing her?"

"I have many girlfriends," boasted Roger.

"Really?" asked Ulrike, "Then why did you try to blackmail Tanja?"

"I didn't blackmail her," said Roger, crossing his arms defiantly.

"All right," said Ulrike, and lighting a cigarette, she said calmly, "Let's hear your viewpoint. What do you think you did?"

With a side glance at Renato who was casually leaning against the taxi, focussed on cleaning his fingernails with a switchblade knife while chewing on a toothpick, Roger said, "I asked her if she'd like to be my girlfriend."

"And?" prompted Ulrike.

"She didn't want to."

When Roger wasn't forthcoming, Ulrike took a drag of her cigarette and asked, "How did that make you feel?"

Roger looked at her in confusion. He obviously hadn't expected that question. Then his gaze turned angry and he spat, "That's none of your business."

Unfazed by his outburst, Ulrike asked calmly, "Have you ever received a rejection from a girl?"

"Sure, if she was already taken," said Roger.

"I see. And that would normally cause you to back off, yes?"

"Of course."

"So, when you learnt that Tanja was taken you backed off too."

"She isn't taken," stated Roger arrogantly, "She's just fooling around with that girlfriend of

hers."

Pausing with his nail cleaning, Renato looked up and raised an eyebrow at Roger. He noticed that Mehmet and Axel, who were flanking the boy, obviously weren't too thrilled about his comment either.

Seeing Kalle slightly shake his head, indicating to her not to fly off the handle but continue with her strategy, Ulrike resisted the urge to punch the arrogant bastard and instead she asked as calmly as she could, "Ah, so they aren't really together, they're just 'fooling around'?"

Oblivious of the indignation he caused within the people around him, Roger scoffed, "Come on; how can they be together? They're both girls!"

In an attempt to curb her irritation, Ulrike flicked the cigarette butt down and ground it under her heel, imagining it to be Roger's private parts. Taking a deep breath to regain her composure, she looked back at Roger and asked, "You seem to think you're a smart guy, how come you've never heard of homosexual relationships?"

"Of course, I've heard of it," said Roger, "But it's not natural. A woman belongs with a man."

Clenching her teeth, Ulrike thought for a second before she asked, "So, in your opinion a woman - or a girl for that matter - doesn't have the right to choose with whom she wants to be?"

"It's not natural for a girl to be with a girl! It's sick!"

"Ah, so when you blackmailed Tanja you only meant to cure her, yes?"

"Exactly," said Roger with a smug grin.

Pursing her lips, Ulrike furrowed her brow as if contemplating something.

She was surprised that Roger had now readily admitted to blackmailing Tanja - not that she had doubted Tanja's statement, but she had felt somewhat hesitant to go on with her plan as long as he was still denying his deed.

Finally, she asked with a forced conspiratorial smile, "So, you think blackmailing someone into doing something they don't want to do is going to help them 'see the light', so to speak?"

"Yeah," said Roger, "Some people just need to be forced to do what's right, for their own good."

Nodding her head, Ulrike said, "That's actually rather convenient, that you think so. It will make it easier for you to understand what I'm going to tell you."

Squinting at Ulrike, Roger asked, "What do you mean?"

Slowly, Ulrike pulled a pair of leather gloves from her jacket pockets and while she put them on, she said, "It may surprise you, but..." she looked up to see Roger's reaction, "I'm not only a friend of Tanja's, but I am also a lesbian." Ulrike couldn't help the feeling of satisfaction when she saw the colour drain from Roger's face. Looking back at her now gloved hands, she tugged at the gloves for emphasis and then interlaced her fingers for good measure. "Needless to say, I do neither agree with your judgement of homosexuals, nor with what you did to Tanja." And looking straight at Roger, she took a step towards him, causing him to stumble backwards against Kalle's taxi. Flashing him an evil grin, she continued, "But I'm an amiable person. So, here's the deal: You will leave Tanja alone, and you will leave the dance studio immediately."

"Or what?" spat Roger, the latter request obviously shocking him into defiance. "You want to beat me up? My father is going to prosecute you all!"

"I have no intention to touch you," stated Ulrike calmly, "But if you refuse to leave the dance studio, or if you only so much as look at Tanja the wrong way, I will tell your father that you assaulted me and tried to rape me."

Roger jeered, "My father will never believe that I'd go for an old hag like you."

"I have four witnesses," said Ulrike coolly, "And I have this." And reaching into her inside pocket, she pulled out her gun and checked the empty chamber. When Roger gulped audibly, she explained, "You know, Roger, my friend here works for the police," she tilted her head towards Axel, "He happens to have a key to the evidence room. Two taxi drivers have been assaulted with this gun, and they still haven't caught the pig." Levelling an icy glare at Roger, she slowly transformed her face into a menacing grin, "They'll be happy to find that the fingerprints match yours." And she held out the gun - butt towards Roger, and commanded, "Take it!"

Refusing to take the gun, Roger buried his hands in his pockets.

"Take it!" barked Ulrike.

"Or what?" asked Roger defiantly.

Raising his eyebrows, Renato stopped chewing on the toothpick between his teeth and looked from Roger to Ulrike. And thinking that maybe it was time to improvise and help his friend out with more than just his presence, he said in a fake Italian accent, "You know, Boss 'ere 'as soft spot for you. She say you should get a chance to become decent human being. Me," he pulled an apple from his pocket and seemed to weigh it in his hand, "I not 'ave soft spot for pigs like you. Boss don't 'ave daughter, but I do. Pigs like you is danger to my precious daughters." He took a step towards Roger and continued, "If we were in Sicily I'd castrate you," and with a swift motion, he cut a piece of the apple.

"But we aren't in Sicily," said Roger smugly, refusing to be intimidated.

Mehmet had had enough of the posh boy's attitude, and in a heartbeat, he was at Roger's side. Grabbing Roger's jacket with one hand and holding a butterfly knife in front of his face with the other he threatened in a fake Turkish accent, "*Nimm die schieß Knarre, Alter, oder isch mach disch alle.*"

Terrified, Roger stared at the knife until he finally reached out and grasped the gun.

"There you go!" said Ulrike, and taking the gun from his hand, she put it back in her inside pocket. "Now, remember, if I hear that you haven't left dance studio or that you have bothered Tanja in any sort of way, I will tell the police to whom the fingerprints on this weapon belong. You got that?"

When Roger nodded, Ulrike added, "I hear you'll be 18 next week..." and when Roger nodded again, she finished, "Good. I'm sure they won't miss this for another week," she patted her jacket where the bulge of the gun was showing. "Have fun with your coming of age celebration, and don't screw up. I'm sure you don't want to spend your next birthdays behind the bars of an adult jail."

When Roger shook his head, Ulrike made an inviting gesture with her arm and said, "You may leave now."

"But I ... I..." stammered Roger, "I don't even know where I am."

Axel pointed back the way they had come and said, "Walk back around the building to the street; about 200 metres to the left, at the corner, there's a bus station. The bus there will take you to Bahnhof Zoo. I suppose you know how to get home from there?"

Roger nodded hesitantly.

"Here, don't forget your bag," said Kalle and handed him the bag he had left on the backseat.

"Thanks," croaked Roger, and after another moment of hesitation he finally headed in the indicated direction.

"Phew," expelled Ulrike when Roger was out of sight, "I'm glad it's over. I'm not sure how much longer I could have taken this disgusting display of stereotyping without breaking into hysterical laughter. You guys truly missed your calling - you'd have made great actors!"

The others grinned and Kalle remarked, "You weren't bad either."

"Thanks," said Ulrike and proposed, "Hey, let's head over to Marco's, drinks are on me."

The others cheerfully agreed, and only Axel said, "All right, but I can't stay long, I really have to get to work."

"Boss, eh?" Ulrike said with a grin as they drove back to Renato's car first.

Renato raised his eyebrow, "Don't let that get to your head. I just improvised to help the girl."

"Uh huh," said Ulrike, her eyes twinkling. Then, suddenly wondering if perhaps they had gone a bit over the top, she asked pensively, "Do you think we watch too much TV?"

"Nah," said Renato grinning, "TV educates."

#

Carmen was leaning against the doorframe, nervously fiddling with her watch while she waited

for José to come up with the lift. For once, she was not looking forward to her brother's visit, and she hoped that he wouldn't stay too long. In less than two hours she would have to call Tanja's parents, but even though she had racked her brain ever since she left the Friedrichs', she still hadn't been able to figure out what she could say or do to help her pupil.

When the lift door opened, Carmen quickly straightened and put on a cheerful smile to welcome her brother who struggled exiting the lift with the many bags he was carrying.

When they got settled in the living room, all of Carmen's anxiety and nervousness suddenly vanished, and were replaced by cheerful giddiness as she started to open the first bag.

"Where is Ulrike?" asked José, "I thought she'd be here."

"She drove home to get her travel bag and wanted take a nap before she comes back. She will probably return late. Why?" asked Carmen absentmindedly and then suddenly she squealed with joy as she fished a finely knitted lace shawl from the bag, "Oooh, I love this!" and she immediately wrapped the shawl around her neck and stroked it, "That's alpaca, isn't it? It's beautiful!"

"It's from Aunt Carla, and yes, I think she mentioned it is alpaca," said José, smiling at his sister's obvious delight. "I brought presents for Ulrike too. I hope she likes them. They are in the blue bag," he pointed at a sports bag next to Carmen's armchair.

"Oh, that's nice of you," said Carmen and reached for the sports bag, "What did you get her?"

"A mate tea set and a leather belt," said José.

"Ah, this is the mate set, right?" asked Carmen as she pulled a wrapped box from the bag. When José responded in the affirmative, she smiled and put the box on the table. "I'm sure she'll appreciate it. She likes mate."

She went on searching the bag and when she took out the belt and admired the multi-coloured Mapuche pattern, José said proudly, "It's of real capybara leather, and it is hand embroidered."

"It's pretty," said Carmen, running her fingers over the belt and the buckle, "And great quality. It's rather masculine, though..." she paused, and looking up at José, she grinned and said, "I bet she'll love it."

Carmen continued unpacking all the gifts José had brought, feeling giddy like a child at Christmas. She had just emptied the last bag and was sorting through a stack of books she got from her cousin Alicia when the phone rang.

"Bauer," she answered the phone.

"Hi Liebling, it's me."

"Ulli? What's up? I thought you were sleeping."

"Eh, well, sleep can wait. I have great news. You don't have to call Tanja's parents; the problem is solved."

"What?!" Carmen exclaimed in shock and grasped the edge of her desk to steady herself, but despite the wave of excitement and relief she felt, she couldn't quite believe her ears, "How did you solve it?"

"Come over to Marco's Pizzeria and you'll find out," said Ulrike cheekily.

"Uh, I can't. José is still here."

"Bring him too. We're having a bit of a celebration here."

If Carmen hadn't known her partner better, she would have thought that Ulrike had had one too many. She had never seen her quite this excited.

"All right, I'll ask him. How long are you going to stay?"

"I don't know. Marco is going to make bruschetta for us on the house, and some of us will probably have dinner too."

"Us? Who is with you? Are you with Tanja?"

"Nah, I took her home hours ago. Come here and you'll see."

"All right, all right, I'll come," said Carmen, annoyed that Ulrike wouldn't tell her more but nonetheless curious to find out.

"Great! See you soon. Love ya! Mmmwah," she finished with the sound of a kiss and hung up.

Carmen looked baffled at the telephone receiver in her hand, and grinning she shook her head and put the receiver on the cradle.

"Was that Ulrike?" asked José.

"Yes. She is at Marco's. She wants me to come over, and she told me to invite you too."

"Aw, I'm sorry," said José and got up, "But I wasn't going to stay much longer anyway. I still have the stuff for Mama and Papa in the car. "

"You want to take it to them now? But you just returned from a long distance flight," remarked Carmen, "I would be absolutely knackered."

José chuckled as they moved to the hallway. "I've slept for almost the whole flight. I'm wide awake now, so I might as well get it over and done with now and be free for the rest of the week."

Shaking her head, Carmen sighed and said, "I wish I had your energy level."

José watched his sister as she put on her jacket. "I bet my energy would be drained too if I had to put up with a bunch of pubescent teenagers all week. You just need to get out more, *Schwesterherz*; be among adults; be more adventurous again. Maybe the trip with Ulrike will help you improve your stamina."

"Perhaps," said Carmen, smiling. She was definitely looking forward to their short holiday. And now that Ulrike had miraculously solved Tanja's problem, she wouldn't even have to worry any longer. And she might even burn some calories with the hopefully increased amount of 'exercise'. Turning away from her brother to hide the huge grin that her last thought caused, Carmen grabbed her keys and handbag and said, "All right, I'm ready, let's go."

#

On her way to Marco's, Carmen wondered what Ulrike and Tanja might have done to solve the problem. Had Ulrike talked to Tanja's parents? Had Carmen underestimated them? Were they far more understanding than she and Tanja had feared?

Well, I guess wonders do happen, she thought, grinning, as she spotted Ulrike's Mercedes and a free parking space right behind it. *Perhaps Ulli's being so confident and comfortable with her own sexuality helped them to understand*, she thought, as she backed into the parking space.

Suddenly her stomach churned as the idea hit her that Ulrike might be celebrating with Tanja's parents. Had she told them that their daughter's teacher was her partner? "Dear God, I hope she didn't," Carmen prayed aloud and had to jam on the brakes as she almost backed into the car behind her. Her heart racing, she finished the parking manoeuvre and turned off the engine. Running her hand over her face, she took a deep breath and leant back, trying to calm herself down. Staring at Ulrike's taxi, she thought, *No, she can't be that insensitive. Not after all the discussions we had. She knows what is at stake for me. She didn't even blow my cover with Susanne, and that was before I explained everything to her. No, she can't have told Tanja's parents about us.* And burying her face in her hands, she prayed, *Please, God, tell me that she didn't do that.*

After an internal battle of several moments about whether she should go inside or rather return home, Carmen finally decided to face her demons and find out whether her fear was warranted.

With a determined stride, she walked the 50 or so metres to the pizzeria and entered.

"Ah, Carmen, *Buona Sera!*" called Marco who was carrying two large plates with a variety of bruschette.

"*Buona Sera*, Marco," greeted Carmen with a forced smile.

"Come on, the others are waiting for you in the backroom."

Carmen followed him with a confused frown. The backroom contained one large table for at least ten people, and the amount of bruschette on those plates was certainly meant for more than four people. Who else was with Ulrike?

Her confusion intensified when she stepped into the room and was swept up in Ulrike's arms in front of Marco, Kalle, Renato and two guys she didn't know.

Ulrike introduced Carmen to Axel and Mehmet, and Marco brought a glass of her favourite wine and joined them at the table - just for a bit, as he said.

Leaning towards Ulrike, Carmen asked quietly, "What are we celebrating? Is it someone's birthday?"

Ulrike shook her head and grinned. "No, we're celebrating our successful teamwork."

"Oh, what have you accomplished," Carmen asked, curiously looking at the others.

Ulrike began recounting and the others alternately added to the picture of what had happened. They were so cheerful and caught up in the retelling of their adventure that no one noticed that Carmen's expression turned increasingly infuriated. Thus, when they finally finished, everyone froze in shock as Carmen burst out, "Have you all lost your minds?! You're sitting here, gloating about a criminal act as if it was some heroic deed," and addressing Ulrike, she continued, "How can you be so irresponsible? You acted like an infantile jerk! If you want to play Rambo, join a theatre group or something, but don't act out your fantasies on underage children!"

As Carmen needed to take a breath, Ulrike jumped in, "An underage asshole who threatened your pupil."

"Yes, exactly - **my** pupil!" Carmen exclaimed, "She is my responsibility to deal with, not yours. Are you even aware that by bullying Roger you weren't any better than him?"

"It's different," argued Ulrike.

"It's not. The only thing he learnt from your stunt is that if you want to bully someone you better be stronger than your victim, even if it is in numbers. And did you, just for a moment, think of what happens when Roger goes to the police?"

"He won't dare," said Ulrike.

"That's what you think, and I'll pray to God he won't, but you can't know that! What if he tells his father, and he presses charges against persons unknown? If Roger memorised your registration numbers you'll all end up in jail, and Tanja's parents will learn that their daughter - and her teacher - are lesbians. And the circumstances in which they learn about it won't be pleasant at all. Can you imagine the repercussions this will have for Tanja, not to mention for me?" Carmen's already loud voice turned into yelling as she finished, "Did any of you ever think about that?" Getting up she threw her napkin on the table and looking at Ulrike and her friends who all stared at her wide-eyed, she spat, "God, you are worse than teenagers!" and grabbing her jacket and her handbag, she stormed out of the room.

"Damn! Wait!" cursed Ulrike and raced after Carmen.

"Oh shit," said Axel, "I hope we haven't ruined their relationship."

Sighing, Kalle said, "I did warn her that her plan sounded a bit drastic. But I wouldn't have thought Carmen would fly off the handle like this, especially since we did it to help her pupil."

#

"Wait!" called Ulrike as she burst out of the pizzeria and saw Carmen striding towards her car, "Please, Carmen, *Liebling*, wait a moment."

Carmen reluctantly halted and crossing her arms she waited for Ulrike to catch up.

When Ulrike reached her, she put a hand on Carmen's arm and said, "Please, *Liebling*, let's talk about it. I really didn't think you'd..."

Shrugging Ulrike's hand off, Carmen interrupted, "You didn't think. That's exactly the problem. How could you be so irresponsible? After all the discussions we had."

"I'm sorry," said Ulrike with drooping arms and bowed head. She shivered as it started to rain and the cold drops hit her bare arms.

Carmen noticed and said surprisingly softly, "You forgot your jacket."

Ulrike shrugged, "Yeah, I was sort of in a hurry."

Carmen smiled despite herself, and said, "Go and get it, and then let's meet at my place, okay?"

Ulrike nodded, "Okay, thank you."

When Ulrike entered the backroom everyone looked up and Kalle asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Is she still mad?"

"I don't know," said Ulrike and grasping her jacket, she pulled her wallet from her pocket, "We need to talk. I just came to get my jacket and to pay for the drinks."

"Forget the drinks, mate," said Kalle, "We can take care of that."

"Nah, I've already done enough damage today," and putting a 100 DM note on the table, she said, "Get yourself something nice as compensation for the trouble I've caused."

"You haven't caused us any trouble, Ulli," said Renato, "We willingly participated."

"Yeah, any of us could have said no," Alex pointed out, "But we didn't, and I still think that arrogant bully needed to be told a lesson."

Getting up from his chair, Kalle took the 100 DM note and gently forced Ulrike to take it, "Go and buy your lady some flowers and a box of chocolates to make it up to her. That's a better investment than wasting money on a bunch of blokes who'll stick with you anyhow."

Ulrike looked at Kalle and then at the others who all nodded in agreement.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, she said, "Thanks guys, I truly appreciate your support."

"Now, off with you," said Kalle and nudged his friend, "Don't let her wait too long."

Raising her hands in a placating gesture, Ulrike grinned and said, "Okay, okay. See ya sometime next week - if she still wants to go on a holiday with me, that is. Thanks again."

The shops were closed now, but there was a large petrol station on the way, so Ulrike decided to take Kalle's advice and buy some chocolates for Carmen, and possibly a bunch of flowers if they still had any left.

She really wouldn't have thought that Carmen would be mad at her for trying to help. Granted, their way of dealing with the problem wasn't exactly legal, and despite their precautions there might be a slight risk of Roger telling his father. Nonetheless, she was fairly certain that he would not dare, and that this had been the best solution for everyone involved.

#

Carmen had already done the dishes and put away José's empty bags, and was now carrying her presents to the dining table in order to make the coffee table more presentable. She had calmed down somewhat, but she was nonetheless still furious about the stunt Ulrike had pulled. The thought of Roger telling his arrogant father, and everything coming out as a result made her stomach churn. And that Ulrike might land in jail because of her stupid actions ... no, she couldn't even think about that or she would fall apart. *Think positive*, she told herself, *nothing will happen. And perhaps Tanja will even be safe from Roger now.*

When only Ulrike's presents remained on the couch table, Carmen sat down, and looking at the wrapped box and the leather belt she wondered why Ulrike hadn't arrived yet. A glance at her watch confirmed that they had parted more than half an hour ago. Just at that moment, the doorbell rang and made Carmen jump. "*Menschenskind!* I need to get a grip on my nerves," exclaimed Carmen, grasping at her racing heart as she got up to open the door.

"Sorry for taking so long," said Ulrike as she approached Carmen and gave her a quick peck, not daring to be more intimate yet in case Carmen was still mad at her. And holding out three different boxes of chocolates for Carmen to take, she explained, "I've been at three different petrol stations, and none of them had any flowers left, so I brought these for you as a little peace offering."

"Uh, thank you," said Carmen, as she hesitantly took the gifts and closed the door, wondering how she was ever going to accomplish losing weight.

"You don't like these?" asked Ulrike as she doffed her jacket and hung it on a coat hook.

"I do," said Carmen with a forced smile, "They are my favourites."

"Good," said Ulrike, smiling and let Carmen proceed into the living room.

"These are for you from José," Carmen pointed at the items on the table.

"For me? Wow, this is cool!" said Ulrike as she picked up the belt.

Carmen grinned, "I told him you'd like it."

"I do! It's really beautiful. And what is this?" Ulrike picked up the wrapped box.

"Unwrap it and you'll see," said Carmen and, unable to restrain herself, she opened the box of her most favourite confectionaries.

"Okay," said Ulrike and removed the wrapping paper. "Wow, that's pretty," she said as she uncovered a wooden box with a little pyrography of a gaucho drinking mate and a curved lettering that read "Argentina".

Carmen chuckled. "That's just a box to protect it. Look inside."

As she slid the lid open, Ulrike's eyes widened in surprise. "Wow, a real mate cup and straw."

"The 'straw' is called bombilla, and the 'cup' is called mate. It comes from mati, the Quechua word for a hollowed calabash gourd. In Argentina the drink is called yerba mate. Yerba means herb."

"Ah, thanks for the explanation," said Ulrike, "That's the coat of arms of Argentina, right?" she pointed at the painting on the calabash.

"Yes, indeed," said Carmen, surprised that Ulrike recognised the emblem.

"That's really nice of José to bring me gifts," said Ulrike. "I would like to thank him. Do you think it would be okay to call him now?"

"I don't think he'll be home yet. He was going to call on my parents."

"Oh. Do you think I can phone him later tonight? I mean, I don't want to be rude and he's probably exhausted from the flight, but if I don't call today, it'll have to wait till we get back ... if you still want to go on a holiday with me, that is."

Suddenly reminded of what had transpired before, Carmen's anger resurfaced; alas after the nice few minutes they just had, she was torn between forgiving Ulrike and telling her that she could stick her holiday where the sun doesn't shine. Unable to come to a decision with her contradicting emotions, she stalled and said, "I don't think he would mind if you called him tonight, but he certainly wouldn't mind either if you waited till next Monday."

"Does that mean you'll come with me?" asked Ulrike hesitantly.

Carmen sighed. "I don't know, Ulli. I'm really not happy with what you did."

Bowing her head slightly, Ulrike said quietly, "I just wanted to help, and I thought it was a great idea..."

"To take law into your own hands?" Carmen interrupted, "That's not a great idea, it's criminal!"

"Excuse me, but the law would not have helped Tanja at all," argued Ulrike.

"Of course not, because we wouldn't have involved the authorities, because it would entail that Tanja's parents learn about her being a lesbian, and that's exactly what Tanja is afraid of. Tanja explicitly asked us not to involve the police, but that's exactly what could happen now. I know you think Roger won't tell anyone and that you've everything worked out like a pro. But this is real life, Ulrike, not an action movie. If your 'idea' doesn't turn out as you imagine it will have consequences not only for you, but also for your friends and for Tanja, not to mention for me. I know you are having a hard time to understand that for the rest of the world things aren't as easy as they were and obviously still are for you, but really, Ulrike, you'd better learn quickly that the world doesn't revolve around you and your fancy ideas. Most people learn that by the time they reach adulthood."

"Are you finished?"

"Yes."

"I know I fucked up. I can see how our actions might cause an even bigger mess. I did not mean to negate that. I simply wanted to tell you why I did it, and that I certainly didn't mean to cause Tanja or you even more trouble."

Carmen was about to interrupt but Ulrike stopped her, "Hear me out, please. You think I don't understand that there are people who are not comfortable with homosexuality and that therefore not all homosexuals dare to be out. You are wrong with that assumption. Yes, I haven't been confronted with these sorts of problems personally, and therefore it does take some effort to adjust for me. But I'm not totally ignorant, *Liebling*. I'm very well aware that things aren't as easy for everyone as they have been for me so far."

Carmen snorted, but refrained from commenting.

"I admit that my reactions may have given you a different impression. It **is** difficult to suddenly be confronted with these issues personally after having been spared from it for almost 43 years."

"If you are really as aware of the problem as you say, then why did you never think about the repercussions your plan might cause?"

"Might - that's the crucial word," said Ulrike, "And of course I did think about it. Hence I came up with a solution that would minimise the risk. Though, granted, the idea with the stickers was Mehmet's, and it might even save our butts **if** Roger tells his father, which I still think he won't."

Carmen shook her head in frustration, "You still think it was a good idea, don't you?"

"Yes and no," admitted Ulrike. "I do admit that it wasn't as great an idea as I first thought, and I deeply regret that it causes you so much worry. However, I still can't think of a better solution. Can you? Tell me, what would you have done to solve the issue? What would you have told Tanja's parents?"

Throwing her hands up in a helpless and frustrated gesture, Carmen replied, "I don't know. I was at Roger's parents' house to ask them to appeal to his conscience."

"Really?" asked Ulrike, "What did they say?"

"Uh, let's say they weren't particularly cooperative."

Ulrike made a face. "Why does this not surprise me..."

"Yeah, well, anyway, my intention was to talk to Tanja's parents or find another way to help Tanja, but you called before I could find a solution and I don't know what I might have come up with in the end. But it certainly wouldn't have been anything illegal, and it wouldn't have involved threatening to kill a child!"

"Um, it may not make a difference to you, but I'd like to point out that the latter was not my idea but Mehmet's improvisation. And, of course, he wouldn't have harmed a hair on the bastard's head; he only made use of Roger's prejudice against Turks after it became obvious that he was not going to take me or even Renato seriously."

"And you think this will help him lose his prejudice?"

"No, certainly not," admitted Ulrike. "But since none of us dared to go any further, and Roger obviously sensed that, I'm rather glad that Mehmet did what he did, as without Roger's fingerprints we wouldn't have had anything to hold over his head."

"Neither do you have that now," said Carmen. "Or are you seriously thinking of making a false accusation and using his fingerprints against him if he doesn't comply?"

"Of course not! But he doesn't know that," said Ulrike.

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, Carmen said, "I guess it is pointless to argue with you. You seem to think that there is nothing wrong with what you did."

"I think that sometimes the end justifies the means."

"You don't even know the end yet," said Carmen, "But even if it turns out as you hope, you will still have traumatised Roger, and that is not something I would ever consider being justified."

"You do still remember that this 'poor, traumatised guy' did blackmail your pupil into sleeping with him?"

"Yes, but it didn't come to that because she asked **me** for help."

Leaning back against the sofa, Ulrike crossed her arms and said, "So, we are back to square one - what would you have done to help her. I'm truly interested in your solution."

"I already told you, I don't know," said Carmen testily.

"Okay, then think about it, however long it takes. And once you find a better solution, please let me know. I'm open to ideas. But thus far you've only criticised my way of dealing with the problem without showing me a valid alternative, and I think that's a bit unfair - especially since we don't know the end yet as you keep pointing out."

Carmen hesitated, but finally she said, "All right, I will think about it."

"Great," said Ulrike, grinning, and wagging her eyebrows, she asked, "So, are you coming with me tomorrow? We could have some more philosophical discussions."

"Uh, I'd rather not - have more philosophical discussions with you, that is."

"Well," said Ulrike and stroked her chin as if pondering, "We could also spend the holiday with totally un-philosophical, purely carnal, passionate ... indoor sports."

Chuckling despite herself, Carmen threw a sofa cushion at Ulrike. "You are terrible!"

Catching the cushion, Ulrike said, "I know. Will you come with me anyway?"

Carmen smirked and said, "Whether I will come with you remains to be seen, but I will go with you on the holiday."

Ulrike laughed. "You're just as terrible as I am - I love you!" And she got up and walked over to Carmen to seal their reconciliation with a proper kiss.

When they finally broke the kiss, Ulrike said softly, "I don't like to say it, but I'd better leave now. I never got to pick up my travel bag, and I really need some sleep. And I'd like to start early tomorrow so we'll have a bit of the day left to explore after we arrive."

Carmen nodded. "All right. So shall I come and get you in the morning?"

"Yes, I guess that would be best. The taxi is better preserved on my back yard parking area than in the streets around here."

"Okay, when shall I be there? Would six be early enough?"

"Whoa, that's a bit too early. How about half past seven?"

"All right, I'll be at your place at half past seven then."

#

Once Ulrike had left, Carmen couldn't help but continue smiling. Despite not agreeing with her partner, she was still looking forward to spending the holiday with her ... and the indoor sports might even help her lose some weight.

###

Recipes:

Bruschetta



Tomato topping:

300g date or cherry tomatoes (finely diced)

1 small onion (finely diced)

2 1/2 cloves of garlic (very finely chopped or minced)
3 Tablespoons of olive oil
2 Tablespoons of balsamic vinegar
1-2 pinches of salt (more or less to taste)
1 pinch of pepper (more or less to taste)
1 pinch of sugar
1-2 pinches of dried oregano
1-2 pinches of dried thyme
1-2 pinches of dried basil (or 3-5 fresh basil leaves, finely sliced)
A tiny bit of chilli (or more to taste)

Ham topping:

3 slices of Parma ham (or other raw ham)
2 leaves of rocket salad

Mozzarella + capsicum topping:

2 red capsicums (sweet pepper/bell pepper) (sliced and fried)
1 ball of buffalo mozzarella (or fior di latte / cow's milk mozzarella) (sliced)
Olive oil
1-2 leaves of rocket salad

For the bread:

3-6 slices of Pane Pugliese or Ciabatta or Baguette (number depending on size, 6 being for baguette sized slices)
3 Tablespoons of olive oil
1/2 clove of garlic (finely chopped or minced)

Grated Parmesan to taste

Finely dice the tomatoes and the onions and put them in a bowl. Mix in the finely chopped or minced garlic and the rest of the tomato topping ingredients.

Slice the red capsicums and put a pan with a bit of olive oil on the stove to preheat.

Slice the bread into ca. 1cm thick slices. Brush one side of each with olive oil and put a bit of the finely chopped or minced garlic on each. Put the slices on a baking tray (or baking grid covered with baking paper) and toast them on the top rack of the oven at 200°C for about 6-8 minutes until the edges are lightly browned.

Put the capsicum slices in the pan to fry.

Slice the mozzarella.

Wash the rocket salad and put it in a sieve to drain.

Take out the bread slices, put them on a plate and add the toppings. Sprinkle some grated Parmesan on top.

If you like, you can decorate the plate with some fresh basil leaves.

You can add the leftover rocket salad to the leftover tomato topping and serve it as a nice tomato salad.

Yerba Mate



Traditionally, Argentinians drink their yerba mate with a bombilla from a hollowed calabash gourd - the mate.

To prepare the mate, the gourd is filled about 1/2 to 2/3 with yerba leaves. Then, the preparer will put their hand over the opening, turn the mate upside-down and shake it so that the finer leaves will end up at the top and the larger ones at the bottom. This way the finer particles will not clog the holes in the bombilla.

Then the mate is carefully turned upwards and by gently shaking, the yerba will finally end up resting in a sloped pile against one side of the mate.

Now a little water (cool or warm but not hot!) is gently poured into the mate, just enough to wet the yerba without disturbing the carefully prepared pile. The wetted yerba will then cautiously be pressed against the mate to further stabilise the pile.

Once this preparation is finished, the preparer inserts the bombilla into the empty half of the mate, leaning it against the pile, and gently pours hot water into the mate, letting it run along the bombilla as not to disturb the yerba pile. The water should not be boiled but only reach a temperature of 70° to 95°C.

Which temperature is preferred depends on region and taste. In general towards the hinterland the yerba mate is drunk hotter and sweetened with either sugar or stevia while at the coast it is drunk less hot and pure (unsweetened).

The mate is now ready for drinking and it can be refilled many times before it loses its flavour.

Traditionally, mate is drunk at social gatherings with friends and family. To offer a drink of mate to a guest is a sign of politeness and hospitality.

Only one mate and one bombilla is used for the whole group.

The preparer usually drinks the first fill as it is deemed unacceptable to offer it to anyone. Often the first brew will even be spit out. After refilling, the preparer passes the mate to the first person, who will drink until the slurping noise signals that the mate is empty. The guest doesn't need to rush but hogging the mate for too long is considered impolite and the 'hogger' will receive a gentle

warning from the others like “¡El mate no es un micrófono!” (The mate is not a microphone.)

Once the person emptied the mate, they will hand it back to the preparer, who will then refill it and offer it to the next person.

###

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