

TAXI

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Telephone

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Taxi - Telephone

By
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A big Thank You to my friends Patti and Sarah
Patti, for all the encouragement you give me, and for the fun we have, not only during beta reading.
Sarah, for doing the proofreading despite all the problems you have to endure.

Taxi - Telephone

Carmen was gathering her things, having just finished giving class 10A their Spanish lesson. Her throat dry from talking, she was looking forward to having a drink in the teacher's room when Tanja, one of her students, approached her.

"Have you got a moment to talk?"

Looking at the clock, Carmen said, "All right, but only for a moment."

"Thank you!" said Tanja. "First, I wanted to thank you. I don't know what you and Frau Hoffmann did, but whatever it was, it worked! Roger has left the dance school and he's avoiding me like the plague." Tanja grinned.

Surprised, Carmen said, "That's wonderful to hear!" She looked at the clock again - As happy as she was for Tanja, she really didn't have time to chat now. "I'm sorry, but I really have to hurry. Was there anything else?"

"Yes," said Tanja, her face sobering, "I wanted to ask if Silke and I could visit you in the afternoon."

"Silke Scholz?" asked Carmen surprised. Silke was a rather quiet girl who was new to the class, and although her Spanish wasn't bad, Carmen would not have thought she would be interested in private Spanish conversation lessons.

"Yes," said Tanja, "There is a problem, which I would like to address as the class' representative, but I don't want to discuss it here at school, if that's all right with you."

Not another problem, thought Carmen with an inward sigh. She was glad that the Roger-issue had been solved without repercussions - hopefully. She really was not looking forward to being confronted with yet another problem. Also, she had invited Frau Krüger for dinner, and she had a teachers' conference to attend which would probably not end before half past three, if that. So, whatever the problem might be, she would rather postpone this talk if possible. "Can it wait till ... for a few days? I don't have much time today."

"It won't take that long," reassured Tanja, "And I would rather talk about it as soon as possible."

Carmen was really getting antsy now. Her next class would start in five minutes and she hadn't even had a drink yet.

"Please," added Tanja for emphasis.

Carmen sighed, "All right. If you can make it short, you may come at half past four."

Tanja's face lit up. "Thank you, Frau Bauer!"

As Tanja hurried from the classroom, Carmen wondered when she would ever learn to say 'no' instead of letting herself be talked into things she wasn't prepared for. How was she going to manage both the girls and preparing dinner for Frau Krüger? She realised she didn't have to worry about the shopping at least, as Ulrike had agreed to do that.

Oh my God, thought Carmen, covering her mouth with her fingers. She had forgotten about Ulrike! The last thing she needed right now was another of her pupils finding out about her relationship with Ulrike! However, her partner would arrive before the girls around four, and she now had her own keys so she could just let herself in. Damn! Perhaps giving Ulrike a set of keys had not been such a good idea, after all.

Groaning, Carmen realised she had her pupils to focus on for now, and she decided to push her worries aside for the moment. She could think about it all later. Grabbing her bag, she rushed to her next class as there was now no time left to have her drink.

#

In the afternoon, Ulrike was in an exceptionally good mood. Her morning already went extraordinarily well, earning her more money than she sometimes made in a whole day, but her latest fare had been the icing on the cake - a nice couple which she drove from Tempelhof airport to a place about an hour north of Berlin. The couple had paid a fair price plus a generous tip; and they'd had such a good chat that the couple asked Ulrike to drive them back to the airport when they

left from the husband's grandmother's place in a week. Of course, Ulrike had happily agreed.

Now, Ulrike was on her way back to Berlin, humming to 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'. She had time now. There was no need to take on another fare. She could easily get the groceries for Carmen and would probably be a bit early. Good that she had the keys now. Carmen had told her to let herself in if she wasn't home yet.

She had been so surprised when Carmen gave her the keys, she almost couldn't believe it. Their short holidays really had done wonders with regards to strengthening their relationship. Falling asleep and waking up together, spending all day in each other's company, and not being interrupted by anyone or anything, had been heavenly.

Nonetheless, despite all the impracticalities and annoyances that living apart entailed, neither Carmen nor Ulrike were keen on moving in together anytime soon. Carmen's flat was too small for two people permanently living there, and Ulrike's flat, though big enough theoretically, could not really be adapted to fit their two very different styles.

No, if they ever wanted to move in together, they would have to rent a bigger flat or buy something. And although Carmen seemed to play with the idea of having a house together, Ulrike was still reluctant.

Looking at her financial situation, Ulrike knew that she could not afford buying a house, especially not in the west part of Berlin. She would need more than half of her savings for the next taxi. And Carmen would never move into the former GDR even if it was in the east part of Berlin or somewhere really close to the Berlin border. And, admittedly, Ulrike wasn't too keen on it herself either. Thus, if they were to buy a house in an area that Carmen liked, it would mean that Carmen would have to pay, as with the square metre prices in those areas, Ulrike's finances would barely suffice to contribute more than the equivalent of a bathroom. This was something that Ulrike was exceedingly uncomfortable with; even though Carmen would probably not mind it, considering how she seemed to spend huge amounts of money without batting an eyelash. But Ulrike loved her independence, and she was not ready to give it up - at least not yet. Hell, they hadn't even been together for half a year yet.

However, another holiday together would definitely be nice, she thought. Perhaps she could persuade Carmen to go on a winter holiday after all. And if Carmen really didn't want to go to Austria in winter, perhaps they could drive to Italy or Spain. Though, it would be a long drive, and Carmen would probably prefer taking a plane. Ulrike shuddered. Heck, she would have to convince her partner that driving was a lot more fun, as they would see a lot more. To Italy, they would cross through Austria; and to Spain they would cross through France. Yes, considering that Carmen didn't fancy the cold, maybe Spain was the better alternative for the winter holidays. They could spend a day or two at the Côte d'Azur before continuing on their way to Spain.

Ulrike's happy thoughts were interrupted when she noticed an elderly woman frantically waving, and she slowed down. The woman stood on the side of the country road next to a grey Trabant with an opened bonnet. Trees were lining the road, and behind them nothing but harvested fields as far as Ulrike could see. There were no houses in the vicinity, and the last village she had passed several minutes ago.

The old woman looked harmless enough, thought Ulrike, and since she wasn't in a hurry, she activated the hazard flashers and halted behind the Trabbi. When the woman came to the driver's side, Ulrike cranked the window open and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Thank you so much for stopping!" said the woman. "My husband is having a look at what's wrong, but he doesn't know much about cars, I'm afraid. Our son usually takes care of Schorsch."

Ulrike had a hard time not to burst out laughing when the woman referred to their car as Schorsch, the same name as the Trabbi in the German comedy film with Wolfgang Stumph.

"Since you are a woman, I don't suppose you can help with the repair, but could you perhaps tow us to the next telephone so we can call our son?"

Before Ulrike could respond, a grey-haired man called, "Margot, I think I found the problem," as he came towards them, waving a piece of black rubber band. And addressing Ulrike, he said,

"*Juten Tach*. You don't happen to have a spare of these, do you?"

"*Nee, ick bin ja nich vom ADAC*," Ulrike answered in the negative. "But you should be able to get to the next village without a fan belt."

"*Nee*," the man disagreed. "The engine stopped running and it won't start."

"How long have you been driving without the fan belt?" asked Ulrike.

"I don't know," said the man, scratching his balding head, but the woman protested, "I told you that noise wasn't normal!" and to Ulrike she clarified, "The noise started about half an hour ago. I told him we should stop at a garage, but he insisted we could make it to Berlin."

Oh boy, thought Ulrike, and addressed the man, "You should have listened to your wife. I'm afraid the fan belt is now the least of your problems. Are you a member of the ADAC or any other automobile club?"

The man shook his head.

Ulrike sighed. "Do you happen to have a tow line with you?"

Again, the man answered in the negative.

"Then I suppose it would be best if one of you stays here and I drive the other to a telephone."

"All right, I'll come with you," said the woman and went around to the passenger's side.

Ulrike addressed the man, who stood there somewhat forlorn, gazing at the shredded fan belt in his hand, "And you, put up a warning triangle! You have one, I hope."

Looking at Ulrike, the man said, "Yes. Right. I totally forgot to put it up," and he hurried back to his Trabbi.

"All right, let's go," said Ulrike as the woman fastened her seatbelt.

#

As Carmen finally arrived home, it was already a quarter past four. Ulrike would most certainly be there already, thought Carmen as she walked down the street towards her home. She had not seen the taxi anywhere, but Ulrike had probably just parked even further away. She wished she could have contacted her partner beforehand. But in the morning she couldn't reach her, and even if Ulrike was already at her place, she would never answer Carmen's phone. *Here's another idea for a birthday present*, thought Carmen. There were only two days left for her to buy one of those new portable telephones, as Ulrike's birthday was on Saturday, but she was sure she could find some time on Friday right after school. She had already bought a gift, but such a telephone would be a tremendous help, as she would be able to reach Ulrike during the day. Relieved to have solved the problem for future occurrences, she filed the idea away.

However, it wouldn't help her in the here and now. Gosh, she couldn't ask Ulrike to leave, that would be utterly rude! Perhaps, she could find a way to persuade her partner to wait in the bedroom for the time her pupils were there. It would still not be nice, but maybe she could think of something to make up for the inconvenience. She would certainly do her best to make a really nice dinner.

Thinking of dinner, Carmen had an idea - maybe she could ask Ulrike to stay at Frau Krüger's until her pupils left. Ulrike liked the neighbour, and it would surely be more entertaining than staying in the bedroom. Yes, thought Carmen with a smile on her face, that was a great solution, and she was certain she could get Ulrike to agree.

The smile instantly left her face when she spotted Tanja and Silke at the front door. Damn! Now there was no chance to deal with Ulrike ahead of time. With an effort, she forced herself to smile politely as she greeted her pupils.

"*Hallo* Frau Bauer," greeted the girls, and Silke asked, "Is it really okay with you? I mean, I don't want to bother you in your free time."

Not even thinking about using the chance to avoid the probably awkward situation ahead, Carmen touched the girl's shoulder and reassured her, "It's all right, Silke. Come on in." She unlocked the front door and held it open for the girls.

#

Meanwhile Ulrike was rattling off expletives, inventing new ones when she reached the end of her repertoire, as she found herself stuck in rush-hour traffic.

She had tried to call Carmen from a phone booth, but Carmen had not answered.

Damn, why had she offered to help the old couple?! Grumbling, she admitted that she did not really regret helping them, even though she had only received a thank you in return. However, that it had taken up so much of her time bothered her tremendously. Admittedly, it wasn't the woman's fault that it had taken them so long to find a telephone, and neither was it her fault that her husband meanwhile found someone who towed him to the next garage. That the husband hadn't waited for them was annoying, and that Ulrike then had to wait for their son to arrive at the spot where the Trabbi had broken down, so as not to leave the woman on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. But from the conversation she'd had with the woman during that hour, she knew that the old bloke would have to suffer for his thoughtless deed, and she did not envy him. Despite the circumstances, she had to grin when she remembered the tirades the woman had released about her husband. At least the guy had the decency to call their son to tell him where he was and that he should get his mother first. Thank goodness that the son had one of these new portable radio phones. If she wasn't so averse to adapting to all such fancy new gadgets, Ulrike would have been tempted to get one of those phones herself. Today it would certainly have come in handy. But these things were obscenely expensive, and she really wasn't up to dealing with this new technology. Sighing, she looked at the clock - a quarter past four and she still had to go shopping.

Spotting another phone booth, she quickly decided to move into the free space in front of it in order to call Carmen again.

#

As Carmen tried to unlock her door, she noticed with surprise that she had to turn the key twice, and the security lock was still locked as well, so Ulrike was obviously not there yet. Raising her eyebrow, she wondered why, but at the same time, she felt profoundly relieved. Again, she lamented the fact that there was no way to reach Ulrike, but at least she could tell her as soon as she arrived.

"Come in," she said to her pupils as she opened the door and switched on the light, and the girls followed her into the narrow hall.

"You can hang your jackets up on the coat rack," she offered, as she put her bags on the floor and crouched down to pet Tabitha who was already waiting.

As the cat cast an appraising look at Silke and finally moved towards the girls to inspect the stranger, Carmen suddenly had an idea what to do about Ulrike, and straightening she took off her own jacket and told the kids, "If you could give me a minute ... please, go ahead and make yourself comfortable in the living room. I just have to check something with my neighbour. I'll be right with you."

"Sure," said Tanja, and urged Silke, who was ruffling the cat's fur, to follow her.

Grabbing her keys, Carmen left to ring at Frau Krüger's door. When the neighbour opened, Carmen explained her predicament and asked if she would be agreeable to having Ulrike stay at her place till the kids were gone.

"Now, don't you worry, *Fräulein* Carmen. Of course, she may stay here," said Frau Krüger.

Touching the old woman's shoulder, Carmen said, "Thank you so much, Frau Krüger. I'll put a note on the door, telling her to ring here first, if that's all right with you."

"Of course that's all right. And don't bother with the note, I'll write it for you. Now, stop worrying and don't let your pupils wait any longer."

Again thanking the neighbour, Carmen hurried back to care for her pupils, sending a quick and silent thank-you prayer heavenwards.

Once she finally sat down with the girls, she asked, "Now, how can I help you?"

With a quick glance to Silke, who had suddenly become interested in a tiny loose thread on her sleeve, Tanja started, "It's because some of the class are mocking Silke for playing the bandoneon."

Surprised, Carmen asked Silke, "How are they mocking you?"

There was a slight pause before Silke mumbled, "They sing sailor songs of Hans Albers behind my back." She finally looked at Carmen and said, "But I've never even played one of those songs. I mainly play tango and other Latin American rhythms. My great grandmother was from Uruguay."

Before Carmen could voice her pleasant surprise, Tanja chimed in, "We thought that, if you agree, perhaps Silke could join our dance class and play the bandoneon for us. Then the others could see what she is really doing, and if they like her performance as much as I do, perhaps they would stop teasing her."

"That's a splendid idea," said Carmen. "Of course, you may join us."

"Thank you," said Silke shyly.

"There's one other problem."

"What is it, Tanja?" asked Carmen.

"Her father doesn't allow her to take the bandoneon to school," explained Tanja. "And we thought, perhaps you could talk to him?"

Carmen turned to Silke. "Why does he not allow it?"

Silke sighed heavily. "It's a family heirloom from my great grandfather."

Pondering for a moment, Carmen finally said, "In that case, I wouldn't advise you to take it to school either. However, I believe the school has a bandoneon. I will ask if I can borrow it for you for the dance class."

"Uh," Silke hesitated. "I've only ever played mine. I'm not sure if I'll be able to perform adequately if the school has a different one."

Carmen looked curiously, "Are there such severe differences? Excuse me, but I've never seriously played a musical instrument."

"Yes, there are," said Silke, and as she rattled off the various kinds of bandoneons and in what way they differed from each other, Carmen became more and more confused by all the technical terms she had never heard of, and laughing, she held up her hands to stop Silke.

"All right, all right. I can't say I understood any of your explanations, but I do understand that you need a specific sort of bandoneon." When Silke nodded, blushing, Carmen proposed, "How about you write down the type you have, and I will find out if the school has a similar one. If you can't use the school's one, I will talk to your father. How does that sound?"

"Great!" exclaimed both girls.

Happily grinning, Silke said, "Thank you so much, Frau Bauer!"

"You are welcome," said Carmen, and she got up to fetch a piece of paper and a pen for Silke to write down the specifics.

"Can I use the loo, please?" asked Silke.

"Of course," said Carmen, and pointing towards the hall, she said, "First door to the right."

#

Shopping bags in one hand, keys in the other, Ulrike finally arrived at Carmen's and spotted the note on the door. Curiously raising her eyebrows, she reached for the note when the door opened, causing her to halt in mid-motion.

"Oh, hi Frau Hoffmann," greeted Tanja grinning.

Retracting her arm, Ulrike said, "Hi Tanja," and stepped to the side to let the girls pass.

Shocked surprise visible on her face, Carmen stammered a last good-bye and ushered Ulrike in. Entering, Ulrike grabbed the note and shut the door behind her.

#

"Who was that?" asked Silke as soon as the door was shut.

"Frau Bauer's friend," said Tanja hesitantly.

"You mean friend as in 'girlfriend'?"

"I didn't say that," said Tanja evasively.

Silke shrugged, "No, but there was a sports bra on the drying rack in the bathtub that certainly wouldn't fit Frau Bauer, and there were two toothbrushes in the mug..."

With a threatening look, Tanja took a step towards her classmate and hissed, "If you tell that to anyone, I'm never going to help you again!"

Raising her hands in a defensive gesture, Silke promised, "Okay, okay. I won't."

#

"I'm sorry for being late, *Liebling*," apologised Ulrike and handed Carmen the note.

Her shoulders slumping, Carmen sighed and said, "That was meant for you."

"Oh?" asked Ulrike surprised, and taking the note back, she unfolded it and read.

Without another word, Carmen took the grocery bags from Ulrike's hand, went into the kitchen and started unpacking.

Ulrike followed her partner and hugged her from behind. "Sorry, that was bad timing."

"Yes, it was," said Carmen as she put a bottle of wine on the counter. Heaving a sigh, she turned around in the embrace and admitted, "But it's not your fault."

Ulrike searched her partner's troubled face, trying to judge whether or not she would be up to more intimacy right now.

Appreciating that Ulrike was giving her time to regain her composure, Carmen finally smiled and leaned in for a kiss.

When they parted, Carmen leaned heavily against her partner and mumbled, "I'm so bad when it comes to handling these situations. At least you weren't already here when we arrived. That would have been even more awkward."

Caressing Carmen's hair, Ulrike said, "I wouldn't worry too much, *Liebling*. The girl may not necessarily draw the conclusion. I could be just a neighbour after all, and Tanja already knows anyway. Or are you afraid Tanja will tell her?"

Carmen shook her head. "No, I don't think she would. Being in a similar situation, I'm sure she knows that it is better to keep it to herself." Glancing at the clock, she sucked in a breath and cursed, "Heavens! How am I going to manage preparing dinner for six o'clock? And I have to call Frau Weber, the music teacher," she explained to Ulrike. "I have to ask her if we have a bandoneon at school that Silke can use tomorrow at the dance class."

"What the hell is a bandoneon?" asked Ulrike.

"Uh ... it's some sort of squeezebox," said Carmen.

"OK, how about you call Frau Weber, and I go and tell Frau Krüger that dinner will be a bit later and we'll fetch her when it's ready?" offered Ulrike and added, "And perhaps I can help you with the preparations - chop onions and vegetables or something?"

"Are you sure?" asked Carmen. "I wouldn't have asked you, knowing that you hate cooking..."

"No problem. I'm sure I can manage the chopping part," said Ulrike with a wink.

"Ulli, you are a treasure!" said Carmen, and she gave Ulrike a peck on the lips.

#

"I knew you could create something delicious with the leftovers," said Frau Krüger.

"Yeah, this is really nice," agreed Ulrike.

Blushing, Carmen pointed out, "I wouldn't have managed without Ulrike's help."

"Oh come on," protested Ulrike, "My help with the chopping only saved you time. The cooking you did all by yourself."

"Fräulein Carmen, you really need to learn to accept praise where it's due," admonished Frau Krüger.

Having her mouth full, Ulrike nodded in silent agreement.

"Yes, well," said Carmen uncomfortably and changed the subject, "Now, where am I going to get a bandoneon for Silke?" She explained her pupil's predicament to Ulrike and the neighbour, ending with the unfortunate fact that the school only had a concertina, which was, as Frau Weber told her, a similar instrument but still quite different from a bandoneon. Heaving a frustrated sigh, she took a sip of wine and leaned back.

"Why don't you just talk to her father?" asked Ulrike. "Don't you think he'd be agreeable if he learns that it might stop the teasing of his daughter?"

"I don't know whether he might be agreeable," said Carmen, "But I don't really want to talk him into it, because personally, I wouldn't take a family heirloom to school either, and I can't ensure the safety of the instrument."

"Why would there be such a safety risk," asked Frau Krüger. "Wouldn't she only need the instrument during dance class?"

"Technically, yes," said Carmen, "And I wouldn't be so concerned if it was just that. But she'd have to take it with her to school in the morning, and there are seven school hours plus breaks before the dance class begins, and that, to me, seems like too big a risk."

"I see," said Frau Krüger, and suddenly her face lit up. "Couldn't *Fräulein* Ulrike fetch the instrument from Silke's home and deliver it at dance class?"

Her mouth full, Ulrike nodded and once she had swallowed, she agreed, "I could do that."

Carmen shook her head. "Theoretically, one of her parents could do that. But as far as I know, they are both working, so they couldn't bring it and they wouldn't be at home for someone to fetch it either."

"Can't she just leave the thing in the teachers' room?" asked Ulrike.

"Again, theoretically, she could," said Carmen. "But in this special case, it being an antique heirloom, I fear the headmistress would not allow it due to insurance policy reasons." She took a sip of wine and then looked at Ulrike. "Do you happen to know a store that sells musical instruments?"

"Several," said Ulrike. "I don't know if they sell bandoneons, but I can find that out for you. You want to buy one for the girl?"

"Not exactly," said Carmen, finally looking relieved. "I want to donate it to the school, so Silke can use it. Would you buy one tomorrow morning and bring it to school before dance class?"

"I can do that," said Ulrike. "Do you know what these things cost?"

"I have no idea," said Carmen. "A few hundred Marks, I suppose. I'll give you a thousand; that should suffice. Perhaps you can even get a case for it too."

"Whoa! Isn't that a bit too generous?" asked Ulrike. "Can't the girl just play the recorder or something?"

"That would be beside the point," said Carmen. "She is teased for playing the bandoneon, and I want to support the girls' being proactive with regards to helping themselves. I think their idea is good; to stop the teasing by showing these kids that a bandoneon isn't just for playing sailor songs and that Silke's bandoneon playing can actually become an integral and fun part of our dance class."

"If she is really as good as she claims," Ulrike pointed out.

"Oh, I trust that she is," said Carmen, "I doubt she would have agreed to play in front of the kids who tease her if she wasn't sure she could make an impression on them."

"Hm, good point," conceded Ulrike.

"Fräulein Carmen, I think you are doing the right thing," said Frau Krüger. "Money shouldn't be an obstacle if it comes to the wellbeing of kids."

Ulrike remained silent. She could think of several other options to help the girl, and none of them involved spending money. But she didn't want to argue any further; it wasn't her money, after all, and if Carmen would rather spend her money than talking to the girl's parents or the headmistress or even the bullies, then that was her prerogative.

The next day, however, Ulrike found herself again questioning Carmen's solution of buying herself an easy way out. She had spent the whole morning driving from one music store to the next, as none of them had had a bandoneon of the sort that Silke needed.

The store she just left had exactly such an instrument, however it cost over four thousand Deutschmarks and it wasn't even new. She didn't know whether Carmen would still want her to buy it at that horrendous price, and she didn't dare call her at school, even if in this particular case it was sort of school related. Thus, she had told the clerk that she would have to think about it.

Slumping into the driver's seat of the taxi, she slammed the door and cursed, "*Mist, verdammt!*" Lighting a cigarette, she forcefully exhaled the first drag as she flopped against the backrest.

If only she could call Carmen, she thought. The clerk had told her that she would hardly get a bandoneon of that specific sort in a similarly good condition for a lower price, as most of them were re-imports of pre-war exports to South America.

If it were her decision, Ulrike would definitely choose to save her money and try all other options first, but Carmen expected her to show up with a bandoneon in front of the school at half past two. It irked her that her partner seemed to think she could solve every problem with money, especially when there were other options ... like talking to the headmistress. There had to be a possibility at school to safely lock away the precious heirloom.

However, Ulrike suspected that Carmen would probably rather avoid talking to the headmistress, even if it cost her a fortune. For a brief moment she considered lying to Carmen and telling her that she hadn't found a suitable bandoneon; but she really didn't want to lie to her partner, and after all, it wasn't her business to save Carmen money. However, thought Ulrike as she watched an old couple passing on the pavement, it was her business to support her partner to the best of her ability, and she finally concluded that Carmen would probably be more upset if she didn't turn up with the instrument than she would be about the price. Sighing, Ulrike shook her head and started the engine. Luckily, there was a branch of her bank around the corner.

#

Half an hour later, Ulrike double-parked in front of the school, as there wasn't a single free space anywhere in sight. She only had to wait a few minutes until the school-bell rang, and shortly after the first pupils surged out of the building. A grey-haired woman and a bespectacled young man exited as well, probably colleagues of Carmen's, Ulrike assumed. They exchanged a few words and then parted ways, the young man striding towards an old 2CV that was parked just a few cars ahead of Ulrike.

Seizing her chance, she took her foot off the brake and let the taxi roll forward.

Just then, Carmen stepped out of the building, and spotting the taxi, she hurried towards it.

The young teacher, thinking Carmen was hurrying towards him, quickly reversed back into the parking space and got out, causing Ulrike to mutter a string of curses as she stepped on the brake.

"Frau Bauer, what's up?"

Having been focussed on Ulrike, Carmen hadn't even noticed her colleague, and she looked befuddled at the young man before she caught up and explained, "Oh, I'm sorry, Herr Fröhlich, I'm just waiting for the taxi," she pointed to Ulrike. "I'm getting something delivered for the dance class."

He looked at Ulrike who was getting impatient as two cars were already waiting behind her, not able to pass her in the narrow street. "Oh! I'm sorry," said Herr Fröhlich, "I thought you wanted something from me," and raising his hands towards Ulrike, he added, "I'm already gone." He quickly wished Carmen a nice day and got back into his car, hurrying to make way for Ulrike.

When she saw Ulrike struggling to free the case with the bandoneon from the seatbelt with which she had secured it on the passenger's seat, Carmen quickly opened the door and exclaimed excitedly, "Oh, you got one!" and leaning into the car, she added in a calmer voice, "You are a real

treasure."

"Wait till you hear the price," said Ulrike, "Perhaps that'll dampen your enthusiasm."

Curious, Carmen looked at Ulrike. "Why, what did it cost?"

"Four thousand two hundred," said Ulrike, handing Carmen the bill.

Raising her eyebrows, Carmen let out a whistle and said, "Gosh, I didn't think it would be that expensive. Thanks for fronting the extra money. I will give it back to you this evening."

"I take it you're okay with the price?" asked Ulrike and added, "It's identical to what your pupil wrote down, but the shop man said he'd take it back if you don't like it. So, if you don't agree with the price, I'll just give it back and say you didn't like it."

"No, no, that's all right," said Carmen. "If it is exactly like Silke's as you say, then she should be able to use it, and that's what counts."

"All right, then," said Ulrike, glad that she had made the right decision; "I hope she'll appreciate it. See you later?"

"Yes," said Carmen as she looked at her watch. "I should be home in about two hours. Come to my place? This time you can truly let yourself in! I will not accept any work-related visitors today!"

"I'll be there," acknowledged Ulrike with a grin.

"You know I would kiss you now if I could," said Carmen with a regretful tone.

Ulrike nodded her understanding. "I know."

The school bell rang, announcing the end of the break, and Carmen quickly picked up the bandoneon. "Thanks again!"

"My pleasure!" said Ulrike before Carmen slammed the door. Lighting a cigarette, she watched her partner hurrying towards one of the side entrances.

She admired Carmen's dedication to her pupils. And even though she thought that it would certainly benefit Carmen if she didn't rely on money as much as she did, Ulrike also knew that her partner was genuinely a very generous person, and she could appreciate that. Pensively, she manoeuvred out of the parking space, and as she drove down the narrow street, she grudgingly admitted that she herself was probably somewhat lacking in the generosity department. "Hm, perhaps I should work on that," she conceded; and noting that she hadn't even bought Carmen flowers in a while, she headed for her favourite flower shop.

#

When Tabitha jumped off her lap and a few seconds later she heard the key turning in the lock, Ulrike switched the TV off and got up, admiring the cat's sense of hearing.

"How did it go?" she asked Carmen who was bending down to pet Tabitha.

A huge smile on her face, Carmen straightened and took off her jacket, stating, "It went marvellously! Silke couldn't get over the fact that the bandoneon was exactly the same as hers. And she did fabulously, playing tango tunes for us." She embraced Ulrike, sharing a sensual kiss with her.

When they parted, she turned towards the kitchen, intending to feed the cat, when Ulrike noted, "I've already fed her."

"Oh, thank you," she replied, surprised; and picking up her bags, she ventured into the living room to put them next to her desk chair, meanwhile she continued chatting, "The kids were all very impressed, and when she started singing to one of the songs, everyone stopped dancing. When Silke noticed, she was embarrassed at first and stopped, but all the kids told her to continue." She turned back to Ulrike, who was smiling at her, and stated, "It really was a great success! Thank you so much for your help!"

"My pleasure!" said Ulrike, "I'm glad, it worked out so well."

"Ooh, you bought flowers!" exclaimed Carmen as she noticed the bouquet on the table, "That's so sweet of you, thank you!"

As Carmen embraced her, Ulrike felt almost shabby for not having bought her partner flowers for so long, and she vowed to do it more often, if just to see the smile on Carmen's face.

"Can I take you out for an early dinner?" asked Carmen, leaning back a little to look into Ulrike's eyes, "I'm hungry, but I'm not in the mood to cook."

"Isn't there still some leftover paella from yesterday?"

"Yes, but that's not enough for the two of us," said Carmen. "I'd have to make something on the side, and I'm really not up to standing in the kitchen now. My feet are killing me."

Refraining from commenting that her partner's feet might feel a lot better if she didn't insist on wearing high heels to work, Ulrike offered, "Well, I've had a late lunch, so I'm not really hungry. How about you just get comfortable and I'll heat up the paella for you?"

Raising her eyebrows in surprise, Carmen asked, "You would do that?"

Ulrike looked at her strangely, "Sure, why not?"

Tilting her head, Carmen hesitated for a moment before saying, "All right, then I will accept your offer and say thank you, once again," and giving Ulrike a quick kiss on the lips, she headed towards the bedroom. "I will change into something more comfortable."

"You do that. I'll be in the kitchen," said Ulrike, smiling.

A few minutes later, as she was stirring the paella in the pan, Ulrike thought about the joy Carmen had radiated when she recounted the success of the dance class. It was nice to see her partner so enthusiastic. Ulrike was very glad that everything had turned out so positive for the girl, and she wondered whether any of her solutions would have worked out as well. Perhaps, if Silke had taken her own bandoneon, she would have been so worried about the precious heirloom that she couldn't have performed as well. So, maybe Carmen's idea had been the better one, after all - at least in this particular case.

#

Saturday morning, Ulrike had already been shopping for her birthday lunch with her mother, her brother and Carmen. She had just put the pot with the peeled potatoes on the stove and lit the gas burner, when the phone rang.

Thinking it might be her aunt calling to congratulate her, she hurried to answer the phone. Her face fell when she heard her brother,

"Hallo Ulli, *ick bin's*, Norbert..."

"Nobbi..." Ulrike started in a low, threatening voice, "*Wenn de jetzt absagst, denn kannst du von jetzt ab Sie zu mir sagen...*" she told him that if he was cancelling now, they were no longer on a first-name basis.

"*I'm not...*" Norbert tried to interrupt but Ulrike went on telling him that in future he could ask someone else to repair his rust bucket, "*Und zum Reparieren von deine Rostlaube kannst du in Zukunft ooch 'n andern Doofen suchen.*"

"Ulli! *I'm not cancelling!*" Norbert protested loudly.

"What?"

"*I'm not cancelling.*"

"Oh ... then why are you calling?"

"*Uh ... the 'rust bucket' quit on me, can you come and help me? I'm at Platz der Luftbrücke, at the bus stop at the corner of Dudenstraße and Mehringdamm.*"

"Take the bus," said Ulrike dryly.

"*Ulli, please, the car is at the bus stop. I pushed it to the very end, but I can't leave it there - they're going to tow me.*"

Breathing a heavy sigh, Ulrike asked, "Okay, so what's wrong with the rust bucket?"

"*I don't know. I was on my way to your place when right before crossing Dudenstraße it suddenly didn't react to the gas and then the motor just stopped working. I used the momentum to turn into the bus stop. I tried to start it again, but it won't.*"

"Just a silly question ... you do have petrol in the tank?"

"*Uh ... I think so.*"

"What do you mean, you think so? What does the fuel gauge say?"

"It's broken. The needle doesn't move at all."

"Well, it won't move if the tank is empty."

"It can't be that empty," protested Norbert, "I just refuelled it."

"When?"

"Uh ... the day before yesterday, ... I think."

Knowing that her brother rarely - if ever - refuelled his car to the brim, she asked, "How much did you put in?"

"I don't know ... I spent five Marks."

"That's not even four litres," calculated Ulrike for him, "How long did you think that'd last you? Go to the next petrol station and get some fuel."

"I don't have a spare can."

"Then buy one."

"Uh ... I don't have enough money with me. And what if it's not just an empty tank? Couldn't you please come?"

"Nobbi, I've just put the potatoes on the stove."

"Pleeese Ulli! I'm totally stranded here. I was lucky I could find a few Groschen in the car to call you."

God, what did I do to be punished with such a brother? Ulrike cursed inwardly and grumbled through gritted teeth, "All right. I'll come."

"Thank you! ... Oh, and happy birthday!"

"Yeah, du mich auch," Ulrike mumbled an insult and hung up. Walking into the kitchen, she turned off the gas burner, hoping that the forced break wouldn't harm the potatoes. Then she wrote a note for Carmen and her mother, telling them that she was getting Norbert and would be back as soon as possible. Luckily, both her mother and Carmen had keys, as Carmen was probably already on her way, and she certainly didn't want to call her mother because that would only end up in a lengthy discussion, costing her even more time. Putting the note on the side board next to the telephone, Ulrike grasped her keys and left.

#

Not even five minutes had passed since Ulrike left when Else arrived with Püppi at the front door. Struggling to balance a large box as well as her rather large handbag and the leash in one hand, she pressed the doorbell.

When the opener didn't sound, she furrowed her brow, and ringing again, she muttered, "What is taking her so long to open the bloody door?" She knew she was half an hour early, but really, her daughter should be expecting her and open the door, and not let her wait outside with the cake and the dog. Could she have had an accident in the kitchen? She wouldn't be surprised if her daughter managed to injure herself or set the kitchen on fire while cooking.

"What a nuisance," she grumbled, and bracing the box against the door so she wouldn't drop it, she fumbled for the keys in her handbag, glad that the dog calmly remained standing at her side.

#

On her way to *Platz der Luftbrücke*, Ulrike cursed her brother for being a pain in the behind, even on her birthday. Not that she usually cared much whether it was her birthday or not. Years ago they had even stopped giving each other presents for Christmas and birthdays, as Norbert always forgot to buy presents in time anyway, and her mother always complained that the growing consumerism would someday bring the doom of humanity. However, her mother valued their little family-get-togethers, and even if Ulrike wouldn't have minded quitting those, right along with the presents, this time she would have appreciated it if her brother had behaved like a decent human being.

On the other hand, she thought, perhaps it was better if he presented himself like his usual, messed-up self, straight away. That way Carmen might perhaps understand better why Ulrike was not as fond of her brother as Carmen was of hers. So far, Carmen was still looking forward to finally meet Norbert, and she was adamantly refusing to be prejudiced by Ulrike's opinion. And while Ulrike appreciated that character trait of Carmen's, she was beginning to look forward to Carmen getting a first-hand impression of her sorry excuse of a brother.

"Ah, there he is," she muttered to herself as she spotted the rusty beige VW Jetta, aka rust bucket No. 13, or was it 14 already? Ulrike had lost count.

#

When Carmen arrived at Ulrike's at five minutes to twelve, she was surprised when not Ulrike but Else opened the door.

"Hello Carmen," greeted Else and shook Carmen's hand as she entered. "My daughter isn't here. She chose to wait till the last minute to get her brother."

Carmen furrowed her brow. "I thought he had a car himself?"

"He does," admitted Else, "But it broke down. For what does she have a taxi, I ask you? She knows his car isn't the newest. Had she driven him in the first place, his car wouldn't have broken down on the way here."

Barely managing not to roll her eyes, Carmen refrained from commenting, as she was certain that it was hopeless to argue with Else's skewed logic. Instead, she asked, "Do you have an idea as to how long it will take her?"

"Heaven knows," said Else, "If she insists on repairing the car herself instead of towing it to the next garage, as every normal person would do, I fear it could take a while. I suppose, we could make us a cup of coffee while we're waiting."

Thinking that Ulrike would most certainly try to fix her brother's car herself, Carmen agreed and followed Else into the kitchen.

#

On her way home, Ulrike was cursing her brother for being such an idiot, and more importantly for always relying on her to fix his problems. Of course, she could have said no - theoretically. But not only would her mother have her head if she didn't help him, she herself would feel bad too. She considered herself a helpful person, and not helping her own brother was something she just couldn't square with her conscience.

By the time she arrived home, she had managed to tone her annoyance down somewhat, and when Püppi greeted her at the door with a happily wagging tail, she couldn't help but smile.

Carmen had followed Püppi to the door to greet Ulrike and wish her a happy birthday, and after sharing a birthday kiss with her partner, she said, "That didn't take as long as I feared. Could you repair his car?"

"There was nothing to repair, he just ran out of fuel," replied Ulrike, grumpily, and bent down to take off her shoes.

"So, where is he now?" asked Else, as she joined the two in the hall.

"On his way here. He'll be here shortly ... I suppose," said Ulrike.

"Why didn't you drive him?" Else wanted to know.

Visibly puzzled, Ulrike said, "Why would I do that when he's coming with his own car?"

Before Else could answer, Carmen reached in the bag she brought, and taking out a large and a small parcel, she said, "Would you like to unwrap your presents now?"

Grateful that Carmen had saved her from an argument with her mother, Ulrike smiled and took the offered parcels. "Aww, thank you *Liebling*." She was about to venture into the living room, when Else reminded her, "What about your potatoes? Aren't you going to make lunch first?"

Shooting Ulrike a compassionate look, Carmen explained, "We didn't dare finish the cooking,

because we didn't know when you'd be back."

"I've already told Carmen that it would be good if she'd teach you something about cooking," remarked Else. "Hopefully, you're more willing to learn from her than from me."

Trying not to get into another argument with her mother, Ulrike put the parcels on the side board and said, "Look, if the potatoes are bad now because they were in the water for..." she looked at her watch, "...about an hour, I'll just throw them away and peel new ones, no big deal."

"It's actually good that you put them in water," said Carmen, "They would have oxidised, had you left them exposed to air."

Raising her hands and shoulders, incomprehension written on her face, Ulrike asked her mother, "Then why are you complaining about my cooking?"

"Because," stated Else, "Kassler with boiled potatoes and Sauerkraut seems to be the only thing you can manage. It's the only meal you ever make whenever I'm here."

"I thought you liked Kassler," countered Ulrike.

Rolling her eyes, Else huffed, "I do, but it would be nice to have something else for a change."

Fed up with her mother's criticism, Ulrike spat, "This is not a restaurant, if you don't like what I cook, you can either lump it or leave."

"Jeez, don't be so touchy. It was just a suggestion," said Else, and looking at Carmen, she asked, "Is she like that with you too?"

Carmen was saved from answering by the ring of the doorbell.

"Guess that's Nobbi," grumbled Ulrike and went to open the door.

"I wonder what took him so long," said Else.

Leaving the door ajar so her brother could enter once he had climbed the stairs, Ulrike strode through the hall, and passing her mother and Carmen, she said, "I'll be in the kitchen."

"May I help you?" asked Carmen.

"Nope," said Ulrike, waving her off, "I think I can manage on my own."

"I didn't mean to imply you couldn't," said Carmen gently.

Glancing back at her partner, Ulrike managed a weak smile and said, "Okay. But I'd still rather be left alone now."

"All right," said Carmen with a nod, and Ulrike quickly disappeared into the kitchen as she heard heavy steps on the stairs, followed by a short bark of Püppi.

"*Hallo Püppi*," Norbert greeted the dog as he entered, and he crouched down to scratch the poodle behind its ears.

"There you are at last," scolded Else, "What on earth took you so long? And just look at you!"

"*Hallo Mutti*," said Norbert and looking at Carmen a grin spread across his face. "You must be Carmen, right?"

Smiling at the bearded man with his shoulder length hair and small round eyeglasses, Carmen shook his offered hand.

"Couldn't you have dressed like a decent human being for once?" asked Else.

Looking down at himself, Norbert shrugged and asked, "Why? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Else pointed out, "Those needle cord trousers look like you've slept in them, and that shirt is just plain awful."

Raising his eyebrows, Norbert stated, "You bought me this shirt to wear to family gatherings."

"Yes," agreed Else, rolling her eyes, "But that was twenty years ago!"

Carmen barely managed to suppress a chuckle.

Norbert shrugged his shoulders. "So? It's as good as new, since I really only wear it to family gatherings."

No longer able to suppress a grin, Carmen said cheekily, "Perhaps, if you keep it a bit longer, it might come into fashion again."

Norbert grinned in response and asked, "Why do we keep standing here, anyway? Is lunch not ready yet?"

Ulrike, who had heard him, growled from the kitchen, "It would be ready by now if it wasn't for

you, you nitwit!"

"How about we sit down in the living room?" asked Carmen, trying to prevent the situation from escalating.

"Yes, let's do that," agreed Else and went ahead.

#

Ulrike was glad that she had escaped her family for a few minutes, however, standing there watching the boiling potatoes was beginning to bore her to death, so she decided to set the kitchen timer and join the others in the living room.

As she sat down next to Carmen, Norbert was just telling them that he was working on a science fiction novel.

"What became of your computer job?" asked Else.

"Oh well," said Norbert, "They fired me. I'm getting unemployment benefits."

"Why did they fire you?" Else wanted to know.

When he didn't answer right away, Ulrike couldn't help suggesting, "He probably didn't turn up at work."

"I did!" protested Norbert, however, he admitted, mumbling into his beard, "I may not always have turned up at the time they expected."

"Uh huh," said Ulrike, shaking her head at her brother's stupidity.

"It's not my fault that everyone expects me to be at work at ungodly hours," Norbert tried to defend himself.

"You didn't work at night either," Ulrike pointed out.

"I did!"

"Sorry, but I don't consider two fares a night as working."

"I was still studying, I had to learn!"

"Stop it. Both of you," Else interrupted the old argument.

"Is this the first book you are writing?" asked Carmen.

"No," said Norbert, turning to Carmen who seemed to be so much nicer and more understanding than his own family. "I've written two novels and a bunch of short stories."

"Really?" said Carmen surprised, and looking to Ulrike, she said accusingly, "You never told me." Turning back to Norbert, she asked, "Would you write down the titles for me? I'd like to buy and read them."

"Uh," Norbert hesitated before answering, "Only one short story has been published so far. But the magazine went out of print. I'm still searching for a publisher."

Ulrike just rolled her eyes, and was saved from further listening to the discussion when the kitchen timer sounded.

She doubted her brother would ever publish any of his books. That he had managed to get that short story published was pure chance, in her opinion. She had read all his stories, and although they were not horrible, Ulrike could not imagine a publisher actually buying them. Mind you, due to his German studies, they were flawless language-wise, except for the odd typo, but they were lacking in so many other ways that Ulrike didn't think anyone would bother reading further than the first two or three pages. Being his sister, and having been asked for an honest opinion, she had suffered reading all of his stories till the very end. Each time, she had told him afterwards what she thought was lacking, however, as far as she knew, he had never bothered to change any of the things she mentioned. He had usually already been fascinated by the next project, whatever that was at the given time. It was still a miracle to her, how he had ever managed to accomplish his degrees in German studies and philosophy, even if it took him three years longer than it should have.

#

"Don't worry about the dishes," said Carmen as Ulrike got up and started to clear the kitchen

table, "I'll do them later. How about you finally open your presents?"

Ulrike smiled. "Okay, thank you!" and she went ahead to get the presents and proceeded to the living room, the others following her.

Carmen was glad that there had been no further arguments during lunch, and she was looking forward to seeing Ulrike's reaction when she unwrapped her presents. For once Carmen had tried not to go for pretty but rather for practical with the choice of her gifts, and she hoped that her efforts would be rewarded by Ulrike liking what she got.

Sitting down on the sofa, next to Ulrike, Carmen became increasingly nervous and started fidgeting with her skirt as Ulrike carefully opened the smaller of the presents.

Ulrike raised her eyebrows as she read the brand name on the white cardboard box she had just freed from the wrapping paper, and turning to Carmen, she asked disbelievingly, "Cartier?"

"Wow," said Norbert and leant forward in the armchair to get a better look, while Else almost fell from hers in her attempt to get closer.

God, Ulrike hoped Carmen wasn't proposing to her. She didn't know what she should answer in that case. She certainly didn't want to hurt Carmen's feelings, but neither did she feel ready to make a commitment - at least not yet; even if in their case there would be no contract to sign.

Carmen smiled nervously and said, "If you really hate it, we can take it back and exchange it for one you like."

"Well, open it already," said Else annoyed.

With a decidedly awkward feeling, Ulrike fumbled to open the box and took out a red case that seemed too big for holding a ring. Encouraged by that, she opened the case.

Norbert let out a whistle while Else could no longer restrain herself and moved next to Ulrike. Reaching for the case to get a better look, she said appreciatively, "Now, that's a pretty watch, and so much classier than your monstrosity."

"Uh, but I rather like my watch," said Ulrike defensively, hoping not to sound too ungrateful.

"I know," said Carmen, "And I'm not expecting you to take it off in everyday situations. I just thought you could use a more stylish one when we go out. But as I said, if you don't like it, we can take it back."

Relieved that Carmen didn't expect her to exchange her beloved watch for the luxury timepiece, Ulrike reassured Carmen, "No, no, for that purpose I really like it. I appreciate that you didn't go for a feminine watch. I like the octagonal shape and the little screws."

"Hehe," Norbert chuckled, "Yeah, the design fits you."

"You mean because of all the screws she's got loose?" asked Else dryly. "I don't think those tiny screws will help."

Ulrike rolled her eyes, and Norbert said, "Uh, no, that's not what I meant."

"Heavens," Else looked at the ceiling, "You wouldn't know a joke if it bit you in the butt, would you?"

"Maybe you need to work on your sarcasm," mumbled Ulrike.

"Tsk," Else made a dismissive gesture and asked, "Aren't you going to open the other package?"

Carefully setting the case with the watch on the table, Ulrike took the larger package and unwrapped it.

"Whoa! A portable phone," exclaimed Norbert.

Looking at Carmen, Ulrike breathed, "These things cost a fortune."

With a lopsided grin, Carmen said, "Don't worry about it." She thought it was funny how Ulrike knew the value of the phone, but didn't seem to have been affected quite as much by the watch which had cost more than twice as much. For Carmen the price of an object hardly ever played a role in her decision making. She knew she was lucky in that regard, and that with only her teacher's salary she would not be able to be quite as negligent about price tags, even if her pay cheque as an *Oberstudienrätin* was quite a bit higher than that of the average teacher.

Puzzled, Ulrike looked at the charger and the brick shaped phone in her hands, and asked, "How does it work? I mean, there's no cradle..."

"It doesn't need one," said Norbert. "A colleague of mine at the computer firm had exactly the

same model. You just press the green button and then put in the number. You'll have to put 030 for Berlin too."

"Why?"

"I suppose, because you are calling from the mobile into the landline network," said Norbert.

"I see," said Ulrike, even though she wasn't sure she really understood. "Is this affecting the calling costs?"

"Of course!" said Norbert, but before he could elaborate, Carmen interrupted him.

"Don't worry about it, *Schatz*. The contract is in my name, so I will receive the bill."

"And that's supposed to reassure me?" asked Ulrike, with that information even more reluctant to ever use this new telephone than she had already been.

"Yes," said Carmen. "You are free to use it as much as you like. Even though I mainly thought it would be a good thing to have so we can reach each other more easily."

"I think that is very thoughtful and most generous of you, Carmen," said Else. "You rarely find those qualities in a person nowadays."

And while Else kept gushing over Carmen and her excellent choice of gifts, Ulrike tuned out her mother's voice, wondering if Carmen would find it very ungrateful if she told her to cancel the contract for the phone as she really didn't see the need for her partner to pay for such a luxury item, even if it might have come in handy a few times in the past.

#

When Norbert and Else had finally left, and Ulrike and Carmen were in the kitchen, doing the dishes, Carmen noted, "I think your brother is a nice guy."

Ulrike shrugged, while she was drying up a plate. "I never said he wasn't."

"Well, from what I have heard about him so far, it sounded as if you didn't have much good to say about him."

"I don't," agreed Ulrike and put the plate on the kitchen table behind her.

"But he is nice," Carmen pointed out again.

"Yeah, unfortunately," said Ulrike, causing Carmen to stop in mid motion and stare at her, the dishwasher dripping from the plate and the dish sponge she was holding.

Ulrike chuckled at Carmen's shocked expression and explained, "Well, if he was a big asshole on top of everything, it would be easier for me to tell him to kiss me where the sun don't shine."

Carmen was about to say something, but Ulrike put a finger on her partner's lips and said, "Can we stop talking about my brother, please? I'd rather spend the rest of my birthday with more enjoyable things."

"Like doing the dishes," said Carmen with a smirk.

"Like doing the dishes with you," Ulrike emphasised and she leant in to kiss her partner.

When they parted, Carmen noted with a glance down Ulrike's front, "Now I've made you wet."

Without looking at her wet T-Shirt, Ulrike acknowledged, "Indeed, you have," and wagging her eyebrows suggestively, she asked, "How about we postpone the dish-washing?"

Carmen laughed. "That is not what I meant. But I rather like your suggestion." And after putting the plate and the sponge back in the sink, she let Ulrike drag her into the bedroom.

#

"Mmh," Ulrike hummed as Carmen snuggled close to her, "I'm beginning to like my birthday."

Looking up at Ulrike with a raised eyebrow, Carmen asked, "Only just beginning?"

"Well, it's not even half past five yet. I was hoping we could go out, and maybe have dinner at Marco's."

Propping herself up on one elbow, Carmen caressed Ulrike's face and said, "I'm sorry, *Schatz*, but I have to go home. I need to feed Tabitha, and I still have to correct the homework of the 9B."

Ulrike's face fell. "I thought you did that yesterday."

"I started with it yesterday, but I'm not even halfway finished yet," explained Carmen. "I will probably not finish today either. So, tomorrow I will have to do what I can't manage today, and I will also have to prepare the exams for the Spanish advanced course. We could meet tomorrow for lunch, though."

Ulrike made a face, obviously not happy with Carmen's revelation.

"I'm sorry, *Schatz*," said Carmen and gave Ulrike a peck on the lips. "I really am," she emphasised and started to get dressed.

"Sometimes, I wish I was a pupil of yours. You seem to spend more time with them than you do with me."

Carmen raised an eyebrow and remarked, "If you were my pupil, the last half hour wouldn't have happened."

Conceding Carmen's point, Ulrike stretched out on her back, and looking at the ceiling she stated, "They should only allow monks and nuns to become teachers. At least they don't have a private life."

Looking at Ulrike, Carmen said, "I'm sure they have a private life too. That they live celibate lives doesn't mean they can't have friends, and ..."

Propping herself up on one elbow, Ulrike interrupted, "Okay, okay, let me rephrase that - at least they don't have relationships that suffer from lack of time."

Carmen sat down on the bed, visibly disturbed. "Does our relationship suffer from lack of time?"

"Well, I do," said Ulrike. "It's not exactly a pleasant feeling that you don't even have time on my birthday."

"I have been here for almost six hours," said Carmen quietly.

"Yeah, but most of that time my mother and Nobbi were here too," argued Ulrike, "I had hoped that we could spend the rest of the day together - just the two of us."

Tilting her head, Carmen asked, "Didn't you say you wanted to go to Marco's?"

"It was just a suggestion. And even then it would be just us. Marco has to work. It's not like he would sit down with us to chat."

"Well, as I said, I'm sorry," said Carmen a tad frustrated. "I had planned on finishing the corrections on Friday, but I went to get the phone for you, and it took longer than I had anticipated. So, from my perspective I am spending quite a lot of time for you, even if not with you."

"And I'd rather you spend it with me," said Ulrike.

Sighing heavily, Carmen conceded, "I will try to keep that in mind."

Sighing as well, Ulrike grumbled, "That's fair enough, I guess."

"I have to go now," said Carmen and then she asked hesitantly, "Are we okay?"

Ulrike nodded, even though it was obvious that she was still far from being happy with the situation. "Yeah, go and do your wretched homework," and she added cheekily, "I hope it's so bad you'll wish you could be with me instead."

Carmen snorted. "You can rest assured; since it's homework from the 9B your hope will be fulfilled."

Once Carmen had left, Ulrike got up, refusing to spend the rest of the day sulking in her flat. Instead she headed for the phone, and dialled a number she knew by heart.

"Hey Kalle, have you got any plans this evening?"

#

"Blimey! You're on fire today," exclaimed Kalle when Ulrike yet again pocketed two of her balls with one shot, resulting in only one ball remaining before she could pot the eight ball. Kalle still had five balls to pocket, and he realised that his chances of winning were dwindling.

They had the backroom with the pool table all to themselves, as usual in recent years.

It had not always been like this. When they had first discovered this corner pub, some twenty years ago, the backroom had been packed full with people, and they had to share the only pool table with at least one other pair or group, alternately taking breaks so the others could play as well. Nonetheless, it had become their favourite pub as it was within convenient walking distance for both Kalle and Ulrike, and they could have a beer or two without having to worry about how to get home.

The last four or five years though, less and less people came here to play pocket billiards, and the backroom was hardly used at all, except for the occasional celebration.

And while the barkeep kept complaining about his declining business, Kalle and Ulrike rather enjoyed the change. They could play without breaks for as long as they liked, the dreadful German schlager music was muffled by the closed door, and the air was a lot better too. Just every now and then, the barkeep came in to ask if they needed anything or a guest would cross the room on his way to the toilets. And each time the door opened, a cloud of smoke, mingled with the strong smell of alcohol, wafted into the backroom along with the booming music until the door was shut again.

Ulrike just grinned as she looked at the pool table, pondering her next shot.

Shaking his head, Kalle said, "I don't know how you do it. When I'm frustrated I can hardly concentrate enough to hold the cue straight, but your focus and concentration seem to increase proportionally to your level of frustration."

Laughing, Ulrike said, "I guess they do," and she got into position to shoot. Letting the cue ball ricochet off a cushion, it kissed the last remaining ball exactly as she had anticipated sending it into a corner pocket, and came to a stop in a perfect position for her to play the eight ball.

Making a face, Kalle remarked drily, "I prefer playing with you when you're happy."

Snorting, Ulrike positioned herself and, compliant to the rules, potted the eight ball into the same corner her last ball had gone.

Straightening, she looked at Kalle with a grin and said, "Next round's on you."

Rolling his eyes, Kalle sighed, "Yeah, yeah, like the previous two. If you keep going like this, I'll be broke by the end of the night."

"Aww, poor you," said Ulrike, and putting an arm around his shoulders she guided him to the table in the corner. "If you're broke after spending what - ten Marks; fifteen at the most - then maybe driving a taxi isn't the right job for you."

Lighting a cigarette, Kalle looked at his buddy and retorted, "And if you're frustrated because Carmen showers you with expensive presents, then maybe she isn't the right girlfriend for you."

"I'm not frustrated about the presents," corrected Ulrike.

"You aren't? Forgive me, but you didn't sound exactly enthusiastic about them."

"Well, I'm not. But they're not the reason for being frustrated."

"But?"

"That she would rather spend her time buying presents than correcting her stupid homework so she can spend the evening with me."

Raising an eyebrow, Kalle asked cheekily, "You don't like winning at billiards?"

"That's not the point."

"Ah, you don't like spending time with me then."

"Kalle, I love spending time with you, and you know that," said Ulrike annoyed.

"But you'd rather spend your time with Carmen than with me."

Ulrike made a face. "Can I plead the fifth on that one?"

Kalle raised his hands and said, "Stupid remark, I'll take it back."

"Thanks."

"I still don't get why you're so frustrated. We're having a good time, aren't we? You used to enjoy our time together when Gitti was doing stuff on her own. What's different with Carmen?"

"Well," said Ulrike slowly, taking a drag of her cigarette before she continued, "Gitti loved going to parties and discos, I didn't. So I was glad whenever I could escape that torture."

"But you'd love helping Carmen correct her homework."

Ulrike opened her mouth to give a retort, but closed it again when she saw Kalle's point.

Kalle grinned and asked, "So what's *really* the difference?"

"Hell, I don't know," said Ulrike, and she emptied her glass of beer.

"Mind if I venture a guess?"

"Be my guest," said Ulrike with an inviting gesture.

"You like being in control," stated Kalle, and before Ulrike could protest, he continued, "I'm not saying you're a control freak, because I don't think you are. But you like having at least some sort of control. Like, for example, I can already say that your next drink won't be another beer but a non-alcoholic drink, probably a coke or a *Fassbrause**." When Ulrike nodded, he continued, "I believe that's the difference."

Frowning, Ulrike asked, "How do you mean?"

"Well, while Gitti was fun to be around with her easy-going, extraverted personality, she really wasn't in your league." Ulrike wanted to protest, but Kalle kept going, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I would say you've never been as attached to her as you seem to be to Carmen."

"Perhaps," conceded Ulrike somewhat grumpily, "And your point is?"

"My point is that, with Gitti you even felt in control when she did whatever she wanted, because, perhaps unconsciously so, you felt superior to her, which is not the case with Carmen." Ulrike narrowed her eyes, but she let him talk.

"Carmen is far more your equal in many ways, and moneywise she even tops you. I can see how that would make you feel insecure. When Gitti went to a party, you could be generous and let her go chat with her "silly" girlfriends, you felt in control by saying "No thanks, I'd rather play billiards with my old buddy, Kalle". But Carmen isn't chatting with girlfriends; she's working - academic work, no less. And your strategy no longer works, because if you'd tell Carmen to have fun with her homework while you go play billiards, you'd feel like you are the inferior one. However, if you ask me, Carmen is a far better match for you, but if you want to keep her, you'd better get a grip on yourself." Leaning back, he folded his hands and waited expectantly for what Ulrike had to say.

Ulrike looked at him for a while before she stated, "I don't like you anymore."

"Aw," said Kalle, feigning a sad face. However, understanding that this was just Ulrike's way of letting him know that his assessment had been spot on, he got up and offered with a wink, "I'll still buy you another drink, buddy. Coke or *Fassbrause*?"

"*Fassbrause*," grumbled Ulrike.

#

On Sunday morning, Ulrike squinted at her alarm clock after she was awakened by the ringing of her phone. "Who the hell calls at eight in the morning on a Sunday?" she grumbled. She was about to put the cushion over her head when suddenly she realised that it could be Carmen. Perhaps she had managed to get her work done and wanted to meet early. Quickly, Ulrike jumped out of bed and hasted into the hallway, cursing, when she bumped her foot on the doorframe. Her face contorted with pain, she yanked the receiver up and said, as calmly as possible, "Yes?"

"*It's me*," she heard her mother's voice. Alarmed, as her mother never called this early, especially not on a Sunday, she asked, "What happened?"

"*Nothing happened*," said Else, "*I just realised that I don't have the number of your new phone, so I wanted to ask what the number is.*"

"How the hell should I know?" asked Ulrike.

"*It's your phone*," stated Else, "*Normally, people know their own phone number.*"

"Mutti, I didn't buy it, and neither did I sign the contract, I haven't even seen the damned thing since I unpacked it yesterday. Ask Carmen."

"*Well, can't you ask her? Or is she not up yet?*"

"She's not here, I..."

"*Did she leave already?*" Else cut Ulrike off.

"No, she left yesterday evening. She had to work. I don't know whether she's up yet, but I

actually learnt from you that it's rude to call before ten on a Sunday morning."

"*And so it is,*" agreed Else. "*I will call her later.*"

"But you thought it was okay to wake **me** up for no other reason than to ask for the stupid phone number?"

"*You're my daughter, that's different.*"

"I like to sleep in on Sundays just like everybody else, and you've never called me this early before. What makes the phone number so important to you that you couldn't wait for a decent time to call?"

"*Look, I'd love to chat with you, but I really don't have time now. I have to go with Püppi. Call me later, if you like. Tschüs.*"

"*Tschüs,*" grumbled Ulrike and hung up, shaking her head, thinking that her mother's behaviour was getting increasingly strange. She hoped it wasn't the beginning signs of dementia or some other psychological issue. Her mother was only sixty-five, and physically she was still fairly fit. And while her mother had always had a tendency to be pain-in-the-arse annoying, Else's recent demeanour made Ulrike wonder about her mother's mental health.

Oh well, thought Ulrike, sighing, *Since I'm already up, I guess I could just as well start the day,* and she headed for the bathroom.

#

Carmen couldn't concentrate. She still had half a dozen essays to correct. She just couldn't help that her thoughts kept drifting back to Ulrike's disappointment the previous day. "*Verdammt!*" she cursed, and got up, heading for the kitchen to get herself another cup of coffee - the third one this morning.

She never used to get stressed over deadlines, and almost always managed to finish her work far ahead of time. However, today she felt increasingly pressured. If she didn't manage to get the work done till noon, she would not have much time to spend lunch with Ulrike, as she still had to prepare the exams too. She knew, Ulrike would not be thrilled, and she really didn't want to disappoint her partner again.

Alas, as she returned to her desk, her desperation grew, and when she found herself reading the first sentence of the essay in front of her for the third time, she threw her pen on the desk and leant back, running her hands through her hair. Massaging her temples in an attempt to prevent the slight throbbing developing into a full blown headache, she stared at the piece of paper on the desk, and suddenly she wondered why she was torturing herself to please her partner. Obviously, nothing she did was good enough for Ulrike anyway. She really had gone out of her way to find presents that her partner would appreciate, never mind that she also spent a fortune on them, but still it seemed that Else and Nobbi had appreciated the gifts far more than Ulrike did. She had spent half a day at Ulrike's, despite all the work she still had to do, but that had apparently not been enough for Ulrike either. Why her partner was being so ungrateful, she didn't know; but she did know that if she kept worrying over displeasing Ulrike, she would never get her work done.

Coming to a resolution, she took a deep breath, leant forward and grabbed her pen.

#

After a short lunch with Carmen, that had - adding insult to injury - been interrupted by Else, and fiddling with the stupid new phone, Ulrike had decided to take on a few fares before spending the rest of the day home, alone. Frustrated about Carmen's lack of time, she wasn't really in the mood for company. On Sundays, most of her friends were spending time with their families anyway, and she certainly didn't feel like getting another assessment from Kalle.

She was just heading for one of her favourite taxi ranks when the new phone rang, causing her to almost jump out of her skin, barely managing not to bump into the car driving in front of her.

Her heart racing, she muttered a string of colourful curses and fumbled for the phone on the

passenger's seat as she steered the car into the taxi rank.

"Yes?"

Wincing, she tore the phone from her ear when Else yelled, "***Hello? It's me! Is this working?***" Still holding the phone a hand's width from her ear, Ulrike asked, "Why are you yelling?"

"*You mean I don't have to?*"

"Obviously not," said Ulrike.

"*Amazing, this new technology. Can you give me Carmen?*"

"No. Carmen is working, and so am I," said Ulrike.

"*Oh. Where are you?*"

"At the taxi rank in front of the Kempinski,"

"*Oh, you have a customer?*"

"No, I'm waiting for the next customer."

"*Oh, so you aren't actually working right now,*" stated Else.

"I **am** working. Waiting for a customer is part of the job. Would you say to a cashier that they aren't working when there's no one at the counter at the moment?"

"*Well, how long do you have to wait?*"

"I don't know, Mutti. There's a colleague in front of me. Could take anywhere from five minutes up to thirty, or so. Usually, it doesn't take very long here."

"*What are you going to do if it takes half an hour or more?*"

"Listen to the radio; read a book ..."

"*What sort of books are you reading?*"

"At the moment I'm reading a book Carmen recommended to me, it's..."

"*Oh, well in that case I shouldn't keep you from reading.* Tschüs."

Puzzled, Ulrike looked at the phone, thinking that her mother's infatuation with Carmen was starting to get ridiculous.

Little did she know that, only a few days later, her annoyance over Else's infatuation with Carmen would fade into the background, while a new habit of her mother's would threaten to drive her insane.

#

"*Mutti!* Would you please refrain from calling me during work hours if it's not an emergency?"

"*Oh, come one, it's not like you have any important work to do - you're just gallivanting around with your Mercedes.*"

Enough was enough, thought Ulrike, and ended the call with a quick, "I have a customer. Tschüs." She didn't have a customer, yet, but she was third in line at the Tegel airport, and she really didn't want to be caught having an argument with her mother. Looking at the phone, Ulrike thought that, neither did she want to hear the cursed thing ringing yet again with customers in the car; and grasping the phone, she got out of the car and headed for the boot.

Only fifteen minutes later, she had just stopped at a red light, Ulrike cringed when suddenly the dreaded phone started ringing. Looking at the two businessmen in the rear view mirror, Ulrike said, "My apologies, I've put the phone in the boot, I didn't think it'd be loud enough to be heard in here."

"I hope it's not an emergency," said the older man on the right. "If you need to check, that's not a problem, we've got time."

Shaking her head, Ulrike said, "It's not an emergency, it's just my mother. Ever since I got this phone as a present, my mother seems to have developed a need to share everything with me immediately - even if it's only an article she just read in the pharmacy's health care magazine."

The passengers chuckled, and the younger man on the left proposed, "Then perhaps you should switch the phone off when you don't want to be disturbed?"

"I didn't know that was possible," said Ulrike intrigued.

"Of course it is. No one wants to be available all the time," said the young man.

"Awesome! Now, I just need to figure out how to do that."

"I'll show you when we're at the hotel."

"Thank you so much. That will save me hours of fiddling," said Ulrike gravely; and to show her gratitude, she switched off the taximeter even though they still had a few minutes to drive until they reached the passengers' destination. "The rest of the way is on me."

"You didn't have to do that," said the grey-haired guy, as Ulrike drove on.

"Really," added the younger one. "Your heartfelt thank you was more than enough."

"Oh no," disagreed Ulrike, "You can't imagine how valuable your help is for me!"

"Oh, I can imagine," said the young man grinning. "It's for a reason that my mother doesn't even have my mobile number."

"How did you manage to keep it from her?" Ulrike asked, envious.

"I told her it's strictly for business."

"Ah well," said Ulrike with a sigh. "I couldn't do that. My mother was present when I got the phone from my partner as a birthday gift."

"Oh my, that's unfortunate," the young man expressed his pity.

#

Carmen sat at her desk and stared at the phone. Why did Ulrike not answer the phone and why did she not call back? She had left her a voice message over an hour ago, telling her that she had to meet with the mother of one of her pupils, and that Ulrike could either come and have dinner with her three hours earlier than they had arranged, or they would have to postpone to another day.

Soon, she would have to leave. If Ulrike didn't call till then, she had no way of letting her know beforehand, and Ulrike would be greeted by Tabitha only. Sure, she could leave her a note on the table, but damn, instances like this had been the reason why she bought the phone for Ulrike in the first place. And now her technophobic partner had probably conveniently forgotten the phone at home. "*Verdammt, Ulli!*" Carmen cursed aloud, and getting up, she pointed at the phone as if it were Ulrike, and admonished, "Don't you blame me again for not spending time with you! This one is your fault!"

#

Ten minutes late for their scheduled time, Ulrike rushed out of the lift, heading for Carmen's door. Unlocking the door, she noticed with surprise that Carmen was not at home, and wondering, where her partner might be, she opened the door.

Greeted by darkness, she almost fell over Tabitha as she searched for the light switch.

"*Scheiße Mann! Wat musste denn ooch im Weg rumsteh'n!*" Ulrike cursed and scolded the cat for being in the way when Tabitha loudly complained and darted into the bedroom.

Seeing no note in the hallway, Ulrike ventured into the living room, but there was no note to be seen either. Thinking, it would probably be useless, she still peeked into the bedroom where Tabitha sat on the chest of drawers, glowering at her.

"I'm sorry, okay?" said Ulrike. "But I can't see in the dark like you." Looking around and again seeing no note, she asked, "You don't happen to know where Carmen is, do you?" Not expecting an answer, she turned back into the living room, wondering if her partner had even been home yet.

"Hm, obviously yes," she mumbled to herself as a quick glance behind Carmen's desk in the far corner of the room revealed her school bag, and on the desk sat a pile of exercise books. Frowning, Ulrike squinted at a piece of paper on top of the pile. With the desk lamp switched off, it was too dark in this corner to really make out words, but the beautiful artistic handwriting was unmistakably Carmen's.

Feeling like spying, but hoping to find an explanation about Carmen's whereabouts, Ulrike hesitantly stepped behind the desk, switched on the lamp and reached for the note.

Oh, this is for me anyway, thought Ulrike and relaxed as she read on.

As she finished reading, she let her arm sink down and looked at the ceiling, heaving a desperate sigh. If only her mother wasn't being such a pest. She wouldn't have switched off the damned phone, and she would have received Carmen's call. How the hell she could check her voice message thing, she didn't know, as up until now she hadn't even known that the phone had such an option inbuilt.

Well, she couldn't help that now. And since Carmen didn't want her to stay and wait for her, but rather wanted to postpone to another day, it would be yet another evening spent apart. And more and more Ulrike wondered if this relationship with Carmen was really what she wanted.

It was not that she didn't love Carmen; because she did. But at this instant she was beginning to wonder if it was really worth all the effort.

Disheartened, she scribbled an apology under the note, switched off all the lights and left.

###

*Fassbrause: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fassbrause>

Recipes:



Käsekuchen (cheese cake) bottomless:

200 g butter

250 g sugar

1 tablespoon vanilla sugar

6 eggs

1 kg quark (if you can't get quark, you can use cottage/farmer/curd cheese, but it's not the same)

1 tablespoon lemon juice

100 g flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

Butter and flour for the spring-form

Cover the bottom of the spring-form pan with baking paper.

Grease and flour the pan.

Cut off a piece of aluminium foil that fits the pan and put aside for later covering the cake.

Preheat the oven to 170°C.

Put butter, sugar, and eggs in a bowl. Whip until the dough is slightly foamy.

Mix the baking powder with the flour. Slowly add to the dough, then add quark and lemon juice.

Stir until the dough is smooth.

Pour the dough into the spring-form pan.

Put the cake into the preheated oven.

As soon as you can see the first brown spots, cover the spring-form pan with the aluminium foil.

After 60 minutes test with a skewer (insert skewer into centre of cake - if it comes out clean, the cake is done; if not, bake for another five or ten minutes.)

Remove the cake from the oven and let it cool.

Tip: The cake is super fluffy and yummy when you eat it warm. Once it cools down, the consistency is denser but it's still delicious :)



Paella á la Carmen (for three people)

150 g (basmati) rice

Olive oil

1 big red bell pepper (cubed or sliced)

300g chicken breast filet (in small pieces)

300g beef filet (in small pieces)

200g lamb filet (in small pieces)

200g fish filet (in pieces) (e.g. coalfish, monkfish)

50g shrimps (peeled)

100g peas (tinned)

150g cocktail tomatoes

1 onion (cubed)

5 cloves of garlic (chopped)

1 tablespoon parsley (chopped)

1 pinch cayenne/chilli powder
ca. 1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon turmeric/curcuma
1 lemon (quartered or sliced)

Cook basmati rice (or any other rice you have available) according to what the package says.

Cut the filets into small pieces. Cube red bell pepper and onion. Chop the parsley and garlic cloves. Drain the peas.

Fry the chicken, beef and lamb filet pieces in olive oil for a few minutes. Add the fish filet and shrimps as well as the bell pepper, peas, onion and garlic and let simmer for another few minutes.

Drain the rice and mix with the fried ingredients. Add curcuma, salt and cayenne powder. Fry for another two minutes.

Cut the lemon in quarters or slices and halve the cocktail tomatoes.

Put paella on plates and decorate with lemon, tomatoes and parsley.

Tip: You can also slice the bell peppers; fry them first and put them aside for further decoration before you start frying the other ingredients.

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