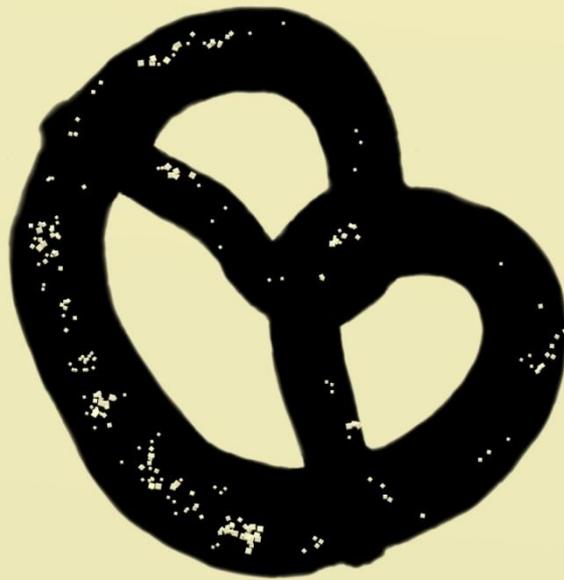


TAXI

8



Trip

Sophia DeLuna

Taxi - Trip

By
Sophia DeLuna

Taxi - Tactics
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Taxi - Trip

Carmen was driving through the rain on her way to Ulrike's. Even though the weather wasn't exactly appealing, she was very much looking forward to spending a few days with her partner.

Ulrike had called her earlier to make sure she hadn't changed her mind. She hadn't, although she was still a little irritated about Ulrike's stunt. However, she had decided not to let it ruin their time together. After all, Ulrike had apologised and it seemed as though she had realised that she acted without thinking about the possible consequences. After having slept on it, Carmen admitted that making mistakes was part of being human, and she hoped that Ulrike had learnt her lesson and wouldn't do anything like that again.

She had sent a prayer to God that there would be no repercussions for anyone involved, and after that decided to let go of the whole incident and enjoy the upcoming holiday.

Looking at the clock, she realised that she was running a little late, all because the skirt she had chosen to wear proved to be a little tight. It was one of her favourite skirts that used to be pleasantly comfortable. Two other skirts and a pair of jeans she took out of the already packed suitcase seemed like they had shrunk in size as well, causing her to unpack and try on each and every skirt and pair of trousers she had packed except the ones she had bought recently. The result of this was that she had to exchange half of the things for better fitting ones, which was quite a challenge. She didn't know where they were going, so she had to select a range to cover all sorts of possible scenarios. When she had finally repacked, she saw that time was running out and, out of sheer frustration, she threw on a pair of slacks she didn't particularly like but knew would fit.

Halting at yet another red light, she sighed heavily and resolved that she really should watch her calorie intake. Hopefully, Ulrike wouldn't notice.

#

Ulrike had just packed a few additional things into her travel bag when the phone rang. Thinking it was Carmen, she picked up the phone and said, "Hi, I hope you haven't changed your mind, *Liebling*. I'm packed and ready, waiting for you." She froze when she heard someone clearing their throat.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not your 'Liebling'."

Barely stifling a groan, Ulrike said, "Mutti. What is it?"

"I just wanted to ask you to get me a few bottles of that Bavarian beer Hedwig always brings and some Allgäuer Emmentaler."

Rolling her eyes, Ulrike responded, "Mutti, you already told me about the beer, and why do you want me to bring Allgäuer Emmentaler? You can get that here at the supermarket."

"It's not the same."

"It's exactly the same, Mutti; otherwise it wouldn't be allowed to carry that name."

"Be that as it may, the one you get here tastes differently."

Sighing, Ulrike said, "All right, Mutti, I'll get it for you."

"Thank you. And don't forget to give Hedwig the Berliner Weiße bottles."

Closing her eyes while taking a deep breath, Ulrike said, "No, Mutti, I won't forget it."

"Good. Have a nice trip. Tschüss!" said Else and hung up.

Looking at the phone, Ulrike mumbled, "*Tschüss*," and shaking her head, she put the receiver on the cradle and glanced at her watch. "A quarter past seven. I'd better get going." And throwing on her jacket, she grabbed her bag and keys and left.

Stepping out of the house, she realised it was still raining and quickly headed for the bus shelter in front of the house. The bus had just left, so she found the shelter empty and sat down, placing the bag on the neighbouring seat.

Watching the cars drive by, she thought back at the previous evening. Boy had Carmen been mad. Ulrike had never seen Carmen so angry, and she would never have thought that her partner would ever vent her anger quite this vehemently in front of other people. Granted, Ulrike really had not thought about the possible consequences. She was just relieved to have solved the problem. Well, actually, she had been delighted that her plan had worked so well, and felt quite proud of herself as well as of her friends. And to be honest, she still didn't know how that ugly situation could have been handled differently while maintaining the successful result. Admittedly, she couldn't be certain yet, that her way of handling the issue had been effective; but she dearly hoped that it had, and that there would be no consequences to pay.

Thankfully, when she called Carmen in the morning, she no longer sounded angry. In fact, she had sounded quite cheerful and eager to go on their trip. Ulrike looked at her watch again, *She should be here any minute.*

Hopefully, her mother would be able cope with the care of the hedgehog. When Else had called, Ulrike had been tempted to repeat the instructions to her mother to give her a piece of her own treatment, but then she thought that this would be really childish, so she had refrained. Now, she wondered if it might have helped to make her mother see just how annoying that habit of hers was ... *Probably not*, she sighed.

#

When Carmen finally arrived, Ulrike jogged to the back of the Alfa in the pouring rain to put her bag in the boot. Seeing that it was already full with Carmen's suitcase and a large travel bag, she cursed as she had to squeeze her bag into the little room that was left.

When she finally slid into the passenger's seat, she quickly shut the door and exclaimed, "Whew! *Was für'n Sauwetter!*"

"It's not the perfect weather for driving, I agree," said Carmen and leant over to meet Ulrike for a kiss.

"What's this for?" asked Ulrike, plucking at the red head-scarf Carmen was wearing.

"There's a draught coming through from somewhere, and it can get a bit uncomfortable on the autobahn," explained Carmen, and leaning back, she asked, "So, you're the taxi driver, what's the best way to get to the A9 from here?"

Shaking her head about Carmen's willingness to cope with the issues of the fancy Italian car, Ulrike put on her seatbelt and said, "Turn left into Grazer Platz, and then ... you know Friedenauer Brücke?"

"Yes," said Carmen and drove on just as the bus came into view behind her.

"Well, from there take the urban autobahn to Zehlendorf," said Ulrike.

"All right."

"Are the wipers always this bad?" asked Ulrike, not accustomed to the Alfa and wondering if even the windshield wipers were made for sunny Italy.

"No," said Carmen, as she merged into the traffic on the urban autobahn, "I guess they will have to be changed."

"Why haven't you done it already?"

"They weren't this bad the last time it rained, so I only had the guys at Alfa check the tyres, the brakes and the oil last week."

"You went to Alfa for a simple check-up? I could have done that for you."

"I didn't know you knew anything about Alfas."

"These checks are basically the same for every car, *Liebling*."

"I didn't know that. I only ever had Alfa Spiders, and I've been taking them to the same garage for over twenty years now."

"Wow, that's brand loyalty!"

"Well, you're loyal to Mercedes."

"Yes, but it's only my second Daimler. Before that I had several other cars. Anyway, these wipers are a safety hazard. Let's stop at a petrol station and get a new set."

"At a petrol station?" asked Carmen and glanced at Ulrike in disbelief.

"Yeah. Just drive carefully for now . . . once we leave the urban autobahn there'll be several petrol stations before we reach the A115. One of them should have wipers that fit."

"And you can change them?"

"Sure, it's a piece of cake," said Ulrike, grinning.

"You are such a show-off," said Carmen and shook her head.

Ulrike shrugged. "Aren't we all, to some degree? You always show off with your clothes and jewellery."

"Which has next to zero effect on you," stated Carmen.

"Not true. I often tell you how beautiful you are."

"Yes, but you would say that even if I wore a potato sack."

Ulrike chuckled, "Yes, I believe that your natural beauty would shine through even if you wore a potato sack. It would certainly entice me into getting that sack off you quickly in order to see more of your beauty."

Rolling her eyes, Carmen said, "You are incorrigible."

#

An hour later, they were finally leaving Berlin on the A115 with new wipers, and Ulrike started to feel like an awful whinger when she raised her voice to compete with the road noise, "It's going to be difficult to have a decent conversation with this noise."

"I'd rather concentrate on the road anyway," Carmen yelled back.

"Oh, okay," said Ulrike, and with a sigh she leant back and looked out of the window at the rain-swept landscape. Damn, this was going to be a long drive. And with the noise they couldn't even listen to the radio.

Meanwhile, Carmen was wondering if maybe she should have agreed to take the Daimler after all. She was used to driving the Alfa alone, and she mostly only ever drove on the autobahn during summer, when it was dry and hot. Also, she admitted, it wasn't quite as much fun to drive the Alfa on wet roads. Perhaps, had they taken the Mercedes, Ulrike could have driven and they could have had a conversation . . . or if she were driving it, at least they could have listened to music. Hopefully, Ulrike didn't mind too much that she had insisted on taking the Alfa.

Never having been one to accept an unacceptable situation, it didn't take long for Ulrike to think of something to end her suffering, and she asked, "Would you please stop at the Michendorf service area? I'd like to get my book from the travel bag."

"Sure," Carmen agreed readily, relieved that she wouldn't need to worry about Ulrike getting bored any longer.

#

When Carmen halted at the car park of the Michendorf service area, she turned off the

engine and said, "I'm going to the loo, so we won't have to stop before Frankenwald. Are you going too or shall I leave the key here?"

"Nah, I'm fine, I'll just get the book," said Ulrike, "You can leave the key."

"Okay," said Carmen and left, while Ulrike headed for the boot.

Ulrike was glad that she had packed the book last, so she didn't have to search the bag in the pouring rain. "*Mann, wat'n Sauwetter!*" she cursed the weather as she slammed the boot shut, and rushed to get back into the car.

"Whew!" exclaimed Carmen as she pulled the door shut, "I should have taken the umbrella." Leaning back with a sigh, she looked over at Ulrike and asked, "What are you reading?"

Ulrike showed her the cover.

"You are reading Rambo?!"

"Yeah," said Ulrike, "You made a reference about me playing Rambo yesterday, and since I've had this book for a while now but never read it, I wanted to see why you compared me to him."

"You don't know Rambo?"

"No. You know I prefer comedies. Action is cool too, but it has to be funny. Rambo never struck me as being funny, so I never bothered watching it."

"Why did you buy the book then?"

"I didn't buy it. A passenger once forgot it in the taxi."

"Ah, I see," said Carmen, "Well, you really don't need to read this rubbish. I never meant to compare you to Rambo. The name has just become an expression for someone who uses violence to solve problems." She reached for the Perrier bottle in the bag at Ulrike's feet.

"I see," said Ulrike, "But you seem to know Rambo. Have you read the book?"

"No," said Carmen and took a sip of water before she continued, "But I had to watch the film."

"You had to?" asked Ulrike.

"Well, no one forced me," said Carmen as she put the bottle back in the bag, "But a lot of the kids were raving about it back then, and some colleagues were worried about the repercussions it might have for them because of the portrayed violence. So, to form my own opinion, I had to watch it."

"And what conclusion did you come to, apart from it being rubbish?" asked Ulrike intrigued.

"Well, there is no easy conclusion," said Carmen. "As much as I dislike the film, I think it actually shows that war and violence are not a good solution and that people who commit violence will have to pay severely for the consequences. It does portray quite vividly that the guy is suffering from severe trauma. However, I'm not sure the kids saw it that way. They seemed to be more intrigued by his survival skills and the whole one-man-against-an-army plot ... and that he sewed up the wound on his own arm," she added with a disgusted shudder. "After the second film they were all buying the ridiculous survival knives, which caused another issue among colleagues, and of course, we had to forbid them to bring any sort of knives to school."

"I have one of those knives," said Ulrike grinning, "It has a compass on the pommel and some tools in the handle. Okay, now I'm even more compelled to read this book."

Rolling her eyes, Carmen started the engine and said with a sigh, "I hope you'll find it as terrible as I did. I'd rather you read something less violent like ... I don't know, the life of Mother Teresa or something like that."

Ulrike laughed. "Somehow I doubt you'd like it if I emulated a nun."

Carmen made a face as she merged back into the traffic of the autobahn. "I didn't say you should emulate her sex life or rather the lack thereof, but emulating a peaceful person would

definitely not hurt you."

The road noise was getting too loud again for a conversation, so Ulrike just raised her hand and said, "Okay, okay." Then she opened the book and started reading, while Carmen shook her head, hoping that Ulrike would judge the book as an adult and not get any further childish ideas from it.

#

Sometime later, Carmen was just slowing down because of a traffic jam at a construction site further ahead, Ulrike muttered, "Ugh this is disgusting," and closing the book she put it on the floor at her feet. Turning to Carmen, she asked, "What age were those kids, who watched the film?"

The traffic had now slowed to a stop-and-go crawl, and Carmen thought for a moment before she answered, "If I remember correctly, they were 10th graders, so they would have been around 16."

"God, I would have had nightmares for the rest of my life had I watched this at 16," said Ulrike and shuddered.

"What scene are you referring to?" asked Carmen.

"The one about his training where they had to slaughter cows, gut them alive and crawl into the carcasses to bathe in the blood."

"What?!" exclaimed Carmen. "I can't say I remember it too well, but I'm certain that there was no such scene in the film. My opinion would have been different for sure!" She shuddered.

Ulrike looked thoughtful. "Hm, well, books are usually more descriptive, and it was his memory, so perhaps they didn't show that."

"They did show some of his flashbacks from his imprisonment in Vietnam, and those were rather brutal as I recall, but nothing like what you said."

"Oh well," said Ulrike, "Maybe I'll watch the film someday, but the book is definitely too descriptive for my taste. I don't want to come across another of those scenes - ugh!" she shuddered again.

Smirking, Carmen said, "I can't say I'm disappointed that you don't like the book."

Ulrike poked her tongue out at Carmen and pouting, she said, "But now I've got nothing to read."

"You didn't pack any other books?"

"No, I didn't plan on spending that much time reading."

"Hm, I'd offer you one of mine, but they are in Spanish," said Carmen, and as Ulrike made a face at that, she suggested, "Perhaps you can find something to read at Frankenwald."

"Actually, I would rather propose we switch places at Frankenwald, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," said Carmen, "I just thought you didn't like driving in the country and wanted a break from your job."

"Ah well, I guess I'd rather drive than take a chance with another book right now," said Ulrike and added, "Also, I know the way, so if I drive it's easier than pointing you in the right directions."

"All right, then let's do it that way," said Carmen, "Although, at this speed it might take us a while to get there."

"The smell is still the same," mused Carmen as they were slowly passing yet another construction site shortly after Dessau.

"Huh?" asked Ulrike, who had been watching the construction crew. It had not rained here yet, and the streets were dry, but heavy clouds already darkened the sky, and Ulrike had been wondering if the workers could continue during rain. If they couldn't, how long would it take

to fix and modernise all of the dilapidated GDR autobahns, considering how often it rained especially in autumn? And in winter they would probably have to stop anyway.

"The GDR smell," clarified Carmen, "It's still the same, even though it's been almost three years since the reunification and there are fewer Trabbis now."

"Hm, yes," said Ulrike. "Well, I guess it mostly comes from the chemical factories in Bitterfeld, and I don't think those have all been closed or modernised yet."

"Obviously not," said Carmen. "It's a pity that they were quicker with closing all the *Intershops*. They should have left them. At least we could get cheap cigarettes as a compensation for having to endure driving through this stench."

"At least we only have to drive through it," said Ulrike, "Imagine all the people who have to live here."

Carmen made a face and stated, "I would rather kill myself than live here."

"Whoa! Isn't that a bit extreme?" asked Ulrike.

Shrugging her shoulders, Carmen halted at a temporary traffic light and admitted, "Perhaps. But I really can't imagine living here."

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike said, "I'm glad you won't have to. I really find it rather shocking that you would think of suicide just because of a little stinky air."

"A little stinky air?! It's disgusting! Don't tell me you would like to live here?"

"No, I wouldn't like to live here," admitted Ulrike calmly. "But I could think of a thousand options to escape it, and suicide would definitely not be among them."

"Back in the GDR times, you would certainly not have been able to come up with a thousand options. And trying to "escape" was not much different from committing suicide."

"True, and I wasn't even thinking of this sort of "escaping" exactly because of that," said Ulrike. "Imagine if everyone in and around Bitterfeld would have committed suicide or tried to escape over the border."

"Then perhaps they would have done something about the stench sooner."

Ulrike opened her mouth to argue, but she closed it again and a moment later conceded instead, "You may actually have a point there, even if it is a gruesome thought. Nonetheless, I still don't like that you would so easily think of killing yourself."

"God! I didn't mean it that seriously," exclaimed Carmen, raising her hands in exasperation while keeping her eyes focused on the red light. "I'm not forced to live here anyway, and probably never will be, so calm down, will you!"

"Um ... I am calm," Ulrike pointed out. "I'm just worried about you."

Carmen sighed and apologised, "You are right. I'm the one who should calm down. I told you I can't concentrate on talking when I'm driving. It is making me nervous."

"Um ... we aren't driving at the moment, *Liebling*."

"Right, we aren't, but this is driving me nuts!" She pointed at the still red traffic light. "We could be in Frankenwald already, if not for all these stupid construction sites. And being stuck in this stench is making it even worse."

Ulrike touched Carmen's arm and advised, "If you ever want to change your profession, don't ever consider becoming a taxi driver in Berlin."

Despite herself, Carmen chuckled. Glancing at Ulrike, she promised with a grin, "I won't."

"Good," said Ulrike as the traffic light turned green, and she squeezed her partner's arm before she let go so Carmen could concentrate on the road again.

Although she had escaped their argument, Carmen was relieved when she could drive on and Ulrike turned her attention to the construction site instead of nagging Carmen about her statement.

Ulrike's strong reaction had taken Carmen by surprise and had caused her to go into a defensive mode, despite Ulrike's calm demeanour. Not that she was habitually thinking about killing herself, and her statement had indeed not been serious. But there had been times when

she had considered suicide, despite her religion, and despite rationally agreeing that there were always other - better - options. However, during these times rational thinking was difficult if not impossible, as even when she thought that she was being perfectly rational, she knew somewhere at the back of her mind that she was not. This discrepancy, although unnerving, had possibly saved her life more than once.

It saddened her that Ulrike would probably never be able to understand this part of her. Admittedly, they had never talked about this issue before, so she couldn't know whether her partner might be more understanding than she thought.

Sighing inwardly, Carmen decided to put her gloomy thoughts aside and concentrate on the road that was finally free again. She accelerated with determination until she reached the 100 km/h speed limit, glad that the road was dry here so she didn't have to worry about the Alfa's behaviour in wet conditions.

#

As the sign came into view that said *Rasthof Frankenwald* was 1000m ahead, Carmen changed into the right lane and noticed that Ulrike was fast asleep. She would have considered driving on, but she wanted to refuel and she was hungry. The rest area would be a good opportunity to have a picnic, even though in the now pouring rain it wouldn't be as nice as she had anticipated.

Looking at the clock, she figured it was no wonder her stomach was growling. She had got up at five in the morning to prepare their food for the journey, and although she had eaten a little during the preparations, she hadn't had any actual breakfast and it was almost two in the afternoon now.

She slowed down as she arrived at the rest area's petrol station and stopped behind an Audi, whose driver had just got back into the car.

Ulrike woke up when Carmen shut the door. She yawned, rubbed her eyes and looked around. "Ah, Frankenwald," she muttered and tried to stretch, but found that the confined space of the Alfa was not sufficient; she had to get out. She unfastened her seatbelt, and bumping her foot against the Rambo book, she leant down to pick it up. "Might as well put this back in the boot," she mumbled to herself and got out.

"Ah, you are up," said Carmen as she put the nozzle back into the holder.

"Yep," said Ulrike. "Just putting this back in the boot, then we can change places."

"We can change places now," said Carmen and handed Ulrike the keys. "But I would like to have lunch before we drive on, okay?"

"Sure, do you want to go to the bridge restaurant or just get some snacks?"

Carmen shook her head with a disbelieving smirk. "Neither. I have much better food in the boot."

Ulrike's eyes widened, a happy grin formed on her face, and she exclaimed, "You are a treasure!" And she quickly gave her partner a peck on the lips.

As Carmen remained standing there with a huge smile on her face, Ulrike nudged her and said grinning, "Now go ahead and pay. I can't wait to see what's for lunch."

The next car in line honked, causing Carmen to jump. Blushing, she raised her hands towards the BMW in an apologetic gesture and muttered to Ulrike, "I'll be right back."

Ulrike laughed as she opened the boot and put her book back in her bag. She was tempted to take a peek into Carmen's travel bag. However, after a moment of consideration, she restrained herself, shut the boot and got into the driver's seat.

She drove a few metres ahead, just so that the BMW driver could get into place before his impatience gave him a heart attack, and then she switched on the radio and started to search

for the *Antenne Bayern* radio station. When she found it, she closed her eyes and leant back with a smile on her face. Whenever she reached a point from where she could receive a Bavarian radio station, she felt like she was really on holiday.

Of course it no longer had the same impact as it used to have before the reunification. Back then it had also been a great relief to be out of the GDR, to have reached Western Germany without any major trouble. But although the borders and the experiences within the GDR were now only unpleasant memories, the feeling of freedom she associated with the Bavarian radio stations remained.

When Carmen finally returned it was still raining heavily, so she headed for the boot and got out the picnic bag before she settled back into the car.

Ulrike turned down the volume when Carmen slammed the boot shut.

"So," exhaled Carmen as she slumped into the passenger's seat and shut the door. "If you can find us a nice parking space, we can have lunch to the sound of rain pattering on the roof."

"Or we can listen to *Antenne Bayern*," proposed Ulrike grinning, and turned the volume up again before she started the engine. "I found it for us while you were gone."

"Sure, if you like."

"You don't sound particularly excited," noted Ulrike as she drove towards the large parking lot.

"Should I be? Is this a favourite song of yours?"

"Well, no," said Ulrike as she manoeuvred the Alfa into a parking bay, "But this is *Antenne Bayern*! We are in Bavaria! Don't you find that exciting at all?"

"Hm, I find it exciting to be on a holiday with you," said Carmen. "But that is not linked to Bavaria or a radio station."

Ulrike sighed, "Okay, maybe I'm just weird. I always thought it was a great relief to finally be in Bavaria after driving through the GDR. Of course it's not the same anymore, but somehow I still feel excited when I can get a Bavarian radio station."

"Oh, that's what you mean," acknowledged Carmen. "Well, I guess I don't have the same feeling because I never drove through the GDR by car. On school trips we went by bus or train, and when I travelled on my own I always took planes."

"I thought you went on trips with José."

"Not during the GDR times," said Carmen.

"Oh, I see," said Ulrike, and wriggling her eyebrows, she pointed at the bag on Carmen's lap and asked, "So, what's for lunch?"

Smiling, Carmen said, "Let's see," and she opened the bag and Ulrike exclaimed, "Hey, what a fancy cooling bag! I've never seen one like this."

"Well, you won't get these at a discounter," said Carmen cheekily and chuckled when Ulrike poked her tongue out at her. "I actually got this one in Italy, but I've seen them at the KaDeWe too."

"Okay, okay, now get the food out already," nagged Ulrike.

Carmen laughed and asked, "What would you like? I made *sándwiches de miga*. There are some with avocado, red pepper and cooked ham; some with cooked ham, Gouda, lettuce and tomato; and some with smoked turkey breast and cucumbers."

Ulrike's eyes had widened with each delicacy Carmen had mentioned, and she blinked and said, "One of each, please. Gosh, you were right, that's definitely better than anything we could get here. When did you make all these?"

Carmen grinned. "I got up early." And she handed Ulrike a paper napkin, and the sandwiches, each neatly wrapped in cling film.

They went on eating and pleasantly chatting until they were interrupted by a crying toddler

and the sound of his parents arguing. They had parked next to them and obviously wanted to go to the bridge restaurant which the toddler seemed to object to.

"When I was young, I would have loved to go to the restaurant," commented Ulrike, somewhat irritated at the shrieking noise, "But we never went."

"That's probably why you would have loved to go," said Carmen with a wink.

"Hm, perhaps. Man, I don't know how you can cope being around children all day," muttered Ulrike as the father grabbed the screaming boy and carried him towards the restaurant. "I would be tempted to strangle them, and go nuts because I'd have to restrain myself."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be a kindergarten teacher," admitted Carmen. "Although teenagers can be just as challenging, I think it's not as difficult as with toddlers."

Ulrike immediately thought of the previous day which seemed to contradict Carmen's assessment, but she held her tongue, not wanting to get into an argument again.

Instead, she just hummed an acknowledgement and concentrated on the taste of the sandwich. Once she had swallowed, she said, "These are the best sandwiches I have ever eaten!"

"I'm glad you like them," said Carmen and took a sip from her water bottle.

#

The rain had ceased, and the noise of the autobahn traffic became more prominent. The parking area became fuller, and more and more people were heading towards the bridge restaurant.

Ulrike didn't notice. She had decided to grab the opportunity and do some much needed stretching exercises while she was waiting for Carmen, who had wanted to go to the loo yet again.

When Carmen returned to the car and noticed her partner performing strange contortions, she rushed to Ulrike, put a hand on her shoulder to get her attention and hissed in a hushed voice, "What are you doing?"

Ceasing her movements, Ulrike straightened and explained, "Stretching exercises. It's good to prevent cramps and back pain when you're sitting in the car for many hours. You should do some too."

"I certainly won't!" spat Carmen, still in a hushed voice. "Get back into the car please and let's drive on." And she hurried to the passenger's side and quickly got in, slamming the door shut.

Ulrike stood there, flabbergasted for a moment, and shaking her head, she slowly settled into the driver's seat. Turning towards Carmen, she asked, "Would you care to enlighten me as to what this was all about?"

Carmen let out a frustrated sigh. "Please drive. People were looking at you strangely. It's embarrassing and I just want to get away from here."

Calmly, Ulrike started the engine and suggested, "They were probably looking because you made such a fuss."

"No, they were looking at you before I even got to you," clarified Carmen.

Backing out of the parking bay, Ulrike said, "Okay, so what? I'm not going to ruin my holiday with cramped muscles and back pain just because some strangers, whom I will never see again, might be looking at me."

"Sometimes, I wish I had your nerve!" mumbled Carmen, fascinated that Ulrike had the guts to not care about what other people thought. She wasn't that brave.

"Oh come on," said Ulrike as she merged back into the traffic on the autobahn. "What's the big deal about doing some perfectly harmless and healthy stretching exercises? I mean, I could perhaps understand your feelings if I did this in the former GDR, as they got suspicious

about anything and everything. But this is West Germany, and even in the East we wouldn't have to fear the Stasi anymore."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Carmen.

"I'd rather thank Gorbi," said Ulrike.

The traffic noise prevented Carmen from answering, and she didn't really want to argue anyway as without Gorbachev the reunification certainly wouldn't have happened.

Meanwhile, Ulrike was reminded of her brother. *One opportunity less for him to get into trouble*, she thought as she remembered how he had almost got into serious trouble with the GDR border officials. Of course, Norbert knew it was forbidden to leave the transit road, and that the transit drive had to be made without interruptions except for short stops at petrol stations or rest areas. Nonetheless, the fantastic weather had caused him to disobey the rules and go for a quick swim in a nearby lake. Unfortunately - and typical for Norbert - he forgot the time, and the 'quick swim' ended up as a time difference of two hours for which he had to answer to the border officials once he got to the border crossing point. When they looked at the time stamp on his visa and asked him where he had been that long, only his talent for finding excuses and the fact that he really did suddenly look very sick - no surprise when you are under suspicion by the Stasi - rescued him, as the border official grudgingly believed him that he had been overcome by a bad spell of nausea and stomach pain.

Ulrike still thought her brother had more luck than judgement. Nevertheless, she admitted that crossing the border had always been an unpleasant experience, although she had never got into trouble with the Stasi. She had always adhered to the rules, as stupid as she may have found them. She was definitely glad that these times were over.

#

"Don't drive so fast, Ulli!" warned Carmen, yelling to be heard.

"120 km/h isn't too fast," replied Ulrike. "There's no speed limit here."

"But the road is wet. The Alfa doesn't like that."

"I've noticed. That's why I'm only driving 120 and not full speed."

"I would feel safer if you didn't go above 80 on wet roads," pleaded Carmen.

Ulrike sighed. She had hoped she could make up for the lost time by driving as fast as she dared to with the Alfa's obviously unpredictable behaviour. Slowing down to 80 would delay them even further. Nonetheless, she didn't want Carmen to feel unsafe, so she changed to the right lane, eased up on the accelerator and said, "Okay."

"Thank you," yelled Carmen.

Once again, Ulrike cursed the Italian tin can for being built for looks rather than for usability. Why on earth would anyone build a car that you couldn't drive properly on wet roads, and that was so badly insulated that you couldn't have a conversation because of the noise, and in which you had to wear a scarf so as not to get a stiff neck or worse?

Because of the uncomfortable draught that was hitting her neck she'd had to stop at the first opportunity after Frankenwald to get a scarf from her bag. She had asked Carmen why she hadn't had the garage put in new seals already. But Carmen only shrugged and said that it was probably just a characteristic of Alfa Spiders as she'd had this issue with all her Spiders, and she added that Ulrike couldn't compare the Alfa to her Daimler; Alfas were built for Italian summers and for having fun.

Ulrike had refrained from commenting that her idea of having fun did not include neck pain caused by icy draughts. Instead she only shook her head, resigning herself to the fate of having to endure the antics of the capricious car for the rest of the week.

The only good point the Alfa had, in Ulrike's opinion, was its velocity, but that she couldn't utilise. *If only the rain would stop*, she thought, sighing. After some consideration about which route to take, she thought, *Oh hell, I'll take the country road*. It was already half

past three, so by the time they checked in and unpacked it would be almost dark anyway, no matter which route she chose. So, they probably wouldn't be doing much anymore, except for having dinner, and testing the mattresses. Ulrike grinned at that thought. Yes, going to bed early was actually a rather nice idea.

Once Carmen noticed that Ulrike took the exit to the B2 country road, she asked, "Are we almost there?"

"No," said Ulrike, "Another two hours, I estimate, maybe a little more."

"Oh, okay," said Carmen. "And you're still not going to tell me where we are headed?"

"Nope," said Ulrike, grinning.

Carmen pouted and turned to look out the window again. Her back hurt, even though she had adjusted the seat at their last stop. She was not used to sitting in the car for so many hours non-stop.

#

Shortly after Donauwörth the rain finally ceased and the sun broke through the clouds. Grey drabness made way for verdurous meadows and rape fields that appeared as glowing seas of yellow.

"Beautiful," said Carmen.

"It is, isn't it," replied Ulrike, smiling, as she followed the B2 further south, passing small villages and patchworks of fields. Different shades of green and yellow dominated between the few already harvested brown patches. The air was still cool and fresh, but at least the road was dry and the late afternoon sun let the sky appear in Bavaria's traditional colours of blue and white.

Ulrike smiled contentedly at the idyllic surrounding landscape. She loved Bavaria. In her opinion it was the most beautiful part of Germany. Not that she didn't love Berlin, she did. But Berlin was different. It was a world city and as such had other benefits she loved. Bavaria, however, smelled of holidays. The seemingly endless fields and meadows and forests, interspersed by small, picturesque villages and scattered farmsteads, the fresh air, the bigger lakes and further south the mountains, the cuisine and the beer, and all the different Bavarian, Swabian and various other dialects of the people, all this and more was what Ulrike loved and treasured about Bavaria. In the past twenty years or so she had been to almost every corner in Bavaria. She usually avoided the bigger cities, except for Regensburg, where her aunt lived. The place where they were headed was one of her favourites, and she had been in the area several times already. And even though she couldn't be sure, she was rather confident that Carmen would like it too.

About half an hour later, they had just reached the peak of a slight elevation, when Carmen cried out in disbelief, "Is that the Alps?"

Ulrike grinned, "Uh huh, nice view."

"Wow, they seem so close already!"

"Yeah, it's föhn, obviously. They aren't as close as they look."

"Are we going to the Alps?" Carmen tried again to get Ulrike to spill their destination.

"We can go there on a day trip, if you like. But we are not staying there."

"Where are we staying?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you behave like a child?" asked Ulrike cheekily. "We'll be there in about half an hour. You should be able to rein in your curiosity until then."

Carmen pouted when, suddenly, the smell of liquid manure entered through the air vents.

"Aah, fresh country air," commented Ulrike, "Gotta love it."

Carmen immediately closed the air vents on her side, and cried out in disgust, "Eeeew,

close the air vents!"

Ulrike laughed. "It's already inside. I suppose we'd better open the windows - wide," and she pressed the button to let down her window.

"Noo!" cried Carmen and held her nose.

Ulrike laughed even more, and then she said, "It's gone now. It was just that one field." And she shut the window again.

"How can people stand living in the vicinity of this stench?"

Ulrike shrugged her shoulders. "I guess you get used to it."

"I could never get used to this!" exclaimed Carmen. "It's even worse than the GDR stench!"

Ulrike chuckled about the vehemence of Carmen's exclamation, but the chuckle died in her throat when she remembered their previous conversation, and she said, "I hope you aren't thinking of killing yourself if I tell you that around here it occasionally happens that you drive by a field that's been fertilised with liquid manure."

"No, I am not," said Carmen annoyed. "But don't expect me to be thrilled about it either."

"Look," said Ulrike, "I don't particularly fancy that smell either, but I think it is a small price to pay compared to the great experiences this area has to offer, with its countless lovely places and fantastic landscape, including the gorgeous Alps."

"Okay, okay," said Carmen, "It is a beautiful area, I'll give you that."

"I know this area very well," said Ulrike. "There are quite a few places I want to show you, which I think you will like. And I think you will like the place where we'll be staying as well."

"Where are we staying?" asked Carmen, smirking.

"Caaaarmeeen!!!" growled Ulrike, and both of them burst out laughing.

#

"You booked us into a monastery?!" asked Carmen, incredulously as Ulrike turned into a narrow side street at a signpost that pointed towards *Kloster Irsee*. They passed old chestnut trees that lined the street on the right side while Ulrike was looking at the parking bays on the left to find a free space.

Trying to keep a straight face, Ulrike replied, "I thought you liked Mother Teresa."

"I ... well, yes, but, uh, don't you think that..."

Spotting a free parking bay around the corner, Ulrike chuckled and came to her partner's rescue, while she manoeuvred the Alfa into the rather narrow bay, "No worries. It isn't a monastery anymore. The brewery still exists, and they still use the old traditional methods to brew really nice beers. There's also a brewery museum from which you can have a look into the brewery. The former monastery is now a conference and training centre. The baroque church is beautiful and has a unique feature I think you might find interesting as well. We're staying at the hotel that's attached to the restaurant. The restaurant is excellent and rather exceptional with regards to the menu as well as atmosphere."

"All right, that sounds interesting," admitted Carmen hesitantly.

"Great! So, let's check in."

#

Once Ulrike was finished unpacking, except for the Berliner Weisse bottles which she left in the bag, she lay down on the bed and watched Carmen unpacking her suitcase. Her eyebrows rose in bafflement and she asked, "Liebling? When are you planning to wear all these?"

Interrupting her activities, Carmen looked at Ulrike, a neatly folded evening dress in her

hands and said, "I just like to be prepared, and you didn't tell me where we would stay, so I didn't know what sort of clothes would be appropriate."

"Ah, I see," said Ulrike, seeing that Carmen had a point. Perhaps she should have at least told her partner that she would only need casual wear.

Twenty minutes later, Carmen finally finished unpacking, and sat down on the double bed, "Phew!"

Ulrike who had been patiently waiting stretched out on the bed asked, "So, how do you like it?"

Carmen looked around before she said, "It is definitely better than what I had feared..."

"But you don't particularly like it, nonetheless," stated Ulrike, somewhat disappointed about Carmen's lack of excitement.

Turning towards Ulrike, Carmen assured, "It's not that I don't like it. The rustic style is certainly interesting, but it requires some getting used to."

Tilting her head, Ulrike asked, "How so?"

"Well, for starters, I will have to refrain from thinking about what creatures might be living in and behind these hand-hewed beams."

Looking at the old support beams on the ceiling and the sloping wall on the window side of the attic room, Ulrike said, "Except for the odd spider, and maybe a fly or mosquito, which you will occasionally find in every room, especially in the country, I don't think anything lives there. They probably sealed them or did whatever to insure that insects won't destroy the ancient beams."

"Hm, well, even though it looks completely different, for some unfathomable reason the rustic style reminds me of the house where I grew up. But I guess I can't compare them really. I suppose there won't be any tarantulas or snakes hiding behind those beams," Carmen said, and continued, "And the room does look perfectly clean."

"Uh, no, luckily you won't find creepy things like that in a German hotel," affirmed Ulrike. "This place has always been very clean whenever I stayed here. And I think the ancient beams and brick walls make for a really cosy atmosphere."

"The bed appears to be really cosy," said Carmen and she leant over to give Ulrike a kiss, alas, they didn't get very far before Carmen broke the kiss and slumped face down next to Ulrike. "Ouch, my back hurts," she complained, her voice muffled by the cushion.

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike commented, "Uh huh. That's what you get when you refuse to do stretching exercises. I bet the people who looked at me strangely have long forgotten about me, but you will get to feel your body's complaints for quite a while. Now tell me, what's worse, being stared at for a few minutes, or being in pain for the rest of the day?"

Turning her head, Carmen made a face at her partner, and Ulrike grinned and said, "I love you anyway," and she leant down to share a proper kiss this time.

#

As they entered the vaults of the monastery brewery restaurant, Carmen grasped Ulrike's arm tighter and whispered, "It is dark in here."

"Yeah, it's romantic, isn't it?" asked Ulrike.

"If you find medieval cellars romantic, perhaps," responded Carmen still in a hushed voice, but Ulrike didn't hear her, as she led Carmen to the far end where she had spotted a free table next to the open fireplace.

"This is one of my favourite places," said Ulrike, as she sat down with a happy smile. "I like to hear the crackling of the fire, and it's cosy and warm."

"I suppose you and I have different ideas about the word 'cosy'," said Carmen.

"Awww," said Ulrike, and reaching for Carmen's hand on the table, she encouraged her, "You just have to get into the spirit of this medieval atmosphere."

"*Nobed mitanand*," greeted the waitress in her traditional Bavarian dirndl as she brought the menus, and asked if she could bring them something to drink.

"Yes," said Ulrike, "I'd like a Kloster Urtrunk."

"I'll just have a glass of water for now," said Carmen.

The waitress acknowledged their order and left.

Ulrike only quickly browsed the menu before she decided, "I already know what I want."

"Yes? What did you choose?" asked Carmen, who was still studying the menu.

"I'll have the roasted pork knuckle with beer gravy, potato dumpling and coleslaw. It's one of my favourites, and it's typical Bavarian. I always have roasted pork knuckle at least once when I'm in Bavaria."

"Hm, I'm not so fond of it. It's too fat for my taste," said Carmen, "How is the roast wild boar?"

Making an appreciative gesture, Ulrike said, "Excellent! I'll probably have that tomorrow."

"All right, then I will try it," said Carmen.

The waitress came with their drinks and took their orders, and when she left, Ulrike put her hand on Carmen's and said, "It's nice to be here with you and to share this experience. I really do like it here. I love the medieval flair and the rustic Bavarian food, and the beer really is exceptional."

"I didn't know you fancy the Middle Ages," said Carmen.

"Only the good parts," said Ulrike, "Only the good parts." And she toasted Carmen with her beer, "Here's to our first holiday together!"

Smiling, Carmen used her glass of water to touch Ulrike's stein. "I do enjoy being here with you. I'm sorry if I have been a bit grumpy today."

"It's okay," said Ulrike, "I haven't been on my best behaviour either. I guess the long drive has affected both of us. That it took almost twice as long as it normally would due to all the constructions and the bad weather was really unfortunate. But now we are here, and I hope after a delicious dinner and a good long sleep we'll both feel better."

"I'm sure we will," agreed Carmen.

During the evening, Carmen discovered that Ulrike had been right with her praise. The food was indeed excellent, and the wine she had ordered was really good too. And while Ulrike was counting off the choices they had between the many attractions in the vicinity as well as opportunities for day trips, Carmen slowly began to enjoy the unusual atmosphere. And she was actually glad that Ulrike had insisted on making it a surprise, because had she told her about it, Carmen was fairly certain that she would have objected, and then she would never have experienced this ambience which Ulrike so loved. And that would have been a real pity, thought Carmen, as now that she had opened herself to this adventure, she began to see why Ulrike liked the place so much, and she even began to find it romantic, in a rustic, medieval sort of way.

#

At night, when Carmen had fallen asleep, nestled in Ulrike's embrace, Ulrike looked at her partner and smiled fondly. Although her arm was falling asleep and it really wasn't particularly comfortable to sleep like this, it somehow made her feel content and happy. *It certainly helps that there is no hedgehog and no cat to disturb us, and that neither of us needs to get up early tomorrow*, she thought, and closed her eyes with a contented sigh.

When she awoke the next morning, Carmen was again snuggled close to her. *Mmmh, nice*, thought Ulrike, and a smile appeared on her face as she remembered the previous night.

It had started with an argument when Carmen saw her coming out of the bathroom in

men's flannel pyjamas. Ulrike argued that it was cold and the pyjamas were warm and comfortable, and Carmen wouldn't have to see much of it anyway as she had said that she was exhausted and wanted to go to sleep.

Alas, Carmen had shown no mercy and threatened that she would not share the bed with her if she didn't take it off.

Shocked for a moment, Ulrike had finally said, "All right, I'll do it for you," and she promptly took off her pyjamas and joined Carmen in bed. "Now, what are *you* going to do to keep me warm?"

Carmen's nonverbal response had kept them up well after midnight.

Carmen had definitely kept her more than just warm. Ulrike grinned at the memory, but the grin faded as she wanted to move a little and noticed that her right arm, on which Carmen was lying, was numb up to her shoulder. Grumbling about the discomfort, Ulrike tried to extract her limp arm from under Carmen's head without waking her.

Carmen mumbled something unintelligible, followed by a loud groan as she attempted to move, "Ow! Ow! Gosh, I'm hurting all over."

"And my arm is asleep. Good morning," said Ulrike, and after giving her partner a quick kiss, she sat up and started massaging her arm to get her sensations back.

"Good morning. Gosh, I'm sore," muttered Carmen, and before Ulrike could comment, she added, "Don't tell me. I know what you want to say. And I'm still not going to do weird exercises in public places."

Ulrike shook her head and offered, "Well, you could do some exercises with me now. I can show you a few things that might help."

"Exercises early in the morning? No thanks," said Carmen.

"It's not that early. It's past eight already," countered Ulrike.

"But I only just woke up, so it's early for me," argued Carmen, "I'd rather take a shower. Maybe that helps. Do you mind if I shower first?"

"Go ahead. I'd like to do some training before I shower," said Ulrike and quickly added, "Ah, just let me go to the loo first." And she jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

"Since when do you train in the morning?" asked Carmen.

Halting at the bathroom door, Ulrike explained, "Since I figured that I won't have time for it at any other time while we are on holiday. So, I have to do it in the morning."

"Well, you could take a break from training while we are on holiday," suggested Carmen.

"Nope," said Ulrike, "You know I work out almost every day. And I've already skipped yesterday and the day before. I don't want to lose muscle," and she vanished into the bathroom.

"I wish I had your determination," muttered Carmen and sighed. So far, Ulrike had not commented on her weight gain, but she really should do something about it if she didn't want Ulrike to lose interest in her. Maybe she should take Ulrike up on her offer and exercise with her. Perhaps it would even be fun to do it together. So, when Ulrike came out of the bathroom, Carmen asked, "Would you still consider doing exercises with me?"

"Sure!" said Ulrike, delighted that her partner would join in.

"Okay," said Carmen and got up. She got out a pair of sweatpants, a bra and a T-shirt from the wardrobe and, heading for the bathroom, she said, "I'll be right back."

"All right, I'll get the equipment out," said Ulrike and opened her compartment of the wardrobe. Grabbing the skipping rope she had brought, she looked around ... damn, this room was definitely too cramped. The single rooms she had stayed in previously were a little roomier. *Hm, well, we'll just have to improvise*, thought Ulrike and put the rope back. Instead, she grabbed the power twister bar, threw it on the bed and shut the door. Then, she went over to the desk and shoved the two chairs in the space between the window and the bed.

Stepping out of the bathroom, her hair pulled up into a bun, Carmen said, "All right, I'm

ready."

"Great," said Ulrike, and looking at the cleared space she stated, "It's still a bit narrow, but it'll have to do. We'll have to take turns, though. We'll start with burpees for cardio."

"What's that again?"

"I'll show you," said Ulrike and did so ... "Now you. Come forward a little or you will bump your feet on the corner. Okay ... now stretch upwards ... now bend down and put your hands in front of you..."

Carmen groaned, but Ulrike went on, "Now jump back with your feet ... good ... now walk forward to the previous position ... get up and put your hands over your head again. Great. My turn."

After she had done the 10th burpee, Carmen sat down on the bed and panted, "Gosh ... this is ... exhausting."

"Don't stop," said Ulrike while she continued on her own. "Do squats. That shouldn't be too difficult for you. Your legs are quite strong." And finishing another burpee, she added, "Come on, you can do it."

Groaning, Carmen got up.

"Do it on your side of the bed, then I can do push-ups in the meantime."

"*Jawoll, Frau Oberstabsfeldwebel,*" acknowledged Carmen jokingly.

Ulrike grinned, "Am I'm too pushy?"

Carmen chuckled. "Well, the way you sound makes me think you'd do well in the army."

"Nah," said Ulrike and got down on the floor for her push-ups, "I wouldn't want to train for war. I'm a pacifist."

"Really?" asked Carmen as she remembered what Ulrike had done to Roger, and she thought that especially that stunt, among other things, did not exactly make her partner look like a pacifist. However, not wanting to cause an argument again, Carmen started doing her squats.

"Yeah, really," said Ulrike, only slightly strained while continuing her push-ups. "I wish everyone could just live in peace and harmony. I definitely wouldn't want to be ordered to kill innocent people. But I like bodybuilding because I like keeping my body strong and fit. But you don't have to if you don't like it. I just thought it might help you, and I think it's fun to exercise with you."

Taking a break, Carmen sat down on the bed and shook out her burning legs. "Well, this is not really my cup of tea, but I'm game to try. At least while we are on holiday."

"Okay," said Ulrike smiling, "Then let's change places. Now I do squats, and you do push-ups ... or knee-push-ups, if you prefer that."

"I really don't like push-ups," said Carmen, "Can I try that?" she pointed at the power twister bar, "José has one like that. It looks easier than push-ups."

"Um, that's a 50 kg tension bar," said Ulrike. "I doubt that's easier for you than knee-push-ups. But you can try of course."

"I would like to try," said Carmen and reached for the bar on the bed.

"Wait, I'll get behind you," said Ulrike, and when Carmen got up, Ulrike stepped behind her partner. "Use the straps, please."

"Gosh, you are making a fuss," said Carmen, slightly annoyed, but did as Ulrike had told.

"This thing is more dangerous than it looks," explained Ulrike, and added, "Show me that you can handle it, and I'll stop making a fuss." And as Carmen had positioned herself, Ulrike grabbed the bar from behind, just to make sure her partner wouldn't injure herself. "Now press."

"Uhh ... it's not working," said Carmen.

Ulrike grinned, and she was glad that Carmen couldn't see her. "Try again," she encouraged her partner, and when she felt Carmen's muscles tensing, she helped by pressing

the bar herself.

"Oh, now it works," said Carmen.

"Now hold it in this position," said Ulrike as the bar was bent, and she started to ease up on the pressure, but when Carmen couldn't even hold the position for a second Ulrike immediately tensed her grip again, and moved the bar in a straight position.

"Okay, you have convinced me," said Carmen, "I'll do the stupid knee-push-ups."

Ulrike chuckled, and took the bar from Carmen's hands. "We can get you a 20 kg one, *Liebling*."

Making a face, Carmen said, "No, thanks," and she got down on her knees.

"Awww," said Ulrike. "If you use the right level, they can be quite fun." And she demonstrated by doing various exercises with the bar.

"I feel like a wimp, compared to you," said Carmen, frustrated, when she sat down on the floor and watched Ulrike after she had done two push-ups.

Ulrike stopped her exercises and turned to look at her partner with a serious expression. Taking a deep breath, she asked, "If one of your pupils would say she feels like a klutz compared to you after her first dance lesson, what would you tell her?"

Casting her eyes downwards, Carmen muttered, "That she shouldn't compare herself to me because I've been dancing since I was eight years old, and she is just a beginner."

"Mhm," acknowledged Ulrike, "And I have been seriously training since I was twenty. Now, what would you tell her if she sat on the floor and kept looking miserable instead of continuing with her dance training?"

Carmen sighed and replied, "That she would never get better if she didn't practise."

"So, adhere to your own advice and continue," said Ulrike. "Come on, practise makes perfect. One, two..."

Carmen groaned, "You are merciless."

"Yup," said Ulrike, grinning, and she put the bar on the bed and continued with the squats she still hadn't done.

#

After a hearty breakfast, Ulrike lit a cigarette and asked, "Have you decided where you would like to go today?"

Lighting one of her extra slim cigarettes, Carmen looked out the window and said, "The weather seems to be really nice today. Could we go somewhere closer to the mountains?"

"Sure!" said Ulrike. "Would you like to see Neuschwanstein Castle?"

"Yes, that would be nice!"

"Afterwards, we could drive across the border to Austria and have lunch in Reutte."

Carmen's face lit up, "That's nice. I have never been to Austria."

"You haven't?" asked Ulrike, surprised. "Well, then that's definitely a must! Austria is really lovely. We must go there on a winter holiday some time. It's awesome!"

"Hm, I don't know, I don't like the cold, and I can't ski."

"I can't ski either, and usually I prefer the warmth as well, but a winter holiday in the mountains is really something you should experience at least once in your life. It can be very romantic too. We could go on a ride in a horse-drawn-sleigh, and sit by the open fireplace..."

"You really fancy open fireplaces don't you?" asked Carmen, amused.

Grinning, Ulrike said, "Absolutely!"

"Well, maybe we can do that someday," Carmen offered reluctantly. "But for now, I will be happy to see Austria in autumn."

"And that you will, *Liebling*," said Ulrike, and reached for Carmen's hand.

Before they left, Ulrike looked at Carmen, who had just put on a rather thin jacket, and

said, "I would suggest you put on a thicker pullover and a warmer jacket."

"I didn't pack a thicker pullover," said Carmen, "And I only brought this jacket."

"With all the many clothes you packed for all possible occasions, you haven't brought anything suitable for outdoor use in cooler temperatures?"

"No," said Carmen. "You didn't tell me that we are going into the mountains."

"Well, unless you buy some proper clothes, I suggest we don't go into the mountains. It's even colder up there. But where exactly did you think we were going? I mean, it's autumn in Germany, and you knew we would be visiting *Tante* Hedwig and that she lives in Regensburg. Did you think we drive to Regensburg via Sicily?"

"No," said Carmen annoyed. "I don't know what I thought, all right? I thought I had covered all possibilities, but obviously I haven't. If I have to, I will buy something warmer. For now I'll see if I can manage with these."

"Okay," said Ulrike, "I'm sorry. I guess wanting to surprise you wasn't such a good idea, after all."

"It's all right," said Carmen and caressed Ulrike's cheek, "I actually like that you made it a surprise. I have come to enjoy this new adventure."

"Have you?" asked Ulrike and pulled Carmen into an embrace.

"Mhmm," hummed Carmen and leant in for a kiss.

#

"Uh oh," said Ulrike as they drove through Hohenschwangau on their way to the parking lot. A crowd of people was waiting in front of the ticket centre, and more were on their way from the parking lot. "Looks like it could take hours to get a ticket. How keen are you on visiting Neuschwanstein?"

"Hm, maybe we can come back later and if it is still full we could have a coffee in one of these restaurants while we are waiting?"

Driving past the entrance to the parking lot, Ulrike halted in a no-parking spot and explained, "The thing is, you get a ticket for a specific time, so if you want to go up to the castle, I suggest we get the tickets now, because by the time we get them, they will probably be for some time in the afternoon."

"Oh, so we would have to wait several hours to get the tickets and then wait again several hours before we can go up?"

"Yeah, unfortunately," acknowledged Ulrike. "I wouldn't have thought that it would be this full during the week. But I have never been here during school holidays, and it was always earlier in the morning."

"Oh well," said Carmen, "It was nice to see it from here. Let's drive on. I don't want to spend the entire day here."

"Okay," said Ulrike and merged back into the traffic. "It's a bit early for lunch though, so how about we have a coffee and a walk at the Forggensee?"

"That's the lake we passed on the way here? Yes that sounds lovely," said Carmen.

Half an hour later they were walking hand in hand along the lake and Carmen was raving about the beauty of the scenery with the view across the lake to the opposite side where the white fairy-tale castle nestled in the foothills of the Alps, surrounded by woods.

"I'm glad you like it," said Ulrike.

Carmen halted and stepped in front of Ulrike, looking deeply into her eyes, "Thank you for bringing me here," and she touched Ulrike's cheek and leant in for a long sensual kiss.

After the kiss, Carmen remained in the embrace and leant her head against Ulrike's shoulder. Ulrike held her close and whispered, "I love you."

Looking up, Carmen said, "I love you too."

A falling leaf interrupted them as it touched Ulrike's cheek and landed on her shoulder. Carmen took the yellow maple leaf and smiled absentmindedly. Then, with the leaf still in her right hand, she stepped aside, linked her left arm with Ulrike's and indicated to continue walking.

"What are you thinking?" asked Ulrike gently.

For several moments, Carmen remained quiet, and Ulrike wondered if she had not heard her question, but just as she wanted to repeat it, Carmen began to speak with a thoughtful voice, "I am thinking about how free I feel, here with you, without having to worry all the time about someone seeing us together." And she smiled at Ulrike and squeezed her arm. "It is wonderfully relaxing."

Ulrike thought about this for a bit, and then she asked, "Do you always worry when we are in public in Berlin?"

"Most of the time, yes," said Carmen, while she twirled the stem of the maple leaf between her fingers. "Though, admittedly, I sometimes forget to worry, but then I usually worry afterwards, and sometimes I can't sleep because of it."

Looking at her partner with surprise and concern, Ulrike said, "Why did you never tell me that it is that bad for you?"

With a lopsided smile, Carmen replied, "I don't want to lose you because of my fears."

Ulrike's chest tightened, and she assured Carmen, "You won't lose me, *Liebling*, and certainly not because of your fears." And to emphasise her statement, she extracted her arm from Carmen's grip and put it around Carmen's shoulder, holding her close while they slowly kept walking.

Carmen quietly snuggled against Ulrike, her fingers still twirling the leaf. A couple passed them, the young woman flashing them a happy grin, and even the guy smiled.

"Did you see that?" asked Ulrike.

"Mhmm," acknowledged Carmen.

"And here we are in Bavaria, in the country. I really don't think it would be such a big deal, especially not in Berlin. Perhaps if you were a teacher in a small village here things might be different, with the people primarily being Catholics."

"I am a Catholic," Carmen pointed out.

"Uh, right," said Ulrike, "I still can't quite comprehend how you can be a Catholic and a lesbian. Shouldn't those be mutually exclusive?"

"Not for me," said Carmen. And because the walking became uncomfortable in their current position, Carmen nudged Ulrike's arm from her shoulder and took her hand instead, before she continued, "I can't help being a lesbian; it's the way God made me. So, it can't be against His will. And we both love each other. I don't believe that could ever aggravate Him. That probably most Catholics think differently is another matter, though."

"Nonetheless," said Ulrike, "Berlin isn't primarily Catholic; it's mainly Protestant with a whole lot of other beliefs, not to mention a huge number of atheists. It's a mixture of many different cultures."

"Of which most would condemn our relationship," countered Carmen.

"Well, not in my circles, they wouldn't," argued Ulrike.

"That's something that still amazes me," said Carmen. "Aren't Renato and his family Catholics too?"

Ulrike shrugged, "I have no idea. I never asked him." Furrowing her brow she noted, "But I think most Italians are Catholics, aren't they? And they have a crucifix hanging in their flat, so I suppose they are Catholics too."

"And they never had a problem with you being a lesbian?"

"Never."

"How long have you known them?"

"Hmm, let me think ... When he took over the hair salon, Michele wasn't yet born, and I

think it was the same year I moved into my current flat ... that was 1980 ... so I've known him for 12 years."

"And since when does he know that you're a lesbian?"

"Since day one," said Ulrike grinning. "When he opened his salon he had a special offer on the first day where everything was half the price, so Gitti and I both went. He was aghast when I asked him to do a men's cut, and Gitti explained to him right away that it was pointless to try to convince me of any other style. And so we all began to chat while he was grudgingly cutting my hair. He never once had a problem with me being a lesbian, but he still hasn't got used to my preferred hairstyle even after 12 years."

Carmen laughed. "That is so funny! And Kalle?"

"Kalle - I've known him for 20 years. We met at *Marianne's Currybude* when it was still running under a different name. Marianne took over a few years later ... '74 I think."

"And they never had a problem either?"

Ulrike shook her head, "Marianne doesn't judge people. In her eyes we're all human beings who share the same planet, and we all try to make the best of our time here, each in their own way. It doesn't make any difference to her whether she's serving a guy in a suit or an old scruffy alcoholic - she treats everyone the same. I guess that's what people like about her. And Kalle - Kalle sometimes even seems to forget that I'm a woman, so for him it's perfectly natural that I prefer women," Ulrike laughed.

Carmen remained silent, and after a few moments, she shivered and said, "It's getting cold. Let's go and have a nice hot coffee."

"All right," said Ulrike, refraining from commenting, but thinking that perhaps they should stop somewhere in Füssen later so Carmen could buy some proper clothes. And laying her arm around Carmen's shoulders again, she turned them around and they headed towards the café.

Later, at the café, they were looking out the window onto the lake and the mountains, when Carmen said in a contemplative voice, "Somehow your 'circles' sound a lot more appealing than mine."

"Hey," chided Ulrike gently, "They are your friends too now."

Carmen smiled sadly, "Thank you, that's nice of you to say. But it's like a different world to me, and I don't know if I fit in. I'm not used to those sorts of circles."

Ulrike raised her eyebrows. "You mean you aren't used to people who accept you as you are?"

"Well, that too," said Carmen and blushed.

"What else?" asked Ulrike, and when Carmen fiddled with the maple leaf she had put on the table but remained silent, Ulrike spelt it out for her, "You mean because we're working class, don't you?"

"You're not working class!" protested Carmen, "You've got a degree."

"Uh huh," said Ulrike, "But, as my mother keeps pointing out, I don't need a degree to be a taxi driver. I'm a one-woman business in the service sector with a not bad but nonetheless precarious income, so by most people's standards I belong in the working class, and so do my friends. I never thought you'd have a problem with that."

"I don't have a problem with it," assured Carmen, "Not in the way your mother does. I'm just not used to socialising in those circles, and I feel out of place."

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike asked, "You don't feel out of place with me, do you?"

"No, of course not," said Carmen, "But that's different."

"Did you feel out of place at Renato's birthday?"

"Yes, a little," said Carmen.

"You never told me that," said Ulrike, surprised, "What made you feel out of place there? You've met Renato and Marco before, and we've eaten at Marco's many times."

"Yes, but then we were paying guests and not in a separate room together with all their family members," explained Carmen and quickly went on, "Don't get me wrong. They were all lovely and I think they are really nice people. It's just that I'm not used to such casual gatherings with people I don't even know."

Ulrike sighed, "I did tell you that you'd be a bit overdressed with the red dress, but I love that dress and I don't think it was a problem as everyone thought you looked gorgeous."

Carmen blushed, "I know. I don't think I've received as many compliments in my whole life as I did on that evening."

Ulrike grinned, "The Italians have got taste, and they aren't shy when it comes to expressing their appreciation towards a beautiful classy woman. Everybody loved you, and they were delighted to learn that you speak their language. What made you feel out of place? Don't you like receiving compliments?"

Shaking her head, Carmen said, "I do. It's not that. I meant the casual attitude. No one really seemed to care that there were strangers among them..."

"There were no strangers," Ulrike interrupted surprised.

"Well, you're not a member of the family, and I certainly was a stranger to them."

"No you weren't. You were with me, and that makes you part of the family too ... not in a relation sort of way, but in a being included sort of way. And the casual attitude ... I'd have thought that Argentinians were a bit more like Italians in that regard."

"Not my family."

"I think your family is a lot more casual than you give them credit for," said Ulrike, "Their dress code for example doesn't seem to be as rigid as you thought."

Carmen made a face. "That only applies to the men and to you. Why they treat you like a man I will never understand."

"Probably because I don't behave like a girl," said Ulrike with a cheeky grin.

"Why don't you?" asked Carmen and took a sip of her coffee.

"What? Behave like a girl?"

"Yes, I've always wondered about that."

Ulrike snorted, "Why would I?"

"Because you are a woman."

Ulrike shrugged, "So? We aren't in the Middle Ages anymore where you had to stay within the given norm if you didn't want to be burnt at the stake. We are all equal now. Boys can play with dolls, and girls can play with cars without anyone having a fit about it."

"Theoretically, you may be right, but the boys and girls I'm teaching are mostly still behaving within their typical gender roles," said Carmen, "And I have never ever seen a boy play with dolls."

"Norbert played with dolls," stated Ulrike.

"Your brother played with dolls?"

"Yup," said Ulrike and as she couldn't suppress a grin, she explained, "He had to ... as an exchange for me reading him stories."

Carmen chuckled and said, "I don't think José would have agreed to such a deal."

"He would have had to if he were my brother," stated Ulrike. "I would have made sure of it."

Again, Carmen laughed, "I can imagine that, *Frau Oberstabsfeldwebel*."

Ulrike snorted. "I admit, I can be a little bit bossy, occasionally."

"Uh huh," said Carmen. "But you are a pacifist..."

"Yes, I am," said Ulrike and quipped, "If everyone would just do as I say, there'd be peace on earth."

Carmen broke into laughter and Ulrike joined in, causing the people around them to gaze and shake their heads.

#

In the afternoon, Ulrike and Carmen left Reutte and drove towards the Plansee. Carmen had bought warmer clothes in Füssen which Ulrike thought were hugely overpriced, and afterwards they had a delicious Austrian lunch in Reutte.

Carmen was still fascinated by the closeness of the mountains and the beauty of the scenery, but what she saw now made her call out in awe, "Wow! This is gorgeous!"

The crystal clear water of the lake and the majesty of the surrounding mountains were truly breathtaking.

"It gets even better," said Ulrike and asked, "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"Yes, I would love to," said Carmen. "It would be a pity to just drive past."

"All right," said Ulrike, "Then I'll park at Seespitze. Look the boats are still going. We could walk till Plansee and come back via boat."

"Oh, that would be lovely."

"Then that's what we'll do," said Ulrike, smiling, and slowed down to manoeuvre into a parking bay.

They climbed up the slight slope until the narrow trail evened out and Carmen stopped to catch her breath and take in the magical scenery. "This is so beautiful."

"Mhmm," agreed Ulrike and she put her arm around Carmen as they looked down at the crystal blue lake. A cool breeze whispered through the trees, and the clear air smelled of pine needles and autumn leaves.

A group of five hikers, coming from the opposite direction, disturbed the peaceful quiet as they forced Ulrike and Carmen to move out of the way in order to let them pass.

"Disgusting!" commented one of the hikers.

"What?" asked another one.

"He means the lesbians we just passed," explained a third one.

Three of the hikers turned around and looked at Ulrike and Carmen, and then one of them asked, "How do you know they are lesbians?"

Carmen's face had flushed crimson and she would have liked to hide under a rock.

Feeling Carmen's discomfort, Ulrike said, "Come on. Let's move on," and she took Carmen's hand as they continued towards Plansee.

"How can you be so calm?" asked Carmen.

Ulrike shrugged. "There's no reason to get upset."

"But..." Carmen started to protest.

"But one of them said that he finds lesbians disgusting, yes, I heard that. And I can see that this upsets you. However, he is entitled to express his opinion, even if we don't agree with it."

"But he said it within earshot, and I'm sure he did that on purpose," argued Carmen and let go of Ulrike's hand to have her hands free to emphasise her words with gestures.

"Probably," agreed Ulrike, casually putting her hands in her pockets. "But nobody threatened us."

"Words can hurt too," countered Carmen.

"Surely, they can, but you don't have to let them."

"I don't understand how you can be so indifferent about it."

"Because I couldn't care less about his opinion," said Ulrike, and asked, "How would you feel if the other guy had said, 'He means the jacket that lady wore'?"

"That doesn't make sense," said Carmen. "Nobody would find a jacket disgusting."

"Why not, maybe he is allergic to feathers, so he finds down jackets disgusting."

"That's ridiculous, even if he was allergic, he doesn't have to wear it," Carmen pointed out.

"No one forces him to be homosexual either," said Ulrike with lopsided grin and a raise of her eyebrow.

Carmen saw what Ulrike meant, but she refused to let go. "That's not the same. You can't compare a down jacket to being a lesbian."

"The difference is only in your head," said Ulrike. "But okay, here's another example: How would you feel if the other guy had said, 'He means the lady with the brown eyes'?"

"I would feel the same," said Carmen.

Ulrike stopped and looked at Carmen in disbelief, "Why?"

"Because it would refer to me being a foreigner," explained Carmen.

"What?! How would you get to that conclusion? And you aren't a foreigner, you're German."

"I am not pure German," said Carmen, annoyed that Ulrike didn't understand her. "And people can see that."

Ulrike searched her partner's face, trying to comprehend, and she realised that there were deeper running issues than Carmen's angered expression showed at first glance. Taking a deep, calming breath, Ulrike asked gently, "Have people treated you badly because of this?"

Relaxing somewhat, Carmen slumped her shoulders and said, "Not physically, if that's what you mean. But with words and looks and subtle hints, even if you think that's nothing."

"I didn't say it's nothing," said Ulrike softly, and she opened her arms to offer a hug, and when Carmen accepted, Ulrike pulled her close. As she caressed her beautiful long hair, she said, "I just tried to explain to you why it didn't affect me, because you wanted to know. And I guess I tried to get you to see it my way because I don't want you to feel hurt just because some backward retard is uttering half-witted grunts in your direction."

Despite of herself, Carmen had to chuckle about Ulrike's description. "Thank you! I will try to remember this. Perhaps it will make it a little easier the next time some backward retard utters half-witted grunts in my direction."

Ulrike snorted. "Had I known that it just needs a bit of colourful language to help you, I'd have saved us the whole argument."

"No," said Carmen seriously. "It was good that we talked about it. I do understand your point of view now. I'm just not sure if I can ever manage to be as indifferent as you are in such situations."

"That's okay," assured Ulrike and gently caressed Carmen's cheek. "I love you anyway."

"I love you too," said Carmen, and after glancing in both directions, and letting a biker pass, she leant forward to share a kiss with her beloved partner.

#

Back at the hotel that evening, Carmen and Ulrike were enjoying a cigarette after dinner, with a stein of beer and a glass of wine.

"I have been wondering," said Carmen.

"About what?" asked Ulrike.

"Do you have any weakness at all? You always seem to be strong and cool as if nothing could ever get to you."

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike replied, "There's a lot that can irritate the hell out of me. Ongoing bad weather for example, and bad drivers, especially those who behave as if they own the road, and of course people who threaten you or me or anyone I know."

"Ah, well, yes, but that was not what I meant," said Carmen, and took a drag from her cigarette while she pondered how to express her thoughts. Finally she asked, "Isn't there anything you are afraid of or that makes you feel insecure?"

"Hmm, I don't particularly like spiders and worms and such, but I wouldn't say I'm afraid of them, it's rather a severe disgust. Although, if someone threw worms at me, I'm pretty sure I would panic, so, in a way, I guess you could call it a fear."

"Okay, that's a fear we share," said Carmen, shuddering, "Anything else?"

Thinking for a while, Ulrike said reluctantly, "I guess I'm sometimes insecure when it comes to you and our relationship, because we haven't been together that long, and I can't predict your reactions all the time. Like the other day, I really wouldn't have thought you'd react that negatively. It rather shocked me. And of course it got to me, because I don't want to lose you. And the thought of my good intentions resulting in you leaving me was almost unbearable."

As Carmen realised how genuinely concerned Ulrike had been, suddenly her own anger and worry about the incident seemed so far away as if it had happened years ago instead of just two days, and covering Ulrike's hand with hers, Carmen said softly, "I'm not leaving you. I suppose it will take time to truly get to know each other. And I think this holiday is a good way to deepen our relationship."

"I think so too," said Ulrike, and she turned her hand and took Carmen's hand between both of hers, and leaning slightly forward, she pulled Carmen's hand towards her face and gently kissed her fingers.

Carmen slowly extracted her hand from her partner's grasp and whispered, "There is a couple at the other table staring at us."

Ulrike sighed and asked, "Why does this bother you so much? We aren't doing anything criminal or even indecent. Some people would disapprove of a hetero couple showing affection in public too, but I don't think any hetero couple would care about that. Why should we?"

"Because we are not a hetero couple," stated Carmen.

Sighing again, Ulrike said, a touch frustrated, "I'm only really aware of this making a difference since I met you."

Carmen smirked, "Going by your behaviour, it doesn't look like you are really aware of it."

"True," said Ulrike, "But you keep reminding me of it. To me we are simply a couple in love, whether we are two females or two males or two yetis, shouldn't make an iota of difference."

Carmen chuckled despite herself. "But it does. And two yetis would be stared at even more."

"They shouldn't," insisted Ulrike.

"Come on," said Carmen, "Don't tell me you wouldn't stare if there was a yeti couple sitting over there," she pointed at an empty table next to them.

"At first perhaps," admitted Ulrike, "After all, you don't see a yeti every day, so it's kind of natural that you take a look. But if I saw them exchanging lovers' gestures, I'd leave them alone and mind my own business."

"I really don't believe you would be that considerate if you saw a yeti," said Carmen, and continued, "But be that as it may, the yetis would probably still feel like I do, because you were watching them, even if you turned around after satisfying your curiosity."

"*Liebling*, if yetis went into public places, they would have to expect that people would look at them, as people are rarely confronted with seeing yetis. But that doesn't mean the yetis have to feel bad about it. Some people, like me, would just watch out of curiosity, not because they mean any harm. Some people would certainly start talking badly about the yetis because they resent them for whatever reason. Perhaps they even begrudge them that they are showing affection in public because their own partner would never do that, or they don't even have a partner. But as long as the yetis aren't threatened, there would be no reason for them to feel bad, in my opinion. My advice to the yetis would be - keep showing yourself in public places, so people get used to seeing you. Once people get used to yetis, they will stop staring, except maybe for some backward retards, but you can just neglect those."

"I wish this yeti here could follow your advice," said Carmen and emptied her glass of wine. "But I'm not sure I will ever manage that."

"Practise makes perfect," said Ulrike with a wink.

#

Later that night, Ulrike lay awake with Carmen sleeping in her arms. She thought about what she had learnt about her partner that day. She would never have imagined that Carmen had experienced any sort of bullying because of her heritage. How could anyone treat her badly just because she was not purely German? She had never heard Renato or anyone of his family say anything about having been bullied for being Italian, nor had she ever witnessed anyone bullying one of her non-German classmates in her own school days.

Of course, she knew that it happened. But just as with discrimination about homosexuals, she had never witnessed it, nor heard it from anyone she knew before she met Carmen. She had witnessed classmates making fun of other kids for various other reasons though, and she had more than once stood up for the victims. One of them, Lilli, became her best friend, and later her first girlfriend. After Ulrike had had a fight with the main perpetrator, and won, Ulrike had had to answer for her behaviour in the head-master's office; and neither her father nor her mother had been thrilled to learn about the incident. *But it was worth it!* thought Ulrike, as Lilli had never been teased again - at least not as long as they were together. Ulrike didn't know what had become of Lilli. When Lilli's father died, the family moved to Lilli's uncle in Baden-Württemberg. They remained in contact via mail for a while, but that petered out after a year or so, as Lilli was now occupied caring for her younger siblings, while her mother worked in a factory to support them all.

Ulrike's musings were interrupted when Carmen mumbled something unintelligible and turned around.

Poor Liebling! thought Ulrike, and turned onto her side to hold her sleeping partner close, spooning her. *Did you have no one who stood up for you? No wonder you are so afraid of discrimination*

#

The next morning, Carmen wanted to refrain from joining Ulrike's morning fitness program, but Ulrike would hear none of it. She was on a mission now. In her opinion Carmen desperately needed a boost for her self-esteem, and doing a proper work-out was one of the best ways to accomplish that. So, she talked to Carmen until she had finally persuaded her to participate, even if grudgingly.

Over breakfast, Carmen groaned and said, "I feel like a horde of elephants trampled over my body. I don't think I can do much walking today."

"Nonsense!" said Ulrike, "You'll feel better once we walk a bit in the fresh air. We can visit Bad Wörishofen, have a walk in the *Kurpark* first and then walk around town. It's a really pretty little spa town. And there are lots of nice cafés and restaurants, and a gazillion benches, so we can take breaks, if you really need it."

"All right," sighed Carmen, "That sounds doable."

"It is," assured Ulrike, "Believe me."

#

Carmen marvelled at the beauty of the spa park that appeared in a blaze of colours, with the red and gold and yellow autumn leaves of the trees, and the many roses that were still blooming in the rose garden, which was one of the largest in Germany as Carmen learnt from Ulrike.

They sat down on one of the countless benches, and Ulrike put her arms on the backrest and stretched out her legs. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked, and inhaled the cool, fresh air that smelled of autumn with a hint of roses.

"It is," said Carmen. "I'm glad you persuaded me to come here."

"Are you feeling better?"

"A little," said Carmen, "Although I'm still hurting all over, but I'm no longer as exhausted."

"No pain - no gain," said Ulrike, grinning.

Carmen shook her head and rolled her eyes, "You really missed your calling; you should have been a trainer, if not in the military then at least in a gym."

"Now there's a thought," said Ulrike, "If, for some reason, I couldn't be a taxi driver anymore, I could open a gym. I think, that could be fun, actually."

"I guess you would have mostly male clients, though," said Carmen. "I don't think many women would put up with your rigorous training."

"It all depends on your goals," said Ulrike. "If you are going for strength, you'll need determination and generally rigorous training. If you just want to do a little cardio, you could do aerobics or such things, and I certainly wouldn't teach that myself, I would hire someone else. I'm wondering why you are hurting so much though, especially as your legs should be used to training with all your dancing and being on your feet at work. And you do swimming too, don't you?"

"I haven't been swimming since the accident in summer, and before that I hadn't been doing it that often anymore either," confessed Carmen. "And except for the dance lessons with the kids, which aren't particularly strenuous for me, I haven't been dancing either. My legs are still used to standing, yes, because I'm doing that all day at school, and I'm used to slow walking as I do that quite often, so my leg muscles haven't deteriorated as much as they might have otherwise; but I'm no longer used to any serious exercising. And I have never particularly trained my upper body, outside of the occasional swimming."

"Oh," said Ulrike, positioning herself sideways on the bench so she could face Carmen. "I wasn't aware you were that untrained. I actually thought your endurance was better than mine, and your thighs feel pretty strong to me."

Carmen blushed, and leaning forward, she whispered in Ulrike's ear, "That's probably just because you measured their strength with your face."

Ulrike chuckled. "That's not what I meant," and she squeezed her partner's thigh above her knee.

Carmen hissed and smacked Ulrike's hand. "Ouch! That hurt!"

Ulrike laughed. "I'm sorry. But I made my point; your thighs do feel strong."

"They aren't strong, they are fat," Carmen muttered.

Looking at Carmen, who had turned away from Ulrike, gazing at the rose arches, her jaw tight, Ulrike said, "Don't you think I can distinguish between fat and muscle? You have a gorgeous well-proportioned figure, *Liebling*. Yes, your body-fat percentage is certainly higher than mine, but that doesn't mean you can't be strong at the same time." When Carmen didn't respond, Ulrike asked, "What's wrong, *Liebling*?"

How could Carmen explain all the different feelings that were assaulting her? She was relieved that her partner obviously didn't mind her weight gain, but she couldn't share the sentiment, and she didn't feel strong either. She was in pain, and she cursed herself for letting Ulrike persuade her to participate in the stupid exercising. Exercising for a bodybuilder! She had never aspired to become a bodybuilder, and she still didn't. Nonetheless, she was mad at herself for having neglected all her former fitness activities for such a long time that she was now feeling the consequences so severely. She felt old and tired and she would have liked to just crawl into bed and hide under the blankets until she felt better. But of course she couldn't do that to Ulrike. Her partner didn't deserve that. She had done nothing wrong really; she was

loving and encouraging and went out of her way to make this holiday together a wonderful experience for them. That she was a little overzealous when it came to bodybuilding was not something Carmen could fault her for. After all, she could have said no, and she could have stopped at any point during the exercises. She was sure that Ulrike would have accepted that.

"*Liebling*, what's wrong?" asked Ulrike again, worry creeping into her voice, and she grasped Carmen's arm to get her attention.

Shaking her head to get her thoughts back into the present, Carmen said, "It's okay." And with the best smile she could muster, she asked, "Can we move on? I'm getting cold."

"Sure," said Ulrike, sighing inwardly that her partner didn't want to talk about what was upsetting her, but respecting her wishes. Squeezing Carmen's arm, she got up and held out her hands.

"Thank you," said Carmen with a genuine smile, and she grasped Ulrike's hands and let her pull her up. As she stumbled a little, Ulrike caught and steadied her, and Carmen leant into the embrace. And for a moment, she did not care if people were staring at them, she just relished in the feeling of being held by Ulrike's strong arms.

They remained in the embrace for quite a while. Ulrike was not sure what else she could do for her partner right now, so she just held Carmen close until she was ready to move on.

#

Later, they were strolling on the lively spa promenade, with its many shops, restaurants and cafés, beautiful flowerbeds and the idyllic narrow creek that was running in a neat channel alongside the promenade, in the picturesque historical centre of Bad Wörishofen. Carmen was delighted, even though she kept complaining about her aching legs and had made them stop twice to take a break at one of the many cafés.

Ulrike, meanwhile, was beginning to feel her arms as more and more shopping bags were weighing her down. And when Carmen dragged her into a jewellery store, Ulrike shook her head, thinking, *Here we go again, and suddenly she is no longer exhausted*. At least the things Carmen might buy here wouldn't add much to the weight Ulrike was already carrying. She wondered how anyone could be so exuberant when it came to shopping, but she was glad that her partner's mood had improved, and if that was the result of her extensive shopping spree, then far be it from her to complain. She sat down on an antique armchair that was situated near the entrance and after setting down the shopping bags she shook her arms and flexed her fingers to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling while she watched Carmen as she chatted with the jeweller.

Carmen was in her element. Since her childhood, when she bought sweets for José and herself, shopping had always been a balm to her soul. How fortunate that this quaint little town had so many nice shops with good quality goods. She had already bought herself a pair of comfortable hiking boots, and in a country style shop she had acquired a dress and two blouses, a cardigan and two embroidered scarves, as well as a shirt for Ulrike. The latter had taken her some persuading and Ulrike had only agreed when Carmen accepted that she get one in the men's section. She had also bought a few presents for her family and for Frau Krüger.

Now, she was looking at a collection of sapphire rings, and trying one of them on, she asked Ulrike, "What do you think?"

Ulrike sighed inwardly and got up to take a closer look. "It's pretty," and in a low voice she asked, "Do you really need another ring?"

"No," said Carmen, and with a disarming smile she added, "But I want one."

Unable to refrain from rolling her eyes, Ulrike said, "Then by all means, take that one and let's go. I'm getting hungry."

"All right," said Carmen and turned to the jeweller, "I'll take this one. And could you make

it quick please, my sweetheart is getting impatient."

"*Selbstverständlich, die Dame,*" affirmed the jeweller politely and took Carmen's credit card.

Ulrike blinked and her jaw slightly dropped. Had Carmen really just called her sweetheart in front of a stranger?

As the jeweller vanished for a moment to give the ring some extra polish, Carmen smiled at Ulrike and whispered, "*Nu guck nich wie'n Auto,*" referring to Ulrike's still stupefied expression, "It doesn't suit you." And she winked and turned around again as the jeweller returned and showed her the ring, this time sitting in a little box.

Coming out of her initial shock, a face-splitting grin formed on Ulrike's face as she watched Carmen and the jeweller.

"Perfect. Thank you," said Carmen.

The jeweller shut the box and put it in a bag, while Carmen signed the receipt.

Taking the receipt, the jeweller thanked Carmen, handed her the bag, "*Vielen Dank. Hier ist Ihr Ring,*" and wishing them both a good time in Bad Wörishofen, he said good bye.

"*Auf Wiedersehn,*" said Carmen, as Ulrike gathered the shopping bags and said good bye as well.

When they were outside, Carmen said to Ulrike who was still grinning, "Please, don't get your hopes up. Although I admit that it felt really good, this was a special occasion."

Sobering, Ulrike asked, "How so?"

"Because I knew he would be polite and discreet," said Carmen. "He is a jeweller, and an expensive one at that. I just spent 1500 DM at his shop. If he wanted that money, he damn well better treat me appropriately and keep his thoughts, whatever they may be, to himself."

Carmen was getting hot. It was almost noon and the sun was shining, so she took off her new down jacket and squeezed it under her arm, mildly annoyed that she had brought the cumbersome item on this beautiful day.

"You spent 1500 DM on that ring?!"

"Yes," said Carmen with a smile, "Well, 1487 to be precise."

"That's crazy," said Ulrike refraining from commenting further on the price of the ring, as, after all, it was Carmen's money and she could do with it whatever she liked. "But I see what you mean." Of course, she saw what Carmen meant. With the jeweller, Carmen was in the better position. Had he said anything nasty, Carmen would simply have turned around and left the shop without buying anything; and of course, as a good businessman, he would never risk that. Even so, Ulrike wondered why Carmen couldn't apply this attitude to any situation. She was, after all, not dependent on those hiking guys either, nor was she dependent on her job - at least not financially. Okay, Ulrike somewhat understood Carmen's issues with regards to her job, since she loved her job as well, and would hate it if she had to quit because of some ignorant idiots. But that her partner obviously felt insecure in other situations here in Bavaria - far away from Berlin and anyone she knew - and couldn't feel as self-assured as she did with the jeweller was something that saddened Ulrike. She hoped that with time Carmen would become more confident.

#

"Look, the beer garden is open," said Ulrike as they came to one of her favourite restaurants in town. "Would you like to eat outside?"

"Yes, that would be nice," said Carmen. Although she thought that beer garden furniture wasn't particularly comfortable, the weather was too perfect this day to pass on the opportunity of eating outside in October.

"I already know what I want," said Ulrike as they sat down at the only free table.

"Yes? What are you having?" asked Carmen.

"Weißwürste and a pretzel," said Ulrike.

"Hm, I haven't tried Weißwurst yet, but I love Bavarian lye pretzels, so perhaps I will give it a go," said Carmen and added with a grin, "I'm in an adventurous mood."

"Great! If you like, I'll show you how to eat them properly," said Ulrike.

"Why? Is there anything specific about eating Weißwurst?"

"Yeah. You don't eat the skin," said Ulrike. "You can either eat it the proper Bavarian way, by sucking the meat out, but I guess that's not for you," she laughed as Carmen looked very sceptical, "I don't like that either. The other way is, to cut them lengthwise and roll the meat out of the skin. I'll show you. It's not difficult once you get the hang of it."

"All right," said Carmen slowly, and she almost regretted her choice. However, once she had her first bite after freeing the meat from the skin more or less successfully, she was glad she had taken up the challenge. "Mmh, they are really good. And I love this Bavarian sweet mustard. Do you think they sell it anywhere in Berlin?"

"Hm, your beloved KaDeWe probably does," said Ulrike. "But I have to go shopping anyway before we drive to my aunt. My mother insists that Allgäuer Emmentaler tastes better when you buy it here." Ulrike rolled her eyes and continued, "So, you could get yourself a jar or two if you like."

"Oh yes, I think I will," said Carmen, and after taking a sip from her water, she said, "I have been wondering ... perhaps I'm just imagining it, but it almost seems as though there are only old people, and mainly women at that, everywhere here, except for the waitresses and sales people."

Ulrike grinned, and said jokingly, "Yeah, I guess the average age here is probably around 80. I don't mind that. I think it's actually a benefit, as there is no hustle and the atmosphere is very peaceful and relaxing."

"That's true," said Carmen, and Ulrike continued, "It's the town of Father Kneipp, and I guess mostly old ladies swear by his hydrotherapy. My mother uses some of the products they sell with his name since she attended one of the health spas here."

"Did you learn of this town from her?" asked Carmen.

"No, she learnt of it from me," said Ulrike and chuckled. "She wasn't too fond of the cure, but she loved the town, so she forgave me for sending her to a torture treatment."

Carmen laughed and said, "It is a very pretty town, and it's great for shopping!"

"I'm not sure I have ever bought anything here," said Ulrike, "But it has a lot of lovely places and good restaurants."

Once they had finished eating, Ulrike proposed, "How about you go and get the car while I stay here with the bags?"

"Oh no," said Carmen, "I'm not sure I could even find my way back to the car, and I definitely don't know how to get here, since I can't drive through the pedestrian zone. How about we call a taxi?"

Ulrike made a face, "Believe me, the driver would not be thrilled to get such a short fare."

"I will give him or her a generous tip to make up for it," offered Carmen.

Ulrike sighed. "All right." She really did not want to carry all the shopping bags all the way back to the car.

Back at the car, Ulrike asked, "Where would you like to go next?"

"I don't know," said Carmen. "What would you suggest?"

"Well, we could go visit one of the many beautiful churches in the area, or visit another town or some lovely country place..."

"Now, I don't want to do any more walking if possible," said Carmen. "Couldn't we just drive around a little and then have a coffee at some nice place somewhere, maybe with a view

of the mountains?"

Ulrike thought for a moment and then suggested, "Okay, how about we drive to Garmisch-Partenkirchen? We could take the route via Landsberg am Lech, then drive south on the B17 which is part of the Romantic Road and continue on the B23 which is to some extent part of the Romantic Road and also of the German Alpine Road, so we could enjoy the great view while we are driving."

"That sounds wonderful," said Carmen. "How long does it take to get to Garmisch?"

"About 1.5 hours, I think. We can have a coffee there and then see where we want to go before we head back to the hotel."

"Perfect."

#

As they were nearing Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Carmen was so enraptured by the spectacular view of the Alps that Ulrike suggested they drive through Garmisch and up to Eibsee and take the cable car up to the Zugspitze.

Ulrike was not particularly fond of the idea of taking a cable car over which she had no control while they were swaying at uncomfortable heights, and she had kind of hoped that Carmen would decline and just agree to have a coffee at Eibsee. Alas, she was once more surprised by her partner.

Carmen thought it was a fantastic idea. She had been to the Andes twice, and she loved the view from cable cars, and of course from the mountain peaks. The majesty of nature never ceased to amaze her. And even though the Zugspitze was less than half as high as the highest Andean mountains, she still thought it would be beautiful to be at the top and have a look at the surrounding Alps. With the cloudless sky the view should be magnificent.

For the next twenty minutes Ulrike listened with interest to Carmen's stories about her experiences in the Andes, and she was amazed at how adventurous and courageous her partner could be. She herself had only ever been to places in Germany and Austria, not counting the visits to her grandparents in the GDR. Renato had offered more than once that she could stay at his family's place in Italy, but as much as she loved watching documentaries and reading books about other countries, she was not comfortable travelling to countries where she didn't know the language. Thus, she had always managed to find an excuse. Though, last year she had actually accepted the invitation, because Kalle would go as well. But then, one day before they had planned to leave, her mother had been taken into hospital, and she kept telling Ulrike that she was sure she was going to die, so Ulrike had cancelled, and Kalle went without her. Her mother's lethal illness had turned out to be a rather harmless gallbladder infection, and she was out of hospital after a few days. Ulrike had not been pleased about the missed opportunity, especially when Kalle returned and raved about the great time he had had in Italy.

Well, thought Ulrike as she turned into the parking lot in Eibsee, perhaps she could go there with Carmen someday.

"Oh, it's beautiful," said Carmen delighted, as she saw the blue-green lake surrounded by mountains.

"It is, isn't it? Would you like to go for a walk around the lake?" asked Ulrike. After all, Carmen had put on her new hiking boots at the car, and she had donned her down jacket again.

"No, I want to go up there!" said Carmen who had already spotted the cable car station. Sighing, Ulrike followed her partner.

Ten minutes later, they had boarded the cable car and were moving upwards.

Ulrike gulped audibly as they were slowly floating above the treetops, causing Carmen to tear her eyes away from the stunning view.

"What's wrong?" asked Carmen as she saw Ulrike's pale face.

"Nothing," said Ulrike through clenched teeth.

Carmen barely suppressed a chuckle as she noticed her usually so courageous partner gripping the rail as if she were holding on for dear life. "What are you afraid of?"

"Isn't that obvious?" asked Ulrike.

"No, not to me," said Carmen while she admired the gorgeous view. "But if you mean you're afraid that we might crash, then how come you are still leaving the house. There are far more people killed on the road each day than people dying in cable car accidents."

"I just don't like heights," admitted Ulrike. "Especially not when there is no solid ground beneath my feet."

"So you don't like flying either?" asked Carmen surprised.

"No. I have successfully avoided it thus far."

"But you wanted to travel to Argentina with me? How did you think we'd cross the Atlantic?"

"I thought we could take a ship," said Ulrike.

Carmen chuckled, "That would take several weeks - one-way."

"Oh," uttered Ulrike, trying to focus on Carmen instead of the first approaching pylon. "I wasn't aware it would take that long. Didn't you come to Germany by ship?" Ulrike flinched as they passed the pylon so closely she feared they would smash right into it.

"Yes, but that was 1958," acknowledged Carmen, totally unaware of Ulrike's predicament as she marvelled at the stunning mountain panorama, completely unfazed by the pylon. "My father didn't want to pay the higher price for a flight, and we had time so it didn't matter that it took three weeks. But really, even if time didn't matter, I can think of a thousand better things to do in six weeks than being on a ship all day and night with nothing else to see but water in whichever direction you look."

"I thought that would actually be a rather impressive experience," said Ulrike, already dreading the second impending pylon, and the quickly approaching mountain. *Don't look down. Definitely don't look down*, Ulrike told herself, fearing she would throw up if she did.

"It's impressive for the first day or two, but then it gets excruciatingly boring," said Carmen and turned back towards Ulrike, who was staring at the nearing pylon as if hypnotised, and she noticed the beads of sweat gathering on her partner's temple. Pulling a paper tissue from her pocket, Carmen put an arm around Ulrike, "Come here." And as Ulrike turned into the embrace, Carmen wiped her face and said, "*Schatz*, why didn't you tell me that it is this terrible for you? I wouldn't have insisted to take the cable car."

"I didn't know. I've never been on a cable car before," croaked Ulrike and buried her face in Carmen's shoulder.

"*Ach je! Mein armer Schatz*," Carmen expressed her sympathy, not even noticing the curious looks they were attracting. "I'm so sorry."

When they finally stepped off the cable car and Ulrike's feet stood on solid ground again, she took several deep breaths while Carmen reassured her with a firm grasp on her shoulder.

"Okay," said Ulrike and straightened, "Let's go and have a look at the Alps."

Baffled at how quickly her partner shook off her discomfort, Carmen said, "If you would rather relax a little longer..."

"Nah," interrupted Ulrike, "We came here for the view, so let's not waste time here," she gestured at the cable station.

"All right," said Carmen, "If you are sure."

"Sure, I'm sure," said Ulrike, grinning. "Come on!"

They went up to the viewing platform, where some remnants of snow in the corners were

an indication of the far lower temperatures at this height. Carmen was delighted, and even Ulrike was mesmerised by the spectacular 360° panoramic view. On this clear and sunny day you had a view over 400 mountain peaks in four countries, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and of course Germany. Most of the peaks were dusted with snow that shone dazzling white in the afternoon sun - a breathtaking image against the clear blue sky.

Once they had looked in all directions, Carmen bought a few souvenir postcards for her family and for Frau Krüger; and when she learnt that there was a post-box here at the top and that the postcards would even get a special postmark, she decided to write them right on the spot.

When Carmen was finally done, Ulrike asked, "Would you like to have a snack at the Münchner Haus now?"

"Later," said Carmen and pointing at the summit cross on the nearby peak, she declared, "I want to go up there!"

"You are kidding," said Ulrike, who did not feel any inclination whatsoever to climb the highest peak in Germany with only a thin rope between her and the deadly abyss.

"No, I'm not kidding. Now that I'm here, I want to get to the highest point too. Why do you think I put on the hiking boots?"

Ulrike sighed. "I thought you wanted to go for a walk around the lake."

Carmen tilted her head and said, "We can walk around lakes anytime, but climbing the highest point in Germany is a special occasion. Look, there's a ladder and there are ropes, you'll have solid ground beneath your feet. It's not dangerous at all."

"No, thanks," Ulrike refused. "If you want to do it, go ahead. I'm not going to play mountain goat!"

Searching Ulrike's face, Carmen hesitated for a moment, before she said, "All right."

"*Viel Spaß!*" Ulrike wished her fun.

"Thanks," said Carmen and was about to turn around when she thought of something. "Oh, since you are staying here, would you hold my jacket till I'm back?"

"Sure," said Ulrike and helped Carmen take off the bulky jacket.

She watched Carmen walk towards a group of alpinists to ask how she could get to the summit cross. They pointed in the direction they were headed, and Carmen joined them on the way, laughing and chatting.

Suddenly, Ulrike felt alone, and she cursed herself for being too chicken to accompany her partner. Sighing, she turned around and leant against the railing, looking down into the abyss where Carmen would soon appear to master the climb up to the summit cross.

For some reason, Ulrike had no problem looking down from this point, because the railing was sturdy and the terrace beneath her feet was solid. She had never had a problem climbing the old plum tree in the back yard as a child either. But even just imagining she were to climb on the narrow ridge with only a thin rope as a hand hold was far beyond her comfort zone; and realising that she had to ride the dreaded cable car again to get back down caused her to shudder.

Even though she had never felt an inclination to fly or to ride in a cable car, she had not known she would react quite that strongly to the cable car ride, and it bothered her.

Finally, she spotted Carmen among the crowd of fellow summiteers as they began their climb to the peak.

It was embarrassing to see Carmen climb on the ridge with such ease as if it was the most natural thing in the world. To think that she had been embarrassed about her lack of fitness ... and just a while ago she had declared she was too exhausted to walk ... and now she was climbing up that precarious looking ladder as if she would do it every day. Dumbfounded, Ulrike followed Carmen's progress on her way to the summit. Now, she could better understand how Carmen felt when she watched Ulrike doing bodybuilding exercises with ease. It was definitely not a pleasant feeling. *Damn!* thought Ulrike as her competitive streak

suddenly came out in full force, *I should practise what I preach. I can do this!* And with determination, she strode towards the spot where Carmen and the alpinists had gone to get to the ridge.

A sign that warned of danger and cautioned to only continue with mountaineering equipment caused her to stop in her tracks. She gulped, but then she thought of Carmen who had done it without any equipment. Determined, she headed down the stairs, trying not to freak out about the fact that she could see the abyss through the steps.

Finally outside again, she got to a gate with another warning sign. She looked at Carmen's jacket which she was still carrying. She couldn't possibly put it over her own jacket and it was too bulky to tie it around her waist, but if she kept it in her hand she would only have one hand to grasp the rope and climb the ladder.

Her thoughts were interrupted when an elderly lady asked her in a strong Bavarian dialect if she was also waiting for her husband. "Wartn Si aa af Eana Mo?"

"Uh, no," said Ulrike, "I would like to follow my lady, but I don't know if I can manage the climb with her jacket."

The woman obviously needed a moment to process this information, but then she said, "Go follow her. I will hold the jacket for you." And when Ulrike hesitated, the woman added, "I'm not going to steal it, dear. I will tell my husband that we will wait for you here."

"All right," said Ulrike, and quickly taking Carmen's purse from the jacket pocket, she stuffed it into her own and explained, "She'd kill me if I left this to a stranger."

Smirking, the woman agreed and took the jacket, "Now off with you!"

"All right. Thank you. I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Take your time," warned the woman, "We don't want you to break your legs!"

Steeling herself, Ulrike opened the gate and began to climb down to the ridge.

Carefully, she moved forward step by step, both hands on the steel rope. She was so focussed on each step that she did not notice the people who were on their way back. Thus, when she was at the lowest - and narrowest - part of the ridge, she flinched when suddenly a crowd of people appeared seemingly out of nowhere blocking her path. Sweat breaking out on her forehead and palms, she held on for dear life as the throng of people climbed around her, pressing her closer towards the rope - and the glaring abyss. Squeezing her eyes shut, she fought against her growing desperation and the tears that threatened to spill. *Scheiße, Scheiße, Scheiße!* she thought, cursing her situation and her stupid desire to prove that she could do it. At this moment, she would truly have preferred to feel like an embarrassed coward, waiting for her courageous partner to return.

When the group had finally passed, she took a deep shuddering breath and slowly moved on, profoundly grateful that no one was behind her, so at least she didn't feel pressured. A harsh, cold wind was starting to blow, making the rope feel icy against her bare hands. At the end of the ridge, the rope ended on this side and she had to take a step to the other side where another rope began. Now the climbing began. With one hand still grasping the rope, with the other bracing herself on the rocks, she set one foot in front of the other and carefully climbed up to the ladder.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she could finally grasp the rails of the ladder with both hands, the formerly so precarious appearing ladder now a welcome anchor in this terrifying experience.

Breathing heavily, she pressed herself against the ladder and shut her eyes, trying to calm down. This was a ladder, a solid steel ladder. Surely she could manage to climb a damned ladder. She had done it countless times. If only she could forget that she was close to 3000 metres high on a bloody mountain. *Don't think about it. Do not think about it! It's a sturdy ladder, and getting up there is a piece of cake!*

After what felt like an eternity, she finally straightened and opened her eyes. And

summoning up all her courage, she started to climb up.

When she had mastered the ladder and got to a small plateau, she noticed an old man in a Bavarian jacket and knee-breeches sitting on a boulder. Thinking that he might be the husband of the old lady, she greeted him with the standard Bavarian greeting, "*Griiß Gott!* Are you okay?"

"*Griiß Eana God!*" the old man raised his hat and returned the greeting in his Bavarian dialect and replied, "Yes, yes, just taking a breather."

"All right," said Ulrike and smiled at him. "I'll move on then."

She waited for a group of people to pass her and then carefully took a step forward. However, as she glimpsed around the corner, she instantly reared back and pressed herself against the hard rock, one hand cramping in a painful grip around the cold steel rope. Breathing heavily, she knew there was absolutely no way she would go any further. There wasn't even the semblance of a path, just the side of the steep mountain cliff and the steel rope that led to the top. She would rather die than move around that corner.

"Have you lost your courage?" asked the old man.

Fuck courage, she thought, *this is suicidal!* "Yeah," she replied.

"I managed it despite my old age," he said. "You're a young woman. You can do it too."

Slowly, Ulrike turned around to face the old man, and pressing her back against the rock, both hands now gripping the rope, she shook her head and said, "No. I take my hat off to you and my courageous lady up there, but I rather remain a coward."

"Nonsense! You're not a coward. You're just more sensible than I am. I'm an old fool. I fear I've exhausted myself with the climb," said the old man, and gesturing at his legs, he stated with dismay, "The muscles aren't as strong as they used to be."

"Oh boy, what are we going to do now?" And looking back the way she came, she quickly shut her eyes and croaked, "I don't even know how I'm going to get back."

Suddenly, Ulrike heard crunching noises from around the corner, and as she turned her head, she flinched back as suddenly someone stepped onto the plateau.

"Ulli! You are here!" exclaimed Carmen, visibly surprised and delighted.

"Yeah, well..." started Ulrike, but she didn't get any further as Carmen hugged her fiercely and kissed her on the mouth, obviously not caring about the old man.

When Ulrike did not return the embrace, as her hands were still grasping the rope, Carmen leant back to look at her partner. She jumped, when she heard the old man clear his throat.

"Ahem, I don't want to be a spoilsport, but I believe we'd better get off this mountain," said the old man, and pointing towards a large cloud formation that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, he continued, "This doesn't look good."

Carmen looked in the direction the man was pointing and gasped as she saw the growing mass of clouds rolling towards them. "Thank you for the warning! Ulli, we have to get down!"

"Uh, okay," croaked Ulrike, and she turned around to face the rock. However, looking down towards the ladder and the ridge below, she gulped and her voice breaking, she squeaked, "I can't."

"You have to!" said Carmen sternly. "There's a thunderstorm approaching, and believe me, you don't want to get caught in it here."

Damn, this was embarrassing. Of course, Ulrike knew rationally that they had to get down, but she couldn't bring herself to move even a centimetre towards the abyss.

"Ulli!" Carmen urged her partner.

Suddenly, Ulrike felt a strong grip on her arm, and the old man said, "I've got you." And then he suddenly barked, "Move!"

Shocked out of her paralysed state, Ulrike moved a step away from the old man, and before she could start thinking again, he told her to move on, "*Weida, weida!*"

Slowly, but steadily, Ulrike climbed down to the ladder, the old man always keeping her

arm in his grip until she reached a point where he could no longer support her without risking his balance. "Go on, the first rung is right beneath you," he encouraged her.

Carmen followed the two, alternating between looking at the approaching clouds and Ulrike and her own next step. The clouds had almost reached them now, and the wind was getting stronger and colder. Carmen shivered without her jacket, and her fingers were hurting from the icy cold.

When Ulrike reached the bottom of the ladder, the clouds engulfed them and the wind was whipping icy snowflakes against Ulrike's face. As painful as it was, there was one advantage which Ulrike welcomed - surrounded by clouds she could no longer see the abyss. She waited until she felt the old man next to her. "Can you see my partner?" she yelled against the howling wind.

"No," he yelled back and grasped Ulrike's arm again, "But we'll wait here for her."

"Thank you!"

"No worries," called the old man and he squeezed Ulrike's arm.

"You don't need to hold me anymore," shouted Ulrike, "See that you keep yourself safe!"

"All right," he acknowledged and let go of Ulrike's arm.

"Ulli?!"

"Yes," yelled Ulrike, "I'm here."

"Okay, let's move on," urged the old man.

Her face and her hands burning, Ulrike carefully climbed down. She could now barely see where she was stepping, so despite the biting cold, she took her time to make sure the ground was stable beneath her foot before she put her whole weight on it.

Meanwhile, Carmen was cursing herself for having taken off her jacket, and she wondered where it was, since Ulrike didn't have it anymore. She hoped it was still wherever Ulrike left it. The snowflakes stung like icy needles on her face and bare hands, and they accumulated in her hair despite the wind whipping it in all directions. She had tried to secure it by stuffing it into her pullover, but with only one hand it had not worked, and she had not dared to let go of the rope to use both hands. Her pullover was drenched by now and the accumulating layer of snow on it made it heavier too. Damn, she had never been this cold in her entire life!

In the Andes she had been with her uncle, and he had made sure they were properly prepared. Both times it had been summer, and the weather, though cold at these heights had been fantastic. And although the climbs had been far more challenging than this little climb, there had been nothing that had tarnished the memorable experience. And she had been twenty years younger!

Suddenly, she heard a muffled curse and bumped right into the old man. He had obviously stumbled and fallen to his knees.

"Are you all right?" asked Carmen, putting her hand on his shoulder.

He uttered another string of curses as he struggled to get up on the slippery, snowy rocks.

Quickly making sure she stood steady on both feet, Carmen let go of the rope and grasped the man's arm with both hands to help him up.

"Thank you!" he shouted, and waited till Carmen had grasped the rope again before he moved on.

He stumbled two more times, and Carmen, despite struggling herself, helped him up.

When Ulrike finally reached the bottom of the platform on the other side, hands reached for her and helped her up. As soon as she stood safely, two men stepped around her to help the old man up, while Ulrike found herself embraced by the old woman, "Dear God, I'm so glad you made it. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm okay," said Ulrike. "I'm just cold and exhausted."

The woman let her go and handed Ulrike Carmen's jacket, then she rushed to her husband, immediately giving him a lecture about climbing on mountains in his old age. She had told him that it was a bad idea and he should skip it, but no, he didn't listen.

Ulrike finally found her bearings and turned around to look for Carmen. The two men were just pulling her up, and Ulrike hurried towards her and wrapped the jacket around her.

Her teeth shattering, her whole body shivering, Carmen leant into Ulrike's embrace.

"Let's get you all inside!" said one of the men, and they all followed them up to the Münchner Haus.

An hour later, they were all sitting around a table in the warmth of the Münchner Haus, wrapped in blankets while their clothes hung over various chair backs to dry.

Carmen had an additional towel turban on her head and warmed her hands on a mug of mulled wine while she listened to the others' chatter.

They had shared a simple but hearty dinner, and for once Carmen did not complain. Neither the historic and rather simple, rustic ambience seemed to bother her, nor the grumpy remarks of the hut warden nor the fact that some people were looking curiously at them when Ulrike put her blanket around Carmen and kept rubbing her. And although she had not been pleased when she learnt that they had missed the last cable car and would have to stay overnight, she had accepted it without complaint. She was simply glad that they had escaped their adventure without any serious repercussions, although she wondered if she would ever get truly warm again.

Ulrike had called the hotel to inform them of their predicament and that they wouldn't return before mid-morning the next day. She was finally feeling her fingers again, and although she was still far from being comfortable, she was happy to be alive and vowed to never ever get up on a mountain again, be it by cable car or otherwise. She was a bit worried about Carmen because she was still feeling cold despite her down jacket and three blankets, one around her bare legs and two around her upper body, but she hoped that her partner would soon feel better as well.

They had made friends with the old couple, Herr and Frau Huber, and the two mountaineers, Sepp and Toni, who had helped them, and even the hut warden joined them for a friendly chat as things quietened down.

Frau Huber thanked Carmen for the umpteenth time for helping her husband, and Carmen replied, "Your husband saved my partner, so let's call it even hm?"

"Eh, I didn't really do anything," Herr Huber waved off Carmen's comment.

"Yes you did," said Ulrike. "I don't know if I could have made it without your help."

"Your lady could have done the same thing, she's quite a strong and courageous woman, your Carmen," he argued, "Might just have taken her a while longer to summon up the courage to bark at you to get you out of your frozen state." He winked at Carmen, an amused smile beneath his bushy moustache.

Carmen blushed, and Ulrike furthered her embarrassment as she countered, "Oh, I don't know, she can be quite fierce when I piss her off."

Herr Huber laughed, "I don't doubt it. Never 'piss off' your lady, or you'll never hear the end of it!"

"And don't climb on mountains when you're over 80!" added Frau Huber sternly.

Looking at the ceiling, Herr Huber sighed audibly, clearly indicating 'see what I mean?'

Carmen and Ulrike chuckled, and Sepp commented, "And don't climb on mountains when you're suffering from fear of heights either."

"Oh, don't worry; you'll never see me on a mountain ever again!" vowed Ulrike.

"Aw, but I love the mountains," said Carmen. "I think you should do something about this fear."

"I thought so too," stated Ulrike. "But the mountain clearly disagreed."

"I beg to differ," said Herr Huber. "The mountain did nothing to you. We're all safe and sound - except for my precious hat that's probably reached the Eibsee by now. And the weather actually helped you with your fear, didn't it?"

Hesitating for a moment, Ulrike replied, "Be that as it may, I'd rather continue appreciating the mountains from the bottom." And to Carmen she said, "I'm sure we can find other things to do that we both like."

Herr Huber couldn't help himself and commented, "If you haven't found those already, I'm not sure why you're calling her your lady."

Frau Huber smacked her husband on the arm, although even she could not suppress an amused grin as the others were roaring with laughter, while Ulrike and Carmen both flushed crimson.

The evening progressed with a lot of joking and laughter; and even Carmen began to feel warmer after her third mulled wine. At some point one of the mountaineers at the other table pulled out his harmonica and began to play tunes of traditional mountaineering tunes and other Bavarian and German songs. His friends began to sing to the tunes and soon others joined in. Even Herr Huber participated with his deep bass voice despite still being wrapped up in blankets.

Ulrike and Carmen didn't know any of the songs, and Frau Huber couldn't sing if her life depended on it, so they just enjoyed the cordial atmosphere and contented themselves with listening to the songs.

When the evening came to an end, and the warden wanted to close for the night, they all gathered their clothes, which were only partly dried yet, and moved down to the dorm in the cellar.

Carmen was not at all pleased when she saw that they would have to share not only the room but also the bunks with several others who stayed overnight. She had already strongly suspected that this mountain hut would not meet the level of comfort she was used to for the past decade, but she had not imagined that it would be this bad.

They had been assigned numbers which would place them in the middle of one of the communal bunks.

When Frau Huber noticed Carmen's discomfort, she offered, "We can change places, if you like. We got the two places near the wall."

Relieved, Carmen accepted the offer, "Thank you so much!"

"That's all right, dear," said Frau Huber. "We've often stayed in this and other mountain huts; haven't we Alois?"

"*Ja*, Else," agreed Herr Huber. "And it's always been nice, hasn't it?"

"*Ja*, nice memories they are," said Frau Huber with a smile and crawled onto the mattress.

Ulrike let Carmen sleep at the wall, so that she would only have Ulrike next to her. Then she spread their jackets out on top of their blankets, as they were almost dry and would provide some additional warmth. Once everyone had settled in and the lights were out, Carmen cuddled close to her partner.

Ulrike sucked in breath and whispered, "Gosh you are cold!"

"Y-yes," shivered Carmen. "I think I'm going to freeze to death."

Ulrike whispered close to Carmen's ear, "I could make you warmer, if you can be quiet."

Carmen shook her head and whispered, "No."

Ulrike didn't know if Carmen meant she couldn't be quiet or if she just didn't feel comfortable to engage in the suggested warming-up-activity, especially with all the other people around; but it didn't really matter. She wasn't that comfortable herself with the idea and

had only offered it as the only solution she could think of to get Carmen warmer rather quickly. So, she just held Carmen close, trying to provide as much warmth as she could, and, against all odds, Carmen fell asleep rather quickly.

#

The next morning, Ulrike and Carmen were the last to wake up, and they found themselves covered by two additional layers of blankets.

"Good morning," said Frau Huber, who was in the process of putting on her jacket.

"'Mornin'," croaked Ulrike, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Mmh, good morning," groaned Carmen.

"I hope you are feeling better," said Frau Huber. "We let you sleep in as long as possible. You'll have a few minutes before you'll have to leave the room." And turning to leave, she added, "We're having breakfast upstairs."

"All right, thank you," said Ulrike. "We're coming." And with determination, she threw off the blanket and cried out in shock, "Waaah, shit this is cold!!!"

Carmen let out a similar scream, and they both agreed that body odour was definitely preferable to death by cold, and decided that they would postpone the shower till they were back at the hotel.

They dressed as quickly as possible, lamenting the fact that their jeans as well as Carmen's pullover were still damp, and headed upstairs.

"Good morning, you sleepyheads," greeted Sepp, he and Toni already ready to leave.

"Gosh, you're leaving already? It's still dark outside!" said Ulrike.

"The sun will rise in a few minutes. I want to prepare the camera and take a few shots," explained Toni.

"Ohh, I want to see this," said Carmen, despite dreading the cold.

"You're welcome to join us," offered Sepp.

"All right," said Ulrike hesitantly, "I'll just let the Hubers know."

It had snowed overnight, and an ankle deep layer of pristine white snow greeted them as they stepped out the front door.

"Beautiful!" breathed Carmen.

"Yeah," said Ulrike, "But I fear our shoes will never get dry again."

"Who cares?" said Carmen and followed Toni and Sepp.

Grumbling, Ulrike followed as well, not at all happy about the fact that the snow was creeping into her runners with every step. She wondered about Carmen's carefree attitude, especially after she had been so cold the previous evening and night. And why had she been so hesitant to go on a winter holiday the other day? At least they would be better prepared on a planned journey in winter.

Nevertheless, despite all the discomfort, once the sun rose, even Ulrike was entranced by the stunning beauty of the golden sunrise over the Alps.

Leaning against Ulrike, Carmen enjoyed the impressive natural spectacle until she could no longer ignore the icy cold and she shivered.

"Let's go back inside and have breakfast, hm?" said Ulrike.

Carmen nodded. "Yes," and with a last glance at the magical scenery, she turned around, and they trudged back to the Münchner Haus.

Over a hearty breakfast, they exchanged addresses and phone numbers with the Hubers as well as with Toni and Sepp, and Ulrike offered that if they ever came to Berlin, she would, of course, drive them around for free.

The Hubers declined. They had never been fond of cities and preferred to stay in country areas close to the Alps. However, if Ulrike and Carmen ever came to the Starnberg Lake, they should visit them by all means.

Sepp thought that his wife would probably be thrilled to visit Berlin because of the shopping opportunities, and Carmen said she would be delighted to show her around.

"I've actually wanted to go to Berlin for ages," said Toni, "I'd love to see the Berlin wall, or what's left of it."

"There isn't much left," said Ulrike. "But I can show you the places where they left parts of it as well as other historically interesting places."

"That would be awesome," said Toni. "Perhaps I can manage next spring."

"Cool," said Ulrike and looking at her watch, she turned to Carmen, "*Liebling*, I think we should leave now. I told *Tante* Hedwig that we'd be there for lunch, and we still have to pack, and I need to get the cheese for my mother."

"Do you think we can make it to Regensburg before noon?" asked Carmen.

"Probably not," said Ulrike, "But lunch will be at one, and I think we can manage that if we leave now."

"All right," said Carmen, and saying good bye to their new friends, they headed for the cable car station.

Yet again, the cable car ride was torture for Ulrike, and she was greatly relieved when they finally stepped onto solid ground again.

There was only a fine layer of snow at the Eibsee, and with the clear blue sky and the sun shining, the temperature was surprisingly mild compared to the Zugspitze's peak. Despite this, Ulrike and Carmen were glad when they finally were on their way to Irsee, the heater at full blast.

"How do you feel?" asked Ulrike as they were driving through Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

"Great!" said Carmen, "Now that I'm finally warm. I almost thought that would never happen again."

Ulrike chuckled. "Yeah, it was bloody cold up there!"

"Yes. What an adventure!"

"Indeed. And we made new friends," said Ulrike.

"I wouldn't exactly call them friends. I don't think we'll ever hear from them again," said Carmen.

"Don't be so pessimistic," scolded Ulrike. "I'm going to write each of them a postcard once we're back in Berlin."

"Good luck," said Carmen. "I've done that a few times with people I met on holidays. No one ever wrote back."

"Hm, not all do, I'll give you that," admitted Ulrike, "But I'm still sporadically in contact with a couple of people I met on holiday."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Robert, a guy I met at the Wörthersee in Austria. He has visited me twice in Berlin. He emigrated to the USA though, so I haven't seen him in over ten years, but we write two or three times a year. And then there's Volker and Wiebke, a couple from Hamburg, whom I met at the Chiemsee. I've visited them a few times in Hamburg and at their weekend house in St. Peter-Ording. They've been to Berlin once too, and their daughter, Inke, stayed at my place for a week last year."

"Wow, I really don't know how you do that," said Carmen, impressed.

"What? Meet people?"

"Well, not only meet people, but actually become friends with so many people."

Shrugging her shoulders, Ulrike said, "I don't know. I suppose it's my irresistible charm." Carmen snorted.

"What? You don't think I'm charming?" asked Ulrike with feigned indignation.

Carmen chuckled and said, "You know I love you, *Schatz*, but charming is not exactly an adjective I would use to describe you."

"So, what was it about me that caused you to make the first move?"

"Temporary insanity caused by midlife-crisis?" suggested Carmen and laughed when Ulrike now seriously looked indignant. "I really don't know what gave me the courage, Ulli. I have never made the first move before. I know I was attracted by your strong hands first, and when I looked into your eyes in the mirror I was lost."

"Hm, well, I don't think any of my friends is particularly interested in my hands or my eyes," said Ulrike. "I guess I'm just a rather extroverted person and I like socialising with friends."

"Yes," agreed Carmen, "That's probably it. Although I do like being with friends occasionally, I am far more introverted, and I also like being alone. Perhaps people feel that somehow."

"Perhaps," Ulrike conceded, "But maybe you just haven't met the right people yet."

"Maybe," said Carmen. "It would be nice if the Hubers would stay in contact. They are a cute old couple."

"Yeah, they are," agreed Ulrike. "Ah, look there's a supermarket; let's stop so I can cross the stupid cheese off my list."

#

Two hours later they were finally on their way to Regensburg. Ulrike had called her aunt to tell her that they might arrive a little later as they were only just leaving and it had started to rain - the story as to why they were leaving so late, she would explain later.

"Your aunt lives in a house, yes?" asked Carmen.

"Yes, a rather big one with a view onto the Danube," explained Ulrike. "They always wanted children; that's why they bought the big house. But for some reason they couldn't have children, so they only shared it with their dachshunds."

"Your aunt has dachshunds?"

"She has only one now - Trudi. My uncle used to breed them and train them for hunting. He was a hunter himself. When he died two years ago, my aunt sold all their dachshunds to hunter friends of my uncle's because she couldn't do them justice as they were trained for hunting and would go crazy without work. She only kept Trudi from their last litter. Gosh, she was so tiny, and my uncle thought she would never make a good working dog. So, when he died a few weeks later, *Tante* Hedwig thought Trudi would be perfect for her as a companion dog. She's quite a handful though. I fear my aunt doesn't have my uncle's skill when it comes to obedience training." Ulrike chuckled. "But damn, I love that dog, and I'm looking forward to seeing her again."

"Have you ever had a dog yourself?" asked Carmen.

"Yes. When Nobbi and I were kids, we had a Cocker Spaniel named Lumpi," said Ulrike.

"Lumpi," Carmen chuckled. "Cute. And after Lumpi?"

"He was the only dog I had," said Ulrike. "I'd love to have a dog again, but since I have to work, it would be cruel to the dog."

"Well, yes," said Carmen, "Cats are easier in that regard. Although I am hoping that Tabitha behaves while I'm gone. I really don't want to cause Frau Krüger more trouble than necessary."

"I believe Frau Krüger can hold her own pretty well," said Ulrike, grinning.

"Well, but you know Tabitha..."

"Yeah, but I also know Frau Krüger. My bet is on Frau Krüger."

"You are biased," said Carmen.

"Hah! If I were biased, I would bet on Tabitha," countered Ulrike, "Because she really can be a bitch!"

"So, why are you betting on Frau Krüger?"

"Because, that lady is so resourceful, I'm sure she'll think of something to prevent Tabitha from causing trouble."

"Well, we'll see," said Carmen. "I hope you are right."

#

"*Hallo*, Ulrike," greeted *Tante* Hedwig when Ulrike stepped out of the car. "It's good to see you, dear." The cheerful elderly woman engulfed her niece in a warm bear hug, and then turned towards Carmen, "And you must be Carmen. What a pleasure to finally meet you."

"*Guten Tag*, Frau Wagner. Nice to meet you too," greeted Carmen politely and offered her hand for a handshake.

Tante Hedwig would have none of it, "You can call me *Tante* Hedwig, as everyone in the family does," and instead of taking the offered hand, she drew Carmen into a hug as well.

Carmen was surprised at how different *Tante* Hedwig was from Ulrike's mother. Despite them being sisters, there was no resemblance at all between them, neither in looks nor in behaviour. While Else was the same height as Carmen, Hedwig was almost as tall as Ulrike; she was rather rounded, while Else tended more towards being slender; and while Else wore her grey hair in a rather old fashioned perm, Hedwig had hers tied into a neat bun at her neck. Also, except from her bun, Hedwig did not appear particularly austere like Else did. Instead she seemed like a jovial and outgoing person with a healthy rosy complexion. And with her dark green loden skirt and a blouse with an embroidered mallard couple, she looked indeed like a hunter's wife, thought Carmen.

"Come in, come in," said *Tante* Hedwig as Ulrike went to the boot. "You can unpack later, the dumplings are ready and I'm keeping the roast warm."

"Okay, I'll just get *Mutti's* cheese, to put it in the fridge," said Ulrike.

"Cheese?"

"Yeah, she wanted me to bring Allgäuer Emmentaler," clarified Ulrike and grabbing the packet, she closed the boot."

Looking at the package of cheese as they all went inside, Hedwig said, "Else can get the exact same one in Berlin."

Ulrike rolled her eyes and said, "That's what I told her, but she insisted it tastes different when I buy it in Allgäu."

Smirking, *Tante* Hedwig shook her head and said, "My, Ulrike, sometimes you can be as obtuse as your *Onkle* Herbert - God rest his soul! She certainly meant a different brand, one you can't get in Berlin."

"Well, she didn't say that," protested Ulrike. "She also told me to get her a few bottles of that beer you always bring, but they didn't have it at the supermarket. You don't happen to have a few bottles?"

Hedwig laughed while Ulrike was greeted by a whining and tail-wagging Trudi. "Else wanted to make really sure, didn't she? She called me the other day to tell me to give you a few bottles for her."

Ulrike groaned. It just figured that her mother had been nagging her sister as well. She obviously didn't trust her daughter with even the simplest task. But Ulrike didn't dwell on thoughts about her mother as she was now sitting on the floor in the hallway, cuddling Trudi, who beslobbered her face in joyful excitement.

"Come," said Hedwig to Carmen, "I've set the table already."

Carmen followed Hedwig into a large wood-panelled kitchen. An upholstered corner bench with a table for at least six people dominated the room. Several pairs of antlers in

various sizes and taxidermied native birds adorned the long window side, while a shelf with pewter mugs and plates crowned the window on the short side. A room-high green tiled stove provided cosy warmth on this chilly October day.

"Ulrike, are you coming too?" called Hedwig.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," said Ulrike and ruffling Trudi's fur a final time, she wiped her face with her sleeve and got up, intending to join the others.

"Wash your face!" called Hedwig from the kitchen.

Rolling her eyes, Ulrike called back, "Yees."

Carmen chuckled. From her place at the kitchen table she had witnessed Ulrike's deed with disgust, however, *Tante* Hedwig couldn't have seen it from her position at the oven, but she obviously knew Ulrike's antics well enough to issue a warning without needing a visual.

"She just used her sleeve to wipe her face, didn't she?" asked Hedwig as she put the roast on the table, and as Carmen nodded, still chuckling, Hedwig stated, "My, that girl will never learn manners! She's just like my Herbert in that regard."

Carmen was truly glad that Hedwig had interfered. She knew she wouldn't have dared to say anything as not to compromise her partner in front of her aunt, but ugh she would have had trouble eating with a beslobbered Ulrike sitting next to her. Sometimes Ulrike really could be a pig.

"Mmmh, it smells good," said Carmen as Hedwig started serving the roast with potato dumplings and red cabbage.

"Pork roast with crackling and dunkel beer sauce is one of Ulrike's favourites," said Hedwig. "I always make it at least once when she's here."

"Ah, that's good to know," said Carmen, thinking that if she liked it, she might ask Hedwig for the recipe.

"What is good to know?" asked Ulrike as she finally entered the kitchen.

"That pork roast is one of your favourite meals," said Carmen.

"Ah, yes it is," said Ulrike, "But only in Bavaria."

"Why only in Bavaria?" asked Carmen.

"Because most of the things I eat in Bavaria are special to me. I wouldn't want to eat them anywhere else. I associate them with holidays, and Bavarian landscape and Bavarian dialect. They make me think of forests and mountains and especially pork roast makes me think of *Tante* Hedwig and dachshunds and *Onkel* Herbert. If I had it anywhere anytime it would no longer be special."

"Wow, I never knew you put so much thought into food," said Carmen.

"Neither did I," said *Tante* Hedwig. "I always thought you didn't have it at home because it was too much work for Else and you to make it yourselves."

"Oh, it would definitely be too much for me, and I don't think *Mutti* would be thrilled to attempt it either," acknowledged Ulrike, and with a smile at Carmen, she continued, "Carmen would probably manage, she's a great cook and makes the fanciest things."

Carmen blushed and focussed on cutting a piece of roast on her plate.

"But," Ulrike continued, "I'd really rather you don't make anything Bavarian for me."

"All right, I won't," said Carmen.

"What sort of 'fancy things' do you cook?" asked Hedwig.

"Eh, they aren't really fancy. Ulrike is just exaggerating," said Carmen. "For Ulrike a medium boiled egg is fancy."

Ulrike laughed. "True, but what you do is *really* fancy. Like the *Spritzkuchen* you made, or the Alfajores - gosh, those are phenomenal! Or that milanesa whatchamacallit, that's to die for!"

"Spritzkuchen I know, of course," said Hedwig, "But what are these other things?"

While Carmen explained, Ulrike could no longer resist Trudi's hypnotising dachshund eyes and she secretly slipped her a piece of pork roast. She knew very well that she should not

do this; that salty human food was not good for dogs, and with any other dog she had always managed to stay firm, but with Trudi it was different.

Ulrike had been here on holidays when the tiny little dachshund was born, and for her she was the cutest of the whole litter. She had not liked how her uncle had talked about Trudi, and although she had of course been sad when he died, she had also been overjoyed when Hedwig told her that she would keep Trudi. And the little dachshund had eventually made up for her initial deficit in size and had grown into a normal sized, perfectly proportioned red longhaired dachshund - with a look that, although typical for all dachshunds, had a special magical power that melted Ulrike's heart.

Nonetheless, she only ever gave her one single piece of whatever meat they were having, and Trudi seemed to know this, as once she had got that one piece, she always stopped begging and quietly moved into her basket.

#

After they had finished lunch and unpacked their luggage, Ulrike and Carmen accompanied Hedwig and Trudi on a walk. Behind the house, a large meadow stretched out, upwards until it ended at a forest that climbed up to a strung-out range of hills. The sky was overcast, and the air was chilly, but at least it did not rain. Hedwig had now donned a dark green loden cape and a felt hat of the same colour, looking even more like a hunter's woman, sans rifle. Trudi was charging ahead off leash, occasionally sniffing at interesting spots.

Ulrike was just telling Hedwig about their adventure at the Zugspitze when Trudi suddenly barked and raced forward into the woods.

Hedwig blew a whistle, but as she had already feared, Trudi did not listen. So, they all hurried uphill in the direction of where the dachshund had disappeared. Together they searched the forest, but the dog was nowhere to be found.

"Trudi!"

"Truuudiii!"

They all called out for the dog, but the dachshund remained missing.

When Ulrike reached the path at the top of the hill and looked around, she stopped in her tracks and shook her head at the sight that greeted her.

The dachshund was happily groaning as she was rolling around in a pile of fresh horse droppings, blissfully unaware that she was being watched.

"Ewww, that's disgusting!" exclaimed Carmen as she reached Ulrike.

Huffing and puffing, Hedwig caught up to them. "Trudi!" she called sharply and she strode forward but then leant on Ulrike's shoulder to take a breather. "My, this dog is wearing me out!"

Meanwhile Trudi had finally noticed the arrival of her human friends, and forgetting about the horse droppings, she trotted towards them, tail wagging and sat down in front of Ulrike, looking up at her, a huge grin on her soiled face.

"*Mensch Trudi, du bist vielleicht ne Marke,*" Ulrike commented on the dog's funny eccentric behaviour.

"You can say that again," said Hedwig. "I tell you, I've already had to bath this dog more often than all the other ones combined."

"Oh come on, you're exaggerating," said Ulrike, defending her favourite dachshund.

"Perhaps," said Hedwig as she put a leash on Trudi to get her home without another incident. "But in over 40 years of owning and breeding dachshunds, there has never been one as badly behaved as Trudi."

"Well, that's probably because *Onkel* Herbert trained them," suggested Ulrike as they were moving downhill.

Raising an eyebrow at Ulrike, Hedwig said, "You think I haven't learnt one or two things

about training dogs during all this time?"

"I didn't say that," said Ulrike. "I'm just thinking that *Onkel* Herbert must have had a few tricks up his sleeve that you may not know about."

"That might be true," sighed Hedwig. "I wish I could ask him."

Putting an arm around her aunt's shoulder, Ulrike said, "I know."

And they went the rest of the way in silence, even Trudi no longer misbehaved.

#

Since Ulrike had offered to bath Trudi, Carmen asked Hedwig if she could help in the kitchen.

"There isn't much you can help with, dear," said Hedwig. "I'll just brew us some coffee and I have baked *Zwetschgendatschi*." Hesitating a moment, she opened the cupboard and said, "Well, I guess you could set the table if you like."

"Sure," said Carmen, and she took the plates Hedwig handed her.

"I hope you don't mind that Ulrike is occupied with Trudi," said Hedwig questioningly.

"Not at all," said Carmen. "It's nice to see how much she loves Trudi."

"Well, that's good to hear," said Hedwig as she put the cups on the counter. "You seem to be far more suitable for Ulrike than Gitti ever was, if I may say so."

Carmen felt weird being compared to her partner's ex, and she didn't know how to respond. But she listened intrigued when Hedwig rambled on...

"Gitti never liked it when Ulrike played with the dogs, and she always complained when Ulrike went on walks with her uncle and the dogs. She never went with them, although neither Ulrike nor my husband would have minded. But she preferred going to pubs in the city, dancing, partying all night. I don't know how Ulrike managed to put up with her for so long." While Carmen arranged the cups and silverware, Hedwig put the cake on the table and brewed the coffee, all the while chatting. "But being alone wasn't good for her either. Although, she never complained, mind you. I bet she was too afraid to end up with another Gitti. I'm glad she found you. You seem a lot calmer and far more mature than Gitti. And I can see that you're good for Ulrike. She has this certain fire in her eyes again. I haven't seen that in ages."

Carmen smiled at Hedwig as she ended her ramblings. "Thank you, for telling me this. I'm certainly not a party-goer, and I love going on walks. I have a cat myself, and I like dogs too, although, I admit that I would not have offered to bath Trudi in that state she was in."

Hedwig laughed. "Not many people would fancy bathing a dachshund that has rolled in poop. I don't either, but since my Herbert is no longer here to do it, I have to regardless of whether I like it or not. I'm glad that Ulrike is not as prissy as we are!"

Chuckling, Carmen said, "Yes, it certainly comes in handy."

#

In the evening, they all sat in the living room, watching a German television series they all liked. *Tante* Hedwig was knitting in her comfortable armchair, and Carmen and Ulrike sat on the large sofa, with Trudi partly lying on Ulrike's lap.

Carmen no longer focussed on the TV. A content smile on her face, she allowed herself to relish in the peaceful atmosphere that wasn't even tainted by the taxidermied forest animals, though she still thought they were horrible. But for some reason she could not explain, there was an air about the house that seemed to say 'You are welcome here', and it made her feel relaxed in such a profound way as she had never experienced before.

All the worries and sorrows that were usually lurking in the background, just waiting to ambush her thoughts as soon as the slightest opportunity arose, were suddenly no longer

there, or if they were, they were of no importance. Nothing mattered at this moment but the here and now, the feeling of her beloved partner next to her, the comfort of the cushioned sofa, the pleasant warmth that radiated from the voluminous brown tiled stove. Even the slight snoring of the dachshund and the rhythmic clicking of Hedwig's knitting needles, which Carmen noticed despite the noise of the TV, were not distracting but rather enhanced the cosy atmosphere.

She was roused from her blissful state when Ulrike and Hedwig chuckled about something on the TV.

Ulrike noticed that Carmen had not laughed and she looked at her and asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, very much so," said Carmen softly, and she squeezed Ulrike's hand for emphasis. "I just didn't pay attention"

"Ah, okay," said Ulrike, smiling, and turned her gaze back towards the TV.

Later, Ulrike made herself comfortable in bed while Carmen was in the bathroom, when she heard the tell-tale clack-clack-clack of Trudi's approaching steps on the wooden floor. Grinning, she folded up the blanket and the dachshund happily took the nonverbal invitation and jumped onto the bed. With a few content groans, Trudi positioned herself in Ulrike's arms, and Ulrike covered them both with the blanket, ruffling the dog's fur as she hugged her close.

None of her uncle's dogs had ever been this close to her. Oh, she could walk them and play with them, and they liked cuddling on the sofa, but they were nonetheless clearly attached to her uncle, and none of them would ever come to bed with her. She didn't really know why Trudi was different. After all, she didn't see Ulrike any more often than any of her uncle's dogs did. But for some reason Trudi had always shared a special bond with her. From the day she was born, Ulrike felt that Trudi was special. Even though she had been so weak and tiny that her uncle hadn't even been sure she would make it. Perhaps it was for this very reason that Ulrike had fallen in love with the little dachshund. She was different, in a way. And she was so frail and helpless that Ulrike felt she needed a lot more love and care than the others.

Because of Trudi, Ulrike had granted herself a prolonged holiday back then. She had always been welcome at her aunt's place for as long as she liked; the house was certainly big enough, she even had her own room here. That summer she had stayed for four weeks, and then two days before she had planned to leave, her uncle had a stroke. Of course she had postponed her journey home to help her aunt with the dogs. Her mother had come too, with Nobbi. Ulrike screwed up her face when she recalled that the first thing her brother had said to her was, "Could you look at the brakes, please, I think there's something wrong." Not even a "Hello," or "How's *Onkel* Herbert", no, his first words had been about his wretched rust bucket! Not the same one he was driving now, mind you. The one he had then had given up the ghost a few months later if she remembered correctly. Why her brother could not manage to save enough money to get a car that lasted a bit longer than just a year or two was beyond her.

Trudi groaned, obviously sensing that Ulrike had tensed up.

Nuzzling the dog's ear, Ulrike muttered, "You're right, thinking about Nobbi doesn't do me any good." Her thoughts drifted back to memories of Trudi, and by the time Carmen returned from the bathroom, Ulrike - and Trudi - were fast asleep.

Carmen stopped in her tracks as she saw the image in front of her. Her first thought was an image of Trudi soiled with horse poo and she shuddered with disgust. But quickly she reminded herself that Ulrike had bathed the dog, and in any case, the view of her partner sleeping with the dachshund in her arms was far too cute to complain. She gazed lovingly at

the two until she finally shook her head and climbed into bed next to Ulrike.

#

The next day right after an early breakfast, Ulrike and Carmen went to explore the old town of Regensburg with its many medieval Patrician buildings, Romanesque and Gothic churches, and the 12th century Stone Bridge.

It also had a lot of nice little boutiques and jewellers, as Carmen discovered with delight. However, since most of the historical centre was a pedestrian zone, they had parked the Alfa in a car park at the edge of the centre, so when Ulrike told Carmen in no uncertain terms that she was not willing to lug countless shopping bags around for the rest of the day, Carmen reluctantly refrained from going overboard with the shopping.

Despite her greatest efforts though, she was not able to restrain herself entirely, and since Ulrike still refused to help carrying the bags with her newly acquired possessions, Carmen had to pay the consequences herself. Initially, this hadn't been a problem, but now her arms were getting heavier and her back was killing her. Nudging Ulrike, she said, "This café looks nice. Let's have a break, hm?"

"Again?!" asked Ulrike and looked at her watch, "We only just took a break half an hour ago."

"Well, I need a break," said Carmen as she strode off towards the café.

Sighing heavily, Ulrike followed. This was getting annoying, and she wondered if she should help Carmen after all. On the other hand, she really could not fathom why anyone would buy so many unnecessary things, especially since you could probably get most of them just as easily in Berlin. She had sort of understood with most of the things Carmen bought in Füssen and Bad Wörishofen, because those were either useful for their holiday or they were things she couldn't get in Berlin. But why on earth did she have to buy two cashmere skirts and two pairs of trousers? Not only were they hugely expensive brands she could most certainly get in Berlin, but also Ulrike knew the extent of her partner's wardrobe. That lady could open a boutique with all her clothes and shoes! Why anyone would have that many clothes and shoes was already beyond Ulrike's comprehension, but why Carmen would even add to these masses truly baffled her.

Ulrike's complete wardrobe fit in a closet that wasn't even half the size of Carmen's bedroom closet, and there was still a lot of room left. And the most expensive item was the down jacket she was wearing. She had bought it several years ago in the men's department of a special sportswear shop. And although the zip no longer worked smoothly and she had had to darn two of the pockets already, she still loved this jacket. It was warm, and had more pockets than she could ever use. Of course Carmen was not so fond of Ulrike's beloved jacket. In Füssen, she had tried to convince Ulrike to buy one like the one she had bought, but Ulrike would rather wear hers till it fell apart than squeeze herself into such an impractical formfitting jacket with only three far too small pockets. She had given in and bought some pyjamas in the women's department, but she steadfastly refused to budge on the jacket.

"Are you coming?" asked Carmen as she was about to open the door to the café.

"Yes, yes," replied Ulrike and hurried to catch up.

Looking at Ulrike as they were drinking their coffee, Carmen said, "I know what you want to say."

"Yeah? What?" asked Ulrike.

"That you have warned me not to buy so much."

Slowly shaking her head, Ulrike said, "Nope, that's actually not what I wanted to say."

"No?" asked Carmen surprised. "What then?"

"I was actually going to offer to take your bags to the car while you have a look at the

cathedral. I'll drive around and park somewhere east of the centre, and we can meet for lunch at the Weltenburger am Dom."

"Hm, how much further is it to the cathedral?"

"It's just around the corner," said Ulrike.

"Then why would you walk all the way back?" asked Carmen. "We can visit the cathedral, have lunch, and then take a taxi to the car, just as we did in Wörishofen."

"Look," said Ulrike, "As much as I love driving a taxi, I don't particularly fancy paying for one if it's not necessary. I have seen the cathedral many times, and you are struggling with the bags, so I'm offering to take them back and get the car, then you can visit the cathedral without having to carry the bags, and we won't have to pay for a taxi."

Carmen smiled. "Why don't we compromise? You carry the bags for the rest of the way and I pay the taxi. Then you won't have to walk back, and I won't have to carry the bags."

Groaning, Ulrike accepted, and she hoped they wouldn't come across any more shops that caught Carmen's interest before they got to the cathedral.

#

"I suppose you don't fancy any more walking?" asked Ulrike as they were back in the Alfa.

"Not particularly. Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Well, we could drive to the Walhalla, have a look at the busts in the temple and then enjoy the great view down onto the Danube and surrounding area. But we can't park at the top, so we'd have to walk a bit uphill from the parking area."

"Hm, how long does the walk take?"

"Honestly, I can't remember. I would estimate, perhaps five or ten minutes, but it's been awhile since I've been there. I just remember that the walk from the back of the hill is a lot easier than the one from the Danube side. For that one you have to climb a seemingly endless number of steps. It's a gorgeous experience, but even I wouldn't fancy that after all the walking we did today."

"Well, five or ten minutes doesn't sound too bad. Let's do it," said Carmen.

"All right," said Ulrike, smiling, and started the engine.

They took the Nibelungen Bridge over the Danube to get to the northern shore, and Carmen admired the view of the river and the city with its beautiful cathedral as she looked back. And as they continued on towards the Walhalla, Carmen noted, "Bavaria really is a beautiful part of Germany."

"Indeed," said Ulrike. "If I weren't so tied to Berlin, I'd love to live here."

"Really? Hm, I don't know. I think if I were to choose another place to live, I would go back to Argentina."

"Oh? I thought you weren't happy with the politics there."

Carmen made a face, "So what? I'm not happy with German politics either. Do you base your love for Bavaria on Bavarian politics?"

"Nah," said Ulrike, "Okay, point taken. Although, I don't think Bavarian politics is really that bad."

"Don't tell me you would vote for the CSU," said Carmen.

"I don't vote for any party because they all suck one way or another," stated Ulrike.

Carmen sighed. "I guess you're right. I suppose I always vote for the lesser evil, rather than not voting at all."

"Oh, I do vote," stated Ulrike, and she explained with a grin, "I always put a cross for each party that has at least one programme point I agree with."

"I see," said Carmen. "But I don't know if voting invalid will accomplish anything."

"Probably not, but what does your voting for the 'lesser evil' accomplish?"

"Nothing, really," admitted Carmen, "Even if the party I vote for wins, it usually turns out to be worse than before."

Ulrike nodded, "Yep, that's the way it is. And that's why I'm not going to help any of them to get elected until there is a party I fully agree with."

"I don't think that will ever happen, unless you founded one of your own," said Carmen.

"Yeah, well, unfortunately I'm not that much into politics that I would want to make it a fulltime job. So, I guess, I'll just keep protesting in my own insignificant way. But enough of politics; we're here," said Ulrike as she turned into the parking area. "Let's enjoy the beautiful scenery and glorious people of German history."

The sky had cleared up, and the sun was shining, lighting up the autumn foliage of the forest in a sea of gold and yellow, as they walked the trail uphill towards the Walhalla.

They weren't the only tourists on the trail. Quite a crowd of people were swarming upwards while others passed them on their way back.

When they finally reached the top, Carmen and Ulrike halted to take in the view of the impressive white limestone temple framed by the blue and white Bavarian sky. Modelled after the famous Parthenon in Athens, it looked imposing with its Doric columns sitting on a massive stone base.

"You could think we are in Greece," said Carmen.

"Yeah, except that this temple is still intact."

"Well, it is a lot younger, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," agreed Ulrike as they walked the rest of the way to the temple. "Want to have a look inside?"

"Sure," said Carmen as they climbed the steps up to the colonnades.

"Okay, the entrance is on the other side. There's an entrance fee though. So, I'll stay outside, since I've already been inside two or three times, and there isn't really that much to see. But it's worth seeing it at least once, in my opinion."

"Okay," said Carmen, and as they reached the front side, she exclaimed, "Wow, the view really is beautiful!"

"Mhm," agreed Ulrike as she leant against one of the columns and looked down across the Danube valley.

"All right. Are you going to wait here?" asked Carmen as she turned her gaze to the huge entrance doors.

"Yep, sure."

Half an hour later, Ulrike was already beginning to wonder what was taking Carmen so long, when her partner finally stepped out of the temple.

Carmen walked over to Ulrike and said, "That was interesting."

"It must have been," said Ulrike, "You've spent quite a long time in there."

"Really? It didn't feel that long to me. I have been reading all the plaques too."

"Ah, okay, I did that the first time too. I wish we could sit down a bit, but the stone is bloody cold."

"Hm, maybe we can manage for a few minutes? I would like to enjoy the view and rest my legs at least for a bit before we walk back down."

"Well, my butt is already frozen, but I guess it can take a few more minutes."

"Frozen meat keeps fresh longer," joked Carmen and sat down on the stone step.

Ulrike snorted. "Gosh, I didn't see that one coming!" And sitting down next to Carmen, who grinned at her, she said, "You seem to be in an exceptionally good mood. How come?"

Raising her eyebrows, Carmen asked, "Do I need a reason for being in a good mood?"

"Uh, nope," said Ulrike. "It's really nice when you're being humorous."

Leaning against Ulrike, looking into the distance, Carmen said, "It's really nice being here with you. I mean not just exactly here, but on this holiday; just the two of us with no work or family or other responsibilities distracting us."

"Mh, that's true," agreed Ulrike and leant her head against Carmen's as she held her close.

"It's a pity that this is our last day."

"We still have tomorrow."

"Not really," said Carmen. "We'll have to leave after breakfast. I don't want to risk getting home too late. I need to be at school early on Monday."

"Oh well, then let's not think about tomorrow, let's enjoy today."

"Hm, agreed," said Carmen and snuggled closer.

They sat like this for quite a while before Carmen noted, grumbling, "Mmm now my butt is freezing too. Let's go home. To your aunt's I mean."

Getting up, Ulrike reminded, "But it won't be just the two of us there."

"I know," said Carmen, "But I like your aunt, and Trudi loves you. I don't know how often you visit them, but going by Trudi's behaviour it is far too rarely, and she would certainly love to spend more time with you."

Gently putting her arms around Carmen's waist, Ulrike said with deep felt emotion, "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

Carmen smiled. "Yes, and I love you too."

Ulrike pulled Carmen closer, and they shared a tender kiss, not caring about the crowd of people that were milling around them.

They were interrupted by a click and a flash.

"What the..." started Ulrike seriously annoyed.

"Take it easy!" said a guy with a Polaroid camera in his hands, a bigger camera around his neck, and a large bag slung over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, I just couldn't let this opportunity pass. No worries, you'll get the photo, of course," and he took the photo from the camera. Before handing it to Ulrike, he asked, "May I see it first?"

Sighing, still somewhat annoyed about the interruption, Ulrike said, "Sure," and they waited till the photo was ready.

"Beautiful!" said the guy, and with a wide grin he presented the photo to Ulrike and Carmen.

"Oh, it really is beautiful," said Carmen as she looked at the image of the two of them kissing next to one of the columns, the beautiful landscape and blue sky in the background. And as Ulrike agreed, Carmen took out her purse and offered the guy a 10 DM note.

"No, no," he waved her off, "I don't expect any payment. I just can't bear missing an opportunity. That's the only reason why I have this camera. But if you would like me to take some professional photos of you, I'd gladly accept. You make a really nice couple. Here's my card."

Ulrike took the business card he offered, and asked Carmen, "What do you think? Shall we let him take a few photos of us here?"

Carmen nodded enthusiastically but the photographer interrupted, "Oh, no not here and now. I'm only here on holidays. I don't have the right equipment with me."

Pointing at the camera around his neck, Ulrike said, "You've got a camera there, no?"

"Yes, but..."

"Look, Herr Kühn, we're here on holidays too. We're from Berlin, and we're leaving tomorrow. And I'm not sure we'll ever get to Cologne," she pointed at his card. "Think of it as an opportunity. You can make the best of the equipment you have, and take some nice photos of us, or we're off. What do you say?"

Looking at his bag, he hesitated for a moment, and then he said, "All right, deal. The equipment I have with me is not perfect for these sorts of shots, but I might be able to improvise a little to get a few nice images. I'll see how they turn out, and I'll send you an offer

depending on the quality. "

"Sounds like a plan," said Ulrike.

Thus, they spent the following hour moving around in the colonnades and on the front steps of the Walhalla, positioning themselves and adjusting their postures according to the photographer's directions until Carmen really couldn't take it anymore, and she said, "I believe that's enough. I'm getting tired and my feet are killing me."

Thank Goodness! thought Ulrike, who had not dared voicing her annoyance about being ordered around.

"All right," acknowledged Herr Kühn, "The film is almost full anyway."

Ulrike handed him one of her business cards. "If you ever need a taxi in Berlin..."

"Hey, that's cool," said Herr Kühn, "I have actually planned on going to Berlin next spring. I have a car, but I could use some insider tips on where to get not so common interesting shots."

"Well, I'm not a photographer, so I don't know how much I can be of help, but if you give me a few hints as to what sort of things you would find interesting, I'll see what I can do."

"Hm, I'll think of something," said Herr Kühn, and suddenly his eyes lit up, "Maybe we could do a photo story - a day in the life of a Berlin taxi driver - or something like that."

Ulrike furrowed her brow, "I'm not sure that would make for an interesting story."

"Oh, I think it would," said Herr Kühn. "I'll think about it. And I'll let you know."

They said good bye and Ulrike and Carmen headed back towards the parking area.

On the way, Carmen noted, "It really never ceases to amaze me how quickly you make new contacts. It doesn't seem to matter where you go or what you do. You just seem to attract people like a magnet."

"Actually," Ulrike argued, "Herr Müller seemed to be far more attracted by you, *Liebling*. For which I'm not blaming him. You're definitely the more attractive one to photograph."

Waving off Ulrike's comment, Carmen said, "But he wants to make a photo story with you."

"Come on," said Ulrike, "That's just a crazy idea of his. I'm sure he'll get a thousand other ideas between now and spring. He needs a guide to show him interesting places, and I bet it's all the same to him, whether that be me or you."

"I don't think it's all the same to him - I wouldn't know what places to show him," said Carmen.

"Neither do I," said Ulrike, "Unless he gives me some more specifics."

"I wouldn't even want to guide a stranger," admitted Carmen.

"See, that's the difference between us. Guiding strangers is part of my job and I love it, if I know what they are looking for."

"And that's why it would not be the same to him if I were to be his guide."

"Well, if you put it this way...", acknowledged Ulrike.

"Still, you aren't running around with a plate that says, 'Hey, I'm a taxi driver from Berlin, and I love meeting new people'. So, how you manage to attract people, without them knowing anything about you, is still a miracle to me."

Ulrike grinned. "I just say - irresistible charm."

"I'm beginning to believe you," said Carmen.

#

They spent the rest of the day with *Tante* Hedwig and Trudi. Ulrike and Hedwig taught Carmen a new card game, and later Ulrike and Carmen went for a walk with Trudi while Hedwig prepared *Apfelküchle* for them. In the evening they sat in the living room chatting while Hedwig knitted.

The next morning after breakfast they packed and squeezed everything in the boot - which had already been a challenge the other day because of all the newly acquired things - and when they were finally ready to leave, Ulrike had a hard time saying good bye to Trudi, as usual.

Apart from the expected stop-and-go traffic at the many construction sites, the drive home remained uneventful.

When they finally reached Berlin in the evening, Ulrike noted with surprise that Carmen was taking the route towards Halensee, and she said, "Um, *Liebling*, wouldn't it be more practical if you drove to my place first?"

"Not really," said Carmen. "If you don't mind, I would like you to come to my place and help me carry the luggage, among other things."

"Uh, okay, I don't mind helping you with the luggage, but isn't it a bit late for 'other things'? I thought you have to get up early tomorrow, and I don't have my car."

"I'll pay for a taxi for you," said Carmen. She hadn't actually thought of what Ulrike was insinuating, but she had come to a decision about something else, and wanted it to be a surprise, so she did not correct Ulrike. And after all, she wouldn't mind engaging in 'other things' as well.

Ulrike thought that all this going by taxi was getting a bit much, but on the other hand, who was she to complain. After all, if not for Carmen's affinity for using taxis, they might never have met. And, depending on how late it would get, perhaps she could call Kalle to pick her up, and go play a few rounds of pool, then Carmen wouldn't even have to pay.

To Carmen's and especially Ulrike's dismay, there was no free parking space close to Carmen's place, and Ulrike cursed as she lugged the heavy suitcase and travel bag across the cobble stone road.

"I'm sorry," said Carmen, who was carrying three bags herself, "Finding a parking space here gets harder and harder."

Ulrike only hummed in response, refraining from pointing out that the parking wouldn't really be a problem if Carmen had limited her luggage to a more reasonable amount. But she had known about the extent of Carmen's luggage when she agreed to help, and she knew that finding a parking space was difficult at Carmen's place, so it wouldn't be fair to put the blame on Carmen. If anyone was to blame it was herself.

When they finally reached Carmen's door, Carmen was surprised to find her security lock already open and she only had to turn the key once in the main lock. "Either Frau Krüger forgot to lock the door or she's still there," Carmen mumbled.

"Don't be alarmed, *Fräulein* Carmen. I'm here," called Frau Krüger from the living room. Carmen rushed inside, and when she saw Frau Krüger lying on the couch with Tabitha fully stretched out on top of her, she scolded, "Tabitha!"

"*Nu schimpfen Se mal nich*," Frau Krüger told her not to scold the cat, "It's all right. The little one has just missed you so much."

Ulrike snorted, "Doesn't look like it to me. Looks rather like she's really happy where she is."

Finally, Tabitha turned her head to face Carmen and Ulrike, and slowly, she stood up, arched her back and jumped down and, not deigning to look at Carmen or Ulrike, she languidly sauntered past them and disappeared into the kitchen.

"See, you shouldn't have scolded her," said Frau Krüger as she sat up.

Ulrike shook her head. "That cat is impossible."

Being torn between being polite and remaining with Frau Krüger, or following her beloved cat, Carmen finally decided to let Ulrike deal with her neighbour and headed for the kitchen. "Tabitha, I'm sorry, Tabitha."

"So, did you have a nice holiday?" asked Frau Krüger.

"Yes, very nice, thank you," said Ulrike, and added, "I'll be right back," and she quickly put the suitcase and travel bag on Carmen's bed before she joined the neighbour on the sofa.

Surprised, Carmen noticed that Tabitha had not only her usual bowls with water, dry and wet food but an additional two bowls, one with what seemed to be cooked chicken and one that was empty but smelled suspiciously of fish. Tabitha sat regally in front of the empty bowl and looked up at Carmen. Carmen crouched down, and talking to her in a soothing voice, she ruffled the cat's fur.

Tabitha humoured Carmen for a while but when she had enough, she got up, walked over to the fridge and sat down.

"Is there something in the fridge for you?" asked Carmen. Opening the fridge, Carmen blinked when she saw an assortment of plastic boxes. Just on a hunch, she opened the freezer as well. It was chock-a-block full with frozen meat and fish.

When she finally returned to join the others, Ulrike was just telling Frau Krüger about their adventure at the Zugspitze.

"Gosh, I'm glad you got off so lightly!" said Frau Krüger.

"Yeah, I guess we were really lucky," said Ulrike, "We didn't even catch a cold. With Carmen freezing so much, I had worried that she might get pneumonia or something. But the next day we were both fine again."

"Ah, *Fräulein* Carmen, thank you for the postcard. I received it yesterday."

"Oh, that was quick!" said Carmen.

"Yes," agreed Frau Krüger. "By the way, and please don't take it amiss, I have put fresh linens on the bed. Tabitha obviously didn't like being alone, especially at night, so I decided to stay with her to keep her from turning the place into a pissoir with shredded furniture."

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry she caused you so much trouble," said Carmen.

"It wasn't much trouble, dear," reassured Frau Krüger, "Your bed is rather comfortable, if I may say so."

Ulrike chuckled. She knew the old lady would prevail over Tabitha's antics, even if it meant that the cat would win as well, in a way.

"Nevertheless, I will of course pay you for all your expenses."

Frau Krüger waved her off, "Don't worry about it ... But, if you would offer to prepare some culinary delight with the remnants that Tabitha didn't like, once you find the time, I wouldn't say no."

"I will gladly do that, Frau Krüger!"

"Well then, I don't want to keep you any longer," said Frau Krüger, and got up. "I'm sure you must be knackered from the drive."

"I admit, I am rather tired, and I need to get up early tomorrow," said Carmen and got up as well to see her neighbour to the door.

"Then you should go to bed soon," advised Frau Krüger, and to Ulrike she said, "I hope you will tell me more about your adventures soon, *Fräulein* Ulrike."

"I'd love to," said Ulrike.

"Splendid," said Frau Krüger and headed for the door. "Oh, I almost forgot," and she turned around and handed Carmen the keys.

"Thank you, Frau Krüger. Good night," said Carmen and Ulrike wished a good night as

well.

"Good night, you two," said Frau Krüger and left.

"Now, where were we?" asked Carmen, and straddled Ulrike's lap.

Ulrike's eyes widened and she quipped, "I thought you were tired."

"Humour me," said Carmen.

"Gladly," said Ulrike and let herself be pressed into the back of the sofa as they shared a sensual kiss. She broke the kiss when she felt Carmen pressing the keys into her hand. "Huh?"

Folding Ulrike's fingers around the keys, Carmen held her partner's fist with both hands and looking deep into her eyes she said, "I want you to have these."

Searching Carmen's face, Ulrike asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Carmen with utter conviction. "This holiday has shown me how much I really feel for you; and how much at home I feel with you. I never ever want to shut you out again. I love you."

Baffled for a moment, Ulrike just gazed at Carmen until she finally said, "I love you too," and she pulled Carmen into another kiss to celebrate this new stage in their relationship.

###

Recipes:



Apfelkühle (apple fritters)

50g flour
1 tablespoon sugar
1 pinch of salt
75ml milk
1 egg (separated)
2-3 apples
Clarified butter (or oil) for frying
Cinnamon and sugar mix

Separate the egg.

Put flour, sugar, egg yolk and milk into a bowl and stir until you get a thick batter. Let the batter rest for half an hour.

Peel the apples, remove the core and cut them into thick slices. (You can sprinkle a little lemon juice on top of the slices so they don't turn brown, but since they will be covered by the batter, it won't matter really.)

Heat up the clarified butter in a saucepan or a high rimmed frying pan (the fritters should be able to swim). Be careful to not let it get too hot.

Beat the egg white until it is stiff.

Gently fold the beaten egg white into the batter.

Dip the apple slices into the batter so they are fully covered and gently put them in the pan.

Turn them around after a minute or two. Once both sides are golden brown, take the fritters out and put them on a piece of kitchen paper to drain the excess fat.

Sprinkle the fritters with a mix of cinnamon and sugar.

Tip: If you have leftover batter but no more apples, you don't have to throw it away. Just put scoops of the batter into the pan with a spoon or small ladle. Fry them from both sides - they will puff up into balls. They are very nice, even without apples :)



Bavarian lye pretzels

Confession: I wanted to include a recipe for lye pretzels. But when I read up on it, I lost my courage as I didn't want to risk my most precious body parts by experimenting with sodium hydroxide (NaOH); especially since I can easily buy lye pretzels here ;-)

For those of you who can't get them where you are ... well, I'd suggest a trip to Bavaria. It's really worth a visit, not just for the food :D

You say, a trip to Bavaria is beyond your travel budget and you can't get lye pretzels where you are but you desperately want to try them? I can certainly sympathise - they are delicious! Nonetheless, I'm still not comfortable even just adding a recipe here, however there are lots of lye pretzel recipes in English on the internet, and there are even really good YouTube videos on how to make lye pretzels. But I want to issue an important warning: **Be careful and wear chemical-resistant gloves and goggles for protection! Lye can cause nasty chemical**

burns and you could lose your eyesight if you get lye into your eyes.

There are more things to consider, like the right way to prepare the lye solution and which materials you can safely use for handling it. Please, read up on those safety precautions before you consider using NaOH lye.

My advice: Leave the making of lye pretzels to the professionals.

Tip: There are also recipes which use bicarbonate (NaHCO₃) instead of sodium hydroxide. The taste of those pretzels is supposedly fairly similar, though not the same; and those pretzels don't brown as much. However, using the bicarbonate method is far less dangerous.

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