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## CHAPTER 1

Marlene Damgaard flew down Merchant Street on her eighteen-speed, carbon-frame Nishiki Criterium racer, causing a taxi driver to slam on the brakes behind her, but the thirty-nine year old athletic blonde didn't have time to respond to the honk or even the one-fingered salute the cabbie shot her through the side window.

Pumping the pedals hard, she stared with laser-like focus at the blurry gray street as it flew past her bike; her smoke-tinted sunglasses shading the world in pale blue. Now and then, she caught glimpses of surprised faces belonging to pedestrians she zoomed past, but she was too experienced to get into any dangerous situations.

In a flash - the readout on the computer on her handlebar said she was going at twenty-eight miles per hour - she was past Crystal Street and the Church of Lady Mary, and was headed directly for a group of German tourists who appeared to have just stepped off one of the cruise liners that were docked two-deep down at the other end of Copenhagen Avenue.

At the last moment, she carefully applied the brakes and let the Nishiki slow down to a slightly saner twenty miles per hour, then further down. Once she was going slowly enough, she sat up straight and freewheeled the rest of the way across the Highbridge Square to her shop, the Juice-n-More - the proud winner of the People's Choice Award for the 'Best Juice & Salad Bar In Town 2011' - even though the entire zone was strictly for pedestrians.

On the last stretch, she unhooked her bicycle shoes from the clamps and moved her legs back to stay clear of the hard pedals. Finally coming to a stop outside the Juice-n-More, Marlene jumped off her bike, picked it up and carried the lightweight racer into the shop on her shoulder.

"Morning, boss," Karen Hansen said with a smile and a little wave. Marlene's employee - freckled and with a strawberry-blonde ponytail that made her look roughly fifteen though she had recently turned twenty-two - seemed to be in a good mood as she invariably was on beautiful, sunny July mornings.

As Karen continued preparing the ovens and polishing the counters, Marlene came back out into the store after putting the bicycle in the back office. "Mornin', Karen. The weather's great today, huh? It's hot already, it's gonna be a scorcher later on... maybe even in the high seventies," the older woman said, fluffing her short mop of honey-blonde hair to get it back into the proper casual look.

Standing just shy of five foot six, Marlene's athletic frame appeared almost as wide as she was tall, though it was an optical illusion brought on by her square-cut olive green chinos and her toned, tanned arms and shoulders that were accentuated by her short-sleeved spring green polo shirt that advertised her own shop.

"Yeah!" Karen said and scrunched up her face while she swept a few bread crumbs down into a clear plastic bag. "Hey, we've already had our first customer of the day. It was a Japanese tourist... I think he was Japanese... I guess he coulda been Chinese... anyway, he bought a double pineapple juice and a small salad. I had barely opened up before he was here!"

"Excellent," Marlene said and went behind the counter. Taking an apron, she put it on and tied the laces behind her back. "If we get enough of those, I might even be able to pay your wages this month."

"Awwww," Karen said, following the spiel she and her boss had played every single morning since she had started working at the Juice-n-More.

Nodding and grinning, Marlene went over to the takeaway window and pulled up the metal blinds. After quickly checking how thoroughly Karen had cleaned the aluminum racks, she began to transfer the twenty plastic containers from the refrigerators to the racks, and stripped off the lids so the various salads looked fresh and inviting for their customers.

Three of them - bean sprouts, organic orange peel and strawberries - needed to be changed so she scooped out the old contents and poured them into one of the clear plastic bags they used for waste before taking three clean containers and filling them with fresh produce.

With everything in place, Marlene stepped out on the Avenue to check how the takeaway window presented itself from the outside. Satisfied that everything looked A-OK, she went back inside and slid into place behind the counter to wait for their next customers.

"Boss, it's two minutes to nine... mind if I listen to the news?" Karen said with her finger hovering above the on-off button on their little radio.

"No, go right ahead, Karen," Marlene said with a smile.

The radio was turned on, and soon, the regular headlines of death, destruction and tax increases filled the juice and salad bar. As the somber newscast droned on in the background, Marlene got herself comfortable on her tall bar stool and looked out onto the sea of humanity that filed past her square view of the world, the takeaway window.

There were several distinct groups of people walking past on Copenhagen Avenue, and for Marlene's experienced eye, it was easy to tell who were potential customers and who weren't: the businessmen and -women who always raced past with their briefcases and expensive suits trying to catch God-knows-what were only interested in the shop at lunch; the locals wearing regular clothes could and did pop in now and then; the streetwise punks with wild hair, torn jeans and provocative T-shirts preferred to get their kicks at the greasy, salty fast food franchises; the transients with their numerous plastic bags and mixed-race mutts couldn't afford it; the glumly dressed people who were on their way to the Church of the Holy Spirit further up the Avenue wouldn't dream of it; and finally, the easily recognizable tourists - always carrying cameras, maps and colorful hats - who provided eighty-five percent of Marlene's business in the summer.

As the news ended and segued into a weather report, Marlene thought back to the day in 2002 where she had decided to start a business. Then, the banks had been easier to deal with, so all she needed to do to get an overdraft facility was to present a thorough, well thought-out business plan and two legal witnesses who were going to act as co-signers - she had brought her parents.

She had been eyeing a store further up Copenhagen Avenue, closer to the City Hall Square, but when the previous owner had moved out, she discovered that every last inch of the plumbing needed to be changed which would have blown her net capital completely.

A week of despair and non-stop bitching later, a new opportunity arose in the shop she was in now; back then, her concept had been that of a traditional coffee and sandwich bar, but after a year of modest success, she had decided to change to an organic and vegetarian concept. The boost hadn't come at once but it had grown steadily from year to year - and the People's Choice Award the Juice-n-More had earned in 2011 had literally been Marlene's proudest moment.

Just as she was pondering the years she had spent watching people walking past, a group of German tourists - a mom and a dad, a grandmother and three children - came up to the takeaway window and started talking excitedly amongst themselves while they debated on what they wanted.

"Uh, hello," the father said, struggling a bit with the language. He started pointing at one of the plastic containers, but before he could say what he wanted, Marlene hopped off her bar stool and came forward.

"Guten Tag. Womit kann ich Sie helfen?" she said in her best high school German. When the children began to jump up and down in glee and the rest of the family all smiled at her in relief, she knew she was about to sell three times the amount of food she would have sold if she hadn't been able to communicate with her customers.

"Karen, I need a hand!" she said loudly over her shoulder after she had taken the orders.

At once, Karen turned off the radio and hurried over to stand behind her boss. As soon as the juice orders were in, she found the fruit in refrigerated drawers under the counter and began to blend them carefully on the machine, filtering out the pits and the flesh, except for one of the orders which called for Grape Fruit Pulp.

While Marlene and Karen were busy servicing their customers at the takeaway window, the glass door was opened and a tall, dark-haired woman wearing yellow knee-length cotton shorts and a thin, white V-neck blouse slipped inside and sat down at the table the furthest away from the street.

"We'll be with you in a moment, Miss!" Karen said, putting a holed lid on the recyclable cups the Juice-n-More used for the beverages.

"No need to hurry," Anita Schott said, crossing her legs and pulling down her shorts so they wouldn't ride up too far. "I don't have anything else to do."

"Uh... okay," Karen said and put the six cups into a carrier frame made of recycled cardboard. She quickly put the carrier frame on the counter next to Marlene who was filling the to-go containers and chatting with the tourists in German about the great weather.

When the orders had been served and the money duly paid, Marlene waved goodbye to the family of six who slowly made their way back down Copenhagen Avenue, no doubt to get to one of the cruise liners. Grinning broadly, she looked at the fifty Kroner note she had been given as a tip. "How about that, Karen? A fifty Kroner tip for a three hundred Kroner order. The day's starting out really well," she said and reached under the counter for a glass jar labeled Tips.

"Yep," Karen said and went down to the other end of the store. "We're sorry for the delay, Miss. Have you thought about what you would like?"

Only then did Marlene notice they had a customer in the shop. For the first two seconds, she was annoyed with Karen for not telling her at once, but then she realized who the mysterious customer actually was.

As the dark-haired woman stepped up to the counter with a shy smile on her face, Marlene froze in place like a salt lick, simply taking in the picturesque, gorgeous qualities of the woman she hadn't seen for a decade and a half.

Every part of Anita's body and face was like Marlene remembered it, from her long, shapely legs, past her strong hands and forearms to her long, exquisitely sculpted torso, and finally up to her slightly round face that had never been able to hide any of the emotions that coursed through her.

The last part hadn't changed at all. As the two women locked eyes, Anita's chin began to quiver and her eyebrows crept together like she was on the brink of crying.

Marlene resolutely flipped open the hatch in the counter and stepped out into the store itself. Without even the slightest hesitation, she pulled the taller woman into a strong hug and began to run her hands up and down the long back.

The feel of the warm, familiar body that wrapped itself around her own made Marlene think back to the time where she and Anita had been an item. It hadn't lasted that long, just shy of two years, but the period had been one of the best in her life. *'If only we hadn't focused so damn much on our careers back then... where would we have been today?'* she thought, taking in Anita's natural scent that mixed with a whiff of her *Click!* deodorant to create something quite unique.

Pulling back, Marlene briefly gave Anita a peck on the cheek, but reconsidered at once and placed a sweet, little kiss right on the taller woman's lips. Snickering, the two women looked at each other with similar goofy smiles on their faces, though Anita's smile was shaded with a touch of sadness.

"Uh...?" Karen said, rubbing her brow, but Marlene just shot her a steely look that said 'mind the store, please.' - Karen promptly turned around to give her boss a little privacy.

After a little while, Anita pulled back but kept her hands on Marlene's shoulders. "Hi," she said in a velvety, if tiny, voice.

"Hi yourself, you gorgeous creature. It's been a while, huh?" Marlene said quietly.

"It's been fifteen years... can you believe it?"

"No, frankly. Come on, let's sit down," Marlene said and helped Anita over to the table she had only just left. "You look like you aren't too steady on your feet. What's happened? Are you ill?"

"No, no... I... ugh, it isn't pretty."

"I'm all ears, hon."

The two women sat down on opposite sides of the polished aluminum cafe table, but their hands soon found each other in the middle near a colorful Turkish lamp with a tea light. All awkwardness over meeting an old lover was swept aside by the tearful look on Anita's face, and Marlene had to restrain herself from reaching up and caressing her old friend's cheek.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend kick you out and slam the door in your face?" Anita said quietly, squeezing Marlene's hands.

"No... no one's ever dared to do that to me. Is that why... is that what happened?"

"Yeah. This morning. We had an argument... a real bad one. We've been like cats and dogs for weeks now, but... this was the final straw. We're done," Anita said and wiped her misty eyes.

"Hon, I'm so sorry to hear that," Marlene said and gave her old lover's hand an extra-strong squeeze. "Her loss. You're the sweetest, kindest soul I know. She's gotta be screwin' someone else... I can't explain it otherwise," she continued, shaking her head.

Anita shrugged and began to toy with the Turkish lamp on the table. "Don't know... don't wanna know. It was so unexpected I didn't get my laptop or my wristwatch or anything... not even my phone. I barely got my wallet. I... I... kept an article from a couple of years ago when you got the award so I knew where to find you... I took the Metro here because I needed to talk to a friendly soul."

"I'm glad you did, hon," Marlene said and squeezed Anita's hand again.

The moment was interrupted by the dinging of the little bell above the door, heralding the arrival of two customers - their clothes, the words on their map of the city, and the fact that the wife had an umbrella over her arm suggested they were British.

"Anita, I just gotta..." Marlene said and got up, earning herself a little nod.

"How do you do," Marlene said in her best high school English once she had slipped behind the counter. "What can we do for you?"

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By the time Marlene got back to the aluminum table to continue the conversation, Anita's eyes were more red than pale blue, and she leaned down to give her old friend a little hug from above before sitting down.

Looking up, Anita sent her former lover a wistful smile that soon faded from her lips. "D- do you know what put the final nail in the coffin?" she said quietly.

"No?"

"I accidentally burned her toast this morning. I had made her some yogurt and cereal... Peach Melba and Frosted Flakes... but then the kitchen phone rang. It was one of those surveys, you know, and I didn't want to be rude and hang up... I just couldn't get back to the toaster in time. She flipped out... and when I say flipped out, I mean flipped out."

Marlene narrowed her eyes down into pale green slits and studied every last inch of Anita's emotional face on which her distress was quite visible. "I'm sorry... she kicked you out because you burned her toast? What the hell kinda woman would do that? And what the hell kinda woman can't make her own Goddamned breakfast!/? Do I know her?" she said in a voice that changed from growly to frosty as she spoke the sentence.

"I don't know... I don't think so. Her name is Julie Prellwitz," Anita said with a sniff. Her nose started running from the emotional strain she was under, but when she patted the pockets in her shorts to find a handkerchief, she discovered that she had left without one.

"Never heard of her," Marlene said icily, "...which is lucky. For her."

"I met her three years ago at an evening class," Anita continued, but the sniffing took over and turned quite insistent.

"Hang on..." Marlene said and quickly rose from the chair. Hurrying up to the counter, she took three napkins and offered them to her former lover.

"Thanks..." Anita said and blew her nose into the balled-up napkins. Sighing, she looked down and started shaking her head despondently. "I don't know what happened between us. At first, we were great together, but we changed... somehow. After Julie's promotion, she worked more, and when she finally came home at night, she was often so frustrated and upset with how her day had gone at the company that she hardly spoke to me..."

Anita suddenly realized that she was rambling - and not only that, but that she was rambling to a woman she hadn't seen in close to fifteen years. The concerned look on the blonde's face seemed to prove it, and Anita hurriedly wiped her nose again and stuffed the napkins into her shorts

pocket. "Oh... gosh, I'm so sorry, Marlene," she said and got up from the chair, "I didn't want to offload all my nonsense on you... you must be bored stiff by now... and you have plenty to do here... I just wanted to see you... so I'll just-"

"Hey, wait a minute... where are you going? Will you let me get a word in edgewise? Come on, sit down and let's talk..." Marlene said and held out her hand.

Anita kept standing at the table for a few seconds while she studied her former lover closely. Unlike Julie, Marlene's face was open and sincere at all times, even if Anita knew the feisty blonde had a temper that could rival anything if she got in the right mood. "But I don't wanna intrude..." she mumbled.

"And you're not... will you give me a break! I haven't seen you in God knows how long... I want to talk to you! I want to know what you're doing now and all those things," Marlene said and got up from the chair to quickly put two strong hands on Anita's elbows. "Tell you what we're gonna do... we're gonna go back to the office so we won't be on show for the world out here, and then I'm gonna make you a cup of coffee. Okay?"

"Well... okay."

"Okay. Hey, Karen!"

"Yeah?" Karen said, standing at the takeaway window.

"Hold the fort. I'll be in the office with my old friend," Marlene said and put a hand on the small of Anita's back. "Call me if you need help."

"Will do, boss," Karen said with a thumbs-up.

Smiling, Marlene turned back to Anita who still looked like she was on the brink of crying. "Hey... everything's gonna be all right. I promise," she said, gently clawing the taller woman's back.

The statement was meant as support, but it had the exact opposite effect on Anita: with jittering eyebrows, she let out a loud sob and an even louder sniff.

"Oh..." Marlene said and furrowed her brow. "Good thing I have a full box of tissues in the office... c'mon, it's right through here," she said and led Anita down past the soft drink refrigerators and through a white door with a row of brass letters that read Private.

"Watch your step," Marlene said as she held the door open so her surprise guest could get inside.

"Thank you." Sniffing, Anita looked down so she wouldn't trip over the doorstep. Once she was in the office, she was slightly underwhelmed by the small room - and on top of that, she was taken aback by its messy, cluttered appearance.

Though the office at the back of the store wasn't large, it held all the creature comforts one would expect: a couch, a metal desk, two chairs, a low table, a coffee machine, a small refrigerator, a magnet board that was covered by Juice-n-More's old, highly colorful menus and flyers, and a random selection of posters and pictures on the walls. Most were photos of the shop, but to offset that, Chrissie Hynde and Cyndi Lauper were looking down upon the office from retro posters designed to look like they were originals from the mid-1980s.

Marlene guided the blubbing Anita over to the couch and helped her sit down. "There, there... the tissues are on the table. What kind of coffee would you like?" she said, patting her old lover's hand.

"Oh..." - *sniff* - "Just black and strong..." - *sniff* - "with a dash of sugar if you have it."

"Well, I have artificial sweetener," Marlene said and moved over to the coffee machine where she held up a small pack of DuraSweet.

"Uh... it'll do. Half of it, please," Anita said with a nod as she grabbed the first of many tissues from the pale blue box.

Marlene nodded back and tore open the pack to pour half of the sweetener into the branded mug. As she took the glass pot and began to pour the freshly brewed black liquid into it, she couldn't help but look at the older version of her long-lost friend and former lover.

The intervening years had left a few marks on her face, especially at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and she had gained a few pounds here and there along her tall frame, but she was still as beautiful as she had ever been with the same blue eyes that still shone with warmth and intelligence - that never turned into snootiness - the same fidgety hands that never rested anywhere for long, and the same endless, delectable legs that just did not quit.

A stinging pain that shot up from her fingers made Marlene look down and realize that in her infatuation of her new, old friend, she had made one hell of a mess on the small table - namely, black coffee everywhere. "Aw, shit!" she cried, yanking her hand back from the burning hot liquid. "Ouch! Ouch-ouch-ouch... Ouch!"

Yelping, Anita instantly shot up from the couch and bounded over to Marlene's side. With well-rehearsed moves, she took a stack of tissues and began to dab the table to stop the coffee tsunami from reaching the edges. "How on earth did you manage to do that, Marlene?"

" 'Cos I was gawking at you, that's how!" Marlene said and wiped her smarting index finger on a towel. Looking at it, she could see that it had turned red, but she'd survive. "Look... hey... Anita, you don't have to wipe up my mess, you know..." she said and put a calming hand on her old friend's slightly frantic gestures.

"I know, but... it gives me something to do," Anita said with a wistful smile.

"I get that, but-"

Just then, Karen stuck her head in through the door and opened her mouth. She briefly stared at the coffee spill, but soon shrugged. "Boss, we have two customers out here. Another German and a local. I can't speak German, so..."

"Yeah, I'm on it, Karen. I'll be right there," Marlene said and helped Anita wipe up the last coffee and dump the soaked tissues into the paper bin. "Well, I guess the sweetener's been a little diluted, but you can take some more if you want. Okay? I gotta go, but I won't be long."

"Oh sure, you have to mind the store, no problem," Anita said and bent down to take a long sip from the mug so she could carry it over to the couch without further incidents. "Go on."

Once Marlene had left the office, Anita carried the mug back and sat down. After wiping it down carefully, she placed it on a dish mat on the table to let the steaming hot coffee cool off. A few moments later, her eye caught a stack of glittery travel magazines that had been placed haphazardly on a desk at the other side of the office. At first, she tried to ignore it, but it proved too strong and she got up to straighten it out.

Squinting, she still felt that something was off, and she finally took the stack and sorted the magazines in chronological order - then she sat down with a satisfied smile on her face.

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Five minutes later, Marlene came back into the office and joined Anita on the couch. "Anyway... how's the last few years been for you?" she said and put her hand on Anita's knee the way old lovers do. When she caught a glimpse of awkwardness in Anita's eyes at the touch, she put her hands in her lap, the way old lovers often did.

"Okay, I guess. Up and down," Anita said and briefly leaned into Marlene's strong shoulder. "All in all, it's been okay... I can't complain. Julie gave me so much but I don't know how much I really gave her back. I did give her my love, though... I did give her that." - The last words were delivered in a whisper. Shrugging, Anita leaned forward and picked up the mug. With a sigh, she drained it of the last of the coffee.

"And she paid you back by throwing you out when you forgot her toast," Marlene said and turned around so she was facing her tall friend. "Now... okay, to me, right? To me, that's just nuts. Madness personified. When I look at you, I think 'oh my God, who is that Goddess who walks among us?!' But maybe that's just me, I dunno."

Hearing that, Anita snorted loudly and slapped a hand over her mouth. "You must be joking... who are you talking about? I know for a fact it's not me," she mumbled through her fingers.

"Well, of course it's you... silly," Marlene said and once again tried to put a warm hand on Anita's knee. This time, she didn't receive an awkward look for her trouble and kept the hand right where it was. "Hey... I got an idea. I got one hell of an idea and I don't want you to say no to it, okay?"

"Uh... okay...?"

"I have a spare bedroom. Anita, I think you should come home with me tonight... no no, don't give me that look! It's simply so you can spend the night in a safe place!"

"Marlene-"

"No, hear me out. Do you feel like... naw, do you \*want\* to go home to Julie tonight? After what she did... after how she made you feel? You don't have to answer, I can see in your eyes that you don't, my old friend," Marlene said and reached up to gently touch the tip of Anita's nose, something that earned her a shy smile. "But what else is there? Rent a hotel room for the night? Sleep on a bench down at the railway station? Go to one of the homeless shelters? Nah, nope and nuh-uh. And I'll throw in another nuh-uh for good measure."

Anita started chewing on her cheek. She knew that Marlene was right, even if she wasn't quite sure how to interpret the look on her old lover's face. For the time being, it was sincere, but she remembered from the old days that a fox-like grin was never far from Marlene's lips - and when it showed up, it usually meant she was ready for a little amorous entanglement. "Well... thank you for the offer, but is this really convenient for you? Aren't you... well, I honestly thought you'd be seeing someone for sure...?"

"I got no one, baby," Marlene said, accompanied by an overly dramatic sigh. "I'm just me, myself and I. Me and other women... we're like ferries passing in the night... when we meet in the middle, we toot out loud and then we wave goodbye... right?"

Anita chuckled and shook her head. When Marlene's face was too cute to ignore, she quickly pulled the fiery blonde into a hug and gave her a little crush. "Like always, you are very, very hard to decipher."

"Is that a yes?"

"I... well, I guess it is."

Marlene wanted to spew out a few dozen quips, but the raw, tearful look on Anita's face gave her enough of a nudge to keep quiet - for once. She settled for grunting contentedly into Anita's body and responding to the hug.

Once they separated, Anita stole a very quick kiss on Marlene's lips for comfort. "Are you still living in the same grotto?"

"No, I've moved over to the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street, just across from the Central Hospital. It's on the fifth floor... I got a clear view of the rescue helicopters when they land on the helipad on the roof of the hospital. Hey..." - Marlene pulled back and studied the blue, highly confused eyes of her old friend, "that's a mighty fine proposition!"

"Uh... what is?"

Getting up from the couch, Marlene went over to the metal desk and picked up her wallet to have money for the taxi she was about to call. "We're going over there now... as in right now," she said and patted her pocket to see if she had her house keys with her.

"But... what about your store? Your employee can't speak German and I really wouldn't want you to lose money just because I need a place to sleep and it's only eleven o'clock so there's plenty of time for me to find someplace else..."

"Anita?"

"Y- yeah?"

"We're going," Marlene said and went back to the couch to grab her old friend's hands.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

Thirty minutes later, the two women stepped out of the taxi and walked across the broad sidewalk to get to the front door of Marlene's apartment building on the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street.

The four-lane boulevard behind them was a beehive of activity with hundreds of cars, vans, trucks and motorcycles noisily rushing past in both directions. The nineteen-story Central Hospital was across the street, majestic and foreboding in all its concrete glory.

Just as Anita was looking at the huge structure, an ambulance and a paramedic unit with full lights and sirens came from the right and drove into the hospital's lot.

"Oh, someone's having a worse day than me... boy, they were really loud," she said, looking at the two emergency vehicles as they drove down a large ramp and disappeared from view.

"Yep," Marlene said and unlocked the front door. "Happens around fifty times a day. C'mon, hon. The door's open."

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Upstairs, Marlene unlocked the door to her apartment and swung it open. "Welcome to my new pad, Anita."

"Thank you," Anita said and walked into a hallway. Her first impression was that it was really white, with every wall of every room held in a pleasant shade of chalk. Her second impression was that Marlene's tastes had matured a lot in the fifteen years that had gone by since they had split up.

Back then, the fiery blonde had had plastic palm trees, sack chairs, classic movie posters on the walls, and garishly colored neon lights and lava lamps everywhere, but now, everything was cool and classy.

"The bathroom's the first door on your left," Marlene said and closed the front door behind them. "The spare bedroom you'll be sleeping in is the first on your right, this one," she continued, tapping an index finger on the door handle.

"Okay."

"Yep. It's next to the kitchen as you can see. The second door on the left is my bedroom... and then we have the ensuite," Marlene said, opening a frosted glass door to reveal the rest of the luxurious apartment.

The two large living rooms continued the classy theme by being a cozy den and an open lounge, respectively. The den was held in warmer colors, with a maroon carpet on the floor and a black-framed glass table standing between three armchairs and a comfortable couch that were all clad in black microfiber. The couch had a blue-and-red plaid spread over it at the far end, and there was a painting matching the plaid's colors on the wall above it.

A large sliding door separated the den from the lounge that was equipped with a beechwood parquet floor and furnished with a low, bright white wooden table, a three-seater couch and two square armchairs, all held in exquisite sandy microfiber.

Two slightly abstract paintings of a pair of whale tails were colorful exclamation points on the off-white walls, and to the left stood a beech sideboard with a pair of blue glass vases and a surprisingly small TV.

"Wow... look at all this," Anita said as she stepped into the lounge. "Goodness me, this is so beautiful... much, much nicer than your old, uh... dungeon."

Grinning, Marlene put a hand on the small of her tall friend's back and guided her further into the lounge. "Thank you. I guess I've grown up."

"You must have..."

"Yeah. Listen, what's mine is yours. Okay? You can kick back and flake out in here or the den, you can take a shower if you like... my bathrobe is probably a little too short for you, but, huh..." - Marlene took the opportunity to sneak a glance at Anita's long legs - "Anyway, if you wanna watch a little teevee, it's all yours. I have sixty channels with a buncha crap on, but you'll find a couple of DVDs in the sideboard, so..."

"Thank you so much, Marlene," Anita said and pulled her friend into a hug. "It really means a lot to me."

"I knew it would, that's why we did it. Yeah? Hey, before I go back to the store, I think I better show you the spare bedroom. I sorta use it for my hobby, and... no, it's not what you think... you perv," Marlene said, grinning broadly at the wide open and slightly shocked look on Anita's face.

"Uh, but I didn't-" Anita said and hurriedly rubbed her chin, but Marlene just shook her head.

"Oh yeah you did! Nah... remember back in the old days, I had a huge collection of furry bedfellows like koalas, teddies, elephants, little monkeys... all kinds of stuff?" Marlene said and hooked her arm inside Anita's. "Well, a couple of years ago, I traded them for an... uh... I better show you."

The two women walked back down the hallway until they were standing at the door to the spare bedroom. Smiling, Marlene depressed the handle and opened the door to reveal - apart from a bed with a Visit Ibiza bedspread - a wooden desk with three antique dollhouses in various states of restoration.

"Oh! My! Goodness!" Anita breathed, staring wide-eyed at the antique toys. "Oh, they're just beautiful! Oh! Look at all those little details!"

"Yeah, they're kinda neat, eh? I traded my collection of bedfellows for the one on the right. I guess it sorta stirred something inside me, and... well, I bought two more. It's such a fun break from the endless slog of mixing salads or working on the balance sheet on the computer, you know," Marlene said and rubbed Anita's back.

Leaning down, Anita peeked into one of the dollhouses to really see the intricate craftsmanship. As she took in the fine details of the miniatures, she found herself needing to reassess her old lover once more. "Oh, I can definitely believe that... they're so beautiful..."

"I'm glad you like 'em," Marlene said and walked back over to the door. "So... uh, I think I'll be going back to the store now. Like I said, make yourself at home. Hey, Anita?"

"Uh, yeah?" Anita said and stood up straight.

Marlene let her eyes glide up the entire length of Anita's body - from her bare feet in sandals, past her silky smooth, endless legs and the yellow shorts, further up along the white v-neck blouse, and finally up to her slightly puzzled but picture-perfect face. "Nothin'," she said with a grin as she left the spare bedroom.

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A quarter past eight in the evening, Marlene locked herself into her apartment and put down a large Styrofoam box and her Nishiki Criterium in the hallway. Out of reflex, she grabbed the door handle for the spare bedroom without considering that her house guest might be inside - dressed or otherwise. "Uh, Anita... are you in here?" she said, but since she already had the door wide open, it was a moot point.

Chuckling over the odd fact that she had to adjust to suddenly living a twosome life, Marlene quickly put the expensive bicycle into the specially designed clamp on the floor and went in search of her guest.

She found Anita sitting on the couch with the TV remote in her limp hand and her head leaned against the backrest - the TV itself was showing the default menu screen of the DVD she had been watching. A half-full glass of very flat-looking mineral water was on the table next to a small plate with a half-eaten chocolate chunk cookie and a few crumbs that proved she'd had more than one.

"Awwww, she's too adorable," Marlene whispered as she tip-toed around the couch to avoid disturbing her slumbering guest. Sitting down carefully, she studied the peaceful face of her former lover, thinking about all the good times they had shared. *'We were great together... hell, we still are. But it would be predatory to catch her on the rebound. Only assholes try to get their hooks into gals when they're this vulnerable... but look at her! Fifteen years older but twice as gorgeous!'*

Marlene's presence stirred Anita from her sleep, and she yawned widely and smacked her lips a couple of times. Shuffling around on the couch, she forgot she was holding the remote and dropped it which made it hit the carpet with a bump. "Oh... wha... what's that? I'll get it... I'll get-oh..." - only then did she notice that Marlene had returned. "Hi. I must have dozed off..." she said and sat up straight.

"Hi. You looked so cute I didn't want to disturb you. Have you eaten?" Marlene said and reached over to place a tiny little kiss on Anita's soft cheek.

"Yes, I had a couple of cookies. I only wanted one, but it was so good I took another," Anita said and rubbed her weary eyes. "Uh... I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not! Sheesh! Hey... wait a minute...? Did you vacuum?" Marlene said and looked around the lounge. "Holy shit, you have! You've vacuumed the whole dang place, haven't you?"

Nodding, Anita ducked her head down between her shoulders. "Well, I guess I did, yes. I did the dishes and made your bed, too."

"Aw, jeez! You're my guest, hon, not my housemaid! Thanks anyhow, though. I was running out of clean plates."

"You definitely were..."

Marlene grinned and shook her head at her old lover's behavior. "You, my friend, have got to learn how to relax and do nothing. Anyway, I saved us some salad and stuff from the store if you're interested? We could share a bottle of white and, you know... kick back a little...? Watch another movie or something...?"

"That's an awful lot of questions, Marlene. Instead of the movie, could we... uh... would you be insulted if I wanted to make it an early night? It's been a really emotional day..."

"No, hon... c'mon, you know me better than that," Marlene said and reached down for the remote. After stopping the integrated DVD, she turned off the TV and put the remote on the table. "I'm just glad you came to me when you needed a friend. Yeah."

Anita smiled and turned her head to the left to look deeply into Marlene's husky green eyes.

They kept eye contact for a few seconds, but then Marlene grinned broadly and rolled her eyes. "You must be exhausted, hon. You just gave me The Look," she said and briefly ran a hand through Anita's dark locks.

Anita blushed and looked back down at her hands. "I think I'm going to need your help tomorrow, Marlene. I called Julie-"

"Ugh!"

"- and arranged that I'm going over to her apartment first thing tomorrow morning to pick up my most important things. So... will you help me?"

"You better believe I will, hon!" Marlene said and caressed Anita's shoulder.

"Thank you."

Marlene grabbed the opportunity and leaned in towards her old lover's neck with a throaty purr. "Do you want me to take my tennis racket? You know, for keeping her back in case she tries to make a pass at you?"

Anita's let out a wild snicker that was soon interrupted by a yawn that broke through and left her face wide open. "Oh... pardon..."

"No worries. I think a little salad will do us good now. You just sit here and rest your gorgeous being and I'll provide the food and the wine and... stuff. Okay?" Marlene said and got up from the couch.

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Two words... oregano breadsticks."

"Oh, I love breadstic-" Anita said but was immediately - and rudely - ambushed by another jaw-breaking yawn.

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The next morning dawned dull and overcast, and Anita could hear a few drops of rain tapping against the window of the spare bedroom as she woke up. Yawning, she rolled over onto her back and stretched out to her full length - plus a little more.

"Ahhhh," she breathed, looking around the smallish room. It was quite full from the items needed for Marlene's hobby, not to mention her Nishiki racer and the spinning bike she used for exercise, but it didn't feel too cramped, merely busy.

After scratching her entire body, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and shuffled around for her sandals. The oversized sleeping shirt she had borrowed was roughly eight inches too short, so she felt rather exposed as she sat on the bed.

Snickering, she got up and pulled the shirt way down so her panties weren't out in the open. She tip-toed over to the door and opened it, and at once, she could hear a radio tuned into Pop FM playing very softly from the kitchen, accompanied by Marlene humming along to an old hit from the 1960s.

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Once nature's business had been taken care of, Anita ventured into the kitchen, thinking somberly about how her life had been turned upside down by events that had transpired in a similar kitchen only twenty-four hours earlier. Her gloomy thoughts disappeared like the morning dew when she caught a glimpse of Marlene jiggly-wiggling along to the radio.

The feisty blonde had always had a compact frame, but now it had turned athletic, too. She was barefoot and wearing green boxers and a simple, purple spaghetti-strap tank, and her body with the toned legs, arms and shoulders - and a scrumptious rear end - moved in perfect beat to the music.

The sight stirred something so deeply inside Anita that she could hardly recognize the feeling - much less remember the last time she had been that affected by something as simple as a woman dancing in a kitchen.

"Good morning," she said to get away from the warm wave that threatened to sweep over her. Instead of following the wave's call, she went over to one of the cupboards and reached up to get a bowl for her cereal.

"Mornin'," Marlene said and turned around to look at Anita's elongated frame. The too-short sleeping shirt caught her eye and she couldn't stop a crooked grin from gracing her features. "Didya sleep well?"

"It took me a little while to fall asleep, but after that, it was just fine. It was a wonderful bed. Very comfortable. Julie preferred a softer bed, but I never really slept well in it..."

"Anita... jeez," Marlene said and shook her head slowly. Sighing, she turned back to the kitchen table and finished slicing two buns for each. Once they were ready, she put them into the toaster

oven, twisted the knob and waited for it to send out its electronic *ding*. "When are you going to learn to look after yourself? Sometimes, you just have to assert your position, girl. They're gonna use you as a doormat if you don't... and that's pretty much what happened, isn't it?"

Shrugging, Anita opened the refrigerator door and took some milk for her cereal. "I guess," she said with a shrug as she put the items down on the small table in the center of the kitchen and started searching for something she could put into the bowl. "Do you have any muesli?"

"Yes, that cupboard right there... it's organic."

"No problem. As long as it's got nuts and raisins, I can eat it... oh... darn, no raisins," Anita said, looking at the clear plastic bag with the breakfast cereal. "Oatmeal flakes, slices of dried banana and papaya, strawberry chunks, whole hazelnuts, sunflower seeds... no raisins."

"Don't like raisins," Marlene said and took the opportunity to stand up on tip-toes and kiss Anita on the neck.

Crinkling her nose, Anita stared at the bag but eventually shrugged and poured some of it out into the bowl.

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An hour and a half later, it was a far more nervous and subdued Anita who stepped out of the station wagon taxi they had called for. On their way to her old apartment, they had stopped at a DIY center to buy five packing cases, but as she put the thick sheets of cardboard under her arm and looked up at the six-story apartment building on Fredericksburg Avenue, a storm of fear and worry raged inside her.

As always when she was nervous, her already jittery hands became like little jumpy kittens, and she simply could not keep them still for more than a few seconds at a time.

Marlene immediately sensed her old friend's anxiety and sought out her free hand to give it an affirming and calming squeeze. "Are you all right? It doesn't have to be today. Perha-"

"Yes, it does. I... I have a deadline. I need my laptop. And if I don't do this now, I never will."

"Well, I'll be right there the whole time to back you up. And maybe trade a few barbs with the Dragon Lady from Hell, who knows?" Marlene said with the face of an angel, but the tone of her voice gave away that she very much hoped that she and Anita's old lover would get into a verbal wrestling match.

"Julie isn't like that at all," Anita said quietly as she pressed the button for her old apartment on the intercom by the front door.

"Dunno about that... no way she's playing with a full deck the way she treated you," Marlene mumbled under her breath.

'Yes?' Julie's disembodied voice said from the panel.

The sound of her exes voice sent a string of shivers down Anita's spine and she needed several deep breaths to calm herself down. "It's Anita and a friend," she said in a voice that trembled slightly, "may we come up, please?"

*'I thought you'd come alone...'*

"Well, I didn't."

Anita's statement was never answered - instead, the door was buzzed open and Anita hurriedly opened it out of fear Julie would change her mind and keep her away from all her things.

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A short while later, Anita and Marlene stood in front of the apartment door on the third floor. When Anita noted that her name had already been removed from the little panel next to the door, she gulped and reached for the bell with ice cold fingers.

As the huge, dreaded moment came closer and closer, Marlene scrunched up her face and stared with laser-like intensity at the door. *'I can't wait to see what kind of dragon she must be... man, to throw out my Anita... the sweetest, kindest, least egotistical person I know... hell, that I've ever known! She must be one hell of a-'*

Marlene's slightly less than positive predetermined notion of Anita's recent lover was popped like a soap bubble when the door was opened to reveal a most un-dragon-like curly-haired, brown eyed woman in her mid-thirties wearing a tan business suit and a sad look on her pretty and slightly angular face.

Julie was around five foot five on bare feet - she was carrying a pair of high-heeled shoes that she obviously hadn't had time to put on yet - which would make her a few inches taller than Marlene once the shoes were on.

Grunting, Marlene tried to stand up straighter.

"Hello, Julie," Anita squeaked.

Julie gave Marlene a very thorough - and very silent - Third Degree examination before she averted her eyes back to Anita. "Hello, Anita. Who's your friend?"

"I'm Marlene Damgaard. I'm Anita's moral support. Hi," Marlene said and thrust out her hand. *'If I don't got the height... or the boobs... I sure as shit got the physical presence... look at her, she's just a scrawny little thing... okay, she's pretty... but hey, I ain't that bad, neither!'*

"Hello, Miss Damgaard," Julie said in a cool voice, briefly shaking the hand that was presented to her.

*I knew it, limp as last week's lettuce,* Marlene thought, unable to stop a shit-eating grin from spreading over her face.

Anita cleared her throat and put her hand on Marlene's back to get the blonde tiger to calm down a little. "We're here to get my things, Julie. My computer, my watch, my clothes and a couple of other items."

"If it can't be helped...?" Julie said and cocked her head.

*Uh-oh, torpedoes in the water, Captain Anita,* Marlene thought at once, no stranger at all to the look Julie was sending the tall woman who was standing between them.

Anita's face grew ever redder at the attention, and she shuffled around on the spot while she searched her mind for something to say. "I think-" - her voice broke and she had to start over, "I think it can't, Julie. I don't think we can get it to work again."

The air was thick with awkwardness and unsaid questions, and each of the three women dealt with it in different ways: Julie scrunched up her face but kept silent, Anita sighed deeply and looked down at her feet, and Marlene offered Julie a blinding *bye-bye-birdie-she's-better-off-without-ya* grin while she squeezed Anita's hand.

"Well, you better come inside, then," Julie said and stepped aside to let her two guests have access to her apartment.

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In the taxi on the way back to Marlene's place, Anita sighed so often and so deeply that she didn't even have to look at Marlene to let the blonde woman know how she felt.

Her heart and mind had become so numb she could barely breathe - all she could think of was the love she had shared with Julie before their relationship had gone sour. *'Like all my relationships... why? What's wrong with me since I can't even keep a very nice woman like Julie... what am I doing wrong? Am I not trying hard enough? Am I trying too hard? Am I looking in the wrong places? Am I just that unlovable...?'*

As the taxi came to a stop at a red light, Anita looked to her right to study the athletic blonde sitting next to her. A part of her wanted to go for it, wanted to at least play the overture before the moment was gone, but another part was frightened of where it would leave her if it went wrong, too.

The first time she and Marlene had split up, they were both young, carefree and very much focused on their respective careers, and the inevitable post-breakup hangover had only lasted for a couple of weeks until the next dazzling gal had come around - but with maturity came insecurity.

In the end, the frightened part won out and Anita looked straight ahead, at the back of the driver's comb-over. Just as the traffic lights went green, a deep sigh that turned into a muted sob escaped her lips. Embarrassed by her emotional lapse, she tried to hide it with a cough, but the tears that followed gave it away.

"Oh, hon, she's not worth crying over," Marlene said and gave Anita's hands a squeeze. The seat belt meant that she couldn't reach over and give her old lover a hug, but she did the next best thing and caressed Anita's shorts-clad thigh.

"I loved her," Anita said quietly, responding to the caress by placing her hand on top of Marlene's to still it. "Two years of my life... I'm not getting any younger..."

"Oh, bullshit... pardon my French," Marlene said and gave Anita's thigh a very gentle slap. "Hon, you look better now than you did fifteen years ago! By the time you're fifty, you're gonna be one hell of a knockout! Hey... hey, Anita, I'm not kiddin' here, you know..."

"Thank you for trying to cheer me up..."

"It's in my job description," Marlene said with a grin.

On the final stretch back to the apartment near Trepkas Street, the taxi had to pull over to let an odd-looking ambulance and its police escort through. Unlike the other ambulances that were typically yellow and green, this one was bright red and the rear windows were covered by what looked like golden tin foil.

"That's the vehicle they use when it's a burn victim," Marlene said grimly.

Anita crinkled her nose in sympathy but looked away from the ambulance, unable to contain any more negativity for the time being.

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Once they had paid the cab driver and had deposited the five packing cases on the sidewalk, Marlene checked her watch. "Okay, Peter and his boyfriend should be home now," she said and looked up at the windows of Peter's apartment on the second floor. "They're willing to do most things for two bottles of red."

"Okay," Anita said, stuffing her hands down her shorts pockets.

"Let's give it a shot," Marlene continued and walked over to the panel by the door - unfortunately, the buzz went unanswered. Another attempt yielded the same result. The inevitable comment wasn't long in coming: "Shit..."

"They're not home?"

"Maybe they're, uh, busy," Marlene said with a sly grin. "Uh... okay, let's haul the packing cases inside. Looks like we gotta do it ourselves. But we can do that, can't we? I mean, we're strong, independent, good-looking... sure we can! C'mon!" she said, thumping her fists against each other and then on her chest like a latter-day Tarzan.

"I want some of the medication you're on..." Anita mumbled under her breath. Shaking her head, she grabbed the first of the heavy packing cases and dragged it towards the door.

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### CHAPTER 3

*Three days later.*

*'Anita, will you listen-'*

*'No, Marlene, house guests are like fish. Three days and they need to go,'* two familiar voices said going down the stairs to the front door of Marlene's apartment building. *'I've arranged everything. It's a sublet apartment, it's very nice, and it's owned by a dear old lady.'*

*'Uh-huh, but you're not a fish!'*

*'It's something I need to do. Didn't you tell me yourself that I needed to be more assertive?'*

*'Yeah, but I didn't mean you had to be more assertive when it came to not wantin' to stay here with me!'*

*'Well, it's just something I need to do, Marlene. I hope you understand. Please hold the door.'*

Grumble, grumble - *'Well, all right.'*

The door swung open to reveal four people carrying packing cases; Anita, Marlene, Peter and finally Peter's boyfriend Thomas who were all displaying wildly different expressions on their faces, though all had a story to tell - Anita was determined, Marlene was miffed, Peter was grinning, and Thomas was simply confused.

Anita put down her packing case on the bed of the carrier cycle she had borrowed from Peter, and pushed it to the side to make room for the other three. Through meticulous and scientific calculations involving endless lists of what would fit where based on size and weight, she had managed to save one packing case by re-sorting the contents.

"Anita, hey..." Marlene said quietly and put her hand on her tall friend's T-shirt clad elbow. "For the very last time, having you here is not a problem. It has never been a problem, and it will never be a problem. Why are you so stubborn all of a sudden?"

When she didn't get an answer, Marlene realized that Anita wouldn't speak her mind with the two interested spectators present, so she spun around and ushered Peter and his boyfriend inside with a pair of gentle but insistent hands on their backs. "Thanks, fellas. I'll drop by with the wine a little later. Okay?" she said as she closed the front door behind them.

Once they were alone - which was a relative term considering they were standing on the sidewalk of a busy boulevard - Marlene went over to the carrier cycle and leaned against it. "Hey... hon, what is this? Huh?" she said, stuffing her hands down the rear pockets of her chinos.

"Oh, I..." Anita said and rubbed her eyes. Sighing, she rubbed them again for good measure and offered Marlene a half-shrug. "I just need a little me-time. Over the last few days, I slipped into the old patterns. I go back to being a servant girl... I just vacuum, do the dishes, make the beds, do the dishes again... all because I don't feel I can bring any emotional substance to the relationship... or in this case, the friendship... and if I can't do that, I can at least do something physical to make you appreciate me."

"Jesus," Marlene said and jumped free of the carrier cycle, "okay, Anita, that's bullshit!"

"No it's not. It's the honest-to-goodness truth."

"No, it's bullshit," Marlene said strongly, leaning in towards her old lover so she didn't have to shout it out across the boulevard. "I don't know what kind of slave driver Julie was, but I have never asked you to... or God forbid, told you to... vacuum or any of the other things you've been doing while I've been at work. If she couldn't see you as the beautiful creature you are, inside \*and\* out, she's the one with the Goddamned problem!"

"It's not that simple..."

"The hell it isn't! It's not what you do, it's who you are... if you had been lazing about all day in bunny slippers, Capris and a tattered t-shirt, the sight of you would still have put a smile on my face when I got home. That's not to say I don't appreciate that you've made my apartment shine like never before, but that's beside the point."

Anita just shrugged.

"You're kind, witty, ba-yutiful, sexy as all hell \*and\* brainy... you translate books for a living, for cryin' out loud! Look, Anita, you have a ton to offer any gal who's clever enough to consider you an equal partner... but that's the operative term, right? Equal. Partner." - The last two words were emphasized by Marlene poking Anita in the gut with an index finger.

Sighing, Anita rubbed her brow and shot her old lover a disheartened look. "Thank you for trying to cheer me up. I've made up my mind. I need some time alone." - *'Before I mess everything up again... I'm already halfway there,'* she continued in her mind.

Marlene echoed Anita's sigh and moved back from her old friend, crossing her arms over her chest with a sour look on her face. After a few seconds, the darkness gave way to a wry smile, and she put out her arms to invite Anita into a hug.

Wrapping her arms around her old friend, Marlene gave the taller woman a strong crush and a little kiss on the cheek. "All right. I respect your decision one hundred percent... if I didn't, I'd be Julie, and the thought alone gives me the creeps. But I'm coming with you, okay? I mean, to help you carry up the packing cases."

"Thank you," Anita said and replied to the kiss by adding one of her own. "It's only on the first floor so I should be all right."

"Of course, but look at this..." Marlene said and pulled back her right sleeve to show off her toned arm. "Now tell me, does the little old lady have anything to rival this? Eh? I think not!"

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A couple of hours later, Marlene tore through the busy city streets on her Nishiki Criterium, disregarding several, if not most, of the traffic laws. Hunkered down over the handlebars, she had the pedals going at a furious pace to blow off some steam - at one point, she overtook a learner car that was driving in the inside lane.

Coming up to a red light at the large intersection by the City Hall Square, she zipped diagonally across the six-lane boulevard ahead of the oncoming traffic with very little regard for her own safety. The concrete lanes at the bus stops on the Square itself - always off-limits for bicycles - proved to be an irresistible shortcut, and she took the corner onto West Rampart Street leaning down like a professional.

She didn't sit up in the saddle until she flew past the sign that banned all bicycle riding in the pedestrian zone; with the street quite busy with people of all sizes and ages, she gradually slowed to a walking pace so she wouldn't get tangled up with anyone.

When she got closer to the Juice-n-More, she unhooked her shoes from the clamps on the pedals and jumped off the Nishiki. The sight of several customers standing at the takeaway window talking excitedly amongst themselves put a smile on her face for the first time since she had given Anita a brief goodbye kiss in her new apartment.

There was no doubting the nationality of the customers - French - and as Marlene went past going into the store with her bike, she offered them a broad smile and a confident "Bonjour!" that made them smile back at her.

"Ugh, glad you're here, boss," Karen said with a harried look on their face. "I can't understand a word of what these people are saying!"

"I'll be there in a flash, Karen. Hang on," Marlene said and wheeled the Nishiki into the office.

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An hour later, the mad rush they always experienced at lunch was over and a sated calmness fell over the Juice-n-More. While Karen was resting her feet in the office, Marlene was sitting on a bar stool behind the counter, pretending to read a newspaper.

'Pretending', because all she could think of was Anita. Anita's smile, Anita's laugh, Anita's gorgeous eyes, Anita's endless legs, Anita's sculpted torso, Anita's cute pout their first morning together when she had discovered the muesli didn't contain raisins, Anita's warmth, Anita's lips... especially when they were in contact with her own.

Marlene was so far into her Anita-shaped daydream that she didn't even notice she had a customer. It wasn't before the man cleared his throat loud enough to wake the dead that it dawned on her there was money to be made. "Oh..." she said and got up. "Sorry. I was, uh... I was reading a really interesting article."

The customer - in his late twenties with a full beard, a pair of shades, a white Tuborg t-shirt and a 1970s-style baseball cap advertising Mack Trucks - stepped up to the takeaway window and pointed at the various plastic containers. "I want a hot ciabatta with Chinese leaves, tomatoes, cucumbers, hold the onions, spicy peppers, olives, corn and sweet peas, plus some seasoning sauce. Got that?"

"Yeah," Marlene said and put two halved ciabatta buns into one of the ovens. Taking a scoop, she started collecting the things the customer had ordered and putting them on a piece of greaseproof paper. As she went through the containers, her eye caught a tall, dark-haired woman who was walking from right to left on the Avenue.

For the first few seconds - while she absentmindedly scooped up the items for the salad sandwich - Marlene thought the woman was Anita, but she could see by the woman's stride that it wasn't.

Behind her, the oven *dinged*, and she quickly took the hot buns and placed them on the counter. With a flurry, she swept the ingredients from the greaseproof paper and into the buns, and finished the takeaway meal by squirting everything with a creamy, non-fattening, organic seasoning sauce and stuffing it down a folded sleeve. "Here you go, Sir. That'll be thirty-five Kroner."

"I'm not paying for that," the man said surly.

"What- why?"

"You put onions in it! I said, hold the onions. I'm not paying for that."

"I did not," Marlene mumbled and pulled aside the top bun to see for herself. Sure enough, there they were, drowned by the creamy, non-fattening, organic seasoning sauce - onion rings, and plenty of them. "Aw, hell," she groaned and started looking around for a fork to get the evil, circular things out of the salad sandwich before the customer lost patience and walked away.

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After another mad scramble around dinner time, the Juice-n-More began to wind down with the rest of the shops and stores along Copenhagen Avenue as the hands of the clock approached eight PM. Marlene had the radio going as she mopped the floor, and she quite literally whistled while she worked.

The mop got a good workout as she gave the floor a thorough scrub to get rid of all the little stains and specs of dirt that always accumulated over the course of the day from the many sandals, shoes and boots that stepped onto the white tiles. She had already put the chairs on top of the polished aluminum cafe tables so she could reach everywhere, and she made sure to mop the legs of the tables to make them extra shiny.

While Marlene was busy, a very familiar tall, dark-haired figure stepped up to the takeaway window and eyed a few of the tasty-looking ingredients. Stifling a snicker, the woman pinched her nose and said: "Uhhh... do you sell fried sausages, lady?" in a distorted voice.

Marlene had time for rolling her eyes and groaning throatily before she noticed she'd had her leg well and truly pulled. "Oh, you," she said and bared her teeth in an unrestrained grin. "No, we don't!"

"Oh, that's too bad," Anita said in her regular voice. "I guess I have to settle for a salad, then."

Marlene suddenly noticed her old friend was wearing clothes she hadn't seen her in before - a very nice purple, long-sleeved T-shirt with silver print on the front that said 'Lady Bartholdy Street Fashion', and a pair of denim shorts that came to mid-thigh. In addition to those items, Anita wore blue canvas sports shoes and a pair of DeMaussey sunglasses that she had pushed up into her hair.

"Uh... I mean, like, wow," Marlene said, cocking her head as she took in Anita's new and improved appearance. "What's going on here? You look hubba-hubba, hon."

"Thank you," Anita said and promptly blushed. "After getting everything set up in my new apartment, I needed to splash out a little. You know, to celebrate."

"Uh-huh? Well, you're a splash, all right."

Snickering, Anita shuffled left and right in front of the takeaway window while holding her hands on her stomach. "I got hungry and I was only one Metro stop away so I thought I'd come and see you. And I wasn't kidding about the salad, I'd really like to buy one."

"Okay...? Well, come in and sit down. I can fix you anything you like," Marlene said and waved her friend inside. As the tall woman entered the store and walked up to the counter, Marlene was hanging over the side to get a better look at the denim shorts - or rather, at Anita's butt. "Hello gorgeous, they're a pretty good fit, huh?"

Anita blushed like mad and ducked her head down between her shoulders. "I think so," she mumbled after a few seconds.

"Aw, you better believe they are. So... the salad. You want a ciabatta bun? They've been popular today."

"No thanks, just a salad. A mixed one, if you don't mind," Anita said and found her wallet.

Marlene shook her head and put her hands on her apron-clad hips. "Tell you one thing right from the start... ain't no way I'm gonna let you pay for it. Nuh-uh. Dinner's on the house, hon. Always. You know that."

"It makes me feel like a leech," Anita said as she put away the wallet.

Marlene couldn't help it - as she looked at Anita, her eyebrows wiggled up and down like a latter-day Groucho Marx. "Best lookin' leech I ever saw," she drawled.

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Five minutes later, Marlene had made Anita a tasty mixed salad that she dug into with gusto while sitting at the same table she had used the first time she had been to the store.

Marlene sat opposite her and simply studied Anita as she ate. Unable to hide the crooked grin on her face, she realized that she didn't have to rely on her daydreams to get a healthy dose of the Anita's - the whole package was right there in front of her.

Behind them, Karen came out of the office and zipped her windbreaker. Looking at the two older women, she shook her head with a smile on her face. "That's it for me this time around, boss. See you tomorrow morning. I suppose you want me to open the shop again...?"

"Uh, yes please, Karen," Marlene said and sat up straight. "I'm grateful that you're here bright and early. I seem to be, uh... unable to... uh-"

"I get it, you don't have to explain a thing. You're unable to get out of bed in the morning, right?" Karen said and winked at her boss. Grinning, she leaned down to whisper: "You know I'm straight, but God she's gorgeous!" for Marlene's ears only before she strolled out of the store.

"Uh-buh... no, we haven't actually- We're not..." Marlene said, but Karen was already long gone. "Okay, that wasn't embarrassing in the least," she continued in a mumble, rubbing her suddenly flushed face.

Anita looked up and dabbed the corners of her mouth on a paper napkin. "What was?"

"Oh, nothin'."

"Yum, this was an excellent salad, Marlene," Anita said and pushed away the empty plastic container. "You definitely know what you're doing."

"Thanks. So... since you're already dressed up like a star, are you doing anything tonight?" Marlene said and casually put her hand across the backrest of her chair.

"Yes."

Grinning, Marlene cocked her head and tried to look the most charming she could. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Like..."

"Yeeeeeah?"

"Finish the chapter I've been translating... and go to bed early. I've discovered that my new landlady has very strict policies on that," Anita said, crumpling up the napkin and throwing it into the plastic container.

When she noticed Marlene's face turn into a mask of disappointment, she chuckled out loud and patted her old friend's hand.

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Five minutes to closing time, Marlene was cleaning out the ovens when the shop's phone rang. Stuck halfway into a toaster oven wearing elbow-length latex gloves and wielding a bottle of organic cleaning fluid, she wasn't exactly in a position to take it.

"Ugh... hey, Anita! Would you mind answering the phone?" she shouted, nodding towards a landline with an extra-extra-extra long cord that was attached to the wall next to the refrigerators.

"I'll get it... I'm on it... I got it," Anita said and hurried out of the office. Clearing her throat, she took the old phone off the hook. "Good evening, this is the Juice-n-More... yes? ... Okay? ... Oh, I really couldn't say, Miss ... you need to speak with the owner. Please hold," she said and put her hand over the receiver.

"Who is it?" Marlene said as she crawled out of the oven, as always cursing the fact that her arms weren't long enough to reach the back part without using an extra-long brush.

"I think it's a potential customer... you need to speak with her. Sounds important."

"Huh, okay... hang on," Marlene said and began to unwrap the tight latex gloves. The left one came off easily enough, but the right one was reluctant to move and ended up in a precarious - and supremely annoying - half-on, half-off position. "Aw, hell," she said, rolling her eyes.

Giving up for the time being, she went over to Anita and waved the receiver over to her with her flapping, latex-green hand. "Good evening, this is Marlene Damgaard, the owner of Juice-n-More. How can we help you?"

*'Hello, my name is Jeanette Christophersen and I'm in real trouble!'*

"Uh... okay?" Marlene said, staring at the receiver.

Anita did her own bit of staring, but her eyes were directed at the flappy glove. Grunting, she went to work slipping it off Marlene's hand.

*'I'm getting married tomorrow...'*

"Huh, congratulations."

*'- thank you... but it's going to be a disaster if we can't get it reorganized in a hurry! My wife-to-be and I had already booked the King's Dining Room restaurant for the post-ceremonial dinner, but when they discovered we were two women, they somehow accidentally lost our booking...'*

"Buncha assholes," Marlene grumbled, finally escaping the clutches of the evil Latex Glove Monster. She mouthed a quick Thanks to Anita before sitting down on the tall bar stool.

*'That's what I said! Then I remembered seeing an ad from the Juice-n-More in the Out & Around magazine, and... and...'*

"How many guests are we talking about, exactly?"

*'Twenty-two in total! We've already sent out the invitations for four o'clock! Now we need to call everyone and-'*

"Uh, yeah, okay... hang on," Marlene said and rubbed her brow. She glanced at the tables, at her stock of salads, buns, sodas and juices, and finally at Anita's highly puzzled face. Calculating furiously in her head, she came to the conclusion that it could work - just. "Hello, are you still there?" she continued into the telephone.

*'Yes!'*

"Just to make sure we're both on the same page, you'll be twenty-two people tomorrow afternoon at four... yeah?"

Hearing that, Anita's eyebrows went up to her hairline at rocket speed.

*'That's right, nineteen adults and three kids- well, teenagers.'*

"Okay. Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmm," Marlene said and whipped down some numbers on her order book. "All right... oh, and you do realize it's a vegetarian restaurant, right? We don't serve

alcohol, either, as we don't have a liquor license. And when I say it's vegetarian, I do mean it. We don't do meat of any kind, not even ham in the salads."

*'Oh, we know, Miss Damgaard. That's one of the reasons we decided to give you a call.'*

"Right. Okay. Hmmm, a rough guesstimate says, oh, in the vicinity of seven thousand Kroner. That includes free salad with optional ciabattas, focaccias, naan bread or beer bread, and beverages for all twenty-two. We have diet sodas, fourteen kinds of juice and bottled mineral water... carbonated and uncarbo spring water."

*'Seven thousand...?'*

The line went silent for a while, and Marlene took the opportunity to recheck her figures. She scrunched up her forehead when she realized she wouldn't be able to go any lower if Jeanette Christophersen felt it was too steep.

*'Hello?'*

"I'm here, Miss Christophersen."

*'We can accept seven thousand. In fact, the King's Dining Room wanted twelve thousand, though we did order wine there. If you can handle us, you've got a deal, Miss Damgaard.'*

"Excellent," Marlene said and sent Anita a big thumbs-up. "We'll get on top of everything."

*'Oh, that's so great! My Dad is going to swing by early tomorrow with the money... uh, before the ceremony so you can see we're not trying to con you.'*

"Okay," Marlene said and made a note of that on the order book. "Are you going for the whole wedding extravaganza in a church, or...?"

*'Yes, the Church of the Holy Spirit. It's just up the Avenue from where you are. That's why my honey and I hoped you'd be able to have us.'*

"Wow, that's a great church, I attended a baptism there last year. Well, best of luck with everything. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Miss Christophersen. Goodbye."

*'Bye!'*

"Wow," Marlene said and walked over to the wall to hang up the receiver.

By now, Anita was bursting at the seams to be let in on the big news. She performed an impatient little shuffle on the floor to let Marlene know that it was high time she spilled the beans. "Well...? What was that all about?"

Marlene went up to her tall friend and put her hands around the inviting waist. "A couple of gals have just hired us to take care of their post-ceremonial dinner. Twenty-two people... yikes, we're gonna be busy... we're gonna be so busy I won't even have time to spell b-e-z-e-e. They'll be here at four... well, probably sooner than that."

"Yikes," Anita said and scratched the side of her nose while she digested Marlene's words. "So we're caterers now?"

"No, here! They're coming here, hon!" Marlene said, gesturing wildly with her hands.

Anita blinked a few times and looked at the aluminum tables that didn't seem to offer enough seats for that many people. "Okay... some of 'em will have to sit on each other's lap," she drawled.

"Ah, it's gonna be fine... last year, I had nineteen people in here at a hen night. Twenty-two will work just fine... just fine," Marlene said, grinning from ear to ear.

Anita blinked again and shook her head slowly. "You're gonna need some help. Do you have an apron in my size?"

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## **CHAPTER 4**

Twenty to four the next day, Marlene was standing in the middle of Copenhagen Avenue wearing a pair of black slacks, the short-sleeved spring green polo shirt that advertised her shop, and a white apron that also carried an ad for Juice-n-More.

Squinting hard, she shielded her eyes from the late afternoon sun while she looked up the Avenue to try to suss out when the first of their customers would arrive. The church bells had rung merrily at half past three marking the end of the ceremony, but the street had only seen the regular activity since then - namely the waves of people who always seemed to be on a journey from A to B at all hours of the day.

"Mmmm," she said and shuffled over to the two flagpoles she had put up outside the closed takeaway window; the Rainbow standard and the Danish flag, the Dannebrog, were both flying proudly. Trying to kill time, she fluffed the two flags to make them stand out better, but the wind came from the wrong angle so they weren't up to much.

Colorful movement to her right made her walk back out into the middle of the Avenue and shield her eyes - two hundred yards further up, a group of well-dressed men and women walked arm in arm, seemingly in high spirits. "Gotta be the first of 'em," Marlene said and strode inside. "Line up!" she barked the moment she stepped into the shop.

Anita jumped up from the table she had been sitting at and stood at perfect Attention. A second later, Karen came hurrying out from the office and lined up next to her tall co-worker - both women were wearing black slacks, spring green polo shirts and white aprons.

"Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, okay, okay... oh no, that's gotta go," Marlene said and folded down Karen's collar that she had flipped up in a fit of youthful exuberance. "Much better. And Anita... nah, no need to change a thing about you," she continued and quickly stood up on tip-toes to place a little kiss on the tall woman's lips.

Karen cleared her throat as she looked at the tender scene. "Actually, boss, I think the union would call that sexual harassment..."

"Oh, phooey. All right, there they are," Marlene said and spun around to greet the first of their guests.

The group of well-dressed men and women she had seen on the Avenue came up to the shop and waited by the Rainbow flag. After checking the marquee above the storefront windows, one of them reached into his tuxedo jacket and found a comb that he used to smooth down his heavily gelled hair.

"What the hell are they waiting for?" Marlene said out of the corner of her mouth.

"No idea," Anita said as she looked over Marlene's shoulder. "Do you want me to go out and ask?"

"No. Not yet. Maybe in a few minutes."

The situation was resolved when one of the women hooked her arm inside the man with the comb and went into the store. "Hi. We're with Jeanette's and Nina's wedding party. This is the Juice-n-More, right?" she said hesitantly. In her early thirties, the woman wore a loud, flowery dress that matched her large, moussed hair and her white gloves to a T.

"That's right, Miss," Marlene said with a smile.

"Okay... uh, it got a little confused down at the church. The photographer took a lot longer than he should have and, uh, Jeanette got a little, uh, hot under her collar."

"Right. Yeah... happens." - Marlene turned around and shot Anita a wink that was responded to in kind.

"*They're coming!*" one of the others shouted from the Avenue, and the two people hurried back out to greet the newlyweds.

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Before long, the space outside the Juice-n-More was awash with well-dressed people who shouted so many Hurrahs and took so many pictures that it resembled a Hollywood premiere rather than the forecourt of a juice and salad bar.

In the middle of it all stood Jeanette and her new wife with an arm around each other's waist, wearing identical goofy grins, holding identical flowers and dressed in identical white tuxedos with bluish violets in their lapels. The happy couple tried to wave to everybody while they were bathed in flashes from the many cameras pointed at them, but they were unable to keep up with the requests.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Anita said, sniffing hard and pressing her brow flat against the window to see better. "Awww... look at them... they look so happy. Oh no... I'm gonna cry..."

"Here," Marlene said and handed her old friend a clean handkerchief. "You better blow your nose, honey. Won't look good on the window..."

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Once the photo session was over, the newlyweds and their guests all turned around and swarmed into the Juice-n-More much to Marlene's excitement.

Soon, she was herding the wedding guests like a traffic officer, directing them to the table they were supposed to sit at according to the meticulous plan Jeanette's father had brought along when he had come with the money earlier in the day.

Before long, most people had found their seats and had made themselves comfortable, though there were one or two grumbles heard about the hard chairs.

"All right!" Marlene said strongly to break through the din that rose like a tide from the many guests. "All right, may I have your attention, please! First of all, I would like to congratulate the blushing brides. In my humble opinion, you look wonderful together... I'm sure your guests will agree."

An excited cheer rose from the crowd, but Marlene managed to subdue it by putting up her hands. "You will find our menus on the tables. In a few minutes, my lovely assistants and I will go from table to table and take your orders. We will make 'em as fast as we can so there's no need to shout... shouting makes no salads, get it?"

Along with their guests, Jeanette and her new wife duly laughed and turned to study their menus. It didn't take them long to put it down and look at Marlene to indicate they were ready to order.

Behind the counter, Marlene and Anita worked flat out at preparing the plastic containers with the ingredients and the stacks of buns and bread they were certain to use. Looking up and locking eyes with Jeanette, Marlene nudged Anita's side. "They're ready. I'll take the newlyweds myself. Please take the table with the parents first... they're most likely to get miffed if it takes too long."

"Yes, boss," Anita said and wiped her hands on a towel before taking a brand new order book.

Marlene quickly went over to the table with the brides and offered them her broadest smile. "Once again congratulations," she said and put out her hand. "I'm Marlene Damgaard. Have you made up your minds yet?"

"Thank you very much, I'm Nina, this is my enchanting, charming, blindingly beautiful wife Jeanette. And yes, we have," the first of the brides said as she shook hands with the owner of the salad bar. The flowery language earned her an embarrassed snicker and a little nudge under the table from her wife.

The two women in the white tuxedos were both in their mid- to late twenties. Both brown-eyed brunettes, one had shorter hair and the other's was a little longer, but there was only an inch in it. One had freckles and the other had dimples; one had highly kissable lips and the other had round, well-shaped eyes; one had a pierced eyebrow and the other had a small tattoo of a butterfly on her wrist, so it all evened out in the end - and Marlene thought they were a fantastic couple.

"We would like two Salad Olympia with naan bread and two glasses of blood orange juice, please," Nina said and took her wife's hand.

"Blood orange, Salad Olympia, naan bread, okay... Uh, the Olympia... you want to hold the garlic, right?" Marlene said and winked saucily.

"That would probably be best!" -- "Uh-huh!" Jeanette and Nina said as one.

"I had a hunch you'd say that," Marlene said and drew a fat box, an arrow and 'no garlic' around the order.

Next to her, Anita and Karen hurried back behind the counter to begin making the meals, each holding a full page of orders.

Anita couldn't actually help Karen create the salads because she didn't have the proper permits that proved she had attended and passed the compulsory courses for safe, hygienic handling of food, but she could find the containers and prepare them. After Karen had pinned their orders to the top of the counter, Anita stared with wide eyes at the many ingredients she needed to find, but went to work getting them as quickly as she could.

Karen worked fast and efficiently and soon had the first salads ready - a cucumber special, and a cantaloupe and gorgonzola cheese mix on a ciabatta bun. "For the parents," she said and shoved the plastic trays towards Anita who equally quickly scooped them up and brought them down to the table.

By the time Anita got back behind the counter, Karen had the next two salads ready, and she had a look on her face that said: 'Will you get a move on?'

Anita gulped and took the next trays, already dreading how her back and feet would feel after the evening was done.

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At half past seven, Karen and Marlene had made more than forty salads of all variants, and the large plastic can they used for organic waste - the peels and various other leftovers from the pressed fruits - had been filled beyond capacity.

Marlene noticed as she wanted to throw out two spent pineapples and a handful of orange peels, but she didn't have time to go out back to empty the can so she simply took a new bag and stuffed the items down into it.

"Hey, hon? Anita, how are you holding up?" Marlene said and dunked a filter-scooper into a freshly-made glass of pineapple juice to fish up a stray fiber.

"Oh, I'm... I'm... just... a little tired," Anita said, leaning against the counter while she waited for the next orders to be completed.

"Yeah, I'll bet. You're probably not used to being up and about all day, huh?"

"Ah, that would be a 'no'."

Having scooped up the fiber, Marlene rinsed the filter-scooper in hot water from the faucet and hung it on a nail to drip off. "According to the plan, they'll break out the festive songs in a little while. Should give us a breather. The orders are letting up, too. You only have, uh, uh... uh, four salads and three juices left to go. Here's the first order, it's for table three," she continued and pushed a tray with a carrot-corn-zucchini-chopped walnuts mix towards her old friend.

"Okay," Anita said and left to carry out the assignment.

When she came back, she bumped shoulders with Marlene and leaned in to whisper in her ear: "Check out the newlyweds. That's just too cute... and nobody's batting an eyelid at it. Isn't that wonderful?"

Wiping her hands on a towel, Marlene looked up from creating a pesto-spicy humus-black olives-feta cheese salad to see Jeanette and Nina with their heads together, sharing a string of loving nibbles and kisses. From the dreamy looks on their faces, it was clear to see that their world didn't stretch beyond the soft lips of their new wife.

"Yeah... that's so great, isn't it? Man, it wasn't like that back in the old days," Marlene said and went back to the salad.

"No. Back then, we didn't even dare to hold hands in the bus."

"Tell me about it. I'm glad to see that things have improved. It's not perfect yet, but we're getting there."

"We definitely are," Anita said. She opened her mouth to add to her comment but was interrupted by Jeanette's father who tapped on his glass and stood up.

As the man went into a witty toast, Marlene finished making the salad and pushed the tray over to Anita. Before she started the next one, she took a few moments to look at Jeanette and Nina who were already blushing from hearing the deliberately embarrassing things and events included in the speech. Reluctantly pulling her eyes away from the two brunettes, Marlene found Anita as she was serving the salad, and wondered for the umpteenth time what it would take for them to get back to what they once had.

*'Or perhaps we're past that...? I mean, we haven't seen each other for so long... I hope we're not, though. The spark is definitely there... for me at least. Just being near her these past few days has... man, I don't even know how to describe it. The weekend flings are fun, but perhaps I'm ready for something more? Or perhaps I'm just ready to give Anita's awfully sexy thighs a buncha hickeys, I dunno...'*

"Boss? Boss?" Karen said, tapping Marlene's shoulder rather insistently.

"Huh? What is it, Karen?"

Karen pointed at the tray with the salad Marlene had been making while she had been preoccupied with her daydream. "You know, I don't think the fork actually needs to be \*in\* the salad..."

Marlene grunted and looked down - sure enough, she had put a little plastic fork into the salad and covered it with a decent-sized squirt of Mediterranean seasoning sauce. "Uh-huh. Okay." - *sigh* - "Thanks, Karen," she said and dug into the salad to fish out the foreign object.

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As tradition dictated, the festive songs were distributed after the toasts, and soon, the wedding party broke out in cheerful and slightly off-key singing. Karen loved to sing so she took one of the sheets with the lyrics and joined the others, belting out the first of many songs at the top of her lungs.

Marlene was no fan of community singing so she stepped outside to cool off. Even though the sun would still be in the sky for a few more hours before it would inevitably go below the five- and six-story buildings on the Avenue, the leading edge of the breeze that always ran through the funnel created by the tall structures was chilly as it invariably was in the evenings, even in mid-July. The massive amounts of pavement around the shop kept the air warm, but the breeze made it difficult to exploit it.

The people who were walking past - mostly locals as the cruise liners typically offered onboard entertainment at eight PM that the tourists didn't want to miss - didn't take much notice of the singing, but one or two stopped and tried to gawk at the shop, no doubt hoping to see a celebrity.

A loud cheer behind her made Marlene look back at the shop to see if she was needed, but it had only been a punch line in one of the songs. Grunting, she turned back to observe the people walking past.

A couple of minutes later, Anita came out to stand next to her old lover. "Wow, they're loud," she said and rubbed her ears.

"Yeah, no shit."

"Karen is singing to her heart's delight. She's a great kid. How did you come into contact with her?"

"Eh, I put an ad in one of the free newspapers that are distributed at the business schools. I had a couple of applicants, but she was the one I clicked with the best."

"Oh," Anita said and shuffled around on the spot.

When Anita didn't seem to want to go on, Marlene walked over to her and stood so close the tall woman was forced to look at her. "And no," she said emphatically, "not like that. One, she's straighter than a straight thing, two, she's got a great boyfriend, and three, she's seventeen years my junior. That would be a major case of cradle snatching, don't you think?"

Scratching her eyebrow, Anita looked down at her blonde companion and offered her a little shrug. "Sure, but... you never know when the sparks will fly. Right?"

"Right," Marlene said with a laugh, leaning in to bump shoulders with her old friend.

Another couple of minutes went by before there was a new lull in the singing, but similarly to the first time, it was merely a punch line.

"Yikes, how long is that song, anyhow?" Marlene said and let out a sigh.

"Long. There were several pages to go when I went out here."

"Huh. I think a lot of the wedding traditions are great, but the singing... no thanks. Singing and Marlene should never be in the same sentence."

Anita suddenly remembered something from their common past that would have been the perfect anecdote for the topic if she'd had the nerve to mention it. Turning around to face Marlene, she opened her mouth but promptly closed it again. Then she opened her mouth - and closed it again. Grunting, she turned away for good and settled for studying some of the people who were walking past.

Marlene couldn't hold back a cheeky "Pfff!" when she noticed Anita's desperate attempts at keeping mum on the old story. Laughing, she took a long step to get over to the tall woman and wrapped a strong arm around her apron-clad waist once she was close enough. "You can say it. You can say I Will Survive, vodka and Club Bearded Clam, Anita. I'm okay with it... now. Back then... less so."

"Oh, I didn't want to make you embarrassed," Anita said and ducked her head between her shoulders.

"Nah, it doesn't embarrass me anymore. You know, the simple fact that we laugh at those situations sort of take away the pain and humiliation. D'ya remember what happened?" Marlene said and gave Anita's waist a squeeze.

"Oh, I remember..."

"Yeah. Singing I Will Survive is bad enough, singing I Will Survive loaded with licorice-flavored vodka shots and not noticing your jeans slipping down before you land face-first on top of the table you were dancing on... now that's mondo-bad. Jesus, that was awkward!" Marlene said and let out a loud belly laugh. "But you were there to help me up and pull up my pants!"

Anita let out an embarrassed snicker and pulled Marlene into a sideways hug. "Yeah... of course, if it had happened today, you would have been immortalized on Facebook two minutes later."

"Ugh, yeah," Marlene said and shook her head. "I'm glad I got all my crap out of the way before the social media came along. I don't know how the kids today can-"

A wild cheer and loud applause from the store made Marlene and Anita look over their shoulders - just then, Jeanette and Nina stood up and gave each other a big kiss on the lips that earned them another round of applause.

"Looks like we should get back to work. Hey, Anita...?" Marlene said and briefly touched the tall woman's elbow.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have any plans for later on? I mean, I'd love to come over to your new pad and talk."

"Oh, I..." Anita said and bared her teeth in a little grimace. "Would you mind if I came over to your place instead? I've only had time to empty out one of the packing cases. It's still kinda messy, so..."

Marlene's face lit up like a little sun and she reached out to poke Anita in the stomach. "You betcha! Hey, I have the greatest idea... we could go home and flake out... put our feet up... fluffy bathrobes and stuff. Wouldn't that be cool? We could have some wine and look at the stars and stuff... how about that?"

"Well-"

"Or we could, I dunno... look at each other?" Marlene added cheekily.

Anita chuckled and waved her hand in jest. "One thing at a time, Marlene. One thing at a time."

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A quarter past nine, the post-ceremonial dinner was slowly winding down, and Jeanette and Nina made their way around the tables to thank all their guests; hugging, slapping high-fives, thumping shoulders or simply shaking hands. When it was Marlene's, Anita's and Karen's turn, they each got a hug and a kiss on the cheek from both newlyweds for their services.

"Thank you so much for coming to our rescue," Jeanette said as she pulled back from hugging Marlene. "We've had a wonderful evening here. I'm definitely going to tell all our friends and co-workers about you. Oh, you made the best salads I've ever had!" she said, leaning in to kiss her host on both cheeks.

Marlene grinned and stroked Jeanette's arm. "And we've had a fun time, too. You were fantastic guests. I think my associates feel the same, right?"

Karen nodded enthusiastically, but Anita was unable to answer. She was biting her lips to stop herself from crying like a baby, and her expressive eyebrows proved how hard she had to work at it by wiggling up, down, left and right. "Uh-huh!" she eventually squeaked.

Nina laughed out loud and pulled Anita into a strong hug. "Maybe it's your wedding next?" she said, holding her hands on Anita's arms.

"Oh, now she's really gonna bawl!" Marlene said and nudged Anita in the side.

Nina grinned at the undeniable truth of that statement and pulled back from the silent - but blubbing - Anita. "Well, that's it for us. Like my wife said, we've had a fab time here. We'll definitely be back," she said and put out her hand to say goodbye.

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The frenzied assault of flashes the newlyweds had experienced when they came to the Juice-n-More was nothing compared to the one they got when they left. To give them a proper, traditional send-off, the wedding guests formed two lines out of the shop and showered Jeanette and Nina with Hurrahs, good wishes and plenty of flashes from their cameras on their way to the waiting rented limo.

As the stretch-limo drove off, Anita couldn't hold it back any longer and wrapped her hands around Marlene's left arm. A split second later, she howled out loud and dove down to bury her head in the nook of her shorter friend's shoulder.

"There, there, hon," Marlene said and patted Anita's back. "Everything's gonna be fine... fine for you, fine for me and especially fine for Jeanette and Nina... mmmm... they might not get much sleep tonight, but they'll definitely be fine."

"Ohhhh!" Anita howled and tried to dig her head even further into Marlene's shoulder.

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## CHAPTER 5

After closing the Juice-n-More, Anita wrung out the mop in the plastic wringer for the last time and left it to lean against the wall. Taking a step back, she cocked her head and looked at the shiny floor with a great degree of satisfaction. "And that's how you clean a tile floor," she said and put her hands on her hips.

"It looks fantastic. Thanks, hon," Marlene said from her position behind the counter. Turning back to her notepad that was completely covered in numbers and shorthand codes, she continued her calculations and came to the same end result as her first run-through. "Okay... those guys chowed down more than I thought they would. We should probably have asked for seven thousand five hundred or perhaps even eight thousand, but... eh. It's still all right. And besides, Jeanette and Nina said they'd tell the world about us, so... that's great PR, especially within our community."

"Very true," Anita said and tiptoed back to the office. Moving as quiet as a mouse, she depressed the door handle and peeked inside at the resting Karen. "She's still sleeping," she whispered as she ducked back out.

"Mmmm. She was really bombed out. All that singing, no doubt. I think I'll give her a couple of days off... she worked her butt off tonight," Marlene said and turned off the electrical master switch for the ovens. "Well, I guess I better wake her up so she can go home and get some proper sleep."

"Have you ever spent a night in the office?"

"Sure I have," Marlene said and moved over to the main refrigerators to turn the temperature slider down to the night setting. After she had done that, she briefly put her hand on the sides of the machine to check that the compressor changed speeds. "...but don't tell anyone 'cos it's a huge no-no. The fire inspectors would pin my ass to the wall if they knew."

"Oh? Well, that would be a crying shame," Anita mumbled, but Marlene had heard every word and responded to it by wiggling her eyebrows.

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Some time later, the taxi they had called for pulled over by the sidewalk on the busy boulevard at Marlene's apartment building on the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street. They had barely stepped out of the cab before they were greeted by the familiar sight of flashing blue lights that came from the other side and turned into the hospital's lot: an ambulance and a paramedic unit.

Because of the lateness of the hour, they had turned off their sirens but the lights created an eerie spectacle reflecting off the many shiny cars that pulled over to let them through.

As they watched the taxi drive away, Anita shivered and put her hands in her pockets. "Yikes, I'm beat... I can't remember the last time I was this tired."

"I'll bet you don't get this exhausted from translating books, huh?" Marlene said and inserted her key into the front door. "Well, come inside and we'll see what we can do about your tiredness... after you, my lady," she said and pushed the door open.

Nodding a thanks, Anita stepped inside the lobby, but as she looked up at the staircase, she sighed deeply and shook her head. "I'm too tired to walk up all those stairs. Would you mind carrying me?"

"Yes, I would," Marlene said and nudged herself against Anita's tall, sculpted figure. "And you know why?"

"No?"

" 'Cos I was about to ask if you would mind carrying me?"

"Oh. I guess that means that either we have to spend the night down here... and that could get pretty boring, or... or we have to climb all those stairs one more time," Anita said in a tired monotone.

"Tell you what we're gonna do," Marlene said and hooked her arm inside Anita's, "You and me are gonna climb that mountain together... yes we are. We're gonna take one step at a time until we reach the glorious, golden peak. Whaddaya say?"

Digesting Marlene's words, Anita narrowed her eyes down into blue slits and shot her companion a steely gaze. "Mmmm... was that a euphemism?"

"Would I do that?" Marlene said with the most angelic look she could muster. "Nooooo! I just meant that the first woman up in my apartment will get the hottest water in the shower. They turn the central heating down this time of night, remember?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's what you meant," Anita said as she began the long, arduous journey upstairs.

"It was!"

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*'Medium red or chilled white, hon?'* Marlene said from the kitchen.

Stretched out on the couch in the lounge wearing a fluffy, pale blue bathrobe and not much else, Anita muted the late news to think better, but her brain was so numb it didn't really work. "Uh... chilled white," she said after a delay, but Marlene had already chosen the bottle and was on her way into the lounge.

"That's what I thought you'd say so I just took it," Marlene said and used her elbow to turn off the lights in the kitchen. Like Anita, she was wearing a fluffy bathrobe, though hers was spring green.

"Mmmm," Anita said and looked back at the TV to put the sound back on. In the meantime, the weather report had come on, and Anita and Marlene kept quiet for the brief update - even if they were both looking at the female presenter rather than at the weather data.

When the inevitable ad break came, Anita turned off the TV and put the remote on the table. Sitting up straight to make room for Marlene, she patted the seat next to her with a warm smile.

"Anything in the news?" Marlene said and put the bottle of chilled white wine and two flutes down on a dish mat on the table before she climbed up next to her old friend.

"Just the usual. There's been another shooting incident in the gang war, a hurricane has struck the Caribbean, a minor earthquake was felt in Northern California... oh, and the Prime Minister has had to defend one of her cabinet ministers who's in trouble with Mister Taxman."

"So what else is new?" Marlene said and snuggled up next to her fluffy, freshly scrubbed and sweet-smelling friend. "Mmmm... go on, have some wine," she purred, reaching out to take the bottle.

After filling Anita's flute, Marlene poured some of the white wine into her own glass and held it up in a toast, but before she made it that far, the ceiling light shone in her eyes and made her squint. "Oh, it's far, far too bright in here," she said and put down the flute.

Quickly jumping off the couch, she padded on bare feet over to the slider and turned the lights down to the setting one click above 'barely there'. "Oh yeah. Darkness is good. Darkness is my friend. Darkness is where wondrous things happen to open-minded people... like the Cocktail Hour at The Mask. Ever visited The Mask on theme nights? It's-"

"No, I haven't... will you knock it off with the pseudo poetry and get back here?" Anita said, having turned around on the couch.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Marlene padded back to the couch and snuggled up next to her house guest. The tall woman's natural scent mixed with her borrowed deodorant and shampoo to create an atmosphere that made it utterly impossible for Marlene not to reach up and caress the black locks that were right

there in front of her - so close that it would have been a crime if she hadn't run her fingers through them.

Anita responded to the gentle touch by sighing deeply, so deeply in fact that Marlene stopped what she was doing and put her hands in her lap with a disappointed look on her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered after a little while, briefly putting her hand across Anita's stomach.

"It's not that... not really," Anita whispered back, and suddenly, the mood between the two women changed to something far more intimate. "It's just that... it's different now that we're older."

"Why? What's so different about it? None of us are seeing anyone. We're not breaking any laws... Cheers, hon," Marlene said and took a sip of her wine.

Sighing again, Anita leaned back into Marlene's touch and took her strong hands in her own. "Cheers. Oh, we're... we're supposed to be mature and levelheaded. Less inclined to follow our lower instincts. We're supposed to be in happy, solid relationships by now... not jumping beds."

"We're not jumping beds!"

"Well, I am. It hasn't even been ten days since the last time I made love to Jul- ...to my ex. And now..."

Marlene chuckled and gave Anita's hands a little squeeze. "Hon, unless I'm grotesquely stupid when it comes to the intimate arts, holding hands isn't categorized as sex. Or maybe it is these days, I dunno... would explain a helluva lot."

"Oh, silly!"

"Who, me?" Marlene said and moved her hand up to place it across Anita's stomach.

Anita shook her head and let out a dark chuckle. After taking a sip of her wine and putting down the flute, she looked down and let her hand rest on top of Marlene's. "Remember that you told me I should be more assertive?"

"Yeah?"

"Is this what you meant?" Pulling her bathrobe aside, Anita took Marlene's hand and placed it on her bare, smooth stomach.

Purring, Marlene sat up straight so she had better access. While she brushed her fingertips across Anita's skin, she leaned forward and placed a tiny kiss on the side of the dark-haired woman's neck. "Yes it was," she whispered, adding another little kiss for good measure. "Mmmm... are you sure? I don't want you to feel forced into anything you're not ready for."

Anita nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm not ready for... actually... I don't \*want\* a new relationship right now. Not with anyone... not even with you."

"Oh... okay."

"But a little rebound sex has never hurt anyone."

"You go, grrrl!" Marlene said and dove in to nibble on Anita's neck.

"I want to make my own decisions now," Anita said and suddenly turned around. "And... and... I... I'd like to... I w- want to..."

Since they were now face to face, Marlene reached up and caressed Anita's smooth cheek. She gave her former lover a smoldering gaze with dark, hooded eyes that spelled out very clearly that whatever Anita wanted, Anita would get. "Mmmm? Go on," she husked, pleased to see and feel that her touch was responded to favorably.

"I want to take you... on the couch," Anita said and ducked her head. The moment she had uttered the provocative phrase, a deep blush crept up from her throat that soon swept over her chin, cheeks, nose, forehead and even out to her earlobes.

Marlene briefly looked at Anita with wide open eyes, but she was more than happy to comply with the request and leaned back against the armrest behind her. Sighing sensually, she loosened the belt on her spring green bathrobe and pulled the fluffy garment aside to reveal that she hadn't bothered to put on any underwear after her shower. While she waited for Anita to make the first move, she put her fingers on the lower part of her stomach and began to draw little, circular patterns.

Anita gulped audibly when she looked at the vast expanses of toned, tanned flesh before her. Her mind and her body wrestled for supremacy, but her body soon won out and blew away her indecisiveness with a powerful love bolt that shot through her and set her skin alight from her breasts to the hyper-sensitive flesh at her center.

Reaching up, she shed her own bathrobe and let the pleasantly cool air caress her heated being. Not wanting to appear like she didn't know what she was doing, she slid down towards Marlene and placed a careful kiss on the blonde's stomach below her navel.

The sweet contact made Marlene chuckle huskily and move her right leg up to lean on the top of the backrest to ease Anita's access - but that was for later.

Purring from sheer anticipation, Anita slid up her old lover's body, reacquainting herself with the many little details that she remembered surprisingly well, even fifteen years on. Marlene's body had gained a few new details in the intervening years, like a near-perfect set of abdominal muscles, but all in all, she looked like the image Anita had stored in her mind.

On her way up the delightfully smooth skin, Anita felt almost giddy at the prospects, and she suddenly wanted to see if one of Marlene's most sensitive spots was still working: the under- and outside of her left breast.

Moving there, she gripped Marlene gently around the upper waist and extended her tongue to let the hard muscle slide across the salty skin, adding just the right amount of pressure to the wonderfully soft tissue.

The results were immediate - Marlene let out a throaty "Oh, Gawd!" and twisted her torso to get her left side closer to Anita's probing tongue. When it wasn't enough, she reached up and grabbed the dark head to press it into her chest.

Anita did what she could to pleasure her lover by kissing the sensitive spot, stroking it with her tongue and even using her teeth for a little nibble or two. When she felt it had received enough love and attention for the time being, she left it behind - much to Marlene's vocal disappointment - and climbed further up the toned, trembling body underneath her.

With Anita putting her hands behind Marlene's strong shoulders and pulling herself up the rest of the way, the two women were finally face to face.

As their flushed, heated bodies touched all the way down, Marlene gazed deeply into Anita's pale blue eyes and thought the dark-haired woman had never looked better, sexier or simply more alluring.

Every fiber of Marlene's being cried out in wanton need, and she had to keep a firm leash on herself or else she would have taken the lead and devoured her old, new lover whole. "Baby... it's your game... do with me as you please," she husked, throwing back her head to expose her throat.

Anita gulped but dove down to nibble on the inviting pulse point on the side of Marlene's neck. "I'm not a..." - *nibble* - "top, but..." - *kiss, kiss* - "I want..." - *nibble, kiss* - "to... to... to..."

Hearing Anita's stuttering hesitation, Marlene decided to help her along and crossed her legs behind the taller woman's firm rear to press their bodies even closer together. With her hands roaming the silky smooth skin of the long torso on top of her, she threw her head back in ecstasy and moaned a greedy "Oh, take me!" - though she added a cheesy grin and a little wink.

No further invitation was needed - Anita growled from somewhere deep in her throat and rushed in to claim Marlene's lips in a fiery, bruising kiss that allowed the beast inside her to finally break free from its chains.

Moaning her unbridled lust into Marlene's mouth, she pressed her aching center down onto the strong body beneath her and was thrilled to feel the body pressing back. When that wasn't enough to satisfy the urges that coursed through her system, she began to rock her abdomen back and forth in an attempt to generate some friction.

A whimpering grunt proved that Anita had trouble finding suitable relief, but Marlene came to her rescue and shifted a thigh to let it slip between Anita's legs.

At once, Anita let out a long groan and began to grind against the smooth thigh, adding more and more pressure until she was so far into her pleasure zone that she could hardly do anything but hang on and enjoy it.

"Oh God, you look so sexy," Marlene croaked, staring wide-eyed at the look of pure, unadulterated lust that played across Anita's face as she rode the thigh.

Flushed and radiant, Anita didn't want Marlene to feel left out, so she leaned down and reclaimed her lover's lips, kissing both of them senseless while her soaked center was given a hard workout against the muscular leg.

Marlene's skin was on fire from being kissed and from watching her old lover enjoying herself so thoroughly, but she wanted to join in on the fun and sought out Anita's hand that had hitherto been behind her shoulder. "Baby... please... I need you so much," she husked, guiding the hand downwards.

Together, they traveled down Marlene's body, past her erect nipples, flushed skin and toned abdominal muscles that stood out very clearly until they reached her closely cropped golden patch of hair and the top of her glistening center. Wasting no time, she took Anita's long digits and ran them up and down the slick folds until they were completely covered in her love juices - then she guided them inside her.

The surge of pleasure that swept over Marlene was so strong that she was forced to throw her head back and let out a husky, throaty groan that sounded like it came from her very core. Pressing her abdomen up towards the hand to send the fingers deeper inside her, she began to rock up and down to assist with the ancient rhythm.

Anita slowed down her own ride to focus on pleasuring Marlene, but the blonde's thigh came back up towards her, insistent she should continue. Happy to oblige, she let out a sensual sigh and resumed the cadence, though she needed to go a little slower to last longer - she had something special in mind.

Marlene's rocking breasts and pert nipples were too good to miss, so Anita leaned forward and began to tickle and tease the two peaks, earning herself an inarticulate groan that segued into a whimper. Her position was a bit awkward so she couldn't really reach all she wanted, but by extending her tongue and letting it run around and across the left pink tip, she was able to do plenty.

Before long, both women were breathing deeply and feeling their orgasms gradually build to a crescendo that grew stronger by the stroke. Anita left the pink nipple behind and concentrated on being near Marlene's face. They fondled, kissed and let their tongues dance; loving each other with gay abandon until they were both balancing on the precipice.

Anita's moans grew louder and stronger until she suddenly gasped and became rigid. She jerked her eyes open and looked directly into Marlene's green orbs at point blank range, a move that gave her the result she had longed for - a full-on, mutual orgasm.

Her fingers were instantly trapped between Marlene's powerful inner muscles as the blonde came hard with a ferocious groan that sent Anita crashing over the edge, bucking and grinding against her new, old lover.

Moaning into each other's mouths, both women rode the crest of the wave as long as it allowed them to, eventually settling down into each other's arms as the golden shroud of afterglow descended upon them like a warm blanket.

After a little while, Marlene had finally regained her breath, and she was able to lean her head to her left to give her lover a kiss on the lips. "Thank you so much, baby. H- how did you do that? I've n- never..." she croaked, relaxing her strong inner muscles to help Anita withdraw her fingers.

"Always wanted to... could never do it before..." Anita whispered back, snuggling down next to her lover. She drew a line with her soaked fingers up Marlene's stomach until she reached her breasts, especially the neglected right one.

"Well... if that's how you make love when you're tired, oh God, I need to be around when you're on top form!" Marlene said and immediately broke down in a sated, husky snicker.

"I'll put you on my speed dial."

Marlene snickered once more and pulled Anita close. "Huh. Maybe I just need to write down the details," she said, imperceptibly positioning herself in a way that would give Anita better access to her sensitive breasts.

When Anita's long fingers began to really play with Marlene's right nipple, the blonde felt a few tendrils of lust peek through her afterglow. A fox-like grin spread over her features as she reached up to put a loving kiss on Anita's luscious lips. "Hey..." she whispered, "careful with that... don't start if ya don't wanna finish."

"Who says I don't wanna finish?" Anita husked and leaned in to nibble on Marlene's ear.

"Uh-huh? Uhhhhh... may I offer a suggestion?"

"Sure," Anita said, taking a break from toying with the succulent earlobe.

"This time, I wanna take the lead..."

Anita pulled back a little and returned the fox-like grin that Marlene was still flashing her. "Yeah? I'll think about it," she husked before diving down to claim the blonde's lips just as she broke out in a throaty snicker.

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**THE END.**

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