



Paper Love

Jae



Chapter 1

Don't ask, don't ask, don't ask, Susanne mentally chanted.

But, of course, her mother asked before the last of the fireworks had even faded away from the night sky over Berlin-Charlottenburg, as Susanne had known she would. It had been a yearly tradition since Susanne and her sister had been kids. “So what are your resolutions for the new year?” Their mother leaned against the railing of her balcony overlooking the courtyard and glanced from Susanne to her sister and back.

Susanne nudged Franziska. *Come on, Sis. Help me out here.*

But all Franzi did was nudge her back.

“Why do I always have to go first?” Susanne grumbled.

“Because you’re the oldest,” Franzi said.

A snort escaped Susanne. “Yeah, by a full seven minutes.”

“Oh, now suddenly those seven minutes don’t matter? You usually hold them over me any chance you get.”

“Girls,” their mother drawled. “No arguing on New Year’s Eve.”

“We’re not arguing,” Susanne said. “We’re just—”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

Damn. She had hoped her mother would let herself be distracted. No such luck. Lying to her was out; she would find out sooner or later, and Susanne didn’t want to face her mother’s disappointment when she realized she had been lied to on top of everything else.

The smoke that hung over the courtyard was so thick that Susanne could barely make out the familiar contours of the one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old buildings on the other side. But for her, there was no hiding behind the gray haze.

Oh, come on. Since when are you such a chickenshit? Normally, she didn’t lack in confidence. Just a couple of days ago, she had marched into her boss’s office and had tossed her resignation letter on his desk without hesitation. But telling her mother was different.

Franzi stepped next to her until their arms brushed, as if sensing that she needed the support.

Jae

“I only have one resolution this year,” Susanne said.

Her mother waved her fingers in a let’s-hear-it gesture.

Susanne took a steady breath. “I, um, I’m going to start looking for a new job tomorrow.”

Her mother put down her glass of champagne, while Susanne white-knuckled her own. “Don’t tell me you got fired.”

“No. I... I quit.”

That might actually be worse in their mother’s eyes. Job-hopping was what their father had done, moving from business to business, from failure to failure.

The firecrackers that had still been going off in the neighborhood stopped, and the silence was deafening.

“Yeah, well, your boss was a chauvinistic pig.” Franzl tried a casual shrug but couldn’t quite pull it off. “I would have quit a long time ago. Plus maybe now you can find a job where you don’t have to travel so much and can stick closer to home most of the time.”

Susanne gave her a grateful look but doubted their mother would see it that way. Would she think Susanne was like her father?

“Well, that’s...” Her mother blindly reached for her glass and drained it in one big gulp. “...really good, actually.”

Susanne shook her head as if something had stuck in her ears, affecting her hearing. *Oookay. Who are you, and what have you done with my mother?* “It is?” she asked with a tentative smile.

“Yes. And you don’t even have to look for a new job. I already have one for you.”

Uh-oh. Susanne traded glances with her sister. Why did she have the feeling she wouldn’t like whatever her mother was about to say?

“Your uncle needs a little help with his business.”

The tension in Susanne’s shoulders receded. “Oh, sure. I can sit down with Uncle Bernhard and give him a few pointers.”

“Not Bernhard. It’s Uncle Norbert who needs your help.”

“No problem. I can help him too. I admit I don’t know much about office supplies, but I guess general business principles still apply. I’ll call him tomorrow and—”

“No. A call won’t cut it. He needs more substantial help, or he’ll be bankrupt before spring.”

This was the first Susanne had heard of Uncle Norbert’s problems. Admittedly, she didn’t have much contact with him or any of the relatives on her father’s side. *Much? Try almost none.* “It’s that bad?”

Her mother nodded. “Yes. And that’s why I need you to temporarily move to Freiburg.”

Now Susanne was the one gulping down the rest of her champagne. “M-move to Freiburg?”

“Yes. Don’t sound so appalled. It’s a charming little city.”

“Yeah. With an emphasis on *little*. Mama, I’m used to Berlin, London, and Chicago. Freiburg is too small...too provincial. Whoever nicknamed it the metropolis of the Black Forest had a few too many.”

Her sister grinned. “Who can blame them? The wine in the region is really good.”

Susanne glared at her. “I’m not moving all the way across the country for the wine. If you like Freiburg that much, why don’t you go?”

“I’m a dentist. Unless all Uncle Nobby’s store needs is a root canal, I’m not going to be much help. As a business consultant, you’re the perfect person for the job.”

Thanks a lot, traitor.

“That’s what I thought.” Their mother smiled brightly. “Plus you’re long overdue for a visit with your uncle anyway. I never understood why you never came with us.”

“I told you I’m too—”

“Too busy with your job, I know.” Her mother waved the objection away. “But now you don’t have a job. Everything will work out perfectly. You can look for another job and spend some time with Uncle Norbert while you help him out for a few months.”

“A few months?” She’d been thinking a week or two at the most.

“Just until Easter.”

“Until Easter?” Susanne was starting to feel like a parrot constantly echoing the last thing her mother said, but her brain had problems processing this whole scheme. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think her mother had planned it all out before even knowing she had quit her job. “But that’s almost three months!”

“Yes.” Her mother was still grinning as if she’d already solved Uncle Norbert’s problems single-handedly. “By then, it’ll be spring, and you’ll get to enjoy a bit of the sunniest city in Germany during your last couple of weeks there. Won’t that be nice?”

Only years of experience in keeping a poker face during business negotiations kept Susanne from grimacing. *Yeah. About as nice as the root canal Franzl just mentioned.*

“Uncle Norbert has a lot of friends in the Wiehre,” her mother continued. “He could help you find an apartment there. You liked that part of the city when we first took you there, remember?”

“Mama, I was a kid. I liked to pretend I was a princess living in one of the Art Nouveau mansions, waiting for a prince to come along and rescue me.” She huffed at her younger self. “I haven’t needed rescuing or wanted a prince—or any man—since I was six.”

Her sister winked at her. “I hear the women in Freiburg are quite beautiful too.”
“I’m not moving there for a woman either.”

Their mother put down her empty champagne glass, stepped closer, and put both hands on Susanne’s shoulders. From only centimeters away, she sent Susanne one of her famous gazes—the one that had gotten them to eat whatever was on their plates when they’d been kids, even if it was spinach. “He’s family, Susanne.”

No one said her name quite like her mother. Susanne winced. “I know. It’s just...”

“If you refuse to help him, he’ll lose the store. It would break his heart. That store is his pride and joy, and it was your grandfather’s before him.”

Oh hell. Susanne rubbed her face. How could she say no now? “Only until the end of March, then I’m gone. Make sure Uncle Norbert knows that.”

Beaming, her mother squeezed her shoulders and then let go. “I will. Don’t you worry. It’ll all work out great, and I’ll help cover the moving costs and the rent.”

Susanne blew out a breath and tried to stay positive. Yeah, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. After all, it was kind of what she’d done for her old company—travel somewhere, get the job done, and get the hell out of there as soon as the problem was solved.

Easy as pie, right? Or rather easy as Black Forest cake, in this case. It wasn’t as if there was anything in that backwoods city that would make her want to stay.

Chapter 2

“Sunniest city in Germany, my ass!” Susanne mumbled as she got off the streetcar and snapped open her umbrella to ward off the lightly falling rain. She hadn’t even seen the sun since she’d arrived in Freiburg on Friday afternoon. The cobblestones of the Kaiser-Joseph-Strasse, Freiburg’s main shopping street, were slick beneath her favorite suede ankle boots, and a dusting of snow covered the forested hill rising up directly behind the Old Town.

A street performer playing the accordion didn’t seem to mind the weather, and neither did the group of tourists being led through the city by a young man in a medieval costume.

Susanne looked around to get her bearings, but a mob of people getting out of another streetcar blocked her view. Someone popping open an umbrella showered her with droplets of water. She gritted her teeth and counted to ten in German, in English, and then in her admittedly rusty French.

Why the hell had she thought taking public transportation was a good idea?

But it wasn’t as if she had a choice. Freiburg’s city center was a car-free zone, and even around the edges of the pedestrian area, finding a parking spot was about as likely as winning the lottery, so she had left her beloved BMW in her apartment building’s parking garage. She would have to ask Uncle Norbert about parking options and getting a special permit so she could take her car to work.

Once the crowd in front of her cleared, she glanced around and checked her phone to see in which direction she was supposed to be heading. A bronze equestrian statue marked the middle of the busy intersection where all the streetcar lines crossed. According to Google Maps, she had to double back a little. She turned and headed toward the tower gate through which her streetcar had just passed on its way into the city center. Its green copper roof and two corner turrets rose high up over the surrounding buildings. The sidewalks and the streetcar tracks ran under its two arches. Her last visit to Freiburg had been more than twenty years ago, but if she remembered correctly, the gate had been left over from the medieval city fortifications. Now, instead of armed guards, a big McDonald’s sign had been placed above the right arch.

Jae

Shaking her head, Susanne crossed the street so she could pass through the arch. A streetcar wildly rang its bell to hurry her along.

Susanne clutched her chest and leaped onto the sidewalk. She hadn't seen the damn thing because the umbrella had blocked her view. "Don't you worry. It'll all work out great," she mimicked her mother. "Yeah, but not if I get killed on my first day at work."

A guy pushing a bicycle gave her a curious look, but she ignored him and marched on.

A familiar green-and-white logo greeted her on the other side of the gate.

At least Freiburg had a Starbucks. Mollified, she headed toward it. No way would she survive this day without caffeine.

But the long line in front of the counter convinced her otherwise. Her uncle's store opened at ten, and if she wanted to be taken seriously by his staff, she couldn't be late.

If he even had any staff.

Following the map on her phone, she turned left onto Gerberau, a smaller cobblestone street. It was picturesque, she had to admit. Cute little stores, cafés, a bakery, an Indian restaurant, and a chocolate shop lined the street. She passed a Turkish restaurant that an artist had decorated with a mural of the gate she'd just passed through and a bearded monk tapping beer. To her right flowed a *Bächle*, one of the narrow canals that lined the streets in the Old Town.

Finally, she caught sight of Paper Love, her uncle's store. Two carousels offering greeting cards had been pushed beneath a blue awning to protect them from the rain.

She headed toward the white-framed glass door with its brass handle, but before she had taken even two steps, an irresistible aroma teased her nose.

Susanne looked around.

Ooh! Right across the street was a little coffee shop. Almost without a conscious decision, she detoured, stepped over the gently gurgling *Bächle*, and walked across a mosaic embedded into the cobblestone sidewalk.

Two minutes later, she held the tallest coffee the shop sold in her hand. She took the first sip right then and there. *Ah. Liquid manna.* Now she was ready to face the disaster that was her uncle's store.

With renewed determination, she strode toward Paper Love.

"Watch your step!" the woman from the coffee shop called after her.

Susanne tried to slide to a stop, but it was too late. Instead of the cobblestones, her foot hit only air—and then crashed down into the clear water of the *Bächle*.

The very *cold* water of the *Bächle*.

Coffee splashed over her hand, soaking the sleeve of her wool coat and the right leg of her slacks.

“Ouch! Goddammit!” She withdrew her foot from the shallow canal and blew on her scalded fingers, all the while trying not to drop the coffee or her umbrella.

“Are you okay?” the coffee shop woman asked.

“Yeah. Just peachy.” If she gritted her teeth any harder, she would have to call her sister for dental repairs. She stared down at the sodden mess that was her left suede ankle boot.

Her stay in Freiburg was definitely not off to a good start.

Cursing, she crossed the street and shoved open the door to the stationery store with too much force.

The bell above the door jingled frantically.

She closed her umbrella and rammed it into the stand by the door, then used her now-free hand to tug on her coffee-stained slacks. She grimaced. So much for dressing for success to make a good impression on her first day.

She let the door close behind her and paused to take in her temporary place of work.

The left side of the store was dominated by a well-lit glass case that held gleaming fountain pens. A locked display case for pens? Wasn't that a little over the top? She'd only ever seen them in jewelry stores. Not that she'd spent much time in jewelry stores since she didn't wear much jewelry and none of her relationships had ever made it to the point where she would have wanted to buy a ring.

A floor-to-ceiling shelf along the right wall was filled with notebooks, school supplies, and writing pads of all colors and sizes. Large reels of colorful paper and racks of glittery cardstock hung behind the cash register, which was located on a counter at the other end of the room. One corner of the store held pencils, erasers, highlighters, bottles of ink, quills, nibs, and items that Susanne didn't recognize.

Who the hell needed all this stuff in the age of smartphones? No wonder her uncle was close to bankruptcy.

Since they had just opened, no customers had found their way to the store yet, but a short woman looked up from the leather-bound notebooks she'd been arranging on an island display that dominated the middle of the room.

At first, Susanne thought she might be an intern or a university student who worked for her uncle part-time, but as she took a moment to study the woman, she realized that only her slight build and her large eyes, which seemed almost too big for her delicate face, made her look younger than she was. The faint lines around

Jae

her eyes and her mouth revealed that she was probably closer to Susanne's own age—thirty-eight—than to thirty, and she had made no attempt to cover them with makeup.

She wasn't beautiful in the classic sense of the word. Her hair was too dark to be blonde and too light to be brown; too wavy to be straight but not wavy enough to qualify as curly. Mostly, it looked windblown.

Not Susanne's usual type for sure. But there was something about her that drew her gaze anyway. If Susanne hadn't been so pissed off, she probably would have found her cute.

But cute or not, this wasn't the look she had expected from a saleswoman. Didn't her uncle enforce a more professional dress code? The woman was wearing blue jeans and a white blouse, for Christ's sake! Admittedly, she looked good in them, but that wasn't the point.

"Good morning." The woman's voice had a surprisingly husky depth for someone so small. She directed a friendly smile at Susanne. "How may I help you?"

At least the saleswoman wasn't rude to potential customers. There might be hope for her yet. Susanne walked toward her.

Splash, splash, splash. Her left boot squished with every step and left puddles of water on the tiled floor. She tried her best to ignore it and appear professional. "My name is Susanne Wolff. I'm looking for Norbert. Is he in?"

"Of course. Um, Nobby?" the woman called toward the back of the room, where an open door led to what might be the office or a supply room. "There's someone here for you. And, um, could you bring the mop while you're back there?"

Nobby? Her uncle was not only on a first-name basis with his employee but also allowed her to call him by his nickname? Such familiarities with employees were often a bad idea. It was high time someone with a clue about managing a business took over.

Things around here would change; she'd make sure of that—as soon as she'd gotten out of this wet boot.

Her uncle entered the sales area through the door in the back. He was a little balder and grayer than she remembered, but he immediately put down the mop and came toward her with open arms. "Susi! There you are!"

"I go by Susanne now." Only her twin sister was still allowed to call her by her childhood nickname.

"Oh. Of course." He squeezed her tightly, then let go and took a step back to look her over. "You look great. You're the spitting image of your father. But, um, what happened to your boot?"

Being compared to her father didn't exactly improve Susanne's mood. With a grunt, she shook her left foot. Her cold, wet toes felt as if they were about to fall off. "I stepped into a gutter." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the death trap.

"It's not a gutter," the employee said softly. "It's a *Bächle*."

"I know what it's called, but frankly, I don't care. Who the hell puts uncovered waterways in the middle of the street? Someone could break a leg!"

The employee didn't back away from Susanne's glare. With her elfin features and her slight build, she might have looked like a pushover, but the tiny cleft in her stubborn chin declared that she wouldn't let herself be intimidated. "Well, look on the bright side."

A snort escaped Susanne. *Oh Christ. She's one of those the-glass-is-half-full Pollyanna types.* Not that she had anything against a positive attitude, but rose-colored glasses wouldn't help them save the store. "There's a bright side to ruining my favorite pair of boots?"

"Oh yes." The woman's smile was irritatingly unshakable. "Legend has it that if you accidentally step into a *Bächle*, you'll marry a local guy and live happily ever after in our beautiful city."

Susanne nearly spat out the sip of coffee she'd just taken. "That's the last thing I want."

Uncle Norbert chuckled and patted her back. "Local girl. Ending up with a guy wouldn't be much of a happy ending for my niece."

The woman's large eyes—they were a warm brown, as Susanne could now see—widened even more. "You...you are...?"

Oh great. Just when she had thought this day couldn't get any worse, it turned out she'd be working with a backwoods person who acted as if she had never met a gay person before. She just hoped the woman wouldn't turn out to be a homophobe. The homophobic attitudes at her former workplace were part of the reason she had quit her last job, and she wouldn't stand for it in her uncle's business either. She squared her shoulders and tried to look as dignified and proud as her coffee-stained clothes and wet boot would allow. "Yes, I'm a lesbian. Do you have a problem with that?"

"W-what? No! That's not what I... I didn't... I just meant..."

Susanne waved away her stammered excuses.

Uncle Norbert wrapped one arm around each of them and beamed as if he hadn't noticed the tension between them. "Susi, um, Susanne, may I introduce you to Anja Lamm, my favorite full-time employee?"

“Only full-time employee,” Frau Lamm threw in.

Lamm. Susanne bit back a snort. That was exactly the way Frau Lamm had just stared at her—like a lamb who’d glimpsed a wolf. She gave her a brisk nod, not in the mood for meaningless pleasantries, and then turned toward her uncle. “Is there someplace where I can get cleaned up?”

“Of course. Let me show you.” He lightly gripped her elbow and led her toward the door in the back.

Susanne left the room without giving Frau Lamm another glance.



Anja grabbed the mop that Nobby had left behind, sank against the island display, and stared after them. That was his niece?

It hadn’t been hard to guess that the tall woman wasn’t a local. In her well-pressed, black slacks, a cream-colored cashmere sweater, and a long, black wool coat, she looked like a lawyer here for a case, a guest lecturer at the university, or an overdressed tourist.

As much as she tried, Anja couldn’t see any family resemblance. Even after she had stepped into the *Bächle*, not a single strand of the woman’s chestnut hair had been out of place. It was swept up into an elegant twist that accentuated the long line of her neck. In comparison, the ring of gray hair encircling Nobby’s otherwise bald head often seemed to defy gravity, lending him an Einstein-ish look. His niece definitely hadn’t inherited Nobby’s bowlegs either—or his kindness. Her gray eyes had been as cool as the weather outside.

No wonder! She thinks you have a problem with her sexual orientation.

Anja groaned. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When steps approached, she busied herself mopping up the water on the floor, not wanting Susanne to think she’d been staring after her.

But it was just Nobby, who returned alone.

“That’s your niece?” Anja whispered, keeping an eye on the door that led to the tiny office and the equally tiny bathroom.

“Isn’t it obvious? I have the same arresting cheekbones, don’t I?” His blue eyes twinkled as he patted his bearded cheeks.

“Don’t forget slender build.” She lightly nudged his potbelly.

“That too.”

“She didn’t look anything like this,” Anja gestured toward the back, “in the photo you showed me.”

Nobby scratched his beard. “Well, I took that photo the last time she visited with her mother and sister, so it’s a few years old already.”

“Years? Try decades.” In the photo she’d seen, Susanne had been a gangly teenager of maybe sixteen or seventeen.

He tilted his head. “Is that a problem?”

“Yes! I mean, now she thinks I stared at her because I have a problem with her sexual orientation, not because I thought your niece was much younger.”

“Oh.” He looked helpless for a second before shrugging. “Well, just tell her you’re bisexual.”

It still amazed her how casually that crossed his lips. Her own father had never had such an easy time with it. “No. I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Want me to tell her?” He took a step toward the back.

She grabbed his sleeve and held on. “No! She’ll think you want to set us up or something.”

“And that would be bad...why? As we just established, my niece inherited my good looks. And since she stepped into the *Bächle*, she’s destined to marry someone from Freiburg.” He winked at her. “You could be the lucky girl.”

“No, thanks.” Anja bit her tongue before she could tell Nobby she liked her partners less overbearing and abrupt. “Please don’t say anything. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” After all, it wasn’t as if she’d have to interact with Susanne again. From what Anja had heard about her from Nobby, she was pretty busy and probably wouldn’t stay around for long. Anja would give her a polite nod any time she dropped in to take a break from her sightseeing, and after a few days, she’d be gone.

Susanne swept into the sales area and strode toward the front door like a woman on a mission. “I saw a shoe store on my way here. I’m going to get myself something dry to wear, and then I’ll be right back to take a look at the books.”

Before Nobby or Anja could answer, the door closed behind her.

Anja stared after her as she marched up the street, giving the *Bächle* to her left a wide berth. “Look at the books? She means the notebooks, right?” She pointed at the rows of Moleskins and Leuchtturms. “Or is she looking for travel guides about Freiburg?”

Nobby ran both hands through his hair in a useless attempt to get it to lie flat against his head. “Uh, no. She’s not here for sightseeing. Her mother asked her to, um, help out in the store for a while.”

A sinking feeling swept over Anja. “Help out for a while?”

“Just until Easter.”

Jae

That meant Susanne would be staying not for three days, but for nearly three *months*. “But why? You and I have things well in hand.”

“Of course, but...” Nobby looked away to turn one of the leather-bound journals on the island display a little more to the left. “Sometimes it’s just nice to have a fresh set of eyes, you know?”

A fresh set of eyes? Why the heck would they need that—especially if it came with an attitude attached? She tugged on his sleeve so he would look at her. “What’s going on, Nobby? Why didn’t you tell me sooner your niece would be coming?” Keeping secrets from her wasn’t like him at all.

He kept his gaze on the journals and touched the leather as if to ground himself. “I didn’t want to say anything, but—”

The chime of the bell above the door announced their first customer of the day.

Nobby put on a welcoming smile and bounded toward the woman as if she were another long-lost relative.

The customer took forever to look around. She seemed to leaf through every single notebook in the store and then asked to try out some fountain pens.

Normally, Anja would have proudly presented each of their fine writing instruments, but now she impatiently waited until the woman finally left—after having bought just a cheap notebook and a single pencil.

As soon as she opened her mouth to talk to Nobby, the bell jingled again and Susanne returned, wearing a shiny pair of new black boots. “We’ll be in the office,” she said to Anja as she walked past and pulled Nobby with her. “Can you keep an eye on the store?”

The door closed behind them before Anja could answer. *Who the heck died and made her queen of the universe?* Nobby had said she was here to help out, not to order people around as if she were the boss. Apparently, his niece hadn’t gotten the message. She hoped this kind of attitude wouldn’t be going on for the next three months.

No matter what the superstition said, if any local girl ended up marrying this woman, it definitely wouldn’t be her.

Chapter 3

By the time Susanne made it back to her temporary apartment south of the city center, darkness had fallen, and she could barely make out the shapes of the beautiful Art Nouveau villas with their ornamental facades in the neighborhood.

She entered the building and unlocked the door of her spacious apartment on the first floor. Her steps echoed through the nearly empty dining room and the kitchen, which was separated from it by two arched doorways.

The fridge was just as bare as the rest of the apartment. *Guess it'll be muesli for dinner.*

At least there were no moving boxes cluttering the space, since she had brought only a couple of suitcases, duffel bags, and one box of stuff for the kitchen. She had figured that the less she took, the less she would need to lug back once her exile was over.

Without any furniture, the dining room was kind of depressing, so she grabbed her bowl of muesli and wandered into the living room, which wasn't quite as bare since she had taken over a recliner and a coffee table from the previous tenant.

The hardwood floor creaked softly beneath her boots. Since she had been gone all day, the air in the room had gone stale, so she opened the French doors that led to the garden she shared with the building's other tenants. The air was cool, but at least it had stopped raining.

She stood in the doorway and inhaled the scent of the wet grass.

An owl hooted from a tree at the edge of the property. No sounds of passing cars interrupted the peaceful atmosphere—only the ravenous growling of her stomach. She hadn't made time for lunch. Instead, she had gobbled down some peanuts while poring over Uncle Norbert's business ledgers and bank statements. What she had seen had ruined her appetite anyway. Her uncle was just as bad of a businessman as his brother. Paper Love was in big trouble. The store hadn't turned a profit in years. It barely made enough to cover payroll and utilities, much less the other monthly bills. Uncle Norbert had used his personal money to help keep the store afloat, but he couldn't keep doing that. If she didn't find a way to turn things around soon, Paper Love would be going under.

Maybe it would be for the best. Why cling to a store that was doomed just for sentimental reasons? Her uncle could sell off the stock and start anew with something else—or enjoy his much-deserved pension. But they weren't at that point yet. Susanne wasn't one for giving up without putting up one hell of a fight. She'd start by taking inventory of the stock and taking a closer look at the products the store sold tomorrow.

A sigh escaped her as she kicked off her boots, stripped off her socks, and sank into the recliner. A blister had formed on her heel where the new leather had rubbed against her foot all day.

Perfect. Just perfect. From the moment she'd arrived in this city, nothing had gone right.

She put her aching feet up on the ottoman and set the bowl on her lap. But when she went to dig into the muesli, she realized she'd forgotten to grab a spoon.

Groaning, she heaved herself up, put the bowl onto the coffee table, and limped into the kitchen.

When she returned with the spoon, a cool gust from the still-open French doors hit her. She shivered and went to close them. As she stepped past the recliner, movement caught her eye.

She whirled around, the spoon raised as if she could chase off the intruder with it.

Instead of the burglar she had expected, a white-and-brown tabby cat stood on her recliner, its front paws on the coffee table, lapping up the milk from her muesli.

“What the hell? Where did you come from?”

At the sound of her voice, the cat turned its head and looked at her. A brown stripe across its nose made it look admittedly cute, but Susanne wouldn't let that sway her. She stabbed her finger in the direction of the open French doors. “Out!”

The cat meowed and went back to enjoying her milk.

“Wow. You've got some nerve, kitty.” It was well-nourished and its fur gleamed with health, so Susanne knew it wasn't a starving stray. Since she couldn't eat the muesli anymore, she decided to let the cat finish its stolen meal. “Just this once. Don't think this is going to turn into a bed-and-breakfast for the next three months.”

When the cat had lapped up the rest of the milk, it withdrew its front paws from the coffee table, curled up on the recliner, and started to clean its whiskers.

“Oh no, you don't.” She reached for the cat to pick it up and carry it outside.

The cat let out a hiss and curled into an even tighter ball so she couldn't get a hold of it.

Not that she would have tried again. With the kind of luck she was having today, she'd probably get the hell scratched out of her.

“This is ridiculous.” She was standing in the middle of her nearly empty living room, her bare feet getting cold, and her stomach was still growling because a cat had eaten her dinner. “Okay, I’m giving you an option here. Are you listening?”

The cat’s ears flicked in her direction, so she took that as a yes.

“Either you go back outside voluntarily, or I’ll, um…” *Yeah, or you’ll do what? Call the police to tell them to come arrest this dangerous intruder?* She snorted. “Or I’ll have to find a way to get you to leave, and trust me, you won’t like it.”

The cat didn’t move.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She grabbed the back of the recliner and pushed the piece of furniture with its furry occupant across the hardwood floor toward the French doors.

Her feline visitor let out a startled hiss.

“I told you, you wouldn’t like it.” When she reached the step leading down to the garden, she tilted the recliner.

The cat slid off the leather seat and landed on the tiled patio. It gave Susanne a disgruntled look.

Quickly, Susanne pushed the recliner out of the way and closed the door before the cat could sneak back inside. Through the glass, she gave the feline a victorious grin. “Mission accomplished!”

She slid the semi-transparent curtain closed and went to get herself a new bowl of muesli.

“Meow!” The plaintive sound drifted after her, followed by the soft thump of a paw against the glass. “Meeoooooow!”

With a groan, she rested her forehead against the fridge. “Be strong.” She was here to do a job, not to make friends—not even with a cat.



“And then she dragged Nobby into the office, and I didn’t see much of her for the rest of the day, thank God!” Anja paused in the middle of the footbridge across the lake and waited for Miri’s reaction.

Gino, her friend’s shaggy mutt, used the opportunity to sniff out the love locks people had placed all over the railing.

Something splashed in the water below them, but in the darkness, Anja couldn’t see what it was. Maybe a swan or a turtle?

“Thank God?” Miri repeated. “What would have been so bad about seeing more of her? I thought you said she was hot.”

“Hello? Didn’t you listen to a word I just said? She’s a total snob. Waltzes in there with her ruined five-hundred-euro shoes and thinks she can take over just like that! Besides, I never said she was hot.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

A passing jogger with a headlamp chuckled at them.

Now Anja was grateful for the darkness that hid her blush.

Miri didn’t seem to mind that he had overheard part of their conversation. When the jogger had disappeared around a bend in the path circling the lake, she asked, “So is she? Hot, I mean.”

“I guess she’s marginally good-looking.”

Miri guffawed. “Marginally good-looking? Now I know I’ve got to visit the store and check her out!”

Anja grabbed her sleeve. “Don’t you dare. I’m in enough trouble as it is. I think she doesn’t like me.”

“What’s not to like?” Miri growled like a mama bear whose cub had been attacked.

Her instant defense warmed Anja despite the cool January wind. She wrapped one arm around her friend and squeezed while they continued to walk. Despite their height difference, their steps matched, probably because they had done this same walk around the lake almost every evening for the past fifteen years.

Anja lowered her gaze to Miri’s favorite salmon-colored sneakers that were practically glowing in the dark—probably just like her ears. “She thinks I’m not comfortable around gay people.”

“You?” Miri shortened Gino’s leash for a second as they reached the end of the bridge and someone on a bicycle whizzed past them. “Why would she think that?”

“Long story.” After the day she’d had, Anja didn’t have the energy for long explanations. “She misunderstood the way I looked at her when I found out who she was.”

“So if she took it personally, I take it she’s part of the rainbow family?”

“Yeah, out and proud, according to Nobby. Having a lesbian niece is probably part of why he took it so well when I came out as bisexual to him.”

Miri let out a low whistle that made Gino bark once. “So she’s hot and gay.”

“Forget it,” Anja said forcefully.

“What? It was just an observation.”

“Sure. Just an observation. Like that time you tried to set me up with the guy from the ice cream parlor who thought being bi meant I’d be eager to have a threesome with him and another woman.”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know he’d be such a creep? He seemed nice.”

“Well, Susanne Wolff is anything but nice, so forget it.”

Miri laughed. “Her name is Wolff?”

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Wolff...Lamm...wolf...lamb...” Miri pointed back and forth between Anja and some imaginary person. “Don’t you get it?”

“Yeah, well, this lamb is not going to get eaten by the big, bad wolf.” Anja kicked a piece of wood out of the way and watched as Gino chased after it until the leash reined him in.

“I want you to know that I’m heroically abstaining from making a suggestive joke about what you just said.”

Anja’s cheeks heated. She hadn’t even realized the double meaning of her words. “Thank you.”

“But seriously, you should be more open toward meeting new people.” The humor was gone from Miri’s voice.

Not this again. “I’m meeting new people in the store every day.”

“I’m not talking about customers. You need more than Paper Love. You haven’t been on a date, much less had a relationship since the Stone Age. There’s this woman I’m friends with on Facebook who—”

Anja groaned. “No Facebook. You know I’m not on any of that social media stuff. If I decide to ask a woman out, I’ll do it face-to-face.”

“Talk about the Stone Age,” Miri muttered.

Anja ignored the comment. “Besides, maybe you’ve spoiled me for other women.”

“Oh, please. We kissed exactly once, and that was enough to nearly convince you that you’re not bi after all.”

Anja chuckled. “It wasn’t that bad.”

After a beat of silence, they said at the same time, “Yes, it was.”

Their laughter rang through the darkness.

They had met a year after Anja had left the tiny little town where she had grown up and moved to Freiburg. She had been curious to explore that part of her sexuality, but she hadn’t worked up the courage to go to one of the few gay bars or parties in the area, and joining the queer sports club hadn’t been her thing either. She and Miri had finally met at the Lesbian Film Festival.

They had instantly hit it off. After the third date, Miri had kissed her. Nothing. No fireworks, no butterflies. It had been like kissing her sister, and that had confused Anja for a while. She had needed some time to figure out that just because she was attracted to women didn't mean she was attracted to *all* women.

And she definitely wasn't attracted to Susanne Wolff.

They paused when they reached the fork in the path where Anja had to go right, while Miri and Gino would head left.

"So are you sure you don't want me to come by tomorrow?" Miri asked. "Not to check her out or anything like that. Just for moral support. I could pose as a customer so you can impress her with your amazing sales skills."

Anja laughed but shook her head. "No, thanks. I don't even want to impress her. She's just here to help out for a while, not to take over."

"Are you sure about that? Nobby is what...? Sixty-two? Sixty-three?"

The veggie *Yufka* they had eaten before their walk suddenly sat like a slab of mud in Anja's stomach. "You think...?" She clamped her mouth shut, not wanting to say the words, as if that would make them more likely to happen.

Miri shrugged. "Maybe his niece is sniffing out the store to see if she wants to take over once he retires."

Anja had been dreading the day Nobby would retire for years, but he had repeatedly assured her that she would always have a job at Paper Love, even if that happened. But with his niece at the helm, Anja wasn't so sure about that—and neither was she sure that she'd want to work for Susanne Wolff.

For the first time ever, she was not looking forward to going to work in the morning.

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BY JAE

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