

## July 14: ♪ 3. One Fine Day ♪

Peter's heart palpitations and lightheadedness continued while riding the subway home. He had to shower away the embarrassment. Change his drenched shirt. Maybe apply some cologne.

He studied his personal organizer on his little netbook, the handheld computer the size of a paperback so popular with the young crowd before the Apple iPad. The small keyboard gave him more trouble than usual.

He yelled into the Nokia phone tugged between his chin and shoulder. "Listen, Sabine, I don't *care!* The two appointments have to go. This meeting is more important. I mean, she's buying the penthouse, you understand? Half a mill. And blow off Mr. Schmidt. Blame the understaffed building department, the *Bauamt*. Everybody knows Berlin's broke. Bye."

He could not focus any longer. Even if he could, he had to get ready for Rose. Make good for the disastrous performance earlier. The detour for his wardrobe emergency would eat up enough time.

When Peter packed away the phone and netbook, a picture on the subway TV interrupted his train of thought. Lady Gaga doing a benefit for a gay and lesbian organization. Visions of the Ga Ga Kids from *We Will Rock You* sang in his head. *Forgettable story, but Queen sure wrote wonderful songs.* Music withdrawals kicked in with a vengeance. He pulled the earplugs from the pocket of his dress shirt and inserted them.

His gigantic music collection had long since surpassed the capacity of any iPod, so Peter had resigned himself to loading it in sections. The thousands of records exceeded even the available space on the 200 Gigabyte hard drive of his netbook, but like a drug, he needed the pretty tunes with him. They created an ocean of sound in which to drown out his horrible,

haunting past and a wall to keep out his hostile, unforgiving present. The songs created a world, a philosophy, a religion in which he could escape.

He scanned the artists list on his iPod Nano. *Only goes to "N." No Queen today. No Doubt then. Gwen Stefani sure rocks. Wonder if they still perform?* Peter had spent half his youth in Los Angeles and had taken full advantage of the offerings in that hot bed of music. He remembered backstage at the Anaheim Pond. You could not get near No Doubt's gorgeous lead singer. Four bodyguards. Nobody cared about the guys, so he hung with them. *The pretty girls sure get it the worst.*

♪

Two hours later Peter left for his super-important appointment. He had scoured the office for brochures and other material that now filled his backpack. The constant interruptions from the phone ringing had not helped. Then the train arrived one minute early. Granted, that counted as on-time for the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe, for historical reasons called "BVG," the company that operates the subway and busses. The doors closed before he could jump inside.

He would definitely be late, so he contemplated not going at all. This meeting could only end in a catastrophe, if he performed as he had earlier in the day. *She's not going to like me being late. In her view, I should probably come an hour early and wait for her.* Some other part of him had taken control, though. He had to see her again no matter the cost. No matter.

*Natasha came back! Descended from heaven into Rose's body to make our lives whole again. Give me a second chance. How else to explain this unbelievable encounter?*

Peter boarded the next train and stood inside the door lost in thought. No subway TV, just black screens. He could not focus, anyway, and barely registered the tunnel walls rushing past the windows.

*Does she recognize me?*

In *Heaven Can Wait* the hero coming back to earth from heaven forgot his previous life. Rules of reincarnation. Only a vague feeling of *déjà vu*, like when Rose stared at him for so long.

Peter's eyes fell on the station sign when the door signal sounded. He just managed to jump out of the train in the nick of time. *Would have missed my stop for sure, if I had sat down.*

Rose stayed in a central location near the Landwehr Canal. Not the ritziest address, but probably less likely to attract paparazzi.

He looked around, puzzled by the numerous exits. So many displayed bus symbols. He knew this station. He had been here many times. He just could not focus. There, the sign for the "187" bus, but in what direction? *Focus, focus, focus.* He found the right exit just in time to get on the standing bus.

His hand scrubbed his face, while he fidgeted on the bucket seat. Sweat welled on his forehead and in his clenched fist. Peter thought of Hugh Grant's line in the movie: "I live in Notting Hill. You live in Beverly Hills."

Panic entered his brain, chased around by weird thoughts. *I knew Notting Hill. Notting Hill was a friend of mine. And you, Neukölln, are no Notting Hill.* He lived in one of the poorest districts in the city, and he wanted to court a star from Beverly Hills. This could not possibly work. He had to wake up from this insane dream.

Although stopping in front of the hotel cost him more precious minutes, Peter needed to calm down. A few deep breaths and in he went. Mrs. Hamilton waited alone in the lobby. He had a sense of disappointment and relief at the same time.

*"Frau O'Rourc wartet in ihrem Zimmer. Sie möchte lieber nicht gesehen werden, –Ms. O'Rourc is waiting in her room. She would rather not be seen."* Mrs. Hamilton said.

Her telling him the obvious irritated Peter. Of course, the famous star would not hang out in the lobby where paparazzi

and everybody else would pester her. The two did not speak in the elevator.

He craved another deep breath outside the room, but Peter did not dare show Mrs. Hamilton his nervousness, so in they went. The unglamorous setting surprised him. Just a regular room with a double bed, desk, and a brown sofa with matching armchair around a glass coffee table. Rose had placed the desk chair in front of the table. Her white laptop computer lay closed on the desk in front of the window.

Rose had changed into a loose-fitting embroidered chiffon lingerie blouse and a knee-length black skirt that matched his black trousers. Peter's eyes hung on the stunning beauty oozing femininity with the perfect makeup of a model. He could feel the arteries above his temples pulsing and hot blood flooding his face.

"Can I offer you anything out of the mini-bar?" she asked.

"Coke...Coke is fine," Peter stammered. He lowered his **gaze** and looked over the coffee table. Only empty juice bottles there. *At least she is sober, unless she hid the alcohol.*

The star placed a can on the table and sat down on the sofa. Mrs. Hamilton took the arm chair next to her in the, leaving the desk chair for him. Embarrassed, he registered the older woman's second angry nod and sat down. Peter intently stared into his backpack while rummaging through it.

"I brought an IKEA catalog," he said, as he handed it to Rose without looking at her.

"The assortment is standard across countries. You can go to one in the U.S., look at things there, and tell us what you want. We can then install them here. We've done that with other customers."

It struck him, when he said those words, that Rose was *not* his typical customer. She was not even in the same league. Or the same universe. *What am I doing here?*

"Of course, um," Peter stammered again, "there are companies that can custom build kitchens to your liking. Another American customer sent us pictures of tile, wallpaper,

furnishings she liked. The guys here matched them as closely as they could. Turned out really nice. I have some brochures for that, too."

He handed Rose more material from his backpack. She examined it and said, "Interesting. You have a card, by the way?"

Peter handed her a business card. She studied the writing.

"Fox. Peter Fox. Cute. Like the English word for the animal. Common in Germany?"

"I'm American," Peter replied.

Rose's face lit up, as she blurted out, "Really? Like, why didn't you say so? Where from?"

*Because my brain stops when I look in your eyes,* he thought. He did not say it, though. Without those gaudy sunglasses, her pretty eyes and that smile of hers impacted him even more than earlier. The sweat pouring out again felt particularly discomfoting now. Rose had the air conditioner on full blast. Peter's inside burned with desire, while his outside turned to ice.

"L.A."

"Don't say?" Rose said, her voice getting louder and more excited. "Like, what area?"

"Ingle..." He cleared his throat, which felt like parchment, then reached for the can in front of him and drank a third of the soda. "Inglewood."

"Inglewood, I see. South Bay, right?"

He nodded.

"How totally exciting! From my neighborhood," Rose concluded.

*Yeah, right,* Peter thought. *You live in Beverly Hills. I live in Inglewood Hills. Those are not in the same neighborhood. Not even in the same league. Or the same universe.*

To change the subject, he said, "I also brought some pictures of wood flooring. Pressed bamboo is as sturdy as oak, and ecological."

He knew she liked ecological things. "About a hundred a square meter installed."

Mrs. Hamilton interrupted him. "We must continue this some other time. I have to pick up my children."

She reached for her handbag. Confused, he grabbed his backpack.

"Peter, can you explain the building brochure to me? It's German, which is, mostly, all Greek to me," Rose said.

Mrs. Hamilton looked puzzled.

Rose turned to her and waved her hand. "Don't worry. I'll be just fine."

What were the agents supposed to say? The customer is always right. Peter answered, "Sure," and sat down. Mrs. Hamilton said her good-byes and left.

Rose took a small bottle of vodka from the mini-bar and jumped back onto the sofa across from him. She slipped off her elegant black pumps, pulled her legs onto the cushions, leaned back, and smiled at Peter.

"El-Aay. Totally hot," she said. "How long?"

He should stop her. If she got drunk, it could only end in trouble. She obviously did not care about the brochure. But he enjoyed this "meeting" too much. He had to stoke the memory of her previous life.

"Five earthquakes," Peter answered.

"Five earthquakes?" Rose blurted out, interspersed with giggles. "What do you mean, five earthquakes?"

*Good. She's laughing at the same jokes.* Her casual comfort calmed down Peter.

"You know, we measure time in earthquakes in L.A. Five earthquakes—fifteen years."

Rose giggled again. Her pink lips framed a crescent moon of perfect, white teeth.

"Sorry, I didn't know that. I'm from Boston. Oh, sit in the comfy chair. You don't have to use that uncomfy thing anymore."

She patted the armchair next to her. Peter moved over, clumsily slipped off his uncomfortable dress shoes, pulled up one leg, and leaned to the right. Rose leaned to the left. A mere arm's length separated his longing lips from her angelic face. Warmth swept through his body.

Rose seemed tense. He noticed the fingers of her clenched fist digging into the fabric of the sofa. Hastily she finished off the vodka.

"Say, what wind blew you to Berlin?"

"The Santa Anas from Smog Angeles... Just kidding! Did the same racket there 'til the crisis hit. Don't let anybody tell you they couldn't see it coming. *I* saw it coming. For miles and miles and miles. I mean, money guys give 100% financing and then, duh, people walk when things get mean. Ivory tower blindness. Us in the field knew this' going ballistic, I mean, to..."

Peter paused. Rose's eyes had widened at his rising volume. He took a deep breath and lowered his voice.

"Sorry, I'm still so mad at these greedy banksters. I'm exiled here 'cause hairbrained securitization ruined the American real estate dream. Anyway, relatives turned me on to Berlin. Germany didn't join the crazy sham. Everything a'ight here, and Berlin's an incredible place."

Rose asked with a sad voice, "You don't miss the California dream?"

"Will in January. I go loco subzero."

"Then come back!"

Peter broke eye contact. She wanted him at the scene of his crime. Did she divine his deepest, darkest secrets? Should he probe her? A whisper left his lips. "Not that easy."

For a moment, he looked past Rose out the window, then regained his composure. "What about you? What's *your* story?"

"So Brenda's fault."

"Brenda Lancer, the singer?"

"Yeah, that one, my 'BFF,' you know... 'best friend forever.' Well, except for my baby sis Alice. They picked me up from jail. Like, you probably heard? Scary place, you know."

Rose pinched her lower lip between her thumbs and index fingers, while her gaze drifted to the table. She seemed so sad, Peter could not help but feel sorry. Given her notoriety, the press always found a "source" willing to talk. Supposedly, her first night in jail had been a horrible experience full of tears and hysterical screams. A tabloid claimed she only survived with tranquilizers during the remainder of that unpleasant forced isolation.

Peter leaned forward a tad. He wanted desperately to reach out and hug Rose, but he lost his nerve when she looked at him again.

"Couldn't miss it. You made the subway news," he said.

"The Subway news?" Rose showed that crescent moon again. Her laughter filled the air. "You mean, they name the news here after the sponsoring company? Like a stadium?"

For a moment, Peter puzzled over the remark. He smirked and said, "No, no, not SUBWAY sandwiches. The real subway. The trains have dual-monitors. One shows text, one pictures. Repeating segments with three stories a piece. You're a regular in the 'Show' segment. Arrest, bail, arrest, bail, clinic. I lost track. Awful mug shot, though. You are so much prettier for real."

"Thanks," Rose said softly. "Anyway, so they pick me up, and I'm, like, depression city. You know, I was in solitary most of the time. The sheriffs were totally trippin' that somethin' would happen and they'd get the blame. A couple days I can handle. A couple weeks..."

She stopped talking, stood up, retrieved two more bottles, and offered Peter a whiskey. He waved it off. Love on alcohol meant trouble. Two shots in one hour. At her weight she would be legally drunk soon. He should stop her. Or, should he? Why? Because the attempt would end like Natasha. How could he stop her when her family and friends had failed? He

could not play father. Not at her age. Or should he? In any case, he was not the one getting drunk.

Rose stretched out on the sofa, with her chin lying on her hand on the armrest. Her other hand poured vodka in her mouth.

"So, we get to the house, and it's the usual zoo. You know, the sheriff didn't tell anyone, like, I was leavin'. They didn't want the zoo. But the paps just hang around my house and wait. So, it's the usual zoo, like totally, everybody trying to get a shot, pressing up against the car. Me without makeup."

Rose's free hand waved past her frowning face and nearly spilled the vodka.

"You know, really. So, Brenda says to me you need to, like, chill somewhere else for a while. Like, they don't show my court dates live in Europe, right? So, she's found this perfect place, Berlin. You know, the cosmopolitan feeling, the new party scene, the Berlinale film festival, like, just what I dig. She said many celebs come here, now."

"Yeah, it's in the news. Brangelina supposedly have a house here. Clive Owen. Must be because Berlin is poor, but sexy."

Rose looked at him puzzled. Cute, but puzzled.

"It's an advertising slogan," Peter said. "The city has no money, but people come here in droves, anyway, including sexy people. Madonna's here all the time."

"And my friend Leo's got a place here. You know, Kapet, the director. He shoots at the local studios. So, he fixes me up with Anna, you know, she has an American husband in the biz. That's how I got here."

"Well, what do you think?"

Rose stared down at her second vodka for a while. A sad tone reverberated in her voice. "Anna says it's a good investment. I'm not sure. But let's not talk about real estate."

She pushed herself onto her knees, opened the whiskey bottle, and took a swig.

"What about you? Like, you must have *tons* of girlfriends here. Handsome American real estate tycoon."

She leaned forward. One hand pressed into the armrest, while the other clung to the little bottle. Peter wanted to lean forward and kiss her, but he feared a hasty move would spoil his chances.

"No, not at the moment. Not that easy in a big city."

What a lie. Pretty women everywhere, from the subway to the stores and cafés. But how could he tell his goddess about guilt and fear?

"Ah, poor darling, all alone in the big city," Rose said.

She sounded drunk, although, for all Peter knew, she just teased him with that sultry voice. Her hand stroked his hair like she would pet an animal. He caressed the inside of her arm with his cheek. The tickling sensation of his budding stubbles scratching her soft skin and a whiff of her sweet body lotion sent shivers down his spine. Everything felt so good. Brandy's "Come a Little Bit Closer" played in his head. He leaned forward, and so did she. They were just a hand's breadth apart. The flowery sweetness of her perfume already engulfed him. Just a little bit more and he would taste her pink lips.

Thud, boom. Peter's arm slipped. His hand hit the floor when his chest crashed into the armrest. It hurt. Rose's eyes widened as she jerked back. Quickly, she relaxed and giggled, though. He pushed himself back into his seat. His hand massaged his sore chest.

Rose scowled.

"I shouldn't. You are, like, here. I live there. This is so totally not going to work."

Peter gave her a longing look and said with a surprisingly calm voice, "Why not?"

Rose sat hugging her knees. How he longed to replace those legs snuggled up to her bosom. His goddess seemed so distant now, as she stared at the fabric next to her. He could hear the sadness in her somber voice.

"I fly back Friday at ten, and you'll stay here, and I'll be all alone, thinkin' of ya."

"Will You Love Me Tomorrow" wandered around in Peter's head. The Shirelles version, or the one by Dusty Springfield, or even Amy Winehouse? *Who cares*. The timeless Carole King composition covers the age-old question after the first date: At night a man belongs to a woman completely, but will he still love her tomorrow. What could he say? Peter could not even *promise* to call Rose tomorrow. He did not have her private phone number.

She held up the empty bottle and slowly moved it back fourth in front of her face. Her eyes twitched, as they intently stared at the colorful sticker. The fingers of her other hand picked at the paper. Rose observed her hands tearing the label of the empty whiskey bottle into rings of paper, then stared at him with glassy eyes. Quiet, slurred speech followed. "You love me, don't ya? Like all my male fans. Tell me the truth."

*She didn't just say it, did she? Not after this short time. Does this even count as a first date? Unless she remembers our previous ones?*

He wanted to say "Ditto" like in the movie *Ghost*, where Sam used the word to avoid saying "I love you," but it surely would not make much sense to Rose. And the somber moment disqualified his usual escape hatch: making a joke.

Peter looked straight at her, and she looked straight back. Rose had already ripped off half the bottle's label. She just kept pulling on the paper while fixing her eyes on him. Those big portals to her soul that sucked him in. Drained his free will. Commanded the truth. The truth he failed to tell Natasha. A mistake he had to correct. Peter labored to speak.

"This is my *Tootsie* moment now. I'll probably regret this, 'cause it never works out. But ..." He paused and straightened his back. "I'd like to think I can tell a woman the truth without her throwing a drink in my face like in that movie. I mean, I should not have to lie to the woman I love. And since you don't have a drink, I'll try."

*Did that make any sense? Who cares.*

His heart pounded and his head felt like it would explode once more. Peter had to escape the tractor beam emanating

from her eyes, so he gazed at his faint reflection on the glass table.

"The truth? The truth...The truth is that I've had a bad crush on you for a long time. A school boy crush. Like a 16-year-old. I can't help it. When I look in your eyes, my brain just stops functioning. And when you smile at me, I'm just *Lost in Translation*. I want you, I want you so bad. I want to touch you, hold you, kiss you, feel you."

He looked up to see Rose smile.

"That's so sweet."

"But I want more. I want to touch you everywhere. I want to make love to you. Have wild, passionate sex all night. Like when I was young. You drive me crazy. I can't control it."

Rose looked down again. "I totally appreciate your honesty, but I'm still checking out clothes on the rack. Not ready for the dressing room, yet."

The dagger to his heart left Peter speechless. He saw through his reflection once more. A growling noise ended the silence.

Rose said, "Someone's hungry. Feel like dinner?"

Peter nodded. *Better than nothing.*

"Please understand," she continued, "I so dread a restaurant right now after one fine day. No press around. Just you. I can, like, make the slip in my, you know, *costume*, but I can't eat with the sunnies on, and then someone will, like, get the picture and the paps will ruin it all. Leo, like, tried it here, you know. So totally no go. We're too famous. Let's order room service, okay?"

He nodded again. Rose handed him the menu from the coffee table.

"Help me. It's all, like, German. I'm clueless other than *Schnitzel*, and that's too heavy for me. Doesn't have to be 'no meat,' but, like, somethin' with veggies."

Peter read through the menu. Today's regional special: Sauerkrauttopf, a stew with sauerkraut and pieces of pork and potatoes. She went for it, so he followed. Fruit juice to drink.

She probably wanted something stronger, but he feared the consequences.

Peter lay down across the bed to reach the phone at the far side and placed the order.

Rose lay down, too, propped up her head on her arms, looked at him, and said, "Talk to me."

He needed to know if he even had a chance.

"What about *your* boyfriend?"

"Left. Probably the drinkin'. Or, not drinkin'. Or the jail thin'. I don't know. The last three just flaked out, you know. It's difficult. So classic. Me, in a hotel room. I totally like it. You can be alone without being alone."

"But you're not alone," he whispered.

He could not resist the young woman within reach next to him. One of her naked legs danced in the air from the knee down. His hand reached out. Peter gently traced her outline with his palm, from her hair down her back to her bottom and to her head again. She closed her eyes and sighed. Rose's smooth hair gave no resistance, but the chiffon blouse tugged at his skin. *What a feeling.* He repeated the course a few times.

"Talk to me," she spoke softly.

He ceased his caresses. Her eyes popped open.

"Don't stop!" she complained. "Just talk to me while you're doing it."

Rose poked her elbow in his side and hit his ribs. He chuckled.

"You're ticklish?" A broad grin appeared on her face as she sat up and said, "I got you now. Ha-ha!"

She poked and tickled Peter, who fell on his back laughing hysterically, then crying, "mercy," then both at the same time. She would not relent.

"Say 'Uncle.' Say it."

Peter, laughing, cried out, "Aunt, aunt, aunt, ha-ha-ha."

"Very funny," Rose said and continued tickling him.

"Okay, okay, uncle, uncle."

Rose stopped tickling him, placed her hands on the bed on either side of his head, looked him in the eyes and asked, "So, who's on top now?"

He said nothing. The tractor beam engaged again. Her face came closer and closer. Their lips touched. Electric. Her body heat trickled through the chiffon, intensifying at the exposed neck and chest. Peter closed his eyes and let the warmth spread from his face down to his toes.

They continued for a while, their mouths exploring the other's face. His shaking hand rode the course again. When it reached the arch in her lower back, Peter felt a shiver ripple through her body. Her lips drew little, wet circles around his mouth. He stroked across her back, down to her side, and then tugged to get under her blouse. One arm simultaneously fondled her neck and hair while pulling her closer.

Peter had Rose trapped now. She could not use her arms without falling on his face. His fingers wandered along her sides and back, occasionally teasing her breasts. He tugged at her blouse again. Once his hand secured an opening, it crawled slowly up her lower back to the band of her brassiere. Peter could feel only two hooks. *This is going to be easy. One –*