

Chapter 1: Fired

Bright morning sun blazed through the bedroom curtains. Lotta Karlson rolled over and curled up on her side. A burning headache stirred distorted memories. Her stomach cramped as she tried to remember how many Ramazzottis she'd poured on top of her four beers.

The mattress wobbled. A jolt ran through her body. No! Please! She opened her eyes and turned around. Oh God! What had she done? Daniel lay next to her, lips parted, face pale under a dark stubble. A whiff of stale whiskey attacked her nose and stomach.

Groaning, she turned on her back and stared at the ceiling. Daniel had been her colleague and friend for three years. A geek, who always worked overtime, he bought the latest gadgets and collected gigabytes of comics. As often as she'd been tempted to spice up his life, she had never crossed that line. Until last night.

Her head throbbed. A blade pierced her right temple. She glanced at the alarm clock. Twenty minutes after nine. Time to get going. Flex time had its limits.

Ugh. How could she forget? Nobody expected her at work. They'd fired her. And only a couple of months away from her thirtieth birthday, for which she'd already scheduled a nice little mid-life crisis. Well, technically they'd laid her off, but the result was the same. A kick in the butt.

More pieces of yesterday's puzzle fell into place. She sat up. Big mistake. The room spun. The knife sliced through to the other side of her head. A long dark hair tickled down her bare arm. Goosebumps popped out on her skin.

A new image flared behind her eyes. Dream or reality? Panic sped up her drowsy pulse. She had to find out. She slipped her legs over the edge, pulled on her t-shirt and heaved herself up. Stumbling into the living room, she picked up the phone. Last night took on clearer shapes and glowed in colors far too bright. Feeling sick, she dialed Brigitte's number.

After three rings her best friend answered. "Hey, you're alive."

"Barely. Just tell me one thing. Did I book a flight to South America last night?"

Brigitte giggled. "You sure did. You should have a confirmation e-mail in your inbox."

Lotta sank onto her desk chair. "How could you let me do that?" Terry Pratchett's impish God of Hangovers seemed to hammer against the insides of her temples, but at least the knife had slipped out.

"It sounded like a brilliant idea at the time. If I remember correctly you're leaving in two weeks. I'll water your plants."

Lotta swallowed. "Don't bother. I'm going to cancel the reservation."

"I don't think you should. You've got nothing to lose. You're between jobs, remember?"

"You mean I'm unemployed." Anger flared when she thought about spineless Harold stumbling through his speech about not enough revenue in the last quarter... As if she were a sales rep, not a project manager. Her team made every deadline in the last—

Brigitte's voice intruded. "...nice compensation pack and three months' pay without having to work. It's the perfect time for a getaway. Listen, if you don't go on that trip now, you never will."

Cold sweat made Lotta shiver. "Chile, was it?"

"I think so. Someone said it was the safest country in South America."

Lotta snorted. Just great. Through the haze, she remembered her funny colleagues—ex-colleagues—getting all excited, recommending places for her to go: Bangkok, Fiji, Rio...

Fifteen others had been laid off. They'd all met at the pub next to the office, joined by several colleagues who still had jobs, including Brigitte and Daniel. As far as Lotta knew, she was the only one taking a trip.

Too much to deal with on top of a hangover. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Wait. Daniel hasn't shown up yet. Do you know if he got home okay?"

"He's fine, I think." Lotta rose and walked over to the window, trying to get away from the next question.

"What?"

Staring out on a side street of Munich's fashionable Leopoldstraße, she cleared her throat. "We shared a taxi and... and things got a bit out of hand."

"Lotta! With Daniel the Geek? What a dream couple: the workaholic and the nerd. He's cute though."

"Please, not now."

"I want to know all about it."

"Tomorrow, if I haven't jumped out the window by then."

Brigitte laughed. "Can't let that happen. Charlie's Bar tonight?"

"Aw, all right."

She slunk back to her bed, slipped under the duvet and poked the lump next to her. "Wake

up."

Underneath a tousle of black hair, Daniel grunted. "Huh?"

"You still have a job to go to."

He turned around, squinting. "Lotta?"

She couldn't help smiling. "Quite a surprise, eh?"

A grin spread over his face. After a few seconds, he said, "You know, I've been fantasizing about this."

Lotta groaned and pulled the comforter over her head. The last thing she needed was a romantic entanglement.

Propped up on his elbow, he tugged on her cover and looked at her with sparkling brown eyes. "My imagination couldn't compete with the real thing though."

Lotta cringed but her eyes lingered for a moment on his smooth, hairless chest inviting her touch. "Oh please! Don't look at me like that. You know this was a mistake."

The spark in his eyes died. He rolled onto his back and sighed. "Mind if I use your shower?"

"Go ahead. Aspirin's in the cabinet behind the bathroom mirror."

"Thanks." He sat up and slipped into his boxers, gathered his scattered clothes and looked down at her, chewing the inside of his cheek.

She closed her eyes and heard his bare feet on the wood floor. Her skin remembered the sensation of his body on top of her. She banned the images and hoped to sink back into oblivion, but different memories of the previous night tortured her mind. She heard herself boasting that she'd go to some exotic country all by herself and have a bit of fun. Erich, the traitor, had pulled out a laptop and connected to the wireless. They started searching the Internet for the cheapest flights to all kinds of destinations while Daniel's arm lay across her shoulders.

Lotta heard the rush of water in the bathroom and felt sorry for kicking him out of her bed so cruelly, but she worried he'd take an apology as encouragement. She felt like screaming. No chance of sleep.

Escape to another hemisphere didn't sound like such a bad idea anymore. She needed coffee and had to check her e-mail, find out her destination and the details of her flight into unadulterated folly. Maybe she'd changed her inebriated mind at the last moment and booked a flight to Medellín for a fiesta with the drug barons.

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Dressed in a short skirt and tank top under a black leather jacket, Lotta entered her favorite bar, one of Munich's lesser known treasures and the last place she wanted to be right now. Blinded by the gloom, she pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and waited for her eyes to adjust.

Charlie waved from behind the bar. Lotta smiled and strode towards him while she scanned the few guests. Brigitte wasn't here yet so she hopped a stool.

Charlie flashed his incredibly white teeth. "Hi, Schatzie, how are you?"

"Don't ask."

His expression wavered between sympathy and amusement. "That bad?"

"Worse. Gimme a Bloody Mary. How are things with your Brazilian beauty?"

His face contorted in a grimace. "Who?"

"Sorry to hear it."

"I'm off at eleven, if you want to go clubbing." He winked and poured tomato juice.

Lotta winced. "Charlie, I don't have too many male friends and I don't think it makes sense to sleep with every one of them."

Charlie laughed. "Okay, spill it. What happened?"

"I screwed up big time. I got laid off yesterday, drank myself silly then booked a flight to Chile. And, to top it off, I slept with a good friend and colleague. Ex-colleague."

"Wow, Chile! Cool."

Lotta sighed. "I have the feeling you aren't taking this seriously."

An arm wrapped around Lotta's shoulders. She looked around into Brigitte's smiling face, rimmed by natural blond curls. "Hi, darling."

"Do you have anything typically Chilean?" she asked Charlie.

He grabbed a bottle labeled *Pisco* from the shelf. "Sure, I'll make something up."

"Excellent." Brigitte dragged her to one of the tables and slumped on the green leather sofa.

Lotta sat opposite her in a matching easy chair, crossed her arms on the table and glared. "I'm not going. No way."

Brigitte shook her head. "Why not?"

"I don't want to, so why should I?"

"Last night you wanted to travel the world."

"I was drunk."

Brigitte looked smug. "In vino veritas."

"I drank beer and Ramazotti, not wine. You can stick your Latin platitudes."

"Honey, you wouldn't have booked the flight if you didn't want to do something very different for once. Now is your chance."

Lotta sighed. "That's not the only thing I regret."

Brigitte sat up. "Right, tell me about Daniel!"

"Daniel was wonderful, but I kicked him out this morning."

"Define wonderful."

Lotta frowned.

Brigitte pressed on, "Well, how was Mr. Geek as a lover?"

"Brigitte!" Lotta felt her cheeks burn. "You're married. Quit thinking about other men in bed."

Brigitte leaned back and crossed her arms. "All right. Then tell me why you kicked him out if he was so wonderful."

"Because we've been friends for years."

Brigitte rolled her eyes. "And that means you can't fall in love with him?"

Charlie placed a purple cocktail in front of Brigitte.

Lotta shook her head at her obnoxious friend. "You might as well ask me to fall in love with Charlie."

He looked at her and grinned. "I wouldn't mind a little romance after my wild Amazon left me bruised and battered."

"Forget it, Charlie. I used you as an example."

Charlie shook his head. "Typical woman, first they use you then they dump you."

Lotta wanted to laugh at his mock pathos, but his words stung.

"If you ask me," Brigitte said, "you've got a commitment phobia."

"I like to think that I was leading a rather happy life until yesterday."

Brigitte sucked on the straw then shook her head. "You're a workaholic and you only go out with colleagues. What kind of a life is that?"

"What else would I need?"

"How about some excitement? An adventure? Love?"

Lotta took a deep breath, but before she found an answer, Brigitte continued, "When did you last have sex?"

Lotta growled, "Last night."

"I mean before that."

She took a deep breath and sank back. "More than a year ago. So what?"

"That was Alex, right? How long did it take before you ran?"

"Half a year. My usual time for the dopamine level to get back to normal. Some call it love; I call it messed-up brain chemistry. Your so-called love lasts just long enough to make sure the female gets pregnant. And that's not only the case with vertebrates. Nature's tricks—"

"Oh please, have mercy. I wish you'd never studied biology. How can you live in such a disenchanting world?"

"Ain't always easy."

"Why don't you mount your horse and ride into the sunset, lonesome cowboy?"

Lotta smiled. Talking to Brigitte always cheered her up. "Let me finish my drink first."

"Chile lies west."

Sometimes the cheer only lasted a fleeting moment. She looked at her annoying friend through a dark fringe of bangs. "What would I do there?"

"I believe under that tortoise shell of yours a child is hiding who wants to come out and play. Set it free. Start living and don't just go through the motions."

Lotta shook her head. "I've got to find a new job."

"No you don't. Not right away. I don't want you to bury yourself in work again. You've got the money and the time. At least give it a try."

Lotta knew she meant well. "I'll think about it."

Brigitte nodded and finished her drink. "Okay. I've got to go. Can't leave Hans at home with the kids two evenings in a row." She sounded apologetic. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Sure."

Brigitte rose and kissed her on the cheek. "You can do it. Live, love and take some risks."

Lotta watched her walk up to the bar, put down some money and exchange a few words with Charlie. He nodded in Lotta's direction without looking at her. Inside, Lotta groaned. She didn't want to imagine what they were discussing. She'd pay and escape as soon as Brigitte left and before Charlie could corner her.

Lotta turned away and sipped her drink. She loved her friends, except when they treated her like a child. She was happy with her life—more or less.

"I thought I might find you here."

Lotta looked up into Daniel's face showing no trace of his usual smile. Her heart beat faster. "Daniel?" He still wore the same clothes as last night: A black Silver Surfer t-shirt and black jeans. They woke too late this morning to allow him to go home and change. Working at an IT company had its advantages. Occasionally a developer might even sleep under his desk.

He nodded towards the sofa opposite her. "May I?"

"Sure but I was about to leave."

"I won't keep you." He sank into the cushions. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, much better, thanks to two aspirins and an afternoon nap." She tried hard to sound casual, pretending that nothing happened. She hid her sweaty hands under the table, afraid they might tremble and betray her feelings.

"Lotta, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take advantage of the situation."

"Hey, it always takes two."

He remained silent for a moment. Lotta didn't know what else to say, how to make last night undone and save their friendship.

"You're not mad at me?" he asked.

"No."

His eyes pierced her. The left corner of his mouth forced a half-smile. "But you don't want to see me?"

Lotta flinched, but she had to be honest. "We've been good friends, Daniel, and I'm sorry about what happened last night. It was a mistake. My mistake." Lotta hated herself. She felt like she'd kicked a puppy.

Daniel dropped his gaze to the glass surface of the table. After long seconds, he looked up at her. "Are we still friends?"

"Sure." She knew it was a lie.

Charlie appeared like a ghost. "Hi Daniel, what can I get you?"

He shook his head, eyes still fixed on her. "Nothing." He cleared his throat. "I'm leaving. Have a good trip." He rose and walked away.

Lotta watched him leave, yearning for him to turn around and smile at her.

"What did you do now?" Charlie asked.

She buried her head in her hands. What a nightmare.