

# SISI'S ALPINE CHRISTMAS

by Soleil

*“Let everything happen to you  
Beauty and terror  
Just keep going  
No feeling is final”  
Rainer Maria Rilke*

## Chapter I

Despite her deep distrust, life knocked her down again. She didn't see it coming.

“You don't work here anymore. You have exactly one hour to pack up your things.” Tom leaned back and relaxed in his Aston Martin Presidential chair, which he had made in exactly the same "Apple-tree Green" as his custom-colored Aston Martin Vanquish. He knew that it was his "attention to detail" that made him a gentleman.

Tom studied the face of his fired Director of Sales.

Josephine O'Flaherty, concentrated hard to keep her light, nonchalant smile. Yet she couldn't control that the color was draining from her face, that blood rushed to her gut, and her hands trembled.

She was amazed. This psychopath leisurely chatted with her, only to stab her in the back with a knife out of nowhere. And now he enjoyed feasting on her defeat! Despite her cynical, negative worldview, people still plummeted deeper than her worst expectations.

There was a period of total silence. Then Tom, speaking every word with emphasis, said, “Rick Favour called me this morning. He canceled the deal. I still wanted to hear your side.”

Josephine remained silent.

He continued. "You obviously do not understand about commitment, and have no appreciation of our customers or this gallery. That's why you have no business here."

The blood rushed back to Josephine's face, and she gasped, "Are you saying that appreciating my work means jumping into bed with our clients? I could sue you for that!"

Tom smiled warily. "I said nothing like that. But the fact is that you have expanded your private life to include the clients of this gallery. And now your sexual problems have cost us seven million dollars. My dear, it's the other way around: you can be glad if we don't sue you for damages and business loss. So now get out of my office!" He turned his chair around.

She got up as if struck on the head, crept through the huge office, and disappeared through the veneered wooden door.

In her office, she collapsed in her chair and looked out the window on North Beverly Drive. She was stunned. Only a minute ago, she had told Tom Zeigarnik, owner of the "Zeigarnik Gallery of Contemporary Art" about her failed date with Rick Favour, hedge fund manager and, more recently, art collector. A minute later she had lost her job.

It had taken a person of power less than one minute to turn her life 180 degrees.

What should she do now? There was nothing to be done. So she sat motionless at her desk and looked out the window. Her eyes followed three young women in burqas who gesticulated and turned right on Brighton Way with their five children. They were probably on their way to Rodeo Drive, where they would break into Gucci or Hermes and raid the shelves.

"Knock Knock!"

She turned around and saw Apoloniusz, who, with raised eyebrows and hands in his pockets, had leaned his six feet casually against her door frame. Apoloniusz was her colleague at

Zeigarnik. They had fostered their hate-love for years. This gorgeous Nigerian loved not only contemporary art, but also the hot emerging artists and the wealthy art collectors in equal measure.

“Princess, I wanted to ask if you are okay or if you do need help?”

“No, Apollo,” she sighed, “Thanks for asking, but I'm fine!”

She smiled a weak smile and waited, but as he made no move to leave, and made a meaningful face, the reason for his presence dawned on her. “Damn it, Apollo, are you serious?”

“Sorry, honey, that wasn't my idea!” He shrugged, but didn't look sad or guilty.

She got up, took her handbag, a pair of high-heeled pumps, and an elegant jacket from the built-in closet behind the door, threw both into a paper bag, and hung the bag over her shoulder. She turned once around her axis and looked at the shelves crammed with heavy art books.

“I'll pack your books and have them delivered to you later,” said Apoloniusz.

“Forget it! I won't take anything from here,” she hissed.

“Sisi, please calm down. Later everything will look different again”, he tried to appease her. He noticed her still trembling hands. For the first time, he looked at her with something like warmth and compassion in his usually distant and haughty face.

“I'm done. Don't you want to check my pockets to see if I took something with me?” She tried to cover up her grief with sarcasm.

Then she walked past him, crossed the huge showroom, stepped through the large, heavy double doors, which were flanked by security guards, into the blazing sun.

And so she left the linchpin of the last ten years of her life behind.

#

When she got home she showered for almost three quarters of an hour. Then she wrapped herself in her Japanese house kimono and went out onto the terrace. She leaned far over the waist-high, round railing.

The sea glittered on the other side of the Pacific Highway, far behind the broad, brownish-yellow sand. Instead of the calming thunder of the surf, she only heard the thunder of traffic rolling under her window on the Pacific Highway towards Malibu on that dreamy Saturday afternoon in November.

She turned around and opened the drawer of the small side table that stood next to the lounge on the terrace. She took a cigarette from the opened box that she kept there for special emergencies, lit it and took a deep drag. Immediately she felt her circulation collapse after the long shower. She lay down on the lounge, stared at the deep blue sky and slowly smoked the cigarette. It was strange. She felt the cigarette vibrate in her hand. Her hand still hadn't stopped shaking.

Her gaze wandered over the vast emptiness of her terrace into the living room. The lounge was the only furniture on the fifty-square-meter, half-way covered terrace of her condominium on the fourth floor of a ten-story apartment building. It towered in huge, flat steps over the Pacific Highway right at the beginning of Pacific Palisades. She had bought the spacious one-room apartment five years ago. It had been the cheapest in all Pacific Palisades, one of the posh neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Still, she had to put all her savings into it.

After five years, the inside of the apartment still looked exactly the same as it did when she moved in. She had put her bed in the middle of the living room, where she could leave the

sliding doors to the terrace open at night. Next to the bed was an old library chair that served as a bedside table. In the other room she had placed a desk on two trestles and used a second library chair as a work chair.

Apart from books and records hidden in built-in cupboards, a floor lamp next to the bed and a desk lamp on the work table, the apartment was empty. No pictures on the walls, no sofa, no dining table, no television, no memorabilia, and no trace of another person.

Josephine loved her apartment. She loved falling asleep by the roar of the sea every night, and she loved the screeching gulls that woke her up around five in the morning. She loved to stand on her terrace in the morning with a hot cup of coffee and watch the sunrise while the wind tousled her hair. For her this was the epitome of freedom, luxury and therapy at the same time. These moments healed the injuries of the past day and prepared her for the struggles of the coming. She had never felt that this overpriced apartment was a bad deal for her. She would have spent her last penny to live here by the sea. Here, in the silence, alone with herself, she felt protected, felt moments of peace.

In the past five years no one but her and the occasional handyman had set foot in this apartment. When Rick picked her up for their date yesterday, he wanted to come in to see the view. But she had pulled him out by the sleeve and closed the door on his face. "This is private!" She had said to him without further ado.

If this alienated him, he didn't let it show. Richard Eugene Favour came from old money, and had his own idea of how a gentleman should behave. He had opened the door to his Tesla for her. Then he cackled incessantly as they drove to the restaurant in downtown Los Angeles where he had made reservations.

Her boss had realized a few weeks ago that Rick's frequent visits to the gallery not only served the further education of the very rich art freshman. Rick also seemed to find the reserved, blonde Josephine attractive. So Tom had given her to understand, that lunches and dinners with clients were, of course, part of the job. When she refused on the grounds that she had no intention of mixing work and private life, he had accused her, as he did today, of a lack of commitment and appreciation for her job. After his and Apollo's long persuasion, she finally accepted Rick's dinner invitation.

Josephine was 36 years old and didn't go on dates. Never. In ten years her colleagues at Zeigarnik had never seen Sisi, as everyone called her, meet a man, no matter how harmless, in private. Sisi dutifully accompanied clients to exhibition openings, soirées, film festivals, the Philharmonic, private museum tours and fashion shows. She accepted invitations to parties, picnics and weekends in the country. But, she had so far declined any invitation to a romantic date. Not, because she had moral reservations. Or, because she didn't like men. Not at all.

In the past ten years, despite her life as a social butterfly, Sisi had never met anyone who had given her the slightest inkling of a tingling sensation in her stomach. For the most part she had to bring herself to be nice and charming with her clients. She would make her favorite aunt Sophia laugh on the phone imitating with caustic sarcasm the bad manners and embarrassing behavior of her super-wealthy customers .

But Rick she had liked from the start. He was different, she thought. She told herself that she wouldn't have gone out with him otherwise. Despite his custom suit, which was a little out of place in Los Angeles, he never seemed to have affectations. Never seemed gauche. It would never have occurred to him to drive a bright green Aston Martin Vanquish to get everyone's atten-

tion. He had assured her with a wink that the Tesla was solely for the purpose of protecting the environment. And although she had shown little interest, he had explained to her at length how he would use his fortune, which has grown to almost a billion, for the benefit of the general public. She had looked at him with a kind smile and that had encouraged him to give a twenty minute monologue on his grandiose, ethical beliefs.

On their first date he had discussed why he was wearing Savile Row suits instead of Neapolitan ones. One had to have a clear-cut position on that. When she threw in that she liked the sharp Florentine or Roman cuts, he had given her a loving smile from above. Then he told her in her face that as a poor middle-class child she had no idea about tailor-made suits.

But that didn't bother her. As little as his compulsive listing of all the toys, collectibles and experiences that he had either already indulged in, or intended to absorb in the next year, or before his death, or the impending climate catastrophe. This typical bad habit of the rich actually repelled her. Yet it was this dependence of rich people on measuring their value as human beings in material things that enabled her and Tom Zeigarnik to sell large, color-splattered canvases for millions and millions.

Rick was smart, he had a Ph.D in Finance and a Masters of Science in Machine Learning from Princeton, and trained his algorithms in intelligent option trading. His incredible success had made him super rich and a famous bachelor in a few years.

Not that she knew anything about option trading, but what she found was that it was stimulating to talk to him about almost everything. He gave direct, open answers to all her questions. He seemed more trustworthy to her than most of the slime balls she'd dealt with.

He entered the Water Grill, Los Angeles “classic seafood restaurant, in front of her, and

the maître d' had brought them to their table. She observed the heads of some of the guests inconspicuously turning towards them. He had noticed it too. After they had sat down, Rick got up again, and knocked with a fork on his water glass. When this time all heads jerked around to look at them, he said in a loud, bell-clear voice: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Yes! I am Rick Favour. My beautiful companion and I hope that you will enjoy your evening here with us in the fabulous Water Grill!" Then he sat down, winked like a fellow conspirator at her, and whispered, "If you have celebrity status, then attack is often the best defense. You will see, now we can eat in peace ...! "

Did the other guests seem like they wanted to rush over to the table for selfies?! Sisi wondered. Didn't think so! After all, they were used to famous guests at the Water Grill. But of course, as a poor middle-class kid, she had no idea about being a celebrity!

They ordered raw oysters from the bar de crudités, and fish for the main course. Rick had chosen a great bottle of white wine from the Rhone "Cuvée Réservee, Châteauneuf-du-Pape" for both of them.

It turned out to be a pleasant evening. The food, wine, and service were perfect. Rick had stopped talking about himself. Instead, he had started making her laugh so hard that she almost fell off her chair several times. When he pretended to feed his ears with his crème brûlée, the other guests began to stare at them for real. Both of their faces turned crab-red from their suppressed giggles, as if they were back at school.

They were both still giggling as Rick exchanged the key to the Tesla with the valet for a fifty dollar tip note. Rick walked around the car, this time placing his warm hand gently on her low-cut back as she got in. She had leaned back in the deep, reclined sports seat when he started



the engine. She had closed her eyes and relaxed for a minute while Rick drove off. She felt the strange, calm driving feeling of the Tesla in her heavy body. And its muscular vigor in the turns, what seemed to be several times. She wondered which way he was driving? Shouldn't he have turned the car to get back on the freeway towards Santa Monica? Now wide awake she opened her eyes. He was about to drive into the underground parking lot of a famous Art Deco building a few blocks from the Financial District.

'What are you doing?'" Sisi sat up straight.

'I thought, we had such a fun evening, it would be a shame to end it," he smiled, "Let's go up to my place, have a night cap, and enjoy the killer view from my penthouse. You can counsel me on where to put the three Anselm Kiefers I'm getting from Tom!"

Sisi smiled at him with a warm smile. "Rick, I had a wonderful evening, but I am tired, and I would appreciate it, if you'd bring me home."

'Well, Sisi, I had a wonderful evening, too, and I think it's time that we explore how much more joy we can bring each other."

'Rick," she said while her smile rather froze on her face, "I am very flattered that you think of me this way, but I don't get involved with clients by principle."

He looked straight out of the windshield and stopped smiling. After an uncomfortable pause, he took her hand into his, again flashing his charming smile. "Sisi," he said with a pretend scolding voice as if she was a naughty girl, "you're such a tease. You know, I think I am really attracted to you. So please, don't make this difficult, come stay with me tonight. I promise: you'll love it, and you'll make me very, very happy."

Sisi pulled her hand away from him. A tiny bit harsher than she had intended, she said,

“Rick, please bring me home now.”

Without another word, he started the car and drove fast as lightning and far above the speed limit, towards Santa Monica. He stopped the car at the curb before her building. With a different smile, he said, “You may think you're something special, but in your age this attitude is just dumb to have. And frankly, I've had girls that were by far more beautiful and accomplished than you are.”

Sisi took a deep breath. She stiffened her shoulders, and swallowed her pride. “Rick, I am very sorry if I hurt your feelings. This was not my intention. I like you very much, and I enjoyed you taking me out tonight. If you had in any way the impression that we could get involved, this was not my intention and I am truly sorry.”

He sat there, and continued smiling his nasty smile. “Good night,” she said and left the car. This time he did not walk around to open her car door.

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In the loneliness of her terrace, the memory of yesterday evening brought her to a boil in a flash. Her otherwise serene face twisted into an ugly grimace. Would she scream in anger, throw up in disgust, or burst into tears?

She clenched her fists. Then a second later she clapped her hands over her face. She shook her head back and forth as if her head had a weight on its own. No sound came from her mouth and her eyes were dry. She sat there, mute, hands in front of her face, slowly shaking her head back and forth as if she were a mechanical doll.

How did she end up in this life? The life of a commodity. The feeling was so foul, so bad, so creepy that she wanted to dissolve into nothing.

She was alone. Completely lonely and alone. Nobody to stand up for her. No friend she could call to cry. Nobody to keep her fingers crossed for her, to wish her well.

It wasn't enough that she was way too over-qualified for her over-glorified sales job. Not enough that she had a tremendous work ethic. Not enough that she sacrificed all her personal life to the job. Had made herself into the very kind of service provider that rich people love to have around. That they pretended to be “friends” with. No, they expected that she would also prostitute her body.

By now, Sisi knew from experience that whenever the many desire what few have, there was no morality and no limit to what was required. In this society it was “the good life” that everyone wanted. The life of the “one percent”. Everything was for sale, everyone was a commodity, everyone was replaceable. Do you have principles? Fine! Outside the door there were hundreds in line. Hundreds who were more talented, prettier, smarter, had more connections, and were definitely ready to do what you fail to “perform.”

The good life was something like an island that looked like a paradise from the sea. It looked like the land of milk and honey. The land where the fruit fell from the trees into the open mouths of the beautiful people.

In her desolation, she started giving a rousing lecture to all the young art-loving women who dreamed of following in their footsteps. “The sea around the island,” she imagined herself lecturing, “is littered with an armada of ships that fight a battle to the knife not to drown and to get to that island. The closer the boats get to the island, the more brutal the hitting and stabbing becomes. But now comes the joke ... “, she imagined stopping, and her audience leaning forward, “From further away the butchering and stabbing near the island already looks like paradise!

Take Apoloniusz and me: we look good, we dress in designer clothes, we go to parties that the rest of the world is excluded from. If we both go to a club, the bouncers know our name and wave us past the line. We travel the world, trade in art, and sleep in luxury hotels. Yet our glittering life is lonely and we completely depend on the whims of greedy, callous people.”

In her desperate mood, Sisi thought about how she had lost dear friends. Friends who thought she had it too good. Yes, even her sweet, gracious mother was jealous of what she thought was her daughter's gilded life.

Apoloniusz, for example. He was gay. One hundred percent gay. Even so, he claimed to be bisexual. He pretended to enjoy his myriad affairs with influential women ten to twenty years his elder. Like Sisi, he hid behind a catty and haughty demeanor. But in contrast to her, he pretended that he had power because everyone - men and women - wanted to have him.

Again Sisi shook her face hidden in her hands in disgust.

If he had faced the fact, she thought, that his "lovers" used him like a thing. That they didn't care about his needs and feelings. That they would throw him away when there was someone newer, hotter and cooler to be had. It would break him.

She thought of how Tom had thrown her away today. You belong in the trash. Bang!

Apollo would forbid himself to do something like her. He was a simple kid from Nigeria who had worked his hardest for a scholarship to a decent college stateside. He loved art so much, art was his ideal world, art was his salvation. And for the price that he was able to spend his life with art, he was ready to stake anything he had, if the gatekeepers of art demanded it.

But if she had made a hint in this direction, he only made fun of her anyway: “Oh dear, let's gaze at our pitiful navels and whine! Let's feel sorry for ourselves, because we're having it

so bad!” No, you couldn't tell the truth. You had to shut up, smile, and keep your stiff upper lip.

Sometimes she wondered if the exploitation would ever stop. For example, one of her younger clients was an investment banker at one of Wall Street's most prestigious banks. This guy made more than five million dollars a year. He lived in Soho, his wife was a well-known beauty from an influential family, and they had a second home on Martha's Vineyard. Yet after their last meeting, when Sisi had wished him a good week, he had growled in a hushed voice, “I'm already preparing to bend over for my daily gang rape.”

It did not occur to Sisi to feel sorry for Wall Street bankers. But she wondered in greater and greater desperation where the idyllic world was waiting that she had so naturally expected as a child at Christmas?

Her parents seemed to live in it!

As an adult, it had become clear to her that her parents were hopeless romantics. They were living in a world apart from reality, a world made up of books, art, and libraries. Above all, a world that they had had fabricated together in their heads.

Her father, who taught art history in a small college in Pennsylvania, was of Irish descent. He was great at creating wonderful, romantic worlds in his head that didn't exist. And Sisi's mother, who worked in the library of the same college, saw reality through the eyes of her husband, who was her greatest hero. Her parents met in Maastricht in the early 1980s. Sisi's father had recently completed his doctorate with a focus on Dutch Baroque painting. He had secured a two-year scholarship to Holland. The fair, shy Dutch girl that was his student in the course “The Influence of Dutch Painting of the 17th Century on the Imagery of Vincent van Gogh” should become Sisi's mother.

How had her lovely, gentle, delicate mother boxed all her competitors out of the way? Had she fallen in love with the tall, slim American Ph.D, who was pacing up and down during his lectures with gesticulating arms? Had she fallen in love with her father's wild red hair and bright blue eyes, when he spoke full of passion of the overwhelming inner world of Van Gogh?

When Sisi was a teenager and became interested in boys, her mother had to tell her over and over about how she they both met. All a sudden her good-natured mother came to life, her eyes sparkled, and the story all but burst out of her.

How she'd always sat in the front row and tried to make eye contact. How her inner voice told her that he was burning all his fireworks up there for no one other than her. How she, when he had introduced himself at a private party, pretended not to be interested in him. How he then asked if he could pick her up for a walk. How these walks became more and more frequent and longer. How they had taken refuge in a hay barn, surprised by the rain. And how he kissed her then while the rainstorm was raging outside.

That was the point at which the mother stopped her story and stared into the distance with transfixed eyes. Sisi had always assumed that her parents had married immediately after that kiss. Then little Sisi had come. And that from then on they had lived happily ever after, with Sisi, their books and their art. At least she had never experienced anything to the contrary as their beloved child. Even if by now she realized that even with her parents, everything could not always have been roses.

When she thought of her parents, she felt queasy. They were so proud in their daughter's success as an art dealer in one of the most established galleries for contemporary art with offices in Los Angeles, New York, London, Zurich and Beijing. She had never brought herself to drag

her parents' ideas through the mud of reality. Whenever her mother scolded her again because Sisi was finally supposed to get married and have children, she usually sighed good-naturedly, "Yes, mom, I know. You are right..."

What, or to be precise, how much of what happened, should she tell them?

And what should she do now anyway? Ten years down the drain. Ten years without ever touching her oil paints that she had hidden deep in the closet. Ten years after which she had nothing to show that she could now build on! In this treacherous art world, it would come out in no time that she had rejected the advances of one of the most generous, most desirable art collectors. Not only had she ruined his one-time \$ 7 million purchase for the gallery, but perhaps any future sale to that customer. Even the big galleries were interchangeable. Rick could get his art from someone else at any time. No, now she was a leper and no one would touch her with a ten foot pole, let alone offer her a new job. The only thing she still had were her contacts. The phone numbers and addresses of hundreds of very rich or influential people.

But it was impossible to know whether that was worth anything. The expectation these people had of the kind of "friend" that Sisi embodied was an undefined type of perfect servant. Be fun, elegant, charming, cool, a little bit rebellious or cheeky so that you are not boring and we can invite you. Be always organized, punctual, unobtrusive, disciplined, get everything done. Everything I expect from you, without me even noticing anything. And never, never, never expect anything from me or come to me with your problems, needs or worries. It was nothing more than the studied ease and casual wit of a perfect courtier of feudal rule.

The fact was that they were living under modern feudal rule today, only everyone pretended that it wasn't the case.

The surf thundered and the sun, which was already lower on the horizon, colored the spray a pale rose gold. Sisi was at a loss, empty and for once had no idea what to do.

But then an idea occurred to her and she knew that there was at least one person she could rely. One person with whom she could be honest and herself.

She looked at the clock. Well. It would be eleven o'clock at night in Florence. She got her cell phone and dialed the number. She knew it by heart.

## Chapter II

The train of the Austrian Federal Railways, which she had waited for almost an hour in Innsbruck, was called "RailJet". But when it finally drove out of the station after the incomprehensible announcement of a sniffy-sounding voice from the loudspeaker and a loud whistle, it lurched comfortably uphill through the misty swaths, which were becoming more and more dense.

After a thirteen hour flight and another three hours by train, Sisi was dead tired and frozen. In L.A. it measured a balmy 70 degrees Fahrenheit when she departed, like every day. The temperature at Innsbruck train station was around freezing. The bad-humored-looking people with cheesy skin and red noses wore hats and scarves. They put their jacket collars up and buried their hands in their pockets. Most of them directed their eyes on the ground and were rushing somewhere. Even those keeping a close watch and waiting did not seem glad when welcoming a disembarking train passenger. Already when she arrived at Munich Airport, everything seemed so quiet, as if a mattress muffled all the noise.

All this seemed in stark contrast to the L.A. airport, where people made noise talking and



laughing. Everybody tried to attract attention through extravert behavior. They were screeching "Oooh myyy goooddd" when they fell into each other's arms and bounced up and down.

Instead of sitting in one of the musty open-plan compartments, she would spend the next two hours until her arrival in the on-board restaurant of the slow train. She would have her first Austrian or Italian coffee - for over ten years. She knew she was lucky, when she was the only guest in the dining car whose kitchen was still closed. She chose the most hidden table, which was covered with a white tablecloth and a red candle with real fir branches. How lovely. Sisi was in a wonderful mood.

There was a built-in heater under the table and she tried to warm her icicle-frozen feet, which were tucked into high-heeled suede ankle boots. She wrapped herself tighter in her blue jacket and lifted the oversized jacket collar. Sisi traveled with minimal luggage as she was used to. Besides, Sophia had promised that all necessities were available in the hidden South Tyrolean mountain hut. It was there that Sophia had retired to over the winter to finish writing her newest book.

Yes, Sisi had escaped from Los Angeles to South Tyrol, the northernmost province of Italy. A few weeks in the Alps, in the snow, and in the purest mountain air would give her new thoughts, open up ways to new shores.

"Sisi, bellissima mia," Sophia O'Flaherty begged her, "Come and spend Christmas with me in the mountains!"

Her paternal aunt was also an art historian, a professor at the University of Florence and a real luminary of Renaissance painting.

'Nay, problems like that, they're not for the phone. We need time so we can put our heads

together and figure out what you need to do with your life. You will see, there is something magical about the Alps. When you see the world from above, everything looks completely different! No “No” is acceptable, child! Book a ticket for the next flight right after our conversation, and I'll pick you up at the train in Marezza! Ciao cara!”

As long as she could remember, Sisi felt happier, more peaceful and hopeful after a conversation with Sophia. Whenever her aunt gave her advice, she even tried to follow it, and it had never been to her disadvantage.

Especially in her current situation, she would give in, and for once trust someone else. Did she not hit the wall with her life, and that with her own great effort?

After her phone call, she immediately booked a flight to Munich, and from there a train ticket to Marezza in the Puster Valley, South Tyrol, Italy.

“Stay as long as you want. Stay until spring, or longer. I have a sabbatical until the next winter semester. My only goal is to finish the maledetto book about Botticelli’s illustrations of the Divine Comedy. And to be honest, I'm dying of boredom and need you here!”

Sophia spoke like a fast-bubbling brook, one influence in which her adopted country made itself felt. Of course, Sisi didn't dare to travel for three months, but booked a return flight four weeks later. She booked the first return flight from Munich to L.A. after the holidays. She thought it was bold, daring. Four weeks of vacation and no job in prospect! Or should she stay in L.A. and start checking out her contacts and reading ads? Nobody paid her loan and the high HOA fees!

“Stop it,” she scolded herself. “With your feelings of guilt, you will destroy your whole life. What are you doing here? You don't even have friends! You didn't take a vacation in over ten

years. You have no obligations at the moment. Also, since *he* is gone, Sophia is the person on earth you love best, and you didn't see her since.

You nitwit! Christmas in a hut in the Italian Alps, and you still hesitate?"

That thought excited her, made her so happy! Happy as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her heart, as if a magical door had opened to let her slip through.

She wanted to run through that door and shut it as tight as she could from the other side. So she never would be made to go back to what all of a sudden appeared to her as a meaningless and joyless hell.

A dignified-looking waiter with long, brown doe eyes and a round, pimply face, only twenty-two years of age, appeared next to her. "*Was darf es sein?*" he asked, bored, and took out his notepad. "*Bitte einen Kaffee,*" she said in broken German, "a coffee please."

He tilted his head, "*ein Kännchen Kaffee, Cappuccino, Café Latte, Café Americano, Wiener Melange, große Tasse Milchkaffe, oder Espresso?*" he rattled down at a monkey pace.

"*Einen Cappuccino bitte. One cappuccino, please,*" asked Sisi, "*und bitte... sweetener... süß... süsse..!!*" She couldn't remember the German word for sweetener.

The waiter looked at her without understanding, "*Sie wollen Süßigkeiten? Cake? Wir haben Sachertorte, Linzertorte, Prinzregententorte....*"

"*Die Dame wünscht Süßstoff.* The lady wants sweetener," said a dark voice from behind Sisi.

The waiter threw an ungracious glance at Sisi and scribbled down the order.

Sisi turns around and noticed the man who had sat down a table with his back to her. He turned to her as he directed the waiter.

Her thinking stopped. His face. It shocked her. The face that turned towards her looked as if it had come straight from an oil painting of a portrait of a renaissance prince. The man was beautiful without looking soft. Under his noble, high forehead and the straight, bushy eyebrows, he looked at her with direct, intense, dark blue eyes.

Pulling herself together, she smiled her most charming smile and showed her regular, pearly white teeth. “Thank you for your help”, she smiled, “my German is rusty.”

“No problem,” he nodded without responding to her smile, and turned back to the book he was reading.

“Mind you,” she thought, “an old leather-bound book and not a Kindle or iPad.”

As he read on, she dared to watch the man from the side, since she had nothing else to do until the coffee came. Hidden under a mane of dark brown hair, she could only see a streak of his profile. Yet his sharp, straight, like drawn nose was of a somewhat aquiline shape at the root. “A Roman nose,” she thought.

After waiting forever, her cappuccino came with a small glass of water and a vanilla *Kipferl* on the side. She celebrated her little feast by enjoying her first European coffee since she had left Florence.

No, that was not a “made with love” drip coffee, hand-milled from Brooklynn, but plain, everyday Austrian cappuccino. She forgot how wonderful this tasted. The strong drink finally blew away the leaden tiredness. Yes! She would get through this until the evening when she could finally fall into the bed at the hut.

She turned to her neighbor. “What are you reading?” She smiled her winning smile again.

He continued reading for a few seconds before knitting his eyebrows and looking up with

reluctance. "I beg your pardon?" He spoke perfect American English! She bet New England.

"Are you American?" She asked in astonishment.

"No," he shook his head unwillingly and turned back to his book.

She kept smiling at him, on purpose, a frozen grin, but he still ignored her. Once again she was shocked. Euro trash! She didn't remember how rude these people were!

Later he got up, walked past her table, and made a short phone call in German in front of the dining car. After he sat down again, he asked her, "What about you? You come from California?"

"Is it that obvious?" she asked, this time with a miffed tone and without smiling.

This time, it was he who smiled, albeit with a hint of mockery, "Quite," he assured her.

She shrugged and rolled her eyes. He smiled kindly at her and turned back to his book.

#

Marezza, was a small mountain town with about 2800 inhabitants in South Tyrol, the northernmost province of Italy. It was in the Puster Valley southeast under the Brenner Pass at an altitude of about 2400 feet. When Sisi got off the train, her seventy-year-old aunt came running towards her, her red head blowing. The petite, small woman wore a gray felt hat with a pheasant feather. Her Loden coat that was far too big for her, and her feet stuck in mountain boots. Sisi couldn't help but laugh out loud. Her elegant Florentine aunt, *la grande signora*, had turned into a rustic mountain farmer's woman! Well, at least there was no need to worry whether her aunt had aged very much in the last ten years!

Sophia fell around her neck and smacked her thousands of times on both cheeks. "*O cara mia, bambina*, how have I missed you! Let me look at you!" She pushed her back with unex-

pectedly strong arms and looked at her with a mock judge's look. “*Dio mio*, you turned out so beautiful. O my! A grown woman. And thank God you come after your mother, even if you have our family's eyes!”

She linked arms with Sisi, “Was the trip awful?” Sisi nodded and rolled her eyes.

As she and her aunt crossed the black and white tiled floor of the old station building, her educated aunt shouted. “Oh, *bambina*, let me run into the station bookstore! I need the latest romance!”

She made no secret that she liked to devour love-schmaltz and disappeared into the small shop. Sisi, not knowing what to do, strolled to the exit and stepped through the heavy double doors onto the street.

There she stopped dead in her tracks.

The impolite Adonis who had been sitting with her in the train restaurant since Innsbruck had also got off in Marezza.

On the other side of the station forecourt the strangest welcome committee greeted him. An old man in Tyrolean clothes held two horses by the reins. One was a pony harnessed to a fiery red carriage. The other was a splendid white steed whose long mane curled down almost to its knees and whose tail could sweep the road.

There was also a donkey tied to the carriage, and three or four dogs of all sizes acted crazy and jumped around her traveling companion. Even the white horse seemed excited, pawing its forelegs and nodding its head up and down as it tried to get to him. They performed a real circus spectacle over there.

The man could not stop stroking, hugging and patting the animals. Laughing with his full

voice, he was talking to them, "Pedro, that's enough! Ernesto, Libby, yes, yes, I'm back!" He heaved his blue duffel bag onto the red carriage and turned to the old man, "I hope everyone was well behaved, Mr. Joseph?"

The old South Tyrolean seemed to answer in the affirmative. Then the welcomed with such enthusiasm turned to the beautiful horse, stroked its muscular neck and said in Italian: "*Pedro! Discendiamo! Let's go down!* " And the horse buckled its front legs. The man swung his leg with ease over his back, whereupon the horse straightened up with him. The rider took up the reins, the old man took his seat on the driver's seat, the dogs barked and ran enthusiastically back and forth.

He sat on the huge horse, grave, tall, and very straight.

Then he let the horse which now stood there in collected attention, turn around its own axis in a volte with an almost imperceptible change in weight of his narrow hips.

For a moment, he looked down at Sisi's face, bowed his head in a curt nod, and rode away, followed by the rest of the troop, with hooves clattering and dogs barking.

Sophia had approached her from behind and was now standing next to her. She watched Sisi's stunned face in silence. Sisi hadn't even realized her aunt's arrival, nor that she was standing there paralyzed like a pillar of salt.

Her heart was pounding in her throat. She had forgotten to take a breath and inhaled with a strange sound. Her chest was too tight. It hurt.

She saw the commanding blue-eyed man on the stunning horse. His eyes were meeting hers. He was out of this world. She would never get over of the supreme beauty of this moment.

END OF EXCERPT

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed this excerpt, and you'd be interested to read the whole novel for an honest review, please get in touch via [soleilwrites@pm.me](mailto:soleilwrites@pm.me), and tell me who you are. I'd be glad to send an Ad-

vanced Reader Copy to avid readers.