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Chocolate Days

Novel

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Chapter 3

The front row of houses faced Imbergstraße, one of the main roads. The back row faced the Steingasse, an alley with rocky slopes rising steeply uphill. Between this *back* and *front*, Alwy and Tina made their way through the city, which seemed to be a relic of a bygone era. Although there were some high-rise buildings clad in glass, modern buildings were an exception. Basically, Salzburg's cityscape was dominated by centuries-old, four-to five-storey houses painted in light, faded colours and, above all, by countless churches.

'It's rather narrow here... like following a dry riverbed.' To Alwy, Steingasse seemed like a ditch, in which each house was a pastel dab against the grey cobblestones; it seemed as if the houses formed a protective wall.

'Such tightly packed houses give me a sense of security, plus the jagged rocks... there's a certain charm about it.' Tina pushed a strand of light brown hair that escaped her plait behind her ear. Excitedly, she pointed to a house that virtually stood out due to a soft pink paint coat on the lower area. 'It's over there. Steingasse 41.'

'Candy pink...?!' Alwy shook her head in amusement.

'Why not? That sets us apart from the rest.' Tina unlocked the iron door next to the white-painted shop door and gestured to the hallway. Alwy carefully carried her aunt's framed picture across the threshold and leaned it against the wall. She squinted to adjust her eyes to the darkness and looked up to see the narrow staircase winding steeply up.

Tina caught her friend's eye and laughed. 'Fitness is included here,' she promised. 'Come on, give me that monster.' She grabbed the wooden box that Alwy was about to pick up. Her friend always kept her spices and recipes in this box. With that and with the rucksack, which she also took from Alwy, she climbed the first few steps.

Tina wasn't exaggerating: climbing the stairs truly required fitness. Halfway up, out of breath, Alwy stopped in front of one of the apartments' doorbells. 'Who else lives in the house besides you?'

'Besides *us*, you mean?' Tina winked at her. 'Elisa lives on the first floor. She's not yet thirty and works as a receptionist at the Hotel Schloss Mönchstein, up on the Mönchsberg. She loves dark chocolate pralines. She buys them from me every week.' Tina looked at the door in front of which Alwy was standing. 'And Ralf lives here on the second floor. He's a teddy-bear type with a small tummy. He sells hats, scarves, and ponchos online, all made from wool from happy sheep.'

'Judging by your grin, I assume that there's more to Ralf than this simple piece of information.'

Tina shrugged. 'When you see Ralf, you would never guess that he of all people sells fuzzy hats. You would rather imagine him working under a Harley. You'll like him, but you won't see much of him. When he's not sitting and working in front of the computer, he's hitchhiking to the museum. He is a fanatical art buff and is always the last to leave every museum. Be careful and never ask him about an art piece because that could take a while.'

'So a functioning house community,' Alwy summed up.

'Absolutely. Ralf is a sweetheart, Elisa as well. I'm lucky with those two.' They went on – Alwy holding the trolley in one hand and the picture in the other – and arrived on the third floor.

'There is another apartment above mine, the one in which Irmgard Walter, the owner of the house, lives. A nice elderly lady. She has been staying with her sister in Italy since March. She has osteoarthritis and likes to keep her joints warm.' Tina pushed the door open and gestured to a narrow hallway that was painted in a peach colour to convey cheerfulness and confidence. 'Welcome to my home, which is now yours, too!' she said.

Alwy put the luggage down and looked out the window next to the cloakroom. ‘My goodness, what a beautiful view. I feel like I’m in a bird’s nest high up in a tree.’ She looked at church towers and domes, at countless shimmering light grey roofs and a piece of baby blue sky – it was as if she were looking into another era.

Tina stepped forward next to Alwy. ‘I felt the same when I viewed the apartment. First it felt cramped, but then this view that leaves you mesmerized.’ Both women enjoyed the view for a few more seconds, then Tina continued: ‘Eighty-five square meters, but the rooms have a good layout, which makes the apartment seem larger.’

The apartment was a charming hodgepodge: vases with fresh flowers as well as souvenirs were placed all over the tables and windowsills, open books were lying around, and framed recipes were hanging on the wall. ‘I’m as fond of decorating as I am of hoarding.’ Tina held up her fingers as in giving an oath. ‘Guilty as charged, Your Honour.’ With a soft creak she opened the guest room door. ‘And this is your kingdom from now on.’

Alwy cast a glance at the room – barely larger than ten square meters – that looked like an oversized candy box with a daring combination of bottle-green walls and pink-painted wooden furniture. This impression was emphasised by charming details, such as a pink quilt and matching colourful pillows on the bed. Tina furnished the room in a very original way.

‘I got the bed at the flea market, and since dark brown isn’t really my favourite colour, I just painted the headboard pink. All or nothing was my motto for this room.’

‘It’s lovely. Simply magical.’ Alwy stepped closer and looked at the moss-green shade of the bedside lamp, which perfectly matched the wooden bed. She’ll be happy here.

Tina dragged Alwy to the window. ‘Look... there is the city’s landmark, the Hohensalzburg Fortress.’

Alwy saw a castle with bastions, which were in a dramatic contrast to the green hills. A red, white, and red flag fluttered in the wind on one of the merlons. The imposing nature of the complex, which housed an entire village within the walls, created an unbelievable atmosphere.

‘Hohensalzburg is Europe’s largest castle complex, its history goes back to the 11th century,’ said Tina proudly.

Alwy could hardly take her eyes off the fortress. ‘And we are damsels who are kidnapped by handsome knights in the evening,’ she romanticized.

‘Unfortunately, no knight has strayed here so far,’ Tina grinned mischievously. ‘But that which is not, may yet be.’ She disappeared into the hallway and came back with the box of spices and recipes, pushed it under the bed, returned to Alwy and put her arm around her.

‘A shop with an apartment above it, plus the view of the city... aren’t those two good reasons for settling down here? As far as the art of baking is concerned, there are the well-known giants, such as the ‘Hotel Sacher’ and the original Mozartkugeln from ‘Fürst’, and a few others. But we’ll only let that inspire us.’ Tina gestured into the hallway. ‘The bathroom is in the back on the left. The door tends to get stuck, so lift it a little bit, then come in. I cleared a shelf for you. Alright, and now I’ll let you unpack. I’ll be in the kitchen. Come when you’re ready.’

As soon as Tina left the room, Alwy sat down on the stool in front of the desk. When she observed it more closely, the room was even smaller than she had initially thought. However, it was so unique that she could hardly get enough of it.

She was used to tiny rooms in Tokyo. With almost ten million inhabitants, every square meter counted. People rushed back and forth from dawn to dusk. All day long Alwy had heard the clinking of the bakeware, the beeping of the kitchen clock and the chatter of countless people. After work, Harald liked to sit in front of the television and flip through the channels. They were often too tired even for that and would go straight to bed, and more than once it had occurred to her that Harald didn’t want to go back to Europe, especially not to settle down permanently. He lived as he had always wanted. Always on the go and ready for something new. He seemed to need that tension.

Alwy opened the trolley and hung her pants and skirts in the closet. When she had unpacked the most important things, she went into the kitchen, where Tina was just making tea.

‘Thanks for letting me stay here for now.’ Her room was meant for temporary accommodation, but it felt like home.

Tina turned to her and frowned. ‘You coming to the ‘Cake Couture’ is a godsend. I was tremendously happy when you agreed. So I’m the lucky one.’ She put the jug on the table and began to whip the cream. ‘Speaking of participation: How long does Harald give us before we declare bankruptcy?’ Tina scooped powdered sugar into the whipped cream while looking over at Alwy.

‘A year. Best-case scenario. But you know what...? We’ll show him that dreams are worth fighting for. Alwy picked up a spoon, tasted the cream and pondered. ‘A pinch of salt and vanilla for a finishing touch? What do you think?’ She suddenly felt an uncomfortable emptiness in her stomach. It was high time she ate something.

Tina waved her hand as she tasted, adding a dash of salt and vanilla bean before pouring the whipped cream into a glass. ‘I take it Harald hasn’t changed much since we were together in Munich, has he?’ Years ago, they had worked together at the Hilton, and even then Harald had been obsessed with the work.

‘Harald is the way he is, but he underestimates our persistence. It won’t be easy to make Cake Couture a success, but I don’t intend to fail.’

‘I should think not.’ Tina pointed to the kitchen table, where a poppy seed cake was standing next to a bouquet of meadow flowers. ‘I hope you still like it?’

Only now did Alwy notice the faint scent of poppies. The air in the room was filled with the aroma of the ingredients: warmed butter, ground poppy seeds, grated lemon peel, rum and cherry jam. ‘I could die for poppy seed cake.’

Tina cut a piece and handed her friend a plate and fork. While standing, Alwy let the delicate glaze of the poppy seed dough and the jam filling melt in her mouth.

‘So? What do you say?’

Alwy nodded enthusiastically. ‘Expert baking... as expected. Including a pinch of love. That’s exactly how Helene would have done it.’

Tina patted herself on the back appreciatively. ‘Your aunt’s name associated with one of my cakes... I must be really good.’