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LIFE JUST DOES WHAT IT WANTS



Women's Novel – 511 pages

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Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

Short Introduction:

Marie is 29, works as an independent photographer and shares a flat with her best female friend. She enjoys life and takes each day as it comes. Marie's world is turned completely upside down when her older sister, Christine, is diagnosed with breast cancer. Since Christine is divorced and a single parent, she asks Marie to move in with her while she undergoes the physical strain of chemotherapy and to help out with her two children, Antonia and Max. Marie feels overwhelmed by the idea, but she wants to be there for Christine and promises to help.

As if that weren't enough responsibilities, Christine is also the general manager of a boatyard for sporting vessels that the family has owned for generations. Since Christine will be out of the picture for an undetermined length of time, and her father believes it's essential for a member of the family to have a presence in the firm, he forces Marie to stand in for Christine. Basically, however, he does not consider Marie equal to the task and assigns shipbuilding engineer Daniel Behnecke to assist her. Behnecke has been director of sales for years and is supposed to conduct all negotiations, whereas Marie is only meant to serve as a decorative accessory who represents the family.

Marie is not enthusiastic about managing the family business. On top of that, Daniel Behnecke is a thoroughly unlikable type she has always found extremely boring. He now begins putting on airs of being the boss, clearly indicating that he considers Marie a thoroughly incompetent spoiled brat.

Soon, Marie realizes that it's all becoming too much for her: the sick sister, the turbulent family life and the company's uncertain future. And then there are the butterflies she feels in her stomach every time she sees Daniel. Which of course doesn't suit her plans at all.

And that is the chaotic situation the reader enters on page 375:

Supergirls don't cry

The next morning, I was woken by the sun shining on my face through a gap in the curtains. The birds chirped cheerfully, and I was just about to roll over languorously and carry on sleeping, when I realised that I had indeed been woken by sunshine, not by Nana Mouskouri's 'Good Morning, Sunshine'. I sat up with a jerk, fumbled for my mobile phone and realised that I had overslept. Not just a little. I jumped out of bed with a curse, slipped into the next best item of clothing, ran into the bathroom to tie my hair back and clean my teeth, and woke the children with the toothbrush still in my mouth.

Downstairs I tipped Cornflakes and milk into two bowls, added slices of banana and ran back upstairs to check whether Toni and Max had got up. They had, thank goodness. While Max was in the bathroom, Toni stood in front of her wardrobe. 'Where is my stripy dress?'

Oh no. Please not. 'In the laundry. I washed and ironed your denim dress yesterday, that's what you usually want to wear.'

'But not today. I want the stripy one today!' she announced in a tone perfectly suited to a Hollywood diva.

'It's dirty and smells. Put on the denim dress or something else. But not the stripy one.'

The corners of her mouth turned down, her chin began to quiver, and I sensed what was coming. 'Toni, I'm warning you. I'm not in the mood, so get dressed!'

Aaaaand ... curtain up for Antonia Ahrens. Her expression distorted to the grotesque Halloween pumpkin face that I had come to know well, the tears spurted from her eyes, and she shouted loudly: 'I'm never allowed to wear what I want! And you're stupid and mean and not my best friend anymore! I want Mummy to take us to school!'

I reached into Toni's wardrobe, grabbed a flowery summer dress and chucked it over towards her. 'Here, you can wear this.'

'I want Mummy to take us to school!' she shouted even louder.

'That's not possible, you know how queasy she feels in the mornings.'

'But I want everything to go back to the way it was.' Now her tears were real, and she started crying so desperately that it nearly broke my heart. 'I don't want you anymore, I want my Mummy and Daddy and Neza again.'

I went over to her and pulled her into my arms. 'Oh Sweetie. I know what a dumb time this is for you and Max.' Dark memories of the first months following my own mother's death surfaced. And I suddenly missed her so much that I couldn't breathe. I needed my mother here and now, I couldn't cope by myself, it was all too much. She would have known what to do. She would have found exactly the right words, both for Christine and Toni, whereas I had no idea how to cope with this situation. I swallowed past the big lump in my throat and stroked Toni's hair comfortingly. 'I'm really trying my best, you must believe me. And we're actually doing quite well together, aren't we?'

She nodded silently, but carried on sobbing.

'We got this far, so we can't give up now, okay?'

'Yes,' she sniffed. 'For Mummy.'

‘Exactly. And just remember, it’s just temporary. Neza is back soon, and your father is coming next weekend, and then you’ll go on holiday with him and have him to yourselves for a really long time. And Mummy is going to get better.’

She shifted out of my arms and looked at me from her tear-filled eyes. ‘Do you promise?’

Oh God, what was I meant to say? Pedagogically speaking I had no idea what the right answer was. But how could I *not* promise her? ‘Yes, I promise,’ I said firmly and felt awful saying it.

Toni wiped the tears from her cheeks. ‘Alright.’

I squeezed her tight and gave her a kiss on her cheek. ‘Right, now off to the bathroom, okay?’

At least Max was fairly agreeable this morning, so we made it school with just a 15 minutes delay.

I arrived in Finkenwerder completely flustered and hurried over to Daniel. I was seriously late for the meeting we had set up with Weinert and Vollmann to go through the new price lists. ‘I’m so sorry not to have got here earlier,’ I said breathlessly when I burst into Daniel’s office. He was alone.

‘No problem. The guys know the score, I told them I would call when you arrived.’ He looked at me carefully.

‘Everything alright?’

‘Yes, sure.’

‘You look pretty rough,’ he said soberly.

‘Well, thanks a lot. There I was thinking I was halfway attractive and then you come along.’

‘Are you fishing for compliments?’ Daniel wanted to know. ‘Do you want me to say that I think you’re pretty? I do. I think you’re very pretty. But you look frazzled. Stressed. Flustered. Depressed. Sad...’

‘Alright, I got the message,’ I interrupted him and quickly smacked down that little part of me that was smoothing its hair and singing ‘Daniel thinks I’m pretty, Daniel thinks I’m pretty’. ‘It’s been a stressful morning. Shall we call Weinert and Vollmann now?’

‘No. Why don’t you sit down first? Do you want some coffee?’

Coffee actually was not a bad idea, as I hadn’t had time to have one yet today. ‘Yes, I’ll quickly go and fetch one. Do you want one too?’

Daniel heaved a deep sigh and got up. He came over to me, gently took hold of my shoulders and let me over to the visitor’s chair in front of his desk. ‘I’ll fetch you one. You sit down.’ He gently pushed me down into the chair and disappeared.

Oh God, all this attention and friendliness when you least needed it. I didn't want him to be nice to me, otherwise I would start crying.

It wasn't long before Daniel returned with two cups of coffee and handed one to me. 'Here you go.'

'Thanks, that's kind.' I blew on the coffee to cool it down and took a big sip. 'Right, now about those price lists ...'

'Forget about the meeting,' Daniel said impatiently. 'I want to know what's the matter with you. And I thought you realised the other night in the tavern that nothing bad happens when you share stuff about yourself and don't constantly try to be so bloody cool and Supergirl-like.'

'Supergirl?' I sniffed. 'Oh, I wish I were Supergirl, then I might know how to deal with all this crap! I feel completely overwhelmed; from the moment I open my eyes in the morning. And that's the way it stays all day long until I collapse into bed at some point during the night. I can't get anything right and I keep asking myself why I can't even look after my sister with her cancer, her two children, house, garden and my job. Others manage it their whole lives, but I can't even do it for a short while. Supergirl, chance would be a fine thing.'

Daniel looked at me thoughtfully. 'How can I help you, Marie?'

'It's already a great help that I'm allowed to leave the office at three fifteen, otherwise I wouldn't manage any of it.' I took a deep breath and had another sip of coffee. 'Can we *please* call Weinert and Vollmann now?'

I felt Daniel's gaze on me, but I stared doggedly into my cup. 'Alright,' he finally said. For the rest of the day I immersed myself in work and enjoyed concentrating on that, ignoring all thoughts of Christine, the children and Daniel. I was researching Blue Pearl again and working on my concept. I had pulled together quite a bit of the necessary information and I was more or less convinced that the project could be a success. Meanwhile my father and Daniel had informed Mr Sjöberg from the Wallin shipyard that they were interested in a stake in the company. The Swedes would be coming to Hamburg in two weeks time to talk to Daniel and me about the 'co-operation' and to make us an initial offer. My stomach twisted when I thought about it. I got all the more immersed in my Blue Pearl project, as I had to present this idea to my father and Daniel before the Wallin people got any say in our decision. Unfortunately I was so absorbed in my work, that I completely forgot the time and turned up far too late at school.

The children were in the playground, and Mirko, one of the staff, came towards me when he spotted me. I suspected I was going to get an ear-full. 'Hello, Ms Ahrens.'

'Hello. I'm so sorry to be late again.'

'No problem. I realise that things are not that easy right now. For you and the children. We're trying to support Toni and Maxi as much as possible, but you can tell that they're really suffering. Toni has been very agitated recently and can barely concentrate. And Max beat a fellow classmate so badly today that he suffered a nosebleed.'

'What?' I asked disbelievingly. Max, the most amicable boy in the world, had beat up a friend?

'But why?'

'They both didn't want to talk about it.'

Meanwhile Toni and Max had spotted me and came running over to us. 'You're late again,' Toni greeted me sternly. 'You're always late!'

'Sorry, Sweetie.'

'Yes, I've heard that a thousand times,' she answered so precociously I could have hugged her.

We said goodbye to Mirko and headed off to the supermarket. On the way I said: 'Hey, Blackbeard and Blackbeard. To make up for me being late we'll make a fire later, okay?'

'Oh yes, a fire!' Max said enthusiastically. 'Can we play around with it too?'

'Yes, of course you can.'

As usual, Toni and Max tried to get me to buy them some hugely expensive toys in the supermarket, but this time I remained firm. 'You know what? I'll soon be broke if I carry on buying you this rubbish. So either you guys stop acting up, or we won't make a fire this evening. Think about it.' Then I turned around and left them standing there. It took precisely two minutes and thirty-two seconds until Max came running, and Toni turned up forty-five seconds after that. The two of them were definitely sulking, but I had made my point. It was all I could do to stop myself from cheering triumphantly.

At home Toni ran straight into the garden, and Max wanted to follow, but I held him back by his arm. 'Hey, wait a second. Mirko told me that you beat up one of your classmates today.'

Max pressed his lips firmly together.

'Is it true?' I pressed him.

He nodded.

'But why?'

'I don't want to say.'

'Why not? I definitely won't tell anyone.' I waited for a moment, but Max stayed silent. 'Was he nasty to you?'

More nodding.

In my mind's eye I saw myself as a six-year old beating up Marco Dreher, and I knew that some fights simply had to be fought. But I could hardly tell Max that. I felt like a hypocrite when I went on to say: 'Hey, listen, I don't know what happened, but you know that you don't just hit someone because they annoyed you. Only stupid people hit others and you're not stupid, Max, so stop ...'

'But Linus said that Mummy's going to die!'

'What?!' I said, shocked.

'He said that all mummies who have cancer die. First they lose all their hair, then they get really thin, and then they go to hospital and die.' Tears welled in his eyes and he started sobbing bitterly.

'Oh God, Max.' My stomach was bubbling like a witch's cauldron and I was sure that if I didn't get hold of myself for Max's sake right there and then, I would breathe fire. Linus, that mean, wicked little rat! I would have liked to give him a right telling off myself. I held Max even closer and smoothed his dark hair, which was sticking out in all directions again. 'Your Mummy is not going to die, Max. She is sick, yes, very sick, but she is definitely going to get better.'

'Mummy can't die,' he sobbed. 'If she dies then me and Toni will be all alone.' My eyes began to fill with tears and my chin started to wobble. 'You're not alone. Your Daddy is here, and Neza is coming back soon. There is Grandpa. And you've got me. I will never abandon you, never. And your Mummy is not going to die. Believe me, Max.'

Max cried so hard that I feared he would choke. 'Do you promise?'

I closed my eyes, and I realised that for the second time today I was promising something that was beyond my control. Nonetheless, I didn't know what else to say except: 'Yes, I promise.'

Max cried for quite a while longer, and it cost me a great deal of strength to stay strong and comfort him. Finally his little shoulders stopped jerking, and he wriggled out of my arms. 'Can we make the fire now?' he asked and looked at me from his tear-stained eyes.

'Sure. Mummy is still at the doctor's, but as soon as she's back, we'll make a start, okay? Why don't you go and join Toni in the garden in the meantime, and you can gather some sticks to burn.'

'When is Mummy back from the doctors?'

'At six I think.'

After Max had run outside, I got up and started putting the shopping away in the cupboards. But after a short while I stopped, slowly slid with my back against the kitchen cupboards, and sat down on the floor. I wrapped my arms around my legs and lent my head back. 'Don't cry, Marie,' I kept saying to myself.

'What are you doing?' I suddenly heard Toni's voice from the terrace door. I jumped and pretended I was looking for something. 'I dropped something.'

'Oh,' she said, shrugging her shoulders. She pulled a couple of magazines from the shelf and ran back outside.

I let ice-cold water run over my hands and arms in the sink and splashed a couple of handfuls on my face. Then I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths and started to chop the ingredients for a salad. I enjoyed the mindless work that made me relax after a while. However, my moment of peace did not last long, as Toni and Max had obviously got bored of gathering sticks in the garden. Instead they had chosen to beat each other with them. 'My God, what is going on today?' I groaned and was just about to head out into the garden, when the two of them stormed into the living room.

'She hit me!' Max screamed and pointed reproachfully at his sister.

'You hit me!'

'But you started it! Stupid cow!'

'Hey!' I tried to stop the two of them, but Toni and Max had already started a new fight. They dashed through the living room and kitchen, screaming at each other, calling each other names and hitting each other with long, thin sticks. I screamed at them to stop, and tried to grab either one of them, but they were too quick for me. A chair fell over, shortly afterwards Max stick hit the salad bowl on the worktop. The bowl landed on the floor with a loud bang and smashed into a thousand pieces. Max ignored it and jumped on the coffee table in order to carry on fighting his sister from this position. The inevitable happened: with a loud crack the vase fell over and broke. The water ran all over the table and dripped onto the carpet, but Toni and Max barely noticed, they were so furious.

'Stop it now!' I dashed towards Max, and just as he was about to take a swing, I made a grab at him in order get a hold. I felt a sharp pain on my cheek, but didn't have time to give it any thought.

'You hit Marie!' Toni screamed. 'Marie is bleeding, Marie is bleeeeeeeeding!' Then she started sobbing loudly. Max was desperately wriggling with his arms and legs, and I thought it really couldn't get any worse, but then the doorbell rang. 'Great, I bet one of the neighbours has called the police because of all the noise you were making!' I scolded and already envisaged myself being called in by Social Services because I wasn't capable of supervising my niece and nephew for two hours without something getting broken, or me undertaking something unsuitable for children or one of us starting to bleed. With Max, still resisting, clamped under my arm, I went into the hall and already started making my apologies before I opened the

door. 'I am sorry, it's a bit ...' Then I stopped. Shocked. There weren't any policemen standing outside the door. It was Daniel.

His gaze shifted from me to Max thrashing around in my arms and then over my shoulder into the living room, where Toni was screeching loudly. Without saying a word, he took Max off me and put him on the floor, whereupon the boy immediately dashed back into the living room to his sister.

'Marie is bleeeeeeeding, you hiiiiiiiiit Maire,' Toni screamed, unable to calm down.

'I didn't, you stupid cow!'

I followed Max into the living room and grabbed the sticks from his and Toni's hands. 'Stop this right now! I so fed up with you both, you can't imagine!'

This comment just brought about even more screeching.

There was a sharp whistle from the door and a 'Hey!' at which Toni, Max and I started and paused.

'Have you all gone completely mad? What an earth is going on here?' Daniel said.

'He hit me!' Toni started on her old theme and pointed to Max.

'But she started and she called me a stupid fart!'

'That's not true, you started!'

Fed up, I collapsed on the sofa. 'I can't take any more of this.'

Daniel gave us all an angry look. 'You're all crew members, aren't you? You captured the *La Concorde* together, didn't you, and now we're planning our attack on the *Great Allen*. And this is how you behave? You can forget it, I'm out.'

'But it wasn't my fault, they started,' I said, outraged.

Toni's rage-distorted face gradually relaxed, instead she looked at us anxiously. 'But we won't managed the *Great Allen* without you.'

'Yes, Daniel, you have to stay in the crew,' said Max.

'No, I'm not in the mood for this rubbish. Definitely not.'

'Please, Daniel,' Toni said with her best puppy-dog face.

He took a deep breath. 'Alright. But only if you make up.'

The two of them nodded eagerly.

'Then shake hands.'

Toni and Max looked at each other reluctantly and finally half-heartedly shook hands.

'Good. And now say sorry to Marie.'

'Sorry,' Toni mumbled.

Max came over to me and put his arms around my neck. 'I really didn't mean it, it really was an accident.'

I hugged him tightly. 'I know. It's alright.'

Daniel sat down close to me, held my chin and turned my head towards him. 'Let me see.' He looked at my face intensively. It was only now that I felt my cheek smarting. And it was only now that I realised that Daniel had caught me in a pretty inconvenient situation, where I was *completely* out of my depth. The crazy thing was that I didn't even mind. On the contrary, I was incredibly happy that he was here. Daniel got up and disappeared into the guest loo, and returned shortly afterwards with a small dampened hand towel. He knelt down before me and carefully dabbed my injury.

It immediately smarted like crazy, and I took a sharp intake of breath. 'Ouch!'

'Shush. Stop being such a baby,' he said, but his tone and his smile were so gentle that at least a thousand butterflies awoke in my stomach and drove away the pain.

Toni and Max had positioned themselves to my left and right and watched us intently.

'Does Marie have to go to hospital?' Max asked anxiously. 'I really didn't mean it, truly.'

I stroked his leg reassuringly. 'I don't have to go to hospital, it's nothing.'

Max breathed a sigh of relief.

I could have sat here for hours and let myself be treated by Daniel, but to my frustration he lowered his hand. 'Okay, I think that's enough.' He looked at me questioningly, as if he didn't know what to do with the bloodstained towel.

'Just put it back in the loo, I'll clear it away later,' I said. Then I turned to Toni and Max. 'And you two help me to clear up the chaos that you caused.'

Together with Daniel we cleared up all traces of the fight. Afterwards Toni and Max wanted to go back out in the garden. 'Are you coming Daniel? We gathering sticks because we're going to make a fire.'

'I'll be right there. I just need to talk to Marie first.'

Toni and Max headed out leaving Daniel and I alone.

'It's not normally this chaotic,' I said and brushed a strand of hair from my face.

'At least not always,' I added.

Daniel smiled. 'That's a relief.'

'Why are you here anyway?'

'I've offered you and Christine my help so many times, and you always refused. But now I am not going to let myself be stopped. I simply going to do it.'

'Why do you insist?'

Daniel remained silent for a moment, and then asked calmly: 'Can't you guess, Marie?'

I shook my head.

'I've been working with Christine for more than five years. We're friends and she means a lot to me. I want to see her, talk to her and know how she is. And you ...' He paused and seemed to be trying to find the right words.

'I feel like shit,' Christine's voice resounded from the door.

We both jerked our heads in her direction, then I quickly looked at Daniel to check how he reacted to the sight of Christine. He hadn't seen her at all since she had started the chemo, and he was completely unprepared. But if Daniel was shocked by what he saw, he didn't let on.

'Hello, Daniel,' Christine said, and I was amazed, how calmly she reacted to his presence. 'I heard what you just said, and I ... thank you. Honestly, I really don't know what to say.' Something similar to a smile flickered over her face. 'Now come here and give me a hug. I look terrible, but I don't bite.'

Daniel was with her in a matter of steps and pulled her into his arms. 'It's great to finally see you again,' he said.

'The same goes for me. I just wish the circumstances could have been different.' She released his embrace and stroked her wig with embarrassment.

'Me, too. But things are as they are.'

Christine nodded slowly. 'Yes, you're right.'

At this moment Toni and Max came charging into the kitchen and hugged Christine. 'Hello Mummy, Daniel is here!' Max said. 'And Marie is going to make a fire in a moment, we've already gathered sticks.'

Christine looked at me properly for the first time since she arrived and widened her eyes in shock.

'What happened to you?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh, so the injury on your cheek just happened to come along?'

'No, I had a little accident.'

'What sort of accident?' Christine looked around the room until her x-ray gaze rested upon the coffee table, which was missing the vase and to the dark, damp patch on the carpet. 'What happened here?' She looked from the carpet to Toni and Max and then to me. When the three of us said nothing, she turned to Daniel.

'Do you know what happened here?'

'Me? No, I know nothing,' he said and avoided her gaze. These amateur liars, everyone knows that you have to maintain eye contact when you lie.

She scrutinised us sceptically, but we all kept quiet. I was very proud of our crew that stuck together. There were definitely no traitors amongst us.

‘Alright,’ she finally said. ‘I hope you realise that I’ll find out sooner or later.’

‘Why don’t the four of you head out to the garden?’ I quickly suggested. ‘I’ll come out with the food in a minute.’

Toni and Max charged off, and Christine followed. Only Daniel stayed behind and looked at me questioningly.

‘Go on,’ I said. ‘Christine is so happy to see you.’

He hesitated briefly, then followed the others out into the garden.

When I came out into the garden fifteen minutes later with a newly-made salad, baguette, marinated vegetables, falafel and dips from the local shop, Daniel had already lit a fire and was sitting in front of it with Toni and Max. Christine was lying on a sun lounger talking to Daniel, while the children were blissfully holding the sticks they had gathered into the fire letting the ends glow. I felt that a fire was a bit unnecessary on a warm summer’s evening, but it was nice to see that Toni and Max were having such fun. Christine also seemed to be benefitting from Daniel’s presence, as she was smiling more than she had done in a long time. We had a picnic and talked about all sorts of things – the weather, *La Concorde*, films and music – anything but Christine’s illness. Later I fetched marshmallows from the house. Daniel, Toni, Max and I sat around the fire and roasted and ate marshmallows until we felt quite sick. All the while we made plans how we might be able to capture the *Great Allen*. At some point Christine said it was time for the children to go to bed. Her gaze shifted back and forth from me to Daniel, then she said: ‘I’m going to stay upstairs. I’m sorry, but I really have to sleep.’

Daniel got up and gave her a hug.

‘It was lovely to see you again,’ she said.

‘Good, because I’m planning on coming by more often. I should have done this a lot earlier.’

‘Can we go out on *La Concorde* when we get back from our holidays?’ Max asked.

‘Definitely,’ Daniel said and looked over to me. ‘Maybe we’ll even sail the next time.’

I waited for the usual internal defence mechanism to begin, the cramps and the panic, but for the first time in twelve years this reaction began with a delay and wasn’t nearly as strong as normal.

Christine and the children disappeared into the house, while Daniel and I remained seated by the fire. For a long time we just stared at the flames and listened to the crackle of the fire. I felt the bolt to the door of the

room in the furthest corner of my memory open of its own accord. But this time I didn't slam it shut. 'I was pregnant,' I heard myself say.

'What?'

I felt Daniel's gaze upon me, but I continued to stare into the fire. 'The father was my boyfriend. You remember, the stuff I told you about in the tavern?' Without waiting for Daniel's answer, I continued. 'I got pregnant. Aged seventeen. It was a complete shock, and I thought my life was over. But then I went to the gynaecologist and saw the little black dot on the ultrasound picture and fell madly in love. It was the cutest dot I had ever seen in my life. And I couldn't ... I really wanted to keep it.'

'And your boyfriend didn't want to?' Daniel asked.

'He wasn't crazy about the idea, but he would have gone through with it. That's what he said at least. I didn't want anyone to talk me out of it, so I didn't tell anyone. I wanted to wait as long as possible so that no one could tell me to get rid of it.' I took a charred stick and held it into the fire. It was really scary allowing these memories to resurface. I had repressed them for so long, but now, having started to talk about it, I couldn't stop. 'I was really looking forward to it and had thought about names and had looked in every passing pram. And then I lost it. At ten weeks.' I threw the stick into the fire and held my forehead with both hands. 'And I couldn't handle it, not at all. Not a bit. I reproached myself because I had carried on sailing, and even though the doctor told me that it hadn't been a factor, I was sure that it was my fault.' I cast a careful glance at Daniel to see how he was reacting to my story. He looked at me with so much sympathy that I dared to continue. 'And then I *couldn't* sail anymore, I just couldn't. I just cried. I managed to hide it from everyone when I had company, but as soon as I was alone I just bawled. And Christian, my ex-boyfriend, couldn't cope. Or rather, he couldn't cope with *me*. He said it was all too much for him, and then he left.'

'What an idiot,' Daniel said, barely able to contain the anger in his voice.

'Well, he was young. We were both far too young. I felt so lonely. I didn't have a mother, my grandmother had died a few months before, Christine had just moved in with Robert. I couldn't talk to Daddy or Grandpa about it. Nor to anyone else. Of course they all noticed that I was unhappy, but I put it down to Christian breaking up with me. I didn't tell anyone what had really happened.' For a moment I paused. 'After a few weeks I just wanted to blot it all out. I started partying. Then my schoolwork started to suffer and ...' My chin began to wobble, and I pressed my lips together. 'Well, shortly afterwards my father gave Christine the job in the shipyard and told me that I was too wild and irresponsible. It was a pretty ... pretty awful time in my life. I haven't been sailing since. And I didn't want anything more to do with the shipyard.'

Daniel didn't say anything, simply placed his hand on my back and gently stroked me. I cleared my throat and ran my fingers through my hair. 'I'm sorry. Today has been a really strange day. I'm not normally this emotional. But Toni and Max are not coping well with Christine's illness. And then their father is away. They both cried so much today, and I promised them that their mother wouldn't die. How could I do that? I'm beginning to get scared myself.' I felt the tears well up in my eyes. 'I'm so frightened that she will die.' My final words came out so quietly and shakily that I wasn't sure Daniel had even heard them. I was hurting all over. My head, my tummy, my heart, I felt the sharp pain of grief, anger and fear all over. 'I'm sorry,' I whispered. But it was already too late; the first tear was running across my cheek. It stung when it went into my wound, and I wanted to wipe it away, but Daniel took my hand and held it tight.

'There is nothing to feel sorry about,' he said. 'Nothing at all.' He moved closer to me, placed his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in. My head came to rest on his chest and my arms found their way around his waist of their own accord. And suddenly I didn't want to stop myself from crying. More and more tears poured down my cheeks, until I was sobbing bitterly and everything burst out of me. I hadn't cried like this for twelve years, and it was exactly twelve years ago that I had done so in front of another person. And now I was lying in Daniel's arms and crying and crying and I couldn't stop. All the bottled-up tears found their way to the surface and drenched Daniel's shirt. He held me tight, stroked my back and my hair and whispered tender calming words. And although I was showing myself to be so vulnerable and weak, I felt secure and protected.

My tears finally dried up after what felt like an age, but I couldn't bring myself to move from Daniel's embrace. I dug my head into his chest and enjoyed his strength and his calmness, which bit by bit transferred itself to me. Daniel gave me time, he cheered me up although I wasn't crying anymore and didn't seem to be thinking about letting me go. But at some point, I pulled myself free with a heavy heart. 'I'm sorry ...'

'Marie, don't tell me that you're sorry. You can cry as much as you want, I'm here for you.' Daniel reached behind and grabbed a couple of napkins from the picnic blanket and handed them to me. 'Here you go.'

I took them gratefully and used them to blow my nose hard.

'Bit better?' he asked.

I took stock. My crying hadn't made the problems disappear, but I still somehow felt lighter. And wonderfully cheered up. 'Yes, I'm alright.'

'You carrying around a lot of baggage,' he said thoughtfully. 'And at the moment you're in a really tough situation. You have plenty of reasons to cry, so do so as much as possible.'

I took a deep breath and shook my head. 'I'd better not. If I just cry all the time, I won't get round to doing anything else. And on that subject: I still have quite a bit to do.'

'Okay.' Daniel got up. 'Where shall I start? I manage almost anything except window cleaning, I really don't fancy that anymore today.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well how do you think I mean it? I came today to help.'

'Yes, but you've done more than enough with Christine and ...'

'Don't argue, Marie,' he said and held out his hand.

Without thinking about it, I grabbed it and allowed him to pull me up. 'Alright. But I'm really going to make you work, so don't say you weren't warned.'

Together we cleared away the dirty dishes and the leftover food and carried them into the house. Afterwards I had Daniel do the ironing, which I was delighted about, as this meant I wouldn't have to do it. All the while we chatted about the shipyard and gossiped about Nele Jacobs and Finn Andersen, who were still madly in love and who Daniel had caught snogging several times. I was done with the kitchen and Daniel with the laundry way too quickly for my liking. 'How come you can iron so quickly? It takes ages when I do it.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm just good at it.'

'Did you make a good job of it?' I asked doubtfully and went over to him to cast a glance at the laundry basket.

'Next time shall I present you with each piece of ironed clothing for a quality control inspection?'

I clapped my hand in front of my mouth. 'Oh gosh,' I uttered. 'What's become of me? I run a household for a short while, and rapidly turn into a complete control freak.'

Daniel smiled and carefully ran his finger along my wound. 'Does it still hurt?'

I had to force myself not to nestle my face into his hand. 'No, it's fine.'

He suddenly lowered his hand and cleared his throat. 'It's almost 11.30,' he said after glancing at his watch.

'Should I leave you now so that you can get some sleep?'

'No, you should stay, so that you can sleep *with* me,' I thought, and felt the warmth rising in my face. 'Yes, right, thatI really need to get to bed.'

I accompanied him to the front door, and I found it really hard to let him leave. 'Thanks for your help. And for listening. And for lending me your shoulder of course.'

'Borrow it as often as you want.'

Without thinking about it, I placed my hands on Daniel's shoulder, went up on my toes and kissed him on the cheek. I perceived his scent, the prickly stubble and the soft skin beneath, and I just couldn't make myself pull back, so that my kiss on his cheek definitely lasted much longer than what was considered normal.

Daniel initially remained quite still, but then he cupped my face in his hands and gently shifted my head away from his cheek, up to his mouth. It felt like an electric shock, when his lips met mine, and I no longer had a bag of popping candy in my stomach, but rather two crates of it, crackling and rustling like crazy. I wrapped my arms around Daniel's neck, clung to him and responded to his kiss, which was so amazingly tender that I could have freaked out. I wanted more, much more, but at some point he pulled back his head. Completely disorientated by the fact that he was no longer kissing me, I opened my eyes. Daniel smiled at me and ran his thumb gently over my lips. Then he lent down again and gave me a kiss on the cheek. 'Good night, young Miss Ahrens,' he whispered in my ear.

'Good night,' I whispered back.

He turned around, went down the drive to street, and I continued to watch him long after he was no longer visible. At some point I closed the door behind me and sank down on the bottom step of the staircase. What a day. Of all the emotions that had taken hold of me today, and of all the events, at this moment it was just the very last event and the very last emotion that remained with me. Daniel and I had kissed. And it had been such a wonderful, magical moment that I wanted to experience it again and again.