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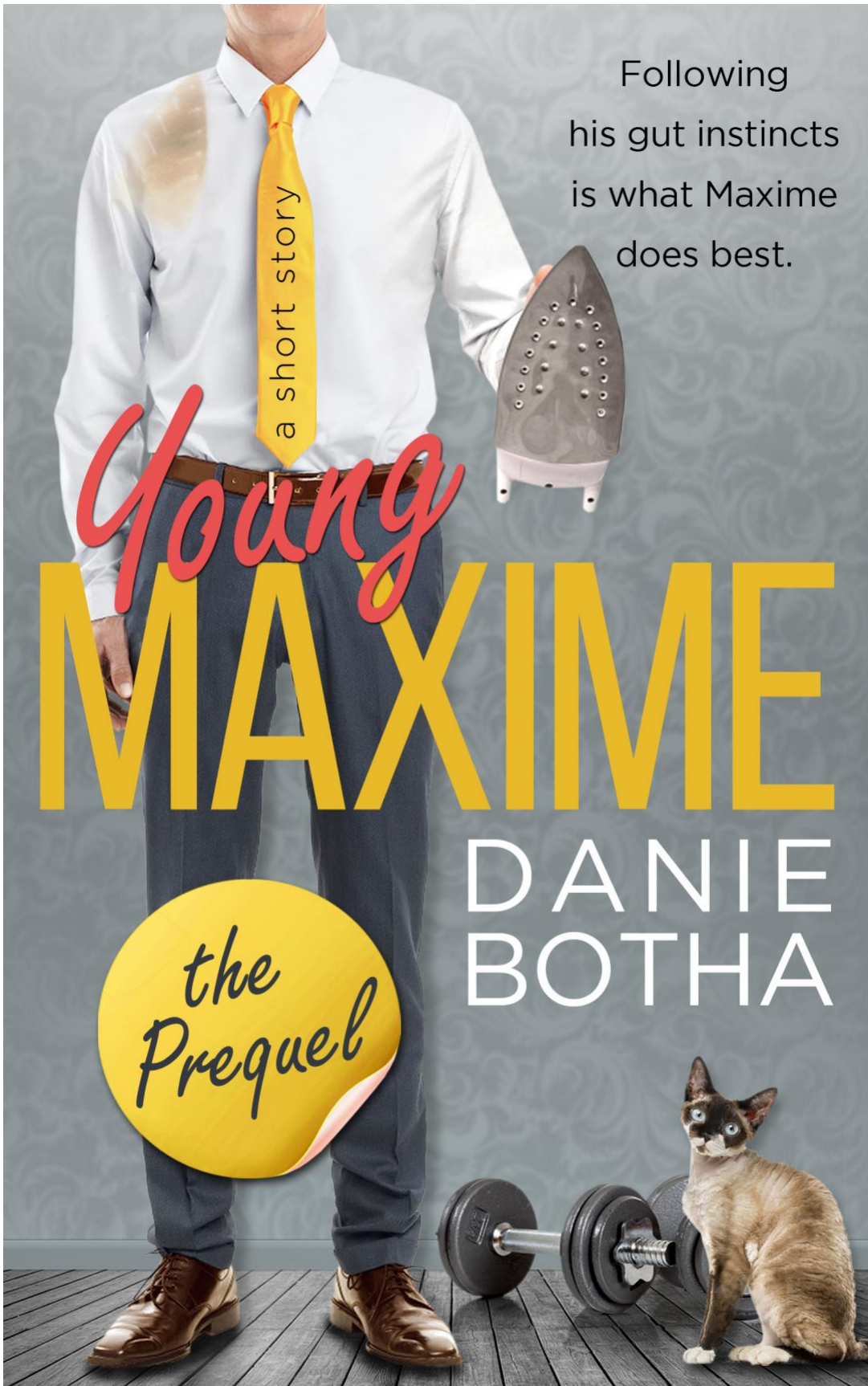
a short story

Young

MAXIME

DANIE
BOTH

*the
Prequel*



YOUNG MAXIME

The Prequel

A short story

by Danie Botha

Young Maxime

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Young Maxime

Following his gut instincts was what Maxime did best.

He did not believe in fate, and he had his doubts about serendipity.

He had learned, growing up in the shadow of an older brother and a father who lived his life guided by three pages of life rules, not to throw matters to the four corners of the wind to fend for themselves. Whenever he failed to take a stand, things often turned sour, biting Maxime, being the youngest, in the behind.

Maxime Baumann and his brother Gunther had traveled that morning in Gunther's car to Basel-Stadt, in the Swiss Alps. Gunther, insisting on running his own errands, left Maxime, who had come along for the company, to his own devices. Retreating to the balcony of the spire of the Basel Minster cathedral, he had a grand view of the old city. The summer's day was lovely—cloudless skies allowed him sighting of Germany to the northeast and France to the northwest. Maxime never tired of the azure heavens, breathing the muskiness of the Rhein, as the river, a mere hundred yards away, snaked silver and glistening through the city.

When the brothers met again at noon, Gunther brimmed with excitement. He had bumped into two sisters, Donna and Cornelia Dykeman at the bus depot. They had missed their tour bus from Basel to Davos he explained.

"The least we can do is offer them a ride to Davos. They're visiting from Canada—for two entire months!"

"How did you end up at the *bus* depot?"

"I had to meet someone at the station, next-door to the depot."

"Why the sudden concern, Gunther? They're only *tourists*."

"It will be the gentleman thing to do."

An hour later, as Gunther introduced the ladies, it was clear why he had been so adamant to help. Donna Dykeman was the epitome of beauty and youth. The brothers would soon learn the innocence of girlhood that lingered around her was infused with a near-lethal dose of defiance.

Cornelia Dykeman had her doubts about inconveniencing the Swiss men. What would her mother say? God forbid—the men were strangers. "We cannot possibly accept your offer, sir. It's two hundred thirty kilometers to the valley. We can never expect you to do this for—"

"I wasn't offering it for free." Gunther straightened his shoulders. "It's two hundred *thirty-six* kilometers."

"Arrogant *asshole*." Donna, crimson in the face, pulled her older sister by the arm, her eyes drilling into the Baumann men. "The travel guide lied. It claims Switzerland is the most hospitable country in Europe—for the third consecutive year since seventy-three."

Maxime shoved his brother aside. "It *is*."

Gunther clasped Maxime's shoulder. "We'll give them a *fifty percent* discount on what they would have paid for the bus."

"Hah! *Come*, Corrie. We'll wait for the next bus." Donna yanked with more determination on her sister's elbow.

"Good luck with that." Gunther laughed. "The next bus is at nine tomorrow morning. You'll need a youth hostel or a hotel. The rates for a two star—"

"Why would we settle for a *two* star? Perhaps we should have picked Lisbon or Rome."

"*Lieber Gott!*" Gunther moaned. "Don't be so sensitive. Relax. I was pulling your *leg*."

"Relax, my *ass*."

The two girls took off without a further word, each hunched under a sizeable backpack. Maxime had to jog to catch up. "Misses, excuse me! Pardon my brother's rudeness." He planted himself in front of the sisters.

"You're blocking our way." Donna advanced, her lips tight.

"We'll take you to Davos." Maxime remained rooted.

"Your brother's humor is appalling."

"Yes . . . His social skills are somewhat deficient."

"Somewhat?"

"Okay, significantly."

"He's an *asshole*."

"He can be charming when he puts his mind to it." Maxime took, first Donna's backpack, then Cornelia's.

"Charming, hah," Donna spat, stretching her legs to keep up.

Maxime called after Gunther as they approached the vehicle.

The older Baumann's mouth opened, but Donna was quicker. "You owe us an *apology*, Herr Baumann. You *really* pissed me off!"

"I'm sorry, *Fraulein*. I was only messing—"

Donna gave a dry sob as she wiped across her eyes, leaning on her sister. "I haven't slept in days; we were stuck for two hours on the runway before take-off out of Toronto, making us miss the damn bus. You showered us with your charm, and we fell for it, only to discover you were pulling a sock over our—"

"*Enough*, Donna. Apology accepted, gentlemen." Cornelia clicked with her tongue as she steered her sister toward the rear passenger door. "Hush now, little one. Hush." She helped Donna into the back. "My Sis falls prone to exaggerations when she's exhausted."

As they left Basel-Stadt behind, Donna, now half-asleep, tapped Gunther, who was driving, on the shoulder. "You drive a hard bargain, Mister. We're only lowly exchange students, but we have our pride. In spite of living on a budget, we *insist* on paying you the fifty per—"

"Eyes on the *road*, Gunt!" Maxime jerked the wheel and steered the car back to the center of the lane, then faced the back, reaching for Donna's hand. "You'll pay *nothing* of the kind, Miss."

A snap crackled when their fingers touched, sending a surprising jolt through them both. Donna turned crimson faster.

Gunther's eyes wrinkled as he observed the sisters in the rearview mirror. Donna, now wide awake, stuck out her tongue at the older Baumann, ten years her senior when she caught him scrutinizing them. There was no end to the man—he winked at her.

Maxime punched his brother on the upper arm. "Eyes on the road!"

Cornelia pulled her sister against her and stroked Donna's hair until she relaxed and her breathing deepened. Enough with the demanding Swiss men.

An hour later, both Dykeman sisters were asleep, and Maxime turned in his seat to watch Donna. Her parted lips painted a subtle amaranth, allowed soft snores to escape as she lay curled against her sister, her damp hair matted on her forehead. Her chest rose and fell, blessing Maxime with the glimpse of an enticing valley. He swallowed. *Lieber Gott*, she's magnificent. *Both sisters are striking—they're like twins. Cornelia is prettier, but Donna has this intensity inside her—a fire that rages with the slightest indication of a wrong being committed.*

Alluring and multifaceted—a fascinating girl. Unobtainable even.

Therein lay several problems.

Maxime was no Don Juan.

He was no nincompoop either.

But brother Gunther, four years his senior, was the one who had introduced Maxime to the sisters. According to the brothers' unwritten agreement, this fact gave Gunther a fair advantage. It gave him first pick. Then again, Gunther was ten years her senior, making him almost as old as her Father. It was clear Donna harbored a well-developed opinion about herself, and of the apparent assholes she shared the world with; she was capable of steering her vessel through any gale or squall.

There was another problem. Maxime was twenty-four, which made him potentially too old too. However, the young lady was mature beyond her years. If she was able, weeks out of high school, to stomp an overbearing mechanical engineer working on his Ph.D. and his younger sibling, a junior lawyer, there lay great potential tied up in her. Limitless possibilities.

Maxime was intrigued. He was a fool for a challenge.

It seemed to Maxime when they dropped the girls off in Davos he had eight weeks to prove to her; not all men were assholes.

The Dykeman sisters insisted the Baumann men's protest in spite, on paying them the fifty percent of the bus fee, counted out in Swiss francs.

Maxime couldn't wait for his brother to close his door and pull back into the street. Maxime, still red-faced, waved the girls goodbye, then spun toward his sibling and smacked him on the shoulder. "She was right. You're an *arse*!"

Gunther shrugged. "Don't be so melodramatic."

"Gentleman thing to do, my foot!"

"Get over it. Here's a dare. You have two months to get either one of the Dykeman sisters to fall in love with you."

"You're too old for them."

"Age is relative. The younger one is a little she-lion. She has the mouth of a thirty-year-old sailor."

"They're not cattle at an auction," Maxime insisted.

"I found them, and I will get one of them to fall for me."

"Donna was right: you are an *arrogant* asshole."

"So, is the chase on?"

"I'm not interested in your dare."

"That's a lie!" Gunther boomed, ruffling Maxime's hair. "You couldn't keep your eyes off the youngest." He choked as he laughed. "I can read your mind."

"Donna wasn't too bad. I don't care for Cornelia."

Gunther whistled. "Donna—what a lady. That mouth. That mind. Those *breasts*."

"Keep your hands off her!"

"Then you'll have to accept my dare."

"I'm not interested in your game."

"If you don't accept my dare, then they're both free for my attention and charm. The loser buys the winner a new set of skis and poles."

Maxime sighed. "Aren't you ashamed? You insult all women. You think little of it to make them fall for you, only to walk away and leave their hearts in tatters. *Okay*. I accept. Now stop your bullshit."

Gunther shrugged. "Come on. How else will they remember their time in Switzerland? It will be *innocent* fun."

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With Gunther having had to return to Basel for the week to meet with his professor in connection with his dissertation, Maxime was lulled into a false sense of security concerning the opposite sex, and the Dykeman sisters in particular. He was completing his first year with a law firm in Davos, leaving him with little time for galavanting, not with his regimented fitness program and the break-up with his high school sweetheart. He didn't need a distraction.

Only when Gunther phoned to say he'd be home in three hours, did Maxime wake from his slumber. Gunther's taunting voice was enough to spur on the younger Baumann.

"I just got off the phone with Cornelia Dykeman. Has little Donna allowed you to hold her hand, or perhaps kiss her? Hurry up, Maximus. You'd better trample the doorstep of Herr Fessler if you don't want me to order the perfect set of skis. The ones I have my eyes on aren't cheap."

Maxime ambled up the steep stone steps and sounded the door ringer of *Herr und Frau Fessler*, the couple where Cornelia and Donna had found accommodation. He caught his breath watching the town, far below. He regretted not taking the car. His obsession with fitness will one day be his undoing. He would never tire of the valley, and the lake, tucked between the foothills in the distance, beyond the town. He inhaled the pines and chestnuts as he stood with his back to the front door.

"*Guten Mittag, Herr Baumann.*"

Maxime spun around. "*Mittag, Frau Fessler.*"

Mrs. Fessler filled her doorway, hands on her ample hips, smiling. "Maxime?"

Maxime cleared his throat. "I'm here to call on the younger sister: Donna Dykeman."

"Not Cornelia?"

Maxime shook his head.

Mrs. Fessler chuckled and pulled Maxime through the door. What with all the formality. She gave a happy laugh and smothered him in a hug, then held him at arm's length, her head thrown back. "I'll call the Fraulein. Ja?" She touched his arm and whispered, "The *temperamentvoll Fraulein, ja?*"

Maxime nodded. "She's a bit feisty."

As the lady of the house rolled from the room, she called over her shoulder. "Sit down, Maxime. Sit down. The Fraulein knows you're here."

Maxime jumped to his feet when the younger Dykeman girl appeared in the door. "Donna, Hi!"

"Guten Mittag, Herr Baumann."

"Oh yes . . . Good afternoon."

"My German is improving."

"Congratulations."

"Wie kann Ich Ihnen helfen?"

Maxime grinned, reaching for her hand. "You can help me by agreeing to go for a walk."

The young Donna kept her hands clasped to her stomach, her feet planted. "Why?" A faint rose crept up her neck. It was impossible not to notice the rising and falling of her chest.

She slanted her head.

Maxime swallowed. "I'm asking you for a *walk*."

"Why do you want to walk with me?"

"I like you." Maxime clenched his teeth, his hands opening and closing into fists.

"I doubt that. You and your brother treated us like objects. You disappeared the entire week. Not even a symbolic phone call to check whether we were managing. Only silence. Then you reappear and expect me to run out the door with you."

"That's harsh. I was busy."

"I get it. I'm a student, a nobody. My German is rotten—"

"Let me try again. Miss Dykeman, will you please go for a walk with me?"

"I don't know . . ."

"I'm not asking you to marry me."

"Thank God for that!" Donna Dykeman turned as if to go back up the stairs.

"Donna, wait! Frau Fessler said you knew I was at the door."

"So?" Donna took another step toward the stairs, paused, spun around, rolled her eyes at Maxime, stepped wide around him, yanked the front door open and called toward the kitchen, "*Weder sehen, Frau Fessler!*"

Mrs. Fessler answered from deep inside the house.

Donna pulled Maxime by the sleeve, closed the heavy door behind them and led him down the stone steps.

Maxime shook his head.

"What?" The petite brunette glanced up at him.

"Did I pass the test?"

"What test?"

"Why play so hard to get?"

"You and your brother are chauvinists. Just because you're attractive, doesn't give you the right to—"

"Chauvinists?"

"Swiss men think women are rags to mop floors with."

"That's untrue! Coming from a feminist it's a bit much, don't you think?" He snickered. "I'm glad you find me attractive."

She laughed. "I was talking about your brother."

Maxime stopped dead in his tracks.

Her lips thinned. "What's it *now*?"

"I'll take you back to Frau Fessler's house; then you can wait for Gunther, the attractive one."

Donna grabbed Maxime's hand and hurried along. "Please don't. Cornelia knows how to handle men like him. Gunther will drive me to homicide."

Maxime squeezed her hand. "I thought you found him attractive?"

"He's attractive but a chauvinist and an arrogant asshole."

Maxime whistled. "What am I?"

They had reached Dorfstrasse, a street parallel to the mountain in the town center, leading to the lake.

"You're okay."

"*Okay*?" Maxime laughed. "I think Gunther was right about three things concerning you."

"Three?" She kept pace but pulled her hand free.

Maxime held up a finger. "One: You're a *belle* with a brain."

Donna gave a crisp laugh. Maxime's pupils dilated as he tilted his head. What an exquisite sound escaped from that mouth. Lips that needed a kiss.

Donna's cheeks turned a deeper rose. She shrugged. The bounce in her step had returned.

Maxime held up a second finger. "Two: You have the spicy mouth of a thirty-year-old sailor."

A louder bell-chime laugh followed. "I'll take that as a compliment. It's my way to keep the menfolk at bay."

They continued in silence. Dorfstrasse had joined Bahnhofstrasse, which would lead them down to the water. They smelled the lake, hidden behind a low hill. Donna inhaled deeply, taking his hand. "What's number three?"

Maxime cleared his throat. "Sorry, there are only two."

"Out with it, Baumann. What's number three?" Her slim hand tried to crush his fingers.

"You have a nice . . . bosom."

"See? He's a *chauvinist*!" She turned in front of Maxime, making him bump into her.

Maxime grasped her by the shoulders. "Sorry!" Their chests brushed in passing before Donna pulled back. "I'm certain those were not his exact words."

"They're a perfect size, he said. Like . . . Two oranges."

"Pig!" The slap on his cheek reverberated across the valley.

"Oranges?" She slapped him a second time. "How *dare* you?"

Passersby paused, intrigued by the blond man holding his cheek where eight narrow red wheels were fast forming. A small crowd gathered. Domestic disharmony was a private matter in Davos, not an activity for the streets.

Maxime's jaw was set as he grasped Donna's hand, waving the pedestrians away with a plastered-on smile. "*Alles ist gut*."

His vice-grip hold tightened as he stomped down the street, heading for the lake.

"You deserved that, Maxime!" Donna freed her arm.

Maxime hyperventilated, accelerating his pace, retaking hold of her hand. "What's *wrong* with you?"

"I overreacted. But I'm only a *little* sorry." She pulled her hand free. Maxime didn't look left or right; he strutted onwards.

When they rounded the hill, the valley opened up around the lake. Donna gasped at the panorama; her anger was momentarily forgotten.

"The lake," she whispered.

"Yes. The *Davosersee*. The lake where I'm going to *kiss* you."

"You won't. I'll call the police!"

"Stop behaving like a spoiled brat. You assaulted me in public. In front of witnesses. The police will take my side. The local chief knows me."

"I'll tell them you harassed me. Insulted me. It was in self-defense."

"Then I'll show them my half-broken jaw."

"*Poor* man." Donna gave a shrill laugh. "You can't kiss me."

"You have forfeited the right to tell me that."

"No means no."

"I'll ask first."

"At least you're not like your brother."

"Damn right, I'm not like my brother." He grimaced as they turned off Bahnhofstrasse and approached the water. "If you'd done this to Gunther, he would have had you over his shoulder by now, and carried you down to the lake and thrown you in."

"You won't *dare* do that."

"I haven't decided yet."

When they reached the gravel path next to the water, Donna hesitated. Maxime steered her toward a bench. A squirrel darted across the way, startling them both.

"Why don't you sit?"

Donna plopped down, as far away as possible. Maxime followed her example. They sat in silence, on opposite ends, watching the water.

"You know what Frau Fessler called you?"

Donna shook her head.

"*Temperamentvoll*."

"Temperamental?"

"That and *more*." He crossed his arms; eyes fixed on the white-tipped peaks behind the lake. He looked older than her father for a moment. "How many people have you hit like that?"

She lowered her eyes. "Only one."

"What did *he* do?"

"I allowed him to kiss me. Then we kissed some more, and the next moment he groped me. He didn't care for me."

"When was that?"

"Last year."

"Did your parents ever hit one another or you and Cornelia like that?"

"Never."

He moved closer, perched on the tip of the bench, looking back at the crouched-into-a-bundle-girl. "Then why did you hit me?"

Around them, the wind toyed with the bushes and shrubs. The taller oaks, birch, and maples stood away from shore, on the lower foothills. Higher up the slopes, only the coniferous trees survived. A robin bounced across the grass, giving chase after a handful of sparrows and a wren.

"You offended me." Her lips pulled up. "My dad taught me how to defend myself."

"Smart dad. But you *insisted* that I tell you."

"I was hoping you'd say something nicer."

Maxime waved his hand. "You remain a mystery. I find that *fascinating*."

"In spite of me striking you?"

"Perhaps because of that."

"You'll think twice before saying that to a lady."

Maxime laughed. "Possibly."

They sat, silent, side-by-side, watching the squirrel chase, first the sparrows, then the robin from a scrap of discarded apple. The antics of the animals made the girl chuckle. The breeze drove hundreds of whitecaps across the lake toward them.

Later, when the wind picked up with renewed fervor, the girl shivered. She leaned against the Swiss man's side and snuck in under his arm, wrapped it around her slim shoulders.

He nudged her with his hip. "Am I forgiven?"

"Maybe."

She sat forward and reached for his chin, turned his face down toward her, then stroked the still visible wheels on his cheek.

"I didn't mean to hit so hard."

He smiled and held her hand against his cheek.

He let go after a while and told her about growing up with Gunther and Father and Mother in Basel-Stadt. He told her about his father's three pages of life rules, about an older brother who was always faster and bigger and smarter. Also how he, Maxime, refused to back down.

Donna's hand bumped against his on the bench.

Maxime turned and faced her, leaning forward. Their hair brushed.

She sighed.

Next, their noses touched.

Lake Davos was mirrored in her irises. Pale aquamarine with black specs. He watched as her pupils dilated. His heart leaped. *Lieber Gott*. Her lips parted. Deep amaranth. Her breathing slowed as she wiggled closer. Their knees met. He breathed in her warmth. It was impossible not to see down the front of her shirt, down two sloping valleys, down sculpted curves jutting forward, only the tips hidden from sight. He shuddered.

Shallow waves lapped at the boulders at their feet. A wood warbler called its mate.

Their eyes locked.

"Your lack of pretense fascinates me. *And* you're beautiful. Gunther's a Neanderthal. *Oranges*. Ridiculous. Yours are perfect." Maxime beamed at her.

"*Chauvinist*."

"I'm trying not to."

He cupped her chin.

"Will you hit me if I kiss you?"

"Do you kiss well?"

Their lips brushed.

"That's not a kiss."

"Don't close your eyes."

Their lips touched a second time, lingered longer.

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"I *hate* my name."

"I *like* it. Donna."

It was a week later. Maxime had introduced Donna to the endless number of hiking trails in the valley and surrounding mountains. Grison's trail was a good one with which to start. Donna was on her knees next to the little Dischma stream, scooping mountain water to her mouth. She slurped as she drank, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and glared at him.

"How can you like such a common name?"

"Donna. It means, lady."

"My parents must have been in a besotted second honeymoon bliss when they decided on a name for me. Donna. *Pathetic*. No proper Dutch girl name for me, not like *Cornelia*."

She clambered to her feet.

"Stop being such a curmudgeon!" He pulled her closer and kissed her on the still damp lips. "*Dónna*." He rolled the word on his tongue, pulling a face. Words, spoken by guests of his father from the south, years ago, bubbled to the surface. He scratched his head. "No. I'll call you, Donatella."

"Donatella?"

"Donatella. It's even prettier."

"What's that supposed to mean, Mr. Smart Aleck?"

"Divine gift. Given by God."

"Bah! You're making that up!" Donna cried as she launched herself on his back, having taken a short running start. She wrestled the surprised Maxime down into the meadow grass. Out of breath from the tumble and the laughing, they ended up on their backs, spread-eagled, side-by-side, their fingers brushing, drinking in the glorious sun.

Donna told Maxime about growing up with Cornelia in Saskatchewan where they lived near the border with North Dakota.

The sun scorched them. Maxime capitulated first and rolled in one swift movement across Donna and pinned her down, laughing down at her, grasping her wrists high above her head, sitting on her thighs. "You still owe me an apology."

Donna shrieked, shaking her head, trying to wrestle free. "You made that up about my name."

"It's true: Divine gift."

"Is not. Your nose is growing!"

Maxime silenced her protestations with his lips. He let go of her wrists when her lips parted, and she kissed him back. She reached for his shirt and pulled him closer, searching his lips with a hunger that surprised him. She kissed him with an urgency. Her hands traveled to the small of his neck and held tight. Soon her tongue slipped past his teeth and tasted his mouth.

Maxime shuddered and sighed.

"Donna!"

"Shit." Donna broke away and pushed Maxime upright.

The caller repeated Donna's name. She rolled out from under him. "*Cornelia*. What does she want? I told her to go ahead; we're coming."

Maxime grabbed Donna by the hand and pulled her to her feet. "Your sister's worried. Afraid I'm overstepping the boundaries of decency."

"Did you, now?" Donna called as she sprinted ahead of him, back toward the restaurant.

Cornelia waved Maxime and Donna closer from a window table. Cornelia hugged and kissed her sister and shook Maxime's hand.

"No kiss for me?" Maxime made a face at the older Dykeman girl who remained unsmiling as he pushed Donna's chair in.

"I think it's inappropriate for Donna to be alone with you, goodness knows where Herr Baumann."

Donna's face turned red as she shoved her chair backward. "How dare you?" she hissed at her sister as she scrambled to her feet.

Maxime helped Donna back in her chair and locked eyes with Cornelia. "We went for a walk." He waved toward the mountain. "Along Grison's trail."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Cornelia, what's *wrong* with you?" Donna pleaded, her face glowing.

"She's only eighteen," Cornelia told Maxime.

"Why are you playing Mother all of a sudden?" Donna had her sister by the elbow.

"Mother phoned me this morning, asking how you're doing. I'm responsible for you. Said you didn't respond to her messages left with Frau Fessler."

Maxime placed his and Donna's order with the waitress, leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "She kissed me back."

A blush had also crept up Cornelia's neck. "Donna's too young."

Donna choked in her water and Maxime snorted. "Too young to kiss?"

"Next thing you'll want to touch her breast. And next—"

"Kissing a girl is not the same as having sex with—" Maxime said.

"*Stop* this!" Donna had her sister by the arm until the latter winced.

Maxime leaned forward. "I would choose my words wisely, Cornelia. You might get a well-deserved slap on the cheek, and not from me."

Cornelia freed herself from Donna's grasp. "She won't strike her sister! Hit me?"

"I got slapped for less." A muscle in Maxime's jaw twitched.

Cornelia's glance shifted between her red-in-the-face sister and the blond Swiss.

"She wasn't impressed to be told her breasts looked like two oranges."

Cornelia implored her sister. "Did you slap him?"

"Twice."

Maxime shrugged. "That's how Gunther described her. I told her they were perfect." He brimmed at Donna who raised her brows.

Cornelia's face was close to crimson too. Her voice rose. "I can understand why she hit you. What a chauvinistic thing to say. *Two oranges*. My God!"

An affected cough, followed by a nasal “Excuse me. Hello Max!” next to their table forced the trio’s attention to the groomed lady standing a hand-width from Maxime’s shoulder. Having stepped, as if from a fashion magazine’s page, she towered over them in her five-inch stilettos, animal skin purse clutched to her slim figure. She leaned over Maxime, baring her ample French-lace covered bosom for all to behold, the indigo summer dress struggling to keep her decent.

She purred, glanced at Cornelia through long lashes, “It was impossible not to overhear the conversation.”

Her hand rested on Maxime’s shoulder. “Max, *Schatz*, why don’t you introduce me to these lovely *young* ladies?”

Maxime brushed her hand from his shoulder and got to his feet, his jaw set. “Clara . . . Okay. Yes.” He brushed through his hair, stealing a glance at the mountain as if for help. “Cornelia, Donna . . . meet Clara Weber.”

Clara snuggled closer, nudging Maxime. “Tell them we’re friends from school days, Max.” She laughed. “*Good* friends. Ja?”

Her alert eyes zoomed in on the Dykeman sisters. She touched her chest. “*Es ist wichtig* . . . Sorry, it’s important—women’s busts. It must be *perfect*.”

Maxime wiggled himself free from the clasping arm with a “Clara, please,” and stood closer to Donna’s chair, who, together with her sister peered at the Swiss man and woman with growing concern.

Clara wasn’t done. She smiled at the sisters, licking her *nocturna*-painted lips. “I was flat as a boy with my 34 A’s. Not anymore. Dr. Schmidt did a great job. I love my 38 DD’s.” She laughed. “The boyfriends love it too.” She gave Maxime a quick pat on the bottom who jumped away. “My patients . . . I’m an optometrist . . . Like it too.”

Donna bolted to her feet, Cornelia’s hand in hers. “Maxime, I’m *leaving*. *We’re* leaving.”

Maxime snapped into action as if freed from a spell. “Let me explain!”

Donna’s glance rested for a moment on the live mannequin’s face, forcing out a “Nice meeting you, Clara,” before hauling Cornelia after her.

Maxime pushed Clara out of his way and bolted after the Dykeman sisters. He caught up with three strides and clutched Donna by the arm. “*Donna*. Allow me to explain.”

Donna’s lip trembled, she swallowed several times and blinked back tears, ripping her arm free. “There’s *nothing* to explain, Maxime Baumann. Go back to your dressed-up optometrist. Go back to your *sweetheart*. I’m only an ordinary eighteen-year-old who’s doing a two-month student-exchange.”

She sobbed, grasped Cornelia’s arm, and stormed from the restaurant. As she burst through the doors, she hollered, “You lied to me, Herr Baumann!”

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The third time Maxime stood inside Frau Fessler’s front door in as many days, calling on Donna, and the lady of the house had to shake her head because the Fraulein refused to see him, she placed her hand on his arm.

“*Gib ihr zeit*, Maxime.”

“There’s little time, Frau Fessler. She leaves in four weeks.”

Maxime gestured toward the upstairs. "What does she say?"

Mrs. Fessler giggled, cupping her hands in front of her formidable bosom. "She was not *beeindruckt* . . . impressed with Miss Clara."

Maxime snorted. "Clara: what a silly woman! She had lost it long before the augmentation surgery." He wiped his eyes. "Money and prestige and vanity had gone to her head . . . To think I was once in love with her. *Mein Gott*, what does that make me?"

Mrs. Fessler hugged him like a mother, before sending him on his way.

On the steps outside, Maxime hesitated. "Donna Dykeman is an explosive little fireball, but she has so much grit. She's brave, she's funny, she's—"

"*Aussergewöhnlich*. Ja?"

"Extraordinary. Yes."

"*Verliere nicht das Herz*, Maxime!"

Maxime waved as he ran down the stone steps. He won't lose heart. He'd go for a second run that day into the mountains.

It remains uncertain whose idea it was to grant Donna permission to drive Frau Fessler's thirteen-year-old Volkswagen Beetle into town. In of itself, it remained a mystery how the two sisters made it safely down the mountain and as far as Bahnhofstrasse before the calamity struck. Donna had become confused with who had the right of way when she smashed into the Butcher's truck.

No one was injured, but the damage to the beetle was extensive. The Butcher, known to be a complex character, ran to the police station to report the accident. Not satisfied with the pampering he had received, he immediately filed a civil case against both sisters in their private capacities.

Days later, seeking urgent legal advice since they were leaving the country in less than three weeks, the sisters knocked on the first law firm's door they could find. Having stated the nature of their predicament in English and broken German, they were instructed to take a seat. They were fortunate, the receptionist told them, one of the lawyers had had a cancellation and would see them sooner.

The Dykeman sisters were showed into a small boardroom, had just sat down, when Maxime wafted in, a folder in hand.

"What are *you* doing here?" The color drained from Donna's face as she bolted to her feet.

"I *work* here." He motioned for them to retake their seats. "What's wrong?"

Donna remained standing. "I drove Frau Fessler's car into a truck. Her vehicle has the most damage. The driver of the truck was mean. He s-s-sued me . . ." She clasped her mouth, her eyes brimming. "Sorry, Max. I can't. You can't—"

Donna dashed for the door, sidestepping Maxime's hesitant reach.

"Donna, *wait*. Let me help you!"

Cornelia bolted after her sister, hissing, "Leave my sister alone, Mister!"

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By five the following afternoon Maxime had the civil case against the Dykeman sisters thrown out.

He stood at Frau Fessler's front door with the news. "They cannot *know* it was me."

"It will be our secret, Maxime. *Ja?*"

Maxime nodded. "May I speak to her?"

Frau Fessler hesitated. She fiddled with her apron. "The *Fraulein* instructed me. I am to tell you; *she is not here.*"

"Frau Fessler? *Bitte.*"

Her hand rested on his arm. "I'm sorry, Maxime."

Nothing seemed to work.

Maxime tried flowers.

The next day he was back with chocolates.

Frau Fessler shrugged her shoulders. "The *Fraulein* says, *nein.*"

Maxime delivered handwritten cards.

A letter.

Maxime was not someone to give up, but it seemed, for the first time, his gut instincts had failed him. It was hard enough to avoid running into Clara Weber while doing his best to run into Donna Dykeman. He had to stop pursuing Donna. She may be of the mind to go to his boss or the police and open a case of harassment against him—accuse him of stalking.

Maxime soon fell into his scaled-up fitness regime: gym at six a.m. and an exhausting run after work, along with a different trail every afternoon.

He was worried he was losing his mind at the age of twenty-four.

It helped little to hear Gunther's taunting. "Only two weeks remaining, Maximus."

Maxime was late that afternoon heading out running. By the time he turned around and headed back, the sun had slipped behind the Jacobshorn mountains, the skies draining fast of its color palette, casting the valley in deepening greys. The Davosersee was able to hold captive, for a few precious minutes, the fading colors in its reflective aquamarine body. In the distance, the street lamps in town turned on, one after the other. Shop owners turned their lights on. In private homes, lights also appeared; hesitant little stars, popping up in an early night sky.

Maxime sprinted harder as he broke from the running path, side-stepped low-hanging branches, lost his footing for a moment as he misjudged himself with loose gravel and turned onto the first paved street, Bahnhofstrasse.

By the time he registered the grey object barreling down at him, heard the screeching brakes and the panicked voice—it was too late. Cyclist, bicycle, and runner ended up in a tangled mess twenty feet farther down the road.

"Dear, Lord! My arm!" A shuddering sob tore the dusk apart.

"*Shit*, lady!" Maxime groaned as he stumbled to his knees. "Where's your light?"

"Asshole! Can't you look where you're running?"

"*Donna?*"

"*Herr Baumann. Du bastard!*" She struggled to her feet, "Don't *touch* me!" She slapped Maxime's hand away.

The street lamp cast enough light to see her tear-streaked face.

She had on running clothes. Her toned limbs were covered in gashes and abrasions, similar to what was the case with Maxime. The collision had torn her running top and bra, leaving her heaving chest partially exposed.

"Let me help you."

"I'm feeling funny, Max—"

Maxime winced from his wounds as he lurched forward to catch the girl, her face drained of color.

An elderly couple that had gone for a walk wandered across the street, greeted Maxime and hailed down the first car that came up the road. The hospital, Spital Davos, was on the other side of town.

As Maxime carried the girl to the waiting car, she shuddered in his arms. "You're strong, Maxime Baumann . . . Why didn't you run . . . with a flashlight?"

"Hush now, little one." He kissed her forehead. "Why didn't you have a light on your bicycle?"

She shivered. "It's Herr Fessler's old men's bicycle. It has no light."

He helped her into the back seat. "Stop trying to see my breasts, Maxime."

Maxime snorted as he held her in a tight embrace. "You had little clothes on, to begin with."

Donna leaned into him. "I was hoping you would see me cycling . . . What's wrong with my arm, Max?"

"It's broken."

"It hurts."

It was dark out. As the car passed under street lamps, yellow light washed over the back of their heads.

"Max?"

"Donna?"

"Did you sleep with optometrist-Clara?"

Maxime inhaled sharp. "Let's get the doctor to fix your arm. You're in shock. You need a tetanus injection, something for pain, something to calm your nerves. They'll clean your wounds and—"

"I need the truth, Max."

"I was in love with her a long time ago. She couldn't handle the prestige and the money. She became obsessed with her bust line. She became vain. I broke up with her last year . . ."

"Did you have sex with her?"

"Donna, please . . ."

"I hate you, Maxime Baumann."

Maxime carried a protesting Donna into the hospital foyer until they found a wheelchair. He wheeled her through to the emergency department. While Donna gave her information to the nurse and admitting clerk, Maxime found a payphone and dialed first Frau Fessler, then his brother Gunther.

Then he returned to Donna's side who ignored him.

Donna was wheeled into a treatment room where a nurse gave her a tetanus injection, an injection for the pain, and started cleaning her wounds and abrasions.

A whimpering Donna grasped her sister's hand in a death knell the moment Cornelia stepped through the door.

Gunther, who walked in seconds after Cornelia, closed his mouth when Donna's eyes bore into his. Donna placed an index finger in front of her mouth, willing him to silence.

The Swiss giant shrugged and said, "Sorry about your misfortune, Miss Dykeman. The police told me your bicycle had no night-time light?"

"Asshole! It's an ancient bicycle dating back to the Napoleonic wars. And there were no police." Donna snapped towards Maxime. "What did you tell him?"

Maxime laughed embarrassed. "I told him about the accident, about me running you off your bicycle and asked him to come to the hospital."

"You're both assholes."

Gunther bowed. "Seems to me your vocabulary didn't expand much these six weeks. I thought Frau Fessler taught you some—"

"She has. *Du bist einen Arschloch!*"

Gunther faced his brother. "I'm afraid the bet is off." He pointed at Donna "You won't win her over. But my original comments stand. She is a belle, has a sailor's mouth and has a gorgeous bust."

Donna jerked upright on the stretcher, repositioned the temporary cast on her forearm, winched, and pushed the nurse's hands away. "What bet, Mister?" Her glare consumed Gunther.

"*Maxime?*" Donna's lower lip trembled.

He told her about his reluctance to agree to Gunther's silly idea of a set of skis and poles for the winner. How his falling in love with her was genuine, it had nothing to do with the bet.

"*Enough!* You lied to me, Maxime Baumann. You'd better leave. I almost bought your story about Clara Weber. The apparent affection you showed, your interest in me—it was all a hoax." She gave a loud sob. "You're a disappointment, Max. You're just like Gunther: attractive, a chauvinist, and an arrogant asshole."

"Donna . . ."

"*I never want to see you again. Goodbye, Max.*"

In spite of having lived in the shadow of an older brother and father, Maxime had not forgotten how to follow his gut instincts.

He stayed away from the Fessler's house for several days. Every morning he had placed a single white rose with a card at their front door. Maxime did not believe in fate. He knew Frau Fessler. He knew what he had seen in Donna's eyes when he had kissed her in the meadow, and the day she had slapped him.

Maxime sounded the door ringer. Earlier that morning he had left a single red rose at the front door. Frau Fessler pulled him through the door and smothered him in a motherly hug. She winked. "The *temperamentvoll* Fraulein, Ja?"

"*Ja danke, Frau Fessler.*"

Maxime went outside and waited on the first stone step. What a glorious morning. A transparent sky spanned the Davos valley that stretched out in front of him, green and dark and lush, down to the lake, tucked away behind the town, rolling into white-capped mountains,

high and far above. Maxime startled when a spotted eagle called above him then swooped down, riding a current.

Movement behind him made Maxime jump to his feet. Donna seemed dressed for a long walk—in her hand was a red rose.

“*Donna.*”

“Maxime?”

“I came to apologize.”

“What for?”

“I’ve been an idiot. I’ve hurt you.”

She reached for his hand.

“Did Frau Fessler tell you each time I called?”

She nodded.

“Clara Weber means *nothing* to me. I agreed to the silly bet with Gunther to stop him from pursuing *you*. I don’t want you to think I lied to you. I care deeply—”

“You talk too much.”

“Would you care for a walk?”

“I would love that.”

Maxime took Donna’s good hand and led her down the seventeen stone steps.

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END

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