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**THE STARNBERG SERIES VOLUME 3: GIVE ME
TIME**

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Leonie Brandt walked towards the house, not daring to look back. She heard laughter and cringed. She was sure they were laughing at her. She had blushed a deep crimson when Juliette kissed her cheek. She still felt the touch burning. Juliette Simon, Germany's sweetheart pop singer, now actress, and her idol for the past five years had hugged her. Well, sort of. And her girlfriend, Jodie Sanchez, writer of a string of international hits, had high-fived her. And then, when she answered someone's question, her unusually deep voice had cracked and broken, which it did sometimes. It was mortifying.

The embarrassed nineteen-year-old hurriedly climbed the stone steps up into the living room of the beautiful lakeside house, trying to make herself as small as possible and taking care not to wiggle her hips or do anything to further catch the attention of the six gay women sitting at the long table under the old tree. She disappeared through the French doors and breathed a sigh of relief, but she didn't continue into the kitchen as she had told them she must. Instead, she stood to the side of a window and looked back into the garden, taking care not to be seen.

Marie Nyman, owner of the house and one of the most famous operatic sopranos of her generation, held a knife over the cake Leonie's mother Wiebke had baked and which Leonie decorated. It took her five hours to mould the intricate design out of fondant, and she poured her love into every second of the time. It was a cake to celebrate Juliette Simon's birthday. Its centrepiece was an American Tony award the singer won on Broadway for her depiction of Roxi in the musical *Chicago*. Surrounding the suspended gold medallion on a plinth, were five platinum and five golden discs. Juliette had accumulated them over the ten years of her singing career.

It was unclear if there would be any more. Leonie knew from the gossip magazines that she was preparing another album, but her emphasis was now on her acting career, and she would soon begin filming a television series about a prosecution lawyer. The days of touring her enormous stage show and the Saturday night entertainment TV spectacles were over, at least for the time being.

She continued watching as Juliette's lover Jodie photographed the cake before Marie cut into it and put slices on the plates being held out to her.

The women were all beautiful in very different ways. After Juliette was given her piece of cake, Marie turned to a striking middle-aged woman with curly hair, dark brunette except for the white streak sprouting from her forehead. Suzanne Weigl, also a classical singer, but, with a much deeper singing voice than Marie's, was best known for her portrayal of 'boy' roles, although she had now given up singing them and was playing women more in keeping with her age. In the operatic world, she was as equally famous as Marie. Her wife Beth, an agent and talent scout, sat next to her. Somewhat younger and distinguished by her long snow-white hair, she was a gentle and wise partner to the rather impulsive Suzanne.

The last member of the group was arguably the most stunning, although as they were all beautiful it was a matter of personal taste. Arabella Cooper, Marie Nyman's wife, with her unmissable raven black hair and blue eyes, had advanced through the ranks in the conducting world at breathtaking speed and was now the designated music director of the state opera in Munich. It would make her the first woman and youngest ever to hold that position.

Leonie could hear her mother in the kitchen, and she knew she should go to help her, but she held back, fascinated by the women on the wooden deck. Two four-year-olds who had been playing at the edge of the lake, supervised by their nanny Margarete, ran to the table, and hauled themselves onto

Marie and Arabella's laps. The twins had very similar features, but Anders had jet-black hair whereas Clara was ash blond like Marie.

Their mothers fed them each a small piece of cake, while the adults all took another slice. Marie's promise to leave a piece for Leonie looked optimistic. As everyone raised their glasses in a toast, she turned away regretfully from the window and joined her mother in the kitchen.

"That took a long time. Did you stay and eat a piece with them?"

"No. They offered, but I felt uncomfortable. I was watching them from the living room. They all took two pieces. There's not much left for us although Marie promised."

"I'm glad they enjoyed it. Leonie, it's getting dark. We should go. Marie said she and Arabella would clear up afterwards. Your father will be hungry. I'll have to make him something when we get back."

They left the house and climbed into Wiebke's VW Golf. Working for the Nyman-Cooper's had given her the independence to buy her own car. When she first began, five years previously, she had merely cleaned the house three times a week, but gradually, largely due to both Marie and Arabella being away from home for long periods of time, she had taken over the running of the household and dealt with repairs, bills, insurance and everything else necessary to allow it to function smoothly. She now rarely did the cleaning herself, instead employing a young woman from her village, whose husband tended the garden.

But she was always available for occasions when they entertained, either to oversee the caterers if the gathering was large or to help whoever was cooking if they had fewer guests. Marie and Beth had cooked today, and Wiebke enjoyed being with them in the kitchen, hearing them gossip about their work. She learnt a great deal about opera over the years and regularly listened to recordings in her own home, at least when her husband wasn't there to scoff and look mutinous.

Wiebke came from a simple Bavarian village background. Her parents owned no books, and although she showed promise at school, there was no encouragement from her parents or other relatives to do anything other than leave school at the minimum age, get married and start a family, which with regret is exactly what she did. She knew even then, years before she started to work for Marie and Arabella, that she would try everything possible to give her own children other opportunities.

Her firstborn, Sepp took after his father Johannes and developed into a plodding child uninterested in anything other than cars and trucks. An interest furthered by her husband, himself a motor mechanic.

Leonie was different. From the beginning, she was a beautiful baby, then a lovely child. She was quick to walk, talk and read, and her schoolteachers spoke of her being gifted. Wiebke took her to an English-speaking kindergarten twice a week, and she was reading English books as well as German ones before she entered junior school. Johannes was uneasy but did nothing to discourage Wiebke, for which she was grateful. Leonie began to draw, and her talent was evident. She advanced effortlessly through junior school and earned a place in the local Gymnasium high school. It was a displaced dream come true for her mother.

Occasionally, when the Cooper-Nyman house was empty, which it often was until the twins were born, Wiebke took her daughter with her, to help her. But Wiebke never let her clean the bedrooms on the second floor or the music room on the ground floor.

The teenager overheard a conversation between her parents. Johannes was agitated. "I don't like you taking her there. You know what they are like, and what they do...though I cannot imagine quite what it is they do."

"I've told you before. I don't allow her into the bedroom."

"So it is true. They have only one bedroom?"

"There are two adjoining rooms."

"Yes, but do they use both?"

"I am not standing there holding a candle, am I?" Wiebke knew her employers slept in one bed but kept the information to herself.

"It's not natural, and the church doesn't approve."

"Johannes, considering half the priests in the Catholic church are doing heaven knows what with the altar boys, I think the church should take care of its own problems before it meddles with people who do no harm to anyone."

"Yes, but I don't want them to have contact with my daughter."

"They don't because I only take her there when they are away. But, in any case, they are kind and generous people, and I would not see a problem with them getting to know Leonie better."

"But what if they converted her?"

"Johannes, it is extremely unlikely. I think you are born the way you are. They haven't converted me, have they?"

"It's your responsibility, and I hope for your sake nothing happens."

At the time, the conversation made Leonie curious, but she didn't know what to make of it.

Her favourite room in the Cooper-Nyman house was the dining room, which was eccentrically resplendent with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, crammed with books of all sizes and colours, the subject matter wide-ranging. It gave the room a lovely warm feeling. Marie had allowed her free range of the books, and she was encouraged to borrow anything she wanted, as long as she brought it back and put it more or less where she had found it.

At first, Wiebke censored her reading, but when she reached the age of fifteen, her mother no longer bothered. She spoke only a few rudimentary English phrases and had no way of knowing what Leonie chose. She discovered a section placed high up, stood on a chair and took a book down, made curious by the rather lurid cover of two women embracing. She knew instinctively she shouldn't show it to her mother. Carefully, she hid it in her pocket and rearranged the shelf so that it looked as though nothing was missing.

That night in bed she began reading it, and she understood what it was her father had accused Marie and Arabella of doing and being.

She had been masturbating since her periods began at the age of thirteen and usually pictured a teeny boy idol, whose pictures circulated among her friends at school. For a time, she had visions of Juliette Simon's husband, Thorsten De Luca, and thought of them having sex together. She envisaged the couple both naked, and these images gave her especially good orgasms. Then he disappeared, and Juliette was alone in the house, with reporters and photographers waiting outside the gates.

Now she devoured the book in her hand although she knew it wasn't very well written. She decided that either Marie or Arabella had read only the first chapter. After that, it was obvious the pages had not been turned. She found it difficult to breathe when she came to the first sex scene, and her hips began to move under the covers. She had particularly sensitive breasts, and when she touched one now, her nipple became hard, and the feeling translated immediately down to her centre. She put her hand down and rubbed herself, surprised by how slick and slippery she was. It didn't take long

until she felt her orgasm coming, and it surged through her, making her bite her bottom lip to stop herself from groaning out loud. She kept her hand down on her folds and felt the contractions, which seemed to go on forever.

Marie was pregnant. Wiebke was at the house more often as Marie could do less herself. Arabella was often away.

Leonie plucked up courage. "Who is Marie's husband?"

"She doesn't have one. Not anymore. They are divorced."

"So he is not the father of her child?"

"They are having twins. It will be children."

"Who's they, mutti?"

Wiebke sighed. "I suppose you are old enough to know. Arabella and Marie are married to each other. They are what are called lesbians, meaning they are women who love other women, instead of loving men."

"Mutti, I know that."

"How?"

"I'm not stupid. And, anyway, everyone at school knows, and they talk about it."

"I hope you don't gossip about them. It would cost me my job."

"Of course not. The kids have stopped asking me. They know they get more information from reading magazines at the hairdresser."

"And are they very disapproving?"

"No. It's not a big deal, is it? You even see it on TV. My friend Sandra's brother is gay as well and as for some of our teachers." She rolled her eyes.

"Things have changed since I was at school although probably not about the teachers now I come to think of it."

"Yeah, well. Anyway, who is the father?"

"The father is a donor, which is the way most lesbian couples go about getting pregnant. In this case, it was Arabella who became pregnant, and her egg was transplanted into Marie. So that they both feel like natural parents. It's a miracle such a complicated process has worked. I think they know the donor personally. He is Swedish."

"That's cool."

"If you say so. Please just don't discuss this with your father. He is not quite as open-minded as I am. And, Leonie, I don't have a problem with it, but please don't think that homosexuality is totally usual. I'm sure you know this. I never ask you about your friendships, but I presume you like boys?"

"Sure I do. Only not any boys in my class. There is a cool guy in the *Abitur* class though."

"Leonie, please be careful. You are too young for sex. Don't ruin your life by getting pregnant while you are still at school."

"Mutti...are you kidding. I know how to take precautions."

"Don't give me a heart attack. Then I would rather you were a lesbian."

"But Marie is pregnant."

For all the bravado with her mother, Leonie hadn't kissed a boy. That happened when she was sixteen after going with a group of friends to a dance. Thomas cornered her outside the venue and pressed her up against a wall. He wasn't particularly attractive, and his face was covered in pimples, but she thought she should allow it because all her classmates did.

She felt excitement in her centre as he pressured her body and put his lips to hers and very quickly pushed his tongue into her mouth. That cooled her ardour. She found it repellent. She fought him off. He was stronger, and she began to panic, but fortunately her group came out of the hall at that moment, and to much catcalling and whistling, she managed to escape his grip.

He kept coming to her home until she asked her mother for help. It was her father who then told Thomas to leave her alone.

She looked with curiosity at her classmates. Neither the boys nor the girls held the slightest attraction. If anyone did, she couldn't make up her mind between her art teacher, Günther Mayr, or her English teacher Barbara Bach. She had crushes on both. Perhaps a little more on Herr Mayr, who was tall, good looking and athletic. She was his star pupil, and he always seemed to lean a little more towards her when explaining something. Frau Bach was of medium height, pretty, and with good legs. Which Leonie liked to look at. She oversaw the drama group in school, which was Leonie's passion next to art. She caught Frau Bach studying her sometimes but couldn't read the emotion in her brown eyes.

The twins were born. Wiebke welcomed them back home, and she asked if Leonie could meet them. She was given a cup of hot chocolate and allowed to sit in the living room with Marie and the babies. She was fascinated by their different hair colour, and she discussed it later with her mother.

"You could believe that Marie is the mother of the little girl Clara. She looks so much like her. Arabella is definitely Anders's mother with his black hair and blue eyes."

"I know it's extraordinary what has happened. Now they must grow up with two mothers and no father. I hope their life won't be difficult."

"Mutti, welcome to the twenty-first century. A third of my class is being brought up by single parents. It's no big deal anymore."

"I worry for Anders."

"Why? Why not worry for Clara as well. That's pure stereotyping."

"If you say so."

She was in the kitchen, helping her mother, when Juliette Simon rang the bell.

"Answer it will you. I've got dirty hands."

"Hallo...Leonie isn't it?"

"Yes." Her deep voice came out in an uncharacteristic squeak.

Juliette laughed. "Don't be nervous, Leonie. I don't bite." She had deep shadows under her eyes. It wasn't surprising with the paparazzi still camped outside the security gate.

"Where are they? I want to see my godchildren."

"Down in the music room. Shall I take you?"

"I know the way." She hesitated. "Can I ask you something?"

Leonie's voice had returned to normal. She wondered what on earth the great Juliette Simon wanted to ask her. "If I can answer it."

"How old are you?"

“Nearly sixteen.”

“You probably don’t listen to my music or watch my shows, do you?”

“Of course, I do. The New Year show was fantastic.”

“What was your favourite part?”

“Cooper-Nyman of course...and Jodie Sanchez.”

Juliette looked as if she had been shot in the stomach. She bent over and clutched herself.

Leonie didn’t know what to do. She tentatively put her hand on the woman’s arm. Juliette straightened up. Her eyes were full of tears.

“Jodie...yes...she now lives in America. She will be a big star.” She regained some of her composure. “I wanted to ask you. Do you like the way my music is going? Or do you think people prefer to hear the folk music and see me in a dirndl?”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t watch that. It’s so uncool. I always leave the room when the Saturday night shows are on. My father likes to watch them.”

“And your mother.”

“She used to, but she doesn’t anymore. She now prefers to listen to classical music on the radio. But she loved your New Year show too.”

“Leonie, thank you for that. Do you have my new album?”

“Not yet.”

“I better be going on down.”

The following day Wiebke brought home a copy of Juliette’s album. The cover photo had a picture of Juliette of course, and Jodie Sanchez and two other girls standing behind her. Her backing singers. It was autographed. *Thank you, Leonie, you helped me a great deal.* There was a platinum disc sticker in the bottom corner.
