

F r a n A n n a f o r d

T H E S T A R N B E R G S E R I E S

Book 6

STAY AWHILE

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"The square of the length of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of squares of the lengths of the other two sides of the right-angled triangle."

"I don't give a fuck."

Alexandra looked at the rebellious twelve-year-old sitting across the large dining room table. The window let in little sun as it was shielded by the high hedge outside and the tall tower of the neighbouring house beyond it. Spotlights illuminated the walls, which were lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. She loved the room.

"You know, I don't think you are as stupid as you make out. You play the piano and violin, and musicians are almost always mathematically talented. And you are a linguistic genius, which is another sign of mathematical ability."

"I'm going to tell my parents you called me stupid."

"Go ahead; although I actually said that you aren't stupid, only pretending to be."

"You are hopeless at coaching me."

Alexandra sighed. "You might have a point there. But if you manage to get rid of me your parents will get another tutor, and he or she might be even worse."

"Nobody could be worse than you."

"OK, let's call your mother and discuss it."

"Which mother?"

"As far as I know, only Marie is at home. Arabella is in Munich today."

Alexandra got up from the table.

"Wait a moment. I think maybe I can remember it."

"Close your book and say it." She sat down again.

Clara repeated the theory in a boring monotone but word-perfect.

"Now open your exercise book and draw me the appropriate diagram."

She leaned as heavily as she could on the pencil, tearing the paper, but it was accurate.

"Good. We'll start tomorrow's lesson with this again. You know, if you stopped being so stubborn, neither of us would have to sit here every day. Anders is out riding, isn't he?"

"My brother is the biggest creep I've ever met."

"Clara, everyone knows that you are the most intelligent twin, and always have been. Why are you so self-destructive?"

"I have my mother's Swedish melancholy."

"Hmmm. Well, it's not genetic, is it?"

The twins knew that Marie Nyman, the woman who carried them for eight months, was no blood relative. They had been conceived by the chosen donor in Arabella Cooper's womb and transplanted during the early weeks of pregnancy.

"It's no wonder I'm so messed up."

"I'm not going to start lecturing you, but you have grown up in the most loving family I have ever had the privilege to meet, and you have never wanted for anything. There are millions out there in the world... I don't have to say it."

The girl looked chastened for a moment. Alexandra felt sorry for her. She was suffering from a particularly bad and early puberty. Today her hormones were in freefall.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't help anyone if I don't eat my broccoli." She sniggered at her own wit.

Alexandra suppressed an eye roll. "I'll tell you my own broccoli story one day."

"Why not now?"

"No. The theory again please; then we can stop for the day."

Clara repeated it perfectly, three times through for good measure, getting

faster each time.

Alexandra closed her own book and packed it into her bag. "You want to come and watch TV with me tonight?"

Clara shrugged. "OK." She tried to conceal her smile.

Marie Nyman opened the door and walked into the room. She had recently turned fifty but looked fifteen years younger. Alexandra tried not to draw in a breath or to blush.

"It's been well over an hour since you began. Are you finished for today?"

"Yes, I think we've killed Pythagoras."

"That's impressive, darling."

Clara pouted. "I'm going to my room."

"Of course, you are. Alexandra, drink a coffee with me?"

Clara started to say something, then glared at them both and left the room, stomping up the stairs, where they heard her open and close a door with some force.

"Alexandra, I feel so guilty inflicting my problem daughter on you daily."

"Marie, it's fine. She is a good girl really, just at the mercy of her hormones. I suffered too at that age although she has particularly rampant ones."

They both laughed and moved into the kitchen where Marie made two lattes. Alexandra watched her. She wore comfortable jeans, and a woollen sweater with a sloppy collar. When she bent to take milk from the fridge, it dipped revealing a generous cleavage. Alexandra's mouth went dry. What she would give to trace a finger down between those glorious breasts before putting her mouth to a nipple. She tore her head away and looked down at her hands, which were trembling slightly.

"The twins had their birthday two weeks ago. Their twelfth. For three days, it seemed as if Clara decided to be a small adult. She was so proud. Then Bella and I had to go to Cologne for a recital, and according to Margarete, all hell let loose, and she is now worse than ever. I am so sorry to bring you into this menagerie."

"Please don't apologise. It's so great for me to be able to stay in Margarete's apartment. It was a real bore having to move out of my shared accommodation, especially with only one more semester to go."

"Where will you live while you take your finals?"

"I can move in with a friend who has a spare sofa. I won't be there too much. It will be fine until July, after which I'll be looking for a job, with money, and can afford to share again somewhere. With my own bedroom. I hope."

"Won't you take a gap year?"

"I had one between school and university. I spent it in Japan with my grandparents, which wasn't terribly exciting, although I got my Japanese up to speed. I would just love to take off after my degree, supposing I pass, to travel and photograph, but I lack the funds. I'm going to have to get a teaching job. It shouldn't be difficult. There is a dearth of people wanting to go into the profession these days."

"A class full of Clara's sounds to me like purgatory."

"I've invited her to watch TV with me tonight if that's alright."

"Are you sure? Haven't you had enough of her today?"

"Is she allowed to eat popcorn?"

"Not too much. Her spots don't make her any more amenable. Anders has

perfect skin. I don't understand it."

"Margarete told me she has always been the most precocious of the two. Maybe it will hit him a little later."

"You say the nicest things. Are you making any progress with her maths?"

"Of course. She can do it all. I don't know why she puts herself through this torture with me every day."

"Attention seeking. That's what Bella and I both think. In a convoluted way, we think it makes her feel special to have a private tutor for the holidays."

"Masochistic."

"Don't girls tend to be that way, though it is a mystery to us why it is. We have tried to bring them up without gender clichés. You know. Bedrooms decorated in greens and yellows. None of the pink and blue stuff. No guns and bows and arrows and peeing dolls. But we've obviously failed somewhere along the line." She sighed. "Was it different for you at Clara's age? Half coming from a different culture I mean? Did your mother bring you up with Japanese values? It is a much more repressive system for women I think."

"I was born in Germany, and my mother went to university here. I know what you mean though. There are parts of Japan where a woman's place is at home rearing the children."

"That is no different to parts of Europe, especially around here in Bavaria. Our wonderful Wiebke Brandt who looks after us and our house, had no opportunity other than to marry and have children. She is extremely bright and would easily have qualified for further education if she had been born into a different family. She has realised for her daughter Leonie what was denied her."

They heard a clumping noise coming down the stairs.

"I'm going swimming next door. Can I have the key?"

"Not on your own, darling. The house is empty, and I can't come with you. I have to brush up the role of Kundry for two performances of Parsifal in Vienna at the weekend."

Clara scowled. "Then we are alone over Easter... again."

"No, sweetheart, Mummy will be here except for Easter Saturday evening."

"Come on, I'll go with you. I fancy a swim."

"Are you sure? You are not here as an au pair you know."

"It's fine."

"Just eat something first Clara. Shall I make you a marmite sandwich?"

"I can make it myself." Marie pushed her gently out of the way, cutting a thick slice of white bread and taking butter out of the fridge. "Don't say it. White bread... I know. Only for a special treat. My wife eats it once a week, with thick butter and marmite. Clara likes it too. Anders gags when he smells it. I'm indifferent despite having lived in London for years. Leonie Brandt comes over sometimes, and she and Bella pig out on it."

Clara lifted down a jar from a cupboard. It was black with a bright yellow lid and label. She upturned it and squeezed a line onto her buttered bread, which she spread thinly before taking a big bite.

"What is it?"

"Some sort of vegetable yeast waste product. Actually, loaded with vitamin B. Want a slice?" Marie spread another slice and halved it, handing one half to Alexandra, before she nibbled on the other half. Alexandra smelt it and took a cautious bite. It was strong and salty, but in combination with the thick butter, very much to her taste. "We have similar salty food in Japan. It's very good."

"I like it today too."

They finished their bread. Marie opened a key safe in the hall and gave Alexandra a key and a card with a code on it. "Guard it with your life, and be careful disabling the alarm, or there will be police swarming all over the property. It's in the office on the right when you go through the front door. Clara will show you."

She collected her swimming costume and a towel from the apartment over the garage block, and they walked the few metres to the imposing gate next door. Alexandra punched in the entry code, and then the next one, which opened the front door. She quickly unlocked the office with the key and turned off the alarm which beeped at her. Clara led the way into the basement with the generous pool and large fully equipped gym.

"Wow."

"My parents are too mean to have an indoor pool."

"The lake is at the bottom of your garden."

"No good in winter, is it?"

"You are a spoilt brat sometimes. Alexandra bit her tongue. "But how lucky you can use this one."

"Only when they are away."

Alexandra nodded. She couldn't imagine Juliette Simon and Jodie Sanchez wanting Clara around when they were in the house.

"Juliette's my godmother you know."

"Ah."

"She was there when I was born. Well, not in the room, but she saw me half an hour later. Not everyone has an Oscar winner godmother."

"Indeed. I certainly don't. I'm going to do twenty minutes on the treadmill. Join me? Before we swim?"

"Oh, alright."

The two machines were adjacent. Clara set hers for a very slow walk.

Alexandra suppressed a grin. "Ooh, that will make you fit."

After half an hour, she had worked up a good sweat and slowed the machine to a walk for five minutes. After the jibe, Clara speeded up a fraction and was puffing. She was far from being fat but was a little rounded. It would come off naturally after puberty.

They got into the heated pool and began to swim lengths. Here Clara came into her own. She was an excellent swimmer.

"You are really good."

"At least something I'm better at than Anders." Is there a complex she doesn't have?

"Hullo." Marie came in. "You are taking ages. Have you been in the water all this time?"

"No, we had a little workout first."

"I'll join you in there." She slipped out of her jeans and sweater. She wore a black swimsuit underneath. Alexandra could barely breathe, as Marie wound her hair on top of her head and slid into the water. She had a perfect model figure. Long legs, slim hips and generous breasts. Only a slight swell on her stomach hinted at her age. Alexandra found it adorable. She ducked her head under the water to cool her flaming cheeks.

"Mama, race you."

"All right." Clara won easily, triumphantly fisting the air. She had a smile on her face for the first time. Marie rolled her eyes.

They got out of the pool. There were four small changing cabins in a corner, along with two showers, although none of them used one. The walls were thin, and Alexandra heard the others. She closed her eyes as she imagined Marie stripping off and towelling herself. She had been tutoring Clara for only five days but had a major crush, despite Marie being old enough to be her mother. Not that there was any possibility of doing anything about it. Marie's eyes were kind when she looked at Alexandra, but there was not a flicker of anything else. Quite unlike the way she looked at Arabella when they were together.

She was invited to dinner on the day she arrived. She had never seen such love, not to mention desire, in both their eyes. She wondered if they still had sex, and if so, how often. Her clit twitched at the thought, and she wiped herself dry.

Marie activated the alarm, showing Alexandra how to do it. She would have guessed but was grateful to Marie for taking the responsibility. They stopped inside their own gate.

"What time can I come up?"

"Any time after 7:00. Then we will both have eaten."

"Do you want to eat with us? Bella should be back around 5:00, and we'll eat at 6:00."

"That's kind, but no thanks. I have food I bought myself. I'll cook tonight." She didn't want them to feel they had to invite her every day.

She lay down on the comfortable sofa and dozed for half an hour. There was a missed voicemail from Margarete asking her how she was. Her father and Margarete's mother were brother and sister. Alexandra and her parents lived in Berlin, whereas Margarete's family lived in Munich, and there was not a great deal of contact between them. At twenty-three, she was fifteen years younger than her cousin, so there had been almost no cousinly visits during her childhood. They met properly two years ago at a family reunion and got on well. Margarete had been married for three years but still lived for much of the time in the garage apartment. The Cooper-Nymans were away from home working a great deal and could not take the twins with them during school term time. It had been easier when they were little.

But Margarete loved her job, and her teacher husband was long-suffering. His house was only a few kilometres away, and he occasionally stayed in the apartment with her.

Marie was well aware they had never had a proper honeymoon, mainly due to her schedule, and she and Arabella offered to pay for them to cruise to the Caribbean for a month. The holiday coincided with Clara flunking her maths test. Marie asked Margarete and her husband if they knew of someone to help the girl, and Margarete thought of her cousin. Alexandra studied modern languages at university but was also a good mathematician. She called her and explained the situation. It was exactly the moment when Alexandra lost her apartment and needed somewhere to stay for the Easter vacation. She was not keen on returning to her parents in Berlin. Marie and Arabella leapt at the idea, and here she was.

She rode down from Hamburg on her Honda bike. Despite stopping over to see a friend in Kassel, she arrived in Starnberg frozen, bowlegged and with

hands like claws.

Margarete thawed her out before taking her over to the house. "Don't stare when you meet them."

"Why? Do they have two heads?"

"No, but the heads they have are the most beautiful you have ever seen.

And... they are lesbian."

Takes one to know one. Alexandra blushed and bit back her answer. She knew her cousin would have no problem digesting the news, but she didn't want it to get back to her family, and anyway, she wasn't sure about herself. She had had sex with two boys and a girl at university. The girl was infinitely more satisfying.

Did she imagine it, or did both Marie and Arabella look at her knowingly when they met? Gaydar, she heard it was called. Despite Margarete's warning, she had problems not staring. Arabella Cooper had the darkest blue eyes she had ever seen, teamed with raven hair now streaked with a few white strands. Marie Nyman's blonde hair and complexion contrasted with Arabella's tanned skin. They were a breathtaking couple. Alexandra felt drawn to Marie, probably because Arabella was more her own type, despite being a great deal taller. She assumed opposites attract. At least they did with her. The girl at university was a curvaceous blonde.

Alexandra's Japanese mother passed on her thick straight black hair and dark brown eyes. Her father gave her green flecks in them, good-sized breasts, atypical for a Japanese figure, and the name Alexandra Strauss. She was slim and couldn't put on weight if she tried. Marie's voluptuous figure sent signals to every one of her erogenous zones.
