

FRAN ANNAFORD

You Don't Own Me

Starnberg Series: Book 2

Sample excerpt

“Thorsten, did you hear that? Arabella said *my wife!*”

Her husband grunted and walked ahead through the open gates. Juliette Simon had decided this morning to make the introductory visit to their next-door neighbours when she happened to look out of her tower window and noticed the gates stood open and a large SUV parked in the driveway. Whether the unfettered access was by accident or design, she couldn't know. After installing a high security barrier at the entrance to their private road, replete with cameras, she figured out the four villa owners in the cul-de-sac felt it was now safe to leave their property unprotected. At least during the daytime. This wealthy area of upper Bavaria was a magnet for criminal gangs, although in Juliette's case, her fear of paparazzi and stalking fans outweighed her fear of being burgled. She had taken with her a good bottle of wine from her native Veneto region of northern Italy.

“A good fuck would cure them of that.” He smirked.

And you consider yourself just the man for the job. Although you sure as hell don't satisfy me. They returned to their own closed gate, and with unnecessary force, he punched in the code to open it. The building in front of them was twice as large as their neighbours, and modern, whereas the neighbours was probably seventy or eighty years old.

Juliette spent months with the architects designing her new house and garden. It was not the first piece of real estate she purchased after her career took off nine years previously, but it was the first residence to be built to her own specifications, and she loved it already. Although it had three and a half floors and a sunken basement, it did not sit higher than Marie and Arabella Cooper-Nyman's next-door villa. Theirs was built into a slight hill, which rose from the hedge border of the adjoining properties. The older established garden sloped much more steeply down to the lake than hers did.

Her husband punched another code into the front door. It opened onto a wide hallway, which had windows onto their drive. They were all securely barred. At the end of the hall, on the left, was a lift. On the right, a broad staircase stretched to the upper levels. Juliette walked into her office, the room next to the stairs, to deactivate the alarm. Thorsten sauntered into the lounge. It was an expansive L shaped room, into which the second door of the office opened. The glass doors along the inner L led onto a wide terrace, with a freshly planted pergola at the far end. Another glass door led into the dining room, which in turn backed onto the massive kitchen, from which double doors could be opened back into the living room. Seen from above, the house, which faced directly onto Lake Starnberg, was built in the shape of an E, without the middle tongue, or a C with ninety-degree angles.

Juliette walked into the lounge from her office. “I'm hot. I'm going up to change. I can make lunch, or would you rather go out?”

He muttered something she couldn't decipher, and opened a door onto the terrace, going outside to flop on a lounger.

She took the stairs. The lift was intended for her parents when they visited. They weren't yet old enough to need it, but Juliette built this house aiming to live in it for many years, and one day they would be grateful. Who knows, one day maybe she would be too, especially if she continued with her backbreaking stage routines. She occasionally felt a twinge in her left knee, the result of a fall four years ago when a fellow dancer dropped her.

She walked into the master bedroom, and on into the enormous connecting dressing room. It stretched the entire length and width of the L part of the lounge and office underneath and was windowless but air conditioned. Racks of stage costumes filled three walls. On the rear wall, tiers of shoes stretched up to the ceiling.

The section nearest the door contained her more modest private clothes, and she slipped out of her jeans and into linen capris. She pulled a sloppy cotton hoody over her head, went into the bathroom and splashed water over her face. She pulled her dark blond hair onto her head in a messy high bun, fanning her neck to cool it, before going back into the bedroom, where she opened the French doors onto the balcony. It jutted out over the terrace, so she couldn't see Thorsten. She looked over to her right, but the high hedge blocked her view of the neighbouring garden. Peering up she could just see the windows of the neighbours' top floor. A hand reached out to open a window, and she caught the sound of voices, but could not make out the conversation. That might be the bedroom. What were they doing in there? She felt a tug in her core. *What?* She shook her head quickly and looked over to her left side. The next door led into Thorsten's bedroom, situated over the dining room. Further along, above the kitchen, was a child's bedroom, bathroom and playroom. When she showed her parents the designs during the planning stage, her mother urged her to incorporate the little suite. She shrugged and conceded.

Her husband's room had its own terrace, separated from hers. She sometimes wondered why she designed it this way. Why she wanted the only access to her bedroom to be through a door she could lock. When she invested in the property two years previously, their marriage had been intact. *More or less.*

On the floor above were three ensuite guest rooms, each opening onto a long communal balcony. The last one in the row was a larger self-contained apartment with a small kitchen.

Situated above her dressing room was her music room with its own terrace. Built into the rear corner of the long room was a spiral staircase leading to her tower room where she kept her books and her most personal possessions. There was a comfortable sofa on which she could rest, and a small shower bathroom. Nobody was allowed in, not even Thorsten. *Especially not Thorsten.* She cleaned it herself. It was where she wound down, and where she went for inspiration.

She would love to go up there now, and think about the strange visit next door, but Thorsten called out.

"Why are you taking so long? Didn't you say something about food?"

She walked slowly down the stairs, prepared a salad for herself and a steak for him.

After lunch, he wanted to take a nap and suggested she come upstairs with him, but she shook her head and said she had to work off the salad. He rolled his eyes.

She went down into the basement, not going straight to the pool or the spacious and fantastically well-equipped gym, but instead into her sound studio under the living room. She put on headphones and began to listen to the first cut of her new album, before she turned it off, dissatisfied. She didn't yet have enough distance to be objective. The sessions finished only a fortnight ago. Her arranger and the composer of many of her hits had sent the CD over. She could have downloaded it from Dropbox, but she preferred to hold the physical manifestation of her work in her hands. She pushed down an icon on her smartphone.

"Bert, hi. Thanks for the CD. I haven't listened yet. It's too soon, but I will by the end of the week. Could you then come over and we can talk about what I think needs changing."

"I'll be there. Let me know when you're ready."

She nearly told him she had visited the neighbours, but something held her back. Bert composed and arranged some of the songs on the crossover album that had earned them a platinum disc. At least she presumed it must have been for the album *Cooper-Nyman Rock*. She couldn't imagine a classical recording having sold a million copies. Juliette had collected two platinum and three gold discs for her recording sales which, among her other earnings, enabled her to pay for this house and the three luxurious cars standing in the four-car garage.

Her wealth also allowed her parents to move out of their small apartment in the middle of Lazise on Lake Garda in the north of Italy, and into a new home with pool in an enclosed and secure neighbourhood overlooking the lake.

Her parents sacrificed a great deal when at the age of twelve her extraordinarily mature voice became apparent. The first thing they did was to send her to a private Liceo where she learnt to speak English and German. She was touched to learn they were taking evening classes, so that they could all practise speaking together. After she obtained her maturità, they made it possible for her to attend the musical academy in Munich. She won a scholarship to study, but they continued to pay for her living expenses until she began getting small concerts and gigs and could support herself.

She would be forever grateful, hence the lift in her house. She was quite determined that they would move in with her when they could no longer care for themselves. It was the Italian way to take personal care of parents at the end of their lives.

Juliette was restless and went out into the garden. As she wandered over to check on the freshly planted rose bed next to the hedge, she was aware of sounds from next door. She moved into the shadow of the hedge.

She heard panting, then a wail, “Bella, darling, please...deeper. Oh sweetheart.”

Now she couldn't ignore her own throbbing core. She thought about joining Thorsten in his bedroom, grimaced, and went to the indoor pool instead. It was filtering, and she stood in front of one of the jets so that the water pushed between the tops of her legs. She held on tightly to the edge of the pool. It took barely a minute before she felt it coming, and she climaxed with a power she rarely experienced. She put her head on the edge of the pool as the after waves pulsed through her. When she recovered, she swam forty lengths, showered, worked out for an hour, showered again, and still couldn't get Marie Nyman's sighs of ecstasy out of her head.

Bert came over ten days later. After a detailed working session in which they hammered out changes she wanted made during the next part of the editing process, they relaxed with a cup of tea on the terrace. Thorsten was out somewhere. He rarely told her where he was going, and she was increasingly uninterested in asking him.

“Bert, you never told me they are...um...gay. Next door I mean. We went to say hello.”

Bert laughed. “I thought you knew. Everybody does.”

“Not me. I don't move in their exalted world, you know. And I don't read gossip magazines anymore. They write such crap about me, it's unbearable.”

“And...were they nice?”

“Yes, very, though I thought Marie Nyman looked at me a bit suspiciously.”

“She's a rather reserved Swede. They call her the Ice Queen.” He sighed. “But I would leave my wife for her.”

“Not for Arabella Cooper?”

He raised an eyebrow. “She more your type?” Juliette felt herself blushing. He laughed. “Annette's too. She said she would quite happily desert me if Arabella crooked her finger. Juliette...don't look at me like that, and don't get paranoid if you feel a pull in that direction. You do know that only a tiny percentage of people are entirely hetero, don't you? Most of us are on a sliding scale between 90/10 and 50/50. And in the case of Cooper-Nyman, I haven't yet met anybody, male or female, who doesn't find them the hottest couple on four legs. Lovely legs they have too. They are both so beautiful.” He sighed deeply.

“Yes, they are. But how do you know about their legs?”

He laughed again. “We made that double album in August. Neither of them wore much in the studio.”

She struggled not to let Bert see her swallowing at the image. Her mouth was quite dry. She took a long gulp of her tea.

“Talking of which. Arabella and I wrote one of the numbers together. They won’t be releasing singles, so it did cross my mind it would be a good one for you. It’s called *How could you leave me*. I’ll mail you the album and you can listen to it and tell me what you think. And I’ll send you a CD as well. The photos of them in the booklet are steamy.” He winked.

There was a Saturday night TV special coming up. They were advertised as going out live, but of course, they didn’t. They were rehearsed and filmed over two days in a large conference facility in a changing roster of German cities. This one would take place in Hannover. Juliette was beginning to get bored with the format and if she had to be really honest, with the fairly mindless songs she had to sing. But folksy pop is what had made her a superstar, and that was her fan base. She was gradually pulling them towards soft pop, with an occasional hint of rock, but she and the team around her, principally her omnipotent manager, Andreas Meyer, put the brakes on her ambition to go further. Only Bert Schmidt sympathised, and some of the songs he wrote for her were becoming increasingly complex. But they both knew she would have to ease them carefully into her albums and her live shows. Huge swathes of her record buying public were of the dirndl and lederhosen wearing variety.

Bert sent her the *Cooper-Nyman Rock* double album, and she listened to it with astonishment. That an operatic soprano could sing like that left her speechless. She thumbed through the accompanying booklet several times. He was right. The photos were erotic, particularly Arabella in that tux adaptation. She phoned her dress designer and ordered a version for herself. The way Marie was dressed was the way she herself often went out on stage, short leather skirt and corsage. Marie’s breasts were more voluptuous than her own. She stared at her cleavage, and her nipples hardened.

She knew as soon as she heard it, she was going to record *How could you leave me*. It was a heart-breaking ballad and she loved it, although she knew it was going to be difficult to get it past Andreas Meyer. Her public expected only happy songs from her. She talked to Bert and asked him to get Arabella Cooper’s agreement. Somehow, she would make it work.

Having enjoyed three precious weeks at home, she now had to gear herself up again to being the Juliette Simon the public expected to see. Thorsten would come with her to Hannover, but he wasn’t dancing in the show. The TV company had not asked him to. They hadn’t asked him for the last three shows as it happened. He was lazy and getting lazier, and she saw he was growing heavier. She wouldn’t tell him. He didn’t want to hear it, and she couldn’t face the shouting match. He justified the lack of an invitation by saying the show’s director was jealous. Juliette’s relationship before Thorsten had been with Leon Hoffmann, but it was long over before Thorsten caught her eye. Leon was now married, and not at all jealous. She knew that for certain. She suspected Leon thought Thorsten a brainless idiot but would have had no problem having him in the show if he had been dancing to his previous form. He wasn’t.

But he would come with her, because he loved the attention and the photographers, and Andreas liked having him around, to cement her happy-couple-image. There would undoubtedly be a half dozen magazine articles following the TV special. At least the rumours the previous week in five of them, claiming yet again she was pregnant and taking time out to be a mother, would be allayed by her super sleek appearance. She had been working out hard for a month, and was femininely muscular, without an ounce of surplus fat on her body.

Juliette was scheduled to be the final act on the show. She had held on to this top of the bill status for the last four years. She would sing two songs, the first a ballad, followed by an up-tempo dance number.

The show's choreographer sent her a film, herself dancing the routine Juliette was required to learn. The dance troupe had already rehearsed. After studying the choreography and practising it alone in the gym, she felt it was a little more complicated than usual, and she asked for an additional day's rehearsal. It was agreed and she left for Hannover.

In the small rehearsal studio, she wore just her dance gear without makeup. She looked like any other member of the troupe, most of whom she knew. They had a hard session, and she needed a shower afterwards. They all did. There was only a communal shower in the girl's dressing room, but that didn't bother Juliette. They were all colleagues. The seven of them stood under the jets. Normally, she would have been oblivious, but she found herself taking an interest in the naked bodies. She looked at the long legs and muscular abs around her but registered nothing more than an aesthetic admiration for beautiful bodies. She felt nothing else. Slightly puzzled but relieved, she dried herself off, dressed, this time applying make-up, and went to meet Thorsten in an expensive restaurant in the city. They would be mobbed when she was recognised, and she needed the protection of full slap.

"Lucky I'm not hungry." They had been photographed from the moment they got into the restaurant, and to her annoyance, the staff did not even attempt to help. They seemed to actively encourage the other diners to come up to them, holding out scraps of paper for autographs, even as her fork was on its way to her mouth.

"They mean well, and they buy your recordings," Thorsten said out of the side of his mouth, as a particularly insistent and overweight couple tried to stand behind her while they asked him to take a photo.

"Come on, I've had enough for today." They stood, and he was chivalry itself, guiding her arm, and holding doors for her, until they reached their hotel suite, where he put his arms around her waist, holding her tight.

"No, Thorsten, please no." He brought her hand to his hard dick. She tried to pull away, but he made her hand stroke him. Being the centre of attention excited him.

“It’s been over two months. You used to be gagging for me.” *It depends on what you mean by gagging.* And it wasn’t true anyway. She sighed. But as he was already hard, it wouldn’t take him long. *Better to get it over with, and then I can dodge it for another month...or three.*

They got undressed quickly, and he reached into his suitcase for the lube. She had needed it after the first month of their marriage. He coated himself, and climbed on to her, slipping in immediately. It still hurt, and she grimaced. He started pumping. She closed her eyes. Usually, she would go through song lyrics in her head, but she suddenly had an image of Arabella on top of her; of holding onto her smooth muscular back and looking into her amazing blue eyes. She pushed her hips up. Thorsten sensed it and thrust harder. As he came close, he lifted his hips to give her space for her own hand to rub her clit. He had finally accepted that he couldn’t make her climax on his own, and after some clumsy attempts to touch her, he had resigned himself to this solution. She put her hand down, imagining it was Arabella’s pianist’s fingers stroking her. She felt her orgasm coming, and she climaxed before he did. He rolled off her panting.

“Well, that was a nice change.” She was as surprised as he was, and she now wanted desperately to be alone to process what had happened.

They were in a two-bedroom suite. She insisted on sleeping alone when she was performing. Without saying a word, she took her clothes and her luggage, went into the other room and closed the door. She took a shower, letting the hot water run over her for many minutes. What had just happened? The dancers’ bodies had done nothing for her at all. Two hours later, she orgasmed while fantasising about being under a woman. She climbed into bed, feeling hungry but too lazy to call room service. She lay awake, confused.

She heard Thorsten go out. He was presumably being considerate not waking her to tell her where he was going. She wouldn’t give a damn if he stayed out for the length of their stay in Hannover.

How could she find herself in a loveless marriage after only three years? And why did she ever marry him in the first place?

She had made the decision herself and she couldn’t blame anybody else, but everybody around her had certainly encouraged her, from Andreas down to breathlessly romantic make-up girls. Only her parents were wary when they met him, but she was fulfilled by the upturn in her career, and it felt good to have his model good looks by her side. They were never out of the press, and her albums climbed immediately to the top of the charts.

Her first attraction had been to his name. She sometimes felt a longing for her homeland, and when this handsome dancer called Thorsten De Luca was introduced, she gave him a second and then a third look. Only later did it become clear that he had hardly ever been to Italy and certainly didn’t speak more than three words of the language, but by then observant members of her team had seen her interest, the press was somehow notified, and they were constantly photographed together. The whole thing spun out of control. She knew immediately that he

was not especially intelligent, but he had charm. He was as lithe as a panther while dancing, and exuded an animalism, which had the fans in the audience screaming for him. They began to be booked together, and her segments in the TV shows got longer, and involved more dance numbers. The music was still folksy pop, but with clever choreography, it was possible to make even the most anodyne number exciting.

Andreas sat her down one day.

“You are gaining a new audience of younger fans, but you are also losing a lot of older ones. My focus group research indicates that there is an element of disapproval about your relationship with Thorsten.”

“What relationship? You know it’s all for the photos and magazine articles. We haven’t even had sex.”

“That’s not what your fans in the mountains and valleys think. I wouldn’t either, the way you look at each other.”

“I went to acting school, don’t forget.”

“Listen, Juliette. You have two gold albums, which is a phenomenal achievement in this genre. I really think we can go for platinum on the next one, but we can’t afford to lose fans, especially as those fans...the mums and dads, buy a lot of old-fashioned CDs.”

“What do you suggest? That I marry him?”

“Exactly.”

“No...I’m not in love with him. With his face and his body maybe a little bit. With his mind most definitely not.”

“Think about it.”

She did. Juliette knew herself to be ruthlessly ambitious and career orientated. She had never been in love. Except with performing and singing. She supposed she loved her screaming fans, who made possible all that she craved. Would it be so awful to have Thorsten as a husband? It would stop other men hitting on her, which was boring and energy sapping. But what about sex? Did she really feel that kind of attraction to him?

They went out to dinner, and she invited him to her apartment. They drank a bottle of wine. *He is gorgeous to look at.* She convinced herself. She let him take her to bed. The wine had made her relaxed, and she stroked his muscles and abs. She felt her arousal flow, and when he entered her, she pushed up her hips to meet his. She had never had an orgasm from sex with anyone, but this was better than a lot of other times. He was gentle at first. She asked him to go faster, hoping it might increase her desire. It didn’t, so she faked it, as she always did. He climaxed and slumped on her.

“Juliette, that was fantastic. We make beautiful music together.” She flinched. *Surely, he can’t be that unoriginal.* But of course, he was.

They announced their wedding. The press went wild, the fans too, and the platinum disc was assured.

Juliette had a rough night. She slept but was aware of half waking up every hour or so. Typically, she was at last in a deep sleep when the alarm shrilled at eight. She felt groggy, and needed a cold, or at least a lukewarm shower. It helped. Thorsten's door was closed. She had not heard him come in. Perhaps he hadn't. She shrugged. Breakfast for one then. She ordered it to be sent up. She had eaten almost nothing in the restaurant last night and worked off a lot of calories in the dance studio, so she spoiled herself with muesli, scrambled egg, bacon, toast and fruit salad. She drank her coffee black, which she always did when she had to sing, as milk clogged her mucus membranes, but she pulled a face as she dropped two sweeteners into it. Milky coffee in the morning was her passion.

She dressed in slim jeans, a top, and an elegantly cut jacket. She dressed her hair, putting it up with a clip, and donned light make-up. Stilettos completed the look. In her large dancer's bag, she had her training clothes and shoes, which she would put on for the dance number, but first she knew she would be meeting a lot of people, and there would most probably be unofficial photos. Juliette Simon had arrived in Hannover, and she would have to play the part.

A large black Mercedes waited for her in front of the hotel entrance, as did two dozen fans. She pushed her sunglasses onto her head and signed autographs. Her image was the glamorous girl-next-door, and she had played the part so often she couldn't tell if she was or wasn't. She did genuinely like and appreciate her fans, which made her interaction with them seem real. They thought so anyway.

She got into the car, waving cheerfully, and sighed. She had a drive of about twenty minutes before it would happen again at the other end.

"Do you think you could take me down the ramp today?"

"I have instructions to bring you to the artists' entrance"

"I know, but I'm running late. I don't have time for another horde."

"Herr Meyer said..."

"Fuck, Herr Meyer," she said it under her breath.

She took out her smartphone and punched on Andreas's icon. The driver had really pissed her off. Did she put her ass on the line at every show, or did Andreas Meyer?

"Andreas, good morning, I'm late, I didn't sleep, I got held up at the hotel with fans. How did they know I'm living there? Oh, never mind. I want to go down the ramp...now. The driver quoted your orders..."

“Of course, that’s fine. I’ll call him.” At least, he knew when he was beaten.

On the dashboard, the mounted phone rang.

“Yes, yes, of course.” The altercation had taken most of the drive. Instead of having a moment to gather her thoughts and calm down, she was really riled up. The driver veered off before he reached the artists entrance where she saw a group of at least fifty people waiting and drove into the loading bay of the conference centre. She didn’t wait for him to open the door, but jumped out, and grabbed a girl with a tablet wearing a headset.

“Where are the dressing rooms?”

“Oh, Miss Simon, oh yes, sorry, I wasn’t expecting you here. Let me bring you to your room.” Juliette felt sorry for the girl. It wasn’t her fault. She shouldered her bag and followed. When she got into her room and dropped the heavy bag with a clunk, the girl put her hand to her mouth.

“I’m so sorry, I should have carried your bag.” She looked as if she was about to cry.

“No problem. Just tell my team that I’m here please.”

She shut the door, but Juliette opened it again. She felt too irritated to have to listen to nervous door knocks. She was very rarely bad tempered, but when she was, she knew her team would tiptoe around her, and she did not want that either. She sighed. She just wanted to get out on the stage, do her rehearsal, go back to the hotel, perhaps enjoy a leisurely workout, followed by a quiet evening on her own. With a book. And without her husband.

Her stylist Jamie, and make-up artist Petra arrived. She would try not to take it out on them. She loved them both. It was Andreas she was gunning for, but he knew to stay clear of her for the moment. *Coward*. Jamie had her costumes hanging on the rack. For the ballad, she would wear a slim gold sheath, showing plenty of cleavage. She would change for the dance number. The choreography was Bob Fosse inspired, so her costume bore a faint resemblance to Liza Minnelli’s in the film *Cabaret*, complete with stockings, straps, and stilettos. She and Jamie had kept it away from Andreas who would be very unhappy. The way she felt about him at the moment, she relished the fight. Her blue grey eyes glinted in the mirror.

But for now, it was just a rehearsal, without costume, and she waited to be called to go on. She would stay in her jeans for the ballad.

The nervous tablet girl came to collect her. Juliette touched her arm reassuringly. She was Italian and tactile. The gesture had sometimes been misinterpreted by a man. The girl blushed. *Why?*

She was led onto the performing area, which was built out into the gigantic arena. There was a stage at one end, on one side of which the orchestra were taking up about a third of the available space. The rest was divided into two. During the show recording, one half would be in use, while the other one was prepared for the next number, with different props, or musical instruments if it was a band.

Jutting out from the middle of the stage was a twenty-metre-long runway, about four metres wide. In the middle of it was a platform, seven by seven metres. On each side were hidden pyro points, where fireballs would be sent into the air during some of the numbers. Thick tape on the floor showed the studio audience how near to the runway they were allowed to stand. This protected the artists from being groped, and their own eyebrows from getting singed.

For the ballad, she would enter from the back of the stage, and with her trademark golden microphone, would gradually walk down the runway until she reached the platform. The microphone was more or less for show. She would also wear a micro-port in her hair, which would pick up a much better sound.

A sound technician fitted her ear monitors and her battery pack, as well as the micro-port. The orchestra were taking a short break before her number, but the conductor was sitting at his desk, looking at his music. It was dark, as the bright lights were dimmed in an attempt to reduce the temperature. Juliette made her way towards the conductor and tripped over something lying directly in her path.

“Merdata!” She just managed to avoid falling on her face, but a second later was almost sent flying again by a figure springing up from underneath her. They gripped each other for support.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry. I thought it was a break. I was just easing my back.” The voice was unmistakably American. She spoke English.

“Of all the stupid places to lie down. I could have broken my neck.”

“I’ve said I’m sorry. Why are you creeping about in the dark anyway?”

There was an icy silence. “I think I have every right to be here.”

They heard voices, and the lights came back on. They were still clutching each other but broke apart. Juliette looked up slightly at a woman a good two inches taller than her own five foot seven. She wore her thick hair in a long unruly pixie cut, and had enormous dark brown eyes, which widened as they looked at her. Her features were perfect in her slim face. She was remarkably beautiful.

“Oh my god, no, please not.” She now spoke accent free German.

“What?”

“You’re Juliette Simon, aren’t you?”

“And you are?” Juliette’s eyes were gimlet hard.

“Jodie...Sanchez.”

“Well, Miss Sanchez, I still don’t know what you are doing here, but I have to rehearse. You will excuse me.”

Jodie stumbled as Juliette's hand pushed her lightly to the side on her way over to the conductor. She said over her shoulder.

"Rather too clumsy to be around a film set I think." There was a veiled hint behind the words and Jodie swallowed hard. It was her first day in her new job. And this had to happen. She had nearly maimed the show's star. She scuttled behind Juliette, giving her a wide berth and took up her position on a high stool behind a music stand, just as she was joined by her two colleagues, who had been to drink a coffee in the break. Her throat was dry, and she didn't have a water bottle with her. *Could she sing?* She cleared her throat. Sadie took a small box of pastilles off her stand and wordlessly handed Jodie one.

"Lifesaver."

"We might be in for a bumpy ride today. I heard in the canteen that Madam is in a terrible mood. She nearly got one of the runners sacked."

Claudia laughed. "Sadie, don't believe everything the girls in make-up tell you. The runner herself told me that it's not true. She was actually nice to her, though she definitely is in an awful temper."

"I don't think I've helped much. She fell over me in the dark."

"You're kidding. How did that happen?"

"I was stretched out on the floor over there. She was on her way to the conductor. She moves like a leopard. I didn't hear her."

"Keep your head down behind your score. Does she know who you are?"

"Not yet."

"Miss Simon, would you please take up your entrance position. We'll run the ballad."

The disembodied voice came over the loudspeakers. The director, Leon was in the broadcast van outside.

"No, I want to run it with the orchestra first," she shouted into the vacuum.

"Juliette, I can hear you fine. Ok, we'll record it then. Just for fun."

Juliette scowled. She moved away from the orchestra to avoid feedback. The conductor gave the downbeat and the orchestra started to play. Juliette began to sing and relaxed visibly. The backing singers joined in. Suddenly, Jodie was not together with them. She stopped singing and looked at her music. She couldn't understand it. She had sung exactly what was written.

"Ritardando," breathed Claudia. That meant she should have slowed down on a certain bar, but the marking was not in her music. Somehow, she had caused a traffic-jam, and they were all out of sync as a result. The conductor stopped.

“Who did that?” Juliette shouted exasperated. “Was it the ritardando? I always sing it like that.” She looked accusingly at the conductor, who shrugged. Jodie put up her hand.

“I’m terribly sorry. It was my fault.”

“You! How many times are you going to fuck up today?”

“I don’t have a rit mark in my music.”

“Where’s the other girl? Claudia and Sadie, where is Alex?”

“She left to go back to Australia. Jodie joined us today. It’s my fault, Juliette. She has completely new music here, because Alex forgot to give hers back. I should have checked.”

“Yes, you should have done,” her tone was biting. “Ok, let’s try again. Jodie, there’s another one on the refrain.”

This time, the number was perfect. Juliette wandered over to the backing singers during the second verse and stood next to them listening. It was unnerving, and all three were glad when she moved away.

“That was great. Are you ready to do it with action?”

“Yeah. Leon, keep an ear on the backing singers please. I don’t think the balance is quite right. What’s her name...Jodie...is too loud.”

They rehearsed the number half a dozen times. The director was satisfied after three runs, but Juliette wasn’t. She called her dresser to bring her shoes and rehearsed again in the stilettos which made her legs even longer and the muscles in her calves tighten. She glanced once at the singers and saw Jodie staring at her legs. She felt hot. Yes, it was time to get out of the shoes and into her dance clothes.
