

Second Chance *at Christmas*

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Second
Chance

at

Christmas

Seasons on the Island 1

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ISBN 9789493139268

NUR: 344

20210105

1



Sanne

The sea around the ferry is grey, like the sky. The slow waves roll over the Wadden Sea, much calmer than on the North Sea side of the island, and in the distance I can see the dikes appear as the ferry turns. It's Friday afternoon, usually one of the busiest times on the ferry, but today the boat feels as empty as I do.

I watch some students as they get their early drink on with cheap beer. Something they'll probably continue doing at the only bar on the island the moment they've dumped their bags at the house they're renting. And then there are the exhausted looking students, likely on their way home to see their parents and other family members after being away

to university for months.

I wasn't supposed to go on this holiday on my own. It was supposed to be a celebration of being together with my girlfriend of four years, I was going to propose to her. But then, three months ago, she said that she wasn't feeling it anymore, that the relationship didn't work for her anymore and that she wanted to start living her own life. It had been such a shock, within days, she'd moved out and left me alone in the apartment we used to share, the apartment we chose together.

I grieved, but then I got over it, I thought so, anyway. Until this holiday came around and cancelling it was not going to happen as it was going to cost me extra money, which I don't have right now. I also realised that I really did need to get away from everything and a week on Schiermonnikoog sounded like a perfect plan. The holiday apartment was paid for, the boat tickets were paid for and I had blocked off the free days anyway. Not going didn't make any sense.

So, here I am, sitting in the belly of a ferry, waiting until it arrives at the island so I can get to my home for the week. The excitement hasn't set in yet, but I'm pretty sure that it will soon. I hope anyway.

There is something special about islands, no matter how non-exotic they are. Just being surrounded by the vast sea,

the silence, the emptiness. It clears my head in ways that few things ever do.

I watch people around me stand up, grabbing their things and putting on their coats. The ferry is almost there. I look out the window, the island is so much closer now.

The mudflat side of the island is just a long row of dikes, with some dunes on either side, and I can see the trees and some houses over the dikes. Three buses are coming down the pier, filled with the people who are leaving, and they'll be waiting to pick up the new travellers.

The ferry bounces abruptly as it finally falls still against the pier and I stand up, grabbing my bags as I get to the exit.

The wind cuts into my cheeks as I leave the warmth and safety of the ferry and get out onto the pier. I drag my bags behind me. The salty air is cold as I've never felt it before and it's almost like my nose is starting to freeze from the inside out. I've never been on one of the islands while it was this cold and when I look over at the pier, I can see ice stacking on the side of it. That's... I've never seen that before.

As I locate the bus to the right stop, I pay for a ticket, cash because that's all they accept, and sit down in a seat. For such a small island, they still somehow manage to have four busses for each boat that arrives. I shiver from the residual cold, only slowly warming up again.

Then I watch over the mudflats as the bus drives onto the island.



I nod at the lady who gave me the key of the apartment I'm in for the week, not sure what else I can do at her fast words. She seems sweet and she's definitely trying to be helpful.

I open the door to the apartment, finding it a little... old? Everything looks well cared for, and I'm sure some things are brand new, but the colour scheme is definitely not something you'd still expect these days. So much brown and so many wooden elements, definitely no longer in style.

When I booked this place, I thought it looked charming. I imagined spending a couple of days with my ex here, cuddled up in front of the fake fire and not having to worry about anything. Now it just feels so grandma-y, not as much fun, especially since I'm alone.

I drop my bags in the bedroom, checking the windows for drafts, since it's a little chilly in here, but I can't find any. Probably just not heated up yet.

I definitely need to hunt down the thermostat first, get the temperature up a little. And after that, I guess it's a good idea to get some food in the house and probably go out to the sea.

The thing I'm looking forward to the most right now is

seeing the sea, going out onto that beach and walk up to the waves. Only, the stores here close early, so I really do need to get some dinner in before I do anything else.

Although...

I remember that the bar here had pretty good food. Although, that may just have been my experience as a broke and drunk teenager. I don't know. That very easily possible. But I also don't know if I want to try out another place to eat today. I think I may need some booze with my food tonight, and the Tox Bar seems like a great place for that. It used to be *the* place to be when I was a teenager. The booze wasn't too expensive and they stayed open until late. That, and it was the only place on the island where they didn't look at you weirdly for being under the age of forty or something, at least in the eyes of my 18-year-old self.

I dig in my bag and pull out a nicer pair of jeans and then a warm wool sweater in black with dark grey elements, which I know suits me well. Even if I don't need to impress anyone, I can at least look nice, just for myself. I pull my hair into a ponytail, and then check myself in the mirror. I look a little red, probably from the cold wind as I came here, but for the first time in weeks, I feel like there is a spark in my eyes.

Coming here was the right idea. Definitely!

I slip into a sturdy pair of low heels, zipping the boots

up, and then put on my long jacket. I get cold so easily, some people, like my ex, used to joke that I should live in a warmer climate, not in the Netherlands, but I also don't deal with heat well, so I don't think it would work out.

I grab my wallet, a small bag and the key of this place. Then I step outside and pull the door closed behind me. The wind is icy and cuts into my cheeks even more than when I stepped off the ferry, so so cold. The forecast said that it's going to get even colder this week, that we may even be able to ice skate during Christmas, which hasn't happened in years. I don't often go ice skating, but I still love it and I know that there is going to be a rink not too far down the road. Important research.

I pull my jacket around me tighter as I walk down the road into town. The place I'm in is about halfway between the town and the beach. Which is great when you want to go to the beach, but when it's cold like this, it's not as much fun to brace the cold to get something to eat from town.

As I walk past the houses, the Christmas lights are on in some of them, though many of the houses are dark, probably not rented out for the winter. Which seems to be common. I walk past a large and very impressive looking hotel, and then an 'evening store' which means it's open until nine in the evening. On the island, that's seen as an

evening store, and for a place where shops close at five or six the latest, it's open quite late. To go from a city to an island like here, it's an interesting experience.

As a teen, I thought it was annoying that stores weren't open late enough, and that the only real bar around here didn't let people in after two in the evening. But that was in the summer months, and I'd spend my days between being drunk and being hungover for not an insignificant number of weeks every year. At the time, I thought that that was the best way to spend my summer holidays, and looking back, I don't disagree. Although, maybe not being *that* drunk would have been a good idea too...

I come to a three way crossing and take the turn to the right, in front of me is one of the three clothing stores that the island has. Although, I'm pretty sure this is one of those 'living place stores' where you can buy clothes and also buy things for in your house and such. I don't know, all the stores here seem to be like that, they'll have like two or three different elements to them. They'll sell clothes and home things, or clothes and being the local drugstore, or they're the local book store, but they're also the only toy store around. I guess that with an island this small, which mostly depends on the holiday seasons to keep surviving, this is a sensible thing to do. But I still find it odd, and you never

know where to find things.

On my right side is the church behind a large hedge, which is bare without its leaves, as I take another left turn, walking into the 'main street' of the island. This is the main road where the only supermarket is at, and the tourist information office, and, of course, the place I'm going for, the Tox Bar. The place of many a drunk night and *interesting* teenage experiences.

First I walk past the whale jaws that are right across the street from the supermarket. The big blue whale jaws as impressive as ever and I stop to look at them for a few moments. I'm pretty sure there are pictures of me kissing some summer fling under them, the booze and warm summer nights making us do silly things. With how drunk most teens were during the summers, I guess that the lack of cars on this island really helped with there not being too many deadly drunk accidents. There's only so much damage you can do with a bike...

I walk on, finally slipping into the Tox Bar, my eyes scanning the large tables and then settling on a seat that isn't too out in the open and is pretty close to a window, so I can distract myself by looking outside. I'm with my back to a wall and can see everyone coming in. I put my jacket over the back of my chair and then make myself comfortable,

rubbing my hands together, trying to get some sensations into them. I blow into my hands, trying to get them to warm up again.

A smiling waiter comes over, holding a writing block in his hand as he hands me the menu. “Do you know what you’d like to drink?”

“I’d like a gluhwein.” Mulled wine, tacky, maybe a little, but I’m cold and in the mood for doing something a little silly.

“One gluhwein coming up.” He walks off again.

When I open the menu, looking at the different items on it, trying to figure out what I’m in the mood for, my eyes catch movement over the top of it and I don’t know why, but I can’t help but look up.

Sitting down a few tables over is a woman who looks somehow familiar. Her long brown hair is caught under a black knitted hat, which she’s taking off right as I’m watching her. She’s all dressed in brown, which could be dull, but not in this colour. This is the brow-red of fall, the colour of chestnuts and fallen leaves. A colour you’d want to wrap yourself in in front of a fire with a cup of hot chocolate, or maybe some cheese and gluhwein.

Then the woman looks up and I’m caught in her pale blue eyes, pale blue eyes I’ve seen very close up before and

I immediately know who she is. Josie, the girl with white hair with streaks of every rainbow colour possible. Josie, the girl who'd wear super short shorts with army boots and a t-shirt that would show off her smooth stomach. Josie, the girl whose freckles I'd count and who I secretly kissed in the dunes.

That Josie had just sat down at a table and she's looking right at me too.

2



Josie

It's freezing cold and the island is almost deserted, but I'm still glad I'm here instead of being at home and preparing for yet another Christmas dinner with my family. My family is generally nice, but when you're thirty and you still live on your own and you spend more time walking your dog and curling up with romance novels than going out and finding a 'partner', their looks and questions do get annoying.

So, this year, I decided to do my own thing and booked an apartment on Schiermonnikoog for the holiday. This way I can spend a whole week doing what I love most, walking the beaches and forests with my dog Bente and then curl up under a pile of blankets and read romance novels on my

ereader. To me, this is almost as perfect as perfection can get, especially in the winter months.

What I hadn't counted on was running into someone I knew once. A girl who I never forgot. Sanne was the bright and always smiling girl from our group of summer friends. She was always laughing and we had such a great time, including many stolen kisses, over a number of summers. Sure, I knew that I was into girls. I don't know if she realised yet that she was too, but I definitely knew. Sure, we all had boyfriends back in the day, that's just what was normal during the summer, but I never really thought anything of it. The boys weren't for me, at least not for longer than a fling, but that didn't mean that it hadn't been fun.

I glance away for a moment, still surprised to see her here. She's grown up really well. Her mid-brown hair now has some shimmer under the lights, which tells me that she's probably got grey hairs, she's gotten older, as have I. Her style is simple, a warm black woollen sweater with some pattern on it that could be Scandinavian or something, I don't know. She's not wearing any jewellery, not even a wedding ring, and she wears her hair in a bun, away from her face, as she always used to do.

Bente pushes against my leg, making me return my attention to her. She looks up at me with her beautiful dark brown eyes in her black masked face with her white snout.

She's a Stabyhoun, a very popular dog race in the northern provinces, and the sweetest dog you'll ever meet. And the best snuggling companion, with her fluffy fur and her easygoing personality.

"Yeah, sweetie, I'll ask for some water for you. We can't forget that." I pet her head and she pushes against my hand, looking at me.

Then I glance to Sanne, her eyes dart my way for a moment, before she looks away again. Then I see the waiter bring her a single glass with a dark red liquid in it. She's not waiting for anyone, she's here on her own too, or she wouldn't have ordered yet, right?

I don't know, it feels bad to just leave her on her own, especially since we've obviously recognised each other. Maybe I should go over to her... I may have come to the island to be on my own, but eating by myself, even with Bente at my side, isn't the most fun, and Sanne looks lonely.

"What do you think, girl?" But Bente just looks up at me happily, always ready for anything.

I slowly get up, leaving my things for now, and then go over to Sanne's table. "Hey." I feel so awkward, like we're teens again.

"Hey." Sanne smiles, her eyes lighting up. "Josie, right?" Though, I'm pretty sure she remembers me, the way her cheeks flare tells me she does.

“Yeah. You’re Sanne, right?”

She nods. “Interesting to see you here too. Are you here by yourself, or are you waiting for someone?” She looks around, as I’d done before.

“I’m here with my girl.” I nod down towards Bente.

As Sanne sees Bente her eyes start to sparkle and she breaks out in a big smile. “Oh, how cute. What’s her name? Can I pet her?”

“Her name is Bente, and yes, you can pet her. She’s very friendly.” Bente, of course, immediately gets close to Sanne and puts her wet and dirty nose to Sanne’s black jeans and I manage to not wince too much. They were nice and clean before, and there is now a brown blotch of dirt on them.

Sanne laughs and leans down to hug Bente more, who gets really excited by it all. Watching them gives me butterflies in my stomach, and it brings back memories of when Sanne and I used to spend time together, long summer nights near the sea.

Then Sanne looks up, eyeing my table. “If you’re by yourself, do you want to join me?” She smiles in a way I can’t ignore.

“Yeah. S-sure.” Why do I feel like a stumbling teen all over again? “Let me just...” I motion at the stuff at my old table.

“Of course.” She nods. “Do you need me to hold her

for a moment?” She looks at Bente.

“If you could.” I give her the leash and then quickly grab my jacket and bag from my own table. When I sit down in the chair opposite Sanne, Bente sits down between us all happily. Her nose going from one to the other, asking for petting the whole time. “What are you drinking? Red wine?”

Sanne smiles shyly, her cheeks pinking. “Gluhwein.”

“Ah. A good idea.” I look up, trying to get the attention of one of the waiters. When he comes over, I also order a gluhwein, and he gives me a menu. I eye the items on the menu, not sure what I really want to choose. “What are you ordering?” I glance up and catch Sanne staring at me, her cheeks going even pinker.

“I don’t know yet.” She looks down at her menu. “There is so much choice, and I have no idea what’s good or anything.”

“Their steaks are usually good. If you’re into fish, you can do that, it’s really fresh. And they have a winter stew that tastes *so* good.” I shrug a little. “I come here regularly.” If I go out to eat on the island, when I’m here with Bente, this is one of the places I frequent. Partially out of nostalgia, but also because it’s just a good place to go, and they’re open really late so it doesn’t matter if I went for a walk that took way too long or if I got lost in a book again.

The waiter comes back with my gluhwein, but we wave

him away again until we've decided what we want to eat. And it's not like there are many other people so it doesn't take long if we do finally order. There are only two other people, at one of the tables at the front part of the restaurant, I saw them when I came in.

"So, tell me..." Sanne looks at me. "Do you do this often? Come here on your own?"

I nod. "I like the island. And when you're outside of the holiday seasons, it's great to walk here with Bente and get away from it all for a couple of days."

"Of course." She nods.

"You don't do this very often?"

She shakes her head, her eyes going down, averting her gaze. "I don't. I wasn't..."

"It's okay. It's not for everyone." I instinctively reach out to her, wanting to put my hand on hers, but then I quickly pull it back. Just because we used to be friends doesn't mean that we can do this now. That was then, this is now.



"And then there was this woman with this really tiny dog..." I shake my head, grinning. "She wanted to know if I also did trimming, you know, hair and nails and such, because her previous vet did that..." I take another sip from the glass

of gluhwein. I'm sure we've drunk more than a whole bottle of this stuff by now. We're onto our desserts, pieces of steaming hot apple pie with whipped cream in front of us. Things were a little awkward at the start, but after a couple of minutes, we went back to how we used to be. Laughing, joking around.

"And, what did you tell her?" Sanne leans forward, her cheeks a little red from the warmth, or from the alcohol, probably both.

"I told her that we're a more rural veterinary, we don't tend to do things like that. But that I could ask around to see if I knew someone who could give her little dog a new haircut."

"And?" Impatient.

"She didn't seem to appreciate it." I shrug. "I don't know. But she shouldn't have moved out to the outskirts of the city if she wanted an all-in-one experience at her vet." I take another piece of the apple pie. I should be leaving in not too long, Bente needs to stretch her legs and get her dinner too. Not that I want to leave...

Sanne shrugs too. "Yeah. That's the difference when you're at an expensive rich neighbourhood vet or one where dogs the size of calves also go to. And maybe the neighbourhood goat." She grins. Her smiles and attention on me keep my heart beating a little faster than normal,

making me feel special.

Bente moves at our feet, putting her head on my lap, getting a little restless. I reach out to her, petting her head. “Yeah, yeah. We’re leaving soon.”

Sanne’s eyes grow and she looks under the table. “Of course, she needs to eat too. Poor girl. Will she be okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s used to this. She’s just being a little needy.” I play with her soft and fluffy ears as I look at Bente. “We’re leaving soon, don’t worry.”

I take the final bite of the apple pie. It’s really good here, although, it could also be the company today. It could definitely also be the company, and the alcohol.

Sanne also finishes her piece and takes the last sip from her glass. “So...” She seems awkward now, and I realise that this would be the moment in a date where we would decide what to do next.

Only, this isn’t a date, right? Right?

It definitely feels like one.

A waiter comes over, collecting our plates. “Was everything as you liked it?”

I nod. “Definitely, thank you.” I watch Sanne nod, smiling.

“Would you like something else? Coffee? Tea?”

“No, thank you. I’d like the bill please.”

“Yes, surely.” He goes off and when I look at Sanne she’s frowning at me.

“What?”

“I thought we were going to split the bill.” She raises her eyebrow at me.

“I’ll pay for this. I don’t know, maybe you can pay for lunch tomorrow?” Possibly a little bold, but we’re both here for the week, and I’d definitely like to see more of her.

“Deal.” She smiles. “But you’re not getting away from that, you know.”

“I know.” I grab my wallet as the waiter comes back. “Can you hold her for a moment?” I give Sanne Bente’s leash and our hands touch for a moment, shooting sparks through my body. I wish I could touch her more, but this is not the time or place to think about that. Then I follow the waiter so I can pay, and as I return, just seeing Sanne sit there with Bente, all comfortable and happy. It fills my heart.

Bente jumps up as soon as I come close, rushing over, and I grab her, holding her. “Yes, we’re leaving now. Just wait a moment longer.”

I put on my hat and jacket, and next to me, Sanne does the same. She looks so fancy in her long grey coat, so different from my ‘practical’ style.

When we get outside, we get to that awkward ‘going your own way’ thing again. “Where are you staying?”

“Halfway down the Badweg. I’m not exactly sure of the name of the place.” She pulls her jacket tighter around her.

“I’m going that way too.” I start walking, hoping to stay warm in the icy cold. When we’re passing the whale jaws, I smile. “These really haven’t changed, have they?”

She looks up too. “No. Same as ever.” Then she holds out her hand, a delighted grin spreading over her face.

Then, after a few moments, a snowflake falls on her black gloved hand.

Snow!

Sure, it’s cold enough for it, but I didn’t expect there to be actual snow. Snow at Christmas is rare, but with just four days until Christmas, here it is anyway. Snow.

I also hold out my hand, watching the flakes fall onto it. Then I look around, more and more flakes coming down. Not even small ones, but really big ones that probably won’t just disappear after a few minutes.

The first snow of the year, and I’m standing here with a beautiful woman from my past at my side. Is it a sign? Is it telling me that I shouldn’t be chicken again? That I should take this chance now?

But I know that I’m not brave enough. At least not tonight, not even with more than half a bottle of gluhwein in me. But I’ve got a week, so maybe I’ll get the courage later. Maybe.

Maybe.