

CHAPTER 10--DANISH DELIGHT

“We’re here. This is Central Station.”

“That was fast.” Amanda looked up and around the large train station as they emerged from the carriage. She had never seen a train station like this before.

Arched beams criss-crossed the roof in giant arcs as they supported the cavernous roof. There were tracks terminating here for numerous trains. Shops surrounded the entire station. A train was coming to a stop on one of the lines. Passengers were waiting, boarding, and exiting trains.

The hive of activity awakened Amanda. She gazed in awe at her new surroundings, then realized that she had never taken a real train before. “I had no idea people built such buildings.”

“I love Denmark. It’s so well planned. It’s great, we don’t need to find a taxi or get in a car. Just hop on the train. Fifteen minutes later and boom, we’re in the heart of the city.”

“This is great!”

“Let me go put my luggage in storage and then we can go see if any of those free city

bikes are available.”

“Sounds good.”

Amanda was greeted by another sight that she thought of as most unusual as they left the station – hundreds, perhaps thousands of parked bicycles. Bikes of all varieties were lined up in neat rows. Some were even parked on double deck parking racks.

“Wow.”

“Impressive isn’t it?”

“I would have never imagined.”

“If you can believe it, Copenhagen was over-run by cars in the early 1960s before the city decided to transform the city by making streets pedestrian only and making it bike friendly.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

The pair walked outside to look for an available bicycle. They spotted several bright colored ones standing out by a City Bike rack. Solid white, yellow, blue, and red. They were adorned with logos of the post office, a supermarket chain, a popular soft drink, and a newspaper.

“Funny looking bikes,” Amanda noted as she examined the bike. It was fitted with a solid disc tires, spoke-less, and puncture resistant.

“Now you know why no one would steal one.”

“For sure.”

“If you ride one beyond the city limits you get a ticket I’ve heard.”

“They’re easy to spot. How many did you say are around in the city?”

“Last I heard was about 2,000. There might be more now. They are very popular and. We are lucky to have a selection to choose from.”

They each inserted a coin into a slot on the handlebar and disconnected the bike from the chain. They set off to explore the town on two wheels.

They rode past Tivoli, the city amusement park and gardens. And Radhuspladsen, the main square where city hall was located. They passed Rosenborg Slot, the former Dutch Renaissance style palace of King Christian IV, and now a museum, home of the crown jewels. The Botanisk Have, botanical gardens, provided a welcome sight of greenery.

Each pedal of the bicycle brought more life to Amanda as she breathed in the fresh air. She could feel her heart pumping blood throughout her body. Vivid memories of her youth came to life, memories of freedom. It reminded her of the first time she drove a car too, except somehow that drug wore off.

They passed by colorful flower shops. There was a certain order, but it was loose, not too rigid. There was a well defined building height to street width proportion. Not too tall, just right. They cycled by some little brick streets. She gazed down the twisted alleys – what mystery lay just behind their corners?

It was all rather serendipitous. The view reminded her of Leavenworth, a small German themed town of 2,000 people in Central Washington that she enjoyed visiting. It attracted upwards of 1.5 million visitors per year. Leavenworth was beginning to look like a bad copy of traditional European classical town architecture. It was a town that did not exude a sense of place.

Amanda recalled the details of a marketing magazine article about theme towns like Leavenworth. Most of them were artificial tourist creations. They were no match for a real living and breathing town which had a sense of permanence as she felt here.

These theme towns were scattered all over America. Some of them were authentic, populated by immigrants from their respective countries who were bringing a bit of their past with them, others were converted into tourist attractions to look like something they never were, such as at Leavenworth. The reason for the attractions of these towns was the same though – they catered to a need for a sense of place, a sense that had been lost in many parts of America.

Amanda realized that life here in Copenhagen was nothing like suburban and urban America with its large tract homes, banal strip malls, asphalt parking lots, skyscrapers, parking garages, and feature less corporate office parks, manifestations of a bigger is better mentality and extreme zoning.

Theme towns ranged from the Danish in Solvang, California and Elk Horn, Iowa. Or Swedish towns like Stanton, Iowa and Kingsburg, California, the home of Sun Maid raisins. The Dutch were represented in Lynden, Washington, Holland, Michigan, and Orange City or Pella, Iowa. The latter complete with 80,000 tulips.

The German and Bavarian theme was represented in such diverse places as Frankenmuth, Michigan or Kellogg, Idaho and New Ulm, Minnesota. Further south, Bavarian representatives include Helen, Georgia or New Braunfels, Texas and the Missouri wine country around Hermann, Missouri.

The French theme was represented in none other than the French Quarter of New

Orleans, which in a curious twist, had a strong Spanish influence if one were to look close enough.

The wind blowing in her face as she bicycled was like a wake up call to live, no wonder dogs liked to stick their head out the window. It was like driving a convertible with two major differences, your blood flowed from pedaling, and you could smile and greet fellow humans without a metal shell in the way. No longer would she weep for not having bought the convertible Beemer, a car that she had thought about, but decided against for practical reasons in Seattle.

They kept riding and came upon the Statens Museum for Kunst, the National Fine Arts Museum, with a large collection of paintings from Matisse. As they rounded back toward the central part of the city they passed a windmill by the Kastellet, the old Citadel, now the northeastern most park in the city.

Along their entire route they had a dedicated bicycle lane to themselves, complete with bicycle traffic lights. Amanda was amazed at the sheer number of people bicycling. Young, old, men in suits, and women in skirts. It appeared that the enthusiasm for bicycling was not limited by income brackets nor ethnicity.

With her confidence rising, she let go of her handlebars and felt she was almost flying – like a bird.

“That was exhilarating!”

“Fun wasn’t it?”

“Very.”

“Did you see the pregnant woman?”

“Yes, several! I still can’t believe it.”

“The Danes don’t think of cycling as a toy which is grown out of. It is a practical way to get around.”

Amanda had a flash back to a rather different definition of bicyclists in her mind. There was a fellow at work who bicycled to work. She had always thought of him as a little odd, perhaps a freak of nature, a weird-o. The normal thing to do, was to drive to work. Now she was beginning to understand the benefits of bicycling, a very different way to live. Although the cyclist outfit and spandex he wore was still silly, there weren’t many people wearing those outfits here. Riding a bike looked so normal, and trim.

“It’s good exercise too. Everyone here looks so fit.” Amanda commented.

Diet fads were like fashion at home in America. There was a popular one in recent memory called French Women Don’t Get Fat that she had read, it proposed a lifestyle change, not a diet per se. Maybe there should be one called Danish Women Don’t Get Fat she thought. Except, it looked like they didn’t need to change their diet here at all. They just bicycled. Little did she know that the Danish were among the least obese of all European nations in a recent survey, even less than the French.

“I’m thinking that people don’t need to go to the gym as often, exercise is built into their routine,” Kayla noted.

“It feels so safe with the lanes. I don’t see anyone wearing helmets either. It feels so normal.” Amanda felt no hint of the fear that sometimes paralyzed her, such as the fear she felt

walking in parking garages late at night alone.

They discussed the stark contrast with America's transportation plan. Kayla explained that the Danes were very conscious of their environment and how it affected their health. She noted how bicycles were good exercise, didn't pollute, and also good for global warming. They also didn't separate people from one another behind fast moving chunks of steel. Bikes also fit into the scheme of Danish social fairness. Best exemplified by the Dane's standing as one of the largest contributors per person to humanitarian organizations around the world. This point coming as a shock to Amanda.

"This is such a beautiful city," Amanda wondered aloud as she gazed at the historical buildings.

"We've built so many of our neighborhoods around the automobile. It creates a lot of dead zones that nobody cares about and asphalt parking lots."

"I've only been here a couple of hours and I can see your point. Though the city isn't quite what I expected."

"How's that?"

"I thought there would be more high rises for such a large city."

"I studied that in one of my classes. The tallest building in a place says a lot about a city. It used to be in a lot of towns that no buildings could be taller than the church spires. Not many go to church here, but they still prohibit tall buildings in the center. I think it's a desire to keep things at a human scale, and to emphasize that people are in charge, not corporations and cars in their tall parking garages."

They passed by a window with a poster of an aerial skyline shot of the city. Amanda could count the number of tall buildings with the fingers of her hands.

“Let’s go park our bikes over there.” Kayla pointed to a small single story square shaped building near the green copper domed marble church that came into view.

“Where?”

“Over there?”

“I don’t see a bike rack over there.”

“Follow me.”

They walked their bikes over there. Kayla inserted a coin and a door opened. She wheeled her bike inside.

“Whoa. This is crazy.”

“Pretty cool eh?”

It was an electronic automatic underground bicycle parking machine.

They crossed the street and walked on to the royal grounds of Amalienborg Slot, the Royal Palace. They walked into the middle of a square surrounded by four modest royal palaces. An equestrian statue was set in the center. Royal guards manned their posts at various entryways.

“The Danish royal family is an interesting bunch,” Kayla remarked.

“Why is that?”

“There is a long custom for members of the royalty to marry foreigners. The Queen is married to a Frenchman. The younger Prince Joachim married Princess Alexandra, who was born in Hong Kong. She was the first Asian to marry into a European royal family.”

“Interesting. That sounds like a good trivia question.”

“She is part Chinese, English, and Austrian. They’re divorced now though.”

“Divorced?”

“Marital problems everywhere I guess. The rumor is that the prince liked to go out and party with other girls in disco clubs. They call him the party prince.”

“Men. They are the same everywhere, aren’t they?”

Kayla chuckled. “I hear the Crown Prince’s marriage is still going strong though. Prince Frederik married an Australian commoner named Mary Donaldson. They met at a pub in Sydney during the 2000 Summer Olympics.”

“At a pub?”

“Sounds like a fairy tale doesn’t it?”

“It does.”

They wandered around the palace grounds and the adjoining park, Amaliehaven. A short walk along the water and they were looking at Den Lille Havfrue, the life sized bronze statue of the Little Mermaid, sitting on a large boulder. The statue appeared small at four feet tall, but it wasn’t the size of it that Amanda thought to be a little strange. Rather, a strange sense of reality. She couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Hans Christian Andersen, he’s my hero.”

“Why’s that?”

“He lived by the maxim – To travel is to live.”

Amanda looked on at the statue and nodded in agreement with Kayla.

“What a great story. It’s sad, but so poignant when she turns into sea foam then ascends into the clouds.”

“Huh?”

“You know, when the Little Mermaid turns into sea foam because the prince married another princess.”

“Huh?” Amanda’s voice groaned louder.

“Are we talking about the same story?” Kayla wondered.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The Little Mermaid I know is the one where Ariel the mermaid gives up her life at sea and her voice to try and win the love of a prince within three days before she becomes a lost soul.”

Kayla flashed a confused look toward Amanda.

“A love that her father, Triton the sea king, forbids. They are about to fall in love when Ursula the sea witch, who she made a bargain with to get human legs for three days, tries to deceive the prince into marrying her instead by using a magical disguise.”

“This doesn’t sound like the story I know.”

“That’s when Ariel’s animal friends, the talking lobster, fish, dolphins, birds, and later the prince too, help her foil the evil sea witch. They get married and live happily ever after. Her father realizes his mistake in forbidding the love too!” Amanda’s eyes glazed over in a trance as she recalled this movie that she must have seen dozens of times as a younger child. She had committed it to memory.

“Ariel the mermaid? Ursula the sea witch? Triton the sea king? I don’t remember any of

those characters having names like that. Talking lobsters? Happily ever after? They don't get married in the book, the mermaid turns to sea foam and then ascends up to the clouds."

"Really?" Amanda knocked herself on the head. "Weird."

"Wow, the movie must be some strange, twisted translation of the book."

They both stood puzzled for a moment as they gazed at the statue along with a few other tourists who had come by to admire it.

"Are you hungry?" Kayla asked.

"Yes."

"Let's get going back to Nyhavn. We can find a restaurant there."

They returned to retrieve their bikes at the electronic parking machine. The high tech factor of the machine continuing to amaze Amanda. Bicycles were tools, not toys.

"How long have these machines been around?"

"Quite a while now, there are a few in Odense too. I think they use them when there are too many bikes or when the visual appearance of an area is a concern. I think this one is pretty new. We still need to return our bikes to a regular rack to get our money back."

"It's very ingenious and innovative."

"Let's go return our bikes. There should be a bike rack over near Nyhavn, the canal area. We can get a bite and take a casual walk back to the train station."

They spotted a City Bike rack and walked their bikes over. Amanda knelt down to grab the dangling chain and connected it to the bike handlebars. Her deposit coin popped out. She stepped backward between the bikes, her gaze fixated on the coin and the simplicity it

represented.

“Excuse me.”

In her moment of wonder, she had walked right into a man waiting for a bike. “Oh, excuse me.” She turned around and was confronted by the presence of a graceful and dashing looking gentleman dressed in full suit and tie.

“No, excuse me,” the gentleman replied.

Amanda blushed. This man was no Viking. Their eyes met for a brief moment. As she gazed into his eyes, there was something peculiar about them, something alive, but she couldn't figure out the meaning of this subtle observation either.

“I'm sorry, I'm late for a meeting and am anxious to get on a bike to get there. I should have given you a little more space.”

“It's ok. Please, please, take it,” Amanda replied as she moved to get out of the way.

They headed over to the popular dock area, Nyhavn. It was a riot of colorful architecture. Even in the cool late March temperatures, many people were milling about enjoying the sunshine. They walked into a cafe and ordered lunch.

“Was that guy cute or what?” Kayla remarked.

“He was very charming. It's cute how men in full suits and ties ride bikes.”

“Maybe he was someone important.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's common here for high ranking officials such as ministers or even corporate CEOs to take their bike into work. I saw a photo once of a minister going to visit the Queen by bicycle.”

“You mean they don’t drive Mercedes or Beemers all the time?”

“Scandinavian equality for you.” Kayla swallowed some herring.

“You sound like you’ve dreamed of being swept off your feet the way you talk about it,”

Amanda noted.

“I admit it. I have. How can you not?”

Amanda smiled.

“It is so magical,” Kayla exasperated.

Amanda munched on her cold cuts from the buffet. “Why else do you like Denmark?”

“The drinking age is sixteen.”

“That’s a good enough reason to like a place.”

“Not sure why our laws still say no drinking until twenty-one. People desire what they cannot have.”

“True.”

“The Danes understand tolerance. Despite a sometimes cold exterior, I always get the feeling that they are quite relaxed and casual about things. Seldom are they prone to extreme positions.”

“Is there anything in particular that makes you feel this way?”

“Lots of things my parents talk about. One thing that comes to mind is – right or wrong – the Danes were the first to legalize gay marriage – in 1989.”

“1989?”

“It’s still a political football in our country. I read that the number of gay couples seeking

marriage per year has gone down. Good evidence, that the more you keep something from someone, the more they want it.”

“Why do you think the Danes are different?”

“Maybe just being an older country they have built up more wisdom about such things. Or maybe it is as simple as their government system.”

“How’s that?”

“In the US we have the Democrats and Republicans with an occasional independent. In Denmark and most Scandinavian countries they have at least five to ten political parties represented. There is room for a lot more voices and compromise as parties have to group together to form ruling coalitions.”

“Five to ten? Sounds like it could get complicated.”

“I agree, but it is either that or everything is black and white. It is a better system of checks and balances.”

“Absolute power corrupts,” Amanda replied in resignation. She changed the subject. “It’s very cozy here.”

“Isn’t it?”

Amanda smiled.

“The Danes call it Hygge.”

“How do you say that again?”

“Hoo-gah.”

“Hygge? What does that mean?”

“It means to have a coy and intimate mood.”

“I get that feeling. Everything is smaller around here, almost miniature.”

“I guess they have figured out that bigger isn’t always better. What else have you noticed?”

“I didn’t realize there were so many different ethnicities here. I figured it would be pretty homogenous.”

“I thought I read somewhere that foreigners make up more than 10% of the population, at least in Copenhagen. There is a sizable Turkish and Pakistani community. I’ve also read about smaller Somalian and Ethiopian communities.”

“I guess you don’t know until you see it for yourself.”

“That’s why I like traveling!”

“Do they all get along?”

“I think I’ve read about some stories of friction, most have to do with newcomers having trouble integrating. There was that whole overblown cartoon flap too. My mom said it was like drinking alcohol, in moderation it is good, but if you drink too much at once, you’ll get drunk and will have trouble seeing and walking. You have to build up your tolerance.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Are all Scandinavian cities like this?”

“Like what?”

“Do they all have a similar feel?”

“...and charming gentleman that you bump into while returning a bike?”

They both laughed. The whole mood was very warm and conducive to conversation.

Even though subjects seemed to have their edge taken off them by the warmth. Amanda was surprised at how intelligent Kayla was. Perhaps foreign travel had a way of expanding the mind.

“The summer I was here we went through Northern Germany to Amsterdam. I’ve been across the Øresund bridge to Malmo, Sweden. Very walkable and bicycle friendly in both places. The Netherlands especially. Nice architecture in Malmo. The Scandinavian countries are very good at creating homey communities, and less economically extreme societies which foster co-operation.”

“How do they do that?”

“I think they like to take a moderate view of things. They question things. It’s not a free for all like we have back at home. I think they like to create a sense of real community, not an illusion of one.”

“I noticed something interesting as we were bicycling and walking, the physical distance is less between everyone. I think I’m beginning to realize how cars and all the maddening technology we use shields us from each other.”

“You don’t say hello to your neighbor or anyone else for that fact when all you do is get in a hunk of steel in your garage and drive off to work. People need places to gather too. On our way back, we’ll be walking through several public squares. I’ve studied all this kind of stuff in school.”

“You’ve studied well.”

“The reasoning behind their laws is interesting too. Of course, the more you make, the more you pay in taxes. They don’t believe in soaking the rich where the rich just get richer.

Taken to an extreme, that would create a lot of friction. It would also create a lot of very contrasting neighborhoods – some very nice, some very run down. When the wealth is better distributed, the whole country looks prettier. I hope to go on a bicycle tour of the entire country someday.”

“That sounds fun. Is that easy to do?”

“Oh yeah. The bicycle network runs across the entire country. There are lots of adorable villages along the way.”

“Adorable villages,” Amanda repeated quietly.

“It takes a village to create a healthy society.”

“That sounds familiar.”

“Yeah, it does, but I don’t remember where I heard it.”

“Should we get going?” Amanda wondered as she checked her watch.

Kayla agreed. They made their move to the door.

They walked back along the Strøget, stopping to explore a few shops. While it was chilly, the streets were alive with people going places. The occasional musician and clown performed for the amusement of others. Amanda dropped a few coins in a jar. She was in a joyous and giving mood.

A curiosity shop attracted their attention, they went in. Kayla stopped to look at some jewelry in the front of the store while Amanda headed toward the back. A full length mirror lay against the back wall. Amanda decided to take a look at how she was holding up with the jet lag. An odd sensation ran down her back as she first looked into the mirror, then quickly turned

away. She squeezed, then rubbed her eyes and sighed. Perhaps that would snap her out of her visual funk.

She looked again at her reflection, it was different, it was her, and yet, it wasn't her. She raised her right arm to adjust her hair, then snapped back in shock, the left arm was moving in the mirror, not her right! She gasped.

She shook her head back and forth, it must be the jet lag. She raised her right arm again and the same thing happened. Then she raised her left arm and the mirror showed the right arm. This was some optical illusion. Finally, she raised her hand toward the mirror and touched it, but it was the other arm moving up. The mirror was reflecting back the actual arm she raised, but from the perspective of what someone looking at you would see!

Who was this strange person in the mirror? Was it really her?

A stack of brochures resting on a small shelf mounted to the right hand of the mirror caught her eye as she stepped back. She picked one up.

You are looking at a True Mirror. This is a non-reversing mirror. It shows how you appear to others, not to yourself, as all 'normal' mirrors do. This is done by fusing two mirrors together at a right angle. This non-reversing feature is also evident when you hold up writing to the mirror, it is readable and looks 'normal', not backward as with other mirrors. Flip this card over and read the quote in the mirror, then ask your retailer or visit our website for more details at www.truemirror.com.

She flipped the brochure over and held it up in the mirror. A quote was printed in bold across the card.

The true voyage of discovery is not in seeking out new landscapes, or conquering new worlds, but in seeing with new eyes. – Marcel Proust

“Hey Amanda, quit looking at yourself, come look at this amber jewelry I found, it’s a Danish specialty,” Kayla shouted from the front of the store.

Amanda turned around, “Oh! Coming.” She didn’t mention what she saw to Kayla, she was too disturbed by it. She forgot about it as they stepped back outside on the busy street.

A gust of wind blew through Amanda’s hair as they continued walking. Amanda looked up but saw only gargoyles looking down at her from the buildings. She felt as if they were keeping a watch over her, monitoring her every movement as if something was about to happen. Whether it was good or bad, she could not determine. She kept walking.

They made a steady pace back to the train station. The commotion of people formed what seemed like a very amiable community in this cosmopolitan city. While Amanda’s sense of time continued to change and slow down from the sense of urgency back home in America, she realized the last time she had felt such a feeling of magic was at an amusement park. But magic had been commercialized across the Atlantic Ocean. Here, they strived to live a life of magic.

They arrived back at Central Station.

“I really enjoyed today,” Amanda mused.

“Me too.”

“Let’s keep in touch.”

“Do you have an email?”

Amanda opened up her small backpack and jotted down her personal email on a business

card for Kayla.

“I hope your trip to Greenland goes well.”

“Good luck with your summer classes.”

They hugged. “Shall we do as the Danes do?”

“What is that?” Amanda asked.

She realized as soon as Kayla initiated an exchange of two cheek kisses.

“I remember that from French class. I always thought we should do that back home more.”

“Two kisses in Denmark is normal. Make sure you get it right.”

Kayla explained how the custom differed among the various countries of Europe. It was two in Spain, right cheek always first. Two in Austria and Hungary. It was three in the Netherlands, right side first again. Three in Switzerland. In France it varied – four in Paris, left cheek always first, but three in Brittany, two in most others except for the Cote d’Azur in Southern France where five or six kisses wasn’t unusual. In Belgium, it was one to three depending on the age of the other person. Yet for all these kisses in Europe, it was rare in Germany, Italy, and the UK, except for close family and friends.

With this warm sense of friendship, they went their separate ways. Amanda’s adventure of discovery was not only intimate, but had only just begun.