

LOVING ILSA

CHAPTER ONE

“You did it, girl!”

“I don’t know if I can take all the credit. Besides, is *it* ever really over? Doesn’t feel that way.”

“Honey, as of this past Saturday your last child is officially a married man and out of your house. He is no longer your responsibility. The nest is empty. The apron strings have been cut. So yes, it is over.”

Ilsa thought about her best friend Denita’s declaration. She was right. Her youngest son was now married and would be living a life in which he no longer needed the care, protection, and attention of his mother. Truth be told, he hadn’t needed those things from her in quite a while.

“You know what this means, don’t you?”

Ilsa shook her head and patiently waited for a dose of Denita’s sage advice.

“Not only is it appropriate to celebrate, but it’s also time for you to start living again as a carefree woman with no dependents at home. You’re free! You need to go out, throw caution to the wind, have fun, get a man.”

Stalling as she tried to come up with a snappy comeback, Ilsa glanced around the crowded restaurant and then back at her well-meaning friend. If she had a dollar for every time Denita gave her that piece of advice, she’d have a whole lot of dollars. Even when her boys were at home, Denita constantly urged Ilsa to go out and have some adult fun. Over the past few years, she had added the “get a man” part to her perceived formula for Ilsa’s happiness.

“Dee, you know I love you. Over the years I have leaned on you, vented to and with you, and laughed and cried with you. There have been countless bottles of wine, greasy pizzas, and cartons of ice

cream shared between us—more than I care to admit—but seriously, I don't know why you keep telling me the same thing.”

“Because you won't listen and, for some reason, you refuse to take my advice. Instead, you work late every evening, take work home with you on the weekends, and continuously put your staff's needs ahead of your own. And I can't remember the last time you had a date or even got dressed up and treated yourself to a nice dinner or a concert. You live like an eighty-year-old spinster.” Denita ignored the exaggerated frown on her friend's face. “Need I remind you that you're a forty-five-year-old single woman who is extremely brilliant, absolutely beautiful, amazingly funny, remarkably successful, and sexy as hell?”

“I need to hire you as my PR rep. But you do have one thing wrong. I am living, thank you very much.”

“No, no.” Denita wagged her finger. “Don't mistake what you're doing with living. My cat has more of an active social life than you.”

Ilsa finished her glass of wine and poured another. Hesitating before taking a sip, she looked thoughtfully at her friend. After all these years, Denita continued to look out for her best interests. However much she disagreed with her approach, admittedly she might be on to something. The prospect of shaking a few things up in her life might not be so terrible.

“Does that mean you agree?” Denita asked, already anticipating a favorable answer.

“Dee, I know I need to get out of the house and do more than just work. I've been on that track for a long time. Don't get me wrong. I still love my job, with the exception of Grant, but since the kids have grown up, gotten married, and moved away, I guess I should start looking at being more Ilsa and less Mom. I have to admit the concept is a little foreign to me at the moment. I'm going to need some coaching.”

Excited that she had finally breached the steel wall of resistance, Denita raised her glass. "Hear, hear! I say let's toast to new and exciting adventures."

Laughing, the two clinked their glasses and finished their wine.

"So, what do you think you'll do first? Sign up on a dating site? Buy a sexy sports car? Oh, I know. You should look into one of those singles-only cruises."

Laughing at the barrage of corny suggestions, Ilsa responded in the most responsible tone she could muster. "I've been on vacation for almost a week getting ready for and then recovering from the wedding. The first order of business is to get back to work so I can continue to have a job to pay for all of the crazy activities you want me to indulge in. By the way, the car thing, that's a big, fat, no. If I can't be sexy and interesting in the car I have, then too bad."

Denita shrugged. "Baby steps."

They finished their dinner and moved on to other topics of conversation.

"Wow, my food was amazing. Yours looked good too. Maybe I'll order that when I come back. Good idea suggesting we come here for dinner."

Denita nodded. "This place has been open for almost three years. I've been meaning to stop in and check it out, but it's always so busy. When you called and said you didn't feel like cooking, this was the first place I thought of. Glad we were able to get in."

Ilsa looked around the busy restaurant. In addition to good food and an inviting atmosphere, the service had been excellent. Featuring Greek and Mediterranean dishes, locally sourced ingredients, and seasonal entrees, all of which had sounded interesting to her, she had readily agreed to Denita's suggestion. Since turning forty she decided to be more open to trying new things. With this choice, she certainly wasn't disappointed.

While they were deciding on whether to indulge in dessert, the waiter appeared at their table. The young man with dark eyes, heavily moussed hair, and deep dimples smiled and placed a small sampling of desserts on their table.

“Oh, we didn’t order—” Denita began.

“It’s on the house,” he replied and left as quickly as he had appeared.

Denita and Ilsa looked at each other and smiled.

“I *really* like this restaurant,” Denita remarked.

As they sampled the baklava, cake, and little pastries that neither of them could name but loved just the same, they momentarily forgot about calories and sensible eating.

“Are you enjoying the desserts?”

Expecting to see their waiter, they were surprised to see someone else. A very handsome someone else. Always quick on her feet, Denita responded first.

“Yes, everything was delicious.”

Ilsa wasn’t sure if her friend was talking about the dessert or the handsome man who had just appeared at their table. Well-built with thick dark hair that was slightly more salt than pepper at the temples, he wore a pale yellow dress shirt paired with dark-washed jeans, unlike the wait staff who wore white shirts and black pants. Although casually dressed he was still quite put together. Olive-skinned with just the hint of a five o’clock shadow, his dark eyes were hidden under thick but not unruly brows. Ilsa noticed a slight smile curling his lips. She found herself staring, something that was completely out character for her.

“And you?” he asked, looking directly at Ilsa. “Did you enjoy the desserts?”

“Uh, yes, I...I did,” she said, a little surprised he had addressed her directly. Had he caught her staring?

“I’m glad. We love satisfied customers,” he replied with a smile meant just for her. “I’m Dominic Markos.”

“The owner,” Denita chimed in when she recognized the name, knowing her friend had no idea who this handsome man was.

Dominic nodded and smiled self-consciously. “Yes, the owner.”

Denita glanced at Ilsa, who clearly was about to let a prime flirting opportunity pass her by. “I’m Denita Harper, and this is my friend Ilsa Tanner.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ladies,” Dominic replied to both women but never took his eyes off Ilsa.

Just then a waitress came over to the table and said something to Dominic about him being needed in the kitchen. He looked slightly annoyed by the interruption, but duty called. Reluctantly, he excused himself.

The moment his back was turned, Denita faced Ilsa with a broad smile.

“What?” Ilsa asked.

“Are you serious? That man was flirting with you big time.”

“So?”

“So you could have flirted back.”

“Dee, you know I’m not good at flirting. Besides, he’s probably married with a house full of kids.”

“What makes you say that? I didn’t see a ring on his finger.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing.”

Denita leaned back in her seat and frowned. “There’s no harm in flirting, Ilsa. You didn’t even try.”

“Oh, come on. He probably flirts with all of his female customers. With that sexy smile and his good looks, he’s trying to guarantee that there’s always a full house and plenty of repeat customers.”

“Something tells me you might be wrong about that.”

Checking her watch, Ilsa noted the time. It was getting late, and she needed to get home.

“Right or wrong, let’s get the waiter’s attention and get our check. Remember, my first day back to work is tomorrow, and I need to be up early to face whatever impossible demands Grant has in store for me.”

“Seriously, Ilsa, I don’t know why you don’t put your foot down about the way he treats you and the staff.”

“Because I’d like to keep my job and not get fired.”

Denita spotted their waiter a few tables over, waved to him, and mouthed “check please.” He nodded in acknowledgment and walked to the back of the restaurant.

As they waited for the waiter to bring their check, Ilsa and Denita went back and forth about who would be picking up the tab.

“Ilsa, I’m not hearing it. You just helped pay for Byron and Patrice’s wedding. Let me take care of the bill tonight. You can treat next time.”

When the waiter returned to the table, he placed the bill between the two women, smiled, and walked away before Denita had a chance to give him her credit card.

“What the heck?” she asked. However, when she opened the folder to view the bill she smiled with understanding at his odd behavior.

“What?”

“It’s free.”

“What’s free?”

“Our meal. The whole thing, including the bottle of wine. Look.”

Ilsa took the bill and scanned down to the bottom of the page. Sure enough, the total read \$0.00. But there was something else. Included with the bill was a business card. The front of the card featured the name of the restaurant, YiaYia's Table, the owner's name, the restaurant's address, and phone number.

"Turn it over," Denita instructed.

On the back was a note:

Ilsa Tanner, please don't let this be the last time I'm allowed to treat you to dinner.