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# *Promises aren't meant to be broken*

In a very different setting, Elsa and Johan Michelsohn were finishing their evening meal in the small dairy community of Deer Creek, Wisconsin. In the old German tradition, Elsa had prepared sauerbraten, fried potatoes, cheeses and bread. Their plates had already been cleared, and they were about to have a dessert of apple strudel with vanilla sauce.

The couple had been married for just over fifty years and had remained best friends as well as husband and wife since their immigration to the United States in the 1950s. Over the years, they had developed their own comfortable routines, and it was their custom at dinner to discuss the events of the day and the needs of their business.

“Any news on your shipment?” Elsa asked, knowing Johan was eagerly awaiting an acquisition to the farm.

“Only that it hasn’t arrived yet!” he replied, frustrated by the situation. “They keep telling me to track it on the Internet, and I feel like a dinosaur when I tell them I don’t have a computer.”

Elsa knew that Johan had been anxiously awaiting a shipment, and that he was becoming more impatient by the day. “Well, it is being shipped from California.”

Johan continued his rant, “Every time I call, I get this automated recording that routes me through four different messages before I finally get a human being who tells me exactly what I already know—that it hasn’t arrived!” He shook his head in frustration, “I tell you Elsa, I never thought technology could be so useless.”

“Ja well...you should’ve paid for overnight service,” she insisted,



implying his frugality finally got the best of him.

“And what, blow the deal of the century?”

A stranger would have thought Johan had purchased the Mona Lisa for five bucks, he looked so proud. And Elsa knew it wasn't a matter of being able to afford the purchase, but rather wasting money where it wasn't necessary.

Her eyes twinkled as she thought about the phone conversation she had overheard. “I'm surprised that poor man didn't offer to pay *you*, after what you put him through!”

Johan laughed at her observation.

“You know,” Elsa said matter-of-factly, “I remember a time when you were willing to pay well above market price to own an original oil painting from an unknown artist.”

“And I would have paid four times that amount to keep it out of the hands of Heinrich Putzkammer. He didn't appreciate your talents like I did.”

Elsa blushed at the ancient rivalry, and her mind drifted to memories of their lives long ago in Dresden, Germany.

The Saxony region, where she and Johan were born, was famous for its music and fine art and was considered one of Europe's premiere cultural and transportation centers. Elsa reflected on her grandfather and the setback he suffered when his brother nearly lost the family fortune at the turn of the century. How he managed to rebuild a life of privilege and prominence during such an unstable period was a tribute to his German acumen and a mystery to many of his colleagues.

Elsa remembered her childhood vividly. She thought about her nanny, her private tutors, and all the luxuries she enjoyed, and how her parents—God rest their souls—recognized early on that she was unusually talented at painting. They provided her with both exposure to works of art and training to encourage her gift. Memories of the family art collection swelled in her mind as she envisioned the Renoir hanging above the mantel and the Faberge egg sitting on the piano like a shimmering star.

Her mother's salon was a gathering place for the artistic and intellectual



minds of their region, and the family dinner parties were always elegant, formal affairs with stimulating conversation. She was allowed to attend as long as she behaved, and her parents eagerly displayed her canvases to their friends.

“Putzkammer,” she reflected, “now there’s name I haven’t heard in years.”

Elsa didn’t like thinking about the war, as was common with most Germans who had lived through that period. But hearing the name Putzkammer took her back to a time she would rather forget altogether. He was the son of a Nazi official who frequently visited her family, and just the mention of his name brought back images of horror and devastation that plagued her beloved city and forever changed the course of her life.

She remembered how the Nazi regime started as a slow spread across Germany and Eastern Europe, with only a few uniforms here and there. But then like a swarm of greedy locusts, they were suddenly everywhere. Elsa’s family had ties with both the art world and German society, and the Nazis sought to establish their authority in both. Her parents were forced by necessity to tolerate their presence while not welcoming it.

But in an effort to minimize Elsa’s contact with the war, she was sent to live with her cousins in Austria. They were farmers who produced cheeses and other marketable goods. It was there that she learned how to cook and clean and the basics of making cheese. She laughed to herself, remembering the first time she had milked a cow, and not very successfully either. But it didn’t take her long to set aside her lace-trimmed dresses in exchange for hard work and more practical clothing.

“Ach! Putzkammer. That schmuk!” Johan protested. “He rode the coattail of his father’s rank...always trying to profit from his connections. I doubt he would have known a Picasso from a kindergartner’s finger painting.”

Elsa laughed. “And you would have?”

“Humph!” Johan scoffed, having spent much of his savings making sure that Elsa’s paintings didn’t fall into the wrong hands. And Heinrich Putzkammer’s were *definitely* the wrong hands!



“Well he did admire my work, so he couldn’t have been that bad,” Elsa offered in his defense.

“No, Elsa, he admired *you*. You were just too naive to recognize it.”

Johan was a couple of years older than his wife and came from a family of scholars. He decided early on to become an engineer and despite the difficulties of continuing his education during the war, managed to keep his focus. Because his early performance in that field was so promising, and because the Third Reich desperately wanted to maintain an edge over the countries it fought, he was allowed to continue his studies and was not forced to enlist. But his hatred toward the regime was so strong that even now the memories of his youth turned his face red with anger, and Elsa could see it was time to change the subject.

“Did I mention my dishwasher is making that noise again?” She knew she could always distract him with practical matters.

Johan paused before answering, trying to recall the last time he had worked on it. He started thinking out loud, and Elsa only half paid attention. She had managed to calm him down, but her thoughts were still in the past.

By the time the war ended, Germany was in shambles and much of its industry would be regulated by the Allies. Johan’s colleagues scattered to various countries and would never come together again to rebuild their own nation. He realized his chance of establishing a successful career in Germany was slim. There was simply too much to do and too few resources available. His only hope was to leave his homeland and pursue opportunities overseas.

Elsa’s dreams of a career in art also dimmed during the years following the war. The balls and the elegant dinners were a thing of the past, and life—as she had known it—ceased to exist. For the first time, her future was uncertain. “How ironic,” she thought to herself, that her cousin’s farm would be the foundation of her destiny.

As they finished dessert, her mind returned to the present and to her favorite topic—their granddaughter, Callie.

Elsa began the conversation timidly, almost as if she were afraid of the answer. “Did Zoey call you back, Johan?” She had asked this



question so many times before with the same results.

Johan knew how much the matter pained Elsa, and aside from missing his granddaughter, he was becoming quite angry with Zoey for ignoring their requests to see her.

“No Liebschen, she didn’t.” He was overwhelmed by the sadness in her eyes. “Don’t worry...I’ll get through. And this time, I won’t give up. If she doesn’t call back by the end of next week, I’ll get Klaus to take care of it. He’ll know what to do. He *does* administer Callie’s trust fund.”

“Oh Johan, do we really need to involve an attorney?”

“Klaus is a good man. He’s handled our business for years. I’ll just explain the situation and tell him to be fair. I’m sure he can convince Zoey to see things our way,” he said confidently. “Eleven years without our granddaughter is too much,” Johan spoke firmly as he reached for Elsa’s hand, “Callie WILL be here for Christmas—I promise.”

Now Johan was a man of his word, and he wasn’t in the habit of making commitments he couldn’t keep. He was tired of seeing his beloved wife in such agony. After all, they weren’t asking for much—just a week or two of Callie’s time. He knew what he had to do to get his granddaughter back, and he was prepared to launch a full scale attack if necessary.



ZOEY WAS IN THE DARKROOM of her studio, analyzing the last roll of film she had shot. There were only a few days left to complete the Victoria’s Secret spring catalogue, and there wasn’t any room for error.

Victoria’s Secret was one of her most enjoyable accounts as well as one of the *bread and butter* basics for which the name Zoey Michaels was known. Not only had it helped her gain her reputation in a very competitive business that was usually male dominated, but it also rewarded her with life-long friendships with top models like Tyra Banks,



Claudia Schiffer, and Heidi Klum. Zoey knew how to wear clothes with style and she knew how to show them off to maximize their potential. Designers and models, alike, insisted on her for their portfolios. And she gladly accommodated them in between agency assignments—it kept her calendar booked, her bank account filled, and her mind occupied.

Her hectic schedule also gave her an excuse to avoid personal relationships. Oh, she was asked out often and by attractive and desirable men, but she only accepted when there was an event she wanted to attend. And when they would call back to ask for another date, she always managed to be out of town or working on a long project. Her heart had been broken once, and she promised *never* to let it happen again.

Zoey heard a tap on the door, followed by her assistant's voice. "Is it safe?"

"Yeah, come in Roxy."

"I finished the breakdown for tomorrow's shoot, made all the confirmations, and gathered the lenses you requested. They're over there by the front door." Roxanne pointed to a large black bag across the room. "Don't forget, Diego said he would be a little late. So we'll have to rearrange the hair and makeup list in the morning."

"Damn him, why does he always have to pick the critical days to be late?" Zoey blurted in anguish.

"Well he did tell you this before he committed to taking the job, so you had the option of hiring someone else." Roxanne was far from the normal assistant. She was young and aggressive, overly pierced and heavily tattooed—and Zoey was lucky to have her!

"So why don't you tell me how you really feel, Roxy!" Zoey cracked a smile then continued, "You're right—I'm wrong. So what else is new? But I'm still allowed to vent, aren't I?"

"Absolutely. That's why I'm leaving now," Roxanne announced with certainty. "Oh, and you might want to check your message machine. It's blinking."

"Yeah...so? When isn't it?" Zoey replied. "Now go home and feed your cat!"

Roxanne grabbed her coat from the sofa and walked to the door. She



turned back to Zoey and confessed, “You know I don’t *really* have a cat.”

Zoey squinted her eyes before whispering, “Yeah, Roxy. I figured that out a long time ago.”

Once Roxanne cleared the doorway, Zoey engaged the series of deadbolts one would expect to find in a New York loft. The apartment was moderately furnished and far too clean to be lived in regularly. As she made her way to the kitchen, she noticed the red indicator light flashing on her answering machine and remembered Roxanne’s words. Hardly in the mood for added stress, Zoey reluctantly hit the play button.

“You have twelve messages,” a generic voice announced.

She reacted with frustration, shaking her head and lashing out. “Why me?”

BEEP.

“Zoey, Darling.” She recognized the deep, raspy Italian voice. “It’s Donatella. I’m lining up my schedule, and I need you at the end of January. Have your agent call my assistant. I’m counting on you. DON’T disappoint me!”

Donatella, or more commonly known by her last name, Versace, was a long-time client and dear friend of Zoey’s. She rarely scheduled her own bookings, so it was an honor to receive her call.

Zoey realized at that moment that any message, regardless of her mood, was worth listening to. So she stopped the machine, grabbed a diet soda from the refrigerator, took out a notepad from the counter drawer, and hit the play button again.

BEEP.

The messages rolled off one by one, from a diverse group of callers, all equally important and by most standards, very impressive. And finally, a message that had her frozen in her seat. She knew the voice all too well. It was her father-in-law.

“Zoey?” A thick, German accent resonated through her soul. “It’s Johan. I want to talk to you about sending Callie for Christmas. Please call me back as soon as you get this message.” Johan cleared his throat and continued talking, “And if this is her helper, please have Zoey call



her father-in-law as soon as possible.” He paused for a split second then concluded, “Thank you.”

BEEP.

She took a deep breath and hit the stop button on the machine. Then speaking out loud as if he could hear her, she responded, “Sorry Johan... I wish I could help you.”

Zoey loved her daughter more than anything, and though it often appeared they didn’t get along, she knew in her heart it was due to her unconventional lifestyle. She had committed to taking Callie to Aspen for Christmas, and there was no way in hell she was going to break her promise.

Not this time.