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Cinderella Conspiracy

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January

El Schenkenberg shouldn't have called Heinrich Meister a slimy toad. Tapping a pen against her chin, she leaned back in her desk chair and stared at the dark window of her den. She'd lost it when the horny old man put his hand on her knee and let it slide up under her skirt. She sighed. Her temper had cost Schenkenberg GmbH their biggest customer. She'd have fired anyone else for handling the situation so poorly.

A lightning flash sliced through the sky. Her eyes closed and she saw the bright green streak of light across her lids. She flinched at the crack of thunder. Too close, too loud. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. A thunderstorm in late January rarely happened. With the thick blanket of snow washed away by rain just a few days ago, she'd been hoping for a spell of sunshine-in vain.

A nice meal and a hot bath and the night wouldn't feel so foreboding.

The phone rang. Ralf's voice. "Forget it, El," her brother-in-law said.

She feigned ignorance. "Forget what?"

"I just got home and found the envelope from the travel agency."
Ralf didn't sound angry but resolved.

She smiled hoping he could hear it in her voice. "Oh, good."

"Sorry, but I can't accept your gift. What kind of a man let's his ... dead wife's sister pay for his honeymoon when he gets remarried?"

El sighed before she could stop herself. "I just want you and Jenny to have an exceptional experience."

"I know and I appreciate the offer. The Andalusia trip sounds great, but that's far too expensive."

A glimmer of hope sparked. "You'd be staying in different historical buildings turned into hotels. How about we split the bill?"

Ralf cleared his throat. "Thanks, El, but no. We'll find something suitable. Maybe a week at a farm in the Bohemian woods. The children could ride ponies."

El glimpsed a new chance. "Tommy and Sa could stay with me..."

Ralf snorted. "Nice try. That's really tempting."

She smiled. "Think about it."

Another flash illuminated the sky. A gentle rumble followed and the drumming of hail. Could it get any worse?

The door bell chimed. Who'd call on her this late in the evening?
"I gotta go, Ralf. Someone's at the door."

"This late? Be careful, okay?"

"Always." She rang off and glanced at the computer clock. 9:36 PM. For a moment she considered to ignore the ring, but in this weather someone might need help. She walked down the corridor and peeped through the spyhole. A tall man held a jacket over his head while the hail pelted him. He looked familiar but completely out of place.

Stepping back, she opening the door. No mistaking him. "The tour guide from hell. I don't believe it."

Martin Sander displayed a rueful smile. "El."

"It's been months. Can't say I expected to see you again."

"Can I come in?"

The cheek of him, showing up unannounced this late. She opened the door wider and stood aside. "Sure. I wouldn't leave a dog out in this weather."

"Thanks." He shook out the wet newspaper and stepped into the hallway.

She smiled. It felt good to see the guy, crazy as he might be. She took the wet paper and tossed it in the recycling bin, while he peeled off his drenched leather jacket and hung it on the coat rack. In the halogen light his bright blue eyes gazed at her with the same intensity as on the trail in the Alps. With his dark-blond hair cropped short and his face clean-shaven, he looked less like a tomb raider.

Then she remembered the revenue forecast. "Listen, Martin, I need to finish some work. Half an hour max. There's beer in the fridge." She pointed to the kitchen door. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Beer? Great. I thought you might be one of those fancy wine types."

Walking towards her den, she called over her shoulder, "Insult me later when I have time to savor it."

"Okay. Go ahead, finish your homework."

Back at her desk, she took a minute to concentrate and blank out the clanging from the kitchen. In the worst case scenario, they wouldn't be able to replace Meister's business with new accounts.

Martin called, "Have you eaten?"

She sighed. "No, but I'm hungry. Want to fix us some sandwiches?"

A chuckle. "Got a better idea."

El checked the clock. 9:44 PM.

She typed the reduced revenue into the spreadsheet and saw the red figure at the bottom of the chart. They'd face a significant loss at the end of the year if they couldn't strike up new business. She e-mailed the updated forecast to her tax adviser, already dreading their meeting the next morning. He'd push her to reduce costs. And that meant head count.

She'd never agree until she saw no other chance to save the company. Schenkenberg GmbH had had some fat years in a row and could take a dip. They simply needed to pull through the drought and work hard to win new customers. No way would she cripple a successful team.

And she'd find a way to send Ralf and Jenny on a romantic honeymoon. Something she'd meant to do for her sister Andrea, but didn't have the money for back then.

She rose and stretched. Nothing went right these days. Ralf with his old-fashioned ideas about a husband having to provide for his family, Meister with his even more out-dated idea of extra services for an important customer. Yuck.

And on top of everything else, a thunderstorm blew Martin Sander straight into her home, her protected zone. What could he possibly want from her? She allowed the idea of him bustling around in her kitchen sink in. The surreal image she conjured up resembled a Salvador Dali painting. All right, no more procrastinating. Time for a reality check.

Sizzling noises and the smell of frying onions and garlic lured her to the kitchen. Martin stood at the stove and stirred in a large pan—a smile on his face. She didn't know what disturbed her more, his actions or his amusement.

This close, she picked out the scent of eggs. "What are you cooking?"

Martin swung around. "Don't look! Go away. Shoo!" He waved with his hands.

Suppressing the laughter bubbling up inside her, she placed a fist on her hip and tilted her head. "This is my kitchen."

"I know. That's why I have to work with some restrictions here." He splayed his arms in a resigned gesture before he turned back to the pan and ground some pepper over it.

El tried to remember the contents of her fridge and deduct what awaited her, but failed. She sighed. "I haven't been shopping in a while."

He cast her a sideways glance. "You look thinner than I remember. High time, someone feeds you a nutritious meal. Plates?"

She took two from the cupboard. Her stomach grumbled. The cooking aromas had stirred hope in her body while her mind remained wary. "Thanks for fixing us..." She peeked around him but still came to no conclusion. "... a meal." Placing the plates on the counter next to the stove, she got a better view and felt disheartened by the yellow-green mesh. "Have you cooked before?"

He scowled. "This is my famous pasta omelet recipe."

"Pasta omelet?" El swallowed. What did she expect from a guy who lost tour members on purpose so he could jerk around the rest of the group in a search and rescue mission. "Did you heat up a bag of your dried trekking food?"

He rolled his eyes. "Have faith, El. You'll love it." And with that, he scooped half of the goo on her plate.

El braced herself. "Let's eat in the boat." She'd need the comforting environment.

His head whipped around. "Eat where?"

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Martin opened a second bottle of beer for El and followed her into a spacious living room furnished with a large dining table plus eight chairs and a sofa in front of a mid-sized TV. No boat. He grinned. Of course not. She'd pulled his leg and he fell for it.

El opened a glass door leading into a green house. The hail had turned into rain and gently beat against the glass ceiling. "Wow," he whispered as he entered the jungle.

"Yeah, this is my favorite place in the house." She stepped into a rowing boat propped up between tropical plants.

"Banana plants?" He'd never seen anything like this in a German home.

"Yep." She grinned and settled in the bow.

Martin sat cross-legged on the cushions across from her and placed his plate and the beers on the bench seat in the middle. What an idea. He grinned at El. Her curly brown hair had grown longer, and she'd applied light make-up. She looked much the same as when he first saw her on the Autobahn rest stop. Only she wore a classy skirt suit then, not baggy sweatpants and a jumper. Her cheek bones looked more defined now. She'd definitely lost a few kilos while everyone else fattened up over the holidays.

She frowned. "Why are you staring at me?"

She had the cutest scowl but he'd have to work a harder to see that. He hadn't expected he'd feel so relaxed in her company while he'd sat in his car outside her house working up the courage to ring her doorbell. Martin grinned. "Why the hell do you have a boat? There isn't even a river close by."

"It was my father's. I couldn't just sell it or let it rot somewhere. He loved this thing." She stroked over the smooth wood. "Loved to fish. Ideally alone. But sometimes he took me along. Just the two of us sitting in silence until we caught something and broke

out in cheers."

He took a swig of his beer then grabbed the plate. "You keep surprising me."

She smiled. "So you keep saying. Now tell me what brings you here."

"Try your food first."

The corners of her mouth twitched slightly as she picked up the plate and carefully scooped some of the omelet on her fork.

"Are your hands trembling?" he teased.

She narrowed her eyes then bravely shoved the food in her mouth. Chewing slowly, she looked past him. Martin couldn't bear the suspense much longer. "Come on, you like it, don't you?"

She swallowed and looked at him with one eyebrow raised. "This is the strangest meal I've eaten since our adventure trek."

Disappointment crashed down on him. "Huh. That's all?"

She ate another fork load then nodded while she chewed. "Hard to believe, but it tastes delicious."

Martin grinned while triumph soared through him. "I knew it." He dug in. It had turned out just perfect. He looked at El eating faster now. He'd missed this woman but never expected it would feel so good to be with her again. Then he realized something. "You are the first person in the world to try a Martin Sander pasta omelet."

"I am? Boy, do I feel special now."

"You should." He chuckled. "I never dared to make it for anyone else before."

She stroked a finger over her cheek. "Hm, I wonder what that implies. A: You don't care what I think of you. B: You enjoy torturing me while you're really trying to do something good. C: You trust me with the darkest side of your character because of point A.

I guess it's all three."

"I should go. It's no fun to torture someone who looks right through you." With no intention of leaving, he put the plate down and leaned over the edge of the boat. "Not sure if I can swim that far."

"Don't rock the boat."

"I think I see alligators."

She chortled then set her empty plate down. "Thanks for feeding me. I'm full to bursting. My stomach is probably in shock."

"Good." He gobbled up the rest of his food and leaned back in the pillows, looking up at the black ceiling. He hadn't felt so at ease in months, so himself. "The rain has stopped. Can you see the stars in a clear night, lying right here?"

"I'd have to clean the glass roof first." She paused then nudged him with her foot. "What are you doing here? Four months and no word from you. Suddenly you ring my doorbell during a night sprung from a horror movie."

"I've been kind of busy." Not too busy though. After the disaster trek with El, he had to cure his concussion and wallow in self-pity. Several times he'd thought about calling her but never did. Couldn't. Then his unexpected inheritance changed everything. But he didn't want to spoil the evening with the weird story so he said, "Something strange happened today. I've just returned from Tenerife."

She whistled. "Sometimes I envy you for your job."

"Yeah, got me a nice sun tan." Much as he tried, he couldn't muster a grin. "I was driving back from Frankfurt airport and saw the sign for your exit. I imagined dropping by and surprising you, but not seriously. Then the thunderstorm made me reconsider."

"Seeking shelter? I see." The corners of El's mouth drooped, her chin lifted. "I've got a guest room. No problem."

"Wait, there's more. The thunderstorm reminded me too much of your

temper so I decided against a visit."

She laughed. "I always knew there's a coward lurking under the macho."

Martin laughed but held up his hand to silence her. If he didn't spill the strange events of this evening now he'd start believing that he'd imagined it all. "When I saw the five hundred meter sign before the turn off, hail set in, forcing me to slow down. I still thought you'd just slam the door in my face."

"Maybe I should have." The corners of her mouth twitched with the strain of keeping a straight face.

"And then I saw the flashing headlights. High beams. Coming towards me fast. The crazy bastard was going the wrong way on the Autobahn. I'd just passed a car and could only hope I'd have enough space to cut in. Half blinded by the brights, I yanked the wheel around and hit the exit ramp at the last second." His heart beat faster while he remembered.

Grinning, El shook her head. "You made that up."

Of course, she wouldn't believe him. Martin slathered his voice with pathos. "Fate sent me here. Or some higher power that enjoys a good joke."

"I'd never have thought of you as the hand of God." Her grin slowly faded and a glint sparked in her eyes. "But then you never know. Tell me about Tenerife."

Surprised, he studied her. "You've never been there? It's almost as popular as Mallorca among Germans."

"No. Never." Her auburn curls danced as she shook her head again. Her eyes urged him on.

Suspicion bubbled up inside him. "What's this about?"

"Remember Ralf, my brother in law? He's finally going to get married."

"To the lovely Jenny?" He still remembered her well, when she came to the rescue of Martin's girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend.

El nodded. "Yes, and I want them to have a blast of a honeymoon. And it has to be cheap. The pig-headed mule won't let me treat them."

"And you don't believe in fate?" Martin laughed. Gazing into her light-brown, almost golden, eyes, he knew he'd gladly accept his lot for once.

"What's so funny?" Her forehead creased.

He smirked.

She kicked his shin. "You're still the same old jerk."