

ROSE

ITS SHADES OF GREY



STEPHAN WELLNITZ

Rose - Its shades of grey

Also by Stephan Wellnitz

Rose - Die dunkle Seite

Rose - Il lato oscuro

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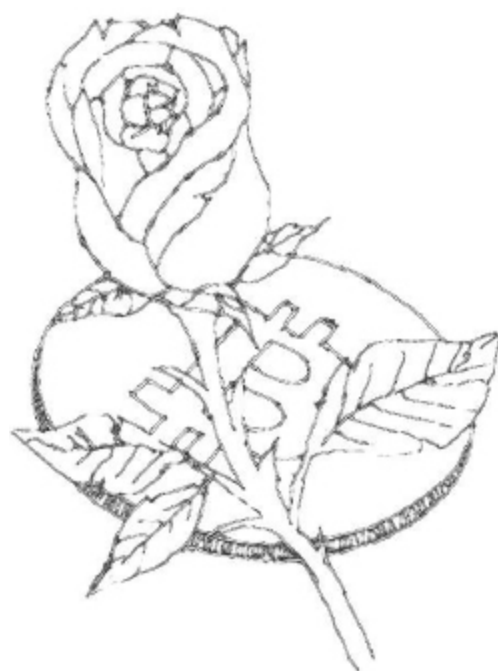
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1st Chapter

Frankfurt am Main, February 2020

Sometimes our greatest talents are hidden in our darkest depths.

The beer bottle made a quiet hiss when Karl opened it. It was only after four in the afternoon, but it was a Sunday and the daylight outside was already clouded with fine threads of twilight. At this time of year, it was sometimes hardly really bright, especially on cloudy days like today.

Only the huge picture painted in intense red colors brightened the room. The canvas was much too big for the small room, dominated it, but that did not bother Karl. The house was too small for this picture, not the picture too big for this house.

"Karl? Can you bring me one of the big salad bowls from the cellar?" Claudia's voice penetrated through the staircase from the kitchen to his study.

Karl sighed and took a deep sip from his beer bottle. The beer tasted tart and cold, pleasantly refreshing, but the alcohol missed its effect.

"Yes, I'll do it right away!" he called and turned back to his laptop, which was standing on the desk in front of him.

Actually, he had never been the type to take homework or read his emails on a Sunday. For 21 years he worked at the same bank, had first learned to be a bank clerk after school, and then later put his master of business administration on top of it, a solid career without significant detours or leaps.

He liked to deal with numbers. Numbers were reliable, predictable, and followed a logic very different from people in all their inconsistencies.

But about a year and a half ago, his boss had approached him and informed him that his department would be closed. There was talk of austerity measures, of working more efficiently now, of lean workforce and outsourcing and other new German expressions to which Karl was not listening to properly. He knew what that meant. A lot of people suddenly got rid of their jobs so that „those up there” and especially the shareholders could earn even more money.

But he was lucky. Someone, perhaps his team leader or the department head, had recognized his ‘potential’ in the handling of numbers, as it was always called now so beautifully, and stimulated his transfer to the new subsidiary FinTech, where one dealt with products such as cryptocurrencies and NFTs for the customers.

Karl didn’t know much about cryptocurrencies before. He had picked up terms like blockchain or bitcoin once or twice, but on his first day at his new job, he realized that he had finally found his true calling here.

It was so wonderfully simple and logical. He would like to do nothing else than talk shop all day about NFT and the blockchain, which meant that he was now also available for his colleagues via e-mail at night and on weekends, much to his wife’s annoyance.

“Karl! The salad bowl!” Claudia just called again.

The smell of pot roast was in the air, along with steamed vegetables, Claudia’s specialty.

Karl rolled his eyes, took another sip from his bottle, and reluctantly got up.

Sunday was reserved for the family, even after the children were long gone. Tobias studied law in Marburg and was about to take his second state examination, but now he had moved to Frankfurt. Annika had taken her teacher training course in Heidelberg in the summer semester but was doing a traineeship here in Frankfurt.

Claudia insisted that the children came home for dinner on Sundays, at least most of the time. Tobias and Annika did her the favor of showing up, at least mostly.

Karl left the study, put his beer bottle on the sideboard in the hallway. He went down into the basement, where it smelled of heating oil, detergent, and the past. Somewhere between the Christmas decoration and the camping equipment, Claudia kept the part of her kitchen utensils had no place in her kitchen, although Karl occasionally wondered what was hidden in the seven kitchen cupboards. She had insisted on the cupboards in fitted kitchen at the time.

25 years ago, shortly after Tobias' birth, they had bought the semidetached house in the north of Frankfurt. It was still affordable then, however today it would probably not be because the property prices in the region had exploded. Actually, it was too big for him and Claudia, but at least it offered enough space for them to avoid each other.

He reached for one of the salad bowls which stood neatly lined up in one of the shelves, between the raclette and the fondue, and went up to the ground floor.

Claudia stood leaning over the steaming pots with reddened cheeks, while Annika diligently shredded salad at the sideboard. Karl put down the salad bowl and went into the living room to see Tobias, who was zapping through the sports channels.

Karl sat down next to him. For a while, father and son sat silently next to each other and stared at the flickering screen, while the two women in the kitchen chatted excitedly.

Annika just told her mother in an excited voice about the new boyfriend she had met at the beginning of her traineeship. Markus was already in the last semester and was a research assistant, a good catch obviously.

"He's so smart, Mama, you have to hear him talk about history," Annika just raved.

Tobias snapped his tongue and the corners of his mouth twitched, knowing his sister's mind all too well. Annika fell in love quickly

and often and it was always 'the right one', of which Karl could also sing a song.

"So, my boy, how are things at university?" Karl asked to break the silence between them.

Almost imperceptibly Tobias shrugged and tightened.

"Um, good, good, I'm studying for the second state exam. The library has become my second home."

Karl nodded. He, himself, had never studied at a university, but had studied courses at a private university while working. It filled him with pride that his son would become a lawyer or even a judge.

"So, what are your plans for the time after that?" Karl avoided looking at his son. He remembered all too well how unpleasant conversations of this kind had once been with his own father. Why did some things never change?

"Well, you know, I was thinking about specializing in environmental law." Tobias said, his eyes fixed firmly on the TV.

Karl raised an eyebrow. "Environmental law? I thought you wanted to do corporate law."

Tobias nodded slowly. "Yes, of course, that was a consideration because of the money and so on. But you know, I realized that I don't want to do something all my life just for the money. I need more in my life. A vocation or something alike."

"Understand," Karl grumbled, even though he wasn't sure whether he really understood. The young people today were somehow very different from him and Claudia back then.

They had longed to have a driver's license, a car, just to get away from home, stand on their own feet.

Tobias, on the other hand, had traveled through South America with his backpack after graduation. Claudia had almost gone mad at that time. Now he was a good student, but he did not have a driver's license until today.

Karl clapped him on his knee. "You'll know what you're doing," he said. It was supposed to sound encouraging, but somehow, he

missed the right tone.

"Karl!" Claudia's voice sounded clearly reproachful.

Karl turned around to face Claudia.

Claudia stood in the passage to the kitchen with his open beer bottle in her hand and shook her head.

"Now I have a beer wreath on the sideboard in the hallway."

Karl pulled a face. Crap, he had forgotten the beer when he came back from the hallway.

"I'm sorry," he grumbled, stood up, and took the bottle out of her hand.

"We can eat now," Claudia said, and it still sounded reproachful.

The family sat down at the dining table. The food smelled delicious and tasted even better which lifted Karl's mood. Claudia's cooking skills were second to none, a trait he still cherished after all these years. Maybe it was also the beer, which now, after the third bottle, finally had a small effect.

Karl joked and laughed, the mood was relaxed and laid back. Family Sunday was not only a mandatory event and the Sunday lunches had something for themselves.

His cell phone beeped and told him that he had received an e-mail.

Karl frowned. "I have to go to the study for a moment." he muttered.

Claudia frowned regretfully. "On Sunday?" she asked.

"It's not work, it's my stocks," Karl said mysteriously and stood up. "That was delicious, honey," he said and gave Claudia a kiss on the cheek, which made her slightly blush. It was no longer often that the two were physically close.

Tobias looked at his watch, and thought of his friends. "I don't have much time, my train is leaving soon."

"I can give you a lift," Annika announced, who never missed an opportunity to tease her older brother with the fact that he did not have a driver's license.

“This is going to be very quick,” Karl assured and hurried towards the stairs.

When he arrived at the study, he locked the door and turned on the laptop. He opened his email and read the new mail for the second time.

SUBJECT: BLACK ROSE

MESSAGE: I KNOW ABOUT YOUR BLACK ROSE IN MADRID. TRANSFER 5 BITCOIN TO THE WALLET ADDRESS BELOW BY FRIDAY, OTHERWISE I WILL SEND PHOTOS AND OTHER EVIDENCE TO YOUR WIFE AND COLLEAGUES.

Karl turned pale, suddenly he felt sick. He tasted bitter stomach acid on his tongue and for a moment he feared that he would retch out all the pot roast and side dish.

It had to be a joke, a terrible, tasteless joke, it couldn't be real, it must not be real. He swallowed, but the disgusting taste simply did not want to disappear.

Again and again, he read the lines in front of him on the screen, but the content did not change.

Panicked, Karl closed the laptop, as if this could make the email and its horrible text disappear. When he got up, he felt the ground swaying under his feet. He took a few steps and then had to hold on to the back of his chair.

Karl gasped, the room around him seemed to be spinning, he was gasping for breath, his heart was racing, he was desperately trying to calm down. Under no circumstances could Claudia or the children see him like this, at least not before he had come up with a good explanation.

He closed his eyes and silently counted to ten. The blood rushed in his ears, but slowly, very slowly, his heartbeat calmed down. He

regained control of his mind and body.

He sat up, took a few deep breaths, and went down to the dining room where the others were.

“So – are you a millionaire now?” Tobias joked, who just stood up from his chair and held out his hand to say goodbye to his father.

“Not yet,” Karl said with a sour smile on his face and grabbed his hand.

Annika was standing in the hallway putting on her jacket.

“We have to go now,” she said and embraced her mother to say goodbye. “Food was super delicious, Mama, as always. I am looking forward to the next time.” She kissed her mother on both cheeks, then hugged her father.

The smell of lily-of-the-valley came into Karl’s nose. That’s how she always smelled, innocent and sweet. He took a deep breath. For a moment, he managed to forget the rift that ran through his world.

Through the window, they watched the children climb into the car and drive away. It had long turned dark outside.

Claudia sighed deeply and rubbed her arms. “They grew up so quickly,” she said, her voice was filled with melancholy. “I’ll go and clean up the kitchen.”

Annika pressed the button on the car key and heard the clicking of the central locking. It had become dark by now and it was raining lightly. It was very cold.

“Hopefully, no ice,” she thought and went to her small BMW at the street corner. Tobias followed her and checked his WhatsApp messages on his mobile phone. Annika turned around, looked at him, and thought that he looked like a ghost, so in the dark with the light from the cell phone display on his face. Pale and grey in color. She was worried about her brother. Since he had returned from the semester break in Argentina, he did not progress with his studies and hung out more with his friends rather concentrating on his studies.