Official reading sample

ELEPHANT IN THE VAN

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This is a work of fiction. The characters and plot were invented by the author; the central substance in the novel is also fictional.

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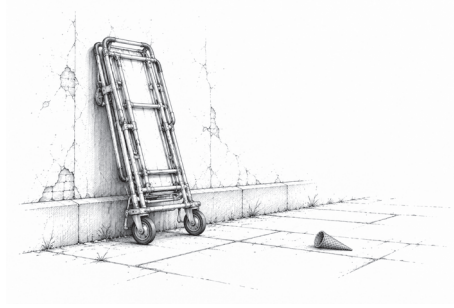

PART ONE
THE GRIP

The Leberkäse is going bad.

IRINA

CHAPTER 1
SUNDAY, 11:23 A.M.



The overweight mother was panting. It was Sunday, 11:23 a.m., and she was hauling her 179 kilos the eighty meters from the shopping center back to her apartment building. It had already taken quite a while.

Outside, it was winter. The night's ice still clung to the bare trees in the courtyard, and where the sun didn't reach, it hung there like glass. She'd had ice cream anyway, real ice cream, in a cone.

Two scoops. Stracciatella and the new burnt caramel. The girl behind the counter hadn't charged for the second one. Irina had complained about the price until the girl preferred to give her the scoop rather than listen to one more sentence. With whipped cream. To her, ice cream without whipped cream wasn't ice cream. It was an insult. In her mind she had already moved on to the leftover Leberkäse in the fridge, which she would eat cold, with her fingers, and the open carton of wine beside it, which would be empty by evening, as every carton was empty by evening.

For breakfast she'd finished yesterday's carton, two glasses, maybe three, enough to make the eighty meters seem like a good idea. She was drunk in the way no one noticed anymore because she always was: slow, friendly, with a face that lagged a little behind each step. Above it, her hair had been dyed again, in the kitchen, a carrot red that doesn't exist in nature, and for weeks a strip at the roots had been lighter than the rest.

She didn't notice the white van. It was a gift from her daughter. Not directly, but the three masked men inside, the man at the wheel, the doctor with his two numbers, the caregiver and the heavy-duty stretcher, the whole team had been hired by Zhenia to help Mom lose weight. Buckled in, ready to catch Irina and put her into a deep, sedated sleep for months.

Irina was supposed to wake up as a cross between a skinny deer, Iron Woman and the last supermodel of the late eighties. That was the plan, anyway.

She couldn't have said what she felt at that moment. Only one detail remained: at first she'd thought she'd tripped. The ground came up to meet her, and she was annoyed, because at her weight getting up was a project, an event with spectators.

Then the hands were there. They weren't rough. That was the disturbing part. They handled her the way movers handle an expensive piano, carefully, with a bill attached. Four grips, left, right, under the arms, under the knees, and the world tipped sideways. The sky above her was the flat, milky gray of a winter Sunday when no one opens the curtains.

From the bus stop, two women saw what there is to see on that street at that time on a Sunday: a white vehicle, a stretcher, men in masks and gloves, a fat woman who has collapsed on her way home. They saw an emergency. One told the other she'd been having trouble walking for a while.

She wanted to scream. What came out was an indignant groan, the sound of someone being passed over at the checkout. One of the figures said something, calmly, almost politely, but in

a language that wasn't hers and that she had never learned. Irina didn't understand a word, and that made it worse. You can't ask for anything in a language you don't speak. Then she felt the cold kiss of the needle in the crook of her arm, and the indignation dissolved like sugar in warm water.

Her last clear thought was absurd, and even as it came she still knew it was absurd. She thought: The Leberkäse is going bad.

WHO WAS IN THE VAN

At the wheel sat a man everyone at the house called the security guard, and it wasn't for lack of a better word. It was the most precise description he allowed. He drove as if the van were empty.

In the back, between the stretcher and the wheel well, the doctor sat watching two numbers on a small device, oxygen saturation and pulse, as if they were the last two numbers in the world. His were the hands keeping this woman alive, and everyone in the van knew it.

Beside him was the caregiver, holding the woman's head without anyone having asked her to. Before the van pulled away, she wiped a trace of whipped cream from the corner of the woman's mouth with her thumb. The doctor saw and said nothing. It wasn't in any protocol.

The three masked men on the bench were interchangeable, and they knew it. Muscle, silence, gloves. The masks were the kind you buy at the pharmacy, blue, with elastic loops. Since that one spring, no one looks twice when three men wear them. One was praying quietly, but no one knew to whom.

THE DRIVE

According to the map, it was three hours and twenty minutes from the apartment building to the forest. It took four, because the security guard stopped at rest areas twice without anyone getting out. A white van going too slowly somewhere attracts less attention than one that drives for hours without stopping.

Inside, it smelled of disinfectant and cold coffee, and the longer the drive went on, the more it smelled of Irina too, the sickly sweet, unwashed smell of a body that for years had carried more than it should, and the morning's wine seeping from her pores. The doctor had smelled it before the stretcher was in the van and adjusted a figure in his calculations for the first three days. No one said anything about it. The heater was on two. The caregiver had laid the emergency blanket over her, gold side in, and for a long time the soft rustle of foil at every bump was the loudest sound in the van.

At kilometer one hundred and twelve, Irina stopped breathing.

Not for long. Eleven seconds, then her breath came back with a sound like a door slamming in the wind. The doctor looked at the number, then at his watch, then at the number again. He'd expected it. It was in the file, it was in the file in both countries, and no one had ever done anything about it: for years this woman had stopped breathing several times every night and still woken up every morning. That was the medical reason for everything that followed, and it was a good reason. That was the convenient part.

She did it four more times on the drive. The doctor wrote down the seconds each time.

Outside, the city gave way to fields, the fields to hills, the hills to a forest that grew denser and darker until the treetops closed over the road like hands over a candle. The temperature

dropped below freezing, and the forest looked as if someone had stopped it and forgotten to turn it back on.

WHAT WAS WAITING FOR IRINA

No one would miss her. That was the calculation, and it added up.

No pet was waiting for her. Animals didn't last long around Irina. One morning she'd let her daughter's cat out the door and never seen it again, and she hadn't even looked properly. She'd vacuumed up the child's hamster while cleaning. It had been out of its cage, and she'd been too sluggish to switch off the vacuum.

What was waiting for her was gossip. A neighbor, a woman who looked half her age and was twice as old, would wonder in three days why the fat woman across the way had stopped waddling to the shopping center. In a week another would say she must be back in the other country, with her mother who had dementia, on account of the apartment, you know how it is. In two weeks no one would ask anymore.

No job was waiting. Since spring she'd been getting a pension, approved after twenty years of doctor's notes. It covered the apartment and the wine and not both. She knitted to make up the difference, and knitted well, for cash the authorities never saw, at prices that covered the wool and a fraction of the hours. Her daughter covered the rest. Every few weeks, at two in the morning, she got a message with a number in it.

Her daughter wouldn't ask. At that hour her daughter was sitting at a kitchen table in another country, where she'd been sitting for a week, and knew where her mother was, down to the kilometer.

The bottle collector would keep looking the longest. He was her last buddy, six years of bottles by the benches and down at the lake in summer, him with the crates, her with the eye, and

the only person who'd ever given her anything without a bill arriving: the money from the bottles, all of it, in coins, every time, and the faucet that no longer dripped, and the door that closed again. That Sunday he'd been standing by the dumpster in the courtyard, looking out through the driveway at the eighty meters, and he'd seen the white vehicle and the stretcher and the four grips. In twenty years he'd seen three ambulances in that courtyard, and he knew they handled people differently. But a bottle collector doesn't file a police report. No one asks him. It's his job.