

FAMILY TRAIT



BEA



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By Bea

After the accident, we discovered that mom and dad had left something, not a lot, for my sister Jean and myself. At that time, she was a couple of years out of college, and smart enough to recognize a booming real estate market when she saw one. Also smart enough to make some canny investments and become relatively well-to-do and financially comfortable long before she was in her mid-twenties.

At the time of the accident, I was a junior in college, and hadn't the brains nor ambition of a wet hen. By the time I had to leave there a couple of years later, I hadn't picked up enough credits to graduate, though I had learned that I was a lousy gambler. In some ways I was lucky I guess. Jean, being the executor, was more than generous with what she gave me - although she always made sure that there was plenty left of my inheritance. In truth, if she had given more to me, I would have lost it just the same. Anyway, I was poverty stricken and in debt.

I finally had to confess to her what had really been going on. She was furious, absolutely furious, but paid off my debts though demanding that I quit college and go to live with her for a while. I was complimented that she still had enough affection for me to take me in, although she cut my allowance to the bone. I was also quite surprised to find that, by this time, she had established herself as a fairly well known engineering consultant in addition to being an up and coming author in that same field.

After a few weeks of lazing about and generating some dirty looks from her, I pointed out that I could take over the weight of running the house, while I was studying to get re-entry to college (fat chance!). Always perceptive - except where I was concerned, she took this line from me hook, line, and sinker, and I fell into a rather idyllic time. Not much to do, and a lot of time to do it. I became quite addicted to afternoon soaps and the game shows on TV. I even picked up a lot of brownie points by starting to do some of her secretarial work. Truthfully? I was lazy, but showed some aptitude. Then came the change!

When I originally joined her, she owned a small cottage on the outskirts of a village, which is where we lived. It was kinda small, and though my bedroom

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was really cramped. In looking back I see that the house fitted our needs quite well. But as self-centered as I was, all I could think of were faults.

As one investment, she'd bought into the mortgage of a much larger house some miles away and further out from the village. The borrowers defaulted, and Jean was left with no choice other than foreclose. About that same time, she got an offer for our current house that she couldn't afford to turn down. At least, that was what I was told.

She was nice enough to ask my opinion and explain why she was considering taking over the larger house. "It will be far too big a house for us," she explained "But with the rising real estate market in this area, it's far too good an opportunity to miss." Here her expression got a little colder. "And being a little larger, it might provide a better environment for your studies. You're not exactly burning the books up, are you?" Then her eyes got wide and innocent – a sign that I now knew could mean trouble.

I grimaced. This was not a subject I wanted to discuss in any detail. But the idea of a bigger bedroom for yours truly was more than enough to get my enthusiastic approval. Naturally, I went along with a lot of satisfaction. In no time at all we had moved our stuff and were well ensconced in our new home. I then discovered the disadvantages of a much larger abode - it seemed as if the work necessary to keep the place clean and tidy had increased exponentially. Jean wasn't a neat freak – but she WAS a lot tidier and cleaner than myself and wasn't slow when it came to pointing out any shortcomings I had. Naturally, her career had to take a major upswing at the same time which meant a lot more secretarial functions for me as well as looking after the house. I wasn't slow in letting Jean know of how hard I was having to work.

But I was surprised when she returned from a short lecture tour in Germany with a fraulein in tow - Elsa. With a shock, I discovered that Jean had actually listened to my complaints and hired a housekeeper!

The original thought of actually having someone subordinate thrilled the hell out of me to tell the truth. I'd actually become accustomed to being low man on the totem pole and was starting to get the sneaky feeling that I was becoming too complacent in that position. My ego needed a boost. Having a subordinate? Oh boy!

But I discovered very quickly that Jean hadn't hired Elsa as any sop to my ego. Far from it. Elsa was a fairly large, robust lady. Blonde, with a tendency towards wearing dowdy, frumpish, dresses, but an excellent athletic body underneath the plain outfits for all that. She had a cheerful, friendly disposition, with a Germanic 'cast' to her talking, and we hit it off immediately.

At first, that is. And, to tell the truth, our falling out was strictly my fault. I guess I just was grumpy that day - who knows. Just got it into my head that Elsa was my inferior - and wasn't showing me enough deference. She laughed at first when I told her to address me as 'sir', driving me further into a nasty truculence.

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Then she tried, genuinely, to find out what was troubling me. But I wasn't having any. Got petulant. Made demands. Finally had an all-out war with her. She wasn't slow to speak up for herself and her accent got thicker and thicker.

Jean heard the ruckus, and came down from her office, a little put out at being disturbed. When she discovered the root cause of the problem, she was furious. Turned in me.

"I don't treat you like a bloody servant! Where do you come off wanting Elsa to kiss your ass?" she snarled at me.

"That's not what it is. . ." I grumbled.

"The hell it's not!" she snapped. "Okay! I don't have time for this nonsense. You Philip. You're my secretary.."

"Manager!" I demanded.

She shook her head, pursed her lips tightly.

"Whatever! Elsa is in charge of the house. Your job is to take care of my schedule, appointments and so on."

"And she reports to me." I added.

"She does not!" Jean retorted. "You both report to me. And if you can't get along - I'll fire the pair of you!"

I'd never seen her so mad. And all of a sudden, realized just how mean spirited and stupid I'd been. I really wanted to apologize to both of them, but didn't. And oh, the ramifications of that stupidity...

There were chances for Elsa and I to settle our differences over the next month or so, but instead we both retreated into our shells, sniping and putting each other down at every opportunity. I think that Jean felt like strangling the pair of us - with good reason. But, like a lot of human relationships, there was so much nonsense from both Elsa and myself that it was hard for her to side with anyone. I saw her shake her head in aggravation many a time. Got to the stage that I even grinned at the chaos I was helping to create.

Looking back, that was what the pair of us were pressing her to do. Make her side with the one against the other I suppose. I had the advantage of being her brother. Elsa had the persuasion of being in the right against a little snob (which is what I was acting like) and was an excellent housekeeper to boot. Jean was caught in the middle.

But then came the news that vitalized the whole house. Jean was chosen to head up a two month lecture tour that would take in numerous countries on the continent. The big thing though, was the fact that she'd actually be responsible for the scheduling for another six lecturers that would join her at differing times throughout the tour. As the fact that each lecturer was a 'star' in his or her own field - but not always entirely 'correct' for a particular country - the 'politics' of

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the presentations - level of accommodations, etc., were of primary importance. Jean had the brains to do what was required, but often lacked the time – so I became more involved with the managerial side of her business.

This, of course, raised my 'level of importance' in the house - which I made sure to flaunt in front of Elsa at every opportunity. She, on the other hand, mounted a campaign for additional help which threw me for a loop. Her reasoning was that the house needed (desperately) a thorough cleaning, from one end to the other. With Jean and I gone for months on tour? What better time to get this done? And if she could hire a temporary maid for the period while we were gone, maybe even before we left? All the better, nein?

And damned if Jean didn't give in! I was truly pissed off! Here was a new addition to the household - who was to be responsible to Elsa! Not me! To make matters worse, the girl was hired well before we left for our tour. I was hurt that I wasn't in the hiring loop. I had the strange feeling that Elsa hadn't been involved either, but left that issue severely alone. I also had an intuition that the new girl and Jean seemed to know each other, but thought that was probably my imagination.

And Bobbi, the addition to our household, was pretty. Make no mistake about that. Maybe a little taller than me, even out of heels. About the same weight, but quick and pleasant enough that her demeanor consistently made her seem smaller and more submissive somehow. Always a ready smile - and deferential? I'll say! Made me feel like an old fashioned plantation owner. Always quick to serve, her cute uniforms flashing and sparkling as she hurried to meet any demand - whether imagined or not.

But oh! How incensed I was. Here was this young girl who looked up to me, but reported to my sworn enemy, Elsa. And don't think that Elsa wasn't aware of my feelings. Just loved to show her authority over Bobbi any time I was in the vicinity. She was always as nice as could be expected, but left her authority in no doubt. I stewed over this and stewed over it - my mind just couldn't leave it alone. Got more and more disgruntled.

After some weeks, I started nagging at Jean to let Bobbi help me, my verbal reasoning being that Bobbi had been originally hired to assist Elsa when Jean and I were away on our trip! Surely Bobbi had learned everything there was to know about the house already - Elsa had to be in a position of just having to 'make work' for the girl - whereas I was inundated with work - I needed her!

Here, I should explain something. One thing I'd learned while Jean and I were by ourselves was that I did enjoy cooking. Was quite good as a matter of fact. When Elsa had come on board, it had been shown immediately that she was no cook. As we'd been getting along at that time, I'd agreed to continue the cooking for all three of us. Now our number had increased to four - and Bobbi had told Jean that her cooking expertise stretched as far as boiling water - beyond that, she was hopeless. So, effectively, I'd become, and remained, the

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cook for the household. This did not bother me at all, but it was a weapon in my fight for supremacy over Elsa.

We generally ate together, all four of us. Sometimes Jean would eat in her office if she was wrestling with a knotty problem, but this was highly unusual. Accordingly, I was often in the position of actually serving the meals up to my sister (my boss) and two of her servants. Secretly, I was in two minds about this. On one hand I wanted both Elsa and Bobbi to recognize my status in the house yet, on the other, I got a strange feeling of satisfaction while acting in a serving capacity to them. One thing I had to give Elsa credit for - she often praised my cooking - and I always blushed at her compliments.

Well, to get this story back on track. I complained to Jean that the additional cooking chores were just another thing that ate into my 'managerial' functions, leaving me an ever-increasing back log of stuff that needed to get done for her tour. Wouldn't it make more sense for Bobbi to help me, rather than Elsa ? At least up until she and I left?

Jean sighed a lot and shook her head, but finally gave in. I, of course, was delighted as much at Elsa's ill-concealed fury as anything else. The fact that I now had a worshipful young girl at my beck and call was a marvelous, delicious, bonus. Believe me, I enjoyed this tremendously.

Then, I discovered another way to raise Elsa's ire. I got Bobbi to stop wearing her maids' uniforms. I don't know where the idea came from - looking back, I have the feeling that Bobbi herself may have been the originator, but when I saw the effect on Elsa , I guess I just had to take it as far as I could.

"She's a maid, for goodness sake!" Elsa had exploded at me the first time she'd seen Bobbi in a skirt and blouse during the work day.

"Maybe! But only when she works for you!" I retorted. "When she works with me, she's my assistant, and I expect her to dress accordingly!"

Elsa stomped off in a rage, leaving me gleefully surveying another of my major victories.

There was a problem though. At first it didn't amount to much, but it gradually grew and grew. I didn't really have enough work to keep Bobbi busy! She was such a quick learner that she had got through my backlog in nothing flat - and I had very little left over from my own duties to keep her occupied. Slowly, I started passing more and more of my remaining work to her, pretending that I was occupied on other things (at a much higher level, of course). Started taking more time at my cooking - which generated more compliments - which drew me into a cycle of doing less and less work - and more cooking.

Bobbi really did do an outstanding job - to the extent that Jean really started getting impressed at the quality of work I was producing - yes, I'm afraid that I took all the credit. When she'd ask how Bobbi was doing, I'd look pensive.

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“Coming along quite nicely.” I'd say. “Has a definite talent for the job, but still a fairly long way to go.”

Then one afternoon, about three weeks before we were due to leave, Jean suggested that she and I have dinner that night by ourselves. “Please cook it if you don't mind, the only time we get a decent meal here is when you do - but get Bobbi to serve it up. She and Elsa can eat down in the kitchen for tonight. You and I need to talk in private”.

I was too stupid to ask what she had in mind, just delighted at the thought of how jealous Elsa would be at being relegated down to the 'servant's quarters' as I thought of them to myself. I was so pleased with the whole idea, that I made a really great meal - about five courses, leaving just enough time for me to get showered and shaved and have a drink before dinner. This covered two delights – the cooking itself and having someone else be the server. I had the shower, but passed on the shave - I only have to shave about every three or four weeks and I didn't see much sense in it that night.

Feeling magnanimous, I made the drinks for Jean and I instead of having Bobbi do it. Settled down beside Jean on the sofa. She had a bunch of papers with her. “Before we start?” she said. “I have to say that I've really been impressed with the level of work you've put into this lecture tour. I mean, you've really outdid yourself. I mean, when I think that you actually did all this - and trained a young girl at the same time? I'm almost speechless.”

“Oh, she wasn't that bad.” I admitted airily. “She had a minor tendency towards goofing off now and then, but she didn't waste too much of my time. I was really impressed by the strides she made.”

Jean shook her head admiringly. “Must admit it. You can be a real juvenile pain when you want, but I'm glad to see the signs of maturity coming through. Nice that you take the credit, but give her some as well.”

I grinned, accepting the compliment.

“But.” she continued. “I really hate discussing business in front of the others and since my time has been getting more and more constricted all of the time, figured that a nice meal – by ourselves was the best way to do it. Now, getting down to business. Do you really think that this exchange rate will hold up for the German mark and the Dutch guilder? If they fall, we could save a lot of money - but if they rise? I don't know. Explain your recommendation again.”

I looked at her blankly. Had absolutely no idea of what she was talking about. Then I remembered. Bobbi had asked me 'something' about exchange rates. I'd suggested that she check with the reference desk of the library, then promptly forgotten all about it. I cursed myself inwardly, because when she'd given me the paper - the rough draft as I called it - I'd been too lazy to read it, so I'd no idea whatsoever what had been written there, simply passed it on as my own recommendation.

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“Let me cast my mind back on that a minute Jean .” I said, trying desperately to give myself some time to think.

She looked a little disappointed. “Yeah. Well okay. But why do you suggest that we keep these two doctors Tryon and Aimsley isolated from each other? - I mean it seems like an awful amount of work and energy for benefits I just can't see.”

I've never been any kind of actor. My total incomprehension of her first currency question must have shown on my face. My attempt to change the subject was also obvious. She cocked her head to one side. Her eyes narrowed. “Wait here a minute.” she said, getting up and ringing the bell for the maid, then came back to sit down.

Within a minute, Bobbi came bustling into the room, her immaculate apron crackling around her as she did so.

“Yes miss Jean?” she said, dropping a pretty curtsy.

“Bobbi? What do you think about the currency rates on the German mark and Dutch guilder?”

Bobbi thought for a moment.

“Oh. I see them as being very steady over the short term ma'am. If you're concerned about either one of them dropping, I don't see it happening quickly – if at all.”

“You don't think they'll fall? Wouldn't we save some money if they did?”

Bobbi thought again for a few seconds before replying. “I don't really know ma'am. But the economist for the Times newspaper? He thinks they'll stay firm for a while. And even if they did slip? It might be too late by that time to get reservations in a decent hotel..”

With that, Bobbi came over to Jean, bent over her shoulder and touched the papers in Jean 's hand.

“And beggin' your pardon ma'am? If you check appendix 'A' there, you'll see that some of the better hotels have their room rates tied to the currency level at the time of the reservation - so if you left it too late?” She shrugged. “Would probably cost just as much, if not more..”

Jean nodded, a reflective look in her eyes. Paused for a second or two then said. “Yes Bobbi. Very good. Thank you. Go back to the kitchen and ask Elsa to come back here with you, would you please?”

“Certainly ma'am.” Bobbi smiled, curtsying again before leaving the room.

Jean turned to me, her face cold. “You rotter! Letting that girl do all the work, while you took all the credit! How disgusting! I'm thoroughly ashamed of you.

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Not only that! You've been manipulating me - and I don't like it, not one little bit"

I hung my head. "Well she didn't exactly do all the work." I said lamely.

"Sure!" Jean retorted. "What's the bet, she can come up with an excellent reason for keeping Tryon and Aimsley apart?"

"Everybody knows that these two guys hate each other." I blustered.

Jean sneered at me. "These 'guys' are both women." she said.

I reddened deeply. Before I could come up with anything Elsa and Bobbi knocked and came in to the room.

"Elsa?" Jean said immediately. "I want to take Bobbi with me on the lecture tour. See any big problems?"

My heart leaped. I was going to get Bobbi to come along as well? Boy, would Elsa be pissed off! And I wasn't wrong on that score. Elsa's face was getting as red as mine had been. Her eyes got flinty.

"This is not fair miss Jean! He.." she pointed an angry finger at me. "Does not need her! Not like I do!"

"Oh, why don't you just be quiet Elsa ..." I started.

"Hush Philip!" Jean commanded and addressed her next comment to Elsa. "I'm not taking her because he needs her. It's me that needs her."

"Well you agreed that I needed help to do the house cleaning." Elsa replied angrily. "And now you are taking my help away."

Jean spread her hands out in a conciliatory gesture.

"Elsa? I can't really do anything else. She's invaluable to me. This tour will make a big difference to the fees I can charge from now on - and anyway, you won't be without help - I'm leaving him here to help you." she flipped her hand so that the thumb was pointing at me.

I think that the astonishment on Elsa's face must have mirrored mine. What in hell was my sister talking about?

Elsa was the first to recover. "I'm sorry Miss Jean. That's not good enough. He's absolutely hopeless. Lazy. Does not know the meaning of a day's work. Can cook, but that's all! Dislikes me intensely. I cannot work with him. I'm sorry. Please accept my resignation, effective immediately."

Jean stood up. Held her arms out towards Elsa.

"Elsa? Dear Elsa? I'm not asking you to work with him. He'll be working for you. He'll do what you tell him, when you tell him." She turned to me. "Isn't that right Philip? You're going to work for Elsa, aren't you? You're going to do as she tells you. Going to do something for your keep, right?"

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"I'm not going to work for her! That's final!" I managed to get out.

Jean looked at me, the anger gradually leaving her face, and being replaced by the coldest expression I'd ever witnessed there.

"You can work for her - or leave here. You can pack a suitcase right now. Come back tomorrow for the rest. I'll also remind you that I have power of executor over the rest of your inheritance - and I'll make sure that you'll get it in a way you're not going to like - believe me it will come to you over the longest possible time!"

"I'm supposed to get it when I'm twenty five." I retorted. "You can't hold it back."

"You're correct Philip, I do have to start distribution of your inheritance then, but there's absolutely nothing to prevent me from giving you a hundred pounds a year for the rest of your life. I have full discretion in how the monies are to be distributed to you. Don't think for one moment that I won't!"

"A hundred pounds! That's nothing!" I yelled.

"Yes, you're right there. Just think Philip, you may have to go out and work for a living. Won't that be fun?"

I swallowed dryly. "Aw, c'mon Jean!"

She looked at me coldly. "Make up your mind. Leave now, or agree to work with - I mean 'for' Elsa. What's it going to be?"

I backed off. "Elsa, I guess." I grumbled.

But Elsa shook me up. "Miss Jean? I can just see what he's going to do. He'll wait until you're gone, then make life a misery for me. I'm sorry, but my resignation stands."

Jean let out a prodigious sigh. "Elsa? He's going to do what you tell him. If he doesn't? Do any damn thing you like - put him over your knee and give him a damned good spanking if you want. I think that you're a LOT stronger than him and could do it if you wanted. I promise that I won't interfere. And, if he gives you the slightest problem that you can't handle? Just let me know. I'll fix his little red wagon!"

She turned back to me. "You are going to do what she tells you. Aren't you?"

Her comment about Elsa spanking me had really shook me, because what Elsa had guessed at was true. The talk of spanking was insulting to my male image, but it had to be verbal showboating on Jean's part. I could safely ignore that. I had already figured I could agree to do what Jean had asked of me until she and Bobbi had left - then Elsa would have to watch out. I'd teach her. Make her life a misery! That would just be a part of it! So I answered Jean's question, looking downwards and prevaricating a little.

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"I guess. If I have to." I said.

The unfortunate thing was that though I was staring at the ground, I let a little too much of my smirk show. Both Elsa and Jean caught it.

"I'll be damned!" Jean started in an amazed tone.

"Miss Jean?" Elsa said. "I saw his attitude too. Think I could give him a small test?"

"What kind of test?" Jean asked.

Elsa looked at me, a small grin on her face. "Just the other day, you told me that Bobbi was your assistant and should dress accordingly. Right?"

"Yes." I agreed, wondering where she was coming from.

"But, as of now, she's Miss Jean's assistant. True?"

I shrugged. "Guess so. Maybe."

"So she shouldn't be wearing that apron, should she?"

"Up to her - and Jean." I admitted openly, though grudging Elsa ANY victory, regardless of how small.

"Fine!" Elsa said. "But you're going to be my assistant now, aren't you? And didn't you just agree that you are going to do everything I tell you?"

I clenched my teeth together so tightly that I didn't trust myself to speak, but nodded.

"Good!" she said, smiling. "Bobbi? Would you please take your apron off? You won't be needing it any more tonight."

"Sure Elsa! Great!" Bobbi said, untying the bow at the back and lifting it her apron over her head and holding it in her hand, a questioning look on her face.

Elsa turned to me again. "But you will. Won't you? You're my assistant now. Right?" she didn't wait for an answer. "And my assistants wear aprons, so that means that you take that apron from her and put it on - now please!"

I was so dumbfounded that I couldn't find words to argue. Saw Elsa make a gesture to Bobbi, and stood helplessly as Bobbi came over to me and, with a little shy grin, put a loop over my head, then helped place my arms through the straps. Then she went around to my back and tied the ties in a large puffed bow. Next, she came around to the front and flipped the points of my shirt collars so that they were outside of the frilled straps going over my shoulders. "That looks quite nice on him." she cried happily. "Really cute!" She smiled at Jean and, to my horror, Jean nodded and smiled back!

I could see my reflection in one of the mirrors. The crisp white, heavily frilled apron that practically encompassed my whole body - including a full skirt that

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fell to just below my knees. It was hard to see that I had any masculine clothes on underneath it.

“Very good Philip!” Elsa said, breaking into my trance. “Now come along with me. Let these ladies get down to work.”