

Excerpt from Exposed: The Education of Sarah Brown

Bestselling Author
MICHELE E. GWYNN

Elsa dialed Sarah's number.

"Elsa, are you still up?" Sarah's sleepy voice answered on the second ring.

"So sorry to call you this late, but Sarah, Anno is missing!" Elsa's voice broke as the tears began to fall.

"What? What do you mean missing?" Sarah, now fully awake, sat up in bed immediately.

"I came home, and he wasn't here. I checked with his friend, Erik, and he wasn't there, either. I looked everywhere, Sarah. I called the police and they came, but now I have to wait, and I'm so worried. Where could he be?" Elsa became almost incoherent as she sobbed.

"I'm coming over right now. Just hold on, okay?" Sarah was already jumping out of bed and pulling on a pair of jeans.

"You don't have to..." Elsa hiccupped.

"Of course I do. You're my friends and I love you guys. I'll be right there. Just wait inside." Sarah hung up and ran to the bathroom to throw on a bra and T-shirt. Slipping her feet into running shoes, she grabbed her purse, a jacket, and her room key. As she rode down the elevator, she pinned up her hair. The night clerk at the desk looked up from reading his book and watched as the blonde American jogged out of the hotel and turned left.

Sarah sprinted like a marathon runner the few blocks up to Elsa's apartment building without even thinking how crazy it was she was running down a street in Berlin in the middle of the night—alone. When she got to the entryway, she stopped. She didn't know the code to get in. She looked at the list of last names of the residents on the panel but didn't know Elsa's last name. She texted her instead.

I'm here. Buzz me in!

The buzzer sounded and Sarah opened the door, running inside to the lifts. On the fourth floor, she jogged down to the end and hooked left, stopping to knock on Elsa's door. It opened before she could finish raising her hand. Elsa, with a tear-stained face, rushed at her, engulfing Sarah in a hug. She cried.

"Where could he be, Sarah? Where?" Elsa was falling apart. Her brother was everything to her; all she had left since the death of their parents.

"Sssh. I don't know, but we'll figure it out. Let's go sit down and then you can tell me what the police said." Sarah kept her arm around her friend as they made their way to the couch.

"They didn't say much, just that he would probably come home by himself. But Anno doesn't go off like this without telling me. Especially in the middle of the night. He knows better. And he didn't take his phone with him. He never goes anywhere without it." Elsa's anxiety was affecting Sarah, who teared up while listening.

"Did you tell the police he left his phone?" Sarah's face was incredulous. How could the police think nothing was wrong when a teenage boy was missing without his phone?

"I, I...don't know! Oh, Sarah, I can't think straight." She blew her nose.

"It's okay. We just need to think." Sarah stood up and walked to Anno's room. She went inside and looked around. Elsa followed her, observing her friend searching the room.

"What are you looking for?" Sarah was on her hands and knees, looking under the bed.

She sat up and looked around. "What's that smell? It's like a hospital in here." Sarah sniffed, then sniffed again while looking in corners and all around.

Elsa inhaled, but her nose was plugged from crying. "I can't smell anything. What does it smell like?" She walked up behind her friend, looking over her shoulder.

"Kind of chemical-like." Sarah lifted the covers on the bed and leaned down to sniff. She reached for the pillow and lifted it up, finding a white cloth lying folded over. She picked it up. It was a washcloth. She sniffed it.

"This is it. Is it one of yours?" Sarah held it up to Elsa's nose. She sniffed, managing to get some air through her nasal cavity and detected the chemical scent which Sarah had referenced.

"Ugh! No. What's that smell?" Elsa's nose wrinkled.

Sarah thought she recognized the odor as one of many she smelled while her mother was in the hospital. "I'm not sure, but we should call the police and show them this, and make sure they know Anno left his phone here."

"You think someone took him, don't you?" Understanding dawned on Elsa, and then she realized that her brother may have been abducted. Tears flooded her green eyes again, smearing mascara down her cheeks. "Sarah. Oh, mein Got! What am I going to do?"

"You're going to hold it together because Anno needs you. And until we know there's something to worry about, we should keep cool heads, okay? Keep it together, Elsa." Sarah took her by the hand and led the way back to the living room where she calmly talked Elsa through calling the police again. It took about thirty minutes for the detectives to come back. KriminalKommissar Heinz, in particular, did not seem pleased. *But that might just be his normal countenance.* Sarah gave them the information on what they found and pointed out that Anno's phone was still in the apartment. They both looked at the washcloth, sniffed it, and immediately pulled out gloves and a plastic bag to put the cloth into.

"You should've shown us this before, Fraulein Kreiss." Heinz gave Elsa a stern look. Elsa's face registered the slight in his address, but before she could reply, her friend spoke up.

"She didn't know this when you first came. I'm the one who found it." Sarah stood and faced the detective.

"And who are you? How did you know where to find this?" He started treating Sarah like a suspect and she was not the least bit pleased with his attitude.

"I'm Sarah Brown, friend of Elsa and Anno. I didn't know where to find it. I simply did what most rational people would do and looked around his room. Elsa was with me and we found it together. You should have done this the first time you were here!" Sarah's temper blazed to the surface.

"Calm down, Miss Brown," said Mahler. She had a look of understanding on her face as if she endured her partner's prickly personality often and knew how it grated on others.