

# ASSASSINS ARE US

A NOVEL

"[An] edgy, delightful romp" — *Kirkus Reviews*



KIMBERLY VAN SICKLE

# Assassins Are Us

*Some family traditions don't need to be followed.*

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*The first mistake in a (family) business is going into it.*

*Benjamin Franklin (paraphrased)*



## **Prologue**

*Tapping on the window of the nursery, I pointed to my newborn's crib, and the nurse held up the swaddled child to me where I wept with gratitude and relief to the point of collapsing on the floor.*

*"You, OK?" a frail female voice on the floor next to me whispered. I was shocked that someone else was on the floor. It's not a common venue in a room filled with chairs and a lot of doctors.*

*"What?"*

*"I asked if you were OK?" she repeated but continued to stare at the wall across the corridor in front of us. "Because if you are down here with me, then you must not be in a good place." And she turned her head towards me. "Am I right?"*

*Although she had on dark sweats far too big for her with the hoodie up, I could see she was pale and weak and traumatized.*

*"No, actually, I am elated." I explained. "I just saw my baby. Breathing! I'm so thankful."*

*"Don't they all do that?" Her darkness overshadowed my glee. "Breathe, I mean. They're all supposed to survive, right?"*

*I laughed uncomfortably, "Yes, I guess that is what God intended, but apparently, it doesn't always..."*

*"...God?" she questioned. "God?!" her soft voice became outraged by the suggestion of a holy power. "If there were a God, then it would have been my kid that didn't breathe."*

*"You?" She was so young that she couldn't have been old enough to have had a child. "Did you just have a baby too?" I chose to skim over the fact that she didn't want a breathing child.*

*"A baby? No." She checks her phone. "A spawn from Hell? Yes." And with that, she ambles to a standing position with difficulty and presses her head against the nursery window with heavy breathing. She speaks into her phone, "Pink blanket. Second from the left. First row." Ends the call, drops the phone to the floor, crushes it with her black Timberlands, and shuffles her way through the emergency door.*

*"Miss? Excuse me, Miss?" I holler as this was clearly a situation in need of addressing. "Wait, Miss! Please!" I stopped the emergency door from closing and gently pull her arm towards me. "You look like you need a doctor. Let's get you some help. We are in a hospital after all." I tried to make light of whatever she was going through which was ominous.*

*"No, man. I'm checking out, not in..." and passed out in my arms.*

## Chapter 1 (17 years later)

“Hitler was not a nice guy.”

Did I really have to sit in AP World History class to know this?

“But more important to note was that he was not to blame for his actions due to a litany of post-mortem diagnoses and analyses. He was born prematurely--and therefore, was a small and sickly child--to his Jewish mother—a fact upon which some base his genocidal mania—and lacked confidence and social skills due to his invalid younger years. Consequently, he grew up exhibiting antisocial behaviors, which directly played into his paranoid delusions as an adult. Additionally, he overcompensated from his pathetic youth by rising to a key political figure in Germany, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder—onset from the stress of his dictatorship--early in his political career, and he contracted syphilis just months before his death—a suicide by the way-- which physically deteriorated the rational sector of his brain.” Blah, blah, blah...Lord, but that man could go on.

Most of us knew better. Dr. Markensen was a sad little man with heavy eyeglasses, an unkempt gray beard, and an ill-matched brown toupee and was notorious for baiting his students with outlandish suppositions just to pose a counter argument and set the stage for he always hoped would be a lively class discussion.

Some idiots totally fall into his little trap:

“Are you saying that what he did **wasn't** his fault?!”

“How can you justify his actions based upon the fact that he was a **preemie**?!”

“Next, you’re going to say a **head cold** he had conjured up the notion of Nazi Political Party!”

Other students rolled their eyes in silent objection, refusing to lower their intellectual standards to take part in such a ridiculous debate. The rest sat watching the clock...then, there’s me.

Dr. Markensen attempted to goad me into the classroom discussion, “Hedy?” Side note: don’t think I haven’t heard every inappropriate joke about my name. Trust me, I have. Plus, I’m not the kind of person whose shit list you want to be on.

“Yes, Dr. Markensen?”

“Honor student that you are, surely you have some thoughtful argument to be made, no?”

Now, if I contributed to the class discussion, I’d be compelled do so honestly and accurately...so here goes nothing:

“Hitler was a stupid, spineless, whiney, weak-ass, pissant. Far too gutless to commit suicide...please. You know the guy was like 4’ 9” and sickly, right? He would have never passed a US Military physical exam. He’d have been given a 4F for sure. In fact, he was obsessed with being more of a physical man than he ever could be, and as he felt America was the physical powerhouse of the world, he created a symbol, which embodied the antithesis to a weak American.”

The whole class stared at me as if I’m about to reveal a Taliban vest beneath my

clothes, so I go to the board to demonstrate.

“So, OK,” I walk to the front of the room and grab the dry marker from the desk caddy on Dr. Markensen’s desk. “In some pathetic desperate attempt to assert his manhood, he took the characters, 4 and F,

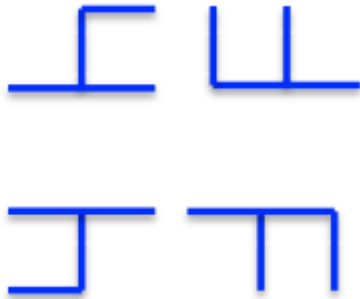
4 F

and doubled it--to be twice as lame, I guess? --,

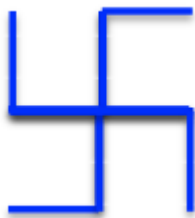
4 F 4 F

then he inverted them (for the obvious symbolic purposes)





and finally, he intersected them to create the ultimate symbol in evil,



the Swastika...you guys have seen this before, right?”

Nothing but stoned expressions looked back at me. Didn't stop me though.

“Well, anyway, back to his so-called ‘suicide’...Adolph managed to piss off the entire Chinese Communist Party in '45 by making some off-the-cuff comment about how China's Dictator at the time, Chiang Kai-Shek, had a serious opium habit—which, of course, was not true, but you can't un-ring a bell, right?--, and when you're a political tyrant, you can't have negative propaganda floating around out there about you. WTF, Adolf? I mean isn't there supposed to be some kind of honor among evil political leaders? Know what I'm saying?” I glanced at Doc Markensen, but he gave me the same look of bewilderment or fear, so I

cleared the front corner of his desk to sit and continue my history lesson. “So, Chiang put a hit out on him (Lord, but could I go on).

“The problem with putting someone from The Chinese Boxer Rebellion in charge of killing Hitler was that Chinese physical features don’t blend well into the German social fabric of the 1940s, so word of a pending international contract on the current Nazi Dictator made its rounds in the assassins’ underworld. Enter the Hinterschotts.” I posed two thumbs toward myself as a proud member thereof.

“On paper, the Hinterschotts were a 500-year-old German family-owned logistics company—you know, imports and exports—, so they had interests in The Far East trade lanes, but could never get their foot in the door, so they proposed a counteroffer that if Chiang could allow Hinterschott vessels access to their ports, then they would ‘export’ Hitler, free of charge.” I could sense I was losing the class, so I decided to interject some death and mayhem.

“Now, ‘exporting’ in the traditional sense of the word in the logistics industry means ‘to transport from one area to another’, so you might think The Hinterschott Logistics Company simply arranged to have ol’ Adolf moved from Germany to China, so The Boxers could do at will whatever they wanted with the guy. First of all, that might have been the case if The Hinterschott Logistics Company was *solely* a transportation business...but it wasn’t. And second of all, logistic companies move products, not people.

“Hinterschotts Logistics wasn’t just a transportation company: it was a family of

assassins-for-hire shell organization, and the word 'export' did not mean to transport iron from Wankendorf to Shag Island, but rather to transport someone into the afterlife, case in point, Hitler.

"As soon as the ink dried on the contract--figuratively speaking, of course. You can't leave a document like that just lying about--Lothar Hinterschott was quick to get the job done within the week. His younger brother, Chadrik wanted the assignment, but lost in an arm-wrestling match to Lothar and was given the less glorious contract to string up Mussolini later that week. Apparently, Mussolini welched on a bet to a Prussian Prince or some damn thing, and became a marked target, so the Hitler Gig went to Lothar, 5<sup>th</sup> generation family assassin, who was known as a clandestine chameleon, specializing in disguises...and killing." Now I had them. They were on the edge of their seats now...I **so** had them in the palm of my hand. Dr. Markensen...not so much.

"So, Lothar had become alarmed at how fast The Red Army was closing in on Hitler, so as a matter of integrity, he couldn't let the Russians get to him first. After all, he had signed a contract, and his family's reputation was on the line. His intelligence liaison...OK," I conceded, "his wife, Eloisa," which actually merited a chuckle from a few students, "...indicated Da Fuhrer retreated to his bunker nightly, which was the perfect opportunity into which Lothar could infiltrate The Reich Chancellery as Hitler's valet, Heinz Linge, and put cyanide in his nightly pussy drink of warm milk." That last comment evoked a throat-clearing from Doc Markensen. Apparently, he didn't approve of the word, "pussy", but that

did not deter me from my quest to teach the children well.

“However, on this particular night, Hitler decided to get married in a rush ceremony to his long-time mistress, Eva Braun. Apparently, Hitler, in a desperate last-ditch effort to make some good of his life as the Russians were closing in, decided to make an honest woman of Eva. Why he grew a conscience at this stage in his life, God only knows, but they became man and wife none-the-less...but I digress...where was I?

“Pussy drink,” some engaged young mind put me back on the right path.

“Oh, right, so Eva was in the wrong place at the wrong time, drank Adolph’s milk, and he had a huge hissy fit. Apparently, Hitler wasn’t big on sharing. Anyway, best-laid plans didn’t pan out, but this was no means to bail for a pro like Lothar.

“As he stood in the shadows of the honeymooners’ bunker and watched Adolf yell at Eva for drinking his milk, Lothar called an audible. As Eva turned away from Hitler sobbing from his petty selfishness—no doubt questioning her choice in men--, Lothar, in that very instance, slid up behind his back, forced Hitler’s hand to draw his own pistol from his holster, guided it towards The Fuhrer’s mouth, squeezed the finger which triggered it, and withdrew himself back into the shadows, all in a matter of 4 seconds, completely undetected. In shock of the gunshot, Eva spun around only to find her groom with a bullet through his head and a smoking gun in his hand. But before she could fully process what had just happened, she began to gag and convulse from the poisoned milk, and she died right beside her newly betrothed. Poor Eva...she was not supposed to be at Berlin, let alone

in the bunker, and became fallout of a political assassination dressed up as a double suicide. But those are the risks you run when you marry a genocidal megalomaniac.

“With the job complete, Lothar made his way back home to Rostock and made a full report to Eloisa. Case closed. Chiang didn’t offer a bonus for the job on Eva but was satisfied with the outcome, none-the-less.”

The class stares at me agape as I make my way back to my seat, and I am quite pleased with myself in revealing the true events behind Hitler's death. A single clap, followed by a few more, some whistles of approval, and then just full-on applause fill the room from everyone. Everyone but Dr. Markensen, but I don’t care much. I sit there relishing in the moment of truth...

But if truth be told, I, of course, don’t say any of that. Not because it sounds nothing remotely like what’s in the history books, and they would lock me up. Not because I’m a total conspiratorial buff, which I am not. But rather because it’s part of my family’s history and our business, our family’s business, Hinterschott Logistics, and I, Hedy Hinterschott, am the 9<sup>th</sup> generation of that proud establishment.

## Chapter 2

“Hedy...Hedy...snap out of it...Hedy!” a forceful whisper from the desk behind me pulled me out of my dreamscape, but it was the pencil poke—the harsh and toxic, pointy and leaded end, not the kind and gentle, soft and pink eraser end—between my shoulder blades that shocked me back into the here and now.

“Yes, Dr. Markensen,” I snapped to attention, “Agreed...uh, Hitler was a victim of circumstance, and his case of poor parenting, improper diet, chemical imbalance, lack of emotional support, and absentee father figure would most likely hold up in a court of law in today’s bankrupt and convoluted legal system. I dare say, if given proper legal counsel—provided pro bono, of course, from every major defense lawyer in our capitalistic society due to the legendary publicity this noteworthy case would bring toward future cases from, no doubt, even more sinister yet high-paying criminals and non-humanitarians—, he would die of old age in a very comfortable psychiatric facility in the Hamptons--perhaps, Upstate New York--before he ever saw a lethal injection.”

This sarcastic rant shut Dr. Markensen down. Again. The guy keeps trying to catch me off guard. Must be torture for a high school teacher with a doctorate in Global Studies to be constantly undermined by a 17-year-old girl. I don’t know which is more pathetic: his lame-ass toupee or his lame-ass attempts to demean my intellect. Poor guy. But he sets himself up for failure e-ver-y-sin-g-le-time. I give him a very self-satisfying look of *Give it*

*up, already, Doc.* As he collapses in his chair, his fake hair flops up, then down off-centered. And with a dead stare, he dejectedly mutters, "Class dismissed."

We're all a bit stunned as there is another 30 minutes of class left but leave quietly, none-the-less. The Doc is expressionless and keeps his gaze straight in front of him, looking as though he were hypnotized. I kinda' felt bad, but that was short-lived. Leaving eighth hour early also meant ending the school day early, so home, I go. Typically, Mother would pick me up, and I know I should have waited for her, but Mr. Pencil-Poker and his entourage catch my eye, so I shouted down the steps outside the school, "Hey!" he turns to my acknowledgement, "I guess we all have you and your pencil to thank for an early dismissal!"

I overhear one of his groupies ask, "Is that the chick?" *'Is that the chick?'...so he's been talking about me...that's suspicious...*

He turned back to take a look and say, "Yeah..." he looked at me up and down, "she's the one...."

Playing it cool, walking towards the crew, I sized them up as I approach:

The blond guy on his left is small, wiry and wears his backpack on both shoulders...most likely an indication of physical weakness, more so than social ineptitude. Looks mealy and far too young to be a senior, but clearly is, as only seniors have the option for an open-campus during non-academics, as is the rest of the clan. Verdict: not a threat.

The guy standing behind him is a slightly larger version of Mr. Pencil-Poker, but not

a fit fellow by any means, leans on his left leg to compensate for his heavy backpack, therefore, right-handed and takes school seriously, wears a cap low enough to shade his eyes, so you can't tell exactly where he's looking and has trust issues. Big, smart and shifty.

Verdict: keep an eye on this one.

The skinny redhead standing next to the wimpy, prepubescent blond is...well, a redhead. Short-tempered, unpredictable, scrappy but notoriously devoted to whomever they admire and will fall on a sword in defense of said admir-ee. But given the fact he cannot take his eyes off my chest, I suspect he's more interested in the female persuasion and could be swayed...but loyalty goes a long way with guys. Verdict: don't cross admir-ee, and I'll be OK.

Speaking of admir-ee, he's a hooded sweatshirt-wearing, baggy pants-pulling, no backpack-toting, very nondescript. Nobody. Had he not poked me with the pointed end of a pencil earlier today, I never would have noticed him. But then, he pulled his hoodie down to reveal some...um, wow... seriously good genetics: clean-shaven, chiseled jawline, high cheekbones, long but not hippy long, wavy brown hair, rosy full lips, and a ne'er-do-well presence. Verdict: my, oh my, oh, my. He's trouble.

But all in all, no real physical threats, so I continued to approach, "so you've been talkin' about me to other people, huh?"

"Yeah...well, today, anyhow...I mean, today, you're my hero. I had to tell my boys about this chick named Hedy..." I stop on the steps to give the boys a pre-emptive *snicker-*



*and-and-regret-it look-around* as Pencil Poker continues, "...who shames The Doc on a regular basis. But today, she did it to the extreme...class dismissed..." he so coolly nods my way that it takes my breath away a bit.

I counter calmly, "Well, one of these days, he's gonna' call on you, so you should be ready," I say, suggesting he tell me his name. "He's gonna' say, 'Hey, hoodie!'" I wait. "He's gonna' say, 'Hey, pencil poker!'" I wait some more as he's not picking up on my hints. "He's gonna' say..."

"Dave..." he finally catches on, "OK, I get it. Name's Dave Corso."

The redhead butts in, "wanna' know my name?"

"Not really," and with those two words, the boys talk about prior commitments, *need to get home, gotta' huge test tomorrow...whatever* else excuse they brainstorm, and they disperse. "Nice friends."

"Yeah, they know how to help a brother out."

"Well, Dave, nice to finally meet the kid who has sat behind me in Honors World History for almost a year." It just struck me, if he's in any Honors class at the U of San (University of San Francisco High School), he must be smart as well. If I were ever permitted a personal relationship (given my family's vocation), he might be someone I could hang with.

"Likewise," and he extended his right hand—no knuckle rings, but I can't account for what's in that baggy sweatshirt sleeve nor for what his left hand might be clutching in the

front pocket of those baggy jeans (a totally non-suggestive clutch, that is). So, I assume it's a hand extended in friendship, but as "caution" has been the watchword from sunup to the next sunup in the Hinterschott household since birth, I casually drop my backpack to the ground to free my left hand if necessary.

I present my hand like a meek schoolgirl, "I'm embarrassed. You know my name, and I never knew yours all these months."

"No worries. You going home now?" Oh, God, I don't want to tell him that my mother always drives my brother and me to and from school every day. You can't imagine the innumerable conversations, pleads, arguments and what-have-you begging our parents to let us drive on our own, but we weren't old enough. I mean we were old enough to drive, legally. We're just not experienced enough behind the wheel of a car to know how to handle a possible drive-up or drive-by confrontation. We're still theoretical in that stage of assassin development. The rule of thumb is: if you're old enough to emotionally handle your first kill, then you're old enough to drive in a life-threatening chase without emotion. So, I divert, per usual.

"No, well, I mean, yes, I am, but I'm not driving home, if that's what you're asking...are you asking that? Are you asking for a ride because..." *Stop and breathe, Hedy.* Rambling is a sign of lacking confidence, feeling uncomfortable, and/or lying, and I was guilty of all three, so I needed to pump the brakes. "I'm walking to the public library. You going that way?"

“I am now,” he flashes his perfect teeth, and together we’re off.

I am a master at pocket texting. It was something I taught my twin brother and myself when we got our first cell phones...at the age of 6. As my parents didn’t grow up with cell phones, I had to teach them as well. You would be amazed how often that skill comes into play. To the naked eye, I was simply walking alongside a friend with my hand in my coat pocket. You know, that would be the case, even to the trained eye. I mean I am *that* good. But I was deftly texting my mother: “walking training no pickup xo” Send. Delete. Which is a loose translation of “I am walking home in a training exercise to keep my senses sharp, so there is no need to pick me up. Love, Hedy.” After which, I hit **Send**, wait 30 seconds for transmission, then hit **Delete**—never leave a trail paper, digital or otherwise. All of which will not sit well with my mother because it was not a pre-approved exercise. Anything “off-schedule” is interpreted as a possible peril, so I’ll catch Hell tonight. But I’m thinking it might be worth it.

“So how is it that you have sat behind me all this time, and I’ve never noticed you?”

“I’m guessing because you don’t have eyes in the back of your head.” Charming response, but I actually do have eyes in the back of my head, figuratively speaking. My situational awareness is second-nature, so in scanning the past seven months, I must have evaluated him, like I have done with everyone else in every one of my classes since preschool, and determined he was a non-issue. I don’t mentally catalog everyone I have ever met. Just possible terrorists, would-be assassins and the like.

“Well, then, you must be a light breather.”

“Nah...I’m just a quiet guy. I don’t really have a lot to add to the class, and I’m not even on The Doc’s radar.” Dramatic pause, “plus, I save all my heavy breathing for other purposes.”

Wait...I’ve read about this...this is what is called *flirting*. Only I’ve never experienced it. This is a great opportunity for me to apply my theoretical skills on the subject matter, so I banter, “You mean like lifting weights, running a marathon, tackling a fullback...stuff like that?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you go for the jocks with visible stomach muscles and no personality. I had higher expectations of you than that.”

When confronted with a possible turned-off mark, SOP (standard operating procedure) was to lower self-esteem, apologetically, not pathetically, and re-engage. But Dave wasn’t a mark. He was just a guy who was intriguing to me, and up to this point, I have never been intrigued with anyone. I have never allowed myself to be intrigued with anyone. Or rather, I was never allowed to be intrigued with anyone. This is unfamiliar territory, but it is also exciting, so I just go with it, “No, not me...but my brother does...I mean my brother doesn’t go for that type...I mean my brother is...what I mean to say is that my brother is the jock type, and I couldn’t possibly be attracted to anything remotely resembling that of my brother...” *You’re rambling again...slow it down and be just as charming as he is*, “Actually, that was a test, and you totally passed. Well, done, my friend!”

“Friend, huh? Isn’t it a little soon to be labeling our relationship?”

“Relationship, huh? Isn’t it a little soon to be labeling our acquaintance?”

“Acquaintance, huh? Isn’t it a little soon to be labeling our common existence?”

“Common existence, huh...?” he one-ups me, “OK, you win. I got nothing lower than ‘our common existence’. Well done...” I don’t dare repeat recent dialog, so I address him by his name, “...Dave.”

“And to you, Hedy,” he bows to me as royalty might, and I respond in kind with a curtsy. OK, I don’t recall the field manual detailing how one might respond when confronted with... “stirrings within”. I don’t know how else to describe the situation or my feelings, so I address this instance as I would with any other strong (and usually aggressive) feeling: I take command, deflect the aggressor, protect myself, cover my tracks and move on swiftly and stealthily. But Dave actually speaks before I have the opportunity to do any of it. “So why does The Doc even call on you? Doesn’t he know better by now?”

I tell him what I have is a curse, carried down by generations of smart-asses, who refuse to be publicly called out, but what I don’t tell him is that this curse is more like a survival instinct which I cannot deny.

“Curse, huh? Sounds more like a very cool blessing.” *That was, um, well, I think it was a compliment.* As we continue to walk and talk, I feel my hardened exterior (come about via nature and nurture) soften a bit. *Is this what it feels like to be a teenage girl?* I am clearly out of my comfort zone, but according to what I have been taught, this is acceptable as one

can only grow and evolve outside of said zone. But I intentionally dismiss a very important element of this rule: exit your comfort zone, but only if you are in control. I put this minor omission out of my head as I am “enjoying the company”. I think that's what the expression is.

“Well, this is me.” He points up to the high-rise condos. *High-rise condos? My God! How long have we been walking? What street were we on? Where was North? Where was my exit strategy? How could I have let my guard down for so long?*

“Oh,” I look up and come back casually, “Wow, big building. What floor are you on?” But before Dave can answer, a doorman makes his presence known. He’s a short man who approaches us with assertiveness, “You can’t loiter here!” Little big-man syndrome. If I’ve seen it once, I’ve seen it a thousand times. Verdict: all talk, no action.

“It’s cool, George. She’s with me.”

“Oh, excuse me, Sir. I guess I didn’t recognize you?”

“That’s OK, George. Can you hail a taxi for my...” he looks at me questioning a definition that fits me: *friend, classmate, acquaintance, chick*, so I jump in.

“No, thanks,” and I wave off George. “The library’s just a few blocks away.” I finally had my bearings, and a walk would clear my head. “There’s a Starbucks around the corner, right?”

“Yes, ma’am, one block west and one block north,” George offered.

“Well, then, I am off to caffeinate and isolate in the library for the long haul,” I turned

to Dave.

“My walk home has never been so pleasant,” but this time, he tucked both hands in his jeans pockets to avoid any awkward body lunges.

“T’was my honor, Sir,” and this time I bowed to him and back away, “See you Monday,” and I escaped somewhat gracefully.

“Yeah, see ya’!” Dave hollered down the block. *I can’t wait.*

Starbucks was pretty scarce for 3:45 pm, on a Friday. Not unusual. Two baristas on duty. Two women in a coffee klatch with their respective toddlers sleeping in their strollers. I double-check to make sure the toddlers are actual toddlers and not some piece of machinery swaddled waiting to be woken. Some old guy sunken into one of the deep-seated, oversized chairs, reading behind a newspaper. And a lady in a scant jogging outfit, who must have had her Starbucks mini card in her shoe because there was no other possible place in that unitard for anything else, waiting for a barista to call out her finished order.

“Tall, double-pump hazelnut, soy milk, no foam latte!” She took her high-maintenance beverage and exited.

“I’ll have an Evian, please.” I didn’t realize how far we had been walking, but once I hit Starbucks, I realized that I was pretty thirsty. I paid. I sat with my back to the wall of ceramic mugs, coffee carriers, and espresso accessories. I drank half my bottle. The mummies exit. The guy with the newspaper was reading *The Burlingame Bugle*. It was

quiet, so I made my way to the door, but before I opened it, I stepped back beside the guy with the newspaper, and lowered it, "Hi, Dad."

"Hey, He! You got me!" The guy with the newspaper smiles slyly. "He" was Dad's nickname for me: it's short for Hedy and a reminder that I was not born male. "Nice work! What gave me away?"

"You're reading the *Burlingame Bugle* in downtown San Francisco. Unless Starbucks pays for 20-mile delivery of a third-rate local suburban rag, it had to be you. You're getting sloppy, Dad."

"Your acuity continues to amaze me, He! You've got an eye like a bullfrog," he stood with pride and planted a kiss on my forehead, "your mother's down the block, and she's pissed. We'd better get going."

Dinner conversation was going to be interesting tonight.



### Chapter 3

...and it was.

“Did you touch anything of his?” Now, typically, when most mothers would ask this question, it would be framed in a sexual context, but not Adelinda (Linda) Hinterschott. Her frame of reference was geared more towards leaving a fingerprint on a notebook or water bottle to be traced, rather than on a suggestive body part.

“Pass the dumplings, Twit.” I diverted towards my brother, “No, Mother, I didn’t touch anything of his...”

“You’re the Twit!” a typical and unimpressive comeback from my brother, Gary. “Ma-oomm, she’s doing it again!” And he shifted the dumplings from me to Oma, forgetting to take some for himself and tattles. Yeah, I said “tattles” ...he’s my age and he tattles like a 9-year-old.

“Unterbrechen Sie nicht Ihre Mutter, Gerhardt!” Oma disciplined.

“Oma,” I request my grandmother’s attention, “if you speak to Gary in German, you need tooooo doooooo soooooo sloooooowly,” throwing the conversation off me once again.

"Shut up, Head Case!" Gary was insulted, "I totally know what she means," he exploded in denial, but then spoke secretly in Oma's ear, "but, Oma, ya 'know, it's not very

smart to speak in German, 'cuz it could draw unwanted attention."

"Gerhardt, mein lepschun, German 'iz 'da new Spanish. Every-vone should know how to shpeak it," Oma pinched Gary's cheek, took the dumplings from him and passed them to me.

"Actually, Oma, Mandarin is the new Spanish, but German is a close second, so you're not too far off base," I continued off-subject and passed the dumplings to Dad to which he scooped four onto his plate.

"I thought Chinese was the new Spanish," Gary confuses.

"Mandarin is Chinese, Ger-Hard!" I kick him when he's down with quick unabashed revelry, but as Gary realizes he has no dumpling on his plate, he reaches over and steals one of mine, but my reflexes are fast, and I stab the cuff of his sleeve with my fork with binds his movement. "Next time you reach for something that isn't yours, I'll be drawing blood..."

"ENOUGH!" Mother slammed a fist down on the table hard enough to jingle the silverware. She had had enough diversions and pulled us back to center. "Hedy! Do not stab your brother! Gary, Oma is right in that you shouldn't interrupt me or anyone when they are speaking. Oma, your German accent gives you permission to speak German without suspicion. It's the 21st Century, after all. And Gary needs the practice, so, Gary, Oma will speak however she pleases. Hedy, we will talk later about your sudden change in your afternoon routine. And Hereld!" OK, she was really pissed. She only calls us by our proper

names when her temper was at a fever pitch: Gary becomes Gerhardt, Harry becomes Hereld, and if she were to ever chastise herself, Linda would become Adelinda. Me, I have no escape. I'm always Hedy, regardless of Mother's temperament.

"Hereld, four dumplings?!?!? Really?!?!? Your cholesterol isn't high enough, already? Have some self-control for God's sake!" and she yanked the dumpling platter out of Dad's hands, and I released Gary's sleeve from my fork.

The table became awkwardly quiet except for our chewing and Gary's yumming at Oma's dumplings. Oma is an amazing cook. Prior to her retirement, she was a culinary chemist. During her "employment," she tainted food with poisons from natural extracts which were completely undetectable not only when eating but also when medical examiners performed autopsy analysis of her targets. Her assassinations always looked like death by a heart attack, or by an unknown dormant blood disease revealed post-mortem. She was a legend in the industry and never took the obvious route for a diagnosis either. If one of her targets was a notorious drinker, planting an undetectable toxin in his brandy to cause liver failure was far too easy, so she would create a cocktail to cause an aneurysm and the guy would just stroke out...such a class act.

"AND!" Mother broke the silent chewing, "Dr. Markensen emailed me today! About **both** of you!" Gary also had Markensen, but he had him for General Global Concepts, which was a course usually for sophomores, not seniors.

"What?!" in simultaneous disbelief, Gary and I looked at each other and continued our

chorus, "What did you do?! Me?! I didn't do..." Our sentences began to separate as we slam one another for a worse offense than the other had apparently done unto the great doctor.

"Hereld!" Mother's insisted Dad become involved, "Say something!" Horse, our Great Dane, decided to contribute by a quick bark for attention and whatever Gary drops on the floor for him. But the bark created aggression in Chester, our Siamese Cat, and she charged him with a hiss and a swipe to his face. The big dumb brute whimpered back into his corner, quite literally with his tail between his legs. It's a typically normal dysfunctional Hinterschott supper. "Hereld, put down that fork and become part of the solution!"

Dad did as Mother directed, but then cleverly diverted, "Oma," Dad smiled to his mother, "you would have been so proud of He today! She sniffed me out in the coffee house just like her mother used to," and Dad artfully diffused the situation with a hand on Mother's and a peck on the cheek. "She reminded me so much of you that one time in The Kremlin, Linda," causing Mother to laugh like a schoolgirl, forget her anger for the rest of dinner, and we were all at peace...until Gary opened his mouth again.

"So, like there is more than one China?" It is so hard to believe that we are twins. I've read stories about twins, identical and fraternal, who share a connection, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, but he and I are so far removed from one another that I can't contain my embarrassment at the dinner table and refer to him as "afterbirth". The insult is lost on him, but not so much on Dad, Mother and Oma as they collectively shrieked, "Hedy Eloisa Hinterschott!"

“What?’ Gary was so lost, “I was born after her, wasn’t I?” He had no clue what afterbirth was. The look on Dad’s face was that complete disappointment not only in his son’s really lame-ass question, but also in the preservation of the family name. Gary is the last to carry the Hinterschott family name forward, and tradition has always been to hand down the family business to the first-born male.

Historically, the Hinterschotts did not have large families; in fact, the first born had always been male, which was reason enough to stop procreating. The Hinterschotts simply needed to preserve the family name. So anyway, the Hinterschott first-borns had always been males. Until me. Yes, as incredible as it is to believe, I was the first female Hinterschott to have ever been born in the family’s 500-year history. Gary was born three and a half minutes after I was born. The women in the family tree were simply associated by marriage, never by birth. So, I was an oddity in The Family Hinterschott, which might explain why I usually felt odd.

However, I realized the afterbirth comment was out of line, so I apologized to Gary, but he sloughed it off to continue yumming about his dumplings.

“I need an antacid,” Dad excused himself from the table.

“Just stay out of the bottle marked Bromo,” Oma advised. “It’s not Bromo at all.” She chuckled and shared with the rest of us, “if he ‘taught he had tummy ache now! Ooof! He ‘would be in for qvite a night!” And laughed even louder. That’s just messed up.

## Chapter 4

Gary and I are always charged with cleaning up after dinner. As we took care of that chore, Oma usually rested on the front porch with Chester in her lap, and Mother and Dad resigned to their bedroom closet. Actually, they resigned to the safe room through the back of their closet. Gary and I know of it, but know well-enough to never enter it. So, dish-time is one-on-one time with my “little” brother. Mentoring, if you will.

“So, who is this guy that you had Mom all freaked-out about.”

“Mother wasn’t freaked-out about a guy. She was freaked-out that I ‘broke team’.”

“‘Broke team’, right...you shouldn’t have done that, ‘cuz it’s dangerous, right?” Gary was reaching, so I give him a leg-up.

“It doesn’t fit our protocol. You know we never are to act spontaneously. If we did, it would be considered out of the ordinary and an indication that we were in trouble,” I shook my head and sighed, “Jeeze, Gary...do you not know this by now? I mean, how can you NOT know this by now? Do you know how stressed-out Mother and Dad get about you?” I get angry with him because he doesn’t get that he adds unnecessary strain to our household. We have enough on our plates, as it is, you know, being a family of assassins and all, not to have to worry about him. I know he can’t help the fact that he has no street smarts, but he doesn’t have to exacerbate the situation by proclaiming his stupidity daily, almost hourly.

He put his dish towel down on the counter and showed early signs of whimpering, “Don’t you even think about crying about this, Gary. Look, I know there is pressure on you to carry on the family name and take on the family business, but you have got to own up to your responsibilities and accept your fate. Man up!” There is NOTHING more humorous than to watch a hulking man-child break down into tears like a little girl. But as this is my brother, it is just this side of pathetic.

He sucked it up, “I’m not gonna’ cry, Head Job! I’m just in deep thought, that’s all.”

“First of all, fat chance of you ever being in deep thought, and second of all the dig you’re fishing for is ‘Head Case’ not ‘Head Job!’” He picks up his dish towel and a wet platter to dry, but fumbles and it crashes on the ceramic floor. Big, dumb and clumsy. What kind of super-spy assassin carries those traits, I ask you?

“Ah shit! It’s Oma’s grandma’s platter.” Irreplaceable, but I focus more on the fact that he is incorrect.

“Also, It’s your great-great grandmother’s.”

Blank.

“You don’t have to say that it’s Oma’s grandmother’s. You just have to say that it’s your great-great grandmother’s,” but he cannot piece together what I am talking about any better than he can piece together the shattered platter.

“What makes her so great?” Hopeless, absolutely hopeless.

“You are such a cliché,” and I shook my head ashamed that we carry the same genes.

He picks up on the fact that I have humiliated him, and becomes contrite.

“I got the rest of the dishes. I know you’ve got a shitload of school stuff. Go on.”

I’d like to think this “killing with kindness” strategic ploy on his part is intentional, but he doesn’t have the where-with-all, so I feel like I’ve just drop-kicked a puppy. I gave him a look of fake gratitude, “OK, thanks, I do,” and I kissed his cheek. “Wanna’ spar later,” I offer up as I know he loves to prove his manliness through some Kali training. He thinks he’s Jason Bourne.

“Yeah, cool,” I can tell he already felt better. I offer up this kind notion, even though he irritates the Hell out of me. He is of Hinterschott blood, and Hinterschott blood is thicker than molasses. At least that’s what I was always led to believe.



## Chapter 5

Actually, I didn't have too much homework. For the first night, all school year, I had no homework in Honors World History. I had myself to thank for that. Well, me and Dave, that is. My God, my parents had me well-trained. A guy like that remained off-scope my entire senior year. I didn't pick up on his scent, his mannerism, his essence, his Dave-ness. So, it's time to do a little background check on the guy. I pull up Google and begin to type in his name but then realize that this is NOT standard practice. *Never leave a trail, digital or otherwise.* What the Hell? My laptop was strictly utilitarian: schoolwork, letters, papers, research. If ever it should be traced, it would appear as though I were a typical teenage girl. But wait, wouldn't a typical teenage girl Google some guy she just met? In fact, my digital record up to this point would reflect atypical teenage girl behavior if absolutely NO boy-Googleing history existed. I convince myself that I am seriously distracted and need to downshift.

Working on my Statistical Analysis project was the answer. I had to come up with a statistical probability situation, research it and calculate the odds of it. You know, like the odds of being hit by lightning twice in one lifetime are one in six million. Something like that. But it couldn't be so unrealistic and unfounded that it couldn't somehow be proven, like the statistical probability of cows flying. I can't think of a damn thing that would be

noteworthy. I mean I could take the easy road out and turn in some bullshit like “one in four religiously floss every night”. *Boring!* I flop on my bed and brainstorm: *flossing, teeth, oral health, cows, cows flossing*. I’m getting nowhere pretty fast, so I broke my concentration and looked around my room for inspiration.

A framed picture on my nightstand of Gary and myself when we were just toddlers rested in the popsicle stick frame he made for our birthday one year: we were hugging each other, laughing, and today if anyone were to look at that photo, they might think how tight Gary and I are. But ever since my earliest memory, I can’t recall a time when he didn’t bug the shit out of me. *If ONLY I were an only child.*

Ca-ching! Only child. Only female child. Only female child ever to have been born in over 500 years. Ca-freaking-ching! That’s it! I would provide statistical analysis of being the first-born female child in a family’s 500-year-old history, and it’s not unfounded because I am living proof of said statistic, but I needed evidence to support such a claim.

“Hey, Mother!”

She appears at my door, “for goodness’ sake, Hedy, you know we don’t raise our voices unless it’s an emergency? Is this an emergency that I’m not seeing?”

“Uh, no, sorry, but I need to pull some family records for my stats class. Can you open up the safe and let me have at it?”

“Well, what kind of family records?” I can see immediately that she’s curious as to where I’m going with this.

“Our family kill ratio spanning over the last 500 years.”

She sits on my bed and smiles because she knows me better than that, “That’s a good one. So, what exactly do you need from the safe?”

“I need to look at The Hinterschott Family Tree in order to calculate the odds of my unique birth.” As I go into the statistical anomaly, the color drains from Mother’s face, and she can’t formulate a sentence.

“Mom, don’t worry, I’m not going to name any names or mention any specifics about our family history. I just need a head count,” but this does not ease her. In fact, she stands up, turns away and braces the weight of her body on the top of my desk. It looks as if she is going to be sick or faint, so I jump up to steady her arm and guide her back to my bed. “Are you alright? Mother, what is wrong? Did you lose the family tree scroll? Oh, my God, that thing is over 500 years old. It’s a family heirloom! You’ve lost it, and you haven’t told Dad, have you?” This coupled with the fact that Gary broke Great-Great Grandmother Elouise’s platter is going to set off both Dad and Oma.

“No, Dear, it’s not that...I...” something suddenly strikes her, and her mood flips like a switch from weepy sorrow to curious rage, “How do you know about the scroll?”

*Oh shit!* “How do I know about the scroll? How do I know about the scroll...?” How could I have been so careless? I knew about the scroll because Opa showed me how to crack a safe (the family safe) when I was 11. It was our secret. After I cracked it, per his instructions, he rewarded me by showing me some fantastic relics dating back to The

Ottoman Empire: Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather Reinhard's saber that lopped off a Serbian King's head, Great-Great Grandmother Bertilda's German Jaeger Sniper Rifle that pierced some fancy King of Sweden's skull from 200 yards, amongst dozens of other family heirlooms in addition to The Hinterschott's Family Tree which dated back to 1437.

I remember at the time, it looked as if it had been unrolled too many more times, it would surely disintegrate as it crackled with every unfolding at Opa's hands. He told me a story from every generation, and when he was finished, I always begged for more, but he would always say that we had dallied too long in the forbidden room, let alone in the safe. He swore me to secrecy, and I had kept our secret...until now. And I did it with such stupidity. Could I backtrack? I had to try.

"You...showed it to me." THAT was the best I could do? God give me strength! She wasn't going to buy that.

## Chapter 6

“No, I didn’t,” she stated matter of factly. “But,” she takes my hand and changes her tone, “but I should have.” And she led me to the master bedroom, through the closet, into the safe room. As Mother pulled The Hinterschott Family Tree document from the safe. I felt I must explain myself.

“Mom, it was a long time ago...”

“Opa, right?” She figured it out. The Hinterschotts weren’t thieves for hire. We were murderers for hire, so cracking safes was never a necessary skill. But it was kind of a hobby for Opa. He could pick any lock anytime, anywhere. In fact, he claimed he unlocked The Kaiser's personal safe with a strand of his hair. He was so full of shit, but it made for a great story, none-the-less.

“Yeah, Opa, he just wanted to pay his gift forward. Then after he died, I just wanted to relive that moment and look at the scroll again. But I haven’t cracked the safe since. Truly. I haven’t.” I could tell she believed me, so there was no danger of any mistrust.

“So, you were 11 the last time you saw this?” Mother asks as she unrolls the parchment onto the safe room floor.

“Right,” my eyes studied the various handwriting throughout the centuries documenting male after male carrying on the Hinterschott family name with every branch extended from a previous one. But occasionally, there was an empty spot on the tree with no name, date nor record.

“Well, then you were probably too young to notice...”

“What are these blanks on the tree?” I interrupted.

Mother’s eyes began to tear up, “Those were babies born unto The Hinterschotts who...died at birth.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.” I looked more closely at the parchment. “Look how many there are. I guess childbirth has come a long way in 500 years, huh?”

Mother choked on her next words: “These were not stillbirths, Hedy. They were infanticides.”

*Infant*, as in *newborn*, *cide* as in *to kill*. I know my Greek and Latin, so I can pull apart the word’s meaning, but I cannot pull together the reasoning, “Mother, these babies were killed at birth? Why?” Oh, God, no. If I say it out loud, I might become ill, “Because they were girls?”

Mother answered with a sobbing nod of her head. She grasped my hand in an attempt to comfort me yet could not take her stare off the scroll. “It was standard practice for men to carry forth the business. Women, girls, females were not to be part of any of it. And given the nature of the business, it was in the interest of self- and family-preservation that this horrific practice took place.”

“This came down to a preemptive rivalry amongst siblings?! Are you kidding me?!” My family’s business never really bothered me until this very moment, “I don’t believe it! I refuse to believe it!” I say it out loud, but it doesn’t necessarily make it so. “...but there were

brothers in our past history. Sibling rivalries. Violent sibling rivalries are more commonplace between two brothers than between a brother and a sister!" Mother has it all wrong, I am convinced, "I know the stories, and their names are here. The names of brothers..." but as I looked closer to the dates of birth and death, one brother's life always ran much shorter than the other.

"Survival of the fittest, Dear. That's how we have sustained all this time. War is in the Hinterschotts' blood. It would have been just a matter of time before one brother pitted against the other brother. Perhaps, they both would have died, and then where would the family's future be?" I think Mother was ashamed to have married into such a barbaric practice, but she further explains, "See how Great, Great, Great Uncle Herman died shortly after Great, Great Grampa Gunter was born?" Mother points to the family tree. "Gunter secured the family name with his birth, which was the death warrant on Herman as he had not yet married, and Siegfried, Herman's brother and Gunter's father, had married and bore a male heir for the next generation."

"Are you telling me that my ancestors killed their own children by their own hands?" I am incensed and ill.

"No! No! Hedy! No! Never! Well, not always. I mean it may have happened a couple of times," Mother back peddles, "but it was a different era. People weren't as civilized as they are today."

"Civilized? You are trying to define what is and is not civilized by way of a family of

murderers!" The more I ranted, the more defeated Mother felt, and with this, she fell back against the gun case. She had nothing else to rationalize with.

"All this to stave off in-fighting, and warring over our family's money, our family's business?!" It is too much to imagine. Could my father do such a thing to me? To Gary? Could Oma and Opa have done this to Dad's brother, if Dad, in fact, had a brother? Which begs the question, "Mother, did Dad have a sister?"

"No, dear, he didn't. In fact, no female child had been born since 1865." She pauses, long and dramatically, "until you, that is." I stare her down as I would any would-be opponent. She caught on and slapped my face for even thinking such a notion. "Get that thought out of your head this instance! I would never, I couldn't ever..." She couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Could Dad?" I think I already know the answer, but it had to be asked.

"Don't you know how much your father adores you?" She cupped my face in her hand. "He could never. His father could never. In fact, every generation has softened exponentially. I think your father would rather slit his own throat than to partake in a medieval practice of killing a child simply because the child is not male." I feel like now, I could probably sleep without my bush axe under my pillow.

"In fact, since 1865, all firstborns were male children, and the Hinterschotts didn't have another child after their male heir was born. I guess because the practice of killing off your own family became too vile as the generations went on. The Census had become



commonplace, so it was much more difficult to cover a series of familial deaths,” Mother wiped her tears and mine, “...and, you know, birth control helped a lot.” Well, that was the extent of my mother-daughter sex talk. When others talk about how uncomfortable they were when their mothers sat them down for “the talk”, I’ll really have something to gage those against.

“But Great Uncle Chadrik was Great Uncle Lothar’s brother. Why did Great Great Grampa and Grandma have another child after Lothar?”

“Chadrik and Lothar were twins. Identical twins. See?” as she points to their simultaneous birthdates. “Actually, it was very much a benefit to their plotting. One person could be in two places simultaneously, which was an extremely valuable trait in the profession.” *Oh yeah, priceless.* I wonder if they knew what their possible fate would have been had they not been born twins. “Let’s keep this to ourselves. It was a shameful and horrid practice in our family’s history, but it has long stopped. And I think your father and Oma wouldn’t ever be the same around you, knowing what you now know.”

“So, then, why tell me at all? I mean I can’t possibly use this information for my Stats project now. Too...” what’s the right word? “...incriminating?”

“Because, you need to know your past in order for the future of this family to prevail.”

“This is all by way of saying...” I’m searching for Mother to elaborate.

“You are the future of this family, Hedy. You, dear daughter.”

## Chapter 7

So, I guess, I was going to be the wizard behind the curtain in the family 'biz. Gary would just be the face of the company, but really, I would run things. But that is years from now, so for the moment, I think I'll stay 17 and unwise to the ways of the world. Ignorance really is bliss. But for Gary, it's more like no brains, no headaches.

I fear sleep will not come easily tonight: familial infanticide, dark family secrets revealed, my lapse in logic. Opa would be so disappointed about that last one, that whole safe slip-up. How could I have been so careless? So NOT in control? Where was my focus? Where was my atten... SON OF A BITCH! Dave! A guy! That guy! Dave! I was distracted by a guy! Now I understood why Mother and Dad had always forbidden any personal relationships: no friends, no play dates, no slumber parties, no boyfriend for me, no girlfriend for Gary. I guess the opposite sex really did have an effect on people. Dave really did have an effect on me...him and his Greek God-like features. One could only wonder what was under those baggy clothes. Did the face of Adonis have a body to match? OH MY GOD, STOP! This was going to be one Hell-uv-a long night after what was one Hell-uv-a long day. Thankfully, tomorrow is Saturday, and I can sleep in, but Dipshit across the hallway is singing (quite awfully) to his Zoom-mate.

"You.... leave me.... ah ...breathless, Dah-lin' ...." This is a near nightly practice for Gary. The "ladies" really like him, but he has never been allowed to outwardly reciprocate. I have been told that he is a good-looking guy, but what sister would ever think that of her

brother? So, when I get approached by ditzy girls who ask, “Oh my God! Do you know how hot your brother is?!” I return with a cocked eyebrow.

“You bet I do?” and wink. That typically grosses them out and they don’t take any more of his calls, Facetimes, emails, texts, tweets, etc. Gary can’t figure it out, but I take great humor in the whole situation.

So, I wonder who “Breathless” is tonight. I really don’t care, but if he doesn’t stop soon, I’ll have to invoke a new Hinterschott family tradition: siblingcide.

## Chapter 8

DING, DING, DING!!! BANG, BANG, BANG!!! PEBBLE-AT-MY-WINDOW, PEBBLE-AT-MY-WINDOW, PEBBLE-AT-MY-WINDOW!!! ROCK!

At the first DING, my instincts kicked in, and I laid out flat on the floor, belly-crawling to my closet. In the back is my safe (it's a cuter, smaller version of my parents' that I got for my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday), which I open and grab my go-bag, the contents of which are my passport, stack of banded 100 dollar bills, a disposable cell phone, and my junior kill kit—there's nothing really lethal in it, just some pressure point needles, knock-out drops, and a ladies' size combat knife. This all gets tucked around the jeans I pull out of my hamper and ply myself into.

Sit. Listen. Be alert. There is silence now. Nothing from outside. Horse isn't aroused, but that doesn't mean anything. He's such a coward. He probably turned tail and ran into the back of Gary's closet, per usual. Had Dad neutralized the assailant? Can't be the competition, or at least any good competition. No good assassin makes such a ruckus, so it must be some other unknown entity. In any case, the in-house rendezvous was the safe room down the hall in the parents' closet. The house is still. Everyone else must either be in the safe room already, or out the door on their way to Tijuana—ugh, I hate that place, but it would just be temporary.

Looking across my bedroom floor, I check for shadows beneath the doorway. Nothing. So, my next move is to...

“GARY! GARY, YOU ASSHOLE! I KNOW YOU’RE HOME, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH! IT’S TOO EARLY FOR YOU TO BE OUT OF BED, YOU LAZY BASTARD! I’M GONNA’ KILL YOU, YOU TWO-TIMING SCUMBAG!”

In the reality of this moment, I think, *not unless I get to him first!* Hedy, downshift, collect yourself, analyze, and act accordingly.

I burst open Gary’s door, “GARY! GARY! ARE YOU FUCKING DEAF?!” Oh, Christ...he’s gone to sleep again with his Bose Noise-Canceling Headset on. This item is considered contraband in our house. Earbuds, headphones, and the like reverberate the little bones in the inner ear and cause permanent hearing loss, which dulls one of critical senses necessary in our line of work in order to...well, not get killed.

But I digress, “GARY!” I slap the Bose of his head, and he finally is alert.

“What the Hell, Head!” DING, DING, DING!!!

“GARY!!!!” whoever this is, her voice carries. Good thing we live far from any nearby road. Gary is waking up and finally catching up.

“Oh, Holy Hell...” Gary jumps out of bed, but gets somewhat tangled in his sheets.

“Who is that, Gary?”

“Shhhh, keep your voice down!”

“You are too dumb to breathe,” and I storm out of his room, make my way downstairs to the front door as he follows me in a desperate plead.

“No, Hedy, no, no, no, don’t...”

Peeking out the dining room windows, just in case this was, in fact, NOT a psychotic tramp wronged by Gary, I confirm a blonde, female, with shirt too tight, heels too high, irrational, hormonal, emotions way too high. Verdict: I can take her if necessary, so I open the door.

“Can I help you?” answering the door so calmly you would have never known that just six minutes prior, I was an assassin-in-training with a go-bag on her way to Mexico.

“Where is he? Where is Gary?” She is way too high-strung to try to talk her off a ledge, so I say it like it is.

“He’s right here.”

“Be-otch,” he whispers and the door swings open to expose his presence. “Kris! Babe! What’s the matter? You look so upset.”

She stood on our front porch with one hand on her hip and the other holding her iPhone, running Facetime.

“Aaah, that’s cool...is that the 11Plus?” Gary is truly impressed.

“Chris, are you there?” Kris, her bitch-wing flared, refers to her phone.

“Yeah, I’m here. Good morning, Gary. Surprised?” Chris, the other Chris (this one’s a brunette) chimes. I duck behind the door spying through the door jam.

*Two Chrisses? Or is it Krisses? Or is it Chris and Kris?* I am loving this moment, but it doesn’t last for long because Gary steps outside shutting the door closed behind him. That’s OK, ‘cuz I’ve had enough drama for one morning.

So where was the rest of the family? Where was Chester? Where was Horse? In the kitchen, there is a note from Mother and Dad, "Running errands. Back around noon. XOXO, MnD." So then, Oma is where? Her bedroom is on the first floor at the opposite end of the house, and I'm only halfway down her hallway before I can hear her signature snort-snore. A result of her diet being too "hoppy". Hmmm, diet suggests food. Food suggests hunger. Hunger suggests eating, but Oma is deep in slumber, so I manage to toast and jam it. Oma's fantastic jam, that is, boysenberry, or "poison-berry" as Gary refers to it. When he was a kid, it was cute because of Oma's professional talent, but he still refers to it as poison-berry today, and it's just another notch on the how-irritating-is-Gary belt.

As I take the last bite of my breakfast, Gary comes back in the house, and he's managed to talk the Chrisses down from a ledge. I try to give him the benefit of the doubt, "so, Gary, let me guess. You're leading on two Chrisses, so that you don't confuse their names in the heat of the moment."

Gary turned to me and snickered, "Yeah, you don't think I can, but I *did learn* from a previous experience, 'The Annie-Michelle'." He makes it sound like a steam line ship disaster. "So then, ya' know, I thought, 'wait a second, Gare. Try names that rhyme!' But I botched the Teri-Sheri situation. So, then I had another conversation with myself and said, 'Gare, what if their names just started with the same letter as Phoebe and Felicity' but that was like..." at this point I just tuned him out and think Mother and Dad are correct: Gary would just run a 500-year-old family institution into the ground in a matter of months. As

he continued his dissertation on handling the fairer sex, I am tempted to inform of him our parents' monumental life-altering decision just to make him feel as inadequate as he unknowing makes all of his conquests feel, but I take the high road.

"Here's a thought, Bro. Just get involved with one girl. It would be less of an affront to them personally and to me as a female." I look at him quite disapprovingly, and he stares me down with an expression that is as empty as his head and decides that I **must** be joking.

"Che-yah, right..." Acting as if I have proposed the impossible, but realizing that I am not and defends himself, "Hey, **they** come looking for me. I never go after one of them!" **One of them.** Wow, what an assbag. "Assbag", look it up in the dictionary, and there's a picture of my brother. "How am I supposed to push away a major chick? Or two?" I maintained my disapproving gaze.

"How is it that you are keeping all this action from Mother and Dad? Any personal relationships with anyone outside of our family puts the rest of us in danger, risks exposure, and makes you a colossal liability." He looks at me like he does when I use too many big words, so I dumb it down for him, "It's a 'no-no', or did you miss that chapter in the assassins' manual?" Now, he looks really worried about what I just said, like when he's missed Mothers' Day or something, so I beat him to the punch, "...no, Gary, there is no manual."

"Yeah, I knew that," he's defensive, but he can't pull off smart, and he knows that I know and becomes desperate and does what he usually does when this happens: he goes



for the jugular, “Look, you’re just jealous ‘cuz guys don’t chase you, Miss High and Mighty Brainiac! And they won’t ever either ‘cuz no guy wants to be with a girl who talks down to him all the time.”

“Gary, I only talk down to you,” hoping to shut him up, but he has the attention span of pocket lint, and he rejoices in what’s on the kitchen island, “Ooo, Poison-berry jam! Awesome!” He dives into the jar with his fingers, doesn’t even bother with toast or even a knife. Dullard that he is, that last comment hit too close to home. Truth of the matter was, I didn’t talk down to any guys because I simply didn’t talk to any guys. Not until Dave. I didn’t want to give Gary the satisfaction of thinking that he’s said something with any intellect.

“Think I’ll work-out.” I remark, but all Gary is focused on is food.

“Hey! Is Oma up yet?!” Continuing to yell as I leave the kitchen. “I’m starving!”

## Chapter 9

Sunny morning that it was, I decide to kayak on our lake. Alone time, contemplation time, stress-alleviation time. I am a world better than I was an hour ago. I change out of my wetsuit, dry off in our boathouse and change into what was supposed to be my robe. It's monogrammed GAH. Gare must have taken mine again. It's not bad enough that he can't tell the difference between his initials and mine, but surely when he put on my robe instead of his, he would realize that it's too small for him. And purple.

"Gare!" I holler when I enter the house.

"What?!" he screams down.

"What color is your robe?" Trying to extract intel from the guy.

"It's dark! Why?" Dark? Really?! He leans over the upstairs railing and sees me approaching the staircase. "Head! That's my robe! Jeez, can't you keep your grubs off my stuff..." he continues to rant at my insolent robe thievery as I walk past him into his room, open his closet and pull out my robe. "Why did you put your robe in my closet?"

It's so not worth blowing a good workout over, so I push my way past him and directly enter sanctuary: the shower. Hedy's Playlist comes to mind, so I plug in and fall into mental cleansing as well as physical:

*If you dig under my feet  
You will find things that you  
DON'T WANT TO SEE.  
Things that I hide way down inside,*

*A menagerie  
of the tragedy  
that I've caused and all of my flaws,  
And my demons!  
Oh, if you could see what I do, if you only knew...  
All of these things that I've done  
Terrible things  
You would never believe  
The things that I've done  
Oh, how you'd run  
If you only knew...*

"Hedy!" Mother pounds on the bathroom door midway through my serenity and screams at me to turn down the volume.

"Mother, you don't need to scream. I can hear you."

"You don't need to play the music so loudly."

"If you would allow us to wear ear buds, then you wouldn't be burdened with the loud music." Which made no sense because I can't wear earbuds in the shower, but nonetheless.

All that I have learned and all that I know is to play the scenario out as if unaware, so I finish my shower, dry, coif, and dress myself in a Dartmouth sweatshirt that Gary gave me for Christmas last year. I hadn't worn it until today.

Before I make my way out back, I grab the mail from the front. This was one of the

responsibilities originally assigned to Gary as a kid, but he never managed to own up to it. I always brought it in, and everyone just assumed Gary always did his due diligence.

Looks like we're eating lunch outside. Wonder what Oma has in store for us. Talking to myself as I walk out back to the family gathering. I tossed the bundled mail to him on the checkered blanket, "Got the mail for you today," and winked at him.

"Wah...?" before he gave away our decade-old secret, I interjected.

"Hobos! Awesome, Oma! That workout on the lake stirred up a huge appetite!" Oma makes these sandwiches, Hobos, out of pastry bread and whatever deli meat and cheese is left in the fridge at the end of the week.

"Oh, I'll take that, Son," and Dad takes the rubber-banded roll of what appears to be mostly junk mail. I mean, it looks like junk mail to every other non-combatant, but to our family, it's a means to an income.

Dad sorts it out as he dives into his Hobo, "Mailer to 'Occupant at 728 Woodland Way', electric bill, Visa bill, in an envelope bigger than your standard letter-sized! Linda, where have you been shopping?" He shakes his head at Mother, "I don't even want to open this one," and hands it directly to Mother, who takes it sheepishly while Dad continues, "mass mailer to 'Mr. Huntershoots'. Ha! Another one!" We all laugh at the goon corporation who solicits our business, but can't do us the courtesy of spelling our name correctly. We get quite a few variants as do most average American families with their own last names: Jinterschotts (the H and the J letters are right next to each other on the keyboard), Hinters

(probably some computer glitch that truncates every recipient's name after the first seven letters), and Huntershoots, which is comically close to our family profession that we all chuckle when that one comes in. But Dad keeps looking for a so-called generic salutation of "Current Residence at 728 Woodlane Way" ..."Residance" instead of "Residdents", which we received today. "Got one..." And all our ears perk up.

As Big Brother is constantly surveying our society with high-tech satellites photo-documenting any and all suspicious activity (don't fool yourself...they're watching you too) cell phone conversations and email encryptions, Dad had the brilliant idea to go low-tech in soliciting prospective bids. "Junk mail" that comes addressed to our house as "Current Residence" is code for "Open me, I gotta' job for you." The very generic looking letter asks us to refinance at the "low, low rate of 1.75%". But when Dad places a piece of cardstock with pre-existing slits cut out over the letter, a series of letters indicating name, time and location are revealed. The bank requesting our business to refinance our mortgage is actually an agency, which we have contracted for 10% of every job. Our name became such an industry standard that Dad decided to have a firm coordinate our business and manage our finances. The Hinterschotts haven't needed to bid out a job in a couple of decades. Does Brad Pitt have to audition for a part now-a-day? No. And The Hinterschotts don't have to apply for a job in the same respect.

"I'll run it through later," he tucks the unopened envelope into his back pocket as if it were a handkerchief, and we continue with our picnic lunch by our pond.

Our lunch is interrupted by a most vile stench, upon which Mother turns to Gary and says, "Please remove your gaseous hound from our meal."

Gary turns to Horse, "Jesus, Horse! What have you been hunting?"

"Right! That dog? A hunter? Gary, you're deluding yourself." I couldn't resist. That dog has no redeeming values what-so-ever: big, clumsy, dumb, cowardly, afraid of Chester, who under-weighs him by roughly 200 pounds, and cannot hold his wind in mixed company.

Gary shooed him toward the pond, but Horse walked a few steps and turned back to see if that was far enough. "Get going!" Dad asserts, so Horse takes six more steps and falls beneath a nearby tree. I suppose you can't blame Horse for being the way he is: he came from an abusive background and was raised by an idiot.

On our 8<sup>th</sup> birthdays, our parents took us to the local animal shelter where we could each get a pet. I chose a Russian Blue foster kitten, named "Punky" ...horrid, so I gave him a much more sophisticated name, "Chester", after President Chester Arthur, our 21<sup>st</sup> President...what's that? You've never heard of President Arthur? Yeah, well he was a lesser-known president, but he was a huge historical influence on our country. Outside of Lincoln, he was the President who was responsible for reunifying our country after the Civil War. He was a behind-the-scenes kind of President, but a significant one. How do I know this? I researched and wrote a report on every US President throughout 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. I became easily bored with the standard curriculum, and my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Ms. McMahon, did not know what to do with me, so she gave me this "enrichment activity" for the entire school year;

therefore, I became intimate with the more obscure presidents. President Chester Arthur appealed to me because he did what my family sort of did: created a great deal of good without drawing a lot of attention.

Gary chose a 1-year-old Great Dane, which came from an abusive home. He chose it because when he saw it, he thought it was a pony; thus, it was named “Horse”. Now one would think that when you’re 8-years-old you are afforded a few idiotic moments. They are considered cute. But Gary shared a picture of Horse one day for Show-and-Tell in 2nd grade, and thusly how Horse got its name. Even though he knew well-enough that this dog wasn’t a horse at all, he still felt the need to share the endearing story behind its name. Since then, it’s been fodder for every one of subsequent school year’s “Stupidest moments”—Gary thought he had a pet horse living in his closet? or “Remember when...”—Gary told everyone in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade the thought he brought home a pet horse from the animal shelter? He’s never lived it down. Thank God he’s a senior and can move past this episode.

“That’s a good boy,” Gary rewarded Horse for plopping to the ground.

“What’s so *good* about what he did?” I had to ask because I cannot abide praising that which is expected.

“He followed directions.”

“Well, give him a doggie biscuit!” My sarcasm perked Horse’s ears because of the word “biscuit”.

“Don’t tease him! Now you’re going to have to get him a biscuit,” Gary defends and once

again, Horse' ears perk up.

"He, go get Horse a b-i-s-c-u-i-t, will you please?" Dad implored peace. Grabbing my Hobo, I conceded and invited Horse to walk up to the house with me.

"You're actually not a bad old pup," I try to make up for all the mean things I've ever said about him, but he just drools and pants in anticipation of a treat.

I really did need to work on a new stats project, so I decided to go to the library. Looking out the family room window down by the lake made me sentimental. Sharing family moments in a tranquil setting, they look like a magazine ad for an insurance company, "Cherish this moment as you cherish your family. Buy Great American Insurance policies for those you love and who love you." Gag. As I didn't want confrontation, I wrote a note, "Catching a bus to the library. Be home for dinner. He", tucked it under Horse's collar, and whipped the biscuit off the back deck. "Go get it, Boy!" And off he gallops towards the family as I gather up my backpack and make my stealthy exit. Glancing back to make sure Horse actually made it, I thought to myself that if I didn't know these people killed for a living, Norman Rockwell would have had them sit for a portrait.



## Chapter 10

I'm gonna' have to haul ass in order to make the 12:55 to the city, but I sprint down the winding hillside and onto the bus in time without really breaking a sweat. I swipe my bus card, but only to hear the bus driver say, "Machine's broken. Tokens only."

Never has this happened. "This is highly irregular."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I've never seen this bus driver before, and he doesn't fit the profile. I look back to a near empty bus: a guy in a blue jacket and a large elderly lady. Near the front of the bus is the seemingly elderly lady who has shockingly white hair, like wig white, and she is holding a cane, which may be concealing something sinister. Verdict: sit behind her if Mr. Bus-Driving-Jackass ever lets me on the bus.

Right behind the bus driver is a guy in a blue jacket...wait, it's the same blue jacket as Mr. Bus-Driving-Jackass. He fits the bus driver profile. "Jared, you need to maintain courtesy to all riders at all times." Jared turns around to what appears to be his supervisor, and I see a tag on his lapel: Trainee. "Ma'am, do you have any tokens?"

"No, sorry." I am **NO** ma'am.

"Here," and the elderly woman with a quaking voice rises from her seat with great effort, straining every fiber in that cane of hers in order to give me four tokens.

"Oh, thank you, Ma'am. Please let me pay you." But she just waves me off and turns towards her window. "Please let me pay you for these, ma'am." But again, she just waves her hand at me to dismiss my manners. I thank her again and plunk the tokens into the coin

box. Jared rolls his eyes and pulls the bus doors closed. Verdict: Jared won't make it as a bus driver.

I sit in the seat next to the lady with whom I have just made friends, not behind her. I see she is large with extremely limited mobility, and that shockingly white hair is all wig. Next to her is a bag with the markings, The Hoffman Cancer Treatment Center. I suspect she is a chemotherapy patient given her weakened condition and distant behavior. New verdict: tragic and threatless.

Before the bus takes off, someone pounds on the outside and screams, "STOP!" The doors open, and I half expect to see Gary who has been summoned to bring me home, but it is not: it's some little girl in stereotypical blonde braided pigtails who feeds the meter and skips to a seat behind my new friend. Now, we're off on a 20-minute trip with five more stops which no one else gets on, but the elderly lady does get off at The Hoffman Cancer Treatment Center. I stand to help her with her bag, but she snatches it from me as though I were attempting to steal it and hobbles to the front of the bus, where Mr. Supervisor helps her off the bus. I thank her again and decide to sit closer to the front with my back to the window so I have a complete view of the bus. My stop is the public library, where I get off and apparently so does Little Miss Pigtails as she follows behind me.

"Daddy!" She runs and he picks her up with a gigantic hug. How sweet.

The SFPL is such a classy library. Everything is mahogany and leather and tapestries. There is even a fireplace, but that area is very popular today with a couple who clearly are

not at the library to study and a freaky-looking Harry Potter wanna-be. Therefore, not conducive to isolated study time. I don't always go to the same location in the library--too predictable--, so today, I decide to sit in an alcove on the first floor far enough away from library traffic, but close enough to keep my eye on the front doors. I sink into one of the oversized leather chairs with my tablet, and the brainstorming begins.

I wonder how many books are in this library. I wonder what the ratio of physical book check-outs compared to the newer, trendier and infinitely more convenient remote eBook check-outs this library makes in one calendar year is. Could I devise a probability out of that notion? Could I even get those statistics from the library? Probably not. Could that guy walking in the library right now probably be...Dave? Well, my heart is thumping like a jack-rabbit, so that probability is now a confirmed fact. He sees me, stops, sinks his hands into both his front pockets, beams with gladness, and flashes his dimples. Oh, how did I miss those before? They are magnificent. I blush as he approaches me, "Wow...what are the odds?"

"What are the odds, indeed?" I say suspiciously.

"Well..." he awe-shucks a bit, "this is actually my third time here today." This encounter just became even more interesting.

"You must be a really fast reader."

"Well, I usually go for the picture books, so yeah." He locks his eyes onto mine, and vice versa. A lot is being said in this moment of silence. "This was your last known location, so I

just banked on the fact that you'd eventually be back." He is really quite likable. "Hoped."

"Hmmm? What's that?" I am not even masking my attraction for him right now.

"Hoped...I hoped that you'd be back." Correction, he is really quite irresistible. He extends his hand in an offering, "How about a coffee break?" I take his hand as if I needed help out of my chair.

"A break sounds lovely." Even though I had only been there a whole 7 minutes, I pretended like I'd been there for hours. As we exit the library together, he pulls my bag from my shoulder in a gallant gesture, but this is not allowable.

"No, that's OK, I can manage." And I pull my bag on my opposite shoulder.

"OK, but coffee's on me." And slips his hand into mine.

We walk for a few blocks, talking about our mutual connection, Global Issues and Dr. Markensen.

"That guy doesn't seem right to me." Dave shows off his observation skills, but I play it cool.

"How so?"

"He is just wrong. Wrong in so many ways...his bad hairpiece, his phony pretense, his...everything. He's probably a Nazi." Which irritates me to respond with a bit of a 'tude.

"Oh, just because his name is German means he is a Nazi?"

"No, because he's creepy, defensive of Hitler, has a Swastika lapel pin secretly tucked away inside his computer bag, AND the fact that his last name is German means he's

probably a Nazi." I chuckle and concede.

"Point taken. You're probably right. What are you doing digging in his computer bag?"

"Looking for Nazi paraphernalia, of course." He winks.

"So, this is like a hobby...or..." hoping he would fill in the "or".

"Just nosey, is all. Hey, did you know that Hitler created the Swastika, himself?" Play dumb, Hedy.

"Oh, yeah. Isn't that an urban legend?" I'm so cool.

"No, no, it's the truth. So, this is how he came up with it." And he tells me exactly how it did not happen. Conspiracy theorist, Nazi hunter, or history buff? Verdict: I don't care because he is *so* my kind of guy.

Inside of Starbucks is way too crowded for my taste, so I wait outside at a café table for two with my chair back to the brick wall while Dave fetches the coffee. Saturday downtown San Francisco is a busy place. I won't be able to devote my attention to Dave. I'll be too busy assessing all things possibly ill-intended, so as soon as he comes back out, I say, "Can I walk you home, Sir?" He doesn't like that I've cut our "date" short. I can see he's a bit hurt, but I counter with, "I didn't realize the time. My parents are expecting me home for supper and the next possible bus for me to catch home is the 3:15."

"Sure, no problem," he agrees, but I don't think he's buying into it. But as smooth as this guy is, he changes the tenor of our conversation as we walk, "Hinterschott...so I'm guessing you're Irish?"

“Well, we used to be O’Hinterschott until the family moved to the US, so yeah.” Ooo, quick and witty. Nice, Hedy...nice.

“Ah, then me’ mother would approve, Lass,” Dave responds in an Irish brogue.

“Mother, really? Don’t you think it’s a little soon to be introducing me to your mother?”

“Oh, this game again?” Dave winks. I think I should back-off because he won this game last time, but before I can relent, he continues. “Nah, I’m not gonna’ introduce you to my mother. I mean, it’s not that I don't want to...” he trails off, so I stop us in our steps.

“Then...why?” Is he ashamed of me?

“She died when I was a baby. I never knew her.” Oh God, my witty banter turned gut-wrenchingly tragic.

“Dave, I’m so sorry.”

“You know, it’s OK, I get that from a lot of people. In fact, everyone I usually tell shuns me, so how about if you try to be original,” he broke the tension with an easy out for me.

“OK, then...let’s start over. Ask me again if I’m Irish...” I nudge his arm.

“Um, OK, so, Hinterschott, I guess that’s Irish, right?”

“No, Idiot, it’s full-fledged German. Does it sound remotely Irish to you?” I say with cold-heartedness that he likes, and we resume our kindly walk.

“German, huh? Yeah, I’ve heard of that name.”

“You ever been stopped by a train?”

“Yeah, sure,” he nods. “Dozens of times”

“Irritating as Hell, right?”

“Sure...I like to get where I’m going just as much as the next guy.”

“Probably even swore at the crossing gate?”

“Right.”

“Well, then you have cursed at my family’s industry.” His eyes light up and is pleased with his recognition.

“Oh, yeah! I’ve seen ‘Hinterschott’ on those boxcars!”

“Please, Dave! *Containers*, if you will! Boxcars are what livestock are shipped in and hobos ride on. Those containers contain *things*, not people or animals. We do have some refinement.”

“Oh, do pardon, ma’am.” And then it hits him, “So that’s what your family does? Owns? For real?”

Tread lightly, I don’t want to lose him or hook him due to my financial status, “Yup. Imports and exports are our business.”

“Wow, just like James Bond, huh?”

I stop short in a panic, “What the hell is that supposed to mean? What are you saying, exactly?”

“Oh wow, sorry...I really didn’t mean anything by it really. I just meant that James Bond worked for Universal Imports...” The word, “cover”, and a reference to an international assassin just popped up. Does he know something? Is he trying to slip me up? He looks a bit freaked out by my stoic reaction. “James Bond is the only famous guy I know in imports and exports. I was trying to be witty. Apparently, it didn’t work.” He’s got no flop sweat going right now, and he looks like he is genuinely concerned that he may have offended me. Verdict: he’s trying to impress me.

“Oh, right,” I laugh it off. “For a second, I thought you were suggesting that my family was a bunch of trained assassins...” And he relaxes, “...very clever.”

“Although, I don’t think James Bond was primarily an assassin, was he? He was a spy and killing was just part of it.” Actually, anyone who knows anything about Ian Fleming’s true James Bond, they would know that, sure, he was an agent of Her Majesty’s Secret Service, but he was first and foremost a trained assassin. That’s how one becomes a Double-O. Single-Os are more like desk jockeys and research analysts, so technically, Dave wasn’t exactly correct, but I didn’t want to kill the moment.

“Actually, I think he was a lady’s man first, spy second, but I take your point.” I smirk at him.

“So...your family’s business?”

“Oh, right, well. I really don’t know that much about it. My dad is priming my brother to take over the company someday.” Liar.



"Your brother, *really*?" Dave cocks an eyebrow, shocked.

"Yep,"

"Oh, do you have another brother?"

"Nope." Wow, this is almost as awkward as when I pried info out of him about his dead mother. "But we have people who run the business, so Gary would just be a figurehead. No real brains behind the corporation." Again, liar.

"Oh, I didn't mean to suggest that..."

"Hey, if you hadn't suggested it, then, I would have thought you weren't as smart as I thought you were."

"What makes you think I'm smart?"

"Well, you're at USF, so you're either really smart or really rich."

"And you're judging that I couldn't possibly be rich because...?"

"Touché." This guy really gets me off my game, which I like about him.

"Nah, I'm just messin' with you. I'm brilliant and on scholarship. So, which are you?"

"And you're judging me that I couldn't possibly be rich and smart because...?"

"I *know* you're both!"

"Good, I'm glad to know you're not just interested in me because my family is crazy-ass rich." He stops, grabs me and lays a kiss right on me out of nowhere. A great kiss, at that. Well, not that I would know what a bad kiss was because this was my first outside a familial one.

“You’re the trifecta. You’re also beautiful.” I drop my coffee.

I have just fallen into: a) the forbidden zone, b) a world beyond what I have ever known, and c) love? Oh, wait, I recall: first loves are highly emotional and irrational due to the very nature of the concept of “love” being introduced for the first time. This is not a first love. This is a first-time emotional entanglement, but Christ on a cupcake, this is good.

## Chapter 11

“Well, this is me...again.” We are standing in front of his condo building again. “See you 8<sup>th</sup> hour.”

But that is almost 48 hours from now, and in realizing this, I squeeze his hand harder. “Can’t wait.” The doorman (this one’s bigger) opens the door for him, and in the building he walks. I walk closer to the door and watch Dave disappear towards the elevator. He sees me watching him and waves as the doors close. I want so badly to follow him in, so I do, but I stop as the doorman opens the door for me, I pause, “Hey, Gary.”

“Son of a Bitch!” It’s Gary, and he is in utter disbelief, incensed, outraged even. “How did you know? Oh Hell!” Without saying a word to him, I point at his buttons, and he sees his error: he’s a button off from the top of his faux-military doorman’s coat to the bottom.

“Plus, I saw Dad’s Harry Potter getup in the library. Where is he now?”

“Down...the...fucking...” he struggles to get his coat unbuttoned, “...block...what is with these buttons?!!”

“They’re snaps.” And with one yank of his lapel, I have freed him from his prisoner of a coat. He yanks it off and throws it to the ground and begins to storm out the door.

“Gary!”

“WHAT?!”

"The hat?" He throws it down at my feet. "Is this one of Dad's?" I yell out the door.

"YEAH! LET'S GO!" He is such a hot-head. I'm not walking next to him. He's drawing too much attention to himself, so I hang back a few yards. He doesn't even notice that I'm not right behind him as he climbs into our van, and I wait. The van door slides wide, and Gary pops his head out and shouts, "I DON'T KNOW WHERE SHE IS?!"

"I'm right here, Asshole," I whisper and he screams like a little girl. I shove his head back in the van, follow in after him, pull the door closed and toss Dad's doorman's outfit in the back with the rest of his getups.

"Where did you go?! Where did you come from?! You're like a freaking spook?!" The more confused he gets, the angrier he gets.

"Nice work again, He," Dad beams in his round plastic eyeglasses and pulls out into traffic to take us home. Gary pouts in the back, and I pout in the front. The tension is more than Dad can bear. "So, Gary, how did you neutralize the doorman?" Dad is just setting himself up for disappointment here.

"I gave him a fifty to take a 30-minute break." He sulks in the back. I look at Dad out of the corner of my eye and he does the same to me.

"That's not..." I begin to say.

"WHAT?! WHAT?! That's not WHAT?! Good enough? Smart enough? Sneaky enough?" I haven't seen him this upset before. "Well? Which is it?"

"Bad," I say.

“What was so **bad** about it?!” he is still brooding.

“No, what I was going to say was, that’s not **bad.**” I meant it. I had to give him credit here. I’d have thought he would have said something like he needed to stalk someone who lived in that building because that someone was stalking his sister. But he was direct and effective.

“Gare! Well-played, Son!” Dad is surprised and proud.

“Really?” Gary blushes a bit. “Proud enough to let me drive?”

“No,” Dad chuckles, and home we go for another dysfunctional dinner.

## Chapter 12

“Where was she?” Mother looks beyond me and addresses Dad directly.

“The library,” Dad states and glances a smile in my direction.

“AND Starbucks AND some guy’s apartment!” Gary feels the need to contribute to my most certain discipline. Both Mother and Oma gasp.

“In a boy’s apartment?!?!? Hereld, where were you!? How could you let her go into a boy’s apartment?!”

“She did not go into the boy’s apartment, Ladies.”

“She went into the building, though!” Gary once again contributes.

“How about if I explain?” We all sit down to eat, and I go into, well, the truth. “I was at the library, and I ran into this kid from my Global Issues class. I told him I needed to catch a bus home, and he graciously escorted me.”

“Ohh, he sounds like a gentleman. So rare, ‘deze days.” Oma gushes.

“Yeah, right, Oma, so I offered to buy him a cup of coffee while I waited for the bus....”

“The bus stop in front of his apartment building?!” Gary questions sarcastically. “Good one, Head! There isn’t one!” So proud of himself he slops another ladle of noodles over his mashed potatoes.

“Gary, I spotted you and Dad at Starbucks, so I knew I had a ride home. I walked him to his apartment so he wouldn’t wait at the bus stop with me.”

“That’s a smart move, Lindie.” Dad pops a meatball into his mouth. “If she allowed him

to wait with her, then he would know the bus number she took. Nice, Hedy. Good thinking, Sweetheart." Dad to the rescue.

"This is total bullshit!" Gary is outraged.

"Gerhardt, Gotteslästerung!" Oma chastises Gary for his offensive language.

"How is this bullshit, Gary? Huh? How, tell me how this is bullshit when all I did was to have coffee with a guy and you're screwing over two girls at once?! Huh, explain this one, genius!"

"Hedy, Gotteslästerung! Don't shtoop to his level, dah-ling!"

"Oma, really? You're defending her and not me?"

"Nein, Gerhardt, nein..."

"Maybe I'm more worthy of being defended because I have more to offer this family than you, Oh Sacred Son!" And my fork finds its way across the table onto Gary's lap. The table is silent, and the stare down begins, which I always win, and Gary knows this.

His only rebuttal is, "I have something to offer this family!" Gary is outraged, but he can't validate what he has started and becomes anxious in the waiting for something to come to him. But nothing does.

"Really? And what is that besides your last name, which I also happen to have, and your testicles?" Oma immediately breaks out into an old German hymnal in denial of the atrocities occurring at her dinner table. Mother verbally attacks Dad about his allowing this situation to escalate to this level. And Gary continues to search for an intellectual

answer.

"BAND!" he explodes in desperation, "I'm musical!"

Oma stops humming and Mother and Dad hang their heads, but I am not about to let it go, "OK, A) Hanging out in the back row of 6th grade band waiting to ding the triangle when the director conspicuously points right at you does NOT qualify as musical..."

"The triangle AND the tambourine!" Gary desperately adds, like that makes it any better.

"...and B) how is *that* musical talent a contribution to the family?" I do the bunny ears thing when I say "musical talent", so the insult is not totally lost on him.

"It takes rhythm, timing, a soft touch..." he points to individual fingers on his hand to accentuate each of his three killer arguments, but he stops cold...can't think of a fourth.

"Yeah, OK, so when we get a contract for a hit on a junior high school marching band's bass drummer, you'll be our go-to guy. Until then, accept the fact that you are not cut out for this line of work!"

"Like you're an expert?!" He is in my face. Dramatic pause. Deathly silent. Disturbingly still. Reality moment happening. Gary is...right. I have been in training since birth. I have studied ancient covert techniques and the most modern weaponry. I am kick-ass in quite a few different martial arts. My instincts are in the sixth sense realm. I have the blood of nine generations of assassins. I have been primed, coached, and groomed in mind, body and soul for my first assignment from the womb. But it wasn't until this very instance that I realized



that I had no clue what it is like to take a human life.

I turn to Mother and Dad looking for an answer from them, but I fear they have come to the same realization as I.

“Who ‘vants strudel?” Oma attempts to break the tension. Not me...I’m outta’ here.

## Chapter 13

The woods on our property have been my playground since I could walk, so I don't need a flashlight to get to the tree house our parents built 10 years ago. I actually haven't been there awhile, so the wooden footboards were a bit loose and there was quite a bit of overgrowth, but I cleared a spot that allowed me to lie down and stare directly up at the night sky. How beautiful and peaceful this moment was. This moment brings me back to the origins of this tree house: the day Mother and Dad informed me of our family's *true* business of being cold-blooded killers. To this day, I don't know how my parents could have thought that a 7-year-old could possibly process this information in a mature fashion.

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### 10 years earlier

"Opa, how old are the giraffes when they are born?"

We loved Opa taking us to the zoo, and Opa loved it too. But on this day, Gary had just asked Opa a question that he didn't quite know how to answer without shredding the boy's self-confidence, so Opa sighed heavily in disappointment, souring the adventure a bit.

"Gary, giraffes are born at the same age we are when we are born." I interjected. Opa smiled at me, and he had to turn away to chuckle about the whole incident. Again, to save face for Gary.

"REALLY? COOL! Are there any other animals that are born the same age as we are when we're born?"

“Oh, yeah, Gary, there are gorillas and elephants and snakes...”

“SNAKES! NO WAY!”

“Yes, way! And tigers and bears and...”

“OK, children, let’s meet up with Momma and Papa, huh?” I didn’t know if Opa stopped my schtick because he couldn’t take it any longer, or if he just couldn’t contain his laughter any longer.

“There they are!” Gary ran ahead to our parents, and Opa was exasperated.

“Oh, that boy! He speaks before he thinks. He acts before he contemplates. You know what ‘contemplate’ means, Hedy?”

“Yes, Opa. It’s a synonym for the word ‘think’.”

“My, but you are such a bright and beautiful young lady! Do you know how proud we all are of you?” I blushed and smiled. “You will take our business into the next century.”

“Into the next millennium even, Opa!” Again, he was delighted with my wit.

“Sit with me, mein lepschun.” We found a park bench next to a lake filled with geese. “Here, Hedy, toss some popcorn in the middle of those birds in the lake and tell me what happens, huh?”

“OK, Opa.” I did as he asked and reported that the geese were all fighting for the popcorn. They flew over one another. Some spread their wings to scare off the other geese. And it seemed as if the biggest geese were the ones who got all the popcorn. “But that’s not fair to the other smaller geese. How are they supposed to eat?”

“Just ‘vatch...” And watched, I did. The smaller geese swam away from the frenzied popcorn fest.

“Those big geese are just a bunch of bullies, Opa! They are their own kind, and they are doing nothing to help them!” I wanted to cry for the smaller geese, but Opa begged me to be a bit more patient.

“Look!” he pointed at the far end of the lake. It was a beautiful swan. Gliding ever so gracefully towards the loud and angry geese.

“So majestic! It’s like Old Britannica floating towards...” At that moment, I was about to continue regarding the elegance and proper manners a swan must have, based upon her appearance alone, charged the big geese in a full-on attack causing them to fly off the pond. Astonished, I asked Opa, “Why did the swan do that? The geese weren’t bothering that swan.”

“Yes, Hedy, you are very smart.”

“Look, that swan doesn’t even want any of the popcorn! It just came in and made the other big geese so scared that they flew away. Why, Opa?” The social politics of the San Francisco Zoo Serenity Pond were more than I could fathom.

“Dis, Hedy, ‘dis is ‘vy. Look!” The swan, having no interest in eating at all, simply swam back to the other side of the pond, and in doing so left the remaining popcorn for the smaller geese.

“The swan was just looking out for the smaller geese who couldn’t defend themselves?” How heroic, I remember thinking.

“Not exactly, Hedy. The swan was just establishing a fair and neutral place for all animals of the pond. Geese, ducks, water herons. She is keeping the peace, and sometimes when peace needs to be kept, extreme actions have to take place.”

“She?! The swan is a female?” I had just assumed it was a male because it was so assertive.”

“Yes, a strong and proud female swan, who is feared and respected because she maintains the balance and reprimands those who are unjust. Do you know what ‘reprimand’ and ‘unjust’ mean?”

I hadn’t up to that point, but I figured it out. “Punishment and unfairness?”

Again, Opa displays his pride by a shoulder squeeze and a kiss to the forehead. “Hedy, you ‘vill go far in life.”

“Would the swan have killed some of the geese if they didn’t obey her rules?”

“I dare say yes. But who knows what it takes to maintain order in the pond.”

“POPCORN!” Gary saw remnant popcorn on the lawn leading to the pond. Yes, he ate it.

Opa reiterated, “Hedy, you ‘vill go far in life! Now, stop your bruza’ before he goes into ‘zee pond.”

Driving home, Gary slept sprawled out in the backseat, snoring while I sat up front in quiet contemplation about the earlier swan dialog.

"Hedala," Opa's pet name for me, "Vy are so quiet? Are you afraid you ‘vill ‘vake your bruza?"

I turned back to look at Gary and chuckled, "No, Opa. I don't think he can hear anything over that chainsaw."

"Zen, why are not zee' chatterbox? You always are zee' chatterbox after 'da zoo."

I wanted to ask him if I was a swan, but being only 8, I didn't think I wanted the responsibility if he said that I was, so I just changed the subject, "I'm just trying to figure out what the surprise Mother and Dad have waiting for us at home."

"Hedala, zat' little mind of yours is always verking!"

Upon pulling into our driveway, Opa pulled out two blindfolds. "Gerhardt, vake up, Lad! You have surprise, but neither can see, so I must blindfold you bote." Gary was his usual dumbfounded self, but even more so as he had just awoken. "Oh, dummkopf, Gerhardt, come in zee' here! You have drool all over your face." Opa takes his handkerchief and wipes Gary's face like one might wipe an infant's.

"Where are we?" Gary dismays.

"We're home, Gary," I pointed at the house. "And Mother and Dad have a surprise for us, but we can't see it yet, so we have to put on these blindfolds."

"Like the Ninja Turtles?" As we all get out of the car.

"Well, sort of..." I can't explain it to him, so I just helped him put his blindfold on and then I put on mine.

"But I can't see anything!" Opa reached out for Gary's hand to guide him around the house to our backyard.

"It is not a mask like zee' Lone Ranger, Gerhardt. It iz a blindfold, so 'zee surprise iz not ruined. Hedala! Vait up, Lepschun!" But I didn't need Opa to guide me. I had a keen sixth sense and developed situational awareness at a very young age.

"Watch out for the badger hole!" As I side step it with Jedi Knight stealth.

In the backyard, I sensed there were others around, but I stood motionless, waiting for Opa and Gary to catch up. I remember being very excited about the surprise, but my breathing remained still and even. My heart rate didn't even rise when I snatched someone's hand from in front of my blinded face.

"Oh, He! You got me, you smart girl!" It was Dad's hand. "Can you see through that blindfold, He?"

"No, Dad. I could just tell that something was there." I could have also detected that it was my father as I caught a whiff of chamomile from his shaving cream.

"You are a natural, He!"

"A natural, Dad? A natural at what?" But before he could answer, we heard fumbling, then tumbling behind us.

"Gerhardt!" The scream from Mother suggested I pull off my blindfold to see what was happening, but upon doing so, I saw Gare tumbling passed me head over heels and every which way down our rocky decline towards the lake.

"Oma, stop him!" Mother screams at Oma, who was setting up a nice little picnic for us down on the dock, in a desperate attempt to keep the laws of physics from hurling her son

into the rocky lake below. As Dad and Opa descaled the jagged hillside, I noticed our giant oak on the hill has a new feature: a newly constructed treehouse, complete with tire swing. The right-brain processes the sheer awesomeness of the moment, and the left-side processes the tragedy which lies ahead. As my logical, sequential side won out, I ran and leapt for the tire swing which flung me far ahead of Gary's path into the lake and landed me just short of the shoreline where I grabbed a nearby boat paddle and plunged it into the sand, stopping short Gary's momentum into certain doom with a sudden impact that knocked him unconscious. Seeing that Gary lived, I looked up the hillside at the smattering of Hinterschotts, motionless and mouths agape. What had I just done?

Opa yelled, "You are 'da Swan 'vich keeps 'da peace in 'zee lake, Hedy! Wunderbar, mein Lepschun! Wunderbar!"

We scraped the mud off Gary, celebrated our new treehouse and ate cake. Later that night, after Gary was asleep, my parents and grandparents told me of our true family business. Opa's swan analogy helped me understand the necessity behind why our family did what it did and why it is so important for our family to continue to do what we do. I've been slowly processing this information everyday ever since that moment. They didn't tell Gary for another two years.



## Chapter 14

I have never been a heavy-stepper. I am always light on my feet by nature more than nurture, so when I enter the house, I do so undetectably. The mudroom door doesn't even creek or slam closed. Just plain old survival instinct keeping me sharp. As I begin to walk upstairs to my room, I overhear Mother and Dad in the library, and their conversation stops me in my tracks. They are not speaking loudly or even at normal decibels, but my hearing is freakishly acute.

"Well, he's not just that good at anything," Dad plainly stated.

"He should have been identified by now, but honestly, outside of Diversion Designer or Chaos Coordinator, I'm not sure there is much out there for him."

"Well, Dear, one needs to be able to organize to commit to a career like either of those...did you see his socks today? One blue, one white. It's not like he confused a black sock with a dark blue sock...I mean the colors are polar opposites." Heavy sighs expressed from both Mother and Dad. "We can't delay much longer. Hedy was hitting her marks at 8 years...and consistently at that." Hmm...so that's why they told me when they told me...they thought I could handle it. Premature intellect is a curse. "He's already behind the learning curve in so many areas." I sense disappointment and despair in both their whispers.

"You know what we have to do," Dad bluntly stated.

"Oh, Harry, no! He's the male heir to our dynasty. We can't give up on him!"

"Think about the family's future. Our family's proud heritage. Think about Hedy."

“He’s only a boy!” There was stress in Mother’s voice. *What **had** to be done?*

“He has become a liability,” I envisioned Dad holding Mother in his arms as she sobbed silently, “We’ll lull him into a safe place together,” Dad consoles. “We plan a training day at the paintball forest preserves. He loves getting all dressed up in his camos,” he’s sounding nostalgic, “Remember when he got his first paintball marker?”

I heard a smile in Mother’s voice, “It was his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, but the course manager said that no one under 12 was allowed...”

“...and we told him that Gary was 13, and he bought it!” They both laugh together. “God, he was a big kid even back then.”

“Well, it wasn’t just his size. He hit puberty so early, he had a 5 o’clock shadow before lunch.” So, as I emotionally mature, Gary physically matured.

“Yeah, we called him ‘Paco’, remember?” I **do** vaguely remember that. “...until the Venezuelan hit, and then, the nickname just didn’t hold the same sentiment.” Dad’s recollection struck a memory of mine: there was a hit Dad pulled on some guy named Paco, a South American lover of a high-ranking political figure (a **male** political figure) who threatened to go public with their affair and had to be “exported”. This tainted their precious recollection and ruined their walk down memory lane.

“What about Hedy?” Mother asked. My hearing became even more acute (so glad I listened to my parents’ warning about the dangers of earbuds), and my breathing became even quieter.

“She can’t be involved in this...there would be too much emotional scarring, blame and distrust if she were to be a part of this.”

“But what will we tell her...how do we explain this to her?” Mother became very concerned.

“We’ll do whatever we have to do in order to preserve the family, Lindy,” and I heard leather cushions squeak, an indication they had gotten up from the sofa in the library, but I had already made my escape upstairs to my bedroom. I slipped under my comforter and was overcome with such emotions that my eyes began to tear. Did I just lay witness to re-activate a 200-year-old, hideous, dormant practice? The words lingered in my head: lull into safety, liability, family preservation, emotional scarring...what did those all mean? *Hedy, you know damn well, so admit it!* But I felt stomach acids rising to my throat, and the thought of my family became abhorrent to me more than the day my parents told me that *one day when I’m a big girl, I’ll kill people for a living*. I was able to control the vomit and choked back the tears as my genetic coding had conditioned me to do so.

Dad popped his head in, “When did you get back?”

“Just a few minutes ago.”

“Strange, we didn’t hear you come in,” he scootches me over on my bed to make room for him to sit. “You OK?” He sees my bloodshot eyes and assumes it’s due to our dinner conversation, but there is an elephant in the room.

“Yeah,” No. “Dad, about Gary...I think if you had a heart to heart with the guy, he

would realize that he shouldn't be so careless with all these girls."

"Honey, give your old man some credit. We've known he's been pulling these stunts for over a year," OK, now I'm really not OK.

"What?! Why?!" I've moved past that Gary might be dead at my parents' hands and really become pissed off like a regular old teenage daughter. "How come he can...and I can't?!"

"Honey," Dad holds my hands, "your mother and I tail you two all the time, but you know this! We would have had a conversation with you at the time we detected any hormonal behavior which might lead to a relationship."

"How sweet and romantic..." I flop back over on my side turned away from him as I can't look at him right now, and then it hits me, "You've been tailing Gary all this time and haven't intervened! Wait! How closely have you been trailing him on his 'dates'?" I think I might vomit again, "Eewww, Dad!"

"I mean we put a trace on him. And we always had background checks on these girls." He says this, but he knows it isn't making me feel any better, "plus," his tone changes to realistic and a bit sad, "it was about a year ago that your mother and I decided that he just can't take on the profession. Your mother told me she told you of our intentions," So does that mean that Mother also told you that I know I come from a monstrous past? No, surely not. "Aren't you pleased? We are so proud of you, and we know you can take our enterprise into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." His words are little comfort. "You know there isn't

anything I wouldn't do to keep you from hurting...you do know that, right?"

It was no secret that I was a daddy's girl and that he appreciated and respected me as much as he loved me. "Of course, I do, Dad. And, of course, I am honored by your decision, but I'm a little overwhelmed and exhausted right now...talk some more tomorrow?" He kisses my forehead and promises that we will. I smile sweetly, and continue, "I know you and Mother would stand in front of a bus for me...or Gary." Trying to impose a little guilt about his probable filicide.

But he chuckles, "You know me better than that, He. I'd preemptively have the bus re-routed, or the driver killed, but yes, I take your meaning, and you couldn't be more right." I so want to tell him that Gary isn't such a liability that needs to be dealt with so drastically as our forefathers did, but I can't bring myself to say any of it. I cry in his arms, and he assures me, "Everything is gonna' be alright."

This tender moment is interrupted by Gary's off-tune rendition of: *Cherish is the word I used to describe our lo-ah-o-ah-o-uv...*no doubt romancing one of the Chrisses via FaceTime.

The expression on Dad's face sums it up for both of us: *W...T...F?*

"You left before strudel, Liebchen," Oma presents warmed strudel and Mother with a glass of iced cold milk to my bedside.

"This is exactly what I need right now, Oma," comfort food to the extreme and Oma's hot apple strudel with a dollop of ice cream and milk to wash it down with is it. I mumble a

thank you as I inhale it all in a minute or less. I am spent, emotionally and physically, and with a happy belly and Mother stroking my head, I easily drift into a sleepy state. As I do so, I hear conversations: "...is this necessary?" "...can't be helped..." "...it's for the best..." "Gary won't even..."

This is the deepest sleep that I can ever recall falling into...ahhhh.

## Chapter 15

Sunlight...my bladder is screaming for me to get out of bed, so I tend to it, but my legs are weak. I feel fragile, dizzy. My head aches and is spinning. I feel like I've been...drugged? I've read about this. Disoriented, discombobulated, disturbed...all in all, just dished. Stumbling into the bathroom, my brain races to recollect last night's events: best night's sleep ever. Strudel. Father-daughter talk. Father-Mother talk. Father-Mother talk about...Gary. Son-of-a-bitch, Oma strudel doodled me! Why? Why...? Think, Hedy...what are the reasonable factors for drugging and detaining but not eliminating a subject? Target is a short-term liability, yet a long-term benefit which needs to be temporarily neutralized. *Liability*...Dad and Mother referred to Gary as a liability last night. Where is Gary? What time is it? Mid-morning, at least. I run to Gary's room to find an unmade bed and a whimpering Great Dane peeking out of the closet. Dear God, NO!

"MOTHER! DAD, GARY! OMA, SOMEONE!"

"Child, 'vat is all 'da fuss?" Oma calls up the stairs from the kitchen.

"WHERE IS GARY?" To say I was out of control was an understatement. I stumbled down the stairs yelling for the rest of my family.

"Hedy, for goodness' sake! 'Vat is 'da matter?! I've never seen you like 'zis, Child!"

Oma grabs my shoulders and tries to contain me somewhat.

"Where is Gary? Where is Mother? Where is Dad?"

"Come with me," and we walk to the kitchen, where she sits me down. "Now...how's

your head?"

"As wrecked as my feelings right now, Oma, where is everyone?"

"Love, I'm sorry about dosing you last night. It 'vas such a light dose, but I guess your pure young system just couldn't handle..."

"Oma, for the love of God, please tell me where they are." My voice is finally calm and I have managed to bring my heart-rate down from near stroke level.

Oma sits next to me to begin some type of explanation, "Hedy, your parents are so devoted to our family...our entire family, including the family before us. 'Zay couldn't risk..." she is interrupted my mother and Dad's kitchen entrance from the garage.

"Hedy?" Mother sees how distressed I am and walks slowly towards me as I arise from my chair.

"Mother, help me to understand this. How could you do this? Dad! Explain this to me!" The expletives fly out of my mouth as my parents try to calm me down.

"Hedy! Really, we thought this was for the best!"

"For the good of our family...for the good of our heritage!"

"Fuck our heritage! I don't want any part of it!" HOOONNK! HOONNK! I'm suddenly distracted, "What's that? A horn? A car horn?" Looking out the window, there appears to be a vehicle pulling into our driveway.

"Hedy, please understand, we needed to..." I don't let Dad finish.

"It's a Jeep. It's a new Jeep. It's a pretty *cool*, new Jeep..." I see who is behind the



wheel and blasting the horn. Gary. I feel like I've been dosed again, and my knees buckle.

Dad is there to catch me before I faint to the ground.

"She's taking this worse than I thought," Dad says as he carries my limp body to the family room couch.

"Sniff, sniff, sniff...." Aaah! I hate that shit!" Oma removes the sal volatile from beneath my nose. Sal volatile, an ammonia inhalant, more commonly known as smelling salts.

"Vatch your mouth, young lady!" Oma chastises.

"You've got some nerve, Oma...after strudel-doodling me!" I look her in the eye, pan left to see Mother with a wrinkled brow staring at me. Looking at me beyond her is Dad, who is smiling with relief that I am OK, and further past him stands Gary with Horse by his side. Horse is looking contrite, but I...wait...stop...pan right...Gary!

"Gary, you're..." words aren't formulating into sentences.

"A jerk? A pain in the ass? A lucky some-bitch who just got a brand-new Jeep!" And he dangles his new key chain in my face.

"No, I..." still struggling for the right sentiment here.

"Fainting is a little overkill for jealousy, don't ya' think, Drama Queen?"

"No, I thought you were..." lumps in my throat are preventing words.

"Don't even think about ever asking me to drive you anywhere. Consider it payback for a lifetime of treating me like floor lint."

“No, I thought you were dead,” I finally manage to complete a sentence, but it’s not taken in earnest as my family looks at each other and bursts out laughing.

“See, like I said...Drama Queen!”

“Why, Hedy, why would you think Gary was dead? Oma, whatever you gave her last night must have given her a realistic dreamscape.” Dad asks in and out of gasps of air, but Mother pieces it together and stops laughing quite abruptly.

“Hedy, Hedy, I told you that we couldn’t ever...” but catches herself from disclosing our secret conversation from just two days earlier.

“Couldn’t ever what?” Gary asks. “Couldn’t ever get your daughter a cool ass car like your son?” He laughs himself into a lather, thinking he really stung me with that last one.

“Gary, stop it! I’ll take those keys away if you can’t act like an adult!” Dad jumps in to quiet Gary.

“Typical! It’s my moment, and she gets all the attention by fainting for whatever damn reason!” he dangles his key chain again, and says with authority, “I’m outta’ here!” And makes a dramatic exit with a door slam.

“Harry,” Mother nods towards Dad.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got the kill switch,” and Dad clicks some device in his hand, which contains some mystical property.

“I’ll get some breakfast for you, Dear,” Oma leaves to prepare me something to eat.

“Could you make that non-toxic...please?” I shout out.

“So funny, Missy!” Our family humor is not for the weak. Outside, we hear Gary swearing about his, “Piece of junk! Won’t start! What the Hell! Brand new Jeep!” So, Dad goes outside to explain to Gary that he had an engine master control installed in the Jeep, so Gary can’t go anywhere without the parents knowing about it. Freaking awesome, as far as I’m concerned.

“I’ve never heard you speak so irreverently to Oma before, Hedy. You must be a bit out of sorts still.” Mother sat on the sofa pulling a blanket up over my feet.

“Well, I figured since she drugged me and all, I’d be given a little latitude.”

“Hedy, she didn’t drug you...” but then stopped short as I raised an eyebrow at her absurdity. “OK, she slightly doped you, but we didn’t want a scene this morning when we took Gary out for his new car...”

“Really, Mother! You didn’t want a scene?! You didn’t want a scene?!?! Most parents...” she shushed me so Oma wouldn’t hear the next predictable words out of my mouth, “most parents would have just lied to their daughter. ‘Hedy, Dad, Gary and I are going to park’, or ‘going to get new shoes’, or ‘going to have Horse put down’. Lying is preferred over drugging in any parental handbook, I assure you, Mother!”

“Well, our family is a bit unconventional, you know that. And you’ve been acting a bit irrational lately with this new boy business and all. We were afraid you might sneak out to see him again. It’s so unlike you to show any...emotions. So, we thought a good night sleep and avoidance of early morning drama would be best. Besides, Oma had been

wanting to try this new sedative recipe for a while, so it just seemed like a good fit.”

Unbelievable. “But, Hedy,” her tone turned hurt, “if I had known that you could have ever thought that we could be capable of doing what you had thought we had done...I mean, Hedy, how could you have thought that your father and I could...”

“Kill off Gary?!” I raised my voice and she tried to calm me down again, “Oh, I don’t know...because this family has a 500-year-old tradition of killing each other off?! Just a shot in the dark, Mother!”

She had nothing to counter with and looked at me with such disappointment.

“We told him, Hedy.”

“Told him what?”

“We told him he wasn’t going to take over the family business. We told him that you were.”

“...AND?!” Keeping me in total suspense.

“And he is fine with it.” Un-freaking-believable. And then Gary’s lack of outrage of the news hits me.

“You told him AFTER you gave him the Jeep, didn’t you?”

“Yup.” Mother cups my face in hand. “Your father and I know how to handle your brother. But you continue to keep us on our toes.” *Well, this next bit of business is going to tip you over, Mother.*

“What if...I don’t want it?” She drops her hand from my face. “Did anyone ever

consider asking me if I even wanted to take on the family business? Huh?" Mother shakes her head. "So, you all just assumed I wanted to head up an international assassination organization?"

"Well, not right away. Maybe when you're 30 or 40?" Mother grabs my hands to attempt and assuage me, "Ours is not a normal existence. It never has been, and it never will be, but our business is necessary. The luxury of our family business is that we have a reputation of being very good at what we do. And as a result, we pick and choose our jobs. Think about it. How many Germans would have taken out Hitler? The Hinterschotts knew he was a bad sort and had no problem exporting him."

"But Lothar killed Hitler because Chaing ordered the hit for personal reasons..."

"Regardless of the motives of others, WE decide who is worthy and who is not based upon our own beliefs."

"So, we play God."

"No, Hedy, we don't play. We are professionals. You asked about not wanting it? Honey, nobody wants this line of life, but it is what The Hinterschotts were born into. There's no escaping, only accepting it."

"And rationalizing it."

The mind can only handle so much reality in such a short amount of time, so I change the subject. "So, when do I get my Jeep?" But it was a joke in poor taste, and Mother and I just sat in silence, which remained until Oma came back in with an egg au gratin

sandwich.

“You need to regain your strength, Liebchen,” Oma coddled.

I looked at the sandwich, then at Mother, then back at Oma, “You first.” And handed Oma half. The silence had been broken with an outpouring of laughter from all.

The three of us split it.

## Chapter 16

“What’s so funny?” Gary storms in and sees the three of us enjoying each other’s company and an egg sandwich.

“You don’t look like a guy who just got a new car.”

“That’s ‘cuz it’s not really my car! It’s only my car when Dad the Dictator says it is!”

Apparently, Gary didn’t fully understand the terms of his new Jeep...shocker.

“Gerhardt! Such awful ‘ting to say about your fadder!” Oma chimes in. “Our family has put many dictators out of business, so choose your ‘verds more ‘visely, yea?”

“OK, then, he’s a Nazi!”

“Gerhardt, ‘vat are they teaching you in ‘dat school of yours, huh?” Oma can’t tolerate the disambiguation that just because Hitler was a German and Nazi and a dictator, then all Germans must be Nazis and dictator-ish.

“Yeah, Gare, you see the Nazis were a socialist political party, and a dictator is a tyrant. In the interest of not perpetuating a stereotype of our people, you could simply refer to Dad as a good citizen who is looking out for every other man, woman and child who is either in a car, walking or riding a bike whenever a hot-head, hormone-enraged man-child might be behind the wheel of a 2-ton death-mobile.” I wink. “Eggy sandwich?” I offer up as I take another bite. He storms off. Things are back to normal. Praise Jesus.

In an attempt to get the rest of the dope out of my system, I go for a long run around the lake. Six and half miles later, I arrive home to find that the parents have left for their

latest job, Gary has locked himself into his room pouting, and Oma is making a sedative-free lunch.

“Mother and Dad gone already?”

“Yeah, ‘dis job had a 24-hour timestamp, so ‘zay should be home before you go to school tomorrow morning.” Was it really only Sunday? It seemed like a month had passed since Friday. “You need to bathe before lunch, Liebchen.” Oma cracks me up. “Bathe” is anything from a bath to a shower. I haven’t taken a bath since I was 5, but off I go to shower off the morning’s bizarro events.

Exiting the shower, I hear Gary: *“Aaaaataaaat laaaaaaast...my loooooove has come along...”*. Etta James. Classy, Gare. Wonder who reaps the benefit of my brother’s affection today. He stops singing, and I hear him griping to his on-screen love about how unfair his parents are. “They give me a car, and then in the same breath, they tell me I can’t even drive it. If he only knew what I thought they were capable of. Ignorance truly is blissful.

I knock on his door, “Gare...” he doesn’t respond. “Gerhardt, mein Liebchen, lunch iz served,” I imitate Oma. “Gary?!?!” He’s probably still pissed about my stealing his thunder from this morning. “Gary, don’t be such a brat!” I try the door handle, and the door is locked. Etta’s live version of “At Last” begins to play, and Gary still refuses to answer. I put my ear to the door, but I can’t hear anything except for Etta’s soulful serenade. I try one more time, “Gary? Kris with a K is here. She says she wants to make up for yesterday. She is wearing a majorly slutty shirt. And some killer do-me boots...” As I talk through the door, I



make my way down to the floor and look under the door for floor shadows. Nothing...no movement, no shadows, just Etta. Then, I hear Gary's closet door slam shut, and I see his hulking overcast on the floor, plunking into his computer chair, where the music suddenly stops. I fear my presence may be blown, so I jump up and leap across the hallway to my bedroom.

"Gerhardt! Hedy! Lunch is getting cold!" Oma shouts upstairs. Upon which, Gary immediately power-opens his door and bolts down the stairs.

"Coming, Oma!" Gary screams. So, Gary responds more quickly to food than to a suggestively dressed, horny blonde? He has an appetite for Oma's cooking, but it can't compare to one of the Chrisses, hot and bothered at our front door. What was going on in his room? I walk in, and there is Horse asleep, consuming Gary's entire bed. What a watchdog, but no Gare. Where waws his voice coming from? I make my way towards his closet. Very suspect, but before I get the chance to open it, out bounds Gary, startled at my presence.

"What the fuck, He! What are you doing in my room? How did you get in?" Gare is beyond startled.

"Horse, let me in," I say as I maneuver around him and sculk into his closet. "Any booby traps?"

"Horse, man! You're supposed to let me know when someone is close to my door, dude." Gare acts truly surprised and disappointed, but Horse just exhales with the weight of

his 120-pound body behind it.

“He sounds a little gassy, Gare. What are you feeding him?” At this point, I am totally in Gare’s closet which looks like a typical guy’s closet. “Spend a lot of time in here, do you?” I move hanging clothes around and knock on the walls.

“He’s not gassy...that was...oh, He, shut the hell up and get out of my closet, but I had discovered a piece of rope hanging from the wall and pulled it.

“Too late,” I grin with great satisfaction as the rope releases a piece of dry wall which falls to the floor with a thud and breaks.

“Oh hell! Now I gotta’ fix it!”

“Wow, Gare. This is some serious James Bond shit. Rope duct taped to a...” I was at a loss for something clever, but there was nothing clever about Gare’s escape hole in the wall. “...hole in the wall.”

“He, you’re not gonna’ rat me out, right?” Gare is fearful of how I might hold this info hostage.

“Gare, I promise Mother and Dad already know. They’re not amateurs...you, on the other hand.” I examine the hole more closely. “Where does it go? And how the hell do you fit through this thing?”

“There’s ladder that leads to the attic, and it’s actually no meant for me to get out...”

“Oh, God, no Gare!” I realize it’s for someone to get in, smaller and of the female persuasion. “You don’t keep them stashed in here, do you? Is there one in there right now?”

“No, wise ass. They just come in and out, and Kris just left. Do you really think Mom and Dad know about this?” I could tell Gare was feeling simple-minded at the realization that he wasn’t as sneaky as he thought he was.

“Pretty sure, but keep playing the game with them. They obviously would rather have you “entertain” at home than out somewhere where you may be more vulnerable.”

At that moment, our doorbell rings. Possibly another Chris. This one probably spells her name with a “Q”.

“I GOT IT!” at a typical Gary decibel level, sprints out of his room, and flies down the stairs to get to the door first...like there’s a prize involved. “Oh, hey...” Gary lowers his disposition back down to his level of coolness. “Uh...Hedy? Well, that depends...who are you?” It’s a one-sided conversation I’m hearing as I’m upstairs looking down our staircase, and I can’t see who’s at the door because Gary’s head has its own orbital system, but clearly whoever is at the door is asking about me.

“Gary? Gary, who is it?” But Gary just flips me the finger behind a partially opened door. So, I take matters into my own hands and charge down the stairs. “What’s the deal, Gary? Another one of your *closeted* boyfriends?” But the dig is lost on him, and I lose all interest in the insult when I pull the door wide open to see my man of mystery. “Dave? Wow! What a surprise! What are you doing here? How did you find me?” I am stunned, flustered and stammering.

“Who’s this guy, Hedy? Oh, wait, Dude, you’re in my peer tutoring study hall!” Gary offers some intel.

“Peer tutoring study hall?” I’m confused.

“Yeah, I worked with Gare on Algebra a while back...” I’m still a little confused, but Dave clarifies, “...as a tutor.”

“Oh, OK...” I’m feeling a little less confused and a bit more relieved. I thought he was just smart. Now I know he’s also generous. And apparently, extremely tolerant if he has worked on math with Gary.

“So, are you like here for me or Head?” Gary is now confused.

“Well, like I said before, I wondered if this is where Hedy Hinterschott lives.” Dave tries to straighten Gary out, but he’s just not picking up on the privacy vibe.

“So, Gare, he’s here for me, not you, so get lost.” At that moment Oma burst into the scene.

“I hope you are all happy! Your lunch is now kaput!” And then without skipping a beat, “Who ‘iz dis’ young man? Gerhardt, aren’t you going to introduce your Oma to your friend?”

“He’s not mine, Oma. He’s Hedy’s,” and storms away in a disappointed huff.

“Hedy, ‘iz ‘dis true? ‘Iz ‘dis young man **your** friend?” Oma can’t believe it.

“Well...yes...Oma...this is Dave...and he is my...friend...” Dave and I share a mutual smile.

“Vell, ‘den, he must have eintopf wit’ us.”

“Ine tof?” Dave quizzes.

“It is ‘vunderful German stew,” Oma declares with pride, “But now ‘iz it is cold German stew, but ‘der ‘iz plenty for everyone. Please come in, Mr. Dave and eat.” As Oma directs him in ahead of us, she pulls me aside, “Has he been check out?”

“Oh, Oma, he’s not an operative. Trust me.” Silly woman.

## Chapter 16

Approaching our kitchen island, Dave taps me on the shoulder, “Is it cool that I’m here?” He looks so concerned. Must have been the weird vibe I put out at the door. I’ve never had a visitor before. Never.

“Yeah,” I touch his hand, “It’s totally cool. I’m just really surprised to see you...happily surprised to see you.”

“So, Dave, you must tell us all about yourself, ya?” Oma prods.

“Oh, well, there isn’t much to tell really. I grew up in Portland, raised by my dad, but I got a scholarship to USF, and I’ve lived here for about two years.”

“Wis’ your fadder?” Oma dishes more eintopf onto Dave’s plate.

“Um, no, actually, my dad’s not around.”

“Oma?!” Gary interrupts because he’s pissed that his empty plate didn’t get a second helping.

“Oh, sorry, dahling’, here you go,” and hands Gary the platter so he can self-serve.

“So, you ‘ver saying, David?”

“Uh, it’s just Dave, ma’am.”

“Oh no, Dave! No friend of my Hedy’s calls me ‘ma’am’. You call me ‘Oma’, ya?” She says as plainly as though she has had this conversation a hundred times over. Prior to this moment, I’ve never even mentioned a single friend, let alone introduced one to Oma.

“Well, OK, Oma...thank you.”

"You 'vere saying about your fatter?" Oma pries.

"Oh, well, I've been emancipated for two years now, so it's just me." Dave looks at me begging not to feel sorry for him.

"You are all alone?" Oma gasps.

"You were a slave?" Gary questions.

"You know what emancipation means?" I wonder at Gary.

I can see Dave isn't used to a battery of questions assaulting in the air, but Gary forgets my dig about his intellect and moves onto a more pressing topic, his stomach.

"Is this all that's left?" Gary is looking at a platter with only half of the original eintopf on it.

"Gary, don't be such an ass!"

"Gerhardt, manners, please, and Hedy, 'vat must your new, little friend think of your language?"

"Here, Gary, please take mine." Graciously Dave neutralizes the situation. "It is delicious, but I am really not that hungry, and actually, Hedy and I need to catch the 1:00 bus to the city library," he suggests with a nod of agreement from me.

"Yes, we need to get going, so, Oma, thank you for lunch. And, Dave, I'll just grab my backpack, and we can be on our way."

"But you haven't eaten a bite!" Oma jumps up and follows us down the hallway while Gary hoards the food from Dave's and my plates. While David makes polite conversation to

calm Oma, I run to my room, change my shirt to something clingier, whip up my hair to something more alluring, grab my backpack, and rush back downstairs to save Dave from Oma quizzing him about his father.

“Well, we’d better get going if we’re going to grab that bus.” Scooping my arm into Dave’s and swooping him out the door, we whisk out the door as I make promises to Oma that I’ll be home before supper. Exhilarated, we escape giggling like we are children ditching school. But he stops short.

“You’re all mine now. There’s no one to rescue you.” And embraces me. Isn’t this what cheesy romance novels are made of?

I break off from the kiss of my lifetime. “Well, aren’t you the charmer!” I hook my arm into his as we walk down my driveway. “I thought Oma was going to make you all hers.”

“My appeal transcends generations.”

“Yeah, it was strange seeing Oma like that. I’ve never seen Oma...” I stop myself because I was going to say that I have never seen Oma act like this, but I can’t suggest I’ve never had a friend over, so I ratchet up my status, “respond so warmly to any of my boyfriends.”

“Had a lot of boyfriends, have you?” Dave smirks like he knows it’s a lie. But how does he know it’s a lie? I lie for a living. I’m quite adept at it. How can now, all the sudden, I miss my mark? Deflect and recover, Hedy.



“Yes,” I turn the situation into a flirtation. “I have had many men. Jealous?”

He leans into me and whispers in my ear, “Insanely.” Oh, my knees. Where did they go? Did I ever even have knees? Wow, this is one of “those moments” I’ve been warned against in combat manuals. Recover once again, Hedy!

“Well,” deep, indictable breath, “you should be.”

The moment is interrupted by the roar of the city bus just a couple hundred yards from the end of my driveway, which meant we sprint and scream in order to catch it. And catch it we just did.

We jump on the bus, and Dave gives a wink to the pimply driver-in-training, and gasps, “Must be our lucky day!”

## Chapter 17

Oh, my head...chloroform coma...Oma's told me about these. I didn't fully appreciate her explanation until now. My eyes begin to adjust to the dark, and I regain some vision, albeit blurry. A wall made of red brick embossed with SFPW on each of them in front of me, cobblestone floor beneath me, hands zip-tied to whoever's back was pushing against mine...no doubt, Dave. Take a whiff, oh, yeah, it's Dave. I can detect his scent through the musty cellar air.

What last happened? We were on the bus, holding hands and laughing about Gary's car. Then, I felt a rag over my mouth...and then, I woke up here. Oh, Lord, Hedy, what is your problem? You are so blinded by love that you overlooked three cut-rate abductors: a fat old lady and a never-before-seen bus driver supervising a pimply driver in training? I say "cut-rate" although here I sit bound and gagged with the man of my dreams. I was *sick* to have dragged him into any of this, but I was...wait...I was sick to have dragged *him* into any of this? *I* was sick to have *dragged him* into any of this? *I* dragged *him*? *I* dragged *him*? No matter how many times I said this internally, the gut-wrenching reality was that I was not the one dragging. God...how could I have been so blind? Dad would have been disappointed.

- No one in high school is that charming!
- He initiated contact with me—that whole pencil-poking incident was the perfect seemingly unintentional foray into a relationship.

- His three friends—co-conspirators.
- No wonder he was off my radar...he's a pro at it.
- Dead mother? cha-right!
- Father? Oma asked about him, but he deflected the topic...such a pro.
- Just happened to find me in the library?
- Just happened to come to my house when my parents were gone?
- Did he have something to do with the job my parents just received?

Coming to terms with my stupidity enraged me to reverse head-butt that son-of-a-bitch, whose hands were zip-tied to mine.

“OOOWWW!” He makes a sound of awakening out of a passed-out state. Fool! Not gonna' fall for this again. “What the Hell? What is going on? Where the Hell am I?”

“Are you finished?!” I project to the wall in front of me.

“Hedy? Is that you?” He acts the part of the lost and confused co-victim soooooo well.

“Shut up, Dave, you son-of-a-bitch! Or should I call you John? Or Mike? Or Billy? Or some other equally generic name?!”

“Oh, God, my head is killing me. I can't see straight.”

“You are priceless! Don't insult my intelligence any further and drop the act! God, I hate it when Mother is right. Men are nothing but distractions!”

“Hedy, what are you saying? What act? Why are you acting like this? Please tell me what the Hell is going on, will you?”

“Oh...I’m onto you. I’m saying I now know you set me up. I’m saying stop acting like you had nothing to do with the situation we are currently in. I’m acting like this because you have put me in the situation we are currently in. And what is going to happen next is going to hurt, so suck it up like a man!”

“What’s going to hur...AAAAAAA! Christ! Did you just break my thumb? Oh, Jesus, I feel dizzy.”

“Stop whining, you pussy. I just dislocated your thumb...hold still. This next part might sting a little...”

“WAIT, NO, PLEASE DON’T...AAAAAAA! Oh, dear God in Heaven! I can’t feel my hand! What did you do? Did you cut it off?”

“No, but I should have, you lying, conniving, manipulating ass bag!” I not-so delicately rip the plastic tie from Dave’s other hand scraping the skin off of that hand as well as a trapper might skin a rabbit. In doing so, I am now able to free both of my hands without injury...to myself, anyway. Dave pulls both of his hands in front of his face and screams with the realization that I have essentially skinned them from the first knuckles to his wrists.

“What! What have you...? Why? Why have you...? Hedy, you are scaring the shit out of me!” He quakes with such believability.

“Oh, my God! Give it a rest, will you?” I pull him up to his feet. “Now shut up!” And I rip a sleeve from his flannel shirt and gag his tongue down with it and a non-slip knot in the back

of his head. His hands are like raw nerves right now. His dexterity is shot so he won't be able to pull or untie it off his head. I throw him up against the red brick and frisk him for a weapon, earpiece, mic, anything, but he is clean, so I flip him around to face his torturer. "Now, I'm going to say this once, and if I don't get the answer I'm looking for, I'm going to do to that handsome face of yours what I did to your hands...got it?"

His eyes are wide and alert but does not nod or shake his head, so I emphasize my point by putting my knee in his groin. He drops, protecting his mid-region with his bloody hands, and I repeat softly in his ear, "You got it, Sweetheart?"

"Hmm! Hmm! Hmm!" he nods with the enthusiasm for which I had previously hoped.

"Good, now, get back on your feet, and just nod, shake or point with your bloody stumps to answer my v-e-r-y s-i-m-p-l-e q-u-e-s-t-i-o-n-s. O—Kay?" He has no choice but to nod in agreement. "Good boy...now, is there someone outside?" He looks at me so panicked, then shrugs his shoulders. I knee him in the groin again and he drops to the floor. "Davey, Dear, did you not hear your only three options? Nod, shake or point...shrugging was not on the list, so we are going to try this again." I pull him up from his curled-up body on the floor and choke hold him up against the wall, which gets his attention and makes his eyes bulge. "Do you need the directions repeated again?" This time, he shakes his head and grunts negatively in desperation that I won't knee him again. "OK, now, I ask you again, is there someone outside?"

He whimpers (pussy) and shakes his head. "You'd better be telling me the truth, Davie

Boy...I don't like liars. Now, tell me, do you know how many there are out there?" Again, panic comes across his expression and he shrugs his shoulders. "Again, wrong answer!" and I knee him in the groin again, but this one takes him to the ground whimpering like a puppy. "This is it, David. No more indecisive answers," and I pull him to his feet again, only this time, he is having a hard time standing. "Blink your eyes to let me know how many are out there?" He opens those blue eyes, which are now blood-shot and blinks three times. "OK, good...we're beginning to understand each other better now, aren't we?"

I put my ear to the thick wood door and hear nothing. The old door has settled over time and there is a space between it and the jam. This room had to be over 100 years old. I push Dave to the ground, climb onto his back and peek through the 2-inch gap: no shadows, no movement, no sound. I jump down from his back and assess the old lock on the door. "If this were 50 years ago, I'd have a bobby pin to pick away at that lock." I stare Dave down. "Don't suppose you have one on you, do you?" But he has cowered himself away from me on the other side of the room, hands still numbed and mouth gagged. I shake my head at him in disgust, "Worthless. Not you, me...I'm worthless. Worthless because I have allowed my sensibilities to become compromised by the likes of you. I let my guard down and you took advantage of me. That's never happened to me before, and I don't much care for this new emotion. So, rest assured that when we get out of here...and we will...your life won't be worth reclaiming whatever identity you have cloaked from me." God, tears...really? Am I tearing up because I'm hurt or beyond hatred? I turn away from him. "I have let my family

down. I have shamed them and clearly, I'm not worthy to carry on 500 years of our heritage."

As I blubber on, I feel his forearms around my body. "Seriously, Dave?" To which I immediately respond with a reverse elbow to his solar plexus and down he goes for a fourth time. "Aren't you tired of being down there by now? You know, for someone in the 'biz, you're really not very good at your defenses. But then again, that is probably all part of your ruse...Asshole." I hate myself more with every minute I spend thinking about how I feel for this guy. "Don't ever touch me again." His continued whimpering is starting to irritate me, so I charge him to where he scoots back against a wall and crouches in a corner. "Stay." I command as though he were Horse. Only he obeys and sits there quietly while I sit opposite him in the dank pit, contemplating my next move and who is behind all this.

"How did we get here?" I ask rhetorically, but he grunts with enthusiasm. "Shut it, Asshole!" I continue with a mind trace. "Bus...little girl with pigtails...dirtbag bus driver in training...fat, old lady..." Dave becomes animated again. "Settle the Hell down! I'm thinking..." His hands were dripping with blood. I really did a number on him. Dad would be proud. At any rate, *fat, old chemo lady.... chemo lady? An overweight chemo patient? Not that it's unheard of, but how realistic is that?*

Dave is making some hand gesture, so I get up to threaten him simply because he has annoyed me for the last time, but unraveled, he continues to do something with his hands. "Dave, I was just playing before. Do you really want to see me get serious?" I

threaten. "Cuz, you don't wanna' see me in all my bad-assness..." I stop mid-sentence to see what he is actually doing with his hands. A Swastika? Is he drawing a picture of a Swastika with the blood from his hand on the floor? "What is that? A Swastika? Are you a Nazi? Oh my God, is this eight decades of payback for The Hitler Job?!" Again, he finds pain at my disposal, only this time, it's my boot across his jaw, which dislodges his sock from his mouth, and knocks him delirious, but not unconscious.

"Ak an sin," he mutters.

"What? 'Ak an in'? What the Hell is 'ak an in'? I have a sin? Blackened skin? Jack in a bin? WHAT?!" I grab him by his jacket lapels and force the issue.

"Mack-in-sin!" his eyes beg for attention to his every syllable.

"Still not making any sense, ex-possible-love-of-mine." I traipse my fingers up his button shirt to the lips to what I now see is a broken jaw. "Ooo, that last kick to that chiseled jawline of yours really did a number." The bitter sarcasm oozes from every pore in my vindictive body. "Although..." I stroke his pale, clammy albeit slightly lumpy cheek, "...I don't think it's broken. Just dislocated." At that declaration, he becomes frightfully aware of my next intentions and wails in desperation. But I'm too fast for this lame, little lamb. My hands respond as they have been trained: quickly, stealthily and steadfast. I reset his jaw in one swift motion, and again he passes out.

"You know, many people don't realize just how sensitive the temporomandibular joint is. Or even what it is for that matter. It is the micro region between the skull and the



jaw, where a very small disc (one-tenth the size of the discs in one's spine) buffers these two bone structures. Although much smaller than a spinal disc, it radiates to almost 1,000 more sensory points in the human body due to its proximity to the brain. Other than a temporary concussion, that's one reason why when boxers aim for the head for the final blow: dislocate the TMJ, and the brain just says, 'Sayonara, Sweetheart' as the pain intensity is too much to bear. Which is what just happened to you." I slap pretty boy's face, "Hey," I slap it again, just for grins. "Did you just hear a word I said?" He comes to slowly (just like a boxer might) and is disoriented. I help him out by propping him up against the cold, damp wall behind him. "I was just explaining...oh, never mind." I've become a maniacal, irrational and slightly mentally-offset bitch. As long as I keep focused on my mission, I can be as offset as I want. And I really want to be "off" with Dave right now.

Strange gurgles sprout from Dave's mouth. "Uh? What? Stop mumbling. Just tell me..." blood is running from the other side of his mouth. "Oh, jeeze, Dave, your tongue must have been in the wrong spot at the wrong time. Let me see if it's cut off." He winces in this continued torture as I practically stick my entire hand in his mouth, and I see he's about to black out yet again. "Whoa! Whoa, now Davey boy! Don't pass out on me again. We still have a lot to talk about. You were trying to tell me something, yes?"

Now, what happens next is still a bit fuzzy to me. I don't know if he was trained in Kali, like Gare and I have, or if he just got in a lucky leg swipe, but he manages to get me off-balance and onto my belly in Full Nelson (it's an illegal wrestling move that renders your

opponent nearly impotent).

“Dave, listen, you may think you have the upper hand right now, but trust me, this is a false sense of domination on your part. You would be sorely mistaken if you took this moment as a sign of weakness on my part. You know what? I’m gonna’ let you have this little moment, only because I’m gonna’ kick your...”

“MARKENSEN!” he bellows in my ear. “It’s Markensen!” He’s still mumbling, but I can detect the name.

“It’s Markensen? What do you mean ‘Markensen’?” and I switch-kick my heel into his back to disarm him, but this just makes him even more resolved, and he cranks on my shoulder to subdue me even more.

“Markensen, Hedy,” he breathes into my ear. His voice is gentle and fatigued, but he repeats with a ripped-up tongue and newly reset jaw, “It’s Dr. Markensen, Hedy. Markensen brought us here.”

## Chapter 19

“You gonna’ stop beating on me now?” My body goes limp as I know Dave is not lying. “Hedy, answer me.” My brain is flashing back. “I’m not gonna’ let you up unless you promise to calm down and stop hurting...” but before he can finish his sentence, I swing my leg towards Dave’s backside and slip it between his legs and retract my foot with a high impact. This swift chop to his crotch causes him to drop, gasping for air. He’s no longer a threat, but I needed him to shut up so I could think. I begin to pace as I piece it all together.

“OK, so the bus. The pimply bus driver, the bus driver supervisor, the little girl with pigtails, the fat chemo lady...the fat chemo lady. Fat? No, not fat, just large for a lady. Not so large in stature for a man. The obvious wig—anyone who knows me would know that I could detect a wig and become suspicious. Thus, the chemo cover story--necessary disguise for a man. Verdict: that lady was no woman. Markensen? Possibly. Never gave himself away by speaking or walking.” Dave continues to recover.

“But wait, she...he sat in front of us, so how did he subdue us? All I remember is the two of us talking about...”

“Pigtails,”

“No, we were talking about meeting my parents...”

“No,” Dave is getting his breath back, “pigtails sat behind us.”

“Of course!” it made sense, “I would have never suspected a little girl as a threat. Or at least I wouldn’t have before certain distractions came into my life.” He was culpable to a

degree, just not directly. "She chloroformed us both?"

"Not a girl."

"That was a little boy?!"

"Not a boy...a little man." I was totally off my game. Gender and age misidentification. "He got you from behind, and before I realized what was going on, Markensen turned around and slapped a rag over my mouth."

"Markensen was the chemo lady...yes, of course he was."

"Apology."

"Oh, no, you couldn't have known, Dave."

"No, you need to give me an apology."

"Oh, well, I..." I stammer with a little humility.

"Who the hell are you? Why are we here? Why did Markensen take us? How the hell do you know all those moves? Why the hell did you beat me up?"

I couldn't possibly begin to explain. It would sound incredulous bordering on the ridiculous. Besides, I'd be disclosing our family's secret identity which has kept us and our business alive for half a millennium. But what the hey.

"I'm an assassin in training, and my family's business is a 500-year-old murder-for-hire covert organization. I thought you might be from a rival agency or revenge strike attack, so I neutralized you. But clearly you are not, so sorry about that. Markensen. Markensen however remains a mystery, as is why we are here. But look at these door

hinges. Give me your belt and one of your boots, and I can get us out of here." I have since moved towards the giant, old door to further analyze our escape plan, and in my hasty explanation of it all, Dave's eyes are glossed over.

"You're a what?"

"Are you gonna' give me your belt, or do I have to take it from you?"

"Stop, just stop! You're a what now?"

"I just told you, now gimme!" But I don't wait for his permission and reach for the belt from his trousers. Given what I've just put him through, he is gun shy and winces back into a corner. "Dave, there would be no tactical advantage to me hurting you now that I know you're not an operative for the opposition. In fact, you're an asset to me now that you are emotionally compromised, and I can count on you to help me get us out of here.

He is confused to the point of paralysis, so I approach him in a slower fashion so as to not frighten him any further (poor thing). I gently pull his belt to loosen its snap with one hand and pull the buckle with the other, keeping an even gaze with his. Strange, even though he was a bloody, cowering shred of his former self, he still had appeal.

I rise over him. "Thank you. Now are you going to give me one of your boots, or should I take it from you?"

He doesn't answer. He just raises his left leg into my hand. I do believe this is the art of seduction. On both of our parts. Again, having only read about this stuff, I can only speculate, but really, I don't need a manual to decode the palpable attraction at this

moment. My smirk acts as an apology and a turn-on.

“What are you going to do with a belt and a boot, MacGyver?”

“Be prepared to be impressed.”

He follows me to the door where I take the snap of the belt and shove it as far as I can up inside the bottom hinge with one hand and pound it upwards with the heel of Dave’s boot with the other.

“No way that will work,” doubtful Dave has obviously never hung a door before. Or read about hanging doors as is the case with me.

“Just need to expose the top of the hinge pin, and hopefully if there isn’t too much rust from the past 150 years from exposure from the damp underground, it should pop out without too much effort.” But it is a bit stubborn, so effort, it does take.

“How do you know we’re underground?” I stop pounding momentarily and give him a look of discernment.

“Really? You doubt me?”

“Well, I...” he realizes he should have known better, and I hand off the boot to him to continue the grunt work. He does this, bloody wrecked hands and all, without argument. After several pounds, he thinks he makes a contribution. “Let’s use that rock instead. It will make more of an impact than my boot’s heel.”

“Yes, it would, and it would also make more noise. Just keep working at it with the boot and let me think about this Markensen thing.”

He goes back to the boot work without retort feeling less of a man. But I needed to focus my energy on Markensen and not on Dave's feelings of inadequacy at the moment.

"Why would he take us? Do you think he needs both of us...or just me?"

"Wait!" Dave takes a break and turns to me with indignation. "Why you? Maybe he's after me?" To which, I cock an eyebrow. "No, really, why not me? I'm smart. I could be a threat. I..." he talks his way out of his own argument and back to his boot work.

"So, what is his motivation?" I continue.

As Dave taps away at the hinge, my mind races back to just a few years prior. Thinking on this, I recall Markensen had become a full-time faculty member at UoSF at the beginning of Gary's and my freshmen year. If he wanted to kidnap me, then why wait four years? Why indeed? Perhaps, he was studying me. Observing me. Waiting for the prime opportunity. So, for years, he waited and observed. Waited and observed. Waited some more. Observed some more. Or maybe, just maybe he did attempt. Freshman year rang something familiar. Chess club, yes, when I signed up for chess club. Markensen suddenly became the new advisor. How convenient. Although, I found chess club was really a drag, so I quit and Markensen was stuck with a bunch of dweeboid geeks for a whole year.

"Whoa! I got the pin out!" Dave impressed himself to the point of jubilation.

"Shhhh...may as well sign our death warrants now. Move on with the middle one."

No doubt ungrateful in his eyes, but this was a time for contemplation not celebration.

Then Markensen became the Debate club sponsor, for which I was president of my

sophomore year, and debated the shit out of all arguments all the way up to State Finals in Sacramento, but I came down with a 102 fever and couldn't make the trip. I'll bet something evil was brewing in his head there.

"I can't get this middle one. There's too much weight from the pressure of the door..."

"Wedge your other boot under the door to give it some lift."

"My other boot? I don't..." He is *so* not spy-like.

"Take it off and give it to me. Your boot! Your other boot! Take it off, give it to me, and I'll show you!" I shouldn't be so impatient with him, but you don't have to be an assassin in training to use common sense. David gives me his boot and watches me wedge the toe of it in the small gap between the door and the floor. Wrenching the boot away from the hinges gave the middle and top hinges a little wiggle room. "Now, pop it before I lose my grip."

One swift tap did it.

"You're like a walking talking gizmo manual." It was supposed to be a compliment, but...

"And you're making Gary look like a rocket scientist." It was supposed to be a criticism, but he kissed me anyway. Like he did the first time he kissed me. Long and meaningful, only this one tasted more like blood, tears and sweat. But I enjoyed it anyway, and when it ended, I opened my eyes.



“Mother,” I whispered.

“Mother? Serious mood-killer,”

“My junior year...” I trailed off.

“Not really the reaction I was going for.”

“No, during my junior year, Mother told me Dr. Markensen petitioned hard to be my senior year advisor for career and college counseling, but I declined that service as I already knew my career path.”

“OK, I’ll work on this last hinge.” He let me go back to my internal dialog to figure this out. So, Honors Global Issues was his last chance to exact his revenge, but as the year progressed, no opportunity ever presented itself. At least knowingly. Thus, the overt covert public transportation operation. Yes, it all made perfect sense to me now. Except for the *why* part.

“Be careful when that last pin pops out, the weight of that door...”

But the inordinately deafening sound of a 200-pound metal door collapsing onto a cold stone floor finished my sentence for me.

“Put your boots on. We’re going to have to make a run for it.

## Chapter 20

A quick scan of the dank stonewalled corridor revealed no security. No armed men, no camera. No impending threat. I can hear water streaming, so that is the direction we run on the tips of our toes to make as little noise as possible.

“Why this way?” Dave asks.

“Water runs down, so we run up towards it.” The look on Dave’s face indicates he kind of gets it. “Just stay close behind me.” But this underground labyrinth is proving to be more challenging with every turn we make.

“We must be getting closer. Hear the water?” Dave proudly provides his insight to espionage.

“Yeah, but closer to what?”

“A sewer, from the smell of it.”

Dave was right. We must be nearing the city’s sewage treatment facility. But why bring us down here? It didn’t make a lot of sense unless...

“RATS!” Dave makes a discovery.

“Dave, seriously, could you please draw *more* attention?”

“What do we do?! They’re everywhere!”

“Just ignore them. They’re not starving and we’re not a threat to them, so they’ll leave us alone.” But Dave is petrified. “Here, take my hand and step where I walk.” It’s kind of cute just how timid he is and that I am the tough one. Glancing back at him, I could tell

he was truly out of his element. He was actually taking all that has happened to him rather well and adjusting better than any other average guy thrown into this situation, extreme as it was. "You'll be fine. Just stay close to me."

"Hedy," he was still a little freaked-out looking.

"We should be close now."

"No, Hedy. Behind..."

"Yes, Hedy. Behind you is someone holding a gun to your back." A different voice chimed in.

I didn't even have to turn around, "Markensen." My situational awareness had really turned to shit.

## Chapter 21

“Hedy, so good to see you.”

As I turned around, I expected to see someone at eye level.

“Down here.” It was the little girl/small man who partook in my abduction.

“No, not Markensen.” Dave added.

“Yeah, I see that now.”

“Do I sound like Markensen?” The little guy was right. Clearly, he spoke at a different decibel level and a couple octaves higher than the good doctor. “What kind of spy are you?”

“I’m not a spy, and I’m a little off my game lately.” Looking at Dave.

“And your situational awareness is for shit.” The little guy just had to dig.

“So where did Markensen get you? Mini Me Corporation?”

“You’re forgetting who’s holding the gun, Toots.”

“*Toots?* I take it back. Markensen must have pulled you out of a retro plex showing cheesy film noirs. Let me guess, Mickey Rooney was starring?”

“Pretty mouthy for a chick with no ammo...” But Dave interrupts before the guy can finish his insult by attempting what I believe was supposed to be a roundhouse kick to our abductor’s gun hand. But he missed. Pathetically and most definitely. He wipes himself out landing flat out on his back while cracking his head on the wretched cobblestones beneath him. This failed attempt at being gallant actually provided the ideal distraction to disarm

the gun holder and head butt him unconscious.

As Dave stumbles back to his feet to find me frisking the guy and he asks, “Did I do that?” referencing the unconscious dwarfish kidnapper.

“Yeah, you were great. Gimme’ your shoelaces.”

We hogtie our assailant and move towards the rushing water and foul odor of human waste.

“Hold it!” I shush.

“Why are you shushing me? No one could possibly hear us over the roaring water and the screeching rats.”

“No, I hear voices.” Dave can’t believe it, so turns his ear in my direction.

“I can’t hear anything.” He insists.

“Singing. Can’t you hear it? Someone is singing. No, it’s more like screaming, but it’s definitely the lyrics to a song.”

“Wait, I hear it too.”

*“You leave me...ahhhh...Breathless, Darlin’...”*

“Freaking, Gary?” I poke my head around a foundry wall. Yup, freaking Gary. Only he’s tied up to a concrete column in the iron-grated room below. And singing. Screaming actually as loudly as he can.

“Why is your brother doing that? Why is your brother here? Why is he singing a song from 1982?”

"I don't know." Was he bait? Was he captured?

"*Breathless*. One of the Chrisses was *Breathless*! He's letting me know he's here...so he must know I'm here too." Dave looks in great disbelief. "Yeah, I know he's a bit on the dim side...or a lot actually. But why else would he be here singing *that* song, especially?" Dave still doesn't get it, but I need to act rather than explain. "Stay here and keep an eye open. You know how to shoot a gun?"

"Well, um, I..." Dave is clearly uncomfortable not only with telling me he does not but also with the fact that he is afraid of them.

"OK, look if you see someone coming, just shoot it at that pipe on the far side of the room below."

"What if I miss?"

"Don't worry about missing the pipe. Just worry about not shooting a person."

"Wait, I don't understand!"

"Just stay here and do what I said!" Before I crouch down to belly-crawl to the steps in order to gain entry to the room below, I slip a quick kiss to Dave. "It's going to be OK. Just don't shoot anyone. Especially me." Another quick kiss and I shimmy down the steps and creep up behind the solid concrete column Gary is tied up to. It's dark behind the column, and Gary can't hear a thing with his incessant wailing and the rushing water in the treatment area, so when I touch his hand tied behind him, he screams, which gains the attention of two men sitting in the shadows opposite Gary.

“What’s the matter?” a pimply kid yells.

“Who cares. I was getting sick of that song anyway. Maybe a rat bit him,” The other henchman hopes.

These two gomers look familiar. The bus driver and bus driver in training. The driver doesn’t seem to be a fan of Gary’s singing, but the trainee is a different story.

“Hey! You know ‘Great Balls of Fire’?” he shouts at Gary, but Gary is trying to figure out what to do next.

“Say, yes,” I whisper directly.

“Uh, yeah, I suppose I could give it a try!” Gare answers to his captors.

“What are you doing, man?” The driver says irritated. “Don’t encourage him.”

“We’ve been sitting here for three hours. My phone gets no service down here. I can’t play Candy Crush. What’s the harm in a little entertainment while we wait for The German?”

“**Mr. H.** doesn’t like to be called that and he especially won’t like us entertaining ourselves when we’re supposed to be keeping on top of this situation. So, keep your ADHD in check and quit screwing around!”

“Who’s Mr. H?” Dave whispers. “And where is Markensen?”

“Wait!” I quietly grab Dave’s arm in a stark realization. “Markensen’s first name is Hank! Can’t be a coincidence, right?”

Couple of dink heads working for a Mr. H. (a German), guarding Gary, while the little

girl/man patrols the tunnels and channels in a soundproof, reception-less underground sewage facility. Verdict: free Gary; neutralize dink heads; grab Dave; escape up the nearest manhole; and figure out how to get Mr. H after my family and Dave are safe.

“Gare,” I emphasize in a soft albeit emphatic voice, “start singing.”

Following my orders for the first time ever, Gary busts out in a Jerry Lee Lewis medley as I quickly work on his padlocked shackles with a piece of electrical wire I found on the floor.

“Oh, will you look at what you started!” The driver is annoyed. “You gonna’ stop him, or you want me to do it.”

*“I wanna’ hold you, baby, like a lover should. So fine. So, kind. I wanna’ tell the world that you’re MINE MINE MINE MINE!”*

The driver jumps up to charge Gary in a fit of irritation, not rage really. That’s the thing with Gary: he’s annoying, but loveable. You can’t really hate the guy. So, the driver comes at Gary with a fierce approach, but not before I have unzipped his hands behind the concrete column, and at which point, Gary surprises Mr. Driver with two free hands gesturing to *“Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire!”* And up-kicks him from the floor with the toe of his boot causing said driver’s mouth to close quickly and sharply enough to chop off his tongue. This also causes the driver to pass out and calls the pimply driver in training to leap towards Gary, but I am the element of surprise from the dark recesses and give a proper roundhouse kick to his head rendering him unconscious as well.



“Did you see how I did that?” I holler up above. “That’s a proper roundhouse kick with a proper end result!” But Dave says nothing in response. “Dave?”

“Hedy, you need to know...” Gary explains as he ties up the two dink heads to the same column he was just a prisoner to.

“Dave?!” I panic and amble up the iron-grated stairs I had just slithered down.

“Hedy! No! Wait!” Gary finishes his handiwork and runs up after me, but not before I see Markensen with the little man’s gun at Dave’s temple.

“Hedy, you have no idea just how long I have waited for this moment!” Markensen smirks, and Dave looks at me apologetically for letting me down.

“Mr. H, I presume.”

“I’m sorry, Hedy.”

“Dear boy, don’t blame yourself. I’m quite capable of sneaking up on an assailant. It runs in the family.”

## Chapter 22

Being dragged by his bound feet by Markensen's hand, I can hear Dave screaming behind Gary and me as Markensen forces us to walk in front of him with a gun to our backs, "What runs in the family? 'Whose family?'" Indeed.

"So, you got it now, right?" Gare whispers to me, but that only results in a gun butt to the back of his head, once again at the hand of Markensen.

I whisper back, "Yeah, Markensen thinks he's part of our family...so he's insane."

"Don't know, Sis. I mean he knew a lot of shit about us, and he explained it all to me after I got caught tailing you..."

"Wait, YOU tailed ME? I hardly think so."

"How do you think I got here, Hedy?" Gare explains he wanted to prove how stealthy he was, so he slipped out through his secret exit in his closet, followed us down the hillside to the bus stop, and hitched a ride on the back of the bus. "I saw what was going down inside the bus from the back window, and when the bus came to a stop, I got the jump on the driver as he was getting off the bus, but then I felt someone jump on my back and get colorfoamed." He of course meant "chloroformed", but I cut him some slack since he probably saved my life, as well as Dave's.

"So, your secret closet exit has more than one purpose?" I winked

"That's your take-away? Seriously?" Gare is outraged by the fact I didn't fully recognize his genius plan. "I mean, come on! I was singing *Breathless* so loudly hoping you'd

find your way to me, and it worked! Give me some credit, would you!" He was absolutely right, but I see how enraged he is getting, and I bank on his anger and his brawn in getting us out of this situation, so goad him a bit more.

"Well, how come I don't have a secret exit in my closet before toady then, huh? How did you even...?"

"Quiet, you two!" Doc Markensen uses his teacher's voice, which only irritates me. His intention of course is to command respect, but that disposition was never established in my eyes.

"So, do I call you doctor? Or will mister suffice?" He doesn't answer and we continue to walk down a long dark corridor.

"So why doesn't she get smacked upside the head for talkin'?" Gary is outraged that our captor favors me over him. So, he gets another gun butt to the back of his head. Only this time, Gary doesn't tolerate the abuse and something miraculous happens.

"SON OF A..." Gare outbursts and simultaneously stops short in his tracks to reverse head-but the good doctor. Seizing this opportunity, I swing my right leg counterclockwise and knock the gun out of our abductor's hands with a swift kick which launches the gun into the air, but as we three captors have our hands bound behind us, not one of us can do anything with it when the gun hits the ground. Everyone, but Dave, that is. He has the presence of mind to slip his bound legs back up through his duct taped wrists, so he is free to hop and lunge towards the sliding gun, while Gary and I manage to gain control of the

situation by sitting on Markensen.

“I got it! I got the gun!” Dave exclaims and fumbles with the Luger.

“Dave, easy with that thing. It’s old and liable to go off...”

But the piercing sound of a bullet from a WWII Luger ricocheting off the walls of the underground cave finishes my cautionary sentiment. Dave panics and drops the gun screaming like a little girl. Kind of a turn off, but I immediately rationalize that he’s new to this business. So, he’s still it for me.

“Dave! DAVE!” I call him to attention. “Unwrap my hands.” Markensen squirms and squeals beneath us, but Gary has neutralized him by scissor choking him with his legs.

“Me next, Davy Boy,” and Dave removes the duct tape to free my brother and me.

“Gary! GARY! Enough, already! He’s passed out. We don’t want to kill him.”

“Oh, shit!” and Gary releases and immediately asks about the midget.

“Dwarf,” I correct him.

“There’s a dwarf too?” he fears and this interrupts his clever reuse of the duct tape on Markensen.

“No, Gary, the term ‘midget’ is politically incorrect. He’s a dwarf.”

“Actually,” Dave joins the debate, “‘Little people’ is least offensive and most globally acceptable. A dwarf is a type of little person due to its physical characteristics...”

“WHATEVER!” Gary’s patience is shot. “Where is the little dude?”

“Subdued and a non-threat.” Dave gleams, Gary is calmed, and I am surprised at his

ability to rise to the occasion. Not shocked and pleasantly, at that, I might add. But I don't let him know this.

"OK, then," he grabs the passed out and excessively taped up Markensen, flops him over his shoulder and commands me to pick up the Luger, "Let's get Mom and Dad."

## Chapter 23

“Mother and Dad are here?!”

“Such a trip.” Dave is excited by his newfound lust for espionage.

“Yes, I’ve been trying to tell you, but you were so focused on my secret exit and not giving me any credit...” Gary rambles on about his injustices. “How can we be from the same gene pool?”

“I have no earthly notion.” And I truly don’t.

“They were with me in that pit until the midg...dwar...the little dude took them away about an hour ago.”

“That must have been right after the little dude ran into us.” I nod to Dave.

“Then, we go back the way we came.” Dave contributes. “And start banging down doors until we find them.”

That’s hot.

“Yeah, or we can just ask Uncle Fester.”

“Who’s Uncle Fester?”

“This asshole.” And Gary flops Markensen onto the floor at our feet with such a jolt that he comes into consciousness.

“Uncle?” I query.

“Yeah, Hedy, try to keep up...he’s Dad’s Dad’s brother...or no, wait...he is our Grand Uncle!” Gary is delighted that he thinks he’s figured this out.

“Well, no actually, Gary, if he is your Dad’s Dad’s brother, he is your Great Uncle.”

Dave brings logic to the situation.

“No, no...” Gary is in deep thought, “Dad is at dad level. Dad’s dad is at grandfather level, so Dad’s brother is at the grand-whatever level. He’s not at a great level.” Gary stares into space to confirm this wisdom. “Yeah, no, that’s right. He’s just a grand, not a great.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” These two muse on while I stare at the bound and gagged Markensen and think back to a 500-year-old parchment and branches on a family tree that were trimmed without consequence. Markensen is now conscious and sees me studying him.

“He is our Grand Uncle Fritzie. Dad’s uncle.” I reach down to remove his gag. “Am I right, Fritz?”

He chuckles and responds, “Ya, ist ton granduncle Fritzie. Fritzie Hinterschott, mein leib.” His chuckle turns to outright laughter, which irritates me to the point of ripping his cheesy toupee from his head.

“Holy shit!” Gary reveals. “It’s like looking at a picture of Opa!” He was right. “They could have been twins.” Which makes Fritzie laugh even harder.

“He *is* Grandfather’s twin. But supposedly, *he* died in childbirth.”

“Yes, supposedly,” Fritz sobers. “But here I sit. So how can it be that I died as an infant?” I wanted to know the answer, but I didn’t want to hear it from him.

“Where are my parents?”

Fritz glares at me with contempt, flashes his hatred at Gary, and gives Dave a look of sheer disapproval.

“Parents’. You call them your parents? How can you be so sure they are your parents?” Gary recoils at the notion. “Not **your** parents, dummkopf.” He assures Gary. “**Your** parents, Hedala.”

The corridor provides only echoes from dripping pipes and distant water rushing through the spillway, while we all contemplate what has just been suggested, or perhaps revealed. Minutes of silence pass before Gary breaks it.

“What the hell?! Do you mean?! Wait! Oh, Christ! Do you mean...” Gary was beginning to piece together what Uncle Fritzie was saying, but I stop this bullshit in its steps.

“I know who I am. And Gary knows who he is.” I direct my attention to the man making the accusation. “Don’t let him get in your head, Gare.”

“Do you?” Smug asshole is starting to either annoy me or make sense to me, but I detour his intention.

“Absolutely.” I state as fact as Dave stands on my left and Gary approaches my right. Flanked by two guys makes for the three of us towering over him an intimidating site, but Uncle Fritzie does not waver.

“Young, brilliant, and ignorant. Hedy, you are in denial. Liebchen, you know you do not fit. I’ve watched you for four years. Your confidence in everything you do is a mask for



your insecurity in everything your family stands for.” He sighs, “Think about it. Look at him.” And I do. I look at Gary, and he looks back at me and sees the doubt in my eyes.

“You may have the same birthdate, but not the same birth parents.” Fritz is beginning to make sense.

But now it’s Gare who speaks the voice of reason to me. “Don’t listen to him, He. You’re my sister. You’re my blood.” Gary tries to convince me and himself. He actually appears to be begging. “You are my older sister. My older, smarter, and insanely gifted sister. Like you said, he’s clearly insane.”

“LIES! You two are fools! Listen to what your instances are telling you right now,” Fritz commands.

“Gare,” my eyes water as I look at him, “...we don’t...” I couldn’t find the right words to complete the concept of our inability to connect, get along or even like each other. I decide to say it like it is, “...see things in the same way.”

“You mean we argue? We fight? We get under each other’s nerves?” He meant get “under each other’s skin” or “get on each other’s nerves”, but now was not the time. Dave winces at the mixed metaphors as Gary continues, “We’ve been at each other since the womb.”

That thought makes me smile, and I convert my confusion to comfort. Comfort in the notion that I am thankful to have Gare as my brother, in any sense. “It doesn’t matter, Gare. We have each other’s backs. We’re family, so let’s go get Mother and Dad.”

With that, Dave muscles Fritz to a standing position, “Which way, Heir Ball?”

“Just listen to the water,” Fritz acquiesces without resistance. “Soon, you will hear the truth from those who claim to be your parents.”

“Let’s move out. Dave, you lead. I’ll keep Fritz in submission. Dave, take up the rear.”

“Take up the rear...yeah, not really sure what that means.” Dave wants clarification for his newly defined role.

“Just make sure no one is following us.”

“That sounds like something I’m not qualified for...”

Gare interjects, “Listen, Buttercup, you can: A) take the lead and watch out for possible booby traps, B) keep Fritz from escaping or killing you, or C) take up the rear and just look behind you every so often to see if someone is following us.”

I smile at Gare, “My heart swells with pride, brother.”

“Yeah, I guess the rear job doesn't sound so bad.” Dave agrees.

“Let's go get the family back together.”

## Chapter 24

Dripping water over our heads became less audible as we grew closer to the interior water supply, no doubt to where my parents were being held.

“Still, I don’t get what this whole ordeal is for Marken... Fritz. What’s his endgame?” Dave muses out loud. “Does he want the rest of you Hinterschotts dead for his 80-year grudge? Seems like a long game for something he could have just handled with a rifle or a grenade.”

“Ah, young David has questions! Maybe I just want revenge, yes? Perhaps, I am not as violent as the rest of my family, huh?”

“Shut up and keep walking, Fritzie.” Gare shouts back.

“Dave, don’t engage him.”

“Well, but seriously, think about all of it. You said he staked you and Gare out four years ago. What took him so long to enact his revenge? If this is actually about revenge? Why did he have to get next to you, Hedy? What does he get out of it? Money? Wait, the Hinterschott money?!”

At the insight of Dave’s speculation, Gare and Hedy slow their pace to a slow stop, and Gare turns around slowly.

“He?” Gare looks at me for answers, and I look into my prisoner’s face as he regales in his twisted riddle.

“No, he couldn’t be in it for the family money. Technically, he doesn’t exist. Fritz

Hinterschott died at birth.” But my brain continues to expound on Dave’s initial query: why all the theatrics?

“Family DNA then! To prove he’s related.” Gare explodes with what he feels is the winning answer, but Fritz just chuckles in my face as I continue to unlayer his motivation.

“Then, how would he explain all our deaths? I mean if he came up as a legitimate heir to the Hinterschott fortune, there would be an investigation no doubt revealing he had a false identity. He followed us all these years. The police would ask why he just wouldn’t reveal himself to us.”

Fritz’s face can barely contain his joy in making us painfully understand. “No.” In a slow roll of contemplation. “It’s not *our* money he’s after.”

“Oh! This is all too good, Hedala! You are all so very close that I’m about ready to burst!”

“I’ll burst your head open if you don’t stop acting like a fucking asshole!” Gare charges Fritz with a headbutt, and I let Fritz fall to the floor because I know. I know it has something to do with the day of our birth.

“If you knew I wasn’t a Hinterschott, then you must know something about my birth parents. Right?” I crouch on the ground next to him as he nods his head in a satisfactory albeit evil way.

“Yes, you are so close, Liebchen!”

“He, what are doing? What are you saying? You mean to say that this asshole is

talking about the day WE were born together, right? Don't play into his head games, He! Please!"

I hear Gare, but I study Fritz very closely. He does not scare me, but his hidden knowledge frightens me beyond belief. "Where's your Nazi pin, Fritzie?"

"What pin?"

"The pin Dave found when he was looking through your briefcase."

"Dude! Are you a clepto?" Gare looks weirdly impressed.

"Right!" Dave remembers as he crouches on the floor with me.

"Hee, hee, hee..." the old German snickers. "Dave, don't you know you shouldn't go snooping into people's personal things? Such a barrier of trust has been broken, Son,"

"Don't you know you shouldn't fuck around with Hedy? She will end you, but first she'll pull out some painful Ninja moves on you just for fun." Dave winks at me.

"Oh, I don't fear for my life for four very good reasons!" and the irritating Nazi has made an impressive chess move.

"What are those?" I need to know.

"One, you still don't know where your parents are."

"I'm pretty smart. I think I can manage." I say this and Gare is openly crying in disbelief.

"Two, you don't know how to disable the pressure explosive which must be becoming very tiresome for them."

“Oh, please, I mastered device detonation in 6th grade.”

“Three, you won’t know anything about your birth parents.”

“Tell him to shut up, He! Or I’ll make him shut up!” Gare is beside himself.

“Ever hear of **23 and Me**, asshole?” My impressive chess move makes me believe I have him now.

“AND four!” Dramatic pause. “You won't know where Hitler’s millions are.”

I’ll admit, that last one got me.

## Chapter 26

"Hitler's millions?" Dave gasps.

"He's just trying to get at us," Gare rationalizes.

"Maybe, but then what does Hitler's money have to do with me?"

"Well, if we hurry, perhaps, you can ask your father about that." And Fritz resumes his maniacal laugh.

"Let's move." Dave and I pull Fritz up and continue on our chase. "Gare!"

"Yeah, Sis?"

"We must be getting closer, so keep your eyes peeled."

Indeed, we were closer. Around the last bend in the aqueduct was a galvanized ladder that screamed "Mother and Dad are this way!" Gare looked back, I gave him the go ahead, and he stepped lightly on the first rung of the rusted old waterworks ladder.

"There are muddy boot marks all the way up!"

"Step exactly on top of those marks, Gare!"

"OK, super glad I wasn't leading patrol now." Dave breaks the tension a bit. "How do we get Fritz up? His hands are tied, and..." Just then Gare drops down a rope. We three look up to Gare having reached the top of the aqueduct where he has just discovered the answer to Dave's question.

Dave shimmies up the ladder, and put Fritz in a hogtie for Dave and Gare to hoist up. All four of us at the top now could see another open chamber in the underground water

system with at least a 75-foot drop, and at the bottom of that chamber were Mother and Dad sitting in invisible chairs, with backs propped up to each other, and a device pressured between them.

“My God! Their legs have got to be fried! Hold Fritz tight! I’m scaling down.” Using Fritz’s body as ballast, I used the rope tied to him to carefully scale the wall. I delighted in hearing Fritz screech in pain as my body weight tightened his torso with every movement down the tense rope.

“OK, get Fritz down next.”

But the boys decided to let him unravel 75-feet to a most abrupt meeting with a concrete floor. I shot a thumbs up signal up to them, and they came down the tether rope Fritz had so conveniently left for them.

With all six of us now in the same chamber, the next challenge was to approach Mother and Dad, disarm the explosive, and save my parents, preferable with no one losing any body parts.

“Let’s get them! They’ve got to be so weak now!”

“NO, Gare!” Dave grabbed the back of his shirt as I screamed.

“Do you really think this asshole would make it that easy?! Use your head, not your heart. I know they are in pain, but there is probably another booby trap in here.” We all scan the chamber, and my mind races.

“Well, Dave,” adds, “we know this prick needs you alive, so...” I like this guy more



and more.

“Damn, Dave! I wanna’ lick you all over right now.” Gare expresses his newfound love and grabs Fritz as a barrier in front of him. “Tell He where to walk, or I’ll start munching off your fingers.” My bound and gagged parents’ legs were beginning to give way, which was all the incentive Gare needed to just bit off the end of Fritz’s pinky, just to emphasize the importance of expedience.

“AHHHH! You, crazy dolt head!” Gare spit the pinky in Fritz’s face and went in for another digit! “STOP! Alright, yes! Hedy, just avoid the black stones!” I make my way quickly and stealthily. “My God, you, insane blunt instrument! Find my finger!”

“QUIET!” I screamed as I reached my parents. “I need to concentrate!” I ungagged Dad.

“He!” Dad’s breath is labored as he and Mother must be exhausted. “There is one pressure point trigger on each side of the device placed between our backs. You will need to keep the pressure firm and steady as you squeeze your hands between our backs and the triggers.”

“Gotit!”

“On 3. Ready? One,”

“STOP!” Screamed Great Uncle Fritz. “Jughead, pull the detonator from my shirt pocket.”

“WHAT?!” The rest of us exasperated in the moment.

“Just do it before Hedy blows up!” Gare removes a small transmitter from his shirt pocket. “It’s the green button.”

“Such an asshole, man,” and Gare obeys to the sound of the explosive powering down. I snatch the device, parents collapse to the ground, Dave contains Fritz and tells Gare to watch out for the black stones as he piles on the Hinterschott pile of love and relief.

“Aw...look how sweet they are!” Dave whispered to Fritz; alas, Fritz is not amused.

I look at my brother, Mother, and Dad in deep calm after the chaos, “We need to talk.”

## Chapter 27

And talk we, do as we tie Fritz back up.

“Hello, Uncle Fritzie,” my dad mocks. “I wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, but that would be a lie.”

Fritz busts out, “LIE?! How dare you speak to me of lies?! My birth was a lie! My death was a lie! My entire life was a lie! I am owed a life!” Fritz no longer finds this situation amusing as the realization of his years of covert planning had just crumbled before him. “And *she* can give it to me.” Fritz stares in my direction, and I look back to my parents who are fearful of what Fritz is referring to.

“Fritz, no...” Mother pleads.

“You are in no condition to plead for anything! You two were supposed to die knowing that I had told Hedela’s about her true parentage.”

“Gare, do you know how to dislocate the temporomandibular joint?” Dave threatens Fritz.

“Don’t know where that is, but I know where his tongue is.”

“Hedy, don’t listen...” Dad pleads.

“Oh, she already knows...don’t you, my dear, or at least she suspects.” Fritz gets in these last words before Gare approaches him with a knife and grabs his jaw.

“Gare! No!” I plead, “just gag him for now.”

I see the people who raised me in despair. They’re faces are white, and I can sense

the fear in the realization that I do, in fact have a sense that they are not, in fact, my biological parents.

“Mother, it doesn’t matter who my birth parents are. Really, it does not. I just don’t know why you could tell me I was adopted?”

“Because the adoption would undoubtedly be the least of your concerns, would it not, Herald?” Fritz jibes.

“I thought you gagged him, Gare!” Dave explodes as Gare looks for something to stuff in Fritz’s mouth.

“He is a bitter, crazed old man bent on ruining our family, He. Don’t listen.” Dad begs me to listen to reason and invalidate Fritz at the same time.

“No,” Mother stops Gare, “Let him speak.” Mother turns to me. “It’s time you knew the truth, your truth.”

“Dad,” I turned to grab his and Mother’s hands. “Fritz said he needed me for Hitler’s millions. I don’t know what that means.”

“Hitler’s millions?” Dave spit out a few questions in utter disbelief. “I mean I’ve heard urban legends about Hitler’s hidden money, but whatever money was found was given to the war tribunal and Holocaust Survivors’ Funds. The money's all gone, right? Those are just rumors, right? Urban legends?” But Dave is interrupted by a German accent.

“Hitler ‘vas not a nice guy.” A German voice from behind us lends its wisdom.

“You, shut the hell up!” Dave was not about to let the good doctor give us another

history lesson on Da Fuhrer.

“Dave, please.” I touched his hand to calm himself into not going after Uncle Fritz.

“Hitler not only took millions of lives. He also took millions of dollars. Hundreds of millions of dollars from the Jews.” Doc has his full German accent going now. Why disguise it any longer? “Do you actually think it was all found? My goodness, child, I would have thought you smarter than that. Hitler was smarter than that. Much smarter.”

“You admire him.” I state with calm resolve.

“My goodness, no, Hedy!” Fritz chuckles in a mad, psychotic sort of way. “I just want his money, child.”

“His blood money,” Dave corrects.

“It all spends the same.” The doctor redirects.

“So then just go get it, and leave us alone! Why involve us? Why all this? We don’t do missing Nazi money. You should have gone to a private investigator, not hired assassins!” As Gare inquired, Dad became visibly uncomfortable, and the doctor picked up on his cues.

“Ah ha! You get it now, don’t you, Gare!” The doctor’s evil chuckle grows into full blown laughter. “You know why you are here, yes?”

“Well, I must admit, I’m lost, so why don’t you enlighten me, you Nazi shithead.”

Dave approached him and crouched down to his eye level as Dad and I watched. “Give me a history lesson that’s off the books.” Personally, I believe I know, and I don’t want to hear it

out loud.

Given how cryptic my family's lifestyle is and has been for over 500 years, I fear there is another secret about to be disclosed. Not one of those little family secrets like the weird cousin with a third nipple or the bottle of gin that Granny wakes up to every morning. No, this was going to be a bombshell as was indicative of the doctor's malevolent grin.

"It's guys like you that give Germans a bad name." Is all Dad can muster as he glowers at the doctor.

"Hedy, you need to be as strong now as ever," and holds my hand. "This is the last family secret remaining untold. I promise."

As the tunnel torches glow, I settle in on the cold cobblestone floor with Dad as Dave keeps close tabs on the doctor. This had all the makings of a horrific campfire ghost story. Too bad we didn't have marshmallows and weenies.

## Chapter 28

“First, young David. I wasn’t always a Nazi.” The doctor continued. “In fact, I’m not really a Nazi at all. Their politics are so extreme, I could never be a true believer, but pretending was a necessary evil.

“It’s 1941, and Nazi Germany is literally goose-stepping all over Europe. Hitler’s final solution to exterminate the Jews was as horrific as it was lucrative. The most influential Jewish families in Europe were not spared. In fact, they were targeted. Their art, their land, their goods, and their money became property of the National Nazi Party to support their cause. But that is no secret.

“Four years later, after my uncle, Lothar, killed Hitler and Eva, and Hitler’s known assets were sold and distributed for war reparations to numerous countries including France, Poland, Yugoslavia, and of course, to the Jews who survived. But Hitler, being such an arrogant megalomaniac, stocked away millions of dollars stolen from Jewish families, not to mention embezzled from the Nazi Party, that even today, funds from Swiss and Brazilian Bank accounts and lock boxes hold untold fortunes. That is no secret either. Well, except for the part about how Hitler died, of course.

“Fast-forward 50 years. A young history doctoral student whose dissertation on revisionist history linking the actions from Nazi Party in 1930 to the current events in West Africa, interviews a Sudanese war lord. This warlord has all the makings of Hitler, but not nearly as charming. He shared his passion for all things Hitler: his history, the conspiracies,

the underground Nazi extremists. He even had Hitler documents that he paid millions of dollars for." Fritz trails off his dissertation, "And this is where I began to research purely for personal and financial edification, and how lucky for me! My own family has adopted the sacred vessel holding the blood of Hitler!" The irony is biblical.

"What kind of documents?" Dave verbalizes what we are all thinking.

"Verifiable proof of Adolph Hitler's descendants. Do you know how valuable Hitler's DNA is? The actual blood lineage of old Adolph himself?" Fritz surmises.

"The Boys from Brazil," I follow. "Genetic cloning. My God, Adolph resurrected."

"Wait, like Hitler reproductions?" Gare simplified the horrific notion.

"It is a demented pipedream to would-be supremacists in the hope to recreate their twisted savior," Mother adds.

"A pipedream that would pay in the billions!" Fritz's greed expounded, "And it would only take a drop or two of blood." My stomach churned and body chilled as Fritz eyed me.

The reality of the moment was lost on no one in that chamber, not even Gare.

"Ja, Hedala! Du trägst kein Hinterschott-Blut in deinen Adern wie ich. Wessen Blut trägst du also, mein Lieber?" Fritz laughed.

"What did he just say?" asks Dave.

"He said I am a bastard." And I look to my parents for a measure of understanding. It is Dad who comes to my side and sits me down to provide comfort and clarity.

"You may not have our blood, but you are our daughter, and you are a Hinterschott,



He.”

“But my blood is a danger to anyone I love.” I look at Fritz’s detonation device in my hand.

## Chapter 29

I had the benefit of being born on the same day as Gare. As Dad tells it, I was abandoned on my day of birth, unwanted, and destined for a life of grief and tragedy had Mother and he not chosen to accept me, or even worse, if my true heritage were revealed.

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### 17 years earlier

*Tapping on the window of the nursery, I pointed to my newborn's crib, and the nurse held up the swaddled child to me where I wept with gratitude and relief to the point of collapsing on the floor.*

*"You OK?" a frail female voice on the floor next to me whispered. I was shocked that someone else was on the floor. It's not a common venue in a room filled with chairs and a lot of doctors.*

*"What?"*

*"I asked if you were OK?" she repeated but continued to stare at the wall across the corridor in front of us. "Because if you are down here with me, then you must not be in a good place." And she turned her head towards me. "Am I right?"*

*Although she had on dark sweats far too big for her with the hoodie up, I could see she was pale and weak and traumatized.*

*"No, actually, I am elated." I explained. "I just saw my baby. Breathing! I'm so thankful."*

*"Don't they all do that?" Her darkness overshadowed my glee. "Breathe, I mean.*

*They're all supposed to survive, right?"*

*I laughed uncomfortably, "Yes, I guess that is what God intended, but apparently, it doesn't always..."*

*"...God?" she questioned. "God?!" her soft voice became outraged by the suggestion of a holy power. "If there were a God, then it would have been my kid that didn't breathe."*

*"You?" She was so young that she couldn't have been old enough to have had a child. "Did you just have a baby too?" I chose to skim over the fact that she didn't want a breathing child.*

*"A baby? No." She checks her phone. "A spawn from Hell? Yes." And with that, she ambles to a standing position with difficulty and presses her head against the nursery window with heavy breathing. She speaks into her phone, "Pink blanket. Second from the left. First row." Ends the call, drops the phone to the floor, crushes it with her black Timberlands, and shuffles her way through the emergency door.*

*"Miss? Excuse me, Miss?" I holler as this was clearly a situation in need of addressing. "Wait, Miss! Please!" I stopped the emergency door from closing and gently pull her arm towards me. "You look like you need a doctor. Let's get you some help. We are in a hospital after all." I tried to make light of whatever she was going through which was ominous.*

*"No, man. I'm checking out, not in..." and passed out in my arms.*

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“Who knows what a non-assassin would have done in this situation, but my situational awareness kicked in, slouched this young girl into a wheelchair, and casually pushed her down the corridor into Lynda’s room. Thankfully, she had a double-bed room, and the second bed was empty. It was meant to be, He.”

Mother adds, “I remember I woke up to the nurse attending to me, and I saw a lump in the second bed, made some comment about how the delivery must have really taken a toll on my husband. But after the nurse left, Herald explained the situation about this poor unfortunate. I called upon Oma’s expertise and she and Opa arrived with a litany of cocktails to awaken the young girl. Confused and concerned, she demanded to know what the hell was going on and that she must leave. I remember how frightened she was...

*“I gotta’ move!” the weak young lady exploded.*

*“Why? Clearly, you need help.”*

*“No, that baby! My cousin is coming for the baby.”*

*“Where is the father?”*

*“He does not know anything about this, and he must never know.”*

*“Why?” asks Lynda.*

*“If you could time-travel, wouldn’t you go back in time to kill Adolph Hitler?”*

*“What makes you think your child is as evil as Adolph Hitler?”*

*“Because it has old Adolph’s blood...on his father’s side.*

*“No, you can’t mean...you can’t kill your baby!”*

*“I won’t be. That’s why my cousin is on his way. And I need to get the hell out of here!”*

*“How soon will your cousin be picking up the child?”*

*"He's on his way."*

"Herald immediately went into covert mode and staked out the nursery as an orderly to abduct the child, and Oma and Opa snuck it home, waiting for the rest of our family." Mother looked at me. "We never gave it another thought. You ARE our child."

"But what about birth certificates, social security numbers?" Dave the novice asks to which we all give him our collectively rolled eyes. "Oh, right. I keep forgetting you are all part of the criminal element. But wait, Hitler didn't have any children." Dave stands firm. "And neither did his brothers." Dad looks at him with newfound respect, and me, well, I'm just turned on even more so. "It's true," he emphasizes as if we don't believe him.

Not only does Fritz believe him, he knows Dave to be correct. "Yes, young Dave, it is true. After Hitler's death, and the horrific stain the name left on the remaining siblings in his family, all swore to allow the insidious seed to die out. No more children in the name of Hitler. No more future little Hitlers. The name may live on through infamy, but at least the bloodline would be severed, and descendants would not be hunted, shamed, and damned for the sins of their evil forbearer.

"Hitler's brothers made an oath not to have children, but not his half-brother." Dad's added explanation jogged my memory of William Patrick Hitler, who wanted no association with old Uncle Adolf for obvious reasons. He moved to America, served in our Armed Forces, had 4 boys of his own, and

their last name in the hope to live the American Dream in peaceful obscurity. But what with the Internet and Ancestry.com, and all, that made William Patrick's dream less of a reality.

"Boys will be boys, don't you know." Fritz said while looking at Gary.

"What?" Gare shrugs. "What are you getting at?"

I changed the subject. "Even if I have a scintilla of Hitler's DNA, how will that make you a millionaire?"

"There are millions covertly and freakishly devoted who pray for the second-coming of Hitler. All I need is Hedy's blood...and, of course, Hedy, herself." Eerie silence fills the room with the collective visual of me strapped to a table in perpetuity for the sole purpose of bleeding for The Reich in order to mass produce little Nazi-steins.

"Like hell, you bastard!" David jumps to clock Fritz across the jaw.

But Fritz just spits and jokes, "Nein, Hedy is the bastard!" He amuses himself as I feel cold, betrayed, and sickened. "It's funny, yes?" This time, Dad kicks him in the gut, and Mother follows with a stomp on his crotch. As Fritz falls to his side in what must be agonizing pain, he continues to mock, "Ah, it's good to have my family at long last."



## Chapter 30

“He’s batshit crazy!”

“Well, he’s had a lifetime with a family who abandoned him, so he’s probably afforded some insanity by nature,” I can't believe I’m defending this guy.

“No!” Dad interrupted, “My grandparents saved his life! Tradition was to have only one male heir; instead, they gave him to an adoption agency, so he could have his life.

“Some life!” Fritz screams. “When I found out who my family actually was, I became enraged that I could not be a part of it! Adoption agency, you say? What adoption? I was but this sickly child, and no one was ever going to adopt due to my asthmatic condition. I was orphaned and passed from foster home to foster home throughout my formative years! But I was destined to locate my true family heritage, which took over half my life, and I did it! When I discovered that the family who had abandoned me was the affluent and wealthy Hinterschott Logistics Family, I vowed revenge. I am owed something, damn you! Damn you all to Hell!”

“Nah, you go to Hell,” Gare boasts and pulls him up to a sitting position. “Here you go, Fritzie. Sit on this for a while.” And finally gags the old man with one of Fritz’s socks and places the pressure explosive device between the wall and Fritz’s back. “Don’t go anywhere, buddy!” Gare grabs the detonator from me and dangles it in front of Fritz’s now very sobered face. Fritz mumbles through his gag, and his eyes become enraged.

“I wouldn’t move too much, Doc.” Dave advises.



“So, this is us, huh?” I say. “Or rather, this is me. I am a descendent of Adolf Hitler. I can never have a family of my own because I won’t do to them what Fritz is doing to me and my family.”

“Feel sorry for yourself much, Sis”

“Gerhard!” Mother and Dad child Gare simultaneously for his insensitivity.

“What?! This changes nothing! She is still my sister. You are still her parents. And you,” Gare directs his attention to Dave, “Well, you, I don’t really know what you are, but I do know that this asshole will not touch my sister or see the light of day!”

“He is a monster,” Mother says to Dad.

“And we choose our own jobs for our own reasons.” Dad chimes in.

“I don’t want his death on my conscience.” My statement causes my family and Dave look at me in shock. Even Fritz’s face looked surprised. “I know he is evil, but if we export him, then I become one walking-talking hypocrite.”

Everyone is quiet. They are all so very quiet in my revelation.

“But then what do we do with him?” Gare asks.

“Put him in a mental institute. Dad can create some bone fide credentials to commit him.”

“I’m sure he’s not the first to claim he has knowledge of Hitler’s descendants.”

Mother adds. “It could work. He’d just be another rambling maniac whose story he tells everyone in the asylum, but no one wants to hear.”

“It’s genius,” Gare confirms, “Except...” Gare reaches for Dave and grabs him by the shirt, “What are we gonna’ do with this guy? He knows everything now! He can’t be trusted!”

As Dave begins to see his life flash before him, Gare pulls him in for a hug and a laugh, “Nah, buddy! I’m just joking!”

Mother, Dad, and I join their union in twisted albeit humorous family moment as Dave exhales with sarcasm, “You guys are seriously fucked up.”

At this moment, Gare pats Dave on the back, forgetting the detonator in his hand.

## Chapter 31

Monday morning was business as usual for the Hinterschotts. Gare complained about not having enough Frühstück; Oma apologized and made more apple pancakes; Dad reached for a pancake from my plate, and Mother scolded him about his cholesterol; Chester chased Horse away from her food dish. All was well in the House of Hinterschott.

“Hedela, mein Liebchen”, Oma addresses me to stand so she can put a necklace on me. “Dis ‘vas your Urgroßmutter, and because you are my Enkelin and so very precious to me, I ‘vant you to have it.”

It was a delicate serpentine chain link locket with the most intricate rose gold and mother of pearl inlay heart. I opened it.

“There, you see. We are one big happy family.” I had to squint, but on both insides of the locket were all the Hinterschotts I’ve ever known: Herald, Adelinda, Gertrude, Reiner, Gerard, and me. “No tears, ‘ya’? You are a strong and vibrant Hinterschott, and ve do not shed tears,” in an ironic moment, Oma wells up, “but ve do love.” And she hugs me so hard, just like Opa used to.

I break away, and chide, “What? No Chester? No Horse?”

“Vell, der is only so much room in zeez teensy lockets...”

“Come on, Head Case, I’ll give you a ride to school.”

“Oh, let’s take the top off the Jeep!”

“You mean MY Jeep?”

“Yes, Gare HARD, your Jeep. I’ll text Dave that we can pick him up.”

“Should you be asking instead of telling? It’s my car after all.”

“But I have the remote to control it, Gare.” Dad explains.

“Keep those away from Gare, Dad. He doesn’t know how to handle the buttons too well.”

“Jeeze, you mishandle one little detonator just once, and you get a rep.” Gare gets a bit defensive, “but lesson learned.”

The family chuckles in light of recent events. We really are an acquired taste.

We swing by to pick up Dave and properly gushes about Gare’s new ride.

“Thanks, man! Hey look, no key. You start it by putting your foot on the brake and pressing this button...”

Dave and both scream in unison as if it were planned, “NO! Don’t push the button!” And we laugh out loud at each other knowing we belong together. It’s hard to find a soul mate with humor as dark as mine. Gare finds no humor in it whatsoever.

“I’m never gonna’ live that down, am I?” and starts his Jeep.

“Nope!” Again, Dave and I respond in unison.

“Hey, I’m just curious...”

This time it is Gare and I who answer in unison to what is undoubtedly the answer to Dave’s question about Markensen’s body, “Don’t ask.”

At school, the day proceeded as usual until 8th hour as Dave and I walked in

together only to find a substitute teacher at Dr. Markensen's desk, and the sub's name on the whiteboard: Ms. Schneider.

"Another Nazi," Dave muses.

"Dave," I quip, "are you saying all Germans are Nazis? Because that is an affront to my heritage..." And then reality set in. The reality of the past 48 hours. It set in upon me as the inevitability of being on the Titanic and realizing the iceberg isn't a thing of beauty in nature, but rather the daunting eventuality of the ship's catastrophic history.

"Hey, He, Hey, what's wrong? I'm sorry I was just messing around." Dave groveled unnecessarily, "I didn't think. I'm so sorry."

But I interrupted, "Nothing can ever be the same, Dave. I don't know what I was thinking. I am a delusional as fucking Hitler himself!" Dave embraces me in an attempt to calm me.

"Whoa, is everything alright here?" Frau Schneider butts in.

"Yes, everything is fine. My girlfriend isn't feeling well. May I please take her to the nurse?"

"Names!" the sub asserts herself with much authority.

"David Corso and Hedy Hi..." Dave answers, but I don't wait and bolt out of the room and continue down the stairs and out of the building running at peak speed through a lush neighborhood into the city where my lungs finally give way, and I collapse in front of the library. The place where Dave and I met. The place where I sought refuge away from my

irritating “twin” brother. The place where I’ve read and researched about one of the most atrocious men in history and my ancestor is at the top of it.

I don’t know how much time passed when I was awakened at a table in the history stacks.

“He, wake up. He,” my dad’s voice was soothing, but I awoke with such a start. I jumped to my feet, checked my exits, assessed any assets around me, and grabbed my pen in knife mode. “He, it is alright. There are no threats. You are safe. It is only me, your father. Please He, breathe. Remember your training. Gain control of yourself.”

He was right. I had become unnerved. Not myself, but then again. I didn’t know who I actually was until 20 hours ago.

“Yeah, OK,” my heartrate was becoming more stable, and I compose myself into a sitting position, but I turned my chair away from the window. “I can’t believe I fell asleep next to an open window.”

“Well, your game is a little off. You’ve had a difficult weekend.”

“Right, not much R and R for the old Hinterschotts, right, Dad.”

He could sense my disdain, my uncertainty of my present and future selves, and I could sense how heart was breaking.

“Wait...how did you find me? What trail did I leave?”

He leaned towards me, and I pulled back with a jerk of suspicion and raised my pen weapon. Upon this, he leaned back into a chair directly opposite me and pointed to my

neck. I looked down and saw the locket Oma had given me just hours earlier.

“You fucking people...” as I yanked it off my neck.

“People?! We are not just people. We are your family, He!”

“Well, I don’t feel like you are family to me!” I yelled on the quiet floor of the library.

“You have lied to me my entire...”

“It was blue.” Dad interrupts.

Processing what he just said, I questioned, “Blue? What was blue?”

“The child’s blanket.” Dad states this like I should already know this.

“The child’s blanket was blue”? Is that code we haven’t covered yet in our training, or...?

“The child’s blanket was blue. The child who was abandoned in the hospital on the day of your birth. The blanket was not pink.”

My world has been rocked again, and my mind reels back to the story of the young mother whose cousin was coming to kill her child because it was a descendant of Hitler.

*“Pink blanket. Second from the left. First row.”* Blue, not pink.

My mind methodically searches for any gaps in Dad’s story. I can see none.

“You...you're telling me that Gare...Gare is the baby who was abandoned? Am I supposed to believe that?”

“Yes, He. you know in your heart that it is true. You must see that. I mean I could provide documentation, but I won’t insult your intelligence.”

"It's just not..." I stumble on my words to look for reason. "But why did Markensen think I was Hitler's descendant?"

"Again, He, use your head. If we can control the narrative of Hitler's death, don't you think we can cover the story of Gare's birth?"

"So, you put a target on my back?"

"No! He, no. Your mother and I created that story just before your Opa died. He knew how special you were and were going to be. And he knew that if anything came out of this story, YOU would be the one who could handle the situation. But we did not think the situation would come about at all, let alone when you were still a child."

"A child? You are still going to call me "a child" after all I've been through the past three days?"

"I simply mean...your mother and I wanted you and Gare," he stopped himself from saying 'have a normal childhood', "...to not have to worry about this ugly part of our family history for a while longer."

"So...whatever happened to Gare's mother. I mean did she get 'exported'?"

"Lord, no, He!" He was appalled at my suggestion. "We wanted to help her. She actually lived with us for a while after you and Gare were born. We thought she might change her mind about her baby after a few days of being cared for. But it was a difficult time because we didn't know that she was an addict. Oma did her best to keep her in a good mental and physical state as she detoxed for a few weeks, but in the end, she needed to live



her own life. We kept tabs on her and sent her money for many years. We helped her in and out of rehab. She overdosed. We had her cremated. There was no service. We felt she would have wanted it that way.”

The Hintershots are masters in the arts of assassination and deception; that being said, they’re hearts are in the right place.

Processing. Processing. Processing...Verdict: this man is my biological father, and I cry. I cry hard and embrace my father.

“Oma would be disappointed in a strong and vibrant woman.” I can’t help but be glib.

“Oh please!” Dad picks up my backpack and puts his arm around me, “She is the emotional one. Do you know she cried the hardest of all of us the day you were born?” We continue to make our way out of the library.

“Really? Why?”

“Because she wanted a grandson. Why do you think I call you ‘He’?”

We walked out of the library arms around one another and we both ask simultaneously, “We’re not gonna’ tell Gare, right?” We laugh in agreement.

“It’s probably best to let him believe I’m Adolph’s great-granddaughter.”

“You would be a great-great granddaughter, He. Do the math...” and we quibble all the way to the car.

“Hey, can I get a Jeep too?”

“Don’t get greedy, He.”

“Well, I do have some serious dirt on you, so I’m not above extortion.”

## **Epilogue**

Although this story is fictional, Adolph Hitler did have an actual half-brother named, Alois Hitler, and he had a son, named William Patrick Hitler; however, he changed his last name to Stuart-Houston, moved to America, and fought for the United States in WWII where he served three years in the war against his Uncle Adolf and even received a Purple Heart. Though he was born in Liverpool, he distanced himself from the Nazis and emigrated to The US in 1939 where he wrote an article to *Look Magazine* titled "Why I Hate My Uncle".