

Inspired by real life events

MAN
ON THE
RUN

VOLUME I ∞ THE HILDEBRANDT DOSSIER

BARON ALEXANDER DESCHAUER



Suite 300 - 990 Fort St
Victoria, BC, V8V 3K2
Canada

www.friesenpress.com

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CHAPTER ONE

Berlin, 1880

“This way.”

“Here?”

“No. There.”

“All the way down?”

“All the way down.” She said it with a smile as she watched yet another man sweat with excitement at his first time. He looked at her with wild eyes. His hair was disheveled and suit crumpled. She could see that he was a powerful man, whatever it was he did, but here, she was in charge. She had seen even the most powerful men shake and cry with uncontrolled joy.

He paused before doing what she knew he had to do, but instead did something unexpected. He closed his eyes, slowed his breathing, and fixed his suit. He used his hands to flatten his hair, probably blown wild by his drive over, and straightened his tie. “I’m sorry but I can’t think straight. You need to show me.” He took her hand

and started walking in the direction she had pointed.

She felt his warm hand envelop hers. The touch was electric and short circuited any remonstrance. It was against hospital policy for her to leave her post. It was also against policy for her to have such inappropriate contact with the public, but the power of his personality overwhelmed her and she found herself quickening her step to stay ahead of him. There was no reason for him to be holding her hand and, in any other circumstance, she would have released herself immediately. The touch was completely innocent, solely intent on getting him to where he needed to be. She was a tool for him, like the switch that turns on a light. She was there to bring him to his newborn son.

“Have you been working here long?”

“Pardon me, sir?” The question, like his touch, was unexpected and she wasn’t sure she heard correctly.

“You look too young to be a matron. I was wondering how long you’ve been working here.”

She blushed. “I’m not the matron but I am in charge when she steps out. In fact, I’m going to get in trouble for taking you to your son.”

“Tell her it was my fault. If you have any problems, I’ll speak to her and explain.” He seemed to notice he was still holding her hand and let it go, slowly releasing his fingers. It was another moment before he felt her fingers let go of his.

“He’s just around the corner. Do you want to see your son or wife first?”

His look told her and she opened the doors to another identical hall, pristine in order and cleanliness. On one side, half way down, a window replaced the wall and overlooked a room of babies, each ensconced in their little cots.

His pace slowed and he stopped at the edge of the glass, not wanting to miss a thing. His hands involuntarily raised to feel the barrier. “Which one is mine?” He began to sidestep along the length of the window, never altering his expression of wonder and searching each little face for recognition.

“You aren’t allowed into the room. I’ll go inside and bring him next to the glass. I’ll be able to bring your baby to you and your wife shortly.” Seeing his face, she added, “It’s hospital policy. There’s nothing wrong with your son; simply administrative procedure.”

He nodded and saw her disappear through a door and reappear on the other side of the glass. He heard only the pushing of a broom or mop somewhere in the corridor, but he ignored it. He expected to see screaming red-faced babies but they were calm and each looked like an angel.

When the nurse brought his son to the window, he could feel his body change. It was as though all his molecules rearranged themselves and he evolved from

a man into a father. His son's eyes were closed and his skin was darker than he would have imagined. He was wrapped in blue with a little blue cap. Holding him, the nurse beamed. It was the first time he had noticed her as something more than the conduit to his son.

She was pretty and young, with perfect teeth and large blue eyes. Her skin glowed as though she had just given birth herself and his son was hers. She held him in front of the window with such pride that he needed to shake himself from the thoughts that threatened to creep into his mind. On her left forearm, he noticed a birthmark where her sleeve fell back. It could have been a heart in someone's imagination, but to him it looked like a map of Africa.

"Beautiful," he mouthed. "Thank you."

She nodded slightly, eyes closing in the process, and mouthed, "You're welcome." She returned the bundle to his cot and returned to him moments later.

"You'll be wanting to see your wife," she said. Something in her voice was hard to place, but he noticed she wasn't in a hurry to return to her station.

"Yes, thank you. And thank you again for this." He waved at the room full of babies.

"It was my pleasure. I can see you are a proud father. Your son and wife are very lucky." She lowered her head and began walking. "Your wife is not far from here."

"Wait." He put his hand on her shoulder, lightly,

barely touching her. “What is your name?”

She turned and opened her eyes. “Anna.”

“Thank you, Anna. You have been very kind and gentle with me. I’m Meyer Hildebrandt. My wife’s name is Siegrun.”

“I know your wife. I was assigned to her when she came in.”

“Then you know how difficult it has been.” He was a tall man, large across the shoulders. He filled his suit as only the truly affluent do. But, as he said this, he seemed to shrink and his shoulders droop.

“Everything is fine, sir. Your son and wife are doing well. We are keeping her in for a couple of days just as a precaution.”

“Please, call me Meyer.”

She blushed. “I don’t think that would be appropriate. I don’t want people talking.”

“Nonsense. I choose with whom I am to be familiar, not others. Remember that. You are in charge of you, no one else.” His suit filled out again and she caught a glimpse of the power he wielded outside of those walls.

“Yes, sir. I mean, Meyer.”

He smiled and put his hand on her shoulder again. “Let’s get me to Siegrun before she starts wondering where I disappeared to.”

Anna’s shoulder felt warm for the duration of their walk. She could feel his hand through her starched white

uniform as though it had never left. She walked slightly ahead of him and became aware of the way her feet met the floor and her body moved. She dared not look back or make any conversation. She was a professional and took care of women at the most profound moment of their lives. She loved what she did. But she had never met a man like Meyer before. No one had ever had this effect on her. She was the one who watched other men become tongue tied and awkward around her. She was the one who was used to every eye being lifted to watch her walk into a room. *Get control of yourself, Anna*, she thought.

“Your wife is here,” she said. “In this room.”

“Thank you. It was a pleasure to be in your company, Anna. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Meyer?”

He turned to look at Anna. He saw her eyes darting around his face. “Yes?”

“Are you forgetting something?”

Meyer’s eyes moved from corner to corner as if searching his brain. “I don’t think so.”

“Flowers? Something special?” Anna immediately regretted it. Meyer was not a young man, perhaps old enough to be her father. He wouldn’t want to be belittled.

His reaction was that of a man frustrated by his own impatience. He clenched his fists and shook his head but recovered quickly. “You shame me, Anna, and you’re

right. I've been so distracted by fear that I forgot to have joy." He hung his head. "Do you know where I can find something nice in short order?"

Anna's face lit up with her easy smile. "I do. Follow me. It'll only take a few minutes." She took him by the hand and pulled him away from Siegrun's door. They stopped outside of an empty room.

"What's this?"

"Mrs. Schultz left earlier today. She had so many flowers and gifts that she gave them to the staff. As I am part of the staff, it would be my pleasure to give them to you. Take your pick."

Meyer eyed the bed surrounded by flowers and boxes of what he presumed to be candy or chocolate. Every surface was covered. His eye fell on a small potted plant with white flowers. "Is that what I think it is?"

"In the small pot? It's edelweiss, my favorite of all of them." She retrieved the gift and put it in Meyer's hands.

"It is beautiful," he said. He turned the small pot around and lifted it to the sunlight. He turned to Anna to find her looking at him already. "You know, there's been talk of a new technology that will change the way we live in ways we can't even begin to imagine."

She laughed. "Looking at a flower makes you think about technology?"

"I'm thinking about light as I look at this beautiful specimen. Then I am reminded of an American inventor

who has made light from electricity. I've seen it. It is remarkable. It is already being fitted in all the best homes and I have no doubt we'll see them in hospitals before long. No more gas."

"Edison?" She had read about it in the papers. Everyone had. It was the biggest news of the decade.

"That's him. I met him recently. Cantankerous character, but brilliant. He'll become rich from this invention, though. Mark my words."

"We have some lights already in our surgical rooms. I'm told the entire hospital will convert as soon as practical."

"And every lightbulb will make Edison richer. It is a wonderful thing, to own a patent." Meyer drifted into his thoughts once again, alternating his gaze from the potted flower, to Anna, to the windows in the hallway.

"Siegrun?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't wish to be rude, Meyer, but your wife probably would like to see you?"

He snapped back into the present and grasped his gift. "I'm sorry. I get wrapped up with all of the wonders of the world. We live in such a magical time. My baby's healthy and life is wonderful."

Anna let him babble. He was becoming the new father that she had seen when he first arrived at her desk, out of breath and terrified of missing the moment.

“Follow me. I’m sure the two of you have lots to talk about.” They walked in silence and she opened the door to his wife’s room.

It was identical to the one that held the flowers, except that the bed was occupied. Siegrun’s long dark hair was matted with sweat and lay splayed across her pillow. Her face was serene with an expression just shy of a smile. Her body was tired and lay motionless on the bed with three thin blankets on top. Next to the bed was a large chair with thin arms and a side table with a small clock, a pitcher of water, and a glass. On the wall above the bed was a crucifix.

“I’m sorry I missed it.”

“That’s okay.” Her voice was tired and resigned, yet happy. “Did you get to see him?”

“I did. He’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

“Don’t. I’m hideous.”

“You’re the mother of my son. You’ll never be hideous.”

They sat in silence for a while, his hand holding hers. She liked the way his hands made hers feel so small, the way he made her feel safe in his arms. The strength of his will made everything okay.

“It almost makes everything else feel less hard.” Her eyes became glassy with tears as soon as she said it.

“Shhh. Let’s not talk about that.”

“It’s why I haven’t named him yet. I wanted you to

be here. I wanted it to be real before I..." She stopped again as her body shook softly and tears began to run down her cheeks.

"He's strong and beautiful, just like you."

"He is gorgeous, isn't he?"

"He'll want for nothing and he'll change the world."

"No pressure then," she said. Her face was smiling again and she wiped her tears with the back of her free hand.

"Can you sit up? That's it, slowly. Good. Now have some water. Can you eat?"

"I'd rather see our son."

"Anna is bringing him to us."

"Anna?"

"The nurse?"

"I know. I didn't think you knew."

"I was a mess when I arrived and she helped me." He turned to where he left the little pot and handed it to Siegrun. "Here. Isn't it beautiful?"

She ran her fingers along the furry petals and smiled faraway thoughts. "It's magical and perfect. Thank you." She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed them. Meyer inwardly thanked Anna.

"Have you thought about a name?"

There was a pause again as emotion washed over her. "Each of our..." she couldn't finish the sentence at first. "...other children were named before they were born.

I didn't want to tempt the fates."

Meyer held her hand firmly. His own emotions were rising as he could still feel the fear and panic as he pushed through the hospital doors. Each time, he was met with the cold hand of death. Each child, a complication that the staff couldn't deal with. He steeled himself, knowing that his pain was still a fraction of his wife's.

"Let's meet our son and see what name fits him," he suggested.

"Seeing this edelweiss, I want to call him that but I can't think of any boys called Edel. If she was a girl, we would have her name."

Meyer kissed her hand and leaned in to kiss her softly on her lips. He stroked her hair and waited for Anna to arrive. He didn't have to wait long.

"Who do we have here?" she said, talking to the baby. Anna held the blue bundle gently against her chest, her hand expertly cradling the head. She looked flushed and happy. She entered Siegrun's room and placed the precious child into her arms.

At first, Siegrun cried and held her baby, all birthing pain forgotten. She moved sideways slightly with her body and her head continued the pendulum as she danced with the life that was given to them. She kissed his cheeks and let Meyer do the same. Anna looked on, hypnotized by the love in the room. It was the reason she enjoyed her job so much.

“Isn’t he the most beautiful baby ever born?” Siegrun’s face was all happiness.

“He is,” Meyer replied. He was stroking the swaddling, wanting to feel his son’s little hands and feet but deferring to his wife’s needs first.

“Anna, what name would you say matches our little boy?”

Anna was still standing transfixed in happiness over the bed. She reached out and touched the little boy’s face with her hand and looked into his eyes. “Joseph, like in the Bible. It is a strong name. An honorable name for a good family.” She looked at Siegrun and nodded. When she looked at Meyer, she found him already looking at her. She could feel the heat of the flush rise on her neck. “But I should get going and leave the three of you alone.” She lowered her eyes and left the room.

“I like Joseph,” Siegrun said. “And Adel. I’ve been thinking. It is close to Edelweiss and it means someone noble.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Meyer said. He was still absorbing the electricity from Anna’s glance.

“Joseph Adel Hildebrandt. I think that’s your new name! Meyer, meet your son Joseph.”

He took the bundle from her and moved up and down as he held the baby next to him. “You are going to bestride the world when you grow up,” he whispered in his son’s ear. He stood and danced with his boy when

the sound began. It was the clear, beautiful sound of a healthy baby crying. It made Meyer weep with joy. “I think our son is hungry.” He passed Joseph back to Siegrun and sat down. *Life is grand*, he thought.

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“Everything okay with Mrs. Hildebrandt?”

“Everything is fine, thanks.” Meyer barely broke his stride as he opened the door and went to his usual chair. The room was full of cigar smoke and ten other men. “Sorry about the interruption.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Hildebrandt. Why else would we do this if it wasn’t for family?” Mr. Rock stood and walked towards Meyer, intercepting him with an outstretched hand. “Congratulations. Boy or girl?”

“Boy. Healthy and strong.”

“Good man.”

Each of the other members shook his hand and clasped him on the back. It was the first time Meyer had seen such an outburst of affection from these men.

“What did I miss?” He wanted to bring things back to business. The total membership rarely met and each man was a titan in his own industry.

“Mr. Rhodes has outlined his expansion plans and we are all in accord. Mr. Rock has set out his objectives for his industry and has agreed to direct funds from

those enterprises into the membership at some future date. The Very Reverend Mr. Peter Beckx has condoned Bismarck's latest actions and we have all agreed that no recourse is needed."

Meyer was mentally checking the points as they were raised and then recorded into the memories of the eleven men. Nothing was written down and no man would ever repeat what was said here. This group helped Meyer become the man he was. As the owner of industries and railroads across Europe, he ensured that his backing brought the right men into power—and that they would protect him once there.

"And my proposal for an expansion of my railways? Any objection?" Meyer tried to be as nonchalant as possible. He had not known of a request to be refused; if it was, it would represent a loss of trust in him. And trust was all he had.

"None whatsoever," Mr. Roth said. "My banks will ensure you have all the monies you need."

"Then this year will mark the best period of my life so far," Meyer said. "My son, my business, and my family. What more can a man want?"

"You speak the truth, Mr. Hildebrandt," said Mr. Roth. "And that can only come with peace. That has always been the purpose of this Order, as it was for our predecessor."

"They were more interested in enlightenment,"

another said. "Peace is its practical application."

"Yes," Mr. Roth continued. "And peace does not necessarily mean a lack of discord. I have been especially fond of Bismarck's ability to bring together the German states with minimal bloodshed. But blood will continue to be shed for the cause of peace. There are many out there who do everything they can to derail order and create nothing. Between ourselves, we create and control over a quarter of North American and European wealth. We must use our strength, our influence, and our determination to keep the course. Peace can be achieved. But we may have been too short-sighted. It may need to be solved at the global level. The world has become much smaller and we need to become more proactive."

"With our money?" Mr. Rock said.

"Yes, and with our influence. Someday, the world may outgrow our brute financial strength, but influence will steer the ship. The soft power, the intelligence, and the ability to shape a leader's willpower will allow us to create the peace we all desire."

"Hear, hear." All voices agreed.

"What do you propose?" asked Meyer.

"The world looks pretty good from where we are sitting, but when sailing a ship, one must always look to the horizon for clues of an impending storm. We must reinforce our relationships, build new ones, and keep our eye on our objective."

“In other words,” said Meyer, “let’s enjoy the good times because they won’t last. We’ll prepare for the worst and continue to hope for the best.”

“I couldn’t have said it better.”

The room relaxed as each titan settled into his chair. The room itself was set off and reserved for the opera house’s directors and special guests. It was spacious, with enough room for fifty seated men. Its ceilings were more than thirty feet high with gilded flourishes. The height absorbed the smoke without it becoming uncomfortable, and the soaring windows were built for gods to peer in on their creations. At Mr. Aguado’s urging, all talk of business ceased and the servants were let in to tend to their needs. The best wine from Mr. Roth’s vineyards flowed beside the brandy from Mr. Aguado’s estates.

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“Have the prince contact Bismarck and see if we can sit down for dinner in the next couple of weeks. Thank you. No, Mrs. Hildebrandt will deal with the domestic matters. Yes, Joseph will be coming home shortly. Yes, he is the blood that flows in my veins and the breath that wakes me at dawn. No, I don’t have time for that; let Mr. Horst see to it.” The conversations rang in Meyer’s head as he made his way into his study.

When Siegrun arrived, he noted the noise and excitement of the house but stayed firmly behind his desk. The niceties of the servants always annoyed him. *If I could run a respectable household without them, I would*, he thought.

“Can I come in?” It was Siegrun.

“Of course. I’ll be right there.”

As he opened the door, his chest began to pound and his palms sweat. He kissed his wife and took Joseph in his arms, partly to provide a barrier between himself and Anna. Her presence shook him as her eyes searched his face. He nodded to her and looked questioningly at Siegrun.

“It was my idea. You never get along with anyone so I wanted to ensure that our new nanny would be someone both you and Joseph could like.” She was still beaming and the world could do no wrong. She was twenty-six years old and had been warned against marrying such an old man as Meyer, but she was content. He had given her a beautiful boy, a safe home, and status in society none of her other suitors could match. Her parents reluctantly accepted his proposal and came to like and respect him. Three still-births later, they remained happy with each other but were both firmly aware of the harsh realities of life. Romance and fairies were something for operas and fiction writers. They lived resolutely in the real world.

“Hello, Mr. Hildebrandt, sir.” Anna extended her hand.

He looked down briefly at her elongated fingers and then back to her face. “Meyer, please. I wasn’t kidding.” He found himself in a difficult position of having a staff member calling him by his Christian name. In ordinary circumstances, he rarely had contact with the staff and left the running of the house to Siegrun. No one in the house called him anything other than ‘sir’ or ‘Mr. Hildebrandt’. Yet, he had extended the offer to her and now it was a point of honor to retain that relationship.

“I’m sorry, Meyer, sir. I mean, Meyer.” She looked straight at him.

He could feel her hand in his again, the second time in as many weeks. Her fingers were warm and left a lingering sensation on his palm as she withdrew them. In his other arm was Joseph and Meyer stood dumbstruck for the briefest of moments while he took in the scene before him. He would revisit that moment later, he knew. He forced himself to return to the exchange of pleasantries and the joy of his boy.

“Meyer?” said Siegrun with genuine surprise. “I’m convinced more than ever that I made the right decision.” His face held an empty smile that Siegrun interpreted as she wanted, namely of his pleasure with her choice of nannies. Anna excused herself and he was able to walk Joseph into his study. Siegrun watched as

her husband held their precious boy. She knew she had chosen him as her husband for this, not the wealth or power he wielded.

“Do you see all of the fancy books? Look at the lovely yellow colors. Yes, I know you do. You’re such a lovely boy. Soon, you’ll be reading here with me. They look big and scary at your size but soon you’ll learn to love them. They hold the secrets of the universe and I’ll show you the key to unlocking all of them. Sounds exciting, doesn’t it?” His moustache tickled Joseph as he whispered the words. To Siegrun, it looked like he was gurgling in their son’s ear, but Meyer was parting with his most intimate hopes and dreams. “You will bestride the world, little Joseph. I will show you the way. Just be strong and healthy and everything will be okay.”

His walk around the paneled study took a further four minutes as he slowly made his way amongst the furniture and took Joseph’s hand in his and touched the books. Each step contained a little bounce to please Joseph. In return, his eyes opened and he gave his father a gummy smile. Then a yawn and he fell asleep. Careful to not wake him, he handed the bundle back to Siegrun. The two smiled at each other, eyes brimming with joy. Siegrun turned to seek out Anna and Meyer returned to his desk, content. His house had finally become a home.

The leather of his seat and the top of his desk was in oxblood red. He had his desk customized when he

finished his first hundred kilometers of railway line. He commissioned his mansion when he finished his thousandth kilometer. He was invited into the Order when he finished his two thousandth kilometer. Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck's mini wars inadvertently helped Meyer secure his position as top industrialist in the new Germany with steel mills, coal mines and political access second only to the Kaiser himself. As with all industrialists, he looked eastwards past the safety of Prussia's spheres of influence into Russia and its unlimited need for railways. As a realist, he restricted himself to the new worlds controlled by England, France and Germany. Their colonies absorbed everything he could throw at them. He became partners in materiel or finance (as Mr. Roth's front man) in over half of all railways in the United States. He kept his name out of the papers and out of the history books with shares that didn't cause offence or concern. He was happy with less than five percent and a seat on the board. He would let others take the glory. He was there for the money.

All of his accumulated money and power came at a cost. It was one of the reasons he waited so long to get married. He was forty-four years old when he met Siegrun. She had just turned twenty and many were beginning to talk of her becoming a spinster. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met with a mind that could challenge him and keep him interested in her.

They would have beautiful, smart and strong children, he thought, and proposed after only three months of courtship.

“No, please, I don’t wish to be interrupted.” His concentration was broken as his butler knocked softly on his study’s door. He enjoyed reliving his successes. *And today is my greatest triumph*, he thought. *Finally, a successor. Someone I can teach and give everything to. Immortality.*

“I’m sorry, sir, but Mrs. Hildebrandt has retired to her room and the new girl wishes to have a word with you.”

“Excuse me? What has she to do with me? Please deal with her for me.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but she is insisting that she must speak with you.” He waited expectantly for some guidance.

Meyer looked at his desk for a moment before nodding his head. “OK, bring her in.”

The door closed and then reopened with Anna framed by the heavy dark oak, her hand resting lightly on the handle. Her hair was down and she wore the uniform of the house. She looked like an angel to Meyer.

“Hello Anna. Is everything OK?” He was torn between standing and remaining seated. As they were on familiar terms, he decided to stand when she entered the room.

“Not really,” she said as she released the door. It closed on its own as she walked towards his desk. She had the grace of an athlete and trained dancer. Her body was

always balanced between steps and her torso remained immobile. When it did move, it did so in order to ensure that her head and eyes remained fixed on their subject, like a cat on the hunt.

“Shouldn’t this be something you take up with Siegrun? I generally don’t deal with household matters and I can’t see what has happened...” he fell silent as she walked closer towards him. The desk remained between them and she took a sideways step to get even closer. She stopped when there was no furniture between them.

“I needed to talk to you, alone.” Her head tilted up and caused her hair to fall away from her face. Her eyes were fixed on his and her hands hung by her side, not moving.

Meyer’s mouth was dry and his body began to warm. “What do you need to talk about?” His chest involuntarily puffed out. *Why is she affecting me so much? I deal with the Kaiser and Bismarck and world leaders. She’s just a girl.*

“I may be a spinster but I’m not blind Meyer.”

“Blind to what?”

“You’re uncomfortable with me being your nanny. Your wife can’t see it because she’s in another world. But I need to live here and I don’t want to feel I can’t talk to you or her or anyone.”

“Do you always talk to your employers this way?”

She smiled. The furrows between her eyebrows

disappeared and her white teeth made her lips even more noticeable. “I’ve been told before that I’m a little too forward.”

He was surprised at himself as he laughed. “You’re just fine. I like women who have a mind of their own.” When he saw her blush, he quickly corrected himself. “I mean, I like everyone in the household to feel comfortable enough to talk to either myself or my wife frankly.”

“I’ll remember that, Meyer.” She dropped her eyes.

Each time she said his name, he could feel a bolt of warmth in his torso. “You don’t have to worry about me. I thought you were super at the hospital when I arrived like a fool and you helped Siegrun through some very tough days. This whole process has been tough on her.”

“I know,” she said as she put her hand on his arm. “She told me everything. I felt like I knew you before we ever met. The way she described you, I didn’t think they made men like that anymore.” She let her hand drop when she realized what she did.

Meyer was as lost as a schoolboy with his first crush. “Well, don’t believe everything. I’m sure she exaggerated.” He took a step backwards, away from her, and started looking through a stack of post he needed to attend to.

“I’m sure she didn’t,” she said in a soft voice. She turned and began walking towards the door.

“Anna?”

“Yes?” she turned to face him, half-way to the door. Her face was once more illuminated.

“You’re welcome to come and see me anytime. But, if the door is closed, it means I’m not to be disturbed. Understood?”

“Understood.” She said it as much to herself as him. Her eyes closed as she nodded farewell and then left him alone.



Time passes slowly and quickly as a parent. The long nights when the baby can’t sleep and cries non-stop. The feeding schedule when the baby doesn’t cooperate. But equally, the clothes that the baby outgrows. The first crawl, first step, first word.

“I can take Joseph at nights so you can sleep,” Anna said.

“And miss my baby’s tears?” Siegrun was fiddling with his clothes, the third change of the day after a diaper malfunction. “I want the cries as well as the laughter.”

“You’re a good mother. But if it gets too much, let me know and I’ll take him gladly. He’s such a bonnie little boy.”

“I still can’t believe it. He fills me with such joy I can’t put it into words.” After a moment, she added,

“How are you with Meyer? I know he hasn’t been around much but he does appreciate all of the work you do with Joseph.”

“Meyer’s been very kind to me. I can’t complain.”

“Have you ever thought about marriage?” Siegrun couldn’t believe she asked the question. Anna didn’t seem to mind.

“Yes and no. If I could find a prince like yours, yes. Most men are fine but I am not sure whether I am prepared to be a wife. You still live like a free person with Meyer. Most women don’t.” She spoke freely and it was one of the things Siegrun liked most about her. She needed someone to connect mentally with.

“And you don’t mind not having children?”

“That’s the hardest part. I love children, especially after working in the hospital and, now, working here. They are pure innocence. All they want is love, food, and sleep.”

“Would you be prepared to meet someone if they were the right person?”

Anna began to imagine Meyer and then nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Siegrun became more excited. “I have someone I’d like you to meet. He’s Prussian, an officer with an income and inheritance, educated, and thirty years old. He’s got a good family and would be perfect for you.” She held Joseph but it was only her and Anna in the

room. "What do you think?"

"Ah, well, I don't know. I'm probably too old for him by now anyway."

"Don't talk nonsense. You're the same age as me and prettier by far. He'd be a fool not to snap you up."

"You're too kind, but I know men a little better than you think I do. They don't want someone old like me. They want someone fresh. Fourteen, sixteen, eighteen at the oldest."

"I won't have it. I am inviting him to tea next week Wednesday. We'll find someone to take care of Joseph and you will join me in the salon. If you like him, we can take it from there." She wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Anna laughed. "All right, but no promises."

"Life is all about broken promises. Our role is dealing with the fallout."

They returned to Joseph and made sure he was loved, fed, and rested. The hours and days accelerated and Wednesday was upon them before they knew it.

Siegrun took the seat of honor in the salon with Anna to her right. They each wore dresses that were tight around the waist now that Siegrun had her figure back. They opted for a small hoop that always reminded Anna of a peacock strutting with its feathers behind. The cut was low enough to entice any red-blooded man, with frills along the seams, arms, and wrists. Anna was in red

with white accents while Siegrun wore a more demure blue. Around them gathered society's grandest women, none of whom knew who Anna was or what she did. If they had, they would not have talked to her.

"We're in for a treat. Bismarck is meeting with Meyer afterwards and he has accepted my invitation to drop in. As has Alex von Trippen, the prince I told you about." She noticed with delight Anna's little squirm. "There will be the usual gentlemen who call in, I'm sure, but you need to concentrate on Trippen."

It wasn't long before Anna leaned towards Siegrun. "I think there's someone there who might match your description."

"Yes, that's him. Isn't he dapper? His moustache is perfect, and he's groomed like an Adonis."

Anna looked over at her. "Are you sure he's for me or you?"

They laughed and waited for him to come over.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Hildebrandt. You have a lovely home and thank you for inviting me."

"Your Serene Highness is too kind."

"Please, we're amongst friends. Call me Alex."

"Certainly. Please call me Siegrun."

"The pleasure is all mine."

Siegrun blushed slightly as he lifted her hand to his lips. "And let me introduce you to my great friend, Miss Anna Voigt."

Alex stood straight, clicked his heels, and bowed deeply to Anna. The action was graceful and well-practiced, but its effect on Anna was profound. It was as though the concussion of his heels was felt through her chest and her eyes became larger than normal. She stared directly into his eyes, causing him to stare back. For a moment, the salon ceased to exist for them both, falling away into a blur of colors and sounds.

“It is my greatest pleasure, Miss Voigt.”

“Please, Anna.”

“And you must call me Alex. May I sit near you?” He was already bending and had reached the seat by the time she assented.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a moment,” Siegrun said. “I need to talk to Meyer about something. Please excuse me.” When she stood, all the men in the room stopped their conversations and stood. “Oh, please be seated. I’ll just be a moment.” Knowing that her behavior would be gossiped about for months, she continued walking until she left the salon, ostensibly in search of her husband.

“I think we’ll need to be finding a new nanny,” she said to Meyer when she found him.

“Sorry to hear about that. What’s happened?”

“Nothing, other than the way Prince Alex von Trippen just about fell over when he was introduced to Anna, and she him.”

The news brought a pang to Meyer. While he had no

intention of acting on his feelings, the thought of a rival hurt. He felt a weakening of his body as a result. "That's great news for her, but does he know who she is?"

"Of course not."

"Don't you think this will cause a scandal?"

"We need a good scandal once in a while to keep things interesting." She smiled with a glint in her eye.

"Siegrun Hildebrandt, I would never have thought it. You are a subversive deep down." He was smiling and pulled her towards her. They were alone and he snuck a quick kiss. "I'm sure we'll weather whatever happens. I'm more concerned about Anna. There's no guarantee that Alex will take her once he is aware of all the facts."

"True, but who are we to stand in the way of true love?"

"Alex can't afford true love. No one in his position can. They need to marry well and be mindful of their strategic importance in Europe."

"You're about as fun as a bucket of cold water," she said. She was smiling so he took it as it was meant.

"I only mean for you to be careful. Anna isn't an experiment or a diversion to keep you busy."

"We can always have another baby," she said, coming closer.

"I'm doing everything I can in that department," he said. "The rest is up to God."

"Then I'll mention Anna in my prayers for us as well."

Meyer shook his head and let her fantasize. There was nothing he could do to change her mind, but the thought of Anna with another man caused something to stir within him.



“You knew this would happen,” she said. Her face was flush and she tried to gather as much air as her corset would allow. “He was never going to be allowed to love me. Me, a lowly nurse. A servant.” She slumped in the corner, the hoop pressing against her back. It hurt, but strangely made her feel better to have a pain other than the one tearing at her shame.

“I had no idea Mrs. Kohler would open her big trap. And she wouldn’t have known had it not been for her maid.”

“But why did she have to embarrass me like she did? I wasn’t hurting anyone.”

“I know, Anna, and it’s wrong. It’s probably my mistake. I wanted you to meet the prince and you hit it off. I thought he would salvage the situation in due course but it was too soon to expect him to do anything other than distance himself from you. I wanted him to spend more time with you to be as enchanted as are we.”

“You two are not the norm. People are mean. And you wonder why I’m still a spinster.”

“It’s because you are looking to the sky when there are diamonds all around you. But the heart wants what the heart wants. I just hope you find your prince someday.” She got up and gave her hand to Anna to help her out of the corner. “In the meantime, let’s get cleaned up and see our men. Joseph is always happy to see us and Meyer may have time, depending on how his session goes today. Sometimes he and the chancellor can spend all afternoon and evening together. I wonder what they talk about so much.”

“Meyer is very intelligent,” Anna said. “Maybe the chancellor is picking his brain.”

“You have a very high esteem of my husband.”

“Of both of you. But it’s a man’s world and your husband becomes our champion by default.”

Siegrun look carefully at Anna. “You’re very intelligent yourself. How come you are here and not at a university or doing something with your brain?”

“I tried university, then nursing, now being a nanny. My parents have some money but that was never my interest. I want to follow my heart, and it led me here.”

Siegrun smiled and hugged her. “You are my diamond. I don’t need to look at the skies any longer. But it doesn’t mean I’ll stop looking for a man for you. You deserve it.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I like to think so.”