

**The Formulation of an Author's 'Other'  
in Late Postmodern Fiction**

Part I of II: Critical/Theoretical portion

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### **Legal Immigrants: The Book Jacket**

*Legal Immigrants* is a darkly comedic fiction novel incorporating real-life news stories and historical research about lucrative German organized crime in the United States and abroad. The novel also details the bizarre misadventures that unravel when three motley siblings launch cataclysmic revenge on their significant others, whom they've learned are leading secret naughty lives.

Brigitte Schneider, the eldest sibling, is a vigorous lawyer in Boston who just found out her boyfriend of five years has been sleeping with other women. Nikolaus, her middle-born brother, is a celebrity entertainment news producer in Manhattan who supports his manipulative 'actor' boyfriend. Their younger brother, Josef, is a strapping soccer star failing most his college classes in Tampa, whose pregnancy-faking girlfriend has been stealing from him since freshman year. In privileged Dallas society, their father, Xavier, CEO of the Schneider Building Company (a homebuilding and real estate façade for his illegal activity), must decide to whom he will leave the family business, now that he has survived a heart attack. His boisterous but stern Texan wife, Sofia, busies herself by preparing for the upcoming family reunion in Bavaria. Together, the Schneider siblings finally embrace the power and opportunity of their family's organized crime legacy – through suspenseful scheming and jovial, often alcoholic fraternal-sororal bonding.

*Legal Immigrants* fuses together a sardonically dysfunctional family saga spanning over two decades with never-before-published factual organized crime information and an enthralling travel journey throughout South Germany.

### Commentary Statement of Intent

This critical commentary accompanying *Legal Immigrants* is divided into two sections that explain my writing and research processes. It offers analysis of novelists whose work was influential for my own novel and the critical theorists whose ideologies also contributed to its composition. The first section analyzes the influences of late postmodern fiction's style, form, genre combinations, and authorial guidance for *Legal Immigrants*. This section also considers subgenres of late postmodern fiction that contributed to my novel, as well as the way literary cinema influenced the way I wrote *Legal Immigrants*, predominantly in terms of point-of-view, plot, and character development. Here I discuss specific novelists whose work was inspirational to my own (Jonathan Franzen, Michael Cunningham, Rick Moody, Michael Chabon, Jeffrey Eugenides, among a few others) and theorists whose viewpoints about postmodern fiction aided my writing process (mainly James Wood, Jeremy Green, and Jean Baudrillard).

The second section focuses on the psychoanalytic concerns and ethics of writing 'factionally' about my immediate family. In this section I challenge gender-based theories and their connections to *Legal Immigrants*, including Freud's Family Romance, Marianne Hirsch's anti-Freudian family dynamic theories, Klaus Theweleit's gender-defining theories of violence and sex, and Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the self in literary form. This section also explains my own inventive formulation of an author's 'Other' and the way this Other is presented and altered within his factional novels. In this section I continue the discussion of writers including Franzen, Cunningham, Moody, Chabon, Eugenides, among lesser known novelists, and how the psychoanalytic construction of their characters influenced my own.

**I.**  
**POSTMODERN FICTION:**  
**EXTENSIONS & INFLUENCES FOR *LEGAL IMMIGRANTS***

When I began writing *Legal Immigrants*, it was mandatory to give much consideration to what genre(s) I would consider my novel. Thinking like a book agent, and imagining that an academic literary critic would soon descend on my creative project to dissect it, helped in my writing process since these sparring literary marketplace identities both automatically demand a genre label. However, since *Legal Immigrants* rewrites and ‘plays with’ history a great deal, since it experiments with my own written interpretation of my self and the selves of my family members, among other realized attributes that I analyze in this section, *Legal Immigrants* cannot be limited to just one genre. *Legal Immigrants* is a family saga novel; a crime thriller; a comedic novel; and an historical fiction novel that explores and reimagines conspiracy theories and true crime events. *Legal Immigrants* also spans nearly three decades, takes place in four major American cities and in South Germany, and takes into account a bevy of social commentary *through* its characters, places, plot, and characters’ actions.

After years of much theoretical research and analysis about genre and the literary movements that help to define genre, I’ve deciphered that literary critics would place *Legal Immigrants* on the Postmodern bookshelf, a space that welcomes novels that cannot be labeled as only one genre. Its postmodern label is appropriate for quite a few other reasons too, which are analyzed in this section. Problematically, though, the very definition of postmodernism is faulty and unanimously *undecided* upon. Over 40 years after postmodernism introduced itself, to this day, any theorist will give you a different answer should you ask him/her what the exact definition of postmodern fiction is. This



said, some literary critics consider postmodernism to already be over, or at least in its final stage. Thus, since the research for and writing of *Legal Immigrants* took place from 2004 to 2010, instead of labeling my novel as wholly 'postmodern,' I instead considered many definitions and sub-genres of postmodern fiction. Then, when writing *Legal Immigrants*, I applied the theoretical ideas of postmodern fiction that I found most appropriate and influential.

### **Hysterical Realism**

Literary critic James Wood coined late postmodernism's genre-spanning quality as 'Hysterical Realism,' which is also known as *Recherché* Postmodernism or Maximalism. In his article entitled, "Tell me how does it feel?," Wood defined Hysterical Realism as fiction filled with "chronic length, manic characters, frenzied action, and frequent digressions on topics secondary to the story," and attributed to writers such as Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Don DeLillo, Zadie Smith, Tom Wolfe, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Thomas Pynchon, and Salmon Rushdie. This article, which ran in *The Guardian* on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2001, pokes fun at contemporary psychotherapy, yet also begs and pleads social novelists like Franzen and DeLillo to "abandon social and theoretical glitter." In short, Wood commanded emotional depth.

Although I too experimented with genre combinations, narrative structure and form, and biographical character likenesses that are similar to my own family members, unlike much of overly stylized postmodern fiction, I still want my reader to *feel* something from *Legal Immigrants*, be it anger, laughter, suspense, a new understanding

or interpretation of history, or empathy. And because of this, reading the work of these novelists who are considered heavily stylized 'postmodern fictionists' – DeLillo, Pynchon, Powers, John Barth, for example – was actually useful for me to know what *not* to do in my novel.

Based on the above definition of Wood's "Hysterical Realism" club, I would also include novelists Michael Chabon, Michael Cunningham, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Rick Moody. However, unlike overly stylized postmodern novelists, whose novels are notoriously void of emotion and empathy, novelists like Franzen (I obviously disagree with Wood about Franzen) and the other novelists I've just mentioned actually *do* take into account their characters' emotional and psychological temperaments. If this were not the case, then the characters in their fictions would not be able to evoke empathy and be established as memorable literary personalities – which all of these authors' characters indeed are. These authors I've mentioned are indeed able to focus foremost on consummate storytelling instead of losing their plot and character to social commentary rants. They explore fully their characters' psyches and "Tell (Wood) how it feels."

Wood's article concludes with the following:

It ought to be harder, now, either to bounce around in the false zaniness of hysterical realism or to trudge along in the easy fidelity of social realism. Both genres look a little busted. That may allow a space for the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for novels that tell us not "how the world works" but "how somebody felt about something" - indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things (these are commonly called novels about human beings). A space may now open, one hopes, for the kind of novel that shows us that human consciousness is the truest Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the newly dark lights of the age. ("Tell me")

Franzen, along with the other authors I've mentioned (particularly Cunningham and Moody, in my view), have instead devoted much of their narratives to the psychological

exploration of their characters, rather than placing importance on plot or stylistic experimentation. Since one sub-genre *Legal Immigrants* could be classified as is 'crime thriller,' I had to focus on plot to keep the narrative in motion, which, generally speaking for crime narratives, does not often mesh well with character development and introspection. Thus, I too made a commitment to focus on the emotional and psychological exploration of my characters.

In fact, the plot development of *Legal Immigrants* was at first difficult for me, as I am always devoted to character development for any fiction I write. After I had initial drafts of character sketches and some scenes where my characters interact with each other, only then was I able to focus on plot. Much of the plot twists and decisions came later in my writing process, because, for me, getting to know my characters intimately is the most important element of fiction – *before* I can progress with plot. And in the siblings' cases, I needed to figure out who they are and, also important, of what crimes and evil deeds they are capable. I needed to like them before I made them criminals. I must know my characters wholly before I can birth them into intense situations in which they are at risk, or making fools of themselves, or undergoing harsh but necessary personal growth.

In regards to the disallowance of plot to overtake character development within postmodern fiction, theorist Hal Foster states simply: "Perhaps, then, postmodernism is best conceived as a conflict of new and old modes – cultural and economic, the one not entirely autonomous, the other not all determinative – and the interests vested therein" (xi). This conflict of 'old' and 'new' is a central trait of postmodern fiction, one which novelists like Jonathan Franzen (which he employed in *The Corrections*, *Freedom*, and

*Strong Motion*) and Michael Cunningham (within his novels *Flesh and Blood*, *The Hours*, *Specimen Days*, and *By Nightfall*) say is integral, as do literary critics like James Wood and Jeremy Green (whose re-takes on postmodern fiction were highly influential for my own writing and are detailed in my commentary). I ‘play around’ with style and structure but still make attempts for my readers to empathize with my somewhat unlikeable, deviant characters. Some of the Schneider siblings’ unlikeability factor derives from their economic status, which Foster also states is necessary commentary in postmodern fiction. The siblings are privileged and spoiled, and because of this, they quite literally think they can get away with murder.

### **Postmodern Fiction in America: Immigration, Capitalism, & Consumerism**

The state of the American economy, and its collective culture, during the time period of *Legal Immigrants* (i.e. early Reganomics through late-Bush, Jr.), is declining, but the siblings do not consider themselves a part of this, due to their economic privilege. They are certainly products of ‘new American’ or ‘American immigrant’ culture but obviously have no understanding of what a collective ‘American identity’ means. This absence of cultural identity is a prime quality for postmodern characters.

About this, Jeremy Green not only offers his own contemporary definition of postmodernism, inclusive of the concept of individual vs. group identities:

Postmodernism, by contrast, is typically understood as dissolving or fracturing identities, social and psychic alike. Postmodern culture, in its eclecticism and relentless superficiality, might offer its consumers a serial or schizophrenic set of intensities, but it does little to cement identities or community alliances. (42)

Green’s definition of these traits of postmodern fiction can be discussed a few ways. One of these is in regards to the characters themselves of *Legal Immigrants*. As mentioned in

regards to Foster's culture vs. economy definition, the Schneider siblings have little-to-no fully comprehended definitions of their adult identities, predominantly because they were deprived of: an authentic German cultural identity; an authentic American identity; and an authentically realized familial and family history identity. Since they were children, and even once they each escaped the plasticity of suburban Dallas, the siblings have lived in an overprotected, unburstable bubble created by their parents. The only familial or cultural identity they have, or the only 'group identity' of which they are capable, is that of their immediate five-prong family, with the supportive Kaestner family thrown into the mix to raise their level of self-importance even higher. This unique but socially affective 'Schneider identity' has depressed the siblings an equal amount but their own individual identities have each arrested their development of romantic relationships and the overall development of their adult 'selves.' Green's suggestion that these "fractured identities, social and psychic alike" is a trait of postmodern fiction characters like the Schneider siblings because they too have disguised themselves with superficial masks. Also, when the siblings must take risks about their romantic relationships – also like Green suggests – their identities are indeed so "schizophrenic" (i.e. hysterical) that they do not perform rational actions. I also applied to the siblings' characterization Green's suggestion that postmodern culture (and literature) "does little to cement identities or community alliances"; Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef, with their frantic, underdeveloped identities, have no connection to a community of culture, nor do they even know how to.

Also, 'elitism' is a trait of modern literature (Green 28), rather than of postmodern, with postmodern literature instead giving focus to "overlooked individuals." Like many other novels that are considered postmodern fiction, which spotlight

characters of minority voice or lifestyle, in *Legal Immigrants* I focused on a few minorities: German immigrants in the States, particularly from the South (these are rarely if ever chronicled in literature), Nikolaus's homosexuality, and even Brigitte's redheaded antihero who remains a minority to Boston's blond debutants and her male chauvinist coworkers. However, instead of making these "overlooked individuals" forgotten or discriminated in *Legal Immigrants*, I purposely made my 'minorities' the elitists instead. I've made the outsiders the insiders, or the outcasts the leaders – even if these sibling outcasts, these second-generation German immigrants, don't necessary make all the most heroic or correct decisions.

In comparison to postmodern "overlooked" immigrant characters, in *Middlesex* (which was influential during my writing *Legal Immigrants*), Jeffrey Eugenides features two generations of a Greek immigrant family, the Stephanideses (who are rumored to be based on Eugenides's family and his upbringing). Eugenides, however, follows this postmodern trend of spotlighting the minority struggle of not only his Greek immigrant family, but also of his hermaphrodite protagonist. Conversely, I personally did not want my immigrant family to be the struggling outcasts of society, so that I could also make commentary on the state of the American economy and the privileges of the elite class.

In an interview for *3am Magazine*, Jeffrey Eugenides said of his 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*:

I've blended postmodern and traditional, I think. My narrator in *Middlesex* is not entirely reliable; he's inventing the past as much as he is telling it. "You can't really know much about what you really know" is the bottom line, which is an old postmodern strategy. There's a lot of self-conscious narration in the book, which is an issue in a lot of postmodern literature as well... (van Moorhem)

Although Eugenides's novel is a reimagining of Greek immigrant culture in both Greece and America, what makes *Middlesex* most postmodern in style is the accuracy and authenticity of the narration. His narrator, Cal/Calliope, somehow knows every infallible detail of four generations of his family's history, from his own childhood up through his great-grandparents. Since this is obviously an impossibility in 'real life,' the accuracy of Cal's details throughout *Middlesex* are constantly questionable, yet the detail of them makes for immensely 'honest' writing. By 'honest' I mean believable or plausible, not necessarily 100% based in truth. Since the definition of 'truth' in a novel, be it fiction or nonfiction, is impossible in today's expectation of and obsession with fiction, believability rules over truth in regards to 'honest' writing. 'Honest writing' is one of the most important aspects of quality storytelling, which is something that overly stylized postmodern writers abandoned during postmodern fiction's conception. Eugenides is in agreement with James Wood and myself that postmodern fiction should not have to forgo quality storytelling: "The one thing that I definitely believe is that strict postmodernists don't all believe is that I believe in this power of storytelling. I think that people are still interested in this old-fashioned goals or traits of novels" (van Moorhem).

Eugenides's comment that Cal's narration cannot be entirely reliable is understandable, as is his proclamation that postmodern fiction borrows from classical storytelling; more so, this narration is upgraded to be a first-person narrator who actually narrates in the style of a third-person omniscient narrator. Cal cannot possibly know every detail of his family history but his seemingly honest retelling of it eventually proves rather trustworthy. Here, Eugenides has complicated these two distinct narrative points-of-view (i.e. first person *as* third person in his controversial narrative with topics

including alternative sexual orientation and identification; generations of incest and abuse; among other taboos).

*Middlesex* follows three generations of a Greek-American family as they travel from Europe to America. His protagonist is Calliope, a 'girl' who struggles to realize that she is a hermaphrodite, who, beginning at age 17, eventually lives 'her' life as an adult male. Eugenides's research and knowledge of Greek history and immigrants is extensive, as is the medical information with which he provides us throughout Calliope's fictional account. Still, even with all of this extensive medical information and terminology, his novel is often heartbreaking – similar to the in-depth storytelling of modern literature – and we care about the characters, the story progression, and the outcome. We care about the *why* and the *how* of Calliope's story because Eugenides shows us this narrative progression.

In addition to being a consummate storyteller, Franzen states that it also helps to be *timely*:

Although good novelists don't deliberately seek out trends, many of them feel a responsibility to pay attention to contemporary issues, and they now confront a culture in which almost all the issues are burned out almost all the time. The writer who wants to tell a story about society that's true not just in 1996 but in 1997 as well can find herself at a loss for solid cultural referents. (*How to Be Alone* 67)

The late postmodern fictionist, like Eugenides, for example, must have contemporary social issues he wants to critique and theorize *through* his fiction, but still request empathy and an emotional reading experience. Like Eugenides, I also bring to light the unsuccessfulness of European immigrants' – or in my novel's case, the children and grandchildren of European immigrants – attempts to recreate or traditionalize their American homes with their cultural ancestry.



Similar to the Stephanides family of *Middlesex*, as well as the Greek Stassos family of Michael Cunningham's *Flesh and Blood* (discussed on the next page), my parental characters, Xavier and Sofia Schneider, battle with tradition versus their Americanness throughout my entire novel. The Schneider parents have become obsessed with American capitalism, as many European immigrant families with money cannot help but do in order to fit into American capitalist society. The entire Schneider family is obsessed with money, consciously or not, since it has become such a commanding part of their lives. Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef Schneider have never known what it's like to not have a large surplus of money accessible whenever they want it. While it is often more difficult for readers to empathize with wealthy characters rather than middle- or lower-class characters, I consciously chose to highlight the Schneiders' financial success. Doing so provides reasons for why this trio of Schneider offspring is spoiled, overly determined, successful, and so competitive. It is their upper-class, no-consequence upbringing itself that tells Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef that they can quite literally get away with murder. This common trend in both the lives of and literature about rich people (particularly celebrities or politicians) getting away with crimes was something I purposely wanted to explore. Had I written poor characters, or perhaps even middle-class characters, there is no way that these siblings could realistically succeed with their crimes and not face punishment.

Within their world of money, Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef have become three of the most unknowingly self-centered and uncompromising products of the American dream. The dramatic irony within the narrative, of which the reader is fully aware, is that they are exactly what their German relatives in Europe consider to be the negative

stereotype of “new” Americans. Capitalism and consumerism rule all five of the Schneiders’ lives, as well as the other characters’ lives in the novel, no matter their economic status. What I have done with my characters, though, is make them empathetic enough to relate to, with Brigitte, the eldest, being the least relatable, down to Josef, whom I think is the most relatable, as he is the ‘nicest’ and youngest sibling.

In comparison to *Legal Immigrants*, and to *Middlesex*, Michael Cunningham’s *Flesh and Blood* explores this capitalism and popular culture versus native immigrant culture and pride relationship throughout four generations of his characters’ lives; the more money they acquire throughout the years, the more capitalist, disapproving of politics, and *unhappier* they become. He writes about the father figure later in his novel:

Constantine had known differently. Under Bush, the economy was turning to shit. Noting was happening out there. Nick had been too old to understand – he’d thought the easy money of the Reagan years was the direct result of his own hard work. Constantine had known how far away that money had gone, but he suspected there might be a new kind of buyer loose in the new, pared-down version of the U.S. He wasn’t thinking about real Americans, the hardworking, optimistic white-people, third or fourth generation, for whom he and Nick had tacked on plaster moldings and aluminum eight-over-eights. He was thinking about the immigrants. (362)

Cunningham’s family of characters becomes even more disillusioned than the Schneiders do in *Legal Immigrants*, and they encounter their own set of cultural and historical problems, including bankruptcy, incest, and AIDS. Still, Cunningham writes these historical/cultural experiences fictionally, purposely infusing them into his characters’ lives.

There is no doubt that Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef Schneider are 100% American. What keeps alive their cultural ancestry and reminds them of their heritage are Xavier’s business and their collective failed attempt to be a part of it. The Schneider siblings are

impressed and bewildered by “these Germans” when they travel to Bavaria for their family reunion because, similar to many American members of their generation, they don’t actually know much about their cultural heritage. They know only what their parents and the maid Helga have told them; they’ve only heard stories. For Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef, their cultural identity is all knowledge rather than experience, which is detrimental to their identities. Frank Lentricchia states that this idea of ‘being American’ for newer generations is usually a difficult concept to grasp:

The undesirability of the distinction between the real and the fictional is the key meaning, even, of being an American. To be real in America is to be in the position of the “I” who must negate I, leave I behind in a real or metaphoric Europe. So in order for America to be America the original moment of yearning for the third-person must be ceaselessly renewed is that America has perfected the practice of cultural imperialism. (88)

This exploration if not exploitation of American capitalism, particularly amongst the *nouveau riche* or immigrant families in America, was something about which I wanted to offer social commentary because the convoluted idea of American capitalism is now such an integral part of American identity itself. Capitalism and consumerism – i.e. making the most money possible, at all costs, and buying as much as possible, so that everyone can see how much you own – is especially prevalent and competitive in newer metroplexes that feature blooming suburbs, like Dallas, where the Schneider family lives/lived.

In *Legal Immigrants*, I began this exploitation of capitalism and consumerism throughout the Schneider siblings’ childhood, and extended it into their adulthood but in a more subtle infusion within their characters. Because of the pretentious world in which the siblings were raised, one which their parents purposely wanted to give them so that their peers might be envious of them, the siblings literally do not know any other life.

They cannot feel empathy for persons who don't have as much privilege or money; they cannot and do not understand other ways of life, particularly outside of America, even though, ironically, their parents encourage them to embrace their Germanic identity. It is only when they're in Bavaria as young adults that they realize their American identity of precocious materialism (ex: Brigitte's pride for her family's property when Walker verbally degrades it; or, when a newly intrigued-with-Munich Joey watches Misty traipsing through the Hotel Bayerischer Hof). Even as adults, Ivy League-educated Brigitte and Nikolaus hold high-paying, respectable jobs, not because they necessarily desired to have these careers, but because doing so is simply what they think they are *supposed* to do; living a successful life to outsiders, or at least projecting a successful lifestyle, is the only option they know. They know they are *supposed* to make lots of money and live lucratively, so that they can buy things, because they've been taught they they're *supposed* to buy lots of things. This whole 'capitalism and consumerism buys happiness' theory is what they were immersed in since childhood, but with much dramatic irony, the reader realizes that they are unhappy before Brigitte and Nick themselves make this realization.

Tony Tanner suggests that most effective postmodern novelists are indeed ones who purposely write social criticism but disguise it as fiction:

(Postmodernism) has its limitations, because it is apt to generate too precise definitions of the contemporary experiment, and has acquired rather too specific associations with contemporary American writing; but it does help concentrate our sense of living in a distinctive period...(to the point where many of the best theorists write fictions, the best fictionalists write criticism). (7)

Other social topics I discuss fictively via critiquing social theory *throughout my fiction*, specifically through my characters' ideals, conversations, and actions, are: the current

heated immigration debate in America; Catholicism, specifically devout lifelong faith, as well as the Catholic church's war against homosexuality; obesity, heart problems, and America being the fattest country in the world, specifically the Southern half; debaucherous MTV university life: binge alcoholism, unprotected sex, abortions, cocaine, and heroin use; the real estate/building boom in the Southwest; the tense late marriage period of middle-aged couples, specifically comparing the unhappily married Schneiders with the happily married Kaestners; the commonness of infidelity in adult relationships and the decreased desire for marriage in the new millennium; the obsession with psychotherapy and casualness of out-patient mental wards; the trendiness and normalcy of Instant Messenger (IM) and Chat rooms, as well as real-life cases where murder, battering, infidelity, and pedophilia were plotted via email and IM; among other issues.

### **Postmodern Fiction's Reimagining of History & Reinvention of Reality**

Jeremy Green offers a flipside to his own preliminary definition of postmodern fiction: "...the other usages of postmodernism...have involved attempts to formulate a historical fracture...while still cultivating a skeptical attitude toward the idea of historical periods and stages..." (23). These ideas I have also implemented into the construction of my novel, mainly via the creations of my characters. Their viewpoints continuously question, with much skepticism, the validity or importance of historical periods (in the siblings' case, the historically defining moments that have formed their family's legacy of organized crime, which they either take for granted or are unaware of). In regards to this "historical fracture," I also offer unconventional 'factional' takes on historically documented events including the JFK assassination, the Columbine shootings, the Branch

Davidian tragedy, Bush, Jr.'s presidencies, among others. While these historical events or time periods are based in truth, in my reimagined history of them, I have included more history about the presence and involvement of German organized crime. Much of my research – be it documented research included throughout this dissertation and in the novel itself, or as per the collective views of conspiracy theorists – suggests that the German mafia was indeed involved in these historical events. However, my implementation of the German mafia's presence within these controversial episodes of history, and in the plot of my novel, is presented in this postmodernist form of fiction, thereby continuing to eliminate this distinguishability between the real and the unreal or imagined.

In contrast to my reimagining of history, place, and the emotional impact of these, Barthes's 'Reality Effect' concept suggests that: "... 'representation' of reality," a naked account of 'what is (or was), thus looks like a resistance to meaning, a resistance which confirms the great mythical opposition between the true-to-life (the living) and the intelligible" (Ankersmit 140-11). In *Legal Immigrants*, I purposely created settings and adhered to the details of fact-based historical events that are 'true-to-life,' as Barthes defines them for readers' perceptions and expectations of these actual places. My versions of New York City, or Bavaria, or Dallas, or any of the other settings where the Schneiders live or travel to, are representations of reality that feature real-life hotels, bars, hospitals, churches, office buildings, apartment complexes, restaurants, monuments, collective attitudes and moods, etc. My recreated places do not propose a 'resistance' to meaning, as Barthes suggests, but rather, my creations of these places 'realistically' mimic these actual places. Ankersmit analyzes Barthes's above quote by stating:

...what is expressed by notation, meaning is *constructed* and therefore cannot achieve the effect of reality... This being so, one wonders whether one should speak of a reality illusion rather than a reality effect. (...as interpreted by Barthes) is that it does not differentiate between language and reality as far as the reference of the sign is concerned. (141)

I have not written places nor reexamined time periods so much that they can only be read as *illusions* of real places and occurrences. Rather, the events of my novel are set against a backdrop of historical events, ones that are still applicable to today's controversies and conspiracy theories. While the 'reality' of *Legal Immigrants* does not and cannot exist, I am *not* rewriting an actual history, but rather, recreating an accurate history with documented, recognizable events and specific time periods complementing my fiction. I am reimagining a history that did not exist but is realistic enough that it could have.

Popular cultural theorist Dominic Strinati discusses how mass media has also helped to warp any sense of reader reality, even within literary fiction:

First, postmodernism is said to describe the emergence of a social order in which the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture means that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships. The idea is that popular culture signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. (223-24)

Strinati's definition is one of the more social-oriented annotations of postmodern fiction, where media has utmost influence on not only collective society itself, but also the way individual persons in society interact and develop interpersonal relationships. There are a couple prime examples of Strinati's definition in *Legal Immigrants*: for one, Nikolaus is obsessed with the media so much that an altered version of reality oftentimes becomes his fantastical yet actualized reality; another is that media dictates the way the Schneider siblings plot the murders of their significant others. Led by Brigitte, who researches actual documented court cases in which persons plotted crimes via the internet, the

siblings have online meetings to plan, research, and, ultimately, become dependent upon new media to assist them with their upcoming crimes. This media influence, particularly for Nikolaus, does indeed ignite a continuous hunger for what Strinati refers to as “power” and social “importance.”

Peter Brooker states a similar definition, but also incorporates this overwhelming influence of technology and mass-culturalization:

In literary and cultural worlds, postmodernism is too often associated with the merely stylistic features of self-conscious play and parody for it to serve the broader radicalizing purpose ascribed to it. In this mode postmodernism is generally explained as the result of changed psychic, technological and cultural worlds which have made any assumptions of a unified subjectivity and any reference to a ‘real’ rather than constructed or simulated world impossible. (15)

Nikolaus, for example, has trouble separating “what is real from what is imagined” (Hantke 89), in both his job and his personal life, which is also a trait of media-affected postmodern characters. Once Nikolaus and his siblings begin committing their crimes, Brigitte and Josef also begin to question their states of reality, especially when they find themselves in Bavaria; being abroad, out of their ‘real’ lives, temporarily encourages them to allow the ‘imagined,’ or the ‘fantasy,’ to overtake the ‘real.’

Along this idea, although Baudrillard often wrote about visual media rather than the printed word, in regards to social novelists’ construction of ‘reality’ on the page...

Baudrillard cites four steps in the progression of an image into simulacra:

1. The image reflects a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever.



Furthermore, Baudrillard notes the existence of simulation as something of a step toward simulacra. Simulation is an imitation of the real that often becomes confused for it. He also posits that we exist in a state of hyperreality, where little distinguishes the real and the imaginary. (Wright 170)

This concept is impossible, as simulation, or an imitation of the real, can never actually happen in recreated printed text – i.e. literature – since there is no ‘actual’ reality on the page. Thus, no ‘accurate’ simulation, and only an imitation of the real, can be successfully represented in fiction.

As *Legal Immigrants*’ author, I admittedly oftentimes had – and still have, during rereads – trouble separating Nikolaus Schneider the character from my actual self and past, since his life is carefully based on my own. Brooker’s statement of “any references to a ‘real’ rather than constructed or simulated world,” and the separation of this being impossible, is relatable as the writer of *Legal Immigrants* because my own memory of events from my childhood and during my twenties are now blurred with those of Nikolaus’s. During the process of writing this novel, my memory began to rewrite itself, thus further solidifying that readers themselves also cannot know what sections of *Legal Immigrants* are true versus what are imagined, invented, or hyperbolized.

Postmodern fiction also plays with the sense and/or lack of clarification of ‘true’ author identity, even though the author is completely self-conscious of his identity as the writer, and entirely aware that he is playing with his readers’ perception of this identity and ‘reality.’ While *Legal Immigrants* is comedic and does occasionally contain over-the-top plot elements such as graphic violence and the Schneider siblings’ overprotected, upper-class perception of ‘reality,’ I still wrote my novel to represent a warped sense of plastic Americana that is *very* ‘real’ to many American readers, particularly those

readers' whose representations of an inappropriately ideal America have been spoon-fed to them by Hollywood-produced and -marketed visual texts.

### **Cinema's Influence on Postmodern Fiction: Storyboarding for Literature**

Regarding the purposely plot-driven style of *Legal Immigrants*, I wrote as though the narrator's perception of the characters' actions is captured by a documentary-style camera that follows them around their homes, offices and, later, Bavaria – albeit one that still takes on each character's point-of-view. Like many successful millennial films (and novels), some of the chapters (i.e. the film-like scenes) are just a few pages long, while other scenes last longer with more 'close-ups' and character interaction. Because my professional background is as a television producer/writer, and also because my higher education began at acting conservatories rather than in university English departments, my innate critical thinking and writing style often incorporates this method of noticeable scene-by-scene storyboarding. Before I learned to think in literary narrative style, I thought in either stage direction or camera editing. Both of these latter styles, I now know, are assistive qualities in writing fiction, as they offer visual thinkers like myself a means with which to create description of place, provide direction for my characters, and capture multiple points-of-view simultaneously. This cinematic method of description and narration is also a quality of late postmodern fiction, one which novelists like Eugenides, Chabon, Franzen, Cunningham, Moody, and others who were influential for my writing, employ more nowadays, too.

In the flashbacks at the beginning of *Legal Immigrants*, the narrative features the siblings and Heather together in the past, while they are growing up. Later, my writer's

‘camera’ juts in and out of Boston, Dallas, Tampa, and Manhattan, invading the Schneider families’ homes, lives, and partners up-close – and captures what seems to be four different fictional (and cinematic-like) narratives, allowing each of the main characters to be storyboarded with equal importance. These four main characters of the younger generation each, at first, get their own story, before converging into one multi-narrated one. This also allowed me to develop the characters individually before the reader experiences how they interact with other. This use of dramatic irony, where my reader knows certain plot points about my characters that the characters themselves do not know, also allowed me to experiment with time, place, point-of-view, and the characters’ perceptions of each other. In the final third of *Legal Immigrants*, these characters’ separate narratives come together again, suggesting that the chopped-up storyboard of the novel’s center section has peaked, allowing these narrative fragments to successfully form a well-paced, fully-realized story.

One example of a postmodern fictionist who also writes this way is David Benioff, whose novel *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* was, because of its storyboarded plot and style, easily adapted into a film directed by Spike Lee. In only 200 pages, Benioff focuses on the psychology of his central group of characters: three childhood friends and the protagonist antihero’s girlfriend, all of whom are now in their troubled mid-twenties. Like I did in *Legal Immigrants*, Benioff used much dramatic irony to allow his readers to know what his characters think about each other, to display their hypocrisies, and to further develop their private lives versus how they act together. *25<sup>th</sup> Hour*, a social novel about masculinity in crisis and overblown male image in Manhattan, is considered ‘postmodern’ fiction because of its playful, stylistic narrative structure; its reworking and

innovation of the genre of crime fiction; and its empathetic presentation of parasitic, unlikable characters' changing points-of-view. Once these characters merge together in certain scenes, Benioff uses a 'rotating point-of-view' to capture what each character present thinks, yet still keeps these points-of-view organized enough so as not to confuse the intent of each scene or to take away from the scene's ultimate plot progression.

I too did this in *Legal Immigrants*, especially later in the novel, but for some of the childhood flashbacks too. In scenes that were very complex to write because of the large amount of characters present, I allowed this 'rotating point-of-view' to switch between characters. For example, when the Schneiders are in Munich's Frauenkirche with their significant others, among other family members and associates, I wrote this scene's point-of-view to rotate from character to character, in order to provide multiple interpretations of what was happening. In this scene alone, the reader gets the point-of-view of Josef sitting at the front of the church; then of Nick, when Dexter comes along; then of Sofia, once mass begins and she is pleased that all her children are actually in church together; and then back to Nick. In order to keep organized these point-of-view switches, I employed a sort of 'baton-handing-off' effect: Joey ignites Nick to take over the point-of-view, followed by Nick conversing with Sofia to take over, followed by Nick taking back over the point-of-view at the back of the church. For scenes with so many characters where so much reaction from these characters further develops their relationships and the plot itself, it is far too limiting to only provide one character with a point-of-view per scene. This 'baton-handing-off' effect of point-of-view allowed me to keep the narrative clean and orderly, rather than what a sort of 'ping-pong' effect would have caused. In other words, the narrative would have been confusing and over-narrated

had the point-of-view switched so rapidly, i.e. in every sentence or paragraph. I do not use this point-of-view technique in every scene, of course; just those that require multiple perspectives and dramatic irony. Most times, one character maintains the point-of-view for an entire scene, with just a small glimpse into another character's point-of-view (a few pages or, when necessary, a few careful paragraphs), and each short switch is purposeful for plot progression.

For example, in Misty's murder scene, the point-of-view is purely through Nick's perspective, mainly because he does the killing. After the murder, though, the point-of-view switches to Brigitte, when she and Heather go talk to the elder German women on the property. Nick could not possibly have held the point-of-view here since he was not present when Brigitte and Heather open the shed to store Misty's body. Another example is in the novel's final chapter: Josef maintains his point-of-view when Walker is knocked unconscious and then throughout the scene at the Bad Wiessee funeral home. Then, once he is back at the property, he converses with his siblings for a few moments, mostly Brigitte, who intercepts the point-of-view from Josef, who then controls it for the rest of the scene. In the final scene of this chapter, the point-of-view has switched to Heather; Brigitte and her brothers have left the table where everyone sat previously, while Heather remains with Xavier. Similarly, it would have been nonsensical for Brigitte to keep the point-of-view in this scene since she was not still seated with them.

Like Benioff, I purposely employed a cinematic rotating perspective for my characters, in efforts to provide more character development and allow for more interpretation of setting, situation, and character relationships, to occur. This was very difficult to write in some scenes (like in the Frauenkirche scene), yet rather easy for this

‘baton-handing-off’ to occur in others (like when Sofia takes over the point-of-view from Josef when they meet in the Hotel Bayerischer Hof; or when Misty takes over the point-of-view from Josef when she escapes the abortion clinic and he sits in the parking lot, or when he’s banging on her dorm room door as she sits in her room).

Many other writers have started to use this more filmic point-of-view technique, perhaps because they too have started to employ more cinematic traits within their novels. Recent crime thriller writers like Steig Larsson have provided this rotating point-of-view for their characters (in *The Girl Who...* trilogy, oftentimes readers get multiple characters’ points-of-view in scenes when they’re plotting against each other). Likewise, some fictionists who write family sagas also want their family member characters to have a voice and thought pattern in the same scene. Examples of this include: Jonathan Dee’s *The Privileges* (whose plotting family members react introspectively together in the same scenes); David Leavitt’s *The Lost Language of the Cranes* (in which a married couple and their son all have so many secrets that it’s impossible to not have this rotating point-of-view to continue the extreme dramatic irony within many scenes); Tom Perrotta’s *Little Children* (whose adulterous married couples forcibly grab hold of some scenes’ point-of-view to, in third person, explain themselves or what they think about their spouses); Brady Udall’s *The Lonely Polygamist* (which, although told mainly through the point-of-view of its cheating polygamist husband, allows the points-of-view of the enormous family’s wives and children to interrupt and converge in some scenes, most of which are later in the novel); among others. Even the novelists I’ve mentioned previously, who were so influential to my own work, have begun using this filmic rotating point-of-view; for example, in Cunningham’s *By Nightfall*, the deceptive,

confused characters' thoughts weave in and out of each other so much in some scenes that whichever character has control over a scene often changes by the scene's conclusion. Although difficult to write, through rewrites and more thoughtful consideration of which character has 'control' of each scene, my narration is able to convey multiple points-of-view in order to offer more interpretation of plot, setting, character relationships, among other integral literary elements.

## II. FACTIONALIZING THE 'OTHER' IN FAMILIAL & HISTORICAL TRUTHS

### The Self-Reflective Authorial 'Other'

In this section, I discuss the difficult construction of an author's 'Other,' not meaning an 'Other' in society, or the 'otherness' of his character, which is what the term typically means in literary criticism. Rather, the 'Other' I define here is that of the Frankensteinian version of his self, i.e. his factionalized character of himself. This exploration of the postmodern 'Other' in fiction is of course my own definition, not that of, say, Freudian or Lacanian conception. While Freud and other theorists refer to 'Others' in the general sense of a person's 'otherness' in society, I interpret and present the 'Other' that is intentionally created by an author himself. Likewise, Lacan's symbolic, ego-conceived definition of an 'Other' differs because this alternative version of the self (this 'Other') formulates from the unconscious. Rather, my exploration of an authorial 'Other' is not a symbolic or secretive notion of the self, one which is trapped in the unconscious, but rather a purposeful alteration of my self within my novel.

Per book, the way authors construct their 'Others' depends much, of course, on the audience for whom they write. The more an author constructs and reconstructs his Other, the more confusing the construction of this Other becomes. Baudrillard's quote "What I am, I don't know. I am the simulacrum of myself" (Poole) is consummately applicable to fictionists such as Bret Easton Ellis, Jonathan Franzen, Michael Chabon, among other influential novelists I discuss in this section, as the reformations of their Others alter over time, as needed and dictated by their ongoing writing careers.



For example: If I were to construct my 'Other' as a factionalized academia-inclined professor version of myself, this creation would be far different than if I were to construct an 'Other' of my: television producer/journalist self; my moody middle child self; my romantically appealing boyfriend self; my twangy Southwestern Texas self; my curt, standoffish New Yorker self; etc. All of these versions of my self – all of these 'Others' – are factionalized constructions of my identity that have been editorially, fictionally scalpeled, so that this 'Other' is most appealing for whatever audience I am writing. These versions of myself all exist, or have existed more prevalently than my *other* 'Others' during different stages of my life, but whichever 'Other' I decide to construct should be complimentary to and synonymous with my audience, plot, tone, thematic content of my work, etc.

As comparison to *Legal Immigrants*: In Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*, and Michael Cunningham's *Flesh and Blood*, each of these novelists subtly presented an autobiographical-originated yet somewhat fictional Other of himself. Upon these novels' release dates, none of these authors' books were publicized as autobiography, of course, nor did these novelists write them to be. However, based on a multitude of author interviews and biographical information, it is impossible to not draw comparisons between the satirized characterizations of these now famous authors. They have created 'factionalized' versions of themselves in order to fabricate or exaggerate an 'Other' of themselves, thereby enabling their characters to act upon and say things that they as novelists cannot in first-person say or do, for fear of immense public criticism of their personal lives.

In Franzen's *The Corrections*, he wrote for his Other:

Chip had crossed his arms defensively and raised one hand to pull on the wrought-iron rivet in his ear... Chip was a tall, gym-built man with crow's-feet and sparse butter-yellow hair; if the girl had noticed him, she might have thought he was a little too old for the leather he was wearing. (15)

While in *Flesh and Blood*, Cunningham scribed for his teenage Other:

Among his friends he was no longer someone called Billy. Billy belonged to the past, the dying era of cars and sorrow and colonial greed, the prosperous desolation of houses. Will had a new beauty: clear skin, a sharp delicate face framed by hair that fell past his shoulders. Will was sinewy and even-tempered, symmetrical of body, with long legs and a soft, ragged triangle of hair at his breastbone. (119)

In Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*, he wrote of his young Other:

James Leer was a handsome kid; he had eyes that were large and dark and always seemed to shine with tears, a clear complexion, red lips; but there was something blurry and indeterminate about his features, as though he were still in the process of deciding what kind of a face he wanted to have. (47-48)

And in Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, he wrote of the eerily similar character of Paul Hood:

He hung out with the stoners. Paul was a garbage head! A loser, as they were called among stoners. Paul bought oregano and thought it was good shit. He borrowed nutmeg from a master at school, hoping to catch its buzz. He had smoked a Quaalude; he had overdosed on cold pills. Paul Hood, eater of morning glory seeds. Decipherer of obscure lyrics... He managed to keep one shirttail untucked at all times. His tweed jackets and khakis looked as though he had slept in them. (84-85)

This quartet of 'Other' characters/altered identities is all self-deprecatd variations of Franzen, Cunningham, Chabon, and Moody. As characters, they are different from purely autobiographical character recreations because the characters of Chip, Billy, James, and Paul, respectively, factionally mirror their authors' personalities, physical traits, psychological and sociological thought patterns, etc., but are still not precisely authentic representations of the authors themselves. These characters have been bettered or

worsened, or in some cases exaggerated, in their personalities, decision-making processes, character interaction abilities, and more.

In *Legal Immigrants*, I turned my ambitious and overworked self into a fictive version of Zachary Snider, but mixed with countless autobiographical qualities that are not necessarily hyperbolized, but instead, authentic qualities of my identity. In the text of my novel, I describe Nikolaus Schneider as a “prissy little man-boy who hates the entire world” (like myself, he is small and looks younger than he is; he is the irritable middle child); “his suburban Dallas upbringing prevented him from always looking like he hadn’t just wandered out of church”; “even at 28, he looked like he was ‘playing’ work when he left for the office every morning”; among other interspersed descriptions that I’ve heard about myself throughout my life. Nikolaus and I look just alike, we have the same often paranoid, sometimes innately snooty, and typically competitive personalities, and his experiences in the novel mirror some experiences I underwent during my mid-twenties, which was not long ago.

Another example of a postmodern fictionist who has created his Other – and then recreated, again and again – in his novels is Bret Easton Ellis, who is most widely known for his character of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. The characters of Bret Easton Ellis’s novels are male metrosexual demons, each obsessed with costly cosmetology products, under the spell of popular culture phenomenon, and more often than not, financially sound for life thanks to trust funds and/or high profile jobs. These man-boys fight vehemently to *not* have to grow up, no matter with how much materialism, consumerism, violence, misogyny, and homophobia they decorate their plastic battle armor. Perhaps the most troubling problem with Ellis’s gang of immature nihilists is that

while their creator knows better than to take these characters seriously, many fans of Ellis's fictions do not realize that his characters are symbols or simulacra of social phenomena more than they are representations of true-to-life humans. They're satirized cultural culminations of the dozens of reasons why male twentysomethings fool themselves with ballooned self-importance – including Ellis's mirrored construction of his own identity, or his own fictional Other.

In 2005 when the Danish television talk show *Deadline* did an interview with Ellis, he promised the host, “The stuff I’ve satirized I’ve always been a part of” (“2 gang Bret”). Stated more directly: Ellis’s characters, most infamously Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho*, have always been a careful reimagining of his fictive ‘Other,’ a horror creation of the worst parts of Ellis’s identity. Ellis originally began experimenting with this Other recreation in *The Rules of Attraction* (with the character Paul Denton), and then continued to reinvent his Other in subsequent novels like *Glamorama* (the character of Victor Ward). As his nihilist characters slowly changed and differed from each other, they mirrored the gradual personal changes of Ellis himself.

During Ellis’s interviews during the first 20 years of his career, he concretely claimed that he was vastly dissimilar to the selfish consumerist characters that he scribed – that he wrote fiction and fiction only. He claimed that his fictive Others were complex representations of young males he had met and despised. However, in an interview Ellis did for the Danish talk show *Deadline*, he stated:

But I must admit, I mean, now, after all these years, I can finally say it, that look – I based Patrick Bateman on myself, as well. And I was too afraid to admit that for many, many years because the reaction to the book was so violent that I felt I had to defend it on a literary level and defend it on a conceptual level rather than, “Hey, look. This is what I was feeling during this decade. This is what I was

feeling when I was 23, 24 and 25 and writing the book. This was the lifestyle that I was also living, and Patrick Bateman – he's me too. ("2 gang Bret")

Ultimately, *Lunar Park* is as much of a confessional diary as it is a work of fiction. The first line of *Lunar Park* is "You do an awfully good impression of yourself" (3), and this line is repeated throughout the novel in regards to Bret Easton Ellis the man, as well as Bret Easton Ellis the character. Throughout his career, Ellis reinvented both his characters *and* his public profile. While he is still able to hide behind his Other (the Other of *Lunar Park* being the fictive version of Bret Easton Ellis), he has had to morph his own image into a much more empathetic urban everyman.

Every character in *Legal Immigrants* is based on my family or someone I've known for a long time – but also, somewhat, on myself. Brigitte and Josef Schneider, and Heather Kaestner, are satirized versions of my siblings and lifelong best friend – but I've still written them to be believable, relatable, real people. If asked where I 'draw the line' between fiction vs. fact when factionalizing my novel's content, I would say this: there is no such fine line in terms of honesty. Since I have not written a strict 'autobiography,' of course (since, well, I am not a murderer), there is no need for me to divulge every genuine aspect of my true identity in comparison to that of Nikolaus Schneider or the other familial Schneider characters. Authors like Chabon, Cunningham, Franzen, and Moody, or even Ellis, differentiate their synonymous characters versus themselves by admitting publicly that the *emotions* or psychological *reactions* of their characters were based on what they themselves were feeling autobiographically at the time. More often than not, this type of social factionalist relies on thematic issues and social commentary in regards to whatever his book is about.

In response to the separation of the authorial 'Other' (i.e. a character that is obviously based on the author, loosely or not) versus an author's actual identity, I'd appreciatively like to remain somewhere in the middle of these two private schools of thought. (1) teaches me to focus on the emotion behind whatever memories or anecdotes on which I base my fiction, whereas (2) suggests that I separate altogether – at least for readers – what is autobiographical versus what is fiction. Autobiography in written format is, essentially, always somewhat factionalized anyway, since it's an author's interpretation or hyperbolized recollection of his memory.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard stated of this complex self assemblance:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. (15)

Suggesting that no matter if a novelist employs fact, fiction or faction about his Self or his Other, there is no certainty that a 'truth' will emerge within the novelist's 'fictional' character anyway.

Of the many ethical considerations that arise when writing about one's immediate family members, perhaps the most pressing is this: *What if my family reads this?* This question is of course an ethical one because, as Lyotard suggests, truth can emerge in fiction more often than it might in real life, particularly amongst a politically correct "Don't ask, Don't tell" family. To any reader who knows my family: In *Legal Immigrants* I've written scenes that involve the personal, romantic, and sexual lives of my siblings. I've written scenes that present my parents' marriage as contrived and rather loveless. I've written a scene of borderline incest between my sister and father; a scene

where my mother cries over how disappointed she is about how her family turned out; and multiple scenes in which my brother divulges how stupid he is compared to my sister and myself.

Or have I? Not really; not absolutely, of course not. The emotions and character reactions in these scenes are more true-to-life than any of the actual plot is, thus further proving Lyotard's point that memories and emotions are more 'honest' in fiction than an attempted recounting of plot itself. Although I did indeed base my sibling characters' romantic relationships in turmoil on those of my siblings' and my own former romantic relationships, they're not *real*. My sister never took kickboxing classes or pillaged through her ex-boyfriend's computer while he was out of town. My brother never took his ex-girlfriend to an abortion clinic or discovered that she'd indirectly stolen thousands of dollars from him. And, of course my mother never urged my father to stop participating in German organized crime and murdering people.

Conversely, I did indeed visit my ex-boyfriend in an outpatient mental ward of the exact hospital I've written about in *Legal Immigrants*, and I did come home early from work once to find him moving out, only to convince him to stay within seconds, since at the time I cared far more about his portion of the rent than about his wellbeing. Regardless of the truths that inspired these 'Nick scenes,' which actually happened in real life, versus those of my family members, which I've fictionalized based on emotions they felt, all of the characters within these scenes, to me, and to anyone else who reads *Legal Immigrants*, including my family members, are just that: *characters*. I've taken so much creative license with each character that, although this family was originally based on my

own (likewise with our significant others, who are now barely identifiable in the novel), they've all become entirely separate and wholly different people altogether.

Before writing *Legal Immigrants*, I never fully comprehended how vastly important this familiar clause that proceeds so many novels is: *This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.* Ethical reasons withstanding, I would never dream of marketing *Legal Immigrants* as 'autobiographical,' just as authors like Cunningham, Franzen, Moody, and Chabon have taught me to never do. Even after researching their private lives, I do not know what percentages of their fictionalized novels are authentically based on their own lives and identities, and, quite frankly, as a reader I should not care. Lyotard's suggestion that fiction mirrors reality more than people's misconceived perceptions of reality, particularly when scribing one's family members, can be viewed even as a 'protective zone' between author and reader. In other words, when ethically considering the presentation – or in autobiographical fiction's case, *representation* – of an author's family members, it's ultimately up to the author to decide how he wants his characters received by readers. None of my Schneider characters are horrible people, nor are they idealized, romanticized representations of my family. They're flawed and thus relatable human characters who have many positive attributes to them as well, which makes them more authentic; ethically speaking, this suggests that I've complementarily served my family well in representing them *as* fictional characters.

### **Writing the 'Other' Into Historical Fiction**



Once I traced my family's roots to Bavaria and discovered that they had/have ties with German organized crime, I became rather obsessed with the acquisition of such contentious research. Not only did I research my own family history and present-day German organized crime groups, I traveled to Germany multiple times to the very sites where these organized crimes took place. In the scenes set in Bavaria, and in Dallas, much of the events and 'fictionalized' details are based on: (a) stories I was told and interviews I conducted in these areas, (b) real news events and reports of cases, or (c) a combination of the two. The same is true for the real news stories I incorporated – directly or by mention – in the portion of the novel when the Schneider siblings, mainly Brigitte, research court cases of criminals plotting murderous or violent crimes via the internet. I have documentation for these court cases, as well as researched sources regarding the organized crime stories I include throughout the novel. Some of these I have reimagined fictionally; others I have reported in the storyline with factual basis but have implemented into the plot.

With the employment of genealogy databases, I traced the roots of my family, the Sniders, who used to be the Schneiders until the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this was a fascinating process, as I even found photographs of my ancestors, dating back nearly two centuries. Before my father's death in October of 2004, he also provided me with an extensive collection of Snider/Schneider ancestral documentation, which extensively recounts the Snider family immigration from Bavaria to Waco, Texas and around the Dallas area. Although Schneider means "tailor" – all over Germany there are helpful signs on clothing amendment shops advertising "Schneider" – this research also included that the Schneider family had been involved in organized crime in Bavaria, and

then in an attempted recreation of it Texas. There is no documented proof of further crime in Texas past the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, nor are these news stories documenting continued criminology of German origins, which is where my fictional/factional aspect of Schneider organized crime comes into play.

In Germany, I temporarily hired a translator named Sebastian Schrepffer, a Masters in English student at the University of Freiburg (who remains a friend of mine), who worked with me in libraries in Freiburg and Munich, as I researched German organized crime. I then contemporized these documented news stories and social theories into my fiction, specifically those that would work best for when the American Schneider family visited their relatives in Bad Weissee. Towns like Bad Weissee, for example, are not featured in many national German newspapers; rather, much of organized crime today is in north Germany, specifically Hamburg and Berlin (and today, much of it is actually Russian) – but I wanted to stay faithful to the Schneider roots. Hence my factionalizing German organized crime details into the fictional accounts in Bavaria. In terms of writing about place, Bavaria offered far more opportunity to scribe about travel, and it allowed me to remain most-biographically honest to the origin of my ancestors.

All of the news stories I included about contemporary historical occurrences (i.e. 1950s up to now) are also researched and included throughout the novel, predominantly in the chapter during which Sofia is reminiscing with her scrapbooks. The news story from the *Pattaya News Press*, for example, is credited to the actual online newspaper, and is the exact contemporary news story of German activity. I factionalized portions of more widely researched events such as the JFK assassination, the David Koresh Branch Davidian tragedy, and the Columbine shootings. However, even these are rooted in my

extensive research. For example, many JFK theories attribute not just the Italian mafia to involvement in the conspiracy, but Russian and/or German organized crime too. Likewise, many theories about the Columbine High School shooting chronicle Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's Nazi Germany fascination to one of their motives for killing their teenage peers.

Even the court cases that Brigitte Schneider continuously researches and refers to in her respective chapters, and during the Instant Messenger sessions with her brothers, are researched and documented from actual court cases. She instructs her brothers from a lawyer's perspective what *not* to do based on how, in real life, criminals whose computer files were used against them in court, which aided in their convictions. These researched court cases assisted in the authenticity of writing the Schneider siblings to commit their crimes, both domestically and in Bavaria.

Another example of a novelist consumed with political and conspiracy theories is crime writer James Ellroy, author of *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz*, who, similar to myself, desired to learn truths about his family. After already accruing much critical success in his career, in 1996 Ellroy published his creative nonfiction novel *My Dark Places*, which is the true story of his investigation of his mother's murderer. Ellroy divides the novel in half, the first of which is written in third-person when Ellroy himself is a young son of a murdered woman. The second half is told in first-person as Ellroy candidly investigates firsthand his mother's brutal murder, and the psychological obstacles he undergoes to research and eventually accept her death. *My Dark Places* is Ellroy's autobiography of sorts, of his childhood up through his tumultuous, often alcoholic adulthood, told against the story of the event in his life that most affected his

psychology and spawned his career. The murder in *My Dark Places* is the conspiracy theory with which Ellroy was more consumed than any other, the one that dictated him to become a crime fiction novelist in the first place. Ellroy's self-titled 'obsession' with his mother's murder spawned his writing of crime fiction just as researching my family's contentious crime history inspired me to pursue writing a PhD novel in the first place.

Another example of a postmodern fictionist who is also a conspiracy theorist, and whose novel *Libra* was a huge inspiration during my writing, is Don DeLillo's fascination with the JFK assassination. DeLillo's *Libra* details intrinsically every real-life 'character' involved with the JFK assassination, predominantly Lee Harvey Oswald, but also the President himself, George de Mohrenschildt, Marina Oswald, Win Everett, Lawrence Parmenter, among others. DeLillo also introduces fictional characters into the mix, disabling his audience to decipher fact from fiction, which is also an attribute of 'faction' I purposely wanted to experiment with in *Legal Immigrants*. Because DeLillo humanizes these historical characters, these real people, *Libra* unfolds in a well-researched and eerily authentic documentarian style rather than just as a work of completely imagined fiction.

*Libra* is one of DeLillo's more empathetic novels, and can thus be compared to the immense empathy that Ellroy commanded in *My Dark Places*. These two novels taught me how to first focus on character development and interaction without letting plot take over my narrative, as well as how to mix in conspiracy theory and historical research. The humanization of real-life (yet often deceased) historical people is certainly one of DeLillo's strengths in *Libra*, but this quality is something he shares with other

novelists such as Michael Cunningham (ex: 'fictionalizing' Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*), whose historical faction technique was also influential for *Legal Immigrants*.

### **Violence, Sex & Love: Reconsidering Freud's Family Romance**

Since *Legal Immigrants* can be categorized as a family saga, the exploration of Freud's Family Romance is an applicable study for the factionalized characters I've based on my immediate family members. These psychoanalytic concepts are especially appropriate for the continued discussion of my fictional 'Other' Nikolaus, but also important to the other Schneider family characters. In this section I also juxtapose Freud's contentious Family Romance theories (contentious especially because they are wholly sexist, as analyzed below) with equally contentious German sociologist Klaus Theweleit's theories about violence, gender, and the relationship between the two. Since family dynamics, violence, and gender roles featured so prominently in my composition of *Legal Immigrants*, my careful analyses of Freud's and Theweleit's work was greatly assistive when writing my characters and their actions. In short: I've updated Freud's theories to be more applicable for *Legal Immigrants*, and have overturned many of Theweleit's, since his ideas about the limitations for both genders were ones I wanted to prove wrong within my fictional characters' constructions.

Freud's concept of the Family Romance dramatically divides the nuclear family into two opposing teams. 'Nuclear family' in American terms defines the family unit of Father, Mother, Son and Daughter. These teams in the Family Romance are composed of Father and Daughter versus Mother and Son, and the team members always consist of the parents with their eldest children of the opposite sex. Another element of Freud's analytical stance on the 'average' family dynamic, which I've explored in the writing of

*Legal Immigrants*, is the idea of child-to-parent admiration, which I've presented in these aforementioned family 'teams.' Freud says: "The child's most intense and most momentous wish during these early years is to be like his parents (this is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his mother and father" (*Freud Reader* 298). In my novel, I've switched the gender 'teams,' so that Brigitte Schneider admires and wants to please only Xavier; Nikolaus admires and wants to be like his mother. Both of these gender identification transferences are integral to who Brigitte and Nikolaus are as children and teenagers during the flashback scenes of the novel, but even more important to my characterization of them as adults. Nikolaus is immensely clean and anal-retentive like his teammate mother, while Brigitte is power-hungry and commanding like her father. Freud continues:

But as intellectual growth increases, the child cannot help discovering by degrees the category to which his parents belong... Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents, and for using, in order to support his critical attitude, the knowledge which he has acquired... The psychology of the neuroses teaches us that, among other factors, the most intense impulses of sexual rivalry contribute to this result. A feeling of being slighted is obviously what constitutes the subject-matter of such provocations. (*Freud Reader* 298)

The 'small events' in Brigitte's and Nikolaus's lives (examples: finding a frozen human head in the family's freezer; seeing how their parents react to the death of Lukas Kaestner; receiving rewards from their parents for being competitive academically and socially) shape their psyches as children. Since another element of the Family Romance is the idea of comparison (i.e. children comparing their parents' worth to other adults and/or their romantic partners once they've become adults), I have also written the siblings to still be immensely family-oriented and intrigued with each other's unsuccessful love lives. They are empathetic and prioritize immediate family values even

as more important than social or romantic relationships. They compare their relationships with their significant others not only to Xavier and Sofia's marriage, but also – somewhat competitively – to each other's adult romantic relationship.

The way the siblings see their parents later in life, when the siblings are in their twenties, begins to alter – I chronicle some of these changes during the family reunion scene in Bavaria. Here, Nikolaus begins to prefer and 'romanticize' about the power and strength of his father, while Brigitte sides with her mother against all of the more traditionalist women at the reunion. Although the cutesy labels of "mama's boy" and "daddy's little girl" can be applied to Nikolaus and Brigitte, respectively, even during their teenage years they begin to question why they've put their favoritism on their opposite gender parent. Freud says:

The later stage in the development of the neurotic's estrangement from his parents, begun in this manner, might be described as 'the neurotic's family romance.'... For a quite peculiarly marked imaginative activity is one of the essential characteristics of neurotics and also of all comparatively highly gifted people. This activity...takes over the topic of family relations... When presently the child comes to know the difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers... the family romance undergoes a curious curtailment... In this way the child's phantasies...are brought up to the level of his later knowledge. (*Freud Reader* 299)

Brigitte and Nikolaus, even more so than Josef, are raring through this parental questioning and abandonment during their mid-to-late-twenties, the age they are for the majority of the book. They remain curious about their parents' obviously tumultuous and somewhat loveless marriage ("obvious" in the way I've written the tense scenes with Xavier and Sofia), especially now that they've admitted their own romantic relationships are failing. It is only natural that Nikolaus and Brigitte, and even Josef, would compare their romantic relationships to each other's – as they do during conversations and in their

own interior, third-person narrated monologues – and also make this comparison to their parents. Thus, when they're all together again in Bavaria, the siblings each want to escape from their significant others, and again find themselves looking for 'romantic' solace in their parents and in each other.

If a nuclear family is later joined by more family members – what many religious-oriented family psychoanalysts and theologians alike consider the archetypal 'Catholic family' consisting of two parents with a surplus of children – these additional children join their Mother or Father's team, dependent upon their sex. The Schneider family has three children who are raised in a devoutly Catholic household. Josef continuously seems stuck regarding which team he wants to join, even as an adult. Because of the way I've written the fraternizing brothers, it's obvious that, even as a young man, Josef idolizes his elder brother, but at the same time, he does not idolize Nikolaus's homosexuality or effeminacy. Thus, with Josef's need to compare his and Misty's rocky relationship to another heterosexual one, Josef instead transfers his idolization to Brigitte's heterosexual partnership. Similar to how he idolizes Nikolaus, Josef essentially sees Brigitte as another iconic family member with which to fraternize, regardless of her gender. And since Brigitte and Nikolaus are in the process of transferring their preferred Family Romance 'team' to the other parent, Josef remains confused about which 'team' to join.

Early on in *Legal Immigrants*, the reader experiences Brigitte as a seven-year-old, Nikolaus as a five-year-old, and Josef as a newborn. Brigitte and Sofia are seen feuding, and the reader gets the sense that this is a regular occurrence. Not once in the chapter do mother and daughter engage in dialogue that is not sparring. Brigitte even goes so far as choosing to first 'murder' the Barbie doll that she named after her mother, instead of



opting for one of the other dolls. Brigitte, approaching her formative pre-teen years, is in full competition with her mother for her father's affection.

Likewise, when Nikolaus eavesdrops on his parents, he listens to his father speaking negatively about him, the firstborn son. To further examine the Family Romance concept, I have written one scene in which each 'team' shares intimate moments in private. Nikolaus's mother saves him from being tormented by his sister, while she also clutches her other son, newborn Josef, to her breast, and away from her daughter. Chapter two ends with Xavier, the father character, spooning Brigitte, with her promising Xavier to be his 'perfect' daughter. Brigitte is written as wise and experienced for her age, always having a 'boyfriend' or romantic interest. As a seven-year-old, she circumvents most of her girlhood desires into her toys (examples: the Ken doll, the Captain Crunch cereal box). However, when her father is around, Brigitte projects her desires onto him, who not only accepts them, but returns the attention and love of his 'punkin.' In the literal sense, Brigitte does not want to have sex with Xavier. She wants his attention, his love and devotion. She does not literally want to kill her mother, nor her girlhood lover (i.e. Xavier).

I've not written either of these 'teams' as incestual partnerships, but other novelists who have explored Freud's Family Romance concept have gone so far as to do so. In *Flesh and Blood*, Michael Cunningham elevates the Father-Daughter Family Romance team to the level of incest. In the chapter when the family's eldest daughter is physically comforting her father late one night, Cunningham wrote:

She didn't move. She was frightened and vaguely excited. It wasn't desire; not exactly desire. She saw the power she could have. She heard her name being called out on the football field, saw a crown lifted in the floodlit air. Slowly, with tenderness, she took his big suffering head in her slender hands and guided his

face to her own. His breath was full of beer, strong but not unpleasant. Human. She thought he would pull away. He didn't. She was frightened. She let the kiss go on. (61)

This father-daughter team continues sharing an incestual relationship for a small portion of the novel. The primary reason I chose not to complicate my characters' interpersonal relationships with popular literary themes like incest or Greek tragedy elements like inner-family murder is because the Schneider family takes so much pride in the grandiose show they put on for the outside world. The children are taught and raised to be 'perfect' while the parental characters take so much precaution in hiding their true crime identity to the outside world. With so much indention in their psyches as they strive for 'perfection,' there is little time left in their lives to psychologically harm each other directly (i.e. the strife for 'perfection' being an indirect wounding of the ego). About this relationship of 'perfection' compared to the outside world, Hantke says:

If, on one hand, the family is intrinsically stable, then it is unlikely that the forces leading to its demise could have been random and unorganized, no matter if they come from without or within the group. If, on the other hand, the family responds to outside forces by withdrawing its beneficiary effects and reversing its protective function, it turns into a conspiracy itself. (38)

Realistically, of course Brigitte as a young girl does not really want to kill Nikolaus. But because of her genetic composition and the environment in which she has been raised thus far (as much as her parents try to conceal the true nature of Xavier's work, and of Sofia's family history, they fail on some levels), her actions of sibling rivalry are out of control. In the novel's first chapter, we get the sense that Brigitte has been terrorizing Nikolaus since he was born. The second she sets foot into Nikolaus's bedroom, a sense of doom overcomes him and he refuses to follow her down the hallway.

As far as Brigitte is concerned, she is no longer the favorite, no longer receives all of her parents' attention, and more importantly, wants to change these things.

In this sense, Brigitte is a narcissist. At seven years of age, she does not and cannot understand why her younger brothers have been unfairly introduced into her and her parents' home, and is of the mindset that they are far inferior to her greatness because they are newer and less knowledgeable of the world. Dr. Jean Hantman offers:

Societally we are expected to believe that our father, violent as he is, is THE Father (likewise, our mother, sloth that she is, is THE Mother). Even the most non-conformist, open-minded, cool, anarchist-type of person in our society can still be heard to espouse the viewpoint of the desire necessity of the "present father". The societal viewpoint is of course the recapitulation of the narcissistic defense (projecting a bad image from a bad reputation).

Sheltered as Brigitte may be from her family's legacy and the media in general, she still acts through violence. This is hereditary; innate; within her. Brigitte severs Barbie limbs and wants to experiment with violence on her little brother because she is not a little girl who throws temper tantrums and whines. As mentioned previously, she has defied Freudian Family Romance by desiring power and ambition, and to not become another traditionalist Texas housewife.

Years later, once the 30-year-old adult Brigitte has had her woes of dating struggles – particularly with Walker White – it is apparent she is no longer playing (or even desiring to play) the role of 'daddy's little girl,' thus removing her from the father-daughter Family Romance team. By the time the Schneider siblings have traveled to Bavaria for the family reunion, Brigitte is ready to take a well-deserved, understandable break from the male sex. She is harassed by her mostly unknown female relatives with questions of when she will get married, if she is engaged, why she is not married or engaged, etc. During this scene, she is immediately guarded alongside Sofia, her mother,

who tries explaining to the traditionalist women that Brigitte's goals are not serving as a housewife or socialite (the *norms* and *choices* for upper-class Dallas society), but rather by having a powerful and monetarily successful career (so, *to these women*, Brigitte 'acts like a man'). Similarly, feminist psychoanalytic critic Marianne Hirsh states:

A closer analysis of Freud's essay can provide a way to define and test the implications of oedipal narratology for women to determine to what extent a "female family romance" might depart from the male prototype Freud outlines. By following out the implications of the Freudian model, it is impossible to construct a paradigm of a "female family romance"... Freud saw the woman's story through...a fundamentally male economy of desire in which the woman is other but cannot be different. (54)

Perhaps Hirsh is correct in stating that female characters have no truthfully analytical place in Freud's Family Romance. Thus, in order to apply to my female characters – namely Brigitte – it seems integral if not inescapable to not write Brigitte into her brotherly fraternity. She does, after all, head the younger generation of the Schneider fraternity, of which Heather Kaestner is also a member; this new Millennial generation of fraternizing is genderless in its hierarchy and acceptance. Since I purposely did not want to write Brigitte as having an extremist case of 'otherness' (in every area of her life: family, work, dating, even in her kickboxing class) and thus being ostracized by her brothers, she certainly does have a place in the Schneider Family Romance.

In a scene the previous night before this inquisition by her female relatives, Brigitte explodes at her father, forcing him to understand that she is not a powerless, stereotypical, submissive Texan woman, one who needs her father or another man to step in and 'save' her. She is ultimately comforted by the fact that Xavier wants to help her and that he pledges to end her suffering from Walker White's egotism, but at the same

time, Brigitte desperately wants her father to realize that, now, she is on her own 'team' instead of his. Hirsh continues by stating:

Freud [does not] explore the gender asymmetry of [the Family Romance]... I see several implications for the girl's relation to her mother, her father, and her own maternity...according to this model, the girl lacks the important opportunity to replace imaginatively the same-sex parent, a process on which imagination and creativity depend... The mother's presence makes her fantasies impossible... The Freudian family romance pattern clearly defines that women need to kill or eliminate their mothers from their lives, if they are not to resign themselves to a weak imagination. (56)

Likewise, I have opposed Freud's Family Romance theory for Brigitte's character to be more legitimate and believable in her romantic and familial pursuits. As an adult woman, Brigitte begins to empathize much more with her mother, which rather goes against Freud's Family Romance concept. As a child, Brigitte symbolically 'kills' the Barbie doll that she has named after her mother, as Hirsh suggests that young female children wish to do. In Brigitte's teenage years, Sofia continuously instructs her to not get married young, or just not get married at all; these subtle warnings by her mother do not work immediately, but ultimately Brigitte comes around and sides with her mother – *against* both Walker and her father (i.e. her romantic counterparts).

Freud suggests that, as adults, "women's fantasies are limited to the erotic" while "men tend to dream of power and ambition" (Hirsch 56). This too I have overturned in the characterization of my sibling characters: it's Nikolaus and Josef who have the erotic fantasies and notions throughout the novel, while Brigitte remains the most ambitious and powerful sibling. Nikolaus is also ambitious because he idolizes his elder sister, which is obviously not meant to liken him to 'dream of power and ambition,' because Freud says only men do this.

Now that the siblings are adults, the Family Romance ‘teams’ have shifted from their original father-daughter and mother-sons teams to Team Siblings and Team Parents. Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef are all in mutual, jovial agreement about their team, while Xavier and especially Sofia fight to maintain the inevitable closure of the teams the Schneider family had when they were all younger (i.e. Xavier’s daughter is no longer his teammate, while Sofia’s sons are no longer hers). I’ve romanticized the element of a sort of ‘sibling romance’ unfolding during their murder plotting, while at the same time have written the parental characters – Sofia, namely – to be mortified to find herself on an unexpected (if not unwanted) ‘team’ with her own husband.

Because the siblings are so close, although they have casual friends in the respective cities where they reside, it’s actually their own three-person fraternity which comforts them most. Their sibling unit is unquestionably their most prized and favorite element of friendship, and when they each begin having romantic turmoil with their significant others, they turn their romantic feelings (not sexual, just in a ‘romantic’ psychological transference method) to their siblings. This is temporary, and is rare that they’re able to do so simultaneously, since of course most siblings’ romantic problems with their respective partners are not identical in type or scale.

Brigitte Schneider, particularly as an adult, is indeed written to be a member of her sibling fraternity, of which she is the naturally designated leader. The word fraternity here is obviously important since other female characters like Heather Kaestner and even Brigitte’s own mother Sofia are written as far more feminine. Brigitte is not *unfeminine*, per se, but in order to relate to her brothers presently (i.e. in the text of the present-day storyline) – and in order to have competed with them as a child, during her peak of

sibling rivalry when her brothers were introduced into her household, against her will – she needed to act a part in this sibling fraternity. Brigitte's brothers are written to not be quite as adaptable, or perhaps not even as intelligent or leadership-capable as she is, and thus she transforms from daddy's little girl who is spooned by her strong father as a young lady, into a powerful woman amongst many men, in multiple facets of her life: professional, family, romantic, etc. She is a fraternity girl, capable of relating to and leading both genders, if not, in her family alone, transcending the limitations of gender stereotypes and roles. Her mother and other familial relatives disapprove of her fraternizing behavior and her refusal to be subservient to both traditional Texan and Bavarian female roles. Ultimately though, by the end of the novel Sofia is able to be proud of Brigitte for her independence and non-submission to American men, so much that Sofia seems jealous of Brigitte.

Brigitte is boss of her siblings, if not her entire family. And what better profession to fictively provide her with than as a high-powered corporate attorney? Theweleit says of Brigitte's 'unwomanly behavior':

Women who don't conform to any of the "good woman" images are automatically seen as prostitutes, as the vehicles of "urges." They are evil and out to castrate, and they are treated accordingly. The men are soldiers. Fighting is their life, and they aren't about to wait until that monstrous thing happens to *them*. (171)

This misogynistic notion that women cannot be the powerful ones of their 'units' – this one being a three-prong sibling unit – is again defied in my narrative, as Brigitte is the leader of her 'soldier'-brothers, and initiates their crimes. Theweleit continues with a statement that can theorize both Brigitte's and Nikolaus's characterizations in regards to the violence they commit:

Feminized men are as repellent...as masculine women... For the male it is the woman within that constitutes the most radical threat of...perception. On the one side there is the soft, fluid and ultimately liquid female body which is a quintessentially negative 'Other' lurking inside the male body. It is the subversive source of pleasure or pain which must be expurgated or sealed off. On the other hand, there is the hard, organized, phallic body devoid of all internal viscera which finds its apotheosis in the machine. (xix)

If Nikolaus is thought to be a 'feminized woman,' then Brigitte is considered the 'masculine man'; it is these two siblings who commit the first two crimes, the first of which, the murder of Misty, is certainly the most violent of the three. Nikolaus performs this act of violence on Misty, while Brigitte kills Kyle by herself, which thus, according to Theweleit, '*unfeminizes*' her as a character. If this theory rings true, then what Theweleit states about men's inability to commit crimes or violence – "This body machine is the acknowledged utopia of the...warrior. 'The new man is a man whose physique has been machinized, his psyche eliminated.'" (xix) – would mean that Nikolaus has actually exalted himself as a 'man.' This would then mean that since Josef did not commit either of the initial murders, that, according to Theweleit, he should be seen as a 'feminized man' and is therefore 'repellent' to his siblings. In truth, part of Josef's male pride does perhaps feel affected by not engaging in violence as easily as his siblings were able to, which is why he desperately wants to participate if not wholly execute the final murder of Walker White.

Unlike Theweleit suggests, however, I did not write Nikolaus to be the instigator of the first and most violent murder because he has 'gender confusion,' or because he is jealous of Misty's sex:

The key to the fantasy of destructive violence and rage against women is the conflict between the longing for fusion and simultaneous terror at the destructive implications for the self that merger entails. Women represent the splitting of masculine desire into the opposites of fusion/autonomy and erotic



merging/armored self. The relentless presence of this threat also explains the compulsion to violence: the “spilling of blood” in the external world is a response to the anxiety of the interior one, the warding off of a danger which demands survival. Reality for these men is something set against the experience of pleasure... men are killers, not out of a simple lust for blood or romantic dreams of glory, but because they want to remain whole. (xix-xx)

Theweleit believes that men enact crimes on women because they are women, which is a theory I purposely avoided when writing the murder scenes. Nikolaus kills Misty *not because she is female*, but because she just happens to be Josef’s girlfriend; if Josef were also a homosexual, I would have equally written Nikolaus to kill Josef’s boyfriend instead). This desire to ‘remain whole’ in order to remain masculine is certainly a characteristic more prevalent in Josef rather than Nikolaus, since it’s Josef who feels like an apologetic failure and wants to commit a murder, too, like his siblings have. Nikolaus killed Misty not because she was a woman, but because she, as his victim, was simply the partner of his brother. Even as an openly homosexual adult, Nikolaus guides his heterosexual younger brother in the killings, still displaying what Theweleit refers to as masculine traits. In other words, his sexual orientation here is unrelated to his gender, and Nikolaus is not seen as a ‘feminine man’ as Theweleit has suggested previously.

However, as mentioned throughout my novel and critical commentary, Nikolaus is indeed a relentless fantasist, so much that when he is killing Misty, Heather must scream at him to stop, that “this is not a movie.” This ‘fantasy of destructive violence’ that Theweleit mentions, and which Nikolaus aspires to during his violent act, explains his genuine ‘compulsion’ to violence. He kills because of fantasy, and to stay in control (in order to ‘remain whole’); he does not kill *because* of the victim’s gender.

Theweleit’s definition of a violent crime-committing masculine “male [who] is not merely someone in search of a father, or someone whose father has failed and who

wishes to overthrow all fathers... a man who must exclude women, who is threatened by any maternal or feminine warmth and sensuality” (xx). This definition is not representative of Nikolaus or Josef, the second of whom I have explained is not in Oedipal competition with his father, as Theweleit suggests, but rather, with his brother. And since Josef’s brother is not vying for the attention or admiration of either Xavier or Sofia, Josef is rather passive and secure so that he does not need to be competitive or ‘in search of a father.’ He seeks guidance from Nikolaus, who often provides Josef with guidance, even as adults, whether or not Josef has requested or wants the guidance. However, he does not want to *be* like his older brother and sees them as entirely separate, different men. Josef nor Nikolaus are ‘threatened by maternal feminine warmth and sensuality’ – Josef in the sense that Nikolaus might and should, according to Freudian, Adlerian (in regards to birth order, with the elder male guiding the younger), and Theweleitian theories, have waded through these emotional waters for him, but didn’t because of his sexual orientation.

Exploring the relationship between a homosexual and heterosexual brother, and the differences of their character developments, was something else I wanted to explore. Even at five years of age, I have written Nikolaus to play with his sister’s dolls and ‘choreograph’ battle scenes with his toys. As a small child, of course he does not yet understand the root or preference of his sexual desires. Klaus Theweleit states in regards to dealing with said blossoming homosexual desires in private, as Nikolaus does:

...‘homosexual longing’ appears not simply as one form of sexual desire among others (as the liberal reformist argument for tolerance tends to suggest)... Homosexuality is generally dealt with in isolation, as a solely individual problem; it is this...more or less absolutely prevents the individual homosexual from recognizing the actual motive and potential of his homosexuality. To deal with

homosexuality as an individual problem is the surest way to subject it to the Oedipus complex. (313)

Theweleit continues his argument to suggest that before persons who have homosexual desires know how to act on them (sexually), what they crave most is “group desire” (313). Since Nikolaus has no same-sex group belonging at home, especially away from his sister, he channels his desires into his gang of heroic He-Man action figures. Later, when Nikolaus is an adult, I defy Theweleit’s definition of “group desire” for homosexuality, as Nikolaus blatantly tells Dexter that he abhors being amongst groups of typically ‘showy,’ flamboyant Manhattan homosexuals; as an adult, middle-child Nikolaus is a workaholic loner, not wanting to be a part of any group identity. He does not play nice with others nor does he want to learn how.

As a child, Nikolaus finds comfort in his mother but fears his father. Nikolaus’s version of the Oedipal Complex is not to compete with his father; it is to be terrified of him. Xavier is Nikolaus’s enemy. But instead of wanting to kill his father in the Oedipal sense, Nikolaus just wants him to disappear. As the reclusive middle child, Nikolaus is too passive and mortified to stand up to Xavier. Theweleit also comments on invalidity of Freud’s Oedipal theory in regards to homosexual longing and family dynamic:

Freudian explanations center on the tendentially homosexual man’s identification with the mother – a theoretical construct that crumbles under the weight of even the tiniest shred of historical evidence... (homosexuality) reveals the motivating impulse of psychoanalysis – and its fundamental fault – to be its desire to hold fast to its own ahistorical, indeed anti-historical character. (336)

Comparisons of these Freudian Family Romance theories can be drawn to other postmodern novelists who have also written family sagas, including Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*), Michael Cunningham (*Flesh and Blood*), and Rick Moody (*The Ice Storm*), all of whom were comparative inspirations during writing *Legal Immigrants*.

Franzen's and Cunningham's novels especially were excellent indirect guidance in the form of fiction due to their equally dysfunctional and disparate three-prong sibling units. As mentioned in the prior section: These novelists' family sagas also contain elements of autobiography for the composition of their middle child characters, just like my composition of Nikolaus Schneider.

Similar to Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef, the three-prong sibling units in both Franzen's (*The Corrections*) and Cunningham's (*Flesh and Blood*) novels reside in different American cities, some of them in entirely different parts of the disparate country. However, like myself, both of these novelists delve back into the past to hint to their audiences about why their characters are the way they are, why they make the fateful decisions they do, and why they are so distant from each other. Their methods of character development were different, though, which was also something I needed to consider in regards to character development and narrative structure.

Franzen chose to examine his characters' pasts much later in *The Corrections* with a flashback of when his characters were children. Cunningham, in contrast, wrote *Flesh and Blood* as an orderly chronological narrative, showing us nearly every important incident that caused the Stassos siblings to become more distant from each other. For my purposes, flashbacks early on in *Legal Immigrants* work better because I agree that the psychological progression of fictional characters is important to build gradually, in the narrative sense. Still, though, I specifically wrote specific life-altering scenes like Franzen did, rather than detailing the Schneider trio's entire childhoods. On a fictional level, the deep roots of the Schneider siblings' psychological prowesses are conveyed through my storytelling, as a sort of "this is what happened to make them this way,"

which are paired via specific sibling-assigned chapters with both a current and flashback scene apiece. These flashback scenes, which are assigned to each sibling's point-of-view at least once, were written to help explain why the Schneider kids are the way they are, as determined by their tumultuously confusing youths.

While direct similarities of career, location, and ambition of the Schneider siblings have little to do with the sibling trios from *The Corrections* or *Flesh and Blood*, similarities of the psychological traits of Franzen's and Cunningham's birth order characteristics and Family Romance aspects are uncanny. Not by coincidence, but because these characters' qualities and behaviors are all so true. Franzen's controlling eldest born Gary is quite similar to Cunningham's bossy first-born Susan, as is his prodigal, moody second-born Chip when compared Cunningham's reclusive, moody middle-born Billy. Likewise, Franzen's aimless baby Denise bears amazing psychologically-ingrained similarities to Cunningham's tragically fatal, misguided youngest-born Zoe. Less time may pass in Franzen's story, while Cunningham's tale is a grand, sweeping epic that covers four generations. My time passage is somewhere in the middle of these two psychoanalytic-exploring novelists, yet the psychological study of my characters' birth orders remains similar.

Franzen and Cunningham each gave ample description to their characters' physiques and childhood versus adulthood personalities, and the developmental differences of these, in efforts to explain their characters. I did the same, yet also wanted to write how the Schneider siblings' language, confidences, interactions with others, etc., also changed. In *Flesh and Blood*, it's obvious that Cunningham's sibling characters were greatly affected by the environments in which he immersed them; I wanted to explore this

same environmental influence on my sibling characters as well. For example, later in life, when Brigitte lives in conservative Boston, Nikolaus is involved in Manhattan's pretentious media world, and Josef hangs out with frat boy jocks in Florida, it becomes obvious that the siblings' identities have also been affected by their surroundings. Michel Foucault's theories that social interaction and influences comprise young persons' identities – their 'Selves', more importantly – can certainly come into play here, given the dialogue, descriptions of wardrobe and appearance, etc., that I've provided for Brigitte, Nick and Joey. Foucault stated of the Social self, often derived from an individual's first social network (i.e. the family):

There is no transcendental subject at the base of experience, no autonomous self, no independent will... Ideology, representing a conscious social plan to be implemented through conscious effort is likewise an illusory source of social power and change... The self always is the product of social interaction, with the mechanisms of power molding body and mind... There is no escape from the political; "the personal is the political. (Yezzi)

Brigitte dresses and speaks conservatively but in expensive threads and labels; Nick often tells his siblings tales of designer drugs and celebrities; and Joey is a beer-guzzling athlete who incessantly exchanges "Dude!" phrases with his soccer buddies. Even their Instant Messenger sessions show this affectation of social influences, which further supports Foucault's social Self theories: Brigitte spells and punctuates her IM messages meticulously; Nick's casual, peppy language is somewhere in between; and Joey's messy language is normally not grammatically correct, and mostly slang.

### **Freud's Joke Theory: A Note on *Legal Immigrants'* Dark Humor**

In the scene following when Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef watch their father murder three men at the Schneider Building Co., Brigitte takes a cynical, sarcastic tone in

the conversation, even though the family discussion is very serious. In an excerpt, Brigitte pokes fun at Freud's Joke Theory concept:

"Yes, but we were joking," Brigitte told Nick. She looked at Joey to agree with her, but instead he looked at Heather, the only seemingly indifferent party in the office.

"Yeah, joking about something we that we really, truly, deep down, thought was true! Brig, there's no such thing as a joke," Nick told her.

"Thank you, Sigmund Freud," she retaliated.

In retrospect, after having written this passage, I agree with Freud's Joke Theory concept, that jokes and humor are passages for the unconscious to allow the conscious to say what it's really feeling. Jokes are the politically correct way of telling the truth. Elizabeth Wright stated similarly:

Jokes and the unconscious go together, for the uncanny works like a joke, and the joke partakes of the uncanny; both participate in the double movement of the return of the repressed and the return of repression. On the one hand, both can appear to be a reassurance that desires will be satisfied; on the other, both can be an unexpected denial of what was hoped for. (124)

One of the qualities of *Legal Immigrants* of which I am most proud is that it is a darkly humored narrative. With so much death and murder and violence and familial dysfunction and cultural identity crises, I questioned whether I would be capable of heightening the humor of my novel. Perhaps because the novel is partially autobiographical, I was able to laugh at myself and the other biographical characters, as well as the non-biographical events in which my characters participate.

Relating to Freud's Joke Theory concept, Jonathan Franzen also proposes that humor is the best, if not only, way for contemporary social commentators to communicate their values and ideals. He says, "Fiction's response to the sting of poor manners, for example, is to render them comic. The reader laughs with the writer, feels less alone with the sting. This is a delicate transition, and it takes some work" (*How to Be*

*Alone* 70-71). His point, which coincides with my aforementioned one, is that a novelist can say damn near anything as long as he is humorous about it. Like Nikolaus tells his sister in my novel, with which Freud himself would agree, "There's no such thing as a joke." My ability to flow humor throughout my novel, I believe, makes it easier for my audience to relate to and empathize with my characters. It's far easier to like and be attracted to someone when he or she is funny. Throughout literature and film, many of the funniest characters are so humorous because they are depressed and seeking escape from their depression. I would venture to say that Brigitte and Nikolaus lean towards depression, while Josef just seems bored.

Flowing humor throughout a novel that is also hefty on social commentary *and* familial biographical elements eases the reading experience for many readers, making much of the storytelling's content more digestible. Heather and the sibling characters of *Legal Immigrants*, particularly Brigitte and Nikolaus, do indeed have a rather wry, sardonic sense of humor which can occasionally border self-effacement or obvious self-defense. Freud's Joke Theory concept also suggests that humor is undoubtedly a method by which to defend not only the self, but to hide what one is really thinking. Rather than cry or scream or seek therapy or 'talk things out' with their significant others, Brigitte and Nikolaus hide their emotional pain and suffering with sarcastic battle armor, and encourage their brother to do the same. Even when the more emotionally genuine character Heather confronts them to suggest the Schneider siblings embrace their *actual* emotions, they make sarcastic jokes in response. The Schneider siblings collectively avoid dealing with their emotional and psychological problems, whether they are aware of them or not, mainly by undermining humorously every unfortunate situation presented



to them. Their crimes of murder, even, started as a humorous, fraternal-sororal joking experiment during their instant message session, which, before they knew it, had gone too far. Their biggest joke in its entirety, which began as harmless suggestions to deal with their collective disappointment about their boy/girlfriends quickly became fatal, challenging them to accept that they actually had no control or expertise in what they had become involved.

The most logical explanation for this humor façade of the Schneider siblings' psyches is that their parents covered uncomfortable situations with humor during the siblings' childhood. During each of the flashback chapters, Xavier and Sofia make light of every disquieting situation, turning every grotesque or deathly situation into a childish joking game. Xavier especially does this, shielding his children away from his secret occupation, their family history and legacy, and, especially, the oft-dysfunctional marriage between Sofia and himself – and, in turn, encourages if not demands that his wife act accordingly. This latter statement also offers reasoning to why, during their twenties, the Schneider siblings accept unhappy romantic relationships, and also why they think the only way out of them is death. Based on what they observed of their parents' marriage, as well as the humorous façade that blanketed their parents' marriage, emotional freedom and the concept of a terminal relationship do not exist for the Schneider siblings. For them to learn, romantic relationships are an unfortunate, life-long debacle to endure unhappily, and to cover with false laughter. They then, of course, choose by far the wrong options in order to escape their tumultuous relationships.

In the end, the joke is on them.

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***Legal Immigrants: A Novel***

Part II of II: Creative portion

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### **Prologue: Dallas, 1985**

The rusty wood-paneled station wagon of Bertram and Inga Koenig rattled into the sparsely populated parking lot of the Schneider Building Company. Clouds of dirt flew from the ground and around the car, fogging the lot. Inga watched the car's reflection in the mammoth building's tinted windows, embarrassed to be arriving in such a clamorous vehicle. When Bertram switched off the engine, Inga routinely covered her ears to avoid hearing the car's monstrous rumble choke itself to death.

Inga emerged from the passenger side and brushed her pastel sundress against her legs, purposely trying to make herself look thinner than she was. From across the car she watched her husband clip on the tie that he had just yesterday purchased from the Sears Outlet store near their trailer park. They were here because of him, Inga reminded herself. Bad luck had surrounded Inga her entire life thus far, but with a gambling husband who was always running off to the casinos in Shreveport, LA, she still wondered when her luck might finally turn for the better. Bertram had affixed the clip-on tie crookedly, and from where Inga stood, she saw that the stiff fabric of the tie was of such poor quality that her husband looked like he was wearing a green cardboard strip beneath his collar. She began to worry that her husband looked cheap. His gut stuck out over the bulky belt buckle that topped his tight Wranglers. Inga didn't want anyone here to know how little their clothes cost, or that most of her apparel came from the Goodwill store in Fredericksburg, or that most of her makeup was either borrowed or stolen. It mortified her for anyone to know about their trailer with the broken sink and the leaky roof. She painstakingly needed to hide her life. Inga focused on the overhang of her husband's gut.

Xavier Schneider is going to save me, Inga told herself. Her poor immigrant family had failed to help her, and her no-good husband had lost all their money. Again. Inga watched Bertram raise and then quickly lower his eyebrows in acknowledgement that it was time to enter the building. She offered no response to her husband's prompt for teamwork. And my god, *that tie*, she thought. Bertram finished sucking on his Marlboro and then with his boot he stamped the cigarette into the dusty parking lot. Overworked nerves prohibited them from speaking to each other.

Bertram held open the door for his wife and then followed her into the Schneider Bldg Co. reception area. He was immediately thankful for the cool blast of air-conditioning that greeted him. Without a working AC in the station wagon, their five-hour ride up to Dallas from New Braunfels had been stifling, especially with the wet blanket of humidity that had invaded their car in Austin and all the way up I-35. Bertram looked in the mirror near the front door. He could feel his wife's glare on him as he checked out the large sweat stains that had formed in his armpits during the drive north. He did his best to avoid Inga's gaze, questioning why, today of all days, she clearly thought she was superior to him.

We are the same, he told himself. He had long ago accepted himself as a failure in this country and considered his wife of identical caliber. Both of their grandparents had immigrated through the Port of Galveston 80 years ago, to settle in towns near the Guadalupe River at the turn of the century. Both he and Inga had lived, survived, and failed at recreating Germanic culture in Central Texas for three generations. And now, all he had to show for it was a wife whom he thought had too much cellulite on her legs, who nagged at him from the second he opened his eyes each morning, plus tens of



thousands of dollars worth of credit card debt. Their unbreakable devout Catholic vow of marriage was, to Bertram, life's ultimate practical joke. But looking at his wife now, in this infamous lobby he had heard so much about, Bertram found nothing to laugh at. They were here because they were desperate, and he knew it. No one came to the Schneider Building Company unless they had another option.

Another couple whizzed by them and out the front door, muttering excitedly under their breath in combo-speak of broken German and English. Bertram noticed that the wife looked ecstatic, grinning widely, and although her husband looked equally optimistic, Bertram couldn't help notice the twinge of fearful skepticism that also rested uncomfortably on the man's face. The couple appeared to Bertram to be in their late-30s or early-40s, around the same age as he and Inga.

When they reached the end of the short hallway of the reception area, Bertram announced their arrival, and the secretary told them that Xavier Schneider would be with them shortly. He heard a slight German accent from the secretary who had greeted them, presumably someplace south of Munich; it was a small-town voice, Bertram noticed. He watched his wife continue shuffling her dress and finger-brushing hair, and he wondered if Inga really thought that her appearance would make a difference whether or not Xavier Schneider would give them money. Since the early '70s Bertram had heard tales of Xavier Schneider giving massive loans to immigrants who had exhausted all other homeowner possibilities. These tall tales of uncompromised benevolence mixed with life-threatening danger had characterized Xavier Schneider as both a messiah and a murderer. The confessions from local friends and neighbors had always, and simply, been the same: Xavier Schneider gives you money and a gorgeous, newly constructed home; if you pay

it back in due time, you're fine; if you don't, you're literally dead, without question or excuse. After so many years of hearing these rumors around New Braunfels, Fredericksburg, and other recreated Germanic towns along the Guadalupe River, Bertram had no conclusive idea of what to really make of the Schneider Building Company.

"Bertram Koenig," a voice boomed from the opposite side of the lobby. Inga and Bertram turned to see a rather short but globose man standing across from them. He flashed a toothy grin that Bertram found simultaneously comforting and suspicious. The man began walking towards them, his hand outstretched to shake Bertram's hand.

"And you must be Inga," the man boomed again, his voice confident and even-pitched. Bertram watched his wife smile nervously at the man but neither of them spoke.

"Xavier Schneider," the man said as Bertram accepted the handshake. This was not whom Bertram was expecting. Xavier Schneider's height couldn't have been more than five-and-a-half feet, but his presence in the room was infinitely larger. The volume of his pronounced voice was one thing, but Bertram was perplexed at how someone so...small...and so...*blond*...could occupy an entire massive room so instantly and effortlessly. Although he was a large man in width, the density of his body was solid, unlike the fleshy, flabby rolls of fat tucked beneath too-tight polos that Bertram was used to seeing on Texas men in more urban areas. He found this man planetary and powerful, and wondered if his wife's smirk meant that she did too.

Xavier Schneider's thick arm swept outward, towards the wide hallway from which he had emerged, and offered, "My office is the last door at the end of the hall."

Bertram waited for Inga to waddle demurely down the hallway, and then he followed her, thanking Xavier Schneider as he passed by him.

“So what is it I can help you folks with?” Xavier Schneider asked when they reached his office. He walked slowly behind his large wraparound desk and then motioned for Inga and Bertram to sit in the two cushy chairs facing him. Bertram and Inga sat, and then watched Xavier Schneider sit down in the high-back redwood chair across from them. Bertram thought it odd that all the blinds in the office were pulled shut.

“You need a loan, I assume,” Xavier continued.

“Yes sir,” Inga stated clearly, trying not to sound too frenzied. “We...Well...We heard that you give loans for houses. Things like that. A friend of ours...Well, a *few* friends of ours, actually...They told us that they’ve visited your office because they just really needed a home...”

“Which friends might that be?”

“Well Mr. Schneider, there are a few. We’ve gotten quite a few recommendations for you over the years,” Inga blurted. “Elsa and Gunther Wannemaker – you know them, they’re from New Braunfels too.”

Xavier nodded his head, frowning.

“Dorthea Thalberg – she’s one of my very close friends, also from New Braunfels. She and her husband Jakob were able to build a nice, great big home from the help you gave them...!”

Xavier Schneider nodded again. “The Thalbergs are very reliable with their payments. Excellent clients of mine. They’re good people, which you must know if you’re so close with them.”

Wide-eyed, Inga and Bertram both nodded slowly. Inga wondered why Xavier Schneider hadn’t complimented the Wannemakers too.

“So, Bertram, what is your source of employment? If we continue this conversation and decide that my giving you a loan for a home is a good idea, how do you plan to repay me?”

“Bertram is in sales,” Inga began, before her husband could answer that he had been fired from his most recent job – and every other job he had ever been hired to perform. “He works for –”

“I sell tobacco in and near Austin,” Bertram answered, cutting off his wife.

“Tobacco salesman.” Xavier paused. “Since you know other people to whom the Schneider Building Company has granted loans, I’m assuming you know how things work?” Bertram and Inga both nodded. Bertram inched back in his chair, all the way.

“When the Schneider Building Company provides you a loan for a home, we own your home, until you’ve paid us back, during an agreed-upon number of years. Which is of course why stable employment is so necessary.”

The Koenigs again nodded, and again did not speak.

“There are no late payments,” Xavier continued. The large grin that had formerly monopolized his face disappeared. “Ever. We agree upon a reasonable rate of interest for your loan, and like any other loan or regular payment, a portion is due at the first of each month. You will not and cannot fail to pay, so you must be positive you want to go through with this deal. Please take some time to think this over, and then we can look at floor plans for your new home. You can come view models, too. We even cover building costs, of course, since you will, over time, repay us for your home.”

The spacey, fairy tale character look on Inga’s puzzled face confirmed for Bertram that his wife too now realized that the rumors about the Schneider Building

company must be true. Still though, he could see in her glimmering eyes that she frantically wanted a new house. A two-story, five-bedroom, three-bathroom house with a garden, a swimming pool, and her own females-only room to do whatever the hell she kept telling him she wanted to do in private. Bertram knew that his wife aspired to be on *Dallas*, with a mansion, a pool boy, and all those fancy designer clothes. He knew that most admiring lovers of American culture – hell, most enchanted immigrants like them – want to Hollywoodize their lives to the umpteenth degree, and nothing less would do. He knew this because he too wanted nothing less. During his recent adulthood – his *American* adulthood, the one where he would finally make a good life for himself, an *American* life, *The Dream!* – Jimmy Carter and Ronald Regan had taught Bertram that wealth, and showing off your wealth, was the definition of manhood and success. His forehead began sweating. He sat on his hands to keep them still.

Bertram watched his wife's gaze bounce around the framed pictures of glorious new homes which were strategically hung on the walls surrounding Xavier Schneider's desk. He knew that his romanticizing wife had been instantly seduced by Xavier Schneider's promises, even though Bertram also knew that Inga thought he himself was financially hopeless. This is it, Bertram thought. This, right now, is my chance to change. The Schneider Building Company will give me a beautiful new home, an enormous, expensive new residence, and all I have to do is get a job and make monthly payments. Our lives will change – forever, he thought – and for the best.

"We're sure," Bertram told Xavier Schneider, and offered his hand to shake.

"Excellent," Xavier Schneider told them after another long pause. "I sincerely hope you won't regret making this decision – it'll be the best decision of your marriage!"

Xavier made more promises and then said his goodbyes to his newest clients. He walked them back to the front of the building, patting Bertram on the back as the Koenigs left the Schneider Bldg Co lobby, and he continued to watch as they ducked into that awful station wagon. Xavier didn't stop watching the Koenigs when the car choked to ignition and pattered out of the parking lot, back towards I-35. He had met so many people like the Koenigs before. They were unfortunate replicas of a grand multitude of his clients, all too excited and hopeful to even finish listening to him. In this competitive, prosperous economy, Xavier had grown accustomed to very few clients listening to him. Especially the newer immigrants who came to him for help, the ones he inevitably had to silence or get rid of. Securing new clients was always this easy for him, particularly with European immigrants. Xavier of course knew better than anyone that Germanic homebuilding methods and artistry had influenced American real estate more than any other culture had, so *Who better to trust than German homebuilders?* had become his prime business mantra. Many Germans in Texas were originally carpenters, and Xavier knew that in Central Texas, many immigrants still tried making their living playing around with pieces of wood. However, Xavier knew that these folks had no business sense, and he also knew that no other immigrant of German parents would surpass his homebuilding successes.

As Xavier watched the Koenigs' car entering the highway ramp off in the distance, he could already tell that they too would never be able to pay what they would soon owe him. They were just that type of people, he knew without second thought, shaking his head and guessing how soon they would probably have to die.

# **PART ONE**

### Chapter 1: Eine Geschichte (A History), Dallas, 2008

The headline of the article that Sofia Schneider printed from the *Pattaya Mail News* website read, "Police Avert German Mafia War." In the article was written: *A squadron of Pattaya police, armed with a search warrant, searched the Condo Villa Germania in Jomtien on October 23 after learning that two German Mafia organizations were preparing for a war. Officers had received tips that weapons sales were transpiring at the condominium. Jocmen Hartel and Detlef Gloutsbach are now behind bars after being caught with a cache of weapons allegedly for use in a local German Mafia war. Entering one suspect's room, officers found Mr. Detlef Gloutsbach, 40, a German national, with weapons in his possession. Officers confiscated a .357 with 50 rounds of ammunition, and 25 rounds of ammunition for a rapid fire weapon. Police also found a pistol with a 6 inch barrel registered in the name of Police Sergeant Suwan Sukhsuwan, 42, of Chonburi. Officers arrested Gloutsbach, charging him with possession of illegal weapons. Officers then went to the 11th floor of the condominium and found Mr. Jocmen Qert Hartel (sic), 54, of Berlin. Officers found in his possession 1 7.65 CZ Super Magazine and 8 rounds of ammunition. Knives were also found. Hartel was also charged with possession of illegal weapons. Police Colonel Phirom Pariyakon of the Foreign Crimes Division said the raid was made after police received information that there was to be a 'Mafia war' because of a disagreement over who was to be the Head of the Board of Directors of the Condominium. The Colonel said that the two Germans were also involved in other illegal businesses in Pattaya and Chiang Mai. Both were remanded to custody and await full charging and trial.*



Sofia Schneider wondered why this article hadn't made the American newspapers. Still, like every time her eyes ran across such an account, she did the sign of the cross and thanked the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that it wasn't featured on the front page of *The Dallas Morning News*. While she felt that local readers should know about German foreign affairs, she certainly did not want her family's name to debut negatively in the newspaper.

For three decades, Sofia had clipped out articles of positive publicity from the Dallas papers featuring the Schneider family name. Over time, the Schneider Building Co. had become the most lucrative home building firm in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, so it was occasionally praised in the business section. Likewise, her deviant but disparately successful children had each graced the pages of the *Dallas Morning News* during their teenage years for triumphs at school or extra-curricular activities. Sofia knew that over the years these recognitions of achievement had served as excellent foils to silence those North Texas citizens who yapped negatively about her family. There were rumors of Schneider family organized crime, but Sofia knew disparagingly well that there were rumors afloat about many affluent Dallas families.

Seated in her private office downstairs, hidden away in the easternmost corner of the Schneider estate, Sofia reached into the top drawer of her antique redwood desk and selected a pair of long orange-handled scissors. She trimmed the extraneous white edges of the article. *This is certainly another one for the Schneider family scrapbooks!*, she thought. After her children had all moved away from home, she had needed a project. Sofia knew better than anyone that being a full-time mother was perhaps the hardest job to stop reporting to every morning. And she hadn't been ready to retire.

Now that she spent most of her days alone, Sofia preferred to converse with herself. Sometimes she thought she might enjoy socializing with the wives of Xavier's employees, but really, she knew she was much happier inside of her own imagination. Socializing with those gossipy Southern women made her cringe, so instead of being lonely amongst other people, she opted to be lonely alone. It was the memories of her children in which she most often took solace.

Sofia's eyes hopped to the bookshelf in the corner across from her desk, where she had sets of annually archived photo albums for each of her children, from the day each of them was born up until the last photos she had taken of them. All of Brigitte's photo albums were similar shades of red, Nikolaus's were matching blues, and each of Josef's was yellow. The older Sofia got, the more she prided herself as being a superb example of the old phrase, *German women love making order out chaos*.

Whenever she found another news story or historical artifact to add to these scrapbooks, she would peruse whichever one she was adding to, admiring how impeccably the newspaper articles were aligned with the sides of each stocky manila page, and how she applied just the right amount of de-acidifying spray to keep the newspaper from yellowing. She ran her hands over the preserved pages, hoping that when it came time for her children to inherit these family archives, they too would marvel at them as much as she had.

Today when she saw a photo of her children from an Easter Sunday about twenty years ago, she became so excited that she had no choice but to email them immediately. Oftentimes, a single photo of her own Holy Trinity would summon such a vivid memory that Sofia had to drop whatever she was doing and phone up one of her children to

reminisce. More often than not, her phone calls never seemed to be at an opportune time for her busy children, which usually just ended with her being disappointed and them annoyed. Not wanting to again be snapped at over the phone, Sofia replaced the scrapbook on the desk and wheeled her chair over to her laptop.

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From: [SchneiderMom@aol.com](mailto:SchneiderMom@aol.com)

Subject: Family Reunion in two weeks!

Hello you three,

I was just looking at a photo from an old Easter, just after Joey was born. It has been making me think so much about the Family Reunion in two weeks! I'm so excited to see you all there! Dad is, too. I'm even more excited for you all to meet your relatives and see Bavaria since you've not been since you were kids! It's so wonderful! I hope that all of you remember about the Family Reunion? Have you all received your tickets yet? Let me know, please. Dad said that one of his secretaries mailed them to each of your homes.

Speaking of Dad... He really needs to discuss something with the three of you when we all get to Germany. I know we'll all be busy and excited, but definitely make sure you all make time to talk with him. He will probably somehow forget. But this is very, very important. You all really need to start thinking about your futures, more than you even realize. Anyway, I was just looking at these photos. I hope you three are doing well.

Love, Mom

After clicking Send, she checked her outbox just to make sure it had gone through properly. When she reread the sentence, *It has been making me think so much about the Family Reunion in two weeks!*, she smiled slyly. For six months it was *all* she had thought about. As Sofia ran her hand across the manila page onto which she had just pasted the *Pattaya News* article, she reassured herself that no other family, dead or alive, had a history quite similar to her Schneider clan, that no other American mother of Bavarian ancestors included newspaper clippings of stories about imprisoned German

mafia bosses in the States and abroad, the JFK assassination, and the David Koresh Branch Davidian tragedy, amongst her children's report cards, first communion photographs, gymnastics and soccer game ribbons, as well as her own wedding photos.

The last time she ran across a stateside article that mentioned German organized crime was a few years prior, and it had been in the Arts & Entertainment section of the *Dallas Morning News*, of all places. That aging action movie hunk, Steven Seagal – although Sofia certainly didn't think he was much to look at – also had a run-in with the German Mafia. It was a small article, and had been stuck down at the bottom of the A&E section's page four. Seagal had filed suit against Edeltrud Vorderwuhlbecke for (1) Intentional Affliction of Emotional Distress, (2) Fraud, and (3) Breach of Lease.

Sofia had read about how Seagal had rented a residential building in Berlin from Vorderwuhlbecke, a man who operates a branch of the mafia in North Germany. When Seagal made some minor damages to Vorderwuhlbecke's property and moved out, Vorderwuhlbecke was enraged. Sofia had heatedly reported to her husband that, according to Seagal's police report, Vorderwuhlbecke not only threatened to extort money from him, but to physically injure him as well. Seagal claimed that the tenant to whom Vorderwuhlbecke leased the property after he moved out was actually responsible for the damage.

The following day, Sofia had been so proud when Nikolaus, her first born son, had produced a short segment about the Seagal vs. Vorderwuhlbecke case for the popular entertainment television news show that he worked for in New York City. Nikolaus had even mailed his mother a photocopy of the pleadings, which Sofia had also pasted into one of the scrapbooks. As she re-read it this afternoon, she chuckled to herself when she

examined number 19 of the pleadings: *Defendants, with their Mafia and underworld connections, are quite capable of carrying out threats to assault him physically and to destroy his reputation.*

When Sofia reached to turn the page again, she suddenly felt her body temperature increase by what felt like a few thousand degrees. The remainder of today's *Dallas Morning News* lay at the edge of her desk, so she picked up the first section and began fanning herself ferociously. Waving the newspaper out in front of her face and neck, she silently cursed her hot flash, praying it would pass quickly. Menopause had visited Sofia seven years ago but *still* showed no signs of leaving. She often wondered if other women suffered for so long? Moments later when the hot flash began to fade, Sofia stopped flapping the newspaper and tossed it back onto the desk. She rolled her eyes, wiped her forehead, and smoothed her shoulder-length dark hair back over her head, hoping, praying, that this was the last of her hot flashes for at least a few hours.

She turned to the next page of the scrapbook and re-read the headline: "Italian Official Calls German Tourists Arrogant Nationalists." She hmph'd under her breath and said, "Ugh. Those slanderous Italians!" The article was about how Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schroder canceled his annual vacation to Italy on account of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's public remark that German politics were like Nazi concentration camps. Berlusconi had made this comment when he assumed the rotating presidency of the European Union, and when Sofia re-read the article, she was disgusted. As a first-generation German-American, Sofia was so pleased to have lived in the States all her life. She couldn't imagine living in Germany, being subjected to Italian politics day after day thanks to the European Union.

In this article, Stefano Stefani, the Italian Deputy Tourism Minister, had publicly announced, “We know the Germans well, those stereotyped blonds with a hyper-nationalist pride who have always been indoctrinated to be first in the class at any cost.” Although Sofia had read this article countless times, she again huffed loudly.

“Why shouldn’t we be proud of our country? Why shouldn’t we be proud of our heritage and want to be the best?” she asked herself aloud. “Even the Pope is German!”

Further into the article, Sofia smiled when she reread the part where Schroder suggested, “Those Romans are crazy,” and that Stefani must “have spaghetti for brains.” It also amused her that *Der Spiegel*, a popular German news magazine, had published a photo of Berlusconi on its cover with the title *Godfather*. Sofia pictured the new generation of a fictional Corleone-type family sitting in their Italian villa, plotting against her relatives in Bavaria. Ridiculous, she thought. The article ended on a pleasant note, with two foreign policy officials – one German and one Italian – proclaiming that they just knew that the longtime German-Italian feud of slanderous opinions would soon end.

“Please,” Sofia hissed. After growing up in the bible belt of Dallas in the 1950s and listening to German vs. Italian political views, she knew that Germany and Italy’s unyielding views of each other were not restricted to only European boundaries. Of course, her loyalty was to Germany, but while she had no problem engaging in political crossfire with a newspaper article, she kept her mouth shut outside of her home. Here, no one was around to hear her, and she was fully equipped to have a political debate by herself.

When she turned to the next page, there was an article from the *Berlin Die Welt* entitled, “Criminal Police Report Mafia Expansion.” It was published in 1998, and a

journalist had reported that the Bavarian police had seized at least 30 Italian citizens, all of whom were suspected of being connected with the Italian mob. As she reviewed this article, she rolled her eyes at the audacity of the *Berlin Die Welt* to have run this story as a recent discovery. "The press is almost as ridiculous as the government!" she laughed to herself as she flipped to the next page. "They may be working together, but my goodness, they sure are slow!"

The article on the next page, published in 1999, was about the Littleton, Colorado high school murders, specifically Germany's reaction to them. This afternoon, Sofia reread about how when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had shot themselves and thirteen other students, they talked proudly of Hitler and Nazism. She reread that they had worn swastika chains around their necks, suggesting an imitation of the Nazi's Gestapo police force, and that they had committed their mass murder on April 20<sup>th</sup>, the day of Adolf Hitler's 1889 birth. Sofia recalled that when these connections had been made by American media outlets, Germany was again reflected upon badly, and issued their own concern of sorrow and disgust. This tragedy had disgusted Sofia as well, particularly since her youngest son Josef, her baby, had still been in high school at the time.

She turned the next page of the scrapbook, flipping quickly through photos of her and Xavier's wedding. They had married young in the spring of 1965, less than two years after the JFK assassination and the early retirement of her father, Maximilian Dietrich. Maximilian had been forced to retire after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, bowing from public view like the rest of the Dallas mafia families had been forced to do, no matter their cultural origin. As Sofia looked at her father's face in the wedding photos, she was reminded of how disquieted he had been at her wedding. She had married

Xavier, who had then been her former high school sweetheart, just weeks after her high school graduation and her father's retirement.

Sofia thought about how disappointed her father had been about his retirement, specifically that he had had to leave his business to Xavier so abruptly. Maximilian had no sons or nephews of his own, so Xavier had been his only family option. As she turned the page, two large black-and-white photos consumed the center of this scrapbook. Sofia gazed down at two unsmiling and stern couples, one per photograph on each page: Xavier's parents in one, her parents in the other – both of them now deceased. Soon after the births of Brigitte, her eldest, and Nikolaus, Sofia and Xavier had both lost their parents, his father to a heart attack, his mother to severe diabetes, while Sofia's parents had succumbed to two bouts of cancer. Sofia could not help but ponder which disease in this smorgasbord of genetic deficiencies would eventually end her and Xavier's lives, but also which ones her children would later inherit.

Time and time again, these photos prompted Sofia to consider how her family might have been different had her parents lived longer or if she had siblings. While this premature change in their lives had made Xavier an emotionally closed-off workaholic, Sofia had devoted her life to her young children. She was often regretful that her kids had no memory of their grandparents, nor did they have any extended family in the Dallas area. Annually, the Schneider family holidays were spent as a small quintet, and her children had no concept of a multi-generational family. Their next door neighbors, the Kaestners, were the only extended family her children had known.



In order to refrain from thinking about her parents, she turned to the next page, where there was an eight-by-ten newspaper cutout of a photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald. Sofia looked at it, chuckled, and said, "Oh, Lee, you're just a Patsy."

Since the Dietrichs weren't Italian, Maximilian and everyone associated with his business had not been a direct suspect to involvement with Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby. Both the Dallas Police Department and the House Committee for Assassinations had investigated ties between Oswald and the German and Russian mafias, as well as Ruby's involvement with the Italian mafia. Sofia remembered how thankful her father had been that the German organized crime groups of Texas were not attacked by police investigation, nor were they suspected of having any connections to Ruby, the CIA, George de Mohrenschildt, or Lee Harvey Oswald. Still, Maximilian's police acquaintances instructed him to close down his business just in case any investigation did occur, like it had with the Italian crime groups.

Sofia remembered that soon after their wedding, she and Xavier could no longer dine downtown at places like Campisi's because Jack Ruby's Italian mafia associates knew who they were, even after Ruby's imprisonment. Especially now that they had been nationally spotlighted, Italian crime groups had claimed ownership of countless Dallas eateries and landmarks. Xavier and his friends could not even gain entry into nightclub hot spots like the Curtain Club because Ruby's friends owned all of them. Joe Civello, the leader of the Italian mafia's Dallas sector, had employed Ruby for racketeering instruction, and he himself owned the Curtain Club.

Sofia turned the page and saw a small black-and-white newspaper photo of Civello, and remembered the day when her father had told her that it was Civello who

had unfortunately spotlighted all nationalized organized crime groups in Dallas. Her father had told her that Civello had relocated from New Orleans and brought many of his associates with him. Looking at his face now, she recalled the stories of how Civello became a devil figure of conversation in the Dietrich household, and whenever he was in the news, Sofia had not been allowed to mention Civello's name in the presence of their father. For years she had listened to her father rant about "those *blodes arschlochs* Joe Civello and Jack Ruby." When Ruby was arrested, and after his death in prison soon after, all organized crime groups had had to temporarily discontinue operations. The publicity from the Kennedy assassination was too huge for them to conduct business in the Dallas metroplex anymore.

Today Sofia's eyes skimmed with renewed intrigue the 1960s *Dallas Morning News* coverage of this locally notorious affair: A few years later, though, when Carlos Marcello, the New Orleans Italian mafia boss, was convicted, Joe Civello was forced to give up his sector of the Dallas mafia. With the loud, brash Italian mafia virtually extinct in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, newly-appointed Xavier, along with his *soldats* and *leutnants*, was able to explore even more business opportunities.

"You messy spaghetti heads," Sofia chuckled. "We won in the end."

On the next page was a school report written by Brigitte. During Brigitte's eighth grade year, her English teacher had assigned everyone in the class to write a reaction to the David Koresh Branch Davidian Waco tragedy. Sofia had been so proud when she read her daughter's report that the Italian Mafia had conspired with President Bush, Sr. to burn down the Branch Davidian compound.

As Sofia ran her hand over the report today, she was floored with pride. She remembered when Xavier came home from work that afternoon, burst into her office, and announced, "That damn Bush and those Italians are gonna burn down the Davidian compound because some of those Mormon freaks found out about the Italians' drug trafficking! That damn Bush fucks up wars and imports drugs, and now he's gonna burn down all those people in Waco, too!"

Xavier had gone on to tell his wife that one of his employees in Waco had informed him that two of the Branch Davidian members had hacked into the CIA computer databases and discovered that under President Bush's direction, the government had conspired with the Italian mafia to transport cocaine and laundered money.

Xavier had continued, "Sofia! It's just like the JFK assassination all over again! The damn Illuminati with all their Republicans and Italians! They just *will not* leave anyone alone! Why do they think they can rule the world?!"

Brigitte had been in Sofia's office that afternoon, and had listened intently to everything that her father blurted. Two days later, Sofia sat upstairs in the den with her children and watched on television as the Branch Davidian compound and everyone in it burned to the ground. In Brigitte's report for her 10<sup>th</sup> grade Advanced Placement English class, she had also predicted that President Bush's involvement with the Italian mafia would continue harming America for decades since the Bush family was so friendly with "those awful Sicilians." And although it hurt Sofia at the time, Brigitte also wrote that she was ashamed to be from Texas, the state that had "produced such an evil president whose family was ruining my country."

Sofia shook her head back and forth and smiled when she revisited the top right corner of her daughter's report. Brigitte's English teacher had written, "This is unacceptable and untruthful. Either get an F or do a rewrite." To avoid a failing grade, Brigitte had written a second, much more sugary report about how those poor religious people had died in such an unexplainable, unfortunate tragedy. She had received an A+ for her rewrite. Brigitte's first edition, however, was one that Sofia included in her scrapbook.

"Sofia," a voice called from outside the doorway.

Sofia jumped and the scrapbook flew into her lap. "Oh, Helga, you scared me!"

"I am sorry, Sofia." The family maid appeared in the doorway, smiling apologetically and clutching the large cross she wore around her neck.

"It's alright, Helga. Do you need something?"

"It is Xavier. He is calling for you again."

"Is something wrong?" Sofia closed the scrapbook carefully, and then ran her hand over its brown leather cover, feeling the ornamented pattern.

"No, Sofia, I do not think so. I think he just wants to talk with you."

"Have you been in to check on him recently?"

"Yes, of course, Sofia."

"No pain or anything?"

"No, he is fine."

"Has he taken his pills?"

"Yes, I make sure he take pills."

"You haven't given him any food, have you? Please don't tell me that he's convinced you to feed him in bed."

"No, of course not, Sofia. I so want his heart to get better."

"Well, I'm sure he'll try asking you to sneak him food or something, so don't listen to him."

"I am sure he will too, but do not worry. Xavier will get nothing out of me."

Sofia walked across the room, lay her hand on Helga's shoulder, and shared a short, prideful chuckle with her petite but masculine maid, before saying simply, "Thank you." Nowadays, Helga was more or less her only companion, but there was only so much that two women in their late-fifties could discuss. She followed Helga downstairs, who stopped to resume Windexing the large window in the foyer.

The ladies' height barely reached five feet, and whenever she passed through the vast foyer, Sofia imagined she and Helga were lady-monarchs, frolicking in *Neuschwanstein* or *Hoenschwangau* or any of the other smaller castles speckled royally throughout the hills of Bavaria. She continued strolling through the foyer in the estate's front entrance, passing by the Bavarian blue-and-white checked wallpaper, underneath the grandiose crystal chandelier, and past the medieval sconces that hung in every corner. Her speed slowed as she entered the dining room, past the sturdy antique china cabinet and the dark red-candled chandelier. She pushed in the one of the eight chairs at the thick redwood dining table that someone had left sticking out.

When Sofia caught a glimpse outside the front windows, she saw two burly men dressed in khakis and button-down shirts standing on the front porch, one of them on a cell phone, the other resting against the wall, shielding himself from the blasting Texas

spring sun. This was no surprise to her; since her husband had returned from the hospital three days prior, his employees had swarmed the estate.

She walked through the living room, past the matching designer catalogue furniture, the large framed photos of her children, the crucifix hanging above the mantle, and was perturbed when she discovered that someone – one of her husband's men, she assumed – had left out an unfolded newspaper on her crème-colored sofa, which she had reupholstered only weeks ago. She swiped up the newspaper, quickly scanned the front page headlines out of habit. Every headline on the front page of the *DMN* covered the early stages of the Obama vs. McCain election, more specifically about who was going to supposedly fix America's collapsing economy. *This*, Sofia thought, was all this modernized country cared about anymore – only the negative *Now*. Not about history, or about native country pride, or about combining nationalist backgrounds to actually create an intriguing, non-Puritanical America. All she ever read anymore in this country's newspapers was the decline of, well...*everything*. America and its plasticity, its lies and promises, had begun to depress her more than she had ever imagined it would have. But Sofia also freely admitted that her entire family had assimilated themselves to this newfound version of the American dream, with its latent definition of wealth, power and control. She sighed and replaced the *DMN* on the cedar chest in the center of the room.

Sofia took pride in the fact that hers was the only home in Preston Hollow Estates that was not a cookie-cutter version of the same floor plans and blueprints that had, in time, sprung up all over the neighborhood. While the inhabitants of every home in Preston Hollow Estates engage in an unspoken battle for the best-looking, most idolized residence, Sofia knew that her neighbors could only come in second place to herself.

Since her own childhood in this historic neighborhood, she knew that in the Dallas suburbs, very few things in life are more important than showing everyone how ideal your life is on the outside, no matter if it was a crumbling disaster behind the façade.

Whenever she left her home, she loved that people driving through the gated community of Preston Hollow Estates saw her family's four car garage, the arched windows near the second floor balcony of the master bedroom, and the lavishly designed landscape, complete with a fountain and seasonal flowers. She appreciated that passersby are envious of the North German immigrant landscapers and mowers who come to do the yards every week (everyone else in the neighborhood used the same families of Mexicans, which Sofia thought was unfair, like modern-day slave labor), the specially designed sprinkler system that pops up every morning, and the elaborate wreaths on the front door that she ceremoniously changes at the first of every month. To an outsider of the Schneider family, the estate was so beautiful and well-kept that Sofia convinced herself that no one ever noticed there were often multiple black sports utility vehicles frequently parked outside and hulking men in suits who piled out of them in groups to march up to the Schneider estate doorstep. While it was Xavier's job to operate the family business, Sofia knew it was her job to hide it.

When she walked through the kitchen, she was pleased to see that none of her Williams-Sonoma cooking utensils had been left out and that her husband's associates hadn't made any messes with the coffee pot. She'd have to make dinner in there in just a couple of hours and did *not* want to cook in a mess.

Sofia halted suddenly in the middle of her kitchen. Without warning, another hot flash had overtaken her body, and she was stranded without the necessary paperwork

with which to fan herself. Desperate, she glanced around the kitchen, looking for something to employ as a fan. After only a few seconds of searching, she quickly gave up and raced over to the freezer door, yanked it open, and stood as close as she could. If it weren't for the overflowing shelves of epicurean leftovers, she would've tried climbing inside. A fiery two or three minutes passed before she was able to close the freezer door and resume the trek to her husband.

Up the stairs she bounced like a peppy teenager and then darted down the hallway past her children's former bedrooms, all of which remained untouched for when they came home to visit their mother. Sofia passed Brigitte's girlhood collections of miniature musical carousel horses, onyx stones carved into small animals, and completed crossword puzzle books, which remained in the same places that she'd left them when she had moved to Boston a decade prior, as did the hundreds of dried hanging rose petals that, as a teenager, Brigitte had kept from Lukas Kaestner, her literal 'boy next door.' All of Nikolaus's 1<sup>st</sup> place trophies from theatre competitions and academic decathalons remained in his old bedroom, along with his old collection of alphabetized videocassettes of every Best Picture Oscar-winner from the past fifty years, film posters, and a bookshelf crammed with novels by the likes of Manhattan writers Bret Easton Ellis, William S. Burroughs, and J.D. Salinger. The walls of the room that had belonged to Josef were still plastered in soccer pendants, and in the corners lived a drum set, a set of golf clubs, and a vintage *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* calendar which Sofia strongly disapproved of on account of her endangered belief that her trio of devoutly Catholic-raised children still abstained from sex until their wedding days – *whenever those may finally be*, she thought, rolling her eyes.



When she reached the end of the long upstairs hallway, she smiled pleasantly at the surly Schneider Building Co. employee standing outside the master bedroom. She could hear her husband inside, snoring so loudly she was amazed she hadn't heard it from her nook downstairs. For nearly a decade now, Xavier's snoring had expelled Sofia to sleep in a guest bedroom downstairs, and she still hadn't forgiven him for getting kicked out of her own bedroom. She had been the one to decorate and maintain it, after all.

Sofia walked over to her husband and hovered above his face, her hands resting on her petite, juttied hips, waiting for him to awaken. She assumed that he had asked Helga to summon her and then fallen asleep literally seconds later. She knew this because he always did things like this. Sofia watched Xavier's huge belly expand and contract, expand and contract, expand and contract, and just for a tiny, pleasurable second, she thought about what it would be like to smother his face with a pillow. She knew she never would, but after 41 years of marriage, she'd never met a single wife who didn't occasionally want to kill her husband. Never mind the fact that Sofia knew she could actually get away with doing so.

"Xavier," she called, louder than necessary.

He snorted volcanically, shoved his head back into the pillow, and yelped, "WHAT?" His eyes shot open.

"Calm down, it's just me."

"Hi."

"Hello," she answered, with conditioned disdain. "Helga said you needed me."

Xavier elevated himself into a seated position as Sofia watched how difficult it was for him to do so. He still had the football player bulk and muscle that she had been

attracted to as a high school girl, but nowadays, Sofia was endlessly repulsed by how many countless layers of fat he had piled on.

“Are you going out at all today?” Xavier asked.

“I wasn’t planning on it. Why?”

“I just need some stuff from Walmart.”

Sofia’s face crinkled up in disgust. “Like what?”

“Some underwear, handkerchiefs, socks...”

“I can get those for you at Nordstrom’s or Neiman Marcus when I go shopping tomorrow. They’re much nicer there, you know. We don’t live on a farm.” Her eyes ablaze with mortification, Sofia’s gaze rotated around the room. Even in her massive bedroom, she felt tiny next to the tall, adorned poster bed and under the even taller beige ceilings – and yet, the grandeur comforted her. After decades of decorating and redecorating and re-redecorating, Sofia’s home made her feel queenly, and she wanted its other inhabitants, temporary or permanent, to feel just as royal.

“Well, I thought it’d be easier at Walmart. What’s the point of spending thirty bucks on a pair of boxers?”

“Why don’t one of your guys do it for you then?”

“I’d rather that my wife bought my underwear instead of my employees, Sofia.”

“Can you wait until tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. What’s for dinner?”

“For you? Steamed vegetables and souerkraut.”

Xavier grunted and rolled his eyes. “That sucks.”

“How old are you? Don’t say ‘sucks.’ That’s what teenagers say.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“I’m having a small filet mignon, and I’m sorry to tell you, but unless you want to eat alone, I’ll have to eat it front of you.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Well, I need my protein.”

“It’s still not fair.”

“Well, maybe now that you’re bed bound, you’ll finally start taking care of yourself. We’re the same age, so I don’t understand why I am in perfect health while you’re...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. And you’re not in perfect health.” Xavier’s focus moved to the 52-inch flat screen across the bedroom. He wondered if there was a late-afternoon soccer game being broadcast.

Sofia backed away two steps. “Excuse me?”

“What about your arthritis?” Xavier spoke softer, realizing that his wife would explode at whatever comment escaped his lips. She spoke so frantically – unnecessarily frantically, Xavier thought – that she reminded him of a cartoon character in fast-forward.

“My medication is working fine, and my iron pills are just...splendid! It’s not like *I* landed in the hospital for not taking care of *myself*.”

Xavier presented a smug smirk and twinkled his blue eyes.

“Well, you’re not going to listen to me anyway, so what’s the difference?” she demanded softly and rhetorically. “And now that I have your attention...”

“Oh, God...” He fixated on the flat screen, wondering where he must have misplaced the remote control last.

"You have got to start thinking about having your children begin helping you. It...is...time! Unless you want another heart attack...or a stroke...or some diabetic attack...or if you want to *die*, then you've got start thinking about this now."

"I know. Sofia, I know."

"And you've got to talk to them about their futures when we see them. You've got two weeks. *Two weeks!*"

"I know, I know, I know." Xavier's unaffected smirk remained on his face.

"I am not flying back to Dallas with you if you don't talk to them about the business when we're in Bavaria. I...will...not!"

"Ok. Sofia, I hear you."

"Well, okay. As long as you're listening. And I'm not going to tell you that they won't want to help at first. I will not explain to you that they have their own lives. But you have to *choose* someone unless you want to get worse. *Pick* one of them already."

Xavier silently watched his wife with a slight grimace, before she continued.

"I know that none of them will be excited about having to move back to Dallas to live near their mother, but you're going to have to be firm with them. They must have known somehow that this day would eventually come along."

"I realize that none of them will want to move home, but we're their parents."

"Oh, right, that's really stopped them before. They just keep moving farther."

"Sofia, what are you so worried about?"

"I am not worried. I'm just excited about the trip back to Bavaria!" Sofia turned away from their bed, the bed in which she hadn't slept for nearly one-third of their marriage, and sped out of the room.

Xavier grinned as his exuberant wife made her grand exit. He pictured her downstairs in the kitchen, already cooking food for him, lively and girlish, just like the woman he met forty-four years prior at Bryan Adams High School. Then he sighed heavily because he realized he would be consuming broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage for dinner. With the exception of his family, Xavier loved nothing more than food, and even food versus family was a strong competition in his eyes.

Xavier knew he needed help with the family business, but also knew that he definitely didn't need his wife to constantly nag him about it. However, he foresaw one major problem with the decision of who should inherit the Schneider Building Co., just as he had accepted from Sofia's father thirty years prior: his only daughter, Brigitte, at 30, was still not married. Which meant he would have no choice but to make one of his sons his successor, which he was not prepared to do. He was fearful that Nikolaus or Josef was ready for this – or if they could actually make a life of it.

Against his mound of pillows, Xavier shifted himself to face his nightstand. On it rested a photograph of his kids posing with Lukas and Heather Kaestner, the children of the family who had lived next door for the duration of Xavier's kids' lives. Xavier's initial friendship and subsequent employment of Jurgen Kaestner had mended the two families together as one larger local dynasty. Heather still lived with her parents while she attended Southern Methodist University's Dedman School of Law, and still came to visit Xavier and Sofia often. Today, though, it was Lukas who captured Xavier's gaze when he revisited the photograph. Lukas, Jurgen and Katarina's able yet troubled son, deceased for eight years now, had been, without question, to whom Xavier would have

readily left the family business. Xavier's proud yet wounded gaze earnestly held his memory of Lukas, for Xavier had thought of him as his third son.

The crushing idea that the Schneider Building Co. was in jeopardy was not something that Xavier wanted to think about right now. Xavier knew he would have to discuss his children's futures with them in two weeks' time when he met them and their significant others in Munich. He knew he would have to elaborate further on the details of his business when they all traveled from Munich down to the family *Answesen* nestled in the Bavarian Alps for the Dietrich Family Reunion, and he also knew he would have to explain about his heart attack and his diagnosis for triple bypass surgery. Xavier knew all of these things, but instead, he just lay there, staring up at the ceiling, dreaming of all the *bratwurst*, *schnitzel* and *leberkase* that awaited him in Germany. After surviving a heart attack, he did not want to think about business whatsoever. He didn't want to think about his children's futures, nor the silly arguments that would surely ensue when he confronted his children about their futures. Rather, Xavier wanted to dream exclusively of sausage.

## **Chapter 2: *Der Leiter* (The Leader), Boston, 2008**

Perched tightly on a chocolate brown leather bar chair, Brigitte re-crossed her legs underneath the solid gray, knee-length skirt of her Valentino suit. As she waited for her boyfriend Walker White to arrive, she sipped on her fourth Macallan 18 on the rocks but still felt rather sober. She knew could have at least ten more tumblers of Macallan 18 and still compose herself in the same controlled manner. For Brigitte's blood content, she had long ago realized – and accepted – that booze was actually the health pyramid's sixth food group instead serving as a social laxative.

Although she was now used to Walker being fashionably late, she cursed him for his hour-long delay. Brigitte alternated checking the time on the diamond-studded watch that Walker had given her the prior Christmas and on her BlackBerry, the latter of which also confirmed for her that Walker was not on yet another business trip tonight. She knew his busy schedule nearly as well as her own. After all, she thought, it was Walker's suggestion to meet at the Lenox Hotel's City-Bar tonight.

There was no message from Walker. Instead, the tiny yellow envelope atop her BlackBerry screen indicated a message from her mother which Brigitte hadn't had time to check earlier. She immediately felt guilty for not checking her mother's message earlier. In fact, guilt seemed to be present *whenever* Brigitte thought of her mother. She never quite understood how Sofia managed to email, text or call her at the least convenient times – usually during a meeting, or when she had just sat down to dinner at a restaurant that she'd waited months to score reservations at, or, most often, afternoons when she walked up the courthouse steps to plead another case. Days would pass during Brigitte's busy workweeks and Sofia's frequent messages would amass in that damned

electronic yellow envelope, serving as a constant nagging reminder for Brigitte that she was too busy for mother's quick bursts of communication. It seemed to Brigitte that Sofia texted or emailed every thought that came into her head, particularly during the past month or two, with their family reunion approaching. Now that Sofia had learned to text, it seemed to Brigitte that her mother was addicted to her cell phone, perhaps more than many teenagers; Brigitte wondered how often her mother actually got a reply, though.

Brigitte frowned at Sofia's ominous email. She knew that her mother's overdramatic begging for her children to talk to their father about this "very, very important" thing could be about something as trivial as what they wanted for their next Christmas presents. Or maybe her mother had heroically wanted to tell them about some internet virus going around, which Brigitte had heard about months ago – these fearful emails were sent frequently. Brigitte placed her BlackBerry down again on the bar, again feeling guilty for thinking that Sofia's 'busy days' paled in comparison to her own.

A couple of slightly drunk men in dark suits meandered over in Brigitte's direction, across the metrosexual playground of leather furniture, dimmed lights, subtle silver décor, and crowd of 20-to-40-something yuppies. When the men caught her attention, they stood on opposite sides of her chair, and Brigitte found herself bookended.

"We've been watching you from our booth in the corner," the man to her right told her.

"Oh?" Brigitte replied, rotating her head and fixating blankly on his eyes.

"Yeah, I...I mean, we... think we've seen you in here before."

"Yeah," the guy to her left grunted, seconding their co-commentary.



“Well, that would make sense,” Brigitte answered, swiveling her chair around with her back against the bar. “Because I have been in here many times before...” She didn’t even have to check what the men were doing; she could feel her head being squashed between their “Awwwww, yeah!” glances.

“So what’s your name, babe?” Righty asked. At five feet tall and bosomy, Brigitte knew she wasn’t a typical “babe,” as they had proposed, but she still chuckled at this pet name anyway. She tucked a loose strand of long red hair behind her ear.

“My name’s Barbie,” she deadpanned, not looking at either of them. Brigitte watched a couple of long-legged, fake blond, fake boobed ladies strut by her, and wondered if these guys would notice the irony of what she told them. The monotonous square-dance of courtship had grown to annoy Brigitte infinitely. Similar to how she felt amongst most men, she could not bring herself to play the silly, submissive flirter with these two innocuous guys, even though she knew that’s what they wanted.

“No last name, Barbie?”

“No. No last name,” she paused. “I’m like Madonna. Or Shakira.”

“Who? Sha-what-uh?” Lefty asked.

“Never mind,” she answered, her lips forming a slim smile. She pivoted her chair past Lefty as she returned to her half-empty bourbon. Unless men peered over her small frame and missed her altogether, Brigitte had grown accustomed to *not* standing out in a crowd. She had a couple of girlfriends with whom she occasionally went out, maybe once a month, but otherwise, she wasn’t one for Girl’s Night Out. She much preferred avoiding the catty girl-team dynamic altogether. In Brigitte’s mind, the only reason why ladies went out together in groups was not only to talk about other women behind their

backs, but moreover, to have a grandiose Man Search competition that inevitably ended in pierced egos and rampant bitchiness. *This* is more fun, she reminded herself; harmless fun with a time limit, but still more fun than the dreadful Ladies Night.

“So what do you do, Barbie with no last name?” Righty inquired.

“I’m a stripper.” She tried picturing herself in a crimson G-sting, straddling and sliding down a dingy metal pole at a strip joint, but was only able to imagine herself at her real occupation: sitting behind her catalogued desk, reading endless stacks of legal briefs at Luckham, Nortz and Hanzel, Attorneys at Law.

“No way,” said Lefty as his eyes widened.

“No, really.”

Righty’s pupils dilated with excitement. “So, like, where do you strip?”

“At Centerfolds. You guys been there?”

“Yeah!” Lefty crooned as Righty seconded: “We love that place!”

After ten years of living in Boston, Brigitte still could not believe that these lothario clones were her peers. But by this point in her life, she was used to such men. She had sat next to them in her classes at Harvard, during both undergrad and law school. They had lived next door to her in her various Boston and Cambridge apartment complexes. Now they were the partners of her law firm who assigned *her* cases, people with whom she had to work side-by-side in courtrooms and meetings. Brigitte cocked her head and smiled before asking, “So, do you guys always approach women together?”

“What?” Lefty asked.

“Huh? No. No, we don’t,” Righty chimed, “whattya mean?”

She laughed. "I mean...when you guys come over here together like this...and start talking to me together...and using the word 'we' instead of 'I'? It's a little weird."

"Weird? Why? How? Why is that weird?" Righty fired.

"Well, because, frankly, it seems like you're trying to pick up someone *together* so that she'll be interested in both of you. Are you guys into each other?"

A series of "What?", "No!", "Aww, c'mon!", "Eww", and "Nasty!" shot from both men as Brigitte continued beaming. She swallowed back a big mouthful of bourbon.

"Just asking," Brigitte said. She loved the effortless control of the game: listening to their harsh signature Boston accents and soaking herself in their rugged testosterone, all the while knowing definitively that nothing further will happen. She already had Walker, her chosen companion, her inevitable betrothed. Overzealous Walker, her powerful, dominating partner of five years, all 6-foot-5 of him, with his flippant commentary and dismissive demeanor, who... – Brigitte again paused and looked down into her drink, wondering where the *hell* he must be now, and why he had instead left her to play with these two...children.

Both Righty and Lefty spewed a few more disgusted remarks and then began chugging their pints of Sam Adams at the same time. Brigitte knew fully well that these guys were carbon copies of the Red Sox-fanatic, brewsky-guzzling frat boys who infested and infected Boston. Recently, she wondered – *wished*, sometimes – if she would be happier with someone so...simple. Someone like these harmless guys, these aged townies, someone actually proud to be a local replica of his father and his 'boys.' Someone *unlike* her, a woman so incapable of satisfaction that she often annoyed herself.

“Brigitte,” a third voice said behind her chair. Like usual, Brigitte heard her name pronounced “Bridge-It.” Except for her family, no one called her by her real name, the correct German pronunciation of how her name should be spoken: *Bri-jeet*. In kindergarten, when no one including her teacher could pronounce her name correctly, she surrendered at age five and was left being called the vulgar *Bridge-It*. She had tried introducing herself correctly as *Bri-jeet* during her university years, but the second her name left her lips, every last person she encountered would answer, “Hello, Bridge-It!” Hoping that Walker had finally made an appearance, she turned around to see who was pronouncing her name incorrectly this time.

“Bridge-It?” Righty said, “Who’s Bridge-It? Wait...your name’s Bridge-It?”

Donald O’Sullivan, a longtime coworker of Walker’s, stood before her. “Hi, Brigitte. Are you with Walker this evening?” Donald asked, kissing her cheek as she reciprocated his greeting.

“No...he was supposed to be... No. No, I’m not with him tonight,” she answered, turning to Righty and Lefty. “Would you boys excuse us for a second?”

Although she was now positive that she was again stood up for the night, for some reason, the sight of Donald – a longtime coworker and friend of Walker’s – made her feel guilty for playing with these harmless bar goers. Righty and Lefty scurried off towards the rear of City-Bar. In the corner of her eye, Brigitte watched them instantly slide onto a sofa across from two peroxided debutantes who were waiting for men like Righty and Lefty to approach, buy them drinks now, and fuck them later.

“Oh,” Donald said, “I was just wondering. I saw you sitting over here by yourself and thought he may be nearby. Just stopping by to say hello.”

"Hello," Brigitte answered, smiling uncomfortably.

"Well, I guess I'll let you get back to your drink. 'Night, Bridge."

"Yeah... 'night, Donald."

Brigitte glanced around the bar: Donald had returned to his table of coworkers; Righty and Lefty were already seated boy, girl, boy, girl, with their new orange-skinned ladies and immersed in cackling conversation; everyone else in City-Bar was sipping cocktails together, fidgeting with smartphones together, fumbling through office paperwork together, ordering appetizers together, or leaving together. Brigitte turned back around to the bar, re-crossed her legs, and was overcome with morbid disappointment when she realized that her tumbler was empty.

Seconds later, without even asking if she wanted another Macallan 18, the bartender replaced her fourth bourbon with a fifth, and gave her a sympathetic smile. She wanly returned his smile, but only for bringing her another glass. Not for his sympathy, because that was the last thing she wanted. This smile, this small gesture of kindness, set off a blazing fire within Brigitte's chest, the same one that sets aflame every time her temper tinkers on volcanic scales. Defeat and despondency suddenly transformed into disgust and deception and she unknowingly glared at the bartender.

His smile made her feel stupid. It meant that she was suddenly a stood-up, stupid, submissive woman, waiting for her investment banker knight in shining cufflinks to burst into City-Bar and rescue her. Nothing in the deep annals of her psyche enraged Brigitte more than someone making her feel stupid. And she knew it wasn't the bartender's fault. Brigitte allowed no one to make her feel like an idiot, and now that she was receiving smiles and potentially free cocktails, Brigitte was ready to find Walker's tall body, climb

up it like a totem pole, and snap off his egotistical head. She also promised herself that all the alcohol in her blood stream had not intensified her temper whatsoever.

In one satisfying gulp Brigitte shot the entire glass of bourbon and then snatched her purse off the bar. Her throat burned as its contents leaked down towards her esophagus. Without asking the bartender for her tab, she slammed onto the bar three twenty dollar bills, slipped into her red velour coat, and stormed into the hotel lobby. *Stupid. Stewwwwwwwww-piiiiiiiiid. Walker's fucking stupid!* she mumbled, chugging along like a petite locomotive wrecking off its tracks.

When the doorman saw her stampeding towards the rotating doors, he spun them and got out of her way. Once outside, without even shooting her Burberry umbrella up into the spring rain, she stomped down the sidewalk, off the curb, into the street, and screamed "TAXIIIIAYYYYY!" so loud that three cabs stopped in the middle of the street. Brigitte hopped into the first one, the leader, and commanded, "Newbury and Fairland Streets!" as she sped away. The back windows were rolled down slightly, but anger prevented her from noticing that rain was flying inside.

Although the Irish cabbie kept asking her questions – "What've you been up to tonight, love?" and "You lived on Newbury Street long, have you? Don't you think it's the loveliest street in Boston?" – Brigitte didn't answer him once. The only time she acknowledged that they were in the same vehicle together was when she glared fleetingly at the reflection of his invading eyes in the rearview mirror. When they arrived at Walker's apartment, although her fare was only six dollars, Brigitte tossed a ten dollar bill through the cabbie window, and slammed the door.

As she stepped out into the soupy evening air, she halted to consider her entrance strategy. This same premeditated process occurred each time she entered a court room; even Brigitte was conscious of the fact that she was incapable of walking an inch without calculated purpose. A ponderous sigh escaped her. She suddenly felt remorseful over her behavior to the cabbie. And when Walker's doorman opened the door for her, instead of annihilating him too, Brigitte smiled courteously as she passed by.

Upstairs, she stepped off the elevator and crept towards 8D, Walker's door. She pressed her ear up to his chilly door and listened, but heard no response. Then, just to again make sure that she hadn't made a huge mistake about their meeting up tonight, with her cell phone she called his land line again. No answer. She fished into her purse, hooked her curious fingers around her keychain, and plugged the key into the lock.

After unlocking the second lock, she quietly nudged the door open with her hip and walked into the small, echoing foyer. From the doorway, Walker's apartment looked no different from when she had been there two nights ago. The fishbowl-sized wine glasses from which they had sipped on Sunday night still rested on the bar, along with three empty Pinot Meunier and Blaufränkisch bottles (two for her, one for him). Behind the bar, a cutting board and a large knife remained on the kitchen countertop from when Walker had made sushi rolls two evenings ago. As Brigitte walked further into the kitchen, two small square plates with soy sauce remains hid in the chrome sink. The lid of Walker's tall, silver garbage can was open, and the remains of unused seaweed wraps rested atop the pile of waste.

In the living room, the hefty crocheted blanket under which Brigitte often curled up was still unfolded on the black L-shaped leather sofa, as was the *Lucky* magazine in

which she'd been circling jewelry and clothing to purchase when she actually had some free time. They'd been watching her choice of Walker's *Run Lola Run* DVD for the umpteenth time – on opposite ends of the sofa – but now, Brigitte noticed that there were videogame controllers to Walker's Playstation stretching from his entertainment center and onto the glass coffee table in the center of the living room. The Playstation controllers, she assumed, were there because Walker had been home alone at some point. He rarely played it when she was around, and had mentioned that he needed to stop home for “a few hours after work” before he arrived at her apartment last night.

Walker's bedroom door was closed. Just like the kitchen, Walker's bedroom was in the same state she had last seen it: a white duvet was mashed towards the foot of his unmade bed, and the His and Her matching white robes that they had stolen, just for fun, from the Shore Club Hotel in Miami during one of their weekend getaways, were atop the messy bed. Even Brigitte's spare hair straightener remained untouched on Walker's dresser.

Instead of anger, she began to feel embarrassment and a slight worry that something bad had happened to her workaholic boyfriend. She kicked off her red heels and sunk her pantyhose-covered toes into the carpet. Just to make sure that she hadn't received any messages from him, she again rang her home and office phones. No message from Walker. She walked over to his computer, just to make sure that after she'd already left the office, he hadn't emailed her on her personal account instead of her work email, maybe telling her that something had come up.

When she turned on the flat screen monitor of Walker's computer, the window to his Gmail account was open. Since Brigitte so greatly coveted her own privacy, she



scrolled the mouse up to the right corner of his inbox, preparing to minimize it. But as the cursor wormed up the screen, Brigitte's eyes glanced casually over the list of senders in Walker's inbox. Nearly every sender had a female name and there were many repeat emails, mostly grouped together around the same time and date. Her hand jerked the cursor from the X at the screen's top right, and she began shuttling down through Walker's epic inbox history.

Brigitte saw messages from herself saved in Walker's inbox, but each of her emails – most of which were loving, excited notes about seeing him on whatever day the message had been sent – were squashed between emails from countless other female names. She opened one of the emails from early March:

*Hey babe, it was great to see you again the other night. Man, you've gotta come back to DC more cuz I can't wait so long this time! Walker, do you realize that you hadn't been here in like three months? And you know I haven't been fucked good since then! Please come back soon!*

*xoxo,  
Sheri*

Brigitte's mind raced back to the first week of March. She remembered that Walker had gone to DC on business for a few days. Her entire body suddenly felt cold and feverish. She closed the email from this Sheri woman and stared at the inbox for a moment. The next cluster of emails was from various women two weeks later, towards the end of March. Brigitte recalled immediately that Walker had spent over a week in San Jose during this time. She opened another email:

*Walker! White! GOD! I can't believe I'll be seeing you again tonight! It's been so long! Almost a year, right? I've totally missed you. Of course I'd love to see you this week, thanks for looking me up again. I love when you drop me a line whenever you're in town. 8 tonight is perfect, but I accidentally deleted the email that you sent me with your hotel room number. Can you send it to me again? Pretty, pretty please? LOL.*

*Later cutie,  
Gina*

Brigitte felt her heart climb down into her stomach. She shivered. There were three more emails from this Gina woman on the same day, all confirming her and Walker's Moorpark Hotel appointment on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. Still, Brigitte couldn't stop reading. She opened another email that was sent only two days after this Gina woman's email succession:

*Walker,*

*I'm so glad you finally got a chance to come to good ole Silicon Valley. I'm tired of coming to Boston all the time for "business" just so I can see you! If I had flown over one more time in the same six-month period, my company probably would've gotten suspicious or something. Hahaha. Anyway, it was delicious seeing you again, but darling, you've got to do something about your hotel mini bar not having more cognac! You're still here for another few days, right? We must see one another before you go because god knows I won't be able to get over to Boston for another month or two. Let me know.*

*-Amanda*

*P.S. Don't worry, doll. You don't have to apologize about me listening to you complain about your little girlfriend for three hours. Just kidding. Seriously, no worries, though. I know that silly little red-headed bitch in Boston isn't half as fab as I am. ☺*

Brigitte froze. She couldn't read any more. A few unwelcome tears snuck down her cheek, but she violently swiped them away. *Walker hates cognac!* This barrage of emails from all these admiring women was worse than anything she had dreaded. Her legs trembled and she clutched her nauseous stomach. And most of all, her vagina was *furious*. Walker had just made love to her less than 24 hours ago, and this made her thighs throb with rage. For five years now, Walker's prick had been the only one to bring her pleasure. Within just a few months into their relationship, she had even stopped using

her red handgun-shaped vibrator, abandoned in her nightstand to instead penetrate dust bunnies. Brigitte's petrified stare could not move from the computer monitor but her mind raced. Brigitte wanted to sever that long, filthy cock of Walker's. That cock, that disgusting tool of his that he had slid deep inside of her, that drilled away at her exclusive vagina hundreds of times, would never enter her again.

City after city after city began racing through her mind, the dozens of American metropolises that Walker had traveled to for business since their steadfast monogamous relationship had begun three years ago. He often also went to London, Tokyo, and Frankfurt, and this made Brigitte feel even more disgusted. The *stoo-pid* feeling that had infuriated her at City-Bar returned, magnified by infinity. If he had gone to the trouble for all these years to make and maintain cheating appointments via email, Brigitte thought, *Who knows where he is tonight? Who's he fucking right now?*

Brigitte wondered how many other women there were in Boston alone. She wondered which ones had introduced themselves to her, had smiled cruelly to her face. She wondered if any of them called her a "friend" or an "acquaintance" at the very least. She wondered what they said about her behind her back, or even when she was in the same room with them, at dinner parties, restaurants, or posh bars around Boston. She wondered if she was the last to know Walker's secrets within their circle of friends. And most of all, she wondered how she would restrain herself from poisoning his food or stabbing him in the chest when she finally saw him again. The chummy conservativeness of the entire city began choking her in front of Walker's \$1,300 flat screen monitor.

“Motherfucker,” she squeezed out of her pinched lips. Brigitte paced around Walker’s bedroom, attempting to control the uncontrollable twitching that possessed her body in its entirety.

Brigitte suddenly had the unusual strength to pick up Walker’s computer – monitor, hard drive and all – and throw it through his window. She desperately wanted to, and she envisioned Walker standing downstairs, getting smashed by his own Dell Pentium Processor eight stories below. She wanted to take matches from the kitchen drawers and burn his bed, his white duvet, and the His and Her robes. She wanted to take a sledgehammer and shatter every last one of his Playstation games. She wanted to snap every film in his DVD collection into thousands of little sprinkles and toss them all over his apartment. Brigitte so badly wanted to smash the three framed photos of Walker and herself that he kept on his mantle, and she wanted to throw into the fireplace all the other photos he had of them. The unbridled desire to *destroy* overcame Brigitte, and she wanted to erase any physical trace that Walker even inhabited the same universe as herself.

But then she caught her breath.

Brigitte stopped pacing and halted in the center of Walker White’s bedroom. She realized that if she wrecked his apartment, any inch of it, this would show him that she was upset. It would show him that she had found out about his cheating and lying, and worse, it would show him that she cared. Walker already knew that she cared. He had to know. She had stayed with him for over five years now and did nearly everything that he asked of her. It was her turn not to care. Now was her chance to skip some performances of the rotating brothel puppet show in which he had apparently cast her.

Brigitte slipped into her heels, picked up her purse from the floor, and slowly smoothed her coat against herself. She walked over to the doorway and switched off the light. Walker's computer screen lit the entire room, which made her realize she'd forgotten to conceal her evidence, as any attorney should know to do. She began walking over to the desk. Halfway over, though, a second thought stopped her in the middle of the room: *Fuck it. Fuck it! Let him figure it out for himself.*

She left his monitor shining across his bedroom, turned off the lights, and shut the door. When she was outside of Walker's apartment, again digging inside her purse for her keys, the front door bumped her on the ass and pushed her forward a few inches into the silent hallway.

"Fuck it," she mumbled again as more uninvited tears scaled down her cheeks. "Fuck it." If Walker's front door was even kicking her out, Brigitte's dignity prevented her from being considerate enough to lock his home.

The rain had stopped by the time Brigitte made it downstairs and out of Walker's building. Cab drivers with empty backseats honked at her as they drove by, splashing the sidewalk, but she paid them no mind. Her apartment was twelve blocks down Newbury Street from Walker's building, and as she passed the colonial brownstones and irritatingly perfect boutiques, she realized that this tiny distance definitely wouldn't be enough to get away from him. She could avoid his phone calls and not answer her door should he stop by unannounced, but any day, she could pass him just by walking down her own street. Brigitte immediately grasped the truth: five carefully planned-out years of

living near Walker and expecting to share her life with him, domestically, matrimonially and familiarly, were now her half-decade's *mistake* instead of her future's happiness.

Brigitte wished impetuously that she had never met Walker White. As she stumbled down a block of Newbury Street which featured a haberdashery of pricy suits and briefcases, she thought of the night when Walker had swooped down upon her at a cocktail party at the Park Plaza Hotel. She had been waiting in line at the coat check when a tall, blond man shoved his way to front of the line. Brigitte refused to let this jerk cut in front of her, so she stood in position at the front, even when she heard him say, "Excuse me, Shorty."

Brigitte remained in her spot in line, not even acknowledging his presence, and moments later when she reached the front, she casually greeted the coat check girl, pretending that the tall buffoon behind her was not really there. After receiving her coat check ticket, she turned around and scowled, still only half-caring. Without skipping a beat, the guy asked, "Did you not just hear me tell you to move?"

"Yes. I sure did." She rolled her eyes and slipped her coat check ticket into her purse, so disinterested that his ghostly Irish complexion was becoming rouge.

"Then why didn't you move?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I asked you to."

"So what? Who the hell are you?"

He stepped forward, folded his coat over his arm with more gusto than Brigitte thought necessary, and said, "I'm Walker White. My company...me specifically...is hosting this party. And who the hell, *prey tell*, are you?"

"Brigitte Schneider," she answered blankly, reaching her hand out for him to shake.

"Schneider? Is that a Jewish name?"

"No."

"Thank God. I wouldn't want any Jews at my party," he laughed loudly, looking around the room to make sure nearby colleagues had heard were laughing with him. He clasped her small hand enclosed in his meaty palms.

"How many red-headed Jews do you know?"

"None."

"It's German, you anti-Semite."

"Well, Brigitte Schneider, welcome to my party."

"Thanks," she answered, still completely unimpressed with her host. She rolled her eyes once more, twirled around, and headed towards the crowded bar, missing the impassioned smirk that she was solely responsible for smacking onto Walker's face.

Less than twenty minutes later, Brigitte heard the same voice in her ear as she ordered her second bourbon-rocks. "So. Brigitte Schneider. Can I get you another drink?"

"So. Walker White. Can't you see that I'm already at the bar, doing a fantastic job of getting my own drink?"

"Yes, I suppose I can, but –"

"– and besides, you called me 'Shorty.'"

"I'm sorry about that."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine, then I'm not sorry."

“Whatever.”

“Enjoying my party?”

“Not really. It’s okay. The bartenders are cute.”

“They look about 21 years old.”

“You don’t.”

“Good, because I’m not. I’m not a child like they are.” He scowled down at her before lowering his voice to ask, “Let me guess – lawyer?”

“Yes,” she answered proudly.

“Figures.”

“You’re not?”

“No. Financial consultant. Don’t you even know what kind of party you’re at?”

“No. I just looked at the email invite, saw ‘Open Bar,’ and RSVP’d.” Brigitte laughed dryly at herself, so Walker laughed too.

For the rest of the night, Brigitte had occasionally spotted Walker exchanging corporate words with a few colleagues and potential clients. Otherwise, he focused most of his attention on Brigitte, and in the dimly lit shoulder-to-shoulder packed hotel bar, she wallowed in it. Brigitte immediately realized his genius, and his egotistical attitude and cynicism turned her on immensely. All night, the more she listened to Walker spew anti-everything punchlines and uber-conservative views to party guests, the more she wanted to hear. The drunker he got, the more Brigitte listened to him spit unpolitically correct hoopla like:

“I know what you’re talking about, David. Those Mexicans drive down the



highway slower than fuck, but they're not as bad as the Asians. They even *walk* slow! I was in Chinatown the other day and this little Chinky woman walked down the street with her big homeless woman bag SO fucking slowly that I *literally* had to pick her up, move her off of the curb, and then put her back down into the street, just so I could get by! Fucking illegal immigrants... And don't even get me started on all the fat niggers..."

and...

"I do agree that Caprice is a great space, but there were so many fags there! I felt like I was in the middle of a Gay Pride parade! It may be just because Caprice is so new, you know? The gays always like going to new places and ordering those fruity drinks, as if they're any different from the last new place that opened downtown. I'm sure I'll like the place much better once there aren't so many faggots shimmying around, you know?"

Walker had even badmouthed his own mother that night:

"I cannot stay at my mother's place whenever I go to the Cape. She always tries to drag me to church every fucking Sunday, even though she knows I don't believe in any of that God crap. I've tried explaining to her SO many times that Christianity is just for stupid, lazy, uneducated and poor people who can't afford shrinks. And my mom's got a good education, so I don't know why she bothers! And? She knows I'll give her money, so it's not like she needs to go pray for more! The last time I even spoke to *that woman* and her asshole husband, that *moron* she married after my father died, was almost a decade ago, and I certainly don't plan to until they stop all that religious bullshit."

While Brigitte certainly disagreed with the majority of Walker's brash right-wing commentary, she fell in love immediately with his unwillingness to censor. When the

party at the Park Plaza Hotel ended that night, Brigitte wouldn't go home with Walker like he requested. Instead, she gave him her business card with her office and cell phone numbers, convinced he'd never call. She'd simply enjoyed *a moment*, something she rarely allowed herself to do.

The very next day, though, when her mousy assistant Stephanie crooned in monotone, "Brigitte, there's a Walker White on line two for you," a devilish smile crept across Brigitte's face. Between her legs, she felt her heart beating heavily. When she answered the phone, she was so excited during the conversation that she paced back and forth behind her desk, until he asked her for an official date. Before she hung up the phone, she was sure that Walker could hear the empowering, co-conquering tone in her voice, because she sure as hell heard it in his. The ravenous new princess of the Boston corporate law kingdom had arranged a date with the longtime financial prince, and she couldn't wait until "tomorrow night at nine."

Walker had instantly become her megaphone of exaggerated self-expression. Regardless of whether or not Brigitte agreed with him, she loved that Walker would say things aloud that most white male conservative republican Boston-ites already thought. She realized fully that Walker was an arrogant, self-confessed classist bastard. Like Brigitte, though, he was a fighter, and also like her, he only appreciated and tolerated fighters. In their social circle, though, it seemed that only Brigitte knew this; thus, she also knew that to most other people, Walker was simply an asshole. Whenever he offended her small group of girlfriends, she often found herself defending him with claims like, "Listen, if an obese poor handicapped black Jewish lesbian immigrant garbage collector could teach Walker something about the world while simultaneously

telling him to go fuck himself, Walker would certainly show this multi-minority the utmost respect. He's just using his freedom of speech. He's a very smart man. Give him a break." But she knew that none of her friends ever would.

Walker was like Brigitte's father in this way, and she often dreamt of her future husband and Xavier having long, hideous, racial-slurring conversations over monstrous liter mugs of Weissbier. Most of all, because of the similarities that Walker bore to Xavier, she had often guessed that her father might have *wanted* Walker to one day inherit the Schneider family business, and more important for her family's success, Brigitte knew that Walker would feel exultant to instantly take charge of an entire family legacy.

Tonight, as she walked home through puddles reflecting the dim streetlights, she wished that "tomorrow night at nine" had never happened. As upset as Brigitte was, her mind was already planning her future, which made her even more infuriated with Walker for deflecting her life plans. There was so much pressure from her parents for her to find a husband; there always had been...even before she was permitted to date. Brigitte realized that when she broke up with Walker, she would again look like a complete failure in her parents' eyes, particularly her father's. Whenever any of her relationships ended early, without a ring, she told herself that, at least in her parents' eyes, she was a miserable, unwanted failure. Every arena of Brigitte's life was successful except for the marriage band, and again and again, she blamed herself.

She also really wanted another drink.

### **Chapter 3: Dallas, 1986**

Brigitte's mincing fingers wrapped around the long, orange-handled scissors she had stolen from her mother's desk. Standing over her victims, she cocked her head and glared down at their condescending smirks, her sprightly red pigtails bobbing up and down with each swift nod. Brigitte had decided that these cheery people had to die, for she no longer enjoyed them. She knelt to the ground, closer to her grinning targets.

She heard Joey crying somewhere downstairs. Clutching the scissors with her right hand, she leaned forward and eeny-meeny-miny-mo'd a row of three Barbie dolls. Ken was there too, but Brigitte still had to decide if he would be spared. The names with which Brigitte had christened the first two dolls were Stacy and Tracy, because Brigitte had received them at her sixth birthday party from a set of twins with the same names who had attended first grade with her at Highland Park Elementary School. Stacy and Tracy were thin little blond girls, so Brigitte found it fitting to name the Barbies after them. Brigitte had named the third doll, the brunette Barbie, after her mother. Glaring down at the Barbie trio, Brigitte decided that Sofia would be the first to die.

Brigitte snatched up Sofia, and with one shrieking slice of the scissor blades, she snipped off Sofia's hair into a mini bob. She gazed down at the small hairs strewn across the plush green carpet, disappointed with the evidence she had left. Making a mess had not been part of her plan, so she quickly became discouraged that she'd have to clean up this hairy trail.

"Now you sort of look like mommy," she whispered to the doll, grinning as her blue eyes widened with delight. A tiny giggle hiccupped from her mouth. She placed Sofia on her lap, the doll's head dangling off the side of Brigitte's small left leg. She then

repositioned herself to sit Indian-style, the starchy new denim of her acid wash Guess Girl jeans rubbing against themselves as she moved. With her homemade Barbie guillotine, Brigitte's fingers clenched the orange handles, and she snapped the scissors around Sofia's neck.

A thorny, joyous chuckle arose from Brigitte as she watched Sofia's head roll across the floor about a foot. When she realized the volume of her laughter, she tossed the scissors on the floor and slapped her hands over her open lips. Brigitte no longer heard Joey crying, so she leapt up from the floor, pirouetted over to her bedroom doorway, and carefully stuck her head into the hallway. The wide hallway was empty, so she dove back into position above the victims. With quick cuts, she snipped off the dolls' blond hair. She choked Stacy's and Tracy's necks with the scissors until their skinned Barbie heads fell to the floor and bounced along the thick carpet towards Sofia's decapitated head.

When her big blue eyes locked with each of her victims' painted-on blue eyes, Brigitte realized she wasn't yet satisfied. She opened the sharp blades widely and began cutting off pieces of the dolls' arms and legs one-by-one, leaving only the hard plastic torso and hip frames. After this improvised step, Brigitte again leapt into a standing position and kicked all of the body parts into a pile. The Barbies' limbs now seemed too disgusting to touch with her hands, so she used her feet to collect the appendage slices.

Brigitte threw herself on the floor, scraping up the hair follicles and becoming increasingly disappointed when some disappeared into the thick green carpet. When she had a large clump of hair stuffed into her fist, she raced to her closet and flung open the door. On the floor at the rear of her closet was a small, ajar metal toy safe with a padlock to which only she knew the combination. She tossed the hair into the safe and whirled

back around. After checking the hallway again for Nick or her mother, Brigitte rushed back to the body parts and loomed over them. She knew she had no choice but to transfer them from the scene of the crime to her secret hiding place. Brigitte stretched the bottom of her red cotton shirt away from herself and loaded all the severed Barbie limbs into her temporary cloth stretcher. She silently congratulated herself for her resourcefulness. Once inside of her closet again, Brigitte let her shirt flap back against her small belly, allowing the body parts to drop into the open safe. She shut the lid of the safe, hard. This would be a closed casket funeral, she decided, much like the ones to which her father frequently dragged her entire family.

Brigitte closed the closet door calmly, as though she hadn't just committed a triple homicide in her bedroom, and then began walking over to her canopy bed. On her way to the bed, she grabbed Ken, the only survivor. Using the red footstool at the right side of her tall bed, Brigitte hopped up and then lay underneath the red and pink silk cloths that floated above her every night. With the color scheme and heart pattern that her mother had chosen three years prior, it was always Valentines Day in Brigitte's bed. Brigitte may have not agreed with the screamingly girlish decoration of her boudoir, but she did revel in being a princess.

"You're lucky, you know," she said to Ken as she rolled over onto her back, holding her plastic boyfriend above her. "But I love you."

And she did. Brigitte always had a boyfriend. Five years prior, Brigitte's first boyfriend had been Cap'n Crunch, the cartoon pirate whose face was plastered against the side of every Cap'n Crunch cereal box. Before Cap'n Crunch Berries, before Cap'n Crunch's Choco Donuts, and before Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch, there was only single,

plain, unattached but monogamous Cap'n Crunch. Brigitte had taken the cereal box everywhere with her, occasionally pausing in public to smack a kiss on her faithful boyfriend's cardboard face. Now, though, as a refined seven-year-old, Brigitte was dating Ken. She wasn't certain whether she might kill him one day too, but for now, Brigitte cherished that they were in love.

Skeletor and his army of bad guys were ascending quickly upon Castle Grayskull, so Nick prepared He-Man, Teela and Man-At-Arms for battle. The trap door was ready, as was the cannon ball. With these apparatuses in place, Nick knew, *just knew*, that there was no way Skeletor could overtake the castle. Nick was elated that, really, *he* was saving Eternia from Skeletor's evil plans, and not He-Man, the Master of the Universe.

The Battle of Grayskull was fought in Nick's carefully sorted bedroom at least three-to-four times a week. Nick had rehearsed the war so many times that he knew it even better than the alphabet, basic multiplication tables, and the tertiary color wheel he was supposed to be learning in kindergarten. Each time He-Man fought Skeletor, it was the same choreographed battle sequence, with Nick providing his action figures' gestures and voicing the dramatic war cries, grunts and groans of his heroes' strife. Eternia was important; Nick had no time for multiplication tables.

In Nick's world, the good guys always won. He didn't know any different.

In recent weeks, though, Nick had had to make some changes. Characters had disappeared; it seemed that those both teams of the Grayskull battle were losing members daily. Last week, Brigitte had demanded that Nick let her direct the battle, completely disregarding the scrupulous plans that Nick had worked so many months to perfect. Nick

had tried playing along while Brigitte maneuvered Skeletor to kill every member of He-Man's army – his friends, really – until He-Man was the last man standing. To Nick's surprise, though, Brigitte had still allowed He-Man to win, even though her version of the He-Man vs. Skeletor face-off lasted for far less time than Nick had previously produced.

Even stranger to Nick, after Brigitte had commanded the Battle of Grayskull that afternoon, Evil-Lyn, Skeletor's female sidekick, had gone missing. During prior battles, Nick had arranged Evil-Lyn and Teela to fight each other since men fighting against women just seemed wrong to him. Now, whenever battles were underway, Nick positioned Teela to watch on the sidelines, sort of like one of the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders that his father always tried to get Nick to watch with him every Monday night, though Nick had never shown interest in sports.

Nick collapsed on the floor, legs splayed carelessly beneath him, and held Teela above his head. Why can't she fight too?, wondered. He would allow her to win. Nick wanted to brush her hair and make her clothing out of colorful construction paper. It was the female action figures who were his favorites. His parents forbid him to play with his sister's Barbie dolls, so Teela and Evil-Lyn were the only ladies he had. And now that Evil-Lyn was on the lam, Nick was distraught and devoted most of his attention to Teela.

"Nicky!" From an alliance of surprise and embarrassment, Nick's little body popped up from his spot on the floor, his stubby little legs flying out from beneath him. Brigitte had appeared in his doorway. He stared up at her, skeptical of her agenda.

"What are you doing?" Brigitte demanded, still clutching the pair of scissors against her jeans.

"Playing."



“Stupid He-Man again?”

“It’s not stupid” he whispered.

“I have a better game.”

Nick hated leaving his toys, let alone his bedroom. He preferred staying in there all day, alone, without any interruptions or guests. Nick looked up at his sister and mustered a soft but forceful, “No.”

“Yes. Sofia said you have to come play with me.”

“Her name is Mommy. And no she didn’t.”

Brigitte rolled her tongue into a tiny taco before answering. “Okay, fine. She didn’t, really. But you know Sofia likes it when we play together while she’s busy.”

Nick stared at her, blank-faced and helpless to his sister’s demands.

“I have a fun new game,” Brigitte told him.

“What game?”

“It’s called Haircut,” she replied, wrapping her hands behind herself and sticking the secret orange-handled scissors into her back jeans pocket.

“How do you play it?”

“You have to come with me.”

“Come where?”

Brigitte stood with her feet shoulder-length apart. Then she placed her hands on her hips, her right fingers strumming her waist while her left foot tapped the floor, as she had seen her mother do so many times before. “Nikolaus Mauritz Schneider! Come on!”

With the sound of his full name, Nick’s eyes shot open. Brigitte had done it: only Nick’s parents referred to him as Nikolaus Mauritz Schneider, and only when he was in

trouble – which was rare. As he rose from the floor, Nick’s head dropped towards his chest. Like He-Man, the Master of the Universe, he had been defeated and now had to obey his enemy.

“Where are we going?” he inquired.

“Just follow me.” Brigitte led Nick out of his bedroom and then into the bathroom at the end of the hallway before ordering, “Sit down, sir.”

“On the potty?!”

“Yes.”

Nick closed the green carpet-covered lid of the bathroom throne, which matched the bathmat and floor carpet of the entire upstairs, and then sat down as he was instructed.

“Would you like a beverage?” Brigitte asked, just like she had seen the perky, peroxided women inquire at her mother’s elaborate Highland Park salon.

“Huh?”

“Do you want some water?” Brigitte rolled her eyes at her brother’s unwillingness to participate. She fished the scissors out of her back jeans pocket and placed them on the vanity. When Nick nodded his head yes, Brigitte grabbed the blue cup, filled it with water, and handed it to Nick. Their mother had color-coordinated the bathroom with the primary colors: red for Brigitte, blue for Nick, and yellow for Joey. Nick drank from his blue cup, which matched his blue toothbrush, blue toothbrush holder, blue towels and washcloths, blue pajamas and blue robe.

“Done yet?”

“No,” Nick spat between guzzles. Brigitte stood nearby in her finger-strumming, toe-tapping Mom position, waiting. A few moments later, Nick finished his beverage and

handed his cup back to Brigitte. He wiped the excess water from his mouth with his hairless forearm, which he then wiped on his blue corduroys.

“So now what?” Nick asked.

“All you have to do is sit still, just like you’re getting a real haircut.”

“I don’t think I want to play this game.”

“No, Nikolaus, it’s fun!”

All he could do was stare at her, helpless. Without wasting any time, Brigitte grabbed a clump of soft, blond hair from Nick’s floppy bowl cut. Nick closed his eyes, tightly, his face squunching up. He thought that maybe if he shut them hard enough, he could disappear.

“Wow, sir. How long has it been since you’ve had a haircut?”

“What? Brig, we got our hairs cut together last time. You should know.”

“You’re not playing right.”

“Oh. Um. I don’t know, maybe like three days?”

“Yeah, right. More like three weeks.”

“Oh. Okay. Like three weeks.”

When Brigitte had a large clump of loose blond hair stuffed into her fist and Nick had a large square cut out of the hair that draped over his forehead, Brigitte lunged for the garbage can and tossed the loose hairs inside. Then she moved back in front of Nick and placed her hands on his cheeks, attempting to measure what section of his hair needed trimming next. “You have a lot more to go, sir.”

“I do?” Nick replied softly, still refusing to open his eyes.

“*Nicky.*”

“Oh. Sorry. I mean, okay, ma’am.”

Brigitte cut more large squares and triangles from the top and sides of Nick’s hair, turning his floppy hair into a geometric, Picasso-esque disaster. Blond hair wafted onto the tiled floor, the vanity, the green bathmat, and all over Nick. When Brigitte had completed Nick’s haircut, she looked at him, perplexed.

“How’s it look?” Nick asked, his eyes still squunched together into teeny slits.

“Fantastic. Almost done.” The scissors widened in Brigitte’s right hand as she brought them up to Nick’s left ear. When she began slowly closing the blades into each other, Nick first felt the cool, smooth steel against the top of his ear. But when the coolness quickly became a sharp, slicing pain in his rubbery cartilage, Nick screamed so loudly that Brigitte dropped the scissors on the floor and backed up against the wall, with her head just barely underneath the towel rack.

Within seconds, there was banging on the bathroom door and they heard their mother call, “What’s going on in there, y’all!?”

“Mommy, help!” Nick yelped after finally opening his eyes.

“Unlock this door right now!” Standing in the hallway, Sofia shifted Joey to her left hip and jiggled the door handle. Nick flew over to the bathroom door, quickly unlocking it, turning the knob, and yanking it open. When Sofia looked down at her first-born son, she saw a tiny trail of blood trickling down from the top of his ear, just barely thick enough to notice, but still enough for her to grab Nick and pull him towards her. Sofia saw Brigitte leaning up against the wall, trying her best to hide under the towels.

“Did you do this!?” Sofia demanded.

“We were playing a game,” Brigitte pleaded.

"Cutting your little brother is not a game!"

"Nicky, tell her that we were playing a game."

Now safe in his mother's arms, Nick glared at Brigitte and refused to speak.

"Honey, were you playing a game?" Sofia asked Nick. He shook his head *No* and then burrowed it into Sofia's shoulder.

"Brigitte, look at your brother." Still holding Joey against her petite left breast, Sofia inched away from Nick long enough to wipe away the blood from his ear, only to see that the small amount of it was already drying to the cartilage. "Look what you've done to him! He can't leave the house like this! What will people think?! Just imagine what all the neighbors will say if they see him! Now he'll have to stay home from school until his hair starts to grow back!"

This, Nick hadn't realized. A proud smile traipsed across his face and when he turned to his sister again, his smile grew even larger.

"Go to your room," Sofia told Brigitte.

"Why?"

"Brigitte, go to your room *right now*, and don't come out until I tell you to!"

"But my room's boring!"

"NOW!"

"I wish daddy was here instead of *you*, Sofia."

"Well, he's not, so you'll have to listen to me," Sofia hissed, even though she knew fully well that Xavier would have had to fight back laughter about the disaster that his prized daughter, his punkin', had turned their quiet son into. Sofia knew that, had Xavier been there, Brigitte would've gotten off easy.

Brigitte tromped out of the bathroom, past her mother and brothers, and began her trek down the hallway. "I want you to get out your rosary and say fifteen Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers for what you just did!"

"No, Sofia, I hate doing that!"

"Madchen, you do not say such things in this house! You will do it, and you will do it now! And call me 'Mom'!" Even at the opposite end of the hallway, Brigitte could feel her mother breathing fire on her. Nick and Sofia continued watching Brigitte stomp into her bedroom, and then watched the bedroom door slam shut behind her. Sofia pulled Nick a few inches away from her and yelled down the hallway, "Little girl, you have until the count of three to open that door."

The door remained shut and Brigitte offered no response from the other side of it.

"One."

Nothing.

"Two."

Still no movement from Brigitte's bedroom door. But when Sofia hollered "Thr...", the door flung open and Brigitte stood in the doorway, her arms folded tightly against her chest. Sofia stared: her daughter looked infinitesimal beneath the hallway's twelve-foot ceiling; so delicate, so harmless, but *so* angry. She wondered why Brigitte always seemed to be infuriated with her on what seemed a daily basis. Other mothers and daughters in Highland Park were teams. They did things together. They dressed alike, went to high tea at the Ritz-Carlton together, went shopping for matching shoes at Northpark Mall. But not Sofia and Brigitte. Brigitte *only* preferred her father, no matter how hard Sofia tried understanding her daughter's mischievous behavior. Sofia knew

instinctively that parents were not supposed to have favorites, but early-on she had decided that Brigitte was not even in the running. Brigitte may have already secured Xavier's vote for favorite child, but until she showed her mother some respect, until she halted her anti-mom etiquette, Sofia would endlessly campaign for her boys.

"*Brigitte?* Rosary. Now." Sofia rose and ushered Nick back into the bathroom to clean off his ear. From the stack of washcloths on the vanity, Sofia selected a blue one and wet it under the tall polished silver spout.

"Here, hold your brother," she told Nick, bending down towards him.

"Really?"

"Careful, just make sure you keep his head supported in the curve of your elbow. Remember how?"

"Yeah, okay. I 'member."

Sofia extended her arms and placed Joey into Nick's stiff arm cradle. Nick beamed down at his baby brother. Joey creaked for a few more seconds while Nick held him, but then Nick spurted, "Mommy, he stopped crying!"

"I guess you've got the magic touch, Nicky. Hold him tight. C'mere." She placed the washcloth over Nick's ear and wiped off the crusty blood. When his ear was clean, she opened the cabinet door and tossed the washcloth into the small wicker hamper inside. "Nicky..."

"Huh?"

"You look atrocious."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, it's not your fault, obviously. But we're going to have to make a hair appointment for you tomorrow and pray, pray, pray that they can do something. Even if they have to shave it all off and let it grow back."

"Eww."

"Well, honey, it'll grow back."

"Mm-kay."

"What were you two doing in here, anyway?" Sofia leaned against the countertop and sighed.

"Mommy, she just told me to come. She said we were gonna play Haircut."

"What?"

"Haircut. It's a game."

"Another one of Brigitte's games, I presume."

"Uh-huh." Nick's gaze did not unfocus from Joey once, so proud that he had been able to get his little brother to stop crying.

"Well, never play that game again. And I'll tell her the same thing."

"Mm-kay. Is Brigitte in big trouble now?"

"That's between your sister, God and me. C'mon, let's go put Joey down for a nap. Be careful with him while you walk down the hallway."

"Can I put him in his crib?"

"No, silly, you can't reach that high."

"But mommy, I'm almost as tall as you are."

"Smartalic."



"Well, I am, almost!" Nick giggled loudly as Sofia led her boys back down the hallway. After placing Joey into his crib and returning Nick to his magical kingdom of toys, Sofia once again found herself abandoned and lonely in her own home.

\* \* \*

Nick sat on the middle of the staircase, crouching down against the wooden dowels of the railing. When he had heard to the door from the garage slam shut, he crawled down the hallway to anxiously overhear what his sister's punishment would be. In order to better eavesdrop on his parents, Nick slid on his belly further down the carpeted steps, attempting to remain out of sight. He heard his mother say, "Are you kidding me? She could have hurt him worse."

"Sofia, you know Brigitte would never *really* hurt him. Besides, he could use a little scare once in a while," Xavier spouted, pacing impatiently around the dining room. He occasionally turned to catch Sofia's glower, making sure that she saw his eye-rolls.

"Are you even listening to yourself? This is your *son*. Your own son that we're talking about."

"He stays up in that bedroom, all day long. He never wants to play ball with any of the other boys who hang out in the cul-de-sac at the end of the street. All he ever wants to play with is the fat girl next door."

"Oh, great, now you're being rude to the neighbors' children, too, as if being rude to your own kids isn't enough. And Heather is not *that* fat."

"Sofia, Nick's turning into a *ficken fotze*."

"Do not speak to me that way. Not in this house." Sofia rose, thrusting her chair back from where she sat at the head of the dining table. She placed her hands sternly on

the table, knocking into a pile of utility and credit card bills, bank statements, envelopes, stamps, and their large dual checkbook. When she remembered that she was standing directly in front of the trio of bay windows in the dining room, she snatched each of the curtain ties away from the hooks on the wall, letting each heavy curtain collapse against the window. Like always, she would not allow anyone see what was going on behind the closed doors and draped windows of her family's home.

"Well, he's growing up now and needs to start being a goddamned man." Xavier seized the other end of the table, squaring off with his wife.

"He is a five year old. Let him be a child! And what is wrong with you? Do not take the Lord's name in vain. Not in this house you don't."

"When I was his age – "

"Xavier, when you were his age, you lived on a farm in Waco and played with chickens and cows. Do *not* forget where *you* came from."

"Oh, so now you're going to turn this around and insult me."

"Actually, no, *you* did that. And this not about you. This is about *your children*."

"Well, it was *you* who just brought up my background, once again, just so you could throw your bourgeoisie queen bullshit in my face again. Just because my parents came to this country with no money and yours did. Always reminding me..."

"What are you even talking about?" Sofia now screamed, which stupefied Xavier. He was the screamer and was only comfortable that way. His wife was the quiet, controlled parent, and it unhinged him whenever they switched roles.

Xavier paused and then announced: "I am through with this conversation."

“Fine. But go talk to your daughter. I would ask you to go speak to your son, but not with the way you’re acting.”

“My son? My son, my son, my son. My *son* is probably upstairs in my daughter’s room, playing with her *fickin* dolls again.”

Sofia threw her hands up in the air. “I refuse to speak to you anymore. I mean, at least not until dinner, when we actually have to *pretend* to still like each other.”

“I love you, Sofia.”

“Don’t even try. Not now. Don’t mock me, I don’t want to hear it. Please get away from me. I’m going to start dinner.”

“Where’s the *verdammt* maid?”

“I gave Helga the night off.” Sofia altered her tone from angry to cynical, suggesting that her husband was hopeless. “I hope you’ll stop cursing by the time our children are at the dinner table. With you around, Joey’s first word will be profane.”

“I had a rough day.”

“Well, so did I, which is what I’m trying to tell you!”

“We’ve got a lot going on right now at work, you know. A bunch of my employees haven’t been so good lately...”

“I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know, I don’t want to know, I do *not* want to know. You know that I will not discuss your business. *I will not*. My mother never had to hear it, and I won’t either.”

Xavier replied with only a nefarious smile and turned to leave the dining room.

On the staircase, when Nick saw his father crossing the foyer towards the living room, he crawled back up to the top of stairs, slinking down as low as he could smush his

little body against the carpeted steps. Before his father reached the top of the staircase, Nick crawled down the hallway, back into the safety of his own bedroom, back into his lavish, colorful world of escape. He climbed atop the He-Man comforter that spread across his bed, closed his eyes, curled into a ball, and prayed that his father wasn't coming upstairs to visit him.

"Hi punkin'," Xavier said as he walked into Brigitte's room.

Brigitte lay on her bed, half-asleep in between a *Ramona Quimby* book and her red rosary. When Brigitte heard Xavier's voice, she straightened up in bed and put on her best adorable smile. "Hi daddy," she said, flitting her eyelashes.

"So..." he started.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Your mother is not happy."

"I know. Sofia yelled at me."

"Well, you did cut your brother." Xavier sat on the edge of his daughter's bed and put his hand on her calf.

"Have you seen him yet?" Brigitte asked.

"Not yet."

"Well. Daddy. He looks *fabulous*."

"Your mother doesn't seem to think so."

She shrugged. "I didn't mean to hurt him. I just thought he needed a haircut."

"But, punkin'...you're not a haircutter."

"I know..." Brigitte provided Xavier a pouty smile and inched closer towards him.

"Do want to lay down with me?"

"Okay, but only for a minute. I'm kind of dirty from work." Xavier pictured himself standing in the back warehouse of the Schneider Building Co, stepping over the tributary of thick blood that seeped from the chest of Volkmar Metzgar, one of the men he had killed today. He saw himself and one of his *soldats* dragging the dead body over to the corner of the warehouse so the *soldat* could hack off Metzgar's limbs and dispose of them soon after. For a second, Xavier considered not climbing into bed with his daughter and touching her with the same hands he had used to pick up Volkmar Metzgar's bloody foot when the jagged, obtuse bone protruding from Metzgar's tibia got caught on strings of bloody nerve tissue.

He stepped away from his daughter. "Punkin, I need to shower before dinner."

"Daddy, I don't even want dinner. Sofia probably won't even give me any, anyway."

"Mom. And I'm sure she will. You need to eat."

"C'mon, please lie down with me for a second."

Although he had already washed his hands multiple times at his office, Xavier wiped them on his khakis as he looked down at his seductive second grader. Then he climbed into bed behind Brigitte, spooning her. Xavier's large, muscled body made up for his lack of height; he felt like a protective giant compared to his dainty eldest child.

"Punkin, you can't do things like that anymore."

She looked away and tried playing innocent. "Things like what?"

"Brigitte, the haircut. You know what I'm talking about."

“Okay, fine.” She paused and thought for a moment. “Why not?”

“Because it’s just not right. What will everyone say when they see Nikolaus?”

“Why are you and Sofia...*Mom*...always soooooo worried about what everyone else thinks?”

“Punkin, our family is a little bit different from everyone else’s.”

“But *everyone’s* family is different from everyone else’s.”

“True. And with that in mind, as you and your brothers get older, y’all have got to realize more and more that we can’t just do things like cutting off each other’s ears.” Xavier said this in a jokey tone, prompting Brigitte to giggle against his stomach. He often employed this cutesy, sarcastic tone with his children, not just for entertainment value, but because he didn’t know how else to hide their family history from them. “Look,” he continued, “Our family is indeed *different*. You will understand more when you’re older, but for now just worry about yourself. Worry about school and gymnastics and dance classes and your math competitions and everything else you get involved in. But punkin?”

“Yes?” she sang, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Especially when you three get older, y’all have got to realize that we can’t give people reasons to talk about us. You know, in a bad way. And punkin?”

“Yes, daddy?”

“You’re in charge.”

“Okay...? But wait. Why would people talk about us in a bad way?”

“I’m just saying. I mean, that may be the case with any family. But with ours, you can never be too careful about what people say.” Xavier realized he was tripping over his

words, struggling to hide just the right amount of information. He reemployed his jokey tone and finished with, “Anyway, you already know you’re perfect. Act like it!” He nudged her and then tickled the side of her hip.

“Okay, daddy,” she giggled. “I’ll be perfect. I promise. I’ll be soooo perfect, and you’ll be so, so, so proud of me.” Brigitte rolled over and kissed her father hard on the lips. Xavier didn’t kiss back, but he didn’t pull away, either.

When Xavier left Brigitte’s room, he walked down the long hallway, through his bedroom, and into the master bathroom. He wondered if his daughter was already kissing little boys her own age. If she let little boys touch or kiss her at school? If anyone was taking advantage of her? As he removed his khakis, thankful that they were free of bloodstains, Xavier most wondered how he would possibly ever accept when his little punkin’ had a husband, or even a boyfriend...a real lover. A man who was not him.

#### Chapter 4: *Der Vermittler (The Mediator)*, Manhattan, 2008

The automatic doors of St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital slid open and Nikolaus marched inside. His taxi had slugged up 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue through rush hour traffic and mobs of pedestrians, but inside the lobby of St. Luke's, only the guard was present, waiting for someone to give him something to do. Nick vacantly announced, "Hi. I'm supposed to visit someone in the mental ward. Would you please tell me where the wackos are?"

The guard shot Nick a dismissive glare and answered in monotone, "7<sup>th</sup> floor."

He wore a nametag that said only *Victor*. Victor asked Nick for photo identification. Just to amuse himself, Nick handed over his old Columbia University student ID. Victor's face changed from accusatory to empathetic for the seemingly young college boy standing before him. Nick chuckled to himself about how *everyone* always mistook him for someone at least five, sometimes ten years younger, and then he snatched the St. Luke's guest pass with which Victor presented him.

Victor's long, wrinkled face reminded Nick of an overdrawn West Village street map and his hair was three shades of gray. Nick knew that, to Victor, he must have looked about 12 years old. Even in his stretch poplin light blue button down shirt, his skinny tie of a darker blue, and his navy slacks, at 26 years old, Nick knew he looked like he was just "playing" work when he left for the midtown branch of the Paramount Pictures production studios office every morning. He knew this because everyone reacted to his appearance this way.

Nick thanked Victor for pointing him down the hallway and walked towards the barren elevator corridor. Only a few lone visitors remained. To Nick, these disheveled, craggly people appeared as though they lived in the hospital instead of just stopping by



for the evening. They were not his people, and he questioned how he had possibly come to be in the same situation as they were tonight.

Bored and impatient, Nick removed his iPhone from the top pouch of his navy messenger bag and tapped the home screen before opening his email account. He routinely began deleting emails from public relations agents' names he recognized who always pitched him crappy stories about seeing bands he would never cover, independent films he knew his senior producers would never promote on the air, or no-name comics who were just that to the rest of his American viewing public: no-names. Nick sighed when he noticed an email from his mother. When he looked at the thick opaque light of the elevator floor indicator and it was still highlighted on 7, he opened the email.

He rolled his eyes at the vagueness of his mother's email. She always worded her communication like this, purposely trying to lure her children to respond quickly in order to find out the important hidden meaning of her ambiguous messages. Nick rarely fell for Sofia's suggestive sentences, mainly because he knew Brigitte always felt responsible enough to answer them. Whenever Sofia emailed the three of them collectively, Nick considered their response time to be Brigitte's duty first, but if Brigitte didn't respond quickly enough, then Nick would eventually cave and continue the communication. After all, he knew Joey never would, since his younger frat boy brother could literally go weeks without checking his email – especially if said emails were from Sofia. And since Brigitte hadn't yet replied to their mother's unexplained plea, Nick plopped his iPhone back into his bag.

When the elevator chimed to the bottom floor, Nick waltzed on and hit the seven button. Ordinarily inside of an empty elevator, which, in Manhattan, he rarely got the

chance to experience, Nick would do handstands against the walls or sing angry Fiona Apple songs or re-tuck his shirt or talk to himself. But not tonight. Instead, he stood there, staring at the closed doors as the elevator brought him up. He was beyond agitated by the reason why he was visiting the mental ward of a prominent Manhattan hospital on a Tuesday night. Before the smudged metal doors parted ways, Nick looked at his reflection: his eyes pressed into the front of their sockets, his teeth grinded, and his nostrils flared. He hadn't exploded yet but knew his fuse wouldn't last much longer.

He stepped into a long white tiled hallway with no directions or pretty signs telling him where to go. The only sound he heard was his own Kenneth Cole boots clanking down the tiled linoleum floor, carrying him towards where he felt obligated to go. Part of him wanted to turn around, go back and insecurely chat up Victor some more, and then hop back into the cab that had brought him here, like all of this was a joke. And to Nick, it kind of was.

When he reached the end of the empty white hallway, he found a non-windowed door with a buzzer next to it. Again: no signs, no instructions, no phone on the wall, no flowery Monet replicas hanging on the painfully white walls, nothing. Blankness. Boredom. Death. Nick pulled his messenger bag towards his fluttery stomach, leaned against the wall, and laughed softly to himself. He then exaggeratedly stuck out his erect index finger – he consciously acted this way even when no one was watching – and punched the doorbell for longer than necessary. After he sighed in disgust a few times, a gruff, tough black woman shoved open the door. Barely acknowledging Nick's presence in her ward, she waddled back towards the wrap-around attendant's desk.

“Good evening!” Nick answered, as he followed the attendant, waiting impatiently for her to tell him that all of this was nonsense. He wanted this woman to give him a prize for coming to visit his boyfriend in an out-patient mental hospital, and to just send him home alone, without Kyle. Without Kyle *ever* coming home to their apartment in Chelsea. For visiting his boyfriend here, Nick wanted this woman to give him a sweepstakes prize in the form of a ten billion dollar check or a surprise vacation to Mykonos or at least the latest new goddamned Cuisinart kitchen appliance collection. Just for showing up at this dreadful place, Nick figured that he deserved to win something because once he walked through that door and past this woman, he would feel like as big of a loser as he admittedly thought Kyle was.

For dealing with Kyle’s Peter Pan-like childishness, what Nick and his fellow Ivy League-educated friends drolly referred to as “Kyle’s Freudian orgy of arrested development, borderline personality disorder, and narcissism,” Nick *really* needed to see that sweepstakes prize. He needed some Adonises in Speedos to shove past this hospital attendant, give him eight bouquets of flowers and a tiara, and present him with what he deserved for walking through this large door and onto another fucking planet.

“I gotta search yer bag,” the attendant said.

“Sure,” Nick said, opening his messenger bag, making sure there wasn’t anything contraband inside. Nick stood there, wondering exactly when the day came that instead of (a) being embarrassed that only textbooks and homework were in his bag, (b) he now had to make sure there weren’t any illegal drugs or drug paraphernalia lingering inside.

“Who you here to see?” the attendant asked, blank-faced and not looking up.

Nick looked her straight in the eyes, and with proud contempt in his voice, he answered, "Kyle Ruziero." The nurse rifled through charts and folders to see who this Kyle Ruziero person was. Nick laughed aloud. Kyle thought he was a celebrity wherever he went, even though Nick knew damn well that Kyle rarely made a lasting impression upon anyone. In every situation Kyle pranced into, he acted like a Hollywood starlet and primmed and preened for a non-existent camera. Nick knew he'd be doing the same here.

"What's his name again? When did he get here?" the attendant asked Nick. Nick chuckled at the lack of celeb status that Kyle had accomplished thus far with his latest performance in his crazy person role, currently starring onstage at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in midtown.

"Dumbass," Nick accidentally said aloud.

"Ex-kuh-use me!?" the attendant said.

"Sorry," Nick retreated, grinning and then cracking his neck side-to-side. "I was talking about Kyle. His last name is Ruziero. He's been here since sometime this afternoon. I don't know exactly when. I didn't even know he was here until his born-again holy-roller brother called me from Chicago and told me to go rescue him."

The nurse finally looked up at Nick but she was not pleased. "Are you sure you should be goin' in there? You don't sound too happy."

Nick beamed. "I am positive that I should be going in there."

She lowered her head, glaring disciplinarily, and asked, "Did you bring the patient anything?"

The Patient, Nick repeated in his head. *The Patient*. Nick rolled his eyes because he knew that "The Patient" was simply more filler for Kyle to be treated like he was

starring in *Girl, Interrupted* or *She Flew Over Her Cuckoo's Nest*. Nick thought, *Kyle is probably behind the closed doors at the end of the hallway, practicing his never-to-be-spoken-in-public Oscar acceptance speech.*

"Yes. I brought...*the patient*...some deodorant and cigarettes." The attendant was okay with this and asked Nick to sign in as a visitor.

"You've only got a little over an hour left," she said, "we close at eight tonight."

"That's fine," Nick said, desperately wishing they closed at seven instead. The attendant led Nick through a metal detector and then to a set of double doors. She pushed open the doors and told him he could enter alone at this point.

"To your left is the Day Room," she said, pointing down another long hallway.

"*The Day Room?!*" Nick blurted, unaware that he over-enunciated each syllable.

"Yes. The Day Room. He's probably in there. If not, his room number is 18." She held open the door as Nick stuck his head through before allowing his body to proceed.

"Thanks," Nick chirped. His boots tramped cautiously into the hallway leading to the Day Room. There was no one in his immediate vicinity, but down the white hallway, Nick could see patients in white pants and white shirts sitting on the white floor or wandering around. He swallowed a huge gulp of nothing and began marching slowly down the hallway. *I should be used to this*, Nick told himself, *if fucking Kyle can deal with these people, then I sure as hell can too.* Nick needed to find Kyle's pretty eyes and petite body so he could feel something, anything, besides pure, absolute, animalistic hate about the *idea* of Kyle. Lately, Nick abhorred him when Kyle was just a concept; in-person though, Nick fell in lust again, recklessly telling himself that this was love.

The patients came into clearer view as Nick approached the Day Room. One man, who Nick noticed looked in his early-30s, childlike and very Bronx Italian, sat on the floor, talking to himself. Another heavysset patient sat diagonally across from him, also on the floor, staring off into space, and occasionally reaching into midair to swat away whatever he was hallucinating. When Nick made his way closer to them, the Italian man jumped up and said, "Gotta smoke, man?"

"No, sorry, man, I don't," Nick lied, clutching his bag against his side.

"You're Eminem!" the man said, thrilled. "Hey Marty!" he said to the fat, hallucinating man, "Eminem's here!"

"I'm...not...Eminem," Nick said, brushing back his short blond hair.

"You sure? You sure you're not Eminem?"

"Yeah," Nick said, nearly becoming unglued, "I am not Eminem. I swear."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Yes...I am sure." Nick smiled uneasily. About a dozen or so patients were scattered around on a few couches, at a card table, and another on the floor. Two of them played cards at the table while the rest of them were entranced with the television, which showed *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Nick's attention escaped for a few seconds as he watched Matthew Broderick and Jeffrey Jones having a cinematic phone conversation about cutting class. For just a few coveted seconds, Nick considered that Ferris Bueller and his fictional principal were far more realistic than all of the living, breathing people who sat before him.

Nick scanned the room until he found Kyle, sitting at the edge of one of the couches, with his knees pulled up into his chest, hugging himself fondly and fixated on

the movie. Nick had seen this sight dozens upon dozens of times when he had walked into their apartment after work – Kyle curled up on the couch watching anything and everything on television.

And it was confirmed for Nick: being here was no different for Kyle. It was just another couch, another television, another opportunity for Kyle to be in his own timeless moment, in love with himself, ignorant that anyone else in the room even existed. While Nick told himself to feel better about his crashing reality in order to harbor the situation in which he was submersed, he considered if Kyle *really* thought that he was in another Kyle Movie, one where his supporting players were just “acting” crazy for him.

I don’t belong here, Nick thought, this is not *my* life. Nick approached Kyle and called his name. Kyle didn’t turn around when Nick called him, so he said his name again, louder this time, with more force and off-pitched embarrassment. When Kyle finally acknowledged Nick’s presence, he turned around and beamed at his boyfriend.

Nick watched Kyle leap off the sofa and prance towards him on tippy-toes. He threw himself atop Nick, attempting to seduce everyone in the room into watching their extraordinary reunion. Nick could not hug back. While Kyle hadn’t seen Nick in less than two days, Nick thought Kyle was acting as though Nick had come to visit him after a long, hard, victorious war. Kyle was the poor farm lady left behind to care for the plantation and the cows, pigs and chickens, and in his mind, Nick was there to comfort him, to tell Kyle how brave he was while Nick lived a real life. To Nick, Kyle’s embrace was repulsive. While he watched Kyle flouncing about like a high school drama queen vying for her trophy, Nick wanted to pry off each of Kyle’s limbs and replace him on the couch.

"I'm so glad you're here!" Kyle said, leaning forward and kissing Nick's lips.

"Good," Nick answered, barely managing to slit out the word through his forced half-grin. He pushed Kyle off of him and glanced around, mortified of being watched.

"We can go into a private room if you want! There are a few down the other hallway, towards the bedrooms, or we can go into my room, but my roommate's probably there, and he'll totally want to talk to us too, and he's always begging me for cigarettes I don't have, so we should probably just use a private room if no one else is in there, otherwise we'll have to stay in here but I don't want to do that cuz I've been in here all afternoon watching TV and these people are kind of annoying sometimes and I'm sorta tired of TV anyway so I think we should just pop around the corner and go in, okay? Cool..." After listening to Kyle's monologue, Nick could only nod in agreement. Kyle clutched Nick's hand and pulled him down the hallway and into a private visitation room.

Nick was led into a small, windowed room, about 10x10, and was surprised to see that the blinds were drawn and shut on each of the windows. Instantly, he was worried that some wacko would come in there, begin harassing him and Kyle if they got too homo-physically close, and try to hurt them. He had no choice but to trust Kyle's loony bin expertise, so he followed Kyle's lead by taking a seat at the rectangular table in the center of the room.

Nick heard a ringside announcer in his head: On the offensive side of the table sat Kyle, a high-school dropout, who had been twice rehabilitated for smoking crack, and never once had a job that didn't require him to be paid in cash. He "had" to smoke himself up with pot every night before passing out, had absolutely no future hopes to do anything (besides the ludicrous notion that he would one day be on *Saturday Night Live*,



although no one considered him to be even remotely humorous), and thought the *National Enquirer* was legitimate literature. His credit was ruined for the rest of his life, he was declined from opening an account at every major bank in Chicago and New York, and he had been a chain smoker since he was 10. He had pretty eyes with long, long eyelashes, like an androgynous gigolo, and he could shower his 5'5 body three dozen times in one morning and somehow still look filthy.

The fantasy announcer continued: On the defensive side of the table sat Nikolaus, who wasn't much taller at 5'7, whose suburban Dallas image prohibited him from ever looking like he hadn't just wandered out of church. Nick had worked his ass off during college and grad school as a production assistant, lugging around camera and lighting equipment twice as heavy as himself, and taking orders from self-obsessed producers and directors in the entertainment industry who crushed him with wordy threats daily, but was now the youngest television producer that *Hollywood Today!*, his glamorous, internationally-syndicated news show, had ever hired. He had gladly exchanged his fabulous club-kid college days for a great salary and notoriety in the television world, and traveled for work between New York and Los Angeles every few months.

Even here, even right now, Nick considered that this situation and all of the characters he had encountered thus far, him included, would make an incredible Reality TV show: *The Mental Hospital*.

"Why are you sitting so far away? Do I smell?" Kyle joked. Nick hadn't noticed that he had sat in the seat farthest from Kyle. Kyle rose from his chair, grabbed the seat closest to Nick, and pulled it over to him.

“Hi,” Kyle said, batting his eyelashes. Nick now realized that all his boyfriend wanted to do was play musical chairs and flirt with him. *Hi? Hiiiiiii? Fucking Hi?* Nick said inside of his head since he knew he couldn’t say it aloud. He wanted to explode but knew he’d be reprimanded, that Nick alone would have to clean up another Kyle Mess.

Nick was growing frustrated with his own overwhelming escapism, wholly unable to focus on his current situation. Like usual, his mind wandered tangentially, attempting to keep himself out of trouble. Nick had been thrown out numerous places in Manhattan – for repeatedly smoking on the dance floor of the Pink Elephant despite the NYC smoking ban; for accidentally barfing in the front couch circle at Verlaine after having had too much to drink and not admitting that he’d had too much to drink; for accidentally barfing directly *onto* the bar at the Sullivan Room after having taken too many hits of ecstasy and having too much to drink and not admitting that he’d taken too many hits of ecstasy and had too much to drink; for telling the chef that his vegan food at Counter tasted like “rhino shit” after being asked how his meal was; for being overheard by a black bus driver while threatening to “shoot” the black teenager who had unsuccessfully tried picking his pocket on the Hampton Jitney; for completely undressing in a yellow cab (he was late to cover a film premiere after leaving the office and, in his mind, had no choice but to change clothes in the cab – *and* had been out of clean underwear that morning); for trying on children’s clothing inside the dressing room at the H&M Kids on 34<sup>th</sup> St. when a random mother accused him of spying on her 8-year-old daughter (he had accidentally walked into this particular fitting room because the girl hadn’t locked the door); for screaming at an employee at the D.M.V. who made some clerical mistakes while processing his application and told him he’d have to come back again after he had

already stood in line for two hours; for losing his temper with City Hall employees when he had showed up for Jury Duty and they told him that he'd be on a jury for the two weeks that he had already planned his latest Berlin vacation; for looting through the closet of Mariah Carey's five-story townhouse on the Upper West Side during an interview when she had excused herself to the restroom (he was trying to increase the evidence in his story); for sneaking into *Notes on a Scandal* after already watching *The Departed* at the Regal Union Square Cinema because he didn't feel like going down three floors to pay again, and also hadn't wanted to spend time with Kyle at home that day – but never before had he been told to leave a loony bin, and promised himself that today would not be the day.

“Hello,” Nick finally answered.

“I'm so glad you came. How did you possibly find me here!?”

*And so the accolades begin*, Nick thought.

“Well, Anne Frank...” Nick began slowly, “your bible-toting brother called me at work and told me where you were...after you called him...and told him that you were here...and gave him my phone number...and told him to call me...and come get you. *That's how I knew.*” Like so many times before, he patted Kyle's head like a puppy.

“Oh,” Kyle said. Nick saw in Kyle's drooping face that he was disappointed the cops, every news channel above the equator, and Nick especially hadn't been scouring the planet looking for him. Instead, the past two nights, Nick had gone to sleep peacefully, and had no problem convincing himself that Kyle was just on another 48-hour partying and drug binge.

“Why'd you just call me Anfrank? Who's Anfrank?”

"Never mind," Nick said, his eyes glossing over Kyle, wondering which drug it was that had ruined his boyfriend more than the others. He tousled Kyle's hair and wondered how Kyle had managed to stay alive so long. Nick wondered if death might suit Kyle better, since life had so obviously been an unkind match.

Kyle kept batting his eyes and looking around the room. Then he asked, "Did you bring my cigarettes?"

"Yes."

"Well, can I have them now?"

Nick reached into his bag and produced a pack of Marlboro Menthols.

"So, I want to tell you why I'm here," Kyle began. Nick remained silent.

"I called the paramedics because I wanted to kill myself, and they took me here."

"You can actually call the paramedics, tell them that you want to kill yourself, and they'll *really* come pick you up!?"

"Yeah, why?"

"That just sounds...."

"Don't you want to know why?" Kyle begged.

"Yes. Yes, Kyle, I do. Please. Illuminate me."

"I just knew that you were going to leave me. I thought you weren't ever going to come home from work the other day and I would've been all alone."

"And why did you think that?"

"Because you went out without me on Sunday night. Again."

"Kyle? I had a shoot on Sunday night. I was at a film premiere."

"I know. But I thought that maybe you'd go out with someone else afterwards. Someone you met there, like a cameraman or a sound guy or those production assistant people you talk about all the time."

"Kyle? I work with those people every day. I rarely hang out with them after shoots. They're all *straight*! And? I came home directly after the premiere..."

"When you answered...you said, 'Sorry, I am, like, way too busy right now, I gotta talk to you later,' and then you hung up on me."

"Kyle, I was about to interview Jack Nicholson. He was approaching me on the press line. Normally I don't even answer my phone...! Look... I'm sorry I hung up on you, but if I hadn't gotten him on the press line, I probably would've lost my job."

"I wanted to tell you that I love you and that you're amazing because of your job and that I couldn't live without you. But I couldn't because you wouldn't talk to me."

"Really? Because, Kyle, you haven't said anything...like that."

"Oh," he answered, defeated. Kyle only called Nick to run errands for him on his way home, or to ask Nick to look something up online because he wouldn't figure out how to himself, or to remind Nick that he was waiting at home, watching TV and smoking pot all day. Day after day, Nick longed for his assistant to tell him that lines one, two or three of his office phone had rung because some highly successful and ambitious PR or TV Exec had called to invite him out after work, and to confess a heartfelt crush over filthy Ketel One martinis and bruschetta at some upscale hotel bar in midtown, like the Gansevoort, the Hotel on Rivington, or even the Hudson, for fuck's sake.

"Kyle...wait...you wanted kill to yourself because I couldn't talk to you?"

"Yes. Because you're always too busy for me."

"I talk to you at least four times a day at work!"

"Well, that's not enough for me."

"Kyle...I have a very busy job...we talk more than anyone I know in my office...my boss doesn't even talk to her husband as much as I talk to you during the day, and she's the bureau chief of the New York office."

"But you should make more time for me."

"I do! I mean, when I come home. And I take you everywhere with me when I leave the office."

"Yeah, and that's something else that bothers me. When we're out at restaurant openings and premiere parties and people ask me, 'What do you do?', I lie."

"Why?"

"Because they look at me like I'm an idiot and walk away. Like...the other week...when we were at the reopening of the Waverly Inn and I was talking to some guy? Well, he asked what I do for a living..."

"Yeah?"

"And I said that I'm an actor?" Nick cautiously rolled his eyes at the fictitious 'actor' word that Kyle so loved tossing around. Kyle prided himself on being *An Actor*, and told everyone that he was one whenever he accompanied Nick to press parties and restaurant openings. However, Kyle had never been to an audition in New York, and hadn't been in a play since he was the prissy son in a community theatre production of *Six Degrees of Separation* in suburban Champagne-Urbana, IL at 16 years of age. Once, when stoned out of his mind, Kyle had confessed to Nick that within the two-and-a-half hour play, his scene lasted approximately five minutes, but he still waited outside the

theatre afterwards to sign autographs for senior citizens who had blinked and missed his stirring performance altogether.

“Yeah?” Nick cringed.

“And he asked me what I’ve been in? And I said, ‘Nothing recently, but I’m getting ready to audition for some things, and in the meantime, I work at Mars 2112.’” Nick pictured Kyle in his alien costume at this Times Square theme restaurant that reluctantly employed him twice weekly. He then began wondering precisely when Kyle’s concept of reality vs. fantasy had become so blurred, or if it had ever even existed. “Well?” Kyle continued, “He just walked away.”

“Kyle, that has nothing to do with me. Maybe you’re insecure about your job.”

“No I’m not! I love being an actor.”

Nick wondered when Kyle was going to stop lying to himself. Kyle radiated the glittery star quality that Nick so aspired to have within himself, the same quality of the celebrities he interviewed and worshipped daily. Kyle was beautiful and lost, and Nick loved that about him. He always had a date for the awards shows and premieres he covered, so actively finding another guy was unnecessary. Nick was the clubby strobe light in the center of Kyle’s arrogant confusion, and he felt congratulatorily proud for repeatedly “saving” him. Kyle’s big green eyes and adorable chunk of a slim but untuned body seduced Nick for mediocre sex near-nightly, and he just couldn’t free himself from thinking of Kyle as a prize instead of a hindrance.

“Kyle,” Nick said quietly, “if you liked your job...or your life...you wouldn’t be...here...in this place.” Finally, Kyle was silent. He looked away from Nick, gazed into the hallway, and then stared hungrily at the pack of Marlboro Menthols. Nick wondered

if Kyle wished he was back in one of his beloved hometown Chicago crack houses. He considered that Kyle would be happier there, amongst the doomed locals with whom he grew up and supposedly rehabilitated. Kyle's face told him *Yes* regarding this question, but he knew that Kyle's ego would never allow him to return to Chicago. Kyle was too busy being a "star" for his audience of childish Chicago friends from afar, treating them with fanciful phoned-in stories and lies of NYC fabulous clubdom.

Every morning, once the drugs wore off and Kyle's hangover set in, Nick knew that Kyle was merely average...boring, even. Nick's return to reality morning after morning was a quick shower, a venti coffee with two extra shots of espresso and nonfat soy milk from the Starbucks on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, and a short ride on the C/E train to his office. Nick realized fully that Kyle had no true talent for anything but being an addict and a wanna-be socialite, but in Manhattan, these qualities got him nowhere between the hours of 4am to 10pm. Thus, Kyle had a gaping 18-hour time span every day to be an aimless nobody, and this was something that he was barely capable of handling.

"Kyle, our lives are very different," Nick continued. "You're not like me...and that's why I...love...you. I wouldn't want you to be like me. You're much freer and...less controlling..." He placed his hand on Kyle's mushy thigh and squeezed gently.

"Oh, Nikolaus! I love you too. But I didn't know what to do that night or any other night. I just never know what to do, I guess."

"I know you don't," Nick said, wondering if this was really true, "that's why I'm here to help you."

"Okay. Good. And that's why you have to help me more."



Nick felt floor-to-ceiling prison bars shoot down on all four sides of him. “Kyle? How long are you staying here? When are you coming home?”

“I want to come home. But I told them I’d stay here for the rest of the week so I could get better. But I also told them I want you to be home more. I told the therapists I’m here because of you.”

“What?”

“Well, when they asked why I felt that I needed to come here, I told them the truth – that it’s your fault. I told them how horribly you treat me.”

Nick had to get the hell out of St. Luke’s before he exploded everywhere into fiery pieces of himself. He couldn’t even look at Kyle anymore. “Kyle, you know I can’t be home as much as you want. I pay our entire rent and work all the time because I love my job and the lifestyle it gives me.” He cleared his throat loudly. “That it gives us.”

“I know. But you can’t spend too much time away. You’re the reason I’m here. It’s not my fault. You still have to change.” Kyle bent over the arm of his chair and kissed Nick’s lips. Nick didn’t kiss back. Instead, he pulled away in disgust. “Oh, also,” Kyle continued, “they were asking me if I’m on my domestic partner’s insurance plan since I don’t have insurance. So tomorrow you need to put me on your insurance, I guess. Don’t forget. I mean, I can’t afford this, and it’s not my fault that I’m in here.”

Nick’s spine hardened. A hospital attendant walked into the private room and announced that visiting hours were over in ten minutes.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be home soon, like Friday or something,” Kyle promised.

Nick darted so fast down the hallway that every attendant he passed by looked up in confusion. The elevator dinged open in a matter of seconds, but Nick felt like the ride

down to the lobby took a millennium. Once he reached the ground floor, Nick dashed past Victor's desk and into the street.

He raced down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, possessing no desire to slow down and catch his breath. If someone got in his way, he grunted at them in disgust, pushing passersby out of his way. He wasn't sure where he was going – he just kept sprinting. He needed to get as far away from midtown, from St. Luke's, and from Kyle, as possible. The small crowds of people frolicking around midtown around 8pm parted quickly to get out of Nick's way. He bolted into oncoming traffic, jumped off of curbs, and roared at pedestrians for clearance if they didn't see him coming from down the block.

When he made it to the busy intersection of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, he accidentally collided with a hotdog vendor cart that rolled out from around the corner. Nick's small body slammed against the cart's side as the hotdog vendor barked in shock. After falling to the ground but landing safely on his ass instead of his face, Nick smeared himself over the dirty concrete. Times Square at night hovered above him, and in his dizziness, he felt suffocated by the flashy interrogative lights. He cackled loudly until he started choking from being out of breath, and then pulled himself into a seated position.

People walking by asked if he was okay. Some tried helping him up, while others asked if he needed a cab or any other help. Unlike Kyle, who would have given a dramatic soliloquy about his painful fall, Nick simply smiled to his audience and walked away, wishing that Manhattan could be completely barren, just this once. He wasn't embarrassed. He just wanted to be alone. Taking a cab would've gotten him home too fast, but he was now in too much pain to walk back to Chelsea. He slowly headed over to 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue to catch a downtown bus.

When he reached the northwest corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, the M11 bus came immediately. To Nick's disappointment, it was still crowded at this time of night, so he took one of the few remaining seats in the bus's rear, next to an elderly, kerchiefed woman. He slumped down in his seat and was comforted by the feeling of his side pressing lightly into her warm, frail body. Nick glanced quickly to his left to see if she was disturbed by their physical closeness, but she smiled at him. Her smile was tender, reassuring even, and Nick started to cry. He had just left his manipulative 'life' in a mental hospital, but now found solace in a complete stranger. With the unintentional snuggling of the sides of their bodies, this elderly woman was Nick's mother, father, sister, and lover for the few minutes it took to travel home. Nothing saddened Nick more than when strangers provided him with such unexpected gestures of benevolence. For the rest of the short bus ride to Chelsea, Nick cried softly as the old woman cradled him with her tender smile.

## Chapter 5: Dallas, 1991

“Did y’all know that black people have black butts?!!” Joey asked his siblings, folding his mini arms onto the table to establish the importance of his question. Nick and Brigitte laughed at their five-year-old brother, and then Nick turned to Brigitte to see what she would say. They sat in the breakfast nook near Helga, who carefully searched the refrigerator’s eclectic contents. Nick watched Helga scan the overstuffed refrigerator shelves, wondering what snack she might produce.

“Joey, what are you talking about?” Brigitte asked, searching through her maroon Jansport backpack. Nick admirably saw how excited his sister was to begin her homework only minutes after arriving home from Highland Park Middle School.

“Yeah, what are you talking about?” Nick seconded.

“I was in the bathroom today?”

“Yeah?” Brigitte leaned forward to listen to Joey’s high-pitched voice, so Nick leaned forward too. Joey sat sprawled in a cushy kitchen chair at least three times too big for him, his little legs kicking back-and-forth with excitement to tell his elder siblings about his discovery.

“And there was this black boy in there? And he pulled his pants down while he was standing at the potty. He pulled them down *all the way!*”

“Was he at the wall toilet?” Brigitte asked.

“They’re called urinals,” Nick said.

“I know, but Joey doesn’t know that.” Brigitte rolled her eyes.

“Uh-huh, yeah I do. I do know that!” Joey belted.

“Okay, sorry, Joey, keep going,” Brigitte said as she flipped through her algebra book. She slid back in her chair, so Nick slid back in his, too. Even Helga stopped her snack search and leaned up against the refrigerator door, listening to Joey’s chaos.

“Well, he pulled down his pants all the way and he had a black butt!”

Nick paused before inquiring, “Did you think he’d have a white one?”

“Yeah. Cuz when you look at some black people’s hands, their hands are white!”

“No they’re not,” Nick corrected.

“Oh, you mean like their palms?” Brigitte asked. She held out her palms to clarify.

“Yeah. Their balms.”

“Palms,” Nick corrected.

“Palms,” Joey overlapped. He nodded repeatedly, bouncing his head up and down. “Well, how would I know they aren’t black under their clothes?”

“Are you kidding? Did you really think that?!” Nick said, and then glanced over at his sister to see if she too was in disbelief. He was positive that Brigitte would be appalled. But to Nick’s chagrin, Brigitte’s face showed no sign of shock or pity for their unworldly little brother. Nick wanted his sister to look at him, acknowledging that, together, because of their mature ages, the two of them were worlds ahead of Joey in both intellect and coolness. He needed Brigitte to accept him as a worthy equal – or at least as a prized assistant. Nick needed Brigitte to show him, some way, *any* way, that she didn’t think he too was still a child. That, just like her, Nick also no longer needed to be babysat and cooed at like their younger, cuter, funnier, more adorable, more fawned-over, better-loved little brother. But instead, while Nick fingered his stubby #2 yellow pencil, Brigitte

loaded her awesome mechanical pencil with new lead, and placed it next to her equally impressive 7<sup>th</sup> grade Texas Instruments graphing calculator. Ever since Brigitte had started junior high, she had no longer accepted Nick on her socially and intellectually advanced team. And these days, Nick was really getting tired of having to be on the same team as the kindergartener seated next to him.

Brigitte, now barely even paying attention, offered only, "That's a funny story, Joey." Nick was flabbergasted that Joey had even seen a black kid in the bathroom at Highland Park Elementary School, since he and Brigitte had had no minorities in any of their classes there. To Nick, having a masculine female bilingual German immigrant maid was normal, but witnessing black children with black rear ends was a completely foreign experience. He noticed himself becoming jealous but, like usual, couldn't quite figure out why, whether it was the butt itself, the rare sighting of the naked black skin in a public yet highly private forum, or just the alien experience.

Seated between his siblings, Nick's head swiveled back-and-forth. Brigitte remained engrossed in her complicated algebraic equations, concentrating so thoroughly that Nick was positive she would finish every problem in the book by dinnertime. Joey, meanwhile, stared straight down into his lap while he fidgeted with his penis, with his small hands crammed tightly under the elastic waistband of his shorts. Hours could pass, Nick noticed, and as long as Joey had his penis to entertain him, he didn't even seem to regard what happened around him. He often did things like this in public, and Nick had accepted early on that it was his lifelong job to arrest Joey's blind behavior. Today Joey sang songs to his penis, whispering secretly for only his penis to hear, just inaudible enough for Nick to decipher what tunes his brother's organ was being serenaded.

Between attempting to mimic his prolific sister's every move and making sure that his brother wasn't embarrassing himself too much, Nick longed to live in Joey's permanent state of idiotic, carefree euphoria. But the thought of doing so also petrified him, because it meant he would never reach what he perceived as Brigitte's incomparable plateau of greatness. Bewildered by both of them, Nick began to pout silently.

"Where's mom?!" Joey shouted, his hands now flying above his head.

"Josef, she go to grocery store and nail paint appointment," Helga answered.

"Oh. Okay. Helga! Can I puh-leeeeeeeeeeease have a popsicle?!!" Joey continued.

"Let me see if there is some in freezer," Helga answered, opening the freezer door, "I do not know if your mother bought more. I think she going to Tom Thumb on way back so maybe –" and then Helga let out a scream louder and more unsettling than any of the children had ever heard. Joey went bug-eyed and looked at Nick to see what to do, who turned stark white and looked at Brigitte to see what to do. Brigitte hopped up from her chair and Nick watched her ponytail bounce towards the refrigerator. Brigitte stuck her head through Helga's left arm, which still grasped the freezer door handle, and then she peered inside.

"What. Is. That?" Brigitte asked Helga, who was as frozen as the vegetables, ice cream, bratwurst, kielbasa, and human head that rested amongst the other food. Helga slammed the freezer door and backed away from it, pulling Brigitte along with her.

"That frozen thing looks like Uncle Sebastian's face," Brigitte continued.

"What?! Are you serious?" Nick said, hopping up from the table and racing past his sister and Helga. He yanked open the freezer door and was immediately entranced by

the frozen head that rested between a box of orange Flinstones Push-Up Pops and a carton of Blue Bell Neapolitan ice cream. “Holy shit!”

“Oooooooooooooo, you said shit,” Joey bellowed from the kitchen table.

“That *IS* Uncle Sebastian’s head!”

“Oh. My. God. No. Way,” Brigitte said, breaking free from Helga’s grasp.

“That is so – ” Nick began.

“Gross!” Brigitte finished.

Seconds later, the doorbell rang, and a few more seconds later, Heather Kaestner from next door walked into the kitchen. Heather then turned to Joey, now cemented to his chair and glowing with confusion. Heather lastly pivoted to Helga, who had backed up against the kitchen table and was rapidly fanning herself with the Employment section of the *Dallas Morning News*.

“Whatch’all doing?” Heather mumbled through her closed-teeth smile. Brigitte and Nick remained silent, both of them again ogling whatever was in the freezer. Smiling and excited to partake in yet another day of after-school Schneider playtime, Heather – already a head taller than both Brigitte and Nick – pounded over to the freezer, gazed clear over their heads, and saw the frozen head on the dessert shelf. Nick turned to her and grinned. Heather then screamed louder than Helga had and began hyperventilating.

“Nicky, what is that!? Brig, what’s in the freezer!? Is that a *huuuuuuh*!?...is that a *huuuuuuh*!?...oh my god, is that a... *huuuuuuh*!?”

“That’s Uncle Sebastian’s head,” Nick told her, not even turning his head in her direction, instead opting to memorize Sebastian’s frozen mustache and frosted toupee.

“Oh my god, y’all, what’s it doing in the freezer? This is horrible!”



"We don't know," Brigitte told her.

"Can I see? Can I see the frozen head?" Joey called, now anxiously strumming his finicky fingers on the edge of the table, unable to reach further to strum harder.

"No Joey, it's gross. Stay there," Brigitte demanded.

"Yeah, Joey, it's gross," Nick repeated.

"Disgusting," Heather breathed heavily.

"Children, get away from the freezer," Helga ordered.

"But I wanna see! I want to see the head!"

"Please, children. Please please please get away from that freezer."

"But why is Uncle Sebastian's head in the freezer, Helga?" Brigitte demanded once she finally shut the door.

"I do not know, *madchen*. You must ask your mother that. Why don't you all go upstairs to playroom and I bring you all some nice pretzels from pantry."

"We don't call it the playroom anymore," Brigitte protested, "I'm 12 now. I'm a teenager. It's called the den, you know."

"Okay, go up to *den* and I bring snacks there."

"But we're not allowed to eat on the carpet," Nick told her.

"I will not tell if you will not. Now go away from kitchen and up stairs!"

Joey hopped up from the table and dashed out of the kitchen, whizzing through the living room and up the stairs. Although Brigitte and Nick seemed more upset by Helga snapping at them than from discovering the frozen decapitated head of a man they believed to be their uncle, Helga noticed that Heather seemed genuinely terrified. Heather trembled and her pudgy face had wrapped itself into a mess of repulsion and fear. Still

though, Heather followed the Schneider kids out of the kitchen and through the living room, her face maintaining the same unnerved expression.

Alone in the kitchen – except for Uncle Sebastian’s popsicle head – Helga collapsed against the kitchen counter and took a few long, deep breaths. She may have known the true nature of her employer’s occupation, but this was the first major evidence she had ever actually *seen* of it. During Sofia’s weaker moments of disclosure, she accidentally dropped hints to Helga like, “We’ll have to have dinner early tonight because Xavier has another meeting at midnight,” to which Helga would silently question, *Who has meetings at midnight?* Or “Just tell the dry-cleaners that the spots on these shirts are Pinot Meunier or something – they’ll buy it,” or, “We have to take the spare car to the store today. Some of Xavier’s guys have stuffed his Avalanche and my Suburban with more stuff than I can even think about.” *What do homebuilder CEOs, VIPs, and realtors fill entire Avalanches and Suburbans with?*, Helga would ask herself.

Helga saw the type of men who came to visit Xavier at home. They were burly and rough, some of them bruised, scarred or cut, but each disguised in typical Dallas businessmen attire of dark blazers during the winter, or short-sleeved button-down shirts tucked into pleated khakis during the warm-to-boiling Texas spring, summer and fall months. She knew that to the public, these men were well hidden beneath shopping mall apparel and thick Texas twangs. It wasn’t until you looked at their business cards or driver’s licenses and read their traditional German names that it seemed odd for them to always travel in groups, carrying oversized briefcases or duffle bags, and each of them driving a large sports utility vehicle that Xavier provided for them as ‘company cars.’

Helga had watched things like this for nine years, long before Joey was born, so she knew for herself what really went on at these men's Home Builders Association meetings and behind the For Sale signs posted in suburban front yards across the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. But never once did she question Xavier or Sofia about anything. She took pride in being deeply rooted in her old German ancestral ways of not making waves amongst family and employers, and knew better than to interfere. Helga figured it wasn't her business to ask questions, and as long as she didn't feel endangered, her job was, for the most part, enjoyable and impervious. And, of course, she loved the children.

She knew that Xavier and Sofia hadn't invented this unspoken *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* rule for their family; they simply carried on the tradition of this cautionary phrase that has mended close-knit German Catholic families together for centuries. And even with a spare head in the freezer, she would continue respecting the Schneider family to the umpteenth degree. Helga had no family of her own, and was touched that the Schneider children treated her like a substitute mommy. Frozen head or no frozen head, she was committed to the Schneider family for the longrun.

Once Helga caught her breath, she decided that preparing an even slightly elaborate snack was now totally out of the question. She flung open the pantry door, grabbed two bags of artificially flavored Snyder's of Hanover pretzels – all the while questioning how the children possibly liked these falsified, mass-produced American knock-offs – and then headed upstairs to the den to give the children their snacks. Her feet padded the thick carpet as she neared the den, which overflowed with sporty, educational and creative games and toys, playthings that Helga knew would later remain for Sofia's future grandchildren to play with. The den was also the only room in the

house with a television because of Sofia's in-house anti-couch-potato campaign, and for this reason, was now where Xavier spent most of his time at home. Helga heard whispering, but when she entered the den, all four children ceased speaking and whirled back around to face the television. She placed both bags of flavored pretzels on the coffee table in the center of the room, and then exited as quickly as she had entered.

"She's gone!" Brigitte whispered, which prompted her brothers and Heather to turn and face her. "So anyway, *I* think that head was in there because X found it somewhere and wanted to keep it for some reason. *I* just have to figure out why."

"Why would X want a head!?" Joey bellowed.

"Yeah, Brig, and where would he have found it?" Nick questioned. Brigitte glared at him for not agreeing with her.

"I still can't believe y'all call your own dad X," Heather said.

"Well, that's his name," Brigitte instructed. "Anyway, if he didn't *want* it for something specific, then why would it still be there? Huh?" She cocked her head, raised her eyebrows, and pinched her lips together, waiting for a response to destroy.

"I don't know," Nick grumbled, again succumbing to his sister's command.

"Yeah, we don't know!? How would we know!?" Joey seconded.

"I just can't believe that y'all don't think it's scary," Heather began.

"It's not scary," Brigitte told her, "it's just sort of, you know, disgusting."

"And a little cool," Nick agreed, smiling and hoping that his sister agreed.

"Gross, are y'all kidding? Finding that thing was so scary! I don't even know if I can come over anymore!"

“Well, then fine, don’t,” Brigitte told her, turning up the volume of the television with the remote control. She faced Heather, smiled, and said, “I bet your brother wouldn’t think it’s scary.”

“Yeah, Lukas probably wouldn’t think it’s scary,” Nick agreed again.

“Yeah!” Joey thirded.

“Whatever,” Heather said, reaching for the mustard-and-garlic-flavored bag of Snyder’s and stuffing her hand inside. Nick and Joey rolled over to the coffee table and began devouring the pretzels too, while Brigitte watched them, shaking her head back and forth and chewing the air.

\* \* \*

Within the hour, Sofia returned home from her salon appointment and went directly upstairs to the den to find her children and Heather sprawled across the matching suede sofas, snacking over her recently shampooed carpet.

“What do you think you’re doing eating in here?”

“Mom! We had to eat here ‘cuz there’s a head in the freezer. Silly!” Joey said without taking his eyes off the *Kids Incorporated* episode they were watching.

Sofia watched her youngest, perplexed: he sat on a soccer ball, so focused on the television that he unknowingly rolled himself around and kicked at nothing in midair.

“Excuse me? And Josef, back away from the television. You’re practically inside of it.”

“Yeah, mom, Uncle Sebastian’s head is in the freezer,” Nick seconded, until Brigitte overlapped with, “Mom...*why* is Uncle Sebastian’s head in the freezer?”

Without listening to another question from her precocious children, Sofia fled the den. When she reached the kitchen, she yanked open the freezer door. Upon making eye

contact with Sebastian Lichtman's frozen eyeballs, she too let out a small scream, and then b-lined for the kitchen telephone. "Xavier. Now. *Please*," Sofia's voice whipped when one of her husband's secretaries answered his office phone.

"Just one minute," the secretary answered. Sofia heard the phone line click to *Hold* so she began pacing the kitchen floor, as far as the spiraled black telephone cord would allow her. She took turns between pacing and stopping to rap her fingers on the countertop while waiting a good five minutes for Xavier to finally come to the telephone.

"Hi, Honey," Xavier answered.

"*WHAT* is that thing doing in my freezer!?" Sofia bellowed.

"Huh?"

"You know what I'm talking about!"

"Huh? *Oh* – oohhh, no. I'm so sorry, Sofia. I forgot."

"You *forgot*!? Your children saw it! Are you insane!?"

"Calm down, honey, I'll take care of it."

"Calm down!? Why is that...*thing*...in my freezer. Or even in my house at all!?"

Sebastian Lichtman, one of Xavier's longtime employees and former close friends, had been introduced to each of the children as their "uncle," for as long as any of them could remember. Xavier hadn't listened to his wife's warnings about allowing his children to socially cavort with his employees, let alone think one of them was a family member – but now, right this moment, he really wished he had. Sitting in his office, Xavier took a long, long pause while he felt his wife fuming through the other end of the phone receiver. He knew he couldn't explain to Sofia that he had to keep Lichtman's head on ice overnight so he could show Gottfried Nachtman, another of his employees,

what would happen to him if he accepted bribes from indebted clients of the Schneider Building Co., thereby hoarding thousands of dollars away from Xavier's company, like Lichtman had done. Xavier tried thinking of something to tell his wife instead of telling her about how he himself had used a chainsaw to sever Lichtman's head on the ping-pong table in their garage last night while his family slept, far away on the opposite end of estate. He searched his cerebral files of suburban husbandness in hopes that he could think of something to tell his wife about how the entire Nachtman family are *blodes eselarschs* who owe the Schneider Building Co. tens of thousands of dollars, and that he would keep killing them one by one until he received his money. Xavier wondered if he should tell her that he had forgotten Lichtman's head because Nachtman was already dead, so he didn't need it anymore. But no alternative story introduced itself to him.

"Xavier."

"Yes, I'm here. Just trying to think of something to say."

"I don't want to know."

"Yes, honey, I know. That's why I'm taking so long to answer."

"Could you please at least lie to me quickly?"

"Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I'll send someone over immediately to get it." Xavier listened to his wife hang up.

\* \* \*

Over dinner that evening, Xavier told his children that their Uncle Sebastian had recently died of a "horrible disease" and that Sebastian had asked Xavier "to donate his head to science," so he was "freezing it for donation." Sofia rolled her eyes at her husband's protective white lies.

“What disease, X?” Nick asked.

“Where’s his head being taken and what’re they gonna do with it, X?” Brigitte demanded.

“Yeah, what disease and what science, X?” Joey chimed-in.

“He died of...pancreatic cancer,” Xavier lied.

“What’s that, X?” Nick asked.

“Well, you know what cancer is, right?”

“Riiiiiii-iiii-iiiiight!” Joey belted. Brigitte and Nick both turned to look at their little brother as he bounced up in down in his chair, making monkey noises and scratching his armpits. Nick wondered if Joey had truly noticed what was going on around him? He questioned why Joey had to scream every statement that emoted from his mouth. Nick so desperately wanted to *fix* his brother. He wondered if Joey would be placed into special education classes at Highland Park Elementary School, and he again retreated into his imagination, wondering how he would possibly cope with having a retarded younger brother.

“Well, when someone is diagnosed with cancer in their pancreas, sometimes they die within days of their diagnosis.”

“Within days?” Joey yelped.

Xavier turned to Sofia and said, “Didn’t one of your uncles have pancreatic cancer, too?”

Sofia shot him an *oh please* look, took a brief pause, cleared her throat, and then replied, “Yes, I think my Uncle...Theodor...had pancreatic cancer.”

“And how many days after he was told about his condition did he die?”



Sofia shot her husband the same dismissive look but quickly responded, "I think it was only two days later."

"Two days?" Joey yelped again as he picked up an entire bratwurst from his white ceramic plate and stuffed it into his mouth. Joey began laughing hysterically as the brat dangled from his mouth. His arms hung by his sides while his light brown floppy hair danced with his small-bodied laughter. Nick could only stare, and again looked to Brigitte, wondering how, instead of mortifying, she found Joey's wiener trick amusing. Sofia reached over to Joey, yanked his arm away from his mouth, and forced him to take a bite out of the large wiener he was attempting to digest wholly. After chomping a mammoth bite from the bratwurst, Joey smiled mischievously with wide eyes. His small body continued vibrating with exuberant laughter.

Nick looked at his younger brother in disgust as Joey chomped away on the bratwurst. Then he looked at his father, who was also chomping away on a much larger plate of meat. Nick could hear every splash of saliva in Xavier's mouth, and each time his father took a bite, he sucked in his food like a vacuum cleaner. As far back as Nick could remember, his father had repulsed him at the dinner table, and to Nick, it was no wonder why Xavier was getting so fat. He thought that his father was a pig-eating pig. Nick reached down and felt his own belly, which was a junior version of his father's big tummy. As he watched X shoveling food into his mouth, Nick vowed to never become as fat as his father. And when he looked at his little brother again, sucking down his food as rapidly as their father, he feared for Joey, too. *Oh, no. Oh, God. Oh, God! Now he'll be the fat kid, too. My brother, the fat retarded kid,* Nick worried.

"I just don't know all about of this," Brigitte announced, sounding like a forty-year-old criminal defense attorney, and prissily placing her fork onto her plate.

"Yeah, me neither," Nick seconded, sounding like the assistant to a forty-year-old criminal defense attorney, and also placing his fork onto his plate in the same prissy manner.

"Well, that's the story," Xavier said in an overpowering tone that always silenced anyone during conversation. Anyone but his children. Brigitte and Nick kept asking questions about how Uncle Sebastian's head would benefit science while Joey kept remarking in disbelief about how someone could die so quickly after having visited a "for-real-life-doctor."

"Besides, the head is gone now," Xavier continued. Nick and Joey jumped up from the dining room table, raced into the kitchen, and flung open the freezer door. The boys returned sluggishly to the dining room, sliding their sock-covered feet along the slick wooden floor, and announced their headless freezer findings. When they sat down, Heather suddenly appeared in the dining room.

"Hi y'all!" she said, "I figured y'all were eating dinner, so I didn't want to ring the doorbell and disturb you, so I just used our key from next door to let myself in!"

"Why are you always here?" Brigitte asked, glaring at Heather.

"What do you mean?"

"You're always over here, like all the time." Heather offered only a blank stare until Brigitte continued with, "Why? Why are you always here? Where's your brother? Why doesn't Lukas ever come over with you?"

“Why, are you in love with my brother or something?” Heather said, grinning so big that her lips climbed over her teeth. She and Nick exchanged grins.

“No! I am not in love with Lukas! I am just wondering!”

“Mother, may Heather stay for the rest of dinner?” Nick asked.

“Yes, of course she can,” Sofia and Xavier said simultaneously.

“Why do you always call her mother!?” Joey bellowed. “Her name is mom!”

“It means the same thing,” Brigitte instructed.

“Shit!”

“Josef! Watch the language!” Xavier’s voice boomed so loud that Joey finally stopped bouncing around. Silence enveloped the room, so Heather began humming, to make the Schneider family dinner bearable, if only for herself.

## Chapter 6: *Das Baby, Tampa, 2008*

Josef thrust his shoulder hard into the defensive team's left wing and kicked the ball out from under him. He dribbled down the field, his short toned legs plowing faster than the other players racing at him. He hadn't committed a foul by knocking into his opponent, but if the other team played dirty, Joey had no problem getting rough too. Besides, they had been knocking into him all afternoon and the ref hadn't called them out. Joey just wanted that motherfucking ball again.

"Joey!" the forward of his team screamed from the center of the field. Joey shot the ball in a soaring diagonal towards the forward but then toppled over the defensive team's midfielder, who was trying to steal the ball away from him. He got right back up, shoved through the defensive team's players, and sprinted down the field, trying to stay parallel with the forward to whom he had just passed. Back and forth down the field, Joey and the forward zigzagged the ball through the other team's players.

Once they were near the goal line, Joey shot the ball to the forward one last time, who finished off the play by kicking it clear above the goalie's head, but low enough under the goalpost that it sailed into the back of the net. Joey, the forward, and the rest of their team *Woooooo!*'d and *Yeaaahhhhh!*'d, and without further whoopla about the ass they just kicked, raced back down the field.

"Dude, that was awesome!" the forward screamed across the field to Joey, who high-fived a couple of his teammates as he raced back into position.

"I know, dude! You too!" Once Joey was back in his midfielder position, he bounced around with adrenaline, swinging his arms back and forth and shaking his hips around in circles. As always, his teammates laughed at his goofiness. Joey could read his

teammates' faces: many wished they were as talented as him, the short, funny player who assisted with most of their team's goals, but because of his position in the game, rarely got the chance to score a goal himself. Joey told himself that this was all he was good at. With sweat dripping down his square jaw and the coastal Floridian winds working against him – and his innate desire to mutilate anyone who crossed his path – the soccer field was Joey's most-owned place in the world. He knew it, his teammates knew it, and he was damn sure that, by now, the other team knew it too.

When the referee blew his whistle and the forward kicked the ball down the field, Joey tore off running, busting apart a cluster of opponents, some of whom stood at least six inches taller than him. The full back kicked the ball high in the air, towards the exact spot where Joey's cleats were circling, and with his entire body, Joey caught it smoothly and let it roll down his head to his chest to his legs, down to his magical feet. Joey knew that other team wasn't very good, so he teased them with seductive ball passes, none of which he actually executed to a fellow teammate. The score was already 3-0 UT, and the game was almost over. Now that they were definitely going to win, he thought it only fair that he have a little fun at the defensive team's expense.

He kicked the ball to no one, clear down the field, and sprinted towards his own pass. Opposing players trailed him, each confused as to what the hell short, stocky star player was doing. When he caught his own pass, he again tore off running towards the ball, into another empty space on the soccer field. Joey could hear some of his own teammates snickering nearby, and then, as expected, the ref blew the whistle and his antagonizing fun was over.

Joey and his teammates screamed and hollered while the opposing team slapped their hands in faux congratulation and marched off the field. After *yeah-ing* and *woo-ing* with his teammates some more, he glanced over to the bleachers and saw his girlfriend, Misty, slumping over the bar and gazing off into the sky. He sighed enormously. His head dropped towards the field. The only time Misty came to any of his games was when she wanted something from him. She didn't have her own car, so she often asked one of her girlfriends (or sometimes one of his friends) to drop her off at the stadium so Joey could chauffeur her around after his games. He turned back around to his teammates and asked, "Hey, y'all, who wants to go grab a beer?"

A unanimous "No, sorry, man," echoed from his teammates.

"Lunch? Anyone wanna go get some lunch?"

"Naw, gotta study," a couple of people said.

"Or, hey, maybe some of us could even go to the library and study?"

"Is *she* coming?" one of his teammates asked, pointing up towards Misty.

"Um...probably. I don't know."

"Then *heyell* no!" another teammate said as everyone else laughed.

"You gotta get a new girl, man," another teammate seconded.

"I'm trying," he murmured.

"If she's still around then you ain't tryin' hard enough, dude."

"Trust me – I'm fuckin' trying." Joey watched his teammates walk towards the parking lot together, and then he reluctantly headed over to Misty, wondering what errand she wanted him to run for her today. Instead of staring off into space like before, she now glared at him, most likely annoyed that he hadn't come over to her before. Joey

knew that her spacey look from before had been more of a damsel in distress pout in attempt to lure him over as bait. The game's euphoria immediately began to wear off and instead heartburn began settling in. Joey watched his feet slogging towards the bleachers. He had tried breaking up with her at least three times before. The blunt words, "Misty, we have to break up" left his mouth and entered her ears, but each time, she had replied simply, "No." He had finally protested on this determined third try, but Misty had become enraged and demanded to know what was so horrible about her. Joey didn't have the heart to tell her that she was codependent and smothering. He couldn't put into words how much she embarrassed him in front of his friends and teammates and how he never got any time away from her. He couldn't express that she was rude and invasive and psychotically obsessed with controlling him. So, instead, he offered no explanation.

"Did you win?" Misty asked as Joey approached.

"Yeah, 3-0."

"Oh. Well I didn't know that. I just got here."

"So you didn't see the whole game?"

"No, I just said that I just got here." Misty rolled her eyes. She vehemently spat each of her phrases, prompting Joey to wonder what countless things he had inevitably done wrong now, without his intention or knowledge.

"Oh."

"Joey, we have to talk."

"We do?"

"I have something really important to tell you."

"Okay?"

“Well, Joey, come up here!”

Joey walked to the end of the bleachers and climbed the steps up to his Rapunzel. The emptiness of the field behind him suddenly felt eerie. When he sat down on the first row of bleachers, Misty sat beside him and draped her leg over his, dangling it into his spread-eagle crotch. These days, he felt like a rape victim every time Misty touched him.

“Joey?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pregnant. You got me pregnant.”

“What?! But we used a condom.”

“It’s not from last night! You’re so stupid! It takes more than one night for a girl to get pregnant. There was a couple times last month when we didn’t use a condom.”

“Shit.”

“That’s all you have to say?!”

“Well, what’re you gonna do? I mean...whatta we do!?”

“I’ve thought this out. I’m gonna get an abortion. But you’ve gotta drive me to the abortion clinic this afternoon. Like right now, before they close. I talked to someone at Planned Parenthood who told me where to go. And I need money. Like five grand.”

“5,000 bucks for an abortion!?”

“Yes, they’re expensive! And after that, I’ll need lots of medical and cosmetic products and stuff. You know.”

“That still seems pretty expensive.”



"I've already made an appointment, so they know we're...I mean, that *I'm* coming," Misty continued, "and they close at six, so we've gotta go now. But don't forget that we gotta go to your bank first."

"How am I supposed to get \$5,000 out of my account today?"

"With a cashier's check. I already called your bank for you to make sure."

"What?"

"Well, I had to make sure you could get the money since you're the one who got me pregnant!"

"Well, fuck, man, I guess let's go then!" Joey jumped up off the bleachers and headed towards the parking lot, with Misty traipsing inches behind him. Once in the parking lot, he unlocked his Explorer with his alarm remote and they climbed inside. As he peeled out of the parking lot Misty handed him sloppily handwritten directions for how to get to the abortion clinic. To ensure that there was no conversation on the ride to the bank, he cranked up his stereo and stared straight ahead at the road. Joey thought about his penis. He wished he would've kept it imprisoned lately. I'm such a fucking idiot, he thought. Stupid, stupid Joey Schneider, he thought.

When they reached SunTrust Bank, Joey tried rolling down the windows, but Misty whimpered, "No, I need air-conditioning! ...think about the baby." He left her his keys before walking towards the bank entrance.

After avoiding all explanation about why he was taking so much money of his account today, which he knew only had about \$5,100 in it anyway, Joey dashed out of the bank and back to his car. It was the end of the month, so Joey assumed that his father had recently deposited money into his account for next month's rent, groceries, allowance,

and whatever else he needed for May. But now he was handing over his entire financial worth to his girlfriend.

“Who do I make the check out to?” Joey asked after turning down his stereo.

“Me.”

“But you’re not giving yourself an abortion.”

“Joey! That’s disgusting! You’re paying me back for the abortion with this check and then giving me a just a little bit more money for stuff that I’ll need afterwards.”

He scribbled the check over to Misty’s name and handed it to her. Misty calmly put the check into her purse and then tapped her fingers nonchalantly to the Fall Out Boy CD blaring from the Explorer’s speakers.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the abortion clinic, Joey unhinged his seatbelt and reached for his door handle.

“No,” Misty started.

“What?”

“I wanna go in alone.”

“But I’m here. I drove you here ‘cuz I’m helping you. I’m going in with you.”

“No. Um. It’s embarrassing.”

“Yeah, for me. To them, I’m the dumbass who knocked you up. They won’t think you’re stupid. You’re, like, the victim to them.”

“Oh. Well? Still. Joey, I just wanna go in alone.”

“Why?”

“Because I just do! Stay here. I’m sure it won’t take long. Maybe an hour or so. If you wanna drive around for a while, go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Joey, you’re not coming in!”

“Fine. God!”

“Joey!”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. Um...good luck? I don’t know what to say. Don’t let them fuck up? I’ll be here. Yeah. I’ll be here waiting. Don’t worry about anything.”

Misty thanked him, grunted melodramatically, and walked into the office. Joey leaned back in his chair, rolled down his windows, and turned off his car.

When Misty walked into the clinic, the receptionist greeted her and confirmed her appointment. She told Misty to take a seat until one of the nurses was ready for her, but instead Misty asked the receptionist where the restroom was. Once she was alone in the restroom, Misty checked her thick makeup in the bathroom mirror, reapplied her lipstick, and left the room. She peeked both ways up and down the hallway, making sure that no one else was around. Then she quickly but quietly pranced to the end of the hallway where the emergency exit door was. Much to her relief, an alarm didn’t go off when she pushed the heavy door, although there was a sign posted saying that one would.

When she exited through the back of the building and stood atop a short cement staircase, Misty was glad to see that her mother was on time to pick her up, waiting outside in a beat-up old black Chevy Camaro. Misty surveyed the car for new rusty dents.

“Hey girly,” Misty’s mother said.

“Hey mama.” Misty descended the cement stairs and climbed into the car. Her mother tossed a cigarette out the window and turned to face her daughter.

“You get the money?”

“Of course. He totally just gave it to me. He’s so dumb!”

“He really think you’re pregnant?” Misty’s mother lit another cigarette with the glowing round car lighter.

“Yes!” Misty and her mother cackled and drove towards the front of the building, each of them taking turns to flip back their identical thinning and peroxided hair. When Misty saw Joey reclining back in the driver’s seat of his Explorer, she crouched down as her mother’s old station wagon sputtered out of the parking lot and into the street.

“We should go deposit that check now, you know,” Misty told her mother, “before something happens.”

“Oh baby, nothing’s gonna happen. You did good.”

“I know, mom, but just in case.”

“Trust me sweetie, nothing’s gonna happen. Besides, it sounds like these people have enough fuckin’ money. He should be givin’ you even more, you know.”

Misty’s mother knew that Joey paid for everything Misty told him to: dinner, movies, gas money, clothes, parties, bars, clubs, even a couple of airplane tickets when they had traveled together during Spring Break. He even ‘loaned’ her money when she demanded it, even though he knew he’d never see it again. When Misty’s mother had found out that her daughter’s privileged boyfriend ‘loaned’ her money freely, she had become jealous of her daughter. So, two years ago, when Misty’s mother had lost her entire life’s fortune of \$1,500 while gambling in Shreveport, she started asking her daughter to get money from Joey. The first time Joey forked over a bit of money, Misty and her mother realized that this trick was so easy that they became addicted. During the

past two years, Misty had convinced Joey to donate a progressive sum of over twenty thousand dollars to her and her mother. She was so proud of her saleswoman skills.

Now that Misty was inside the clinic, Joey was able to think more clearly. Think nicer and more realistically. And the first thought that crossed his mind was: *Thank God for abortions, man!*

If Joey had to tell his parents that they should expect a baby who would spend half of its holidays at the Schneider estate in Dallas and the other half in Blustery Palms Trailer Park in Tampa, he couldn't even imagine what his parents would say. And he *really* couldn't fathom the flippant discourse that would snap from of his siblings' lips. Joey told himself that his siblings would surely disown him and get a new dog instead.

It was too early to be sentimental about having a Baby Joey. Rather, Joey thought about condoms. He thought about sex and Misty's commanding vagina and, specifically, how horrible sex had become with her. Joey thought about last night, when he had been studying for his Statistics exam and Misty had let herself into his apartment and demanded sex from him. He had been sitting at his desk with his textbook spread open, attempting to solve the sample problems in the book, when she walked into his bedroom, stood behind him, and put her hands over his eyes. Joey knew it was her immediately. He could smell her cheap imitation perfume and feel her cold fingers on his face. He thought Misty's fingers felt like those canned fifty-nine cent Vienna sausages she was always gnawing on between classes.

"Dude, I have a Statistics test early tomorrow morning, and if I don't pass, I can't play anymore. I gotta study!" he told Misty when she stuck her wet finger into his ear.

Misty pulled his chair out from the desk and sat on his lap. Her physical strength continued to surprise him. Since they had started going out during freshman year, Misty had gained at least 25 pounds, which Joey did not appreciate. He spent countless hours weight-training and scrimmaging every week, sculpting his body into an athletic physique. Thus, he didn't think it was fair that his 21-year-old girlfriend already had cellulite while he was expected to look like an Abercrombie & Fitch ad.

"Misty, what're you doin'?" he belted.

"Joey, C'mon, it'll help you study!"

"Can't we do this later? I'll stop by your place later, I promise."

"I don't wanna to do it later. I wanna do it now." She took off her shirt, grabbed his hands, and placed them on her breasts. When he tried taking them off and turning his chair back around to his textbook, Misty pouted and pulled his chair back towards her.

"Fuck, man! I gotta study!"

"I told you this will help you! You know I'm always right!" Misty laughed but Joey did not. While no man was able to bully him, Joey couldn't comprehend the abusive power that Misty had over him. It wasn't just sex. He knew he could easily hop into bed with any of the college girls who flirted with him, so he knew Misty wasn't his only option of getting laid. But every time, he let Misty have her way. Joey's philosophy on conflict was just to avoid negative confrontation altogether, no matter what it cost him. If he knew one of his teammates was too drunk to drive home, Joey still got into the car with him rather than protesting. When any of his professors told him he was wrong in class, even if he had spent significant time preparing for class discussions or presentations, he didn't object to the professor's ruling. And now, when Misty bent

down, unzipped his jeans, and stuck her hand into the fly of his boxer shorts, he didn't stop her.

"See? I told you you wanted to do it now. I have proof right here," Misty said, grinning at him and feeling his erection. Joey said nothing and just lay back in his chair.

"Well come on, Josef! Come over to the bed, I'm not gonna do everything, you know!" Joey's chest again burned with irritation, but he rose from his chair and followed Misty to bed. She quickly shoved off her jeans, while his pants slid down slowly. Joey sat at the foot of his bed for less than a second, before Misty threw herself on him, yanking his polo above his head and demanding that he raise his arms to assist her. Once he was naked, Misty inched even closer towards him, swinging her leg above his head and awkwardly straddling him. Since she couldn't get her leg high enough, she nearly kicked Joey in the head before he had to crouch over.

"Well? Come on," she said. Misty knew that pestering Joey like this, suggesting he wasn't performing properly, would work. She always knew what worked in his sweet-natured head, and operated him like a windup toy. Upon hearing this, Joey pushed her back onto the bed, towards his stack of pillows, and ripped off her holey, worn panties. She impatiently unhinged her own bra but then Joey grabbed it and tossed it across the room. Misty moaned under Joey's hard, passionless kisses, and then moaned much louder when he stuck his fingers between her legs.

"I gotta get a condom," he told her.

"No! I like it when you make love to me without one!"

Joey wondered if Misty really thought they were 'making love.' He assumed she was just speaking in yet another of her beloved daytime television clichés that she loved

reciting, but he wasn't positive. He knew wholeheartedly that they were not making love – they were just fucking.

“Misty, we're using a condom.”

“But we've done it before and not used one!”

“I know, but we were drunk and stupid. We're using a condom.” He lifted himself off of her and hopped off the bed. Across the room, he opened the top drawer of his dresser and snatched a Trojan. Misty watched her athlete boyfriend's muscles dance up and down as he walked, and then yelped with glee when he pounced back on top of her.

“Wait, I wanna put it on! You know I like to put it on! Joey, stoooooop!” Joey rolled his eyes and fell back onto the bed while Misty bit off the corner of the condom wrapper with her teeth. While she apparently thought she was seductively slipping the rubber slowly over his penis, during the time it took her to do this, Joey felt like he was waiting an eon to take a penalty kick into her hungry vagina. He often joked with his buddies that “Misty's dragon cunt must have teeth on it!” and that “Dude, that big-ass thing tries to swallow me whole as soon as I stick it in! That fucker's scary!”

Once she finally got the condom on, Joey climbed back atop her while she reached down to stick his cock inside of her. She had to do it. Every time. *She* had to say when they fucked, *she* had to take off his clothes, *she* had to put the condom on, and *she* even *had* to put him inside of her. Nowadays, Joey preferred masturbating to internet porn much more than performing what he now considered charity sex on someone who had somehow convinced herself it was romantic. Joey knew that after growing up with a headstrong sister, such a proper-mannered mother, and even his Niles Crane-esque gay brother, he had so much conditioned respect for women. He would never force himself



upon any girl, but after two years of sleeping together, Misty had become just a hole. He hated himself for thinking this way, but still felt powerless to Misty's demands.

Joey's hips pumped into her and she moaned much louder than he did. He barely made any noise whatsoever, and if it wasn't for his memory jogging through images of the ladies from his beloved internet porn, he probably wouldn't have even kept his erection while inside of her. Misty did come quickly though, for which, nowadays, Joey was thankful. When they first began dating, Joey had hated this because he'd always have to escape to the bathroom and jerk off before Misty made him cuddle with her while she talked about herself for the rest of the day and well into the night; he was never allowed to get a word in. "Harder!" Misty screamed, "HARDEEEEEERRRRR!"

By now, Joey poked her with so much angry contempt that she couldn't have handled anything harder. Minutes later, Misty came and shoved Joey off and into the wall. He went limp immediately, slithered the condom off of his flaccid penis, and hopped out of bed to put his clothes back on.

"What're you doing later?" Misty demanded.

"Studying. All night. Just like I was before."

"Oh, well maybe I'll come back later."

"Great," Joey said, not looking at her and rolling his eyes. As Misty put her clothing back on, Joey sat down at his desk and went back to reading his textbook like nothing had just happened.

"Joey!" Misty yelled.

He turned around and watched her staged frown turn into a flirty smile. Swinging her big hips back and forth, she walked over to him and planted her lips on his. Joey

wouldn't let her tongue enter his mouth, and for once, she didn't fight him. She turned around, slipped on her canvas Payless sneakers, and slammed his bedroom door as she left the room without saying goodbye.

Forty-five minutes had passed and Misty still hadn't emerged from the clinic. According to her, the place closed at six, and since it was 5:50, Joey knew she couldn't be in there much longer. Joey looked around the parking lot. He had been slumped down in his reclined chair for nearly an hour and hadn't noticed that every car but his own had driven out of the lot. He got out of his Explorer and walked up to the clinic's entrance. The front door was locked and all the lights were turned off. Joey's palms began sweating and he circled around the parking lot in confusion. He was sure that Misty and his soon-to-be-dead baby had been abandoned and trapped inside the clinic. He tried calling Misty's cell phone but it went straight to voicemail, so he then pounded on the door and stood there for a few minutes. No one answered. Then, the corner of his eye caught a sign on the front door with the clinic's operating hours: *Monday thru Friday 9am – 5pm*.

"What the *fuck*?" He raced to his Explorer, slammed the door after climbing in, and peeled out of the parking lot.

"Oh, shit," Misty said as her mother drove the corroded Camaro back into the parking lot of the abortion clinic. They had only been gone about twenty minutes, just enough time for Misty to endorse Joey's check over to her mother, and for her mother to deposit it into her checking account.

"What?" her mother replied.

“Joey’s car is gone. He must’ve found out that the clinic closed.”

“I knew you shoulda done this earlier in the day, baby. Sometimes I think you’re as stupid as your lil’ boyfriend.”

Misty gazed into the parking spot where Joey’s Explorer had been parked. “I really didn’t think he’d actually check the time or anything? Maybe he went to get food or something. He didn’t eat after his game. He drove me straight here.”

“Oh, whatever, baby. Where should I take you now? School?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Misty, what the hell are you worried about? It’s not like somethin’ like this ain’t happened before.”

“I know. It’s fine. Yeah, sure, mom. Just drive me back.”

Misty’s mother pattered out of the parking lot while Misty kept her eyes fixated on Joey’s former parking space.

When the Camaro pulled into the parking lot of Misty’s dorm, Misty climbed out of the car and stood in the passenger doorway. She held out her palm and said, “Mama, where’s my part of the money? I need it.”

“Whatchoo mean, girly?”

“Well, duh, I took that money for me too, not just for your trailer.”

“Please, honey, you don’t need it. You still got Joey.”

“Mom?!”

“Bye, Misty.”

“Mama, give me my fuckin’ money!”

“Girl, calm down. It’s all gone in my account now. If you want more, you get some more from your lil’ boyfriend.” She cackled, coughed and lit another cigarette.

“You bitch! I’m the one who got it all!”

“I know. And *thank you*, baby...”

“You fucking bitch! Give me my money!”

“Girl, quit yelling at me, you’re making a fool of yourself.” Two ponytailed female students in khaki shorts and polos walking back towards the dorm stared at Misty screaming at her mother through the passenger door. They tried to muffle their giggles.

“I never wanna fuckin’ see you again! You fucking bitch!” Misty slammed the door. She stormed towards the dormitory but could still hear her mother laughing and coughing as the Camaro clunked through the parking lot and onto the street.

Moments later, Joey’s Explorer peeled into the parking lot of Misty’s dorm. He’d already been there once and had then gone to check other places where Misty hung out. He had checked the student union building and the Jack-in-the-Box within walking distance of her dorm. He knew she wouldn’t be in the library, the computer lab, or any research lab because she never studied, so he had searched places like the quad, the coffee shop, and even the bookstore to see if she was in there stealing cigarettes again.

He caught the door of the dorm entrance as another female student walked out, and then he ran down the main hallway, up the stairs to the third floor, and down the split hallway to Misty’s room. The dry erase board of her door read, “Out running errands with Joey,” but he pounded on the door anyway. There was no answer.

Misty sat inside of her dorm room, staring blankly at the wall. She heard Joey shouting her name and heard him pounding on her door, but she just stared, slumped over on her twin bed, with her hands folded carelessly in her lap. Her eyes focused on nothing. For only a second, she wondered why she felt no guilt from this afternoon's prank. She listened to her boyfriend screaming and pounding but couldn't manage to care. When she heard Joey ask a couple of girls walking down the hallway if they had seen her return to the dorm, she remained calm. When he pounded harder and yelled louder from outside, and even when he violently rattled the door handle to see if it was unlocked, Misty didn't flinch. Her eyes remained captivated by the blank emptiness of her dorm room wall.

She remained immobile even when she heard Joey's firm feet stomping down the hallway. And when she heard two girls laughing outside of her room, and one of them saying, "Omigod! Someone wrote, 'Call me the fucking second you read this!'" and the other girl respond, "'That Misty girl is such a dumb slut!'", Misty simply closed her eyes, stretched across on her bed, and fell asleep within seconds.

When Joey returned to his apartment, he stood in front of the open refrigerator door, letting the blasting air cool him off. In situations like this, he did his best to not think about what was troubling him. He told himself that the biggest concern on his mind was whether he wanted to select Bud, Beck's, Corona, or Rolling Rock from his refrigerator. Joey and his roommate filled the large fruit-and-vegetable drawer of their refrigerator with beer cans and bottles twice weekly since their diets consisted mostly of fast food, frozen snacks, and brew. Too upset to make a well-thought-out beer decision, Joey instead reached down and yanked the entire beer drawer out of the fridge. It was

heavy with all those glass bottles and aluminum cans (he had filled it just yesterday), but its weight didn't faze him as he stumbled down the hallway towards his bedroom.

He put the beer drawer on the floor next to his desk and opened a bottle of Beck's Dark. After removing his sweaty soccer shorts and scratching his balls beneath his baggy boxers, he put ESPN on his television, hoping a good soccer or basketball game was on to distract him. Instead, there were a couple of old ex-jocks arguing about something he didn't care to understand, so he began flipping channels. When nothing interested him, he sighed heavily, sat down at his computer desk, and logged into Google Chat. No one was on, but there were messages from his mother, brother and sister. Joey had one-hundred-and-seventy-four buddies on his buddy list and not a goddamn person was on.

Defeated, he read his mother's message but found it lacked any importance whatsoever; if Sofia didn't tell Joey exactly what she meant to say, he ignored the attempted communication altogether. Brigitte's message was to both himself and Nick, stating, *What do you guys think Dad wants to tell us? Mom's probably just being overdramatic again. I'll call her tomorrow and let you boys know.* Joey scrolled next to Nick's email response and read, *Hi Brothaman and Sistaman. Who knows – y'all know Mom is going ape-shit about this reunion. If Dad wants to tell us something so badly, like Mom claims, he'd email or call himself. I'm not going to worry about it.* Joey shrugged and then stared desperately at his Google Chat buddy list, silently begging a friend to come on, so he didn't have to feel all alone. Joey hated little else than being alone, particularly if something was bothering him. He needed a friendly upper, a distraction from reality. Joey chugged the Beck's, scratched his balls again, and then reached for another beer.

## Chapter 7: Die Geschwister Schneider (The Schneider Siblings), Manhattan & Boston

Nick made damn sure he didn't lay his eyes upon Kyle's futon as he walked into their living room. He wanted to pretend that Kyle didn't exist, as if his beautiful apartment belonged solely to him. In the literal sense, Nick knew most of it did since he had provided 95% of the apartment's physical items, including the bed, the living room furniture sans the raggedy futon, and the entirety of the kitchenware. If Kyle were to miraculously move out one day, the only difference that visitors of their home would notice would be a gaping, futon-sized hole in the living room. Still, though, like every other time he walked across the threshold, Nick couldn't help but remember that it was *their* home. After Nick had paid for their movers, he and Kyle had rearranged the sofa, futon, bookcase, armchair, and lamps together, and they had made a home *together*, as domestically as two non-domestically-inclined people could. Materialistically, Nick knew that everything belonged to him, but as his eyes darted around now, he realized that until he and Kyle resided between different sets of Manhattan walls, every possession in their home would remind him of the man-child he had just visited at St. Luke's.

When he walked into their bedroom, he rolled his eyes at the overflowing mess of clothing, shoes, and other miscellaneous crap that flooded from Kyle's closet and into the middle of the room. A few empty hangers hung from the handle bar, but everything else in the closet was on the floor. Nick looked at the parallel corner of the room where his closet was, and silently admired how he had fit all his designer labels and footwear into the small space without a hitch. When he returned to the living room, his eyes cased across Kyle's futon, and he was reminded of a night when he had come home from work

and confronted Kyle about the closet war. “Kyle, are you ever going to sort out all your stuff in your closet?” Nick had asked, feeling like he was scolding a small child.

“I can’t. Your closet is bigger than mine!” Kyle answered, refusing to take his eyes off of the television during a rerun of *Absolutely Fabulous*.

“No it’s not, they’re exactly the same size.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Kyle, you haven’t even hung anything up. Your stuff is spread out all over the floor. There’s one shirt hanging in there.”

“Well, if you’re so concerned then why don’t you just do it for me?” Upon hearing this, Nick considered organizing Kyle’s closet for him. Not only would it have cleaned up the heinous mess in their bedroom, but secretly, he thought this puzzle would have been highly enjoyable. However, seconds later, when Nick realized that Kyle really *wanted* him to clean up everything for him, Nick surrendered the closet war, and never again spoke of Kyle’s suffocating disorganization.

Tonight, Nick wandered back into the kitchen and grabbed a 3/4<sup>th</sup> full bottle of Ketel One from the freezer, along with a stocky tumbler and a bar of Godiva dark chocolate from his pantry. He then wandered back into his bedroom, seated himself at his computer desk, and signed into his Google account. He wondered if Heather or any of his other friends were online. He needed someone, anyone, to cheer him up, or at least compliment him for a little while. When he signed on, he saw his little brother’s name on his buddy list, but thought nothing of it. Joey left on his Google Chat around the clock, but was rarely available to chat should Nick want to say hello. He knew that Joey just kept it on for the novelty of being online, just so his friends could read his Away



Messages, all of which announced some proudly tawdry statement about getting shit-canned drunk, banging his white-trash girlfriend, or the lack of studying he was doing. Nick filled the glass with straight vodka and put the icy bottle on the floor by his feet. Just as he was about to knowingly be rejected from his little brother's absent online presence, Nick saw his sister sign on. Instead of assuming his elder brother disciplinarian self, he instead morphed into his much preferred naughty little brother mode.

\* \* \*

Standing in only her bra and thong in her bathroom, Brigitte neatly hung her soaked Valentino suit on a hook above the bathtub. She looked around her bathroom at the candles, flowers, potpourri, and cutesy knickknacks, glancing anywhere but the mirror because she did not want to see her livid face. In her bedroom, she slipped into a red silk pajama set, and then wrapped a clean towel around her wet hair. She then climbed onto her canopy bed and perched herself at the head, against a mountain of cushy pillows of different shades of red. Her ragged teddy bear, which she'd had for 29 years now, sat next to her, so she grabbed it and sat it in her lap like a needy baby.

When she looked at the clock, she was not happy to see that it was already midnight. Brigitte habitually went to bed between 11:30 and midnight, and after she had finally cleared her mind, fell asleep around 12:30. She awoke every morning at 5:30, but as long as she had her coveted five hours of sleep, she had conditioned her body to think that this was enough. As she glared at the clock tonight, though, she knew that anger would prevent her from falling asleep for quite some time. "Motherfucker," she said yet again. Walker was now depriving her of sleep, too. She pulled her legs underneath herself and tossed her teddy bear back and forth from right to left hand. Until she had a new big

problem, which she assumed she wouldn't for a long time, everything that turned to shit in her world would be Walker's fault. If her drycleaners couldn't get a stain out, she would blame Walker. If her cell phone bill was higher than the exact figure she had already calculated for herself, using her own complex mathematical system of tallying her phone calls and texts, this too would be Walker's fault. When she awoke and the sky was raining instead of blasting sunshine through her bedroom window, Walker would most certainly be to blame.

She tossed the teddy bear behind her and hopped up, making sure the towel didn't fall off her head. Brigitte walked into the kitchen and seized a bottle of Bombay Sapphire from the bar. She filled a glass halfway with gin, halfway with tonic, and downed the entire thing within seconds, forcing herself to enjoy the quick rush of the gin. She faced the refrigerator, which was plastered in photographs, most of which were of her and Walker. Magnets clinked to the floor as she ripped off the photographs, tearing each of them into little pieces, and sprinkling them all over her kitchen floor. Brigitte may have stopped herself from destroying Walker's photos and other property, but in her own home, she didn't see the point of acting tame. Her eye darted around her dim apartment, from the pile of mail that rested on her bar, to her matching designer furniture from Zoe Home, to all the homely décor of big pillows, aromatherapy candles, and photographs in rustic wooden frames, all of which usually comforted her when she came home at the end of the day. Tonight, she looked around and thought, *What's the point of all this shit?* She lived in an uber-feminine apartment, and after what had happened tonight, she wondered if her girly abode would always look like this.

Brigitte poured herself another gin and tonic, and then headed back into her bedroom. She put the glass on a marble coaster at the edge of her desk, and then shook the mouse of her computer until the hard drive stopped hibernating. When the Internet window popped up, she signed onto her rarely used Gmail account. Part of her just needed a distraction right now, but mostly she wanted to see if Walker was home yet, if he was possibly, magically, online at this hour, too. She certainly wouldn't have said anything to him, but she wanted to see if he had the balls to initiate contact with her after doing whatever or whomever the hell it was that he had been doing all night. Instead, Brigitte saw that her brothers were online. This calmed her. When she chatted with them, online or in person, she felt like she was listening to two young men speaking foreign languages at each other, which further entertained her. Within seconds of her signing on, Nick IM'd her.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** Brig!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Hi Nicky.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** how's it going?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Don't ask. Are you talking to Joey?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** no, i just signed on. just got home. i've had the WORST fucking night.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Yeah!? Me too...I just got home too. Let's tell Joey to go in a chat room.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** okay. he's probably not even there anyway. he leaves his messenger thing on all the time.

**red\_lawyer\_lady** has entered the room.

**ohhiitsmeNick** has entered the room.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** So why'd you just get home? Did you have a shoot tonight?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** no, i wasn't working tonight. don't even ask where i was...

**soccerbigballs** has entered the room.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** wow, i'm shocked. hey joey.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Hi Joey!

**soccerbigballs:** hey peeps. what'chall doin?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** eating dinner.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** This late? What's for dinner?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** a bottle of ketel one and a godiva bar.

**soccerbigballs:** hahahahahaha. awesome. i'm drinkin becks.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Actually, I just made my second gin and tonic. I'm too anxious to eat.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, why aren't you out partying like always?

**soccerbigballs:** just don't feel like it.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** why? what's wrong with you?

**soccerbigballs:** shitty day.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Why? What happened?

**soccerbigballs:** dude, i don't wanna talk about it. but mostly misty. again.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** sounds like you really had a great day. hey joey, i will trade you (1) one misty for one (1) kyle.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Wow, you must really be pissed at Kyle to want to trade.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** you have no fucking clue.

**soccerbigballs:** yeah, i'll totally take him over fuckin misty.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** I'll give you Walker for free. You won't even have to trade.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** god, brig, you too?

**soccerbigballs:** what's wrong with walker? dude's pretty cool.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** that'd be awesome if we could do that.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** You want to kill your clingy little boyfriend?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** yes. oh god, I would love to. i can't deal with him anymore!

**soccerbigballs:** me too! but misty i mean, not kyle.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oh, well good then. let's just fucking kill them all.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Okay, even if we're joking around, we of all people should not be talking about this on IM.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** whatever. by this point, i'm serious. and you're the one who started it.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Even so.

**soccerbigballs:** why, it's not like we could get in trouble.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Um, yeah it is. Didn't you read anything about the Kobe Bryant case a few years ago?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** who?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Kobe Bryant, with all the emails he and that girl exchanged about consensual agreement to have sex. It was a big case!

**soccerbigballs:** you big gay man. he's a basketball player. you know, that sport with the net and the ball and the tall black dudes.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oh shut up.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** HAHAHAHA!

**ohhiitsmeNick:** i wanna kill my boyfriend, i wanna kill my boyfriend, i wanna kill my boyfriend! brig, please call X immediately and make three demands – one for each of us.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Okay, Nicky, seriously, you gotta stop.

**soccerbigballs:** brig, u know if we ask X, he'll do it. especially you!

**ohhiitsmeNick:** no he wouldn't!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, are you insane?

**soccerbigballs:** whatever, i think he would.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** he would SO not do it, Joey. but after the night i just had, i want to chop Kyle's head off and use it to play basketball with Kobe Bryant.

**soccerbigballs:** LOL!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Ha ha.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** You know what? I'm totally gonna read old torts about all this tomorrow at work!

**soccerbigballs:** what's a tort?

**soccerbigballs:** are those those things that mom makes on holidays?

**soccerbigballs:** mmmmmmm, torts, i wanna tort right now

**ohhiitsmeNick:** no, joey, that's a TART.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, please tell me you're joking.

**soccerbigballs:** oh. tArt

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** A tort is like 'a wrong done to a person.' Like a crime. Like, oh, I don't know, killing someone, for example. ☺

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oooo. fascinating. i wanna do a BIG 'OL WRONG to a person.

**soccerbigballs:** me too! me too me too me too!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Holy shit, y'all, I'm totally gonna look up this stuff tomorrow at work and see if these IM conversations are actually traceable or anything.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** awesome. then let's kill them, far away in germany next month!

**soccerbigballs:** ROCK! LETS DO IT!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Seriously, we need to stop. This is probably traceable, like forever.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** but it'd be so easy!!!! no one would ever know! holy shit this rocks!

**soccerbigballs:** THIS IS AWESOME!!!!!!!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** BOYS – STOP! ☺

**ohhiitsmeNick:** ☹

**soccerbigballs:** ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** It's very late. I'm gonna make one more drink and then try to go to sleep, which so is not going to happen, I'm afraid.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** me neither.

**soccerbigballs:** i'll just keep drinking til i pass out!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Of course you will, Joey. Of course you will.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** okay, night.

**soccerbigballs:** night y'all.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Goodnight boys.

**ohhiitsmeNick** has left the room.

**soccerbigballs** has left the room.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** I really miss y'all.

**ohhiitsmeNick** is unavailable.

**soccerbigballs** is unavailable.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Okay, fine, I'll just talk to myself.

**red\_lawyer\_lady** has left the room.

Brigitte shut down her computer as she sipped the rest of her Sapphire and tonic. The open windows of her bedroom let in a cool breeze that made Brigitte wrap her robe around herself even tighter. When the screen of her computer went black, she continued staring at it. Moments later, a smile slithered across her face. Brigitte knew she and her brothers had been at least halfway joking, but now she thought, *What if we could actually do this? What if all three of us could actually, really and truly, get away with killing those assholes?*



Her mind became a film projector with images of her adolescence shuttling through: the men in dark suits walking around the Schneider estate... all the funerals of men that she and her brothers didn't know but were dragged to anyway... the nasty, sarcastic organized crime rumors about her family that she had listened to float around her high school...the Kaestner family...and then...she thought of Lukas.

Brigitte set her glass on the edge of her desk and sunk down into the chair. The newfound excitement that her brothers had ignited within her disappeared and again her face felt flush. Her fingers clasped the silver handle of her top right desk drawer and then she pulled it open. Underneath a small pile of notepads and file folders was a picture frame, and she ran her fingers over its cool glass plate. She gently pulled out the frame. Inside was a photo of a Lukas, who had rarely smiled when he was alive but now grinned in the photograph. Only Brigitte knew why: when the photo was taken, he had been looking at her, the naked photographer, one night after he had snuck through her bedroom window and made love to her as a teenage girl. They'd spent many nights like this, and she was the only one who had ever seen him smile this way, so delicate and vulnerable.

\* \* \*

The night that Lukas died, Brigitte sat alone in her childhood bedroom. She and Nikolaus were home from college for Thanksgiving break, she from Boston and Nick from New York. After an early dinner with her family, Brigitte had tried getting ahold of Lukas, who had promised to see her when she'd come into town. They had made plans to meet up immediately and had shared late night phone calls during the two weeks leading up to her Thanksgiving break. When Brigitte hadn't been able to track Lukas down, she retreated to her former childhood bedroom and waited for his phone call.

Later that evening, Brigitte sat in the middle of her canopy bed, doing very little else. Like many Dallas autumns, it was still warm but windy outside, so Brigitte had opened her window. She heard someone knock and then, without her responding, Nick opened the door and stood in her doorway. "Brig, what are you doing?"

"Nicky, I don't know. I feel really strange right now. You ever get that feeling?"

"Yeah...I guess..." Nick began stumbling over his words, confusing Brigitte even more. She cocked her head and stared at him until he continued with, "Hey Brig?"

"Yeah?"

"Lukas is dead."

"What?"

Nick looked at his sister, unable to repeat what he had just told her.

"Nicky, *what* did you just say to me?"

After another long pause, Nick continued, "Mr. Kaestner just came over from next door and told Heather to go home with him. Um...and he said that Lukas is...dead."

"Get out."

"What?"

"Nicky, I'm sorry, just leave. Please."

"What?"

"Please, Nicky, just leave."

Brigitte watched Nick escape her girlhood bedroom, accidentally slamming the door behind him. She rose slowly from the bed, where she and Lukas had spent so many nights after he'd snuck in through her second floor window. She locked the door behind

her brother. Her parents tried talking to her that evening, but Brigitte allowed no visitors. She told herself that this was not really happening.

The next day, on Thanksgiving morning, Brigitte dragged herself out of her canopy bed, delirious from sleeplessness, and slipped into her blood red Victoria's Secret robe. Once she was downstairs, she heard her family's voices coming from the dining room. Brigitte inched her way across the estate and, from the foyer, she saw her parents and brothers sitting at the dining table.

"Brigitte," Xavier said when he saw her. Brigitte said nothing. She could not enter this fantastical scene in the dining room to be with them. If she crossed the threshold, this moment would be real. Xavier sat upright in sweat pants and a T-shirt, clutching the cordless phone tightly, while Sofia sat cross-legged, wrapped in a fluffy pink robe, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Xavier was tearless, but Brigitte saw that her brothers had been crying too. When they saw her face, they both looked down at the table and resumed weeping. "Brigitte," Xavier repeated.

She said nothing.

"Brigitte, I just got off the phone with Jorgen."

Again, nothing from Brigitte.

"Did you have any idea Lukas was using heroin? Did you know he dropped out of college too?" Xavier asked.

Sofia shot him a menacing glare. "*Xavier*. Just tell her what happened."

Brigitte said nothing. She had heard what her father said. But she listened only to the words 'heroin' and 'college' and instead thought of a documentary she had seen

recently on MTV about the rapidly increasing use of heroin amongst teenagers in the upper-class Dallas. Brigitte stood there, surprised at herself for instead thinking about the irresponsible, misguided Texas teens she had seen on television. She thought about the teenagers' tongue piercings, their baggy jeans, the slutty girls, faux-gangsta boys, anything and everything that she had watched on MTV one lazy Sunday afternoon in her Boston apartment; anything that prevented her from thinking about Lukas just now.

Xavier's face was as pale as his sons' faces were, and he clutched the phone tighter as he spoke. Brigitte glared at her father, shooting bullets into his eyes. She thought about MTV. "Jurgen...Mr. Kaester...he told your mother and me that Lukas has been using heroin...maybe for even a year now?...last night he...had too much...he overdosed, Brigitte," Xavier finally said in one breath.

Brigitte's family looked up at her and waited for a response. They watched her bite her lip and shift her weight from one hip to the other. They watched her eyes bounce around the room, watched her fail at being able to take a deep breath, and then watched her hands drop to her sides as she leaned against the towering doorframe. After a few moments of silence, Brigitte said only, "Why?"

Sofia burst into tears again while Xavier just stared at his daughter, having no idea how to answer her question. Brigitte could not blink. Like always, she needed a reason. And when no one in her family could give her one, she went back upstairs to her bedroom and stayed there, undisturbed, until the funeral two days later.

\* \* \*

On the afternoon of Lukas's funeral, Brigitte followed her parents into the chapel. She barely noticed Nick and Joey walking on either side of her like crutches, making sure

she didn't fall over in either direction. As they neared the front of the chapel, people reached out, putting their hands on Brigitte's shoulders and arms, and saying her name, but she couldn't look at anyone. She focused straight ahead, searching for Lukas. She heard Nick and Joey bawling like man-babies, each pretending to not keep glancing in her direction and wondering why Brigitte wasn't crying her eyes out with them. Nick grabbed Brigitte's hand and tried squeezing the numbness out of it, but she didn't notice. Brigitte saw none of the elaborate flower arrangements, the dozens of white candles, or even the photo collages of dead lover. Funeral guests circled around her, staring her down, but she acknowledged no one's presence. She felt like a widower at the age of 21, but hadn't even gotten the chance to get married.

When Brigitte reached the coffin with her brothers, she saw Jurgen, Katarina, and Heather standing in front of it, receiving people. Heather was the first person Brigitte saw, and she wondered how Lukas's sister was still standing. But as she neared Heather, Brigitte saw that she was just as unresponsive, if not more. People walked by Heather, laying their hands upon her supportively, some giving her hugs and kisses, but Heather ignored them as tears waterfalled down her cheeks. Not far from Heather, Brigitte could hear the Kaestner parents uniformly repeating the same statement to everyone who greeted them: "No one should have to bury their child."

Brigitte noticed that Heather was narrating the entire funeral to her dead brother in his coffin. While Heather's state of disbelief prohibited her from interacting with most of the funeral goers, it frightened Brigitte when she heard Heather whispering things like, "Lukas, here comes Reed and Matt, you were friends with them in high school. They were on your varsity team with you, remember?"

When Heather saw Brigitte and the boys, she smiled gratefully. Joey stepped forward and gave Heather a big hug. She smiled, squeezed him, patted his head playfully, and then he stepped away. When Heather saw Nick, though, she fell apart, shaking and shrieking softly. Brigitte could tell that Nick was struggling to hold Heather up; her tall, developed frame covered Nick's boyish body, and Nick faltered underneath Heather as she muffled her screams into his shoulder.

After Nick had calmed Heather and stepped to her side, Brigitte knew it was her turn. As she stepped closer to Heather, she saw the inflated redness around Heather's eyes, and she realized that Heather must've been crying nonstop during the two days leading up to the funeral. While Brigitte had yet to shed a tear, when she looked into the deep, coffin-sized bags under Heather's eyes, she realized that Heather didn't have many tears left.

"Hi, Brig," Heather said randomly between sobs, which allowed them a small laugh. Brigitte kneaded her fingers into Heather's back. When Heather released their embrace, Brigitte pulled out a small package of tissues from her purse, removed one, and wiped the mascara streaks off Heather's face. Heather giggled sadly, and when Brigitte finished, they held hands, suffering from utter disbelief of why they were in the chapel.

Then they smiled. They laughed – laughed comfortably about all the bullshit surrounding them – and held hands. Brigitte still couldn't cry. But she also kept her eyes from accidentally darting towards Lukas's coffin. His *box*. That large wooden thing that the funeral people had stuffed him into, that everyone marveled at as they passed by.

"You okay?" Joey asked his sister. He took Brigitte's hand while Nick wrapped his arm around Heather's waist. Brigitte nodded her head. She wanted to start crying,

wanted to feel something, but remained numb. She looked over at her parents, who were now looking inside Lukas's box. Sofia cried very politely, lady-like, and when she made eye contact with her daughter, she offered a lackluster smile. Xavier motioned that they were going to sit down and asked Brigitte if she was alright. She again nodded her head. Nick grabbed Joey away from Brigitte, hooked his little brother's firm arm into Heather's shaky arm, and whispered for him to take Heather to sit down. Nick then surprised his sister by giving her a kiss on the cheek, and then they hugged each other, hard, and went to take their seats as well.

Brigitte paid little attention to the funeral service. She sat in the long front pew with her family and the Kaestners, staring past the priest, past Lukas's coffin, and far past the front wall of the church.

When the service was over, Joey offered to walk Brigitte out to the burial site. Brigitte looked at the side exit of the chapel and watched as Nick led Heather out after their parents, and then realized that everyone else had gone, too. She told Joey to go help Nick with Heather, and then found herself alone in the chapel. Brigitte sat in the pew for a few more minutes and then slowly pulled herself up. For the millionth time in the past two days, an assaultive hum enveloped her ears.

She reached the coffin, placed her fingers on the edge and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, she saw Lukas's body. The Kaestners had chosen a mystic black suit that Brigitte had not seen him wear. She thought about how the dark suit would have accentuated his cobalt eyes, but Lukas's eyes were closed. He was so white underneath

the makeup that Brigitte could see the blue veins in his temples and cheeks. Until now, she had only seen Lukas tanned and muscled, and was daunted at how thin and pale he had become. Her ears rang and she couldn't feel the floor beneath her.

*He looks so unhappy*, she thought. *Not peaceful at all, but unhappy and cold.* After attending so many funerals while growing up, she knew that when dead bodies are made up well, sometimes it looks like the deceased are sleeping. But Brigitte knew that when Lukas slept, he curled up into a ball on his right side like a little boy, and sometimes even looked like he was smiling, no matter how deep of a sleep he was in.

She wanted to put him into a more comfortable position. A Lukas position. She needed to see his eyes. Her body tensed up because everything was wrong. Brigitte wondered how everyone else had seen Lukas inside of his body, because when she looked at him now, he just was not there. Brigitte stared down at this empty corpse. She had barely listened to the fucking priest talk and talk and talk about someone he didn't even *know*, which re-convicted her that religion was worthless.

Brigitte closed her eyes again, just like Lukas's. Deep, painfully sharp breaths escaped her chest, so deep she was sure that they clouded the chapel. She expected a flood of random memories to gush through her mind, all perfectly choreographed to the ultimate mix CD. But no cinematic montage came rushing through.

Instead, all alone, she began crying. She sobbed with her mouth gaping open, with no volume, quivering, her fingers clawing the side of Lukas's coffin. Tears flooded down her face, all over her black dress, and for the first time in her adult life, she was a complete mess. Standing there, nothing else mattered, and when she looked down at Lukas's empty corpse, she knew it was okay to act this way. Brigitte felt herself age five,



maybe ten years, as she stood there, exhausting herself in front of Lukas's coffin, until her body was as empty as his.

\* \* \*

Tonight, in her serene Newberry Street apartment, Brigitte clutched the framed photograph of Lukas, staring down into his eyes. Even after what she had discovered about Walker tonight, Brigitte realized that her life wasn't really all that different than it had been a decade ago. Lukas was still dead, Walker was still an asshole, and she was still a very lonely woman.

## **Chapter 8: Dallas, 2002**

Heather Kaestner stood outside the Schneider estate, leaning up against her black Mustang convertible, waiting for Joey to come outside. When she caught her reflection in the car's tinted window, she again beamed in pride over her physique. The girl who had once been an oversized, awkward teenager was now a shapely 19-year-old woman. At six feet tall, Heather now stood a half-foot taller than the Schneider boys, and she loved that her breasts and hips grew more voluptuous with age. Her mannerisms and speech had remained childlike, which even she knew was contradictory to her fully developed figure.

She looked down at her watch, wondering what was keeping Nick's little brother. Heather could not wait to go pick up her best friend at the airport. As college sophomores, now that she and Nick were on the brink of adulthood, Heather thought it hysterical that her parents and the Schneiders had assumed that she and Nick would end up together. Heather thought Nick was cute in a little boy sort of way. Their relationship had never once teetered on sexual, and the thought of having sex with Nick made Heather choke with laughter. Heather knew she needed a tall, broad-shouldered, rugged man who could wrap himself around her; not some cocky little man-boy who, except for her, seemed to hate the entire world – or, at least, the entire Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

It had been no surprise to Heather when Nick had come home from Manhattan the prior Thanksgiving break and announced to his family that he was gay. Brigitte had been excited by his news and gave him an enormous hug. She informed Heather that many of her friends at Harvard were homosexuals because all of the overly macho straight guys irritated her so much, and most of the girls annoyed her even more. Joey had suspected his "brother's big ole gayness" all along and was as equally accepting. After Nick had

moved away to attend Columbia, whenever Joey had called Brigitte or Heather from home, he had always joked with them, “So, is Nicky gay yet?”

Heather was even more shocked when Nick’s parents hadn’t been upset about his news. It did not, however, surprise her when Sofia told her kids, Heather included, that Nick’s “homosexual life partner” must be German, too. Sofia was more concerned about keeping alive the cultural ancestry of their family than she was about her eldest son’s sexual orientation. Likewise, while Heather had assumed that Xavier hadn’t wanted a fag for his firstborn son, he had shown no outright disapproval.

“Hi, Heath!” Joey grinned from ear-to-ear as he raced down the sidewalk.

“Hey baby boy, you ready?” Heather smiled back at the excited, athletic 16-year-old boy as he hopped over the side of her car, into the passenger seat.

“Let’s go, Heath!”

“Your mom doesn’t mind that she’s not going to the airport?”

“Nah, she’s cool with it. She knows I wanna surprise ‘em. She’ll just see ‘em when they get home.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Joey!”

“But Thanksgiving’s not ‘til tomorrow.”

“I know, I’m just being festive!”

Twenty minutes into the drive, Joey reached over to the stereo to turn down the volume, and asked, “Has Nicky seen any pictures of you recently? I mean, I know you guys saw each other for just a little while last summer, but how ‘bout recently?”

“No, and I can’t wait till he sees me!” Heather said, smoothing her floral sundress against her legs with one hand as she used the other hand to exit off the highway. When

Heather and Joey pulled up to the American Airlines arrival area at DFW airport, Nick and Brigitte stood on the curb, both of them dressed head-to-toe in black clothing and dark sunglasses, with matching square black suitcases at the curb. They both smiled enormously when they saw Heather and Joey pulling up. Heather was barely able to shift the gear into park before she flew from her Mustang over to Nick, who dove into her arms just as quickly. Joey embraced Brigitte while Heather screamed, “Oh my god, Nicky, look at you!”

“Heath! Holy shit! Look at you!”

“Nicky, how much have you lost?!”

“Since two summers ago? Like over 100 pounds!”

“Oh my god, me too!”

“Heath, you look amazing!”

“You do too!” Heather grabbed Brigitte’s and Joey’s shoulders and pulled them towards their brother since, like usual, they didn’t seem as excited as her. “Look at him!”

“Both of you are like half of who you were, dude,” Joey said, laughing.

“Heath, you mind if we go see X at his office?” Heather and the boys agreed to Brigitte’s request, and the foursome piled into Heather’s Mustang. During the drive to Xavier’s office, they all joked about unimportant details of Thanksgiving rather than their increasingly separate lives. Now that they all lived apart, Heather and the Schneiders unspokenly realized that memories – rather than their current lives – were what they had in common. Heather caught her reflection in her rearview mirror; she grinned, ecstatic that her family was all home again. Now, a year after Lukas had died, the Schneiders really were her only siblings.

"X's office is at this exit," Joey mumbled to Heather after some time. All four of them looked through the windshield at the building to which Joey pointed. Looking at the Schneider Building Co. from the highway gave drivers a view of a giant warehouse-looking space that looked presumably more industrial on the inside. Located on the outskirts of downtown Dallas, the Schneider Building Co. was surrounded by empty fields of minimal grass and maximum dirt.

"*That's* X's office?" Nick said. "It looks like one of those ugly indoor soccer stadiums or something."

"Woah, you actually know what they look like?" Joey joked.

"What's with the tinted windows? It looks like a big strip joint," Brigitte interrupted.

"Woah, you actually know what they look like?" Joey joked again. They all laughed. When the mustang pulled into the parking lot of the Schneider Building Co., Nick commented about the lack of cars.

"Nicky, most people probably aren't working today because of Thanksgiving break. You know X always lets them off early for holidays and stuff," Brigitte instructed.

"Well, X's car is still here," Joey said, "that's all that matters, right?"

"Right," Nick answered, granting his younger brother permission to speak. While the parking lot was nearly empty, the front door of the office building was still unlocked.

Monika, one of Xavier's three secretaries, sat alone in the building's lobby. She wasn't a small woman, but to the foursome before her, Monika looked miniscule sitting behind the half-walled reception desk, like a doll lost in a massive dollhouse of model

home furniture and manufactured shopping mall knickknacks. Monika greeted Joey with a big, “Wey-ell HAAAAIIIIH!” and he gave her a goofy smile.

Joey watched his siblings’ faces as they looked around Xavier’s office. He’d been waiting to see what they thought of their father’s workplace. Now that Joey was the only Schneider child left in Dallas, Xavier dragged him around all over the city, and many times this meant stopping by his office. During 18 years of growing up in Dallas, Brigitte and Nick had never been taken here by their father. Joey didn’t feel privileged by this, though – to him, it was just a big ugly space with tons of boring, useless crap.

The office was decorated to make visitors feel like they were walking into someone’s nice, new suburban Dallas home, but compared to the Schneider estate and his friends’ homes, Joey thought everything about it seemed eerily plastic. The carpet that began in the lobby and stretched throughout the rest of the building was unblemished, so much that looked like it had just been re-lain that morning. Joey noticed that it always looked like this, and the smell of new carpet permeated the lobby. All of the expensive wooden furniture matched, as did the spotless shell-colored walls. To Joey, sitting down in the Schneider Building Co. lobby felt like having permission to lounge as long as you wanted in a Haverty’s or Gabbert’s furniture store show room. The paintings on the wall were all by a random, unknown artist, and it was obvious to him that they had all been purchased as a package, for purposes of necessary decoration instead of taste.

Joey thought that even Monika seemed like a battery-operated mannequin, as did Konstanze and Ingrid, Xavier’s other secretaries. He had never seen them without gargantuan smiles on their faces, waiting to robotically greet whomever wandered into the reception area. Every time he saw them, he was tempted to walk over, yank up one of

their blouses, and look for the On/Off button he just knew was in the middle of their artificial spines. Each of the secretaries even sounded the same, speaking cheerily in an unthreatening yet assertive Texas twang. These ladies weren't so much steel magnolias as they were well-programmed cowgirls costumed in floral dresses or mass-produced business suits, always ready to assist you with anything, whether you needed a paperclip or a kidney. And most of all, Joey thought they seemed a bit scared.

Today, when Monika bellowed, "Whatchall doin'!?", Joey had no idea what to say, so he asked her where Konstanze and Ingrid were.

"Oh, yer daddy let 'em go uhr-lee 'cuz-uh Thanksgivin'! Yer daddy's sew naahs! He let erry-body ey-else go te-ew!"

Joey just stared at her, fixated on the fact that her facial expression still hadn't changed since he and his siblings had walked through the door. He looked at his siblings and Heather, all of whom could not take their eyes off of Monika. Nick, Brigitte and Heather told her hello as she continued. "Butchew know me – ah cain't leave this place 'til I know it's gon' be puh-urfect when we awll git back ohn Mun-dee."

"Mmm-hmmmmmmmm," Brigitte answered, "So do you know where X is?"

Monika laughed uproariously and said, "Oh yeah, I fur-got chall call 'im X 'steada Dad." The four of them stood there dumbfounded but all smiled back at her, waiting for a response to Brigitte's question.

Monika had worked for Xavier for over a decade. She had watched these kids grow up, but like Xavier's other employees and friends, only watched them from afar and showcased their talents via conversation and praise. Very few adults who knew the

Schneiders actually chatted with Xavier's kids about topics other than their successes; asking any of them how they *felt* was completely taboo, and Xavier's employees knew it.

"Oh, aah thank he's in hee-is awfiss wee-ith uh cuuhple uv his gahhz."

"Thanks," Joey told her, and led his siblings and Heather down the front hallway.

The blinds were drawn on each of the already tinted windows that covered the entire front of the building. When they reached the end of the hallway, Joey led everyone into Xavier's office. He flicked on the light, plopped down at his father's desk and propped up his feet, while his siblings and Heather laughed at him. Similar to the matching paintings in the lobby, most of the walls of Xavier's office were covered in mass-produced framed inspirational photography message posters, the ones with a photo of a sunset or a mountain climber accompanying a word and trite definition like, *Destiny: The choices we make and the chances we take determine our destiny!*

Nick walked over towards Joey and examined the framed photos on Xavier's wrap-around desk: one of Brigitte at her high school graduation; a triple frame with three photos of Joey playing soccer; one of Brigitte and Xavier when she was a little girl; one of Joey's entire soccer team; two more of Joey posing on the soccer field; one of Sofia; two more of Joey playing soccer; and one of Sofia and Brigitte posing together in Boston Common. And then, finally, on the wooden two-drawer file cabinet next to the desk, was a photo of the entire family. Nick swallowed the meaty lump in his throat, disappointed that his father was apparently prouder of Joey's soccer teammates than of his own firstborn son. Heather approached the desk and saw Nick's eyes glazing over the photos. When she noticed Nick's lack of photographic representation, she smiled and then rubbed his shoulder, but he rolled his eyes.



Joey began reading aloud the yellow sticky pad squares that were plastered on Xavier's computer monitor: *Xavier, Dagmar Dietrich called from Germany for you twice. He says it's urgent.*

"X works with people named Dietrich? Y'all know that's mom's maiden name, right?" Brigitte asked.

"Didn't that Dagmar guy used to call the house all the time when we were younger? I think that Dagmar guy is mom's cousin or something," said Nick.

"Yeah, he's mom's like third or fourth or whatever cousin. He still calls the house all the time," Joey informed them. His siblings rotated their heads towards him. Joey could feel from their stares that they were bewildered that, somehow, he now knew more about their parents than they did. While Joey also realized this could have made him feel more accepted or expertly informed, instead, he felt guilty. Guilty that he had always been the slower one, the younger one, the stupid one. Joey knew they didn't particularly consider him moronic, but he also knew that his place among them was to let them always be more knowledgeable.

"So anyway, where else would he be?" Brigitte asked Joey, changing the subject and thereby appointing him the leader of the hunt for their father.

"I don't know? We can walk around and try to find him, though." Joey hopped up from his father's desk and everyone followed. He led them back into the main hallway, which branched off into three other smaller offices, one of which belonged to Jurgen Kaestner, who served as Xavier's *Familienberater* (family counselor). The second office belonged to Leopold Zumvald, who served as his *Stellvertrender Chef* (second in

command). Xavier's *Finanzberater* (financial consultant) occupied the third office, whose wall plaque read Karl Wechsler, Certified Public Accountant.

Each of these offices was empty too, so Joey turned the corner. In this long hallway were about twenty more small offices, each belonging to Xavier's *leutnants* (lieutenants) and *soldats* (soldiers), who, to the outside world, doubled as his home inspectors, realtors, and building contractors. Their offices were decorated simply and had very little in them. Name plaques hung outside each doorway, but to Joey, it looked as though their inhabitants rarely, if ever, used them.

After moving away to Boston and Manhattan, respectively, Brigitte and Nick had come to realize the plasticity of Texan suburbia. Walking around their father's office building crept them out even more; it was an even faker replica of suburbia, double-plasticity at its spookiest attempt at normalcy. To them, the entire office building was one big *product*. Brigitte and Nick gave each other looks of repulsion as they walked down the hallway, with raised eyebrows and squinched faces they knew that Heather and Joey could not have understand nor participate in because they hadn't left Dallas.

When they found no one in the hallway of Xavier's employees' offices, Joey cruised through the vast conference and training rooms, each of them dark, spacious and empty. The dry erase boards were all wiped clean, and each chair was in its organized position around large U-shaped conference tables. Joey led his siblings and Heather through the big industrial kitchen, and grabbed a Snickers bar from a basket of non-perishable snacks that was always left hospitably on a small table in the corner. He led them through the coffee/lounge area, where at least two dozen black leather chairs were grouped together in threes. Joey hopped playfully into one of the chairs and bit off the top

of the Snickers. Nick and Brigitte followed his lead, each mimicking the oafish leap that Joey had performed while hopping in the chair. Heather stood next to the trio of chairs, once again reminded that although her father worked in this building too, she was not technically part of the Schneider star threesome.

“So where the hell is he?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, Joey. His car’s here,” Brigitte seconded.

“Mm-mm-mm? Maybe he’s in the warehouse in the back or something? I doubt it, though, he never goes back there. Maybe he’s in the bathroom?”

“If he just went to take a piss then his office light wouldn’t be turned off,” Nick told him.

“We could go check.” Joey hopped off the chair in the same oafish manner and headed towards the warehouse in the back of the building with his siblings and Heather still following closely. The heavy metal door of the warehouse had been left open a small crack. Joey pushed his entire body weight into the door, walked through, and held it open for his siblings and Heather. Next to the door were towers of sealed, unmarked cardboard boxes and wooden crates. Brigitte, Nick and Heather tilted their heads up towards the high ceiling while Joey again questioned silently why a homebuilding and warranty company needed so much storage space. Besides the boxes, there were For Sale signs, boxes of Schneider Building Co. promotional material (posters, clipboards, flyers and pamphlets, plastic hardhats, etc.), full boxes of floor plans, amongst other home owners warranty paperwork.

“What *is* all this?” Brigitte asked.

"No shit. Why's there so much *crap* in here? You can barely walk around there're so many boxes everywhere," Nick complained, preparing himself for an OCD fit.

"I don't know," Joey told them, "sometimes X'll pay me and some friends to re-organize all these boxes and shit, but we never know what's in 'em."

"You've never looked?" Brigitte and Nick said in unison. Joey didn't answer, and instead just stared at them, wondering the exact date when his brother and sister had morphed into the same person.

"Let's open one," Heather suggested.

"No, X'll probably find out. Then he'll just get pissed at me 'cuz somehow he'll find out I was in here. Maybe Monika'll tell 'im I was back here or something." Their conversation came to an immediate halt when they heard a man's voice off in the distance, presumably coming from the back of the warehouse.

"Who was that?" Brigitte whispered, again looking at Joey like he knew the answer to everything that occurred in their father's office. He shrugged, and then all four of them took turns looking at each other.

"Let's go look," Brigitte directed. Still playing tour guide, Joey ran his hands along the towers of boxes, crates and chests, until he found a walkway. The other three followed as Joey made his way through this maze of supplies. As they walked through Xavier's supply castle, the voices in the distance became louder, and they discerned that they were listening to some men fighting.

"That's totally X's voice," Nick whispered to everyone, which prompted a collection of muffled giggles.

Joey realized that he was about to see his father conducting business with one of his employees, perhaps firing him for not selling enough homes or for fucking-up on the blueprints of a specified floor plan design. When Joey saw an opening at the end of the rows of boxes, his feet pounded the concrete as he ran towards the end. They all giggled insidiously as they darted towards the opening, finally able to surprise their father after searching the entire building. Joey shot out into the empty vastness of the warehouse, followed by Brigitte, Nick and Heather, and they all bumped into each other when Joey came to a sudden halt.

“Nooooo! Xavier, please, God, nooo!” they watched a man scream, who stood next to another panicking man, not fifteen feet away from their father, Jurgen Kaestner, and Leopold Zumvald. Heather and the Schneider siblings watched as their fathers and Leopold each aimed a German MP-43 at the two victims and fire. They watched their fathers fire multiple times into the men’s chests and faces. They watched the victims’ bodies convulse uncontrollably, and they watched as blood gurgled from the victims’ mouths and funnel out of the new holes in their bodies. They watched the two men die instantly when they fell to the ground.

Brigitte and Heather screamed. Heather grabbed Nick and dug her fingernails into his arm, while Brigitte stood alone, hugging herself. All color disappeared from Joey’s face, his eyes widened, and then he turned towards his siblings, away from the bodies. Although Nick had jumped at the harrowing sound of the gunshots echoing through the warehouse, he stepped forward slowly towards the lifeless bodies, his formerly gaping mouth now becoming a smile.

Xavier, Jurgen and Leopold spun around after hearing the screams, and were aghast to see who was standing behind them. Nick continued creeping towards the bodies as smoke rose from the raw gunshot holes. When Xavier stepped forward and gently placed his hand on Nick's arm, Nick gently yanked his arm away from his father, and progressed forward. Xavier watched his son move past him, seeing only a patch of black fabric topped with blond hair.

"Nikolaus...what are you...?" Xavier began, unable to finish his sentence. His son put his hand up into the air, silencing him.

Nick's glare wasn't hateful or disapproving; rather, he was mesmerized by the violence he had just seen. He continued forward until he stood over the bodies. When he reached them, Nick knelt down in between them, his eyes caressing the blood and torn flesh of one man's face. He inhaled deeply the scents of gunpowder and shit. Soon, as blood seeped through the men's oxfords and suit coats, Nick smelt the faint scent of iron wafting up from the small burgundy puddles. One of the dead men had landed on his side, and his crotch, front and back, was soaked, which Nick gathered was piss, shit, or both. Everyone watched as Nick's head tilted back and forth, transfixed as he surveyed the corpses before him. When he finished his examination, he stood back up, stepped a few feet away from the bodies, and smiled, still salivating and wide-eyed.

Nikolaus was hungry. His stomach groaned and a wave of excitement rumbled over him. He wasn't hungry for flesh or death, but for power.

"Nikolaus..." Xavier began, "what... why are y'all...what are you...how did you get..." After a long, careful pause, Xavier followed with, "Son, step away from them and get back over with your brother and sister." Until X said *them*, Nick hadn't regarded the

dead men as people; to him, they were just more supplies in the warehouse. *Them* made the dead men human to Nick, and he backed away.

Nick wanted to hold his father's big gun. He wanted to have a go at the next round of people who Xavier might be "disciplining" that afternoon. Nikolaus immediately wanted to show his father that he understood his secret profession, the life that he and his siblings had often joked about ever since they saw that head in the freezer, the life that Nick had secretly hoped his overprotective father really lived. He wanted to tell X that all of this was okay for his kids to know about. And most of all, Nick wanted to tell his father that he had finally found something about him that he really, really liked.

But Nick said none of these things. Instead, he returned to his siblings and Heather. He held Heather's hand and wondered why Brigitte's and Joey's faces still displayed looks of horror instead of excitement.

"Come with me into my office," Xavier instructed his children. He extended his hand for them to walk back through the long tunnel of boxes, and waited for his kids to go ahead of him. Heather watched as Xavier motioned for Jurgen and Leopold to remain behind and take care of the bodies, and she halted at the sight of her father being told what to do. Jurgen failed at offering his daughter a smile and instead mouthed, "Go."

They walked single-file through the building in silence until they reached Xavier's office. Brigitte and Joey sat in the two chairs in front of Xavier's desk while Heather and Nick seated themselves on the sofa on the side of the room. Xavier sat down slowly behind his desk and sighed heavily. He had dreaded this day since Sofia had been pregnant with Brigitte, and 21 years later, his parenting nightmare had become reality. He began, "I guess you've probably known for a while..."

“You’ve been lying to us for years,” Brigitte scolded, “I mean, of course we’ve known something, but why didn’t you just tell us? You think we’re all going to freak out or something? Nicky and I don’t even live at home anymore, so why keep hiding it?”

Xavier bit his upper lip. The ground felt like a treadmill beneath him. “You all needed...well, still *need* to have your own lives. Do your own things. Mom and I are very proud of the three of you. We didn’t want to let anything affect your successes or ambitions any more than all of this probably already has.”

“But you still lied to us. Our whole lives,” Brigitte continued, “you guys always demanded to know everything we did, were up our asses 24-7 about everything, and you didn’t tell us about *this*. At least not the whole picture...”

Xavier strained to choose his words carefully. “Brigitte, you’re right. Of course we did our best to hide as much of this from you, *on purpose*. Imagine growing up knowing everything. Imagine how different your life would be.”

“Yeah, I probably would’ve left home a lot sooner.”

“Why are you attacking him?” Nick asked, defending his father for the first time in their family history.

“What? You think all of this is okay?” Brigitte glared at her brother.

“I don’t know? I mean, it may not be okay, but I certainly don’t mind it.”

“It’s weird, but a little cool, too,” Joey interjected.

“Are you kidding me?!” Bridget crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair.

Nick continued, “Brig, you just said it yourself – we’ve known shit like this all along. We’ve always talked about how there must be more going on...?”



"You have?" Xavier blurted but his children ignored him. When the three of them united, he knew that even he was powerless, excluded from their restricted triangle, even if he was in the same room.

"Yes, but we were *joking*," Brigitte told Nick. She looked at Joey to agree with her, but instead he looked at Heather, the sole seemingly indifferent party in the office.

"Yeah, joking about something we that we really, truly, deep down, thought was true! Brig, there's no such thing as a joke," Nick told her.

"Thank you, Sigmund Freud," she retaliated.

"Y'all, look. Please try to forget about all of this now—" Xavier began.

"Forget?!" Brigitte burst.

"Sorry, wrong choice of words. Look...why don't you go home and see your mother? She hasn't seen Brigitte and Nikolaus in months. I'll finish up here and then meet you at home. Your mother and I can tell whatever you want to know."

Brigitte kept on, "See, you're still talking to us like we're all babies. Instead of us asking questions, why don't you tell us everything we need to know? I mean, I'm still going to ask questions at home, but you could at least start telling the truth about all of—"

"*Fine*. I'll meet you at home, and I promise we'll do that. Heather, please come over, too. Bring your parents. I'll discuss this with your father before we leave."

"Do you sell drugs and prostitutes and stuff like that?" Brigitte demanded, "I at least need to know that right now because I will not support any of that."

"You sound just like your mother," Xavier said, smiling caustically. He wanted to answer *No* in the completest sense, but could not. Xavier stood firmly behind his desk and thought about his associates in Germany, many of whom he knew imported Thai

prostitutes and sold them to overweight, middle-aged German men who would not have sex or a wedding ring without their Asian slave ladies. After a long pause, he answered, "No, no drugs and no prostitutes. The Schneider Building Company is completely legitimate. If it weren't then how do you think I could give you everything that y'all have? Brigitte, look. We're not like the Sicilian or Russian mafia or something ridiculous like that. All of this is *just work*. My associates and I help people when they need help with their homes. But when they won't return the favor because they're too irresponsible or dishonest or...lacking in the money they owe us...we have to do something about it."

Nick grinned at his big, powerful father. Joey looked at his brother grinning, so he grinned too. Brigitte said, "What, you mean kill them?"

"Not always. And I'm not going to lie to you anymore. Sometimes, yes, if it's warranted, but not always. I'll explain everything when I get home. *Go see your mother.*"

As her brothers and Heather rose to obey their father, Brigitte took a pen and a mini yellow legal notepad out of her purse and began writing her list of questions.

\* \* \*

"So why'd you shoot those two dudes?" Joey asked the second Xavier walked into the dining room after arriving home. His wife, children and the Kaestners sat around the dining room table.

When Sofia heard Joey's question, she burrowed her face into her palms. Sofia had never had to watch her husband or father kill anyone and she was deflated that her own children had been finally subjected to this scene. She looked over at Katarina Kaestner, wondering if she was struck by the same fear. With a heavy brow, Katarina

shook her head back and forth in Sofia's direction, showing Sofia that she too wished things hadn't unfolded like this.

Xavier huffed as he set his briefcase on the floor. He approached the table, assumed his seat at its head, and said, "Look. As you know, through the company, we deal with house foreclosures. Homeowner's loans. Realty dominance." Sofia slid a glass of iced tea in front of him. He picked it up and took a long guzzle, wondering how to best phrase the next part. "But we also loan money. When people are turned down from banks or mortgage companies or other homeowners' loan companies, we give them a loan. And like every other bank or mortgage company, we charge those people interest. But when they don't pay us back within the agreed upon time..."

"So, what, you're a loan shark?" Brigitte interjected. "That's illegal."

"So is killing people," Nick said, focusing on her frown. "Which do you think is worse?" When Brigitte glared back at Nick, he began fidgeting with his knife, rubbing it casually against the veins of his left wrist.

"No one says *loan shark*. We give Texans, often immigrants from Europe, a chance at having a life, even after everywhere else has turned them down. But when people are ungrateful...when they do not pay us back...we have to do something about it."

"Yeah, we saw what that was," Nick said.

"Wait," Brigitte began, "How do you have all these clients but no trace back to your company if, oh, I don't know, a bunch of your customers *die*?"

"Please stop with the sarcasm," her father told her. "Either you accept it or you don't. Who do you think pays for Harvard?"

“I’m just wondering.”

“We don’t use paperwork. I said – we do people favors. There is no paper trail, no signatures, no proof that we are connected to these people. They make the choice of having it this way before accepting the money we give them. In essence, you could look at it like we buy people’s homes for them. And the vast majority of people pay us back. Believe it or not, there are far less major problems than you are apparently convinced of.”

“Well, if I got a free house, I probably wouldn’t care about paperwork either,”  
Joey butt in.

“I just said that it’s not a free house. It’s a loan. And all loans must be repaid. Most people repay the loans and interest in due time, which is where we make our money. *Most people.*” There was then a silence around the table, which Xavier eventually ended by stating, “I have no plan of making Nick or Joey my successor. I love my sons too much and don’t want them in danger.”

Nick and Joey both looked at their father with a combination of relief and disappointment. Then Nick asked, “Oh yeah. You worked for grandpa before he died, huh? I remember those stories from when we were really young.”

Xavier looked down at Sofia in acknowledgment of her father before saying, “I did. Your mother’s dad. And he left the business to me, as you know. He had no sons of his own, so I stepped in for him. We just changed the name when I took over, as well as...some other changes. And for the next generation, the Schneider name must be also erased from the company. Just as my father-in-law left the business to me...”

“Wait,” Brigitte interrupted. A conflicted look overtook her face. “So this means that the person who’ll take over will be the guy that I –”

“Yes, exactly. Brigitte, your future husband will be my successor.” After saying this, Xavier again locked eyes with Jurgen Kaestner. They nodded in accordance.

“But don’t get married too quickly!” Sofia chirped, “If you marry someone you don’t love, then the rest of your life will be awful! *Awful!* You’ll want to get away from your husband *every day!* Brigitte, do *NOT* marry too young, you will be miserable!”

Xavier looked at his wife but she looked away and lowered her head, slightly embarrassed by her outburst. He paused and waited for Sofia to make eye contact with him, but instead she fiddled with the festive, overflowing wicker cornucopia in the center of the table. He sighed enormously before asking, “Do I need to explain anything else?”

The room was silent. Brigitte suddenly felt the pressure of her love life – or the lack thereof, since Lukas’s death. Her parents, brothers and neighbors all stared at her, waiting for a response. Her family’s business and its very happiness rested on her future marriage, a romance that had yet to even *exist*. The pressure of these fourteen vigilant eyes around the large redwood dining table was too much for Brigitte right now. As if Lukas’s death the prior Thanksgiving break, just one year ago, hadn’t been enough trauma for Brigitte, the unofficially appointed leader of her family, she now understood that all of these interrogative people were waiting impatiently for her to mate and marry. Her face became rouged and she felt her temperature increasing.

Brigitte excused herself from the table, and from her family. She exited the dining room, swatting away the decorative papier-mâché turkey and the red, orange and brown-lettered *Happy Thanksgiving!* banner that dangled above the doorway.

# **PART TWO**

*2008*

## **Chapter 9: Manhattan**

Nick sang along to Kid Rock's "Cowboy" on his iPod as he danced out of the 23<sup>rd</sup> St. subway station, not caring if anyone in Chelsea heard him. When Newmarket Films called to cancel his last shoot of the day – an interview with Lindsay Lohan about her character and the prosthetic mask she wore to portray a serial killer in her new film – he packed up his messenger bag and darted out of his office within minutes. Now, he sang and smiled to random pedestrians who walked out of the Gap, Dunkin Donuts, and Duane Reade. As he strummed an air guitar as his messenger bag thumped him on the ass. As Nick rounded the northwest corner of 26<sup>th</sup> St. and 7<sup>th</sup> Ave, he grinned about his opportunity to devour the few hours of Nick Time he had until Kyle returned home from Mars 2112.

When Nick reached his building, he saw two scraggly men sucking on cigarettes and loading a futon cushion into an unmarked, rusty orange van. Without stopping, when he looked closer at the futon cushion, he realized it looked exactly like Kyle's cushion – he saw the cigarette burns, white ash stains, and frayed purple strings blowing in the breeze. With just a quick glance, it was obvious to him that these men were not professional movers because of their awkward, lanky physiques and lackadaisicalness. One of the men was so skeletal that one prong of the metal futon frame seemed thicker and heavier than him. Still, Nick had no idea who these people were because he could count Kyle's friends on one hand, and they were not the type of people to help someone move. Kyle's friends were drug dealers and aging club kids, people Nick had outgrown during his drugging and partying college years.

At first, Nick became excited at the sight of the ratty cushion being loaded into the van. So many things pranced through his mind, none of which involved Kyle's well-being: *Did my father surprise me by buying me new furniture? Did Kyle finally agree to get rid of that shitty thing?*, and eventually, *Holy shit, am I being robbed?!?*

Nick raced through the lobby, not greeting the doorman with his usual peppy-but-distant *Heehlllllo*, and rode the elevator up to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. Panic soon silenced his prior excitement, and a sinking feeling of *what-the-fuck-is-going-on?* overcame him. He raced down the hallway and pushed open his already semi-ajar apartment door, where he found Kyle and Kyle's drug dealer friend Wes standing in the middle of the living room, tossing the rest of Kyle's minimal belongings into a cardboard box. Nick looked at his adult lover from across the room, but once again saw a manipulative adolescent.

Immediately, Nick thought about money and nothing more. He thought about not receiving the greasy wad of a few twenty dollar bills from waiting tips that Kyle gave him every month before Nick wrote out the rent check. He thought about the Con Edison bill, the Verizon bill with all of Kyle's needy long-distance calls to his burnout friends in Chicago, and he even thought about the extra measly thirty bucks he wouldn't be receiving from Kyle for the Time Warner subscription that they split evenly (although Kyle rarely paid and thought that Nick forgot, which he never did). Nick looked at his boyfriend and saw diminishing dollar signs dancing out of his apartment and into the elevator. When Nick was finally able to speak, he said only, "What are you doing?"

Kyle said nothing and looked away, focusing on the end of his cigarette butt.

"Kyle?" Nick said again, pausing and staring into his eyes so hard that all four eyeballs burned. "What exactly is it that you're doing?" Kyle still didn't answer, but this



time he sashayed over in Nick's direction, attempting to pass him and flee the crime scene. Nick gently grabbed Kyle's wrist and pulled Kyle towards him.

"Kyle? What's going on?"

"I have to go," Kyle finally answered.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not? Kyle? Why are you leaving?" Nick still spoke softly and controlled, still seeing dollar signs dancing above Kyle's head.

"Nick, let go of me. I'm not telling."

"What's going on? Whatever it is, this is not the way to handle things."

"Don't tell me how to handle things!" Kyle shrieked.

"Sorry. Fine. Kyle, what's going on? Let's go into the bedroom and talk about this." Nick glared at Wes from across the room, wondering when the drug dealer was going to get out of his home. Wes didn't budge and glared back, as if he was Kyle's teenage punk friend, there to defend Kyle from mommy and daddy. Wes was in his late-thirties, and was the person who Nick realized was the embodiment of the ageing, depressed, pathetic person who Kyle would one day become.

Even then, as Kyle's CDs, sequined club kid clothes and platform shoes hid in cardboard boxes, Nick looked at Kyle and thought about that night in the mental ward, just a couple of weeks ago. Now, Nick realized instantly that Kyle's latest stunt was to go "missing" for a few days and act out his *Have You Seen Me?* milk carton ad fantasy.

"Fine, I'll go with you in the bedroom," Kyle finally agreed.

Kyle wanted attention. Nick knew this. And Nick wanted to murder him. He genuinely wanted to kill him, right here, right now. Strangle him, push him out a window, stomp his face in – anything would do for him. The two young men went into their bedroom, sat on opposite ends of the bed, and stared at each other without words, until Nick, once again falling for the soap operatic dialogue for which Kyle had set the mood, said, “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“...oh, I don’t know. I just... I have to go,” Kyle answered without looking up.

“*Why?*”

“...oh, I don’t know...I just...I...ugh...you make me feel so lonely. You’re at work all the time, I haven’t been to an audition in months...”

“Kyle, you’ve *never* been to an audition.”

“Oh, I know, I just don’t have time...”

“So what does that have to do with moving out of our apartment!?” Nick snapped. He couldn’t even roll his eyes because they bulged so far out of his head.

“Don’t yell at me!”

“Sorry. Puh-leeaaase...continue.”

“You just think you’re so much better than me.”

“No I don’t,” Nick lied. He wanted to say, “No, Kyle, of course I don’t feel like I’m better than you! That would be like abusing the handicapped! Me thinking that I’m better than you would be like begrudging a fucking wheelchair to a man with no fucking legs!” In his head, though, Nick told himself, *This is the last time, this is the last time, this is the last fucking time I’ll ever have to do this.* He calmed himself and answered, “Kyle, I don’t think I’m better than you.”

“Well, that’s how I feel all the time.”

“Kyle, I’m sorry. That’s not my fault. I’m not in charge of your feelings,” Nick replied, mortified because he knew he sounded just like his mother.

“Well, I still do. Whenever you’re around me.”

“So what am I supposed to do about this?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I don’t knooooooooooooooooowwww. Nick, I’m ~~sorry~~..... I don’t really wanna leeeeeeeeeeeeeeeave.”

Nick saw dollars. He also imagined himself and Joey racing through the Bavarian Alps, using Kyle’s head as a soccer ball during a fraternizing afternoon of brotherly love, and he imagined Brigitte and Heather cheering for them on the sidelines. No. No, no, no, Nick corrected himself; he imagined Brigitte and Heather joining in the game too, all four of them kicking around Kyle’s face through the forest until it was unrecognizable.

“Then don’t go,” Nick grunted through clenched teeth, crumbling a corner of his duvet so tightly that his hidden hand was turning purple, and barely, just barely, he managed a smile.

“You mean iiiiiiiit?” Kyle answered, beaming through whines, “you really don’t want me to goooooooooo?”

“No, I don’t. I never wanted you to,” Nick answered, disgusted with himself and his dollar signs, and then finished with, “of course I don’t. I had no idea what was going on when I walked in earlier.” He accidentally started laughing so he had to put his hand over his mouth and turn his head.

“Okaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyy.” Kyle slowly stretched himself out towards Nick on the bed, laying his head in Nick’s lap, waiting to be petted like a yapping poodle. Nick crinkled his face in disgust, but then extended his hand towards Kyle’s short, badly thinning hair. Then Nick did indeed pet him like a puppy. Kyle closed his eyes, appearing to be nodding off to sleep in his fantasy world, completely forgetting that his futon and boxes were down on the street, smack in the middle of Chelsea.

*That was all it took,* Nick said inside his head. *That was all it fucking took.*

When Nick heard Kyle breathing deeper and he was convinced that Kyle wasn’t faking sleep, Nick marched into the living room, glared at Wes, and said, “Go get Kyle’s shit and then get out.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“No, fuck you,” Nick answered, mocking Wes’s adolescent taunt. “And get the hell out of *MY* apartment.” Wes tossed his cigarette onto the clean hardwood living room floor, stubbed it out with his worn Converse sneaker, and sauntered out of the apartment. Nick smiled and shook his head back and forth in disgust. He walked over to the window and looked down at 26<sup>th</sup> St., eleven floors below. Within minutes, Nick watched Wes wander out of the building, and then watched him and the other goon throw Kyle’s things out of the van and into the building lobby, including the ratty futon cushion.

When the phone rang, he darted across the living room to the kitchen, trying to find the misplaced cordless telephone. After locating it on top of the refrigerator, he answered it on the sixth ring, and heard a female voice say, “Kyle?”

“No, sorry, this is Nick.”

“What? Oh...”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Oh, um, Nick, this is Kyle’s mother.”

“Hello, Mrs. Ruziero.” Nick grabbed a glass from a cabinet above, and then walked over the freezer, balancing the telephone under his chin.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work, Nick? Kyle said you would be at work.”

Nick put a few ice cubes into the glass and then removed an icy bottle of Grey Goose from his freezer. After filling the glass, he walked back into the living room. “I left early.”

“Oh. Oh...no.”

Nick halted in the middle of his living room and felt his eyebrows shoot into the middle of his forehead. “Why would it matter if I’m not at work?”

“Well, I just thought...” she began.

“What?”

“I thought that....well, Kyle said that he...”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

“Mrs. Ruziero, did Kyle tell you that he was moving out today?”

“Well, no, of course not. I had no idea.”

Nick guzzled his vodka, waiting for another response.

“Nick, is Kyle still there? I mean, is he staying there?”

“Yes, of course he’s staying here. What are you talking about?”

Nick heard another voice in the background say, “Mom, give me the phone.” Then the voice said, “Nick, it’s Bennett, Kyle’s older brother.”

“Hi?” Nick said.

“We had no idea that Kyle was moving out,” Bennett said.

“Really? Then why did your mother just randomly call and ask if he had?”

“Look, Nick, I don’t know if Kyle has ever told you much about his past.”

“What do you mean?”

“He used to do things like this all the time. You know, like run away from home. And he told me about his visit to the hospital the other day. He’s tried to kill himself before, you know. Or...well, not really. But he’s talked about it. You know, like left suicide notes and stuff. But don’t worry, he’s never actually done anything.”

“Um...and?”

“Nick, you must not be very good for my little brother. I think he should get away from you and find someone else to take care of him, but my mom thinks that –”

“Excuse me?” Nick fell onto the edge of his blue suede sofa.

“Nick, why do you love my brother?”

Had Nick still been at work today, had he still been receiving phone calls from publicists or agents or public relations contacts, had he been interviewing Lindsay Lohan or any other scheduled celebrity, he would’ve thought of a brilliant response to this question. However, for total lack of words, he fell silent, and realized that he had absolutely no valid reply as to why he told himself that he loved Kyle. Nick could not freely admit to himself that Kyle was just...there.

“Nick, are you religious at all?”

“What?”

“I mean, have you found Jesus?”

“Um...no. I sure haven’t. And Bennett? I’m going to let him go missing.”

“It’s a shame you talk like that.”

Nick provided silence.

“I found God a couple of years ago. I used to run away from home and was once in rehab, too, sort of like Kyle. I think you and Kyle need to find God together. Then all your problems will go away.”

“...I’m sorry, Bennett, what exactly is the reason for your call?”

“Well, you know that Kyle is your responsibility now...”

“Excuse me? He’s a 27 year old man. He’s his own responsibility.”

“Look, since he moved away from home –”

“What? He told me that you guys kicked him out?”

“Well...yeah, we did, he’s not welcome here anymore...but now that he’s got you, he’s no longer our responsibility. Like...we all felt bad at first...cuz, like, we couldn’t deal with his shit anymore, but now that you’re taking care of him...”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Look, my mom and I are happy that he didn’t move out of your apartment cuz then he’d just have to find someone else to take care of him, and sometimes that takes him a while...”

“Kyle is not my responsibility. He never has been.”

Kyle’s mother returned to the phone and said, “Nick, honey –”

“Mrs. Ruziero, please don’t...you know...with the *honey*...”

“Nick, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to Kyle.”

“What, are you trying to sweet talk me now?”

“We thought that Kyle would’ve changed after he moved away. Well, after we...let him go. What we’re trying to say is that, well, thank you for taking care of him. The only times he calls us are times like today, when he tells us that he’s going to run away from home, or like the other day with the hospital...”

“You *knew* he was going to the hospital before he went!?”

“Oh, of course. I agreed that he should go. He needed to get your attention because it sounds like you haven’t been very attentive to him lately. And since we can’t do that anymore –”

“Yeah, you keep saying. I’m going to hang up now.”

“Oh, well, okay, but Nick, just remember...my son’s just a little helpless, and whatever happens to him is not *our* fault. But Nick, it’s not *his* fault either. It’s your–”

Nick punched the end button of the phone and tossed it onto the cushion next to him. When he fell back into the sofa, he accidentally bumped his head on the wall, but was too angry to even release an *Ouch*.



## Chapter 10: Dallas

“Got anything else you want to tell me?” Xavier roared from where he stood on the bridge over Lake Lewisville. Two *soldats* stood near him, above the rippling dark green reservoir, which was deserted at two o’clock in the morning, away from the side streets and oft-populated pier. Xavier regularly brought people here at night, when the area was free of North Dallas families crowding the lake on sailboats.

“Please!” screamed Andreas Beckenbauer, “I’ll get you your money!”

“You said that six months ago.” Xavier motioned for the two *soldats* to move towards Beckenbauer. He stood firmly on the bridge, letting his *soldats* do all the physical work for him. After spending the past two weeks in bed post-heart attack, he knew that he had no choice anyway.

“No, Mr. Schneider! I can get it!”

“Then where the hell have you been?”

“I had to go out of town!”

“Bullshit. I know you’ve been here. How the hell do you think we found you at your cousin’s house? You weren’t fucking out of town. You idiot, I’ve leased homes to your entire family’s family’s family. If you haven’t had my money for six months then where are you gonna find it tonight, huh? You got it stashed somewhere? Cuz I really doubt that.” The *soldats* approached Beckenbauer and wrapped duct tape around the bulky trench coat he wore. Beckenbauer wasn’t a large man, but after he’d been forced into a black oversized trench coat with bricks stuffed into the coat’s lining and pockets, nearly an entire roll of black duct tape was needed to cover him.

“This guy’s a *fickin* pussy,” one of Xavier’s young *soldats* laughed. Xavier did not laugh with him. This was routine. It was work. He knew that killing Beckenbauer was just another point-of-sale-transaction. Someone who knew Beckenbauer would pay Xavier now instead, and that person would pay immediately. After 40 years of this, Xavier had gone from being fearful of his power to being unfalteringly confident. Now, in the twilight of his being the Chief of the Dallas branch, Xavier just felt exhausted.

As his *soldats* pulled a black bag over Beckenbauer’s head and taped that up as well, Xavier could no longer listen to him screaming through his gag. Xavier motioned with his head for his *soldats* to get out of the way, and they shuffled back up onto the main part of the bridge behind him.

“I am too old for this shit,” Xavier said before firing his MP-43 into Beckenbauer’s head and torso. Beckenbauer’s body shook as bullets torpedoed into him, and then, without the *soldats* even having to push his limp body into Lake Lewisville, he tumbled off the bridge.

“Well that was a disappointing little splash,” one of them said.

“Let’s go,” Xavier again motioned with his head, and his *soldats* followed him down the bridge. One of them carried his gun while the other returned to him his Football Club Dallas cap, which Xavier slipped back onto his gray-blond head. Xavier realized that his *soldats* had slowed their walking pace to accommodate him, so he increased his pace as they walked back towards the large Chevy Avalanche. After a few steps though, he winced over the sudden cramp he felt in his chest, and halted for a few seconds.

“You okay, boss?” one *soldat* asked as Xavier remained still, holding his chest.

“Yeah. Fine. Let’s just get out of here.” He began walking again.

“You sure?” asked the other.

Xavier glared silently at the second *soldat*, and when they reached the Avalanche, the *soldats* fought to open the passenger door for him. When Xavier climbed slowly into the passenger seat, the first *soldat* hopped into the driver’s seat and the second hopped into the back. The Avalanche loped through the muddy field near Lake Lewisville and towards the highway leading back into Central Dallas. Xavier clutched his chest again when another cramp hit him, so he rolled down the window and inhaled the night air.

“You sure you’re okay, boss?” said the *soldat* driving, “you seem kinda –”

“Yes, I am fine. Totally fine. Just remember that I’ve got children the same age as you *fickin’* kids, okay?” The car sped past dark billboards and dim highway lamps once they had made it back to I-35. Xavier remained silent so his *soldats* did too. The vast emptiness of Texas at night still seemed naturally portentous to Xavier, no matter if he had been working, or was driving home from a late-evening dinner with his wife. Once the sun had hidden in even the more urban parts of Texas, Xavier knew not only that he could get away with committing any crime, but he could also easily hide all of his secrets. Even North Texas’s more commercialized areas featured so much desolate isolation that Xavier rarely even worried about his work anymore. Dallas’s outskirts were like outer space to most of its inhabitants, the scary great beyond, which Xavier took advantage of fully. And now, during the car ride home, Xavier began rehearsing in his head the speech he would soon have to orate to one of his sons, whomever he ultimately decided would take over this opportunistic wasteland for him.

\* \* \*

From the downstairs guest bedroom, Sofia heard a car door slam shut. The glowing red digits of her clock read 3:12am, and she wanted to know what was going on. Paranoia rarely visited her anymore, the way it had early in her marriage; nowadays, she just wanted to *know* everything. She rose from bed, tucking her nightgown underneath herself as she reached for her eyeglasses on the nightstand. When she had fumbled over to the window, her small fingers separated two blinds, and she saw the circular frame of her husband walking towards the front door. She rolled her eyes and growled.

Pounding down the hallway, Sofia continued flipping on hallway light after hallway light as she neared the living room. When she flicked on the living room light, Xavier jumped at the sight of her.

“Sofia! You just scared the shit out of me! What are you doing awake?”

“I believe it’s past your curfew.”

“I had some business to take care of.”

“You have no business to take care of. Are you *trying* to kill yourself?”

Xavier smiled wanly and walked slowly over to one of the sofas. He sat down slowly, and then slipped off his boots before resting his feet on an ottoman.

“Would you please do me a favor?” he asked, leaning his head back onto the sofa.

“What?” Sofia said sharp as knife, jutting her hip to the side and frowning.

“Would you please get my pills from the kitchen? Helga usually brings them. I don’t even know where they are.”

Sofia stomped through the foyer, the dining room, and into the kitchen. She seized two orange prescription bottles from a cabinet and a small bottle of Evian from the refrigerator, and then returned swiftly to the living room.

"Thank you," Xavier said as she handed over the pills and Evian. Sofia stood over him with her arms crossed, scowling. Xavier looked up at her and, like always, surrendered to her glare. "I'll stop."

"I don't believe you."

"I mean it. I'll stop."

"Oh, sure. You said that a week ago when you couldn't even get out of bed."

"I think I almost had another heart attack tonight."

"*What?*"

"Please calm down. I'm fine now." Xavier again felt his wife's glare. "I swear!"

Sofia stood silently for a few minutes, watching Xavier take his pills, and then asked, "Do you need help up the stairs?"

"No, I can make it. But I think I'm going to rest here for a few minutes."

"You'll fall asleep."

"No I won't, I promise. You know I can never fall asleep right after a job. How many nights have we done this?"

"Too many. And this is the *last one*."

He shrugged his shoulders and took another sip from the Evian bottle.

"Xavier, you're not doing anything for the next few days. Nothing. *Nothing at all* until we leave for the airport on Friday morning."

"Okay."

"Got anything else you want to tell me?" Sofia asked.

"Funny, I think I just asked someone that very question a little over an hour ago."

He smiled again, which caused Sofia to throw her hands up in the air.

"I don't wanna know, I don't wanna know, I don't wanna know. Xavier, you know that I do *not* want to know!"

He shook his head back and forth and looked away.

"And by the way..." Sofia said.

"Huh?"

"My cousin Dagmar from Bavaria called for you earlier. He was wondering what day we are arriving."

"Did you know that Dagmar now has a stepson Nikolaus's age, who I think also lives in New York?"

"How do you know?" Sofia asked, yawning.

"I speak with Dagmar on the phone at work all the time. He phoned me up at work just last week, actually. He needed some help with –"

Sofia gave him a shriveled stare. "I don't want to know."

"Am I supposed to call him back?" Xavier continued.

"I'm not sure. He just said to tell you that he'll be in Munich this weekend."

"Also," Sofia began, "are you sure the kids have their plane tickets?"

"Yes, of course. My secretaries mailed them to each of them."

"And they've received them?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. They all confirmed with me by email that they have them."

"Well, they didn't email me back!" She twirled around and Xavier watched her fly out of the room. Giddier now, he stared down the hallway, with his blue eyes

sparkling, watching his wife disappear. Whenever Sofia had a rare moment of showing any love for him, no matter how aggressive her display, boyish whimsy floored him. Xavier told himself that Sofia was right – he really had to stop *now*.

He rose from the sofa and walked slowly into the kitchen. Standing in front of the refrigerator, he bent down and pulled open the meat drawer as quietly as possible in order to stay out of trouble. Onto the countertop he placed bologna, salami, and ham, and then moved on to the dairy section of his wife's categorized refrigerator. Sofia had even put labels on every shelf of the refrigerator so no one misplaced food items in the wrong place. Once he had cheddar, Swiss, and provolone on the countertop, along with a tub of mayonnaise and plastic bottle of Hidden Valley ranch dressing, he crept over to the pantry to retrieve a loaf of white bread.

After Xavier had assembled two overstuffed sandwiches, he also grabbed a bag of month-old fried potato chips from the pantry, snacks on which he was typically not allowed to feast, and then snatched a liter of Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator. Before returning into the living room, Xavier stuck his head around the corner to make sure Sofia hadn't returned to catch him preparing his late-night feast. Now convinced that his wife was not lurking in the living room, he tiptoed to the staircase, up the carpeted stairs, and towards the master bedroom, carefully carrying his beloved sandwiches and junk food as he crept down the hallway.

## **Chapter 11: Boston**

The colossal metal file cabinets in the research library of Luckham, Nortz and Hanzel, Attorneys at Law, were so tall that Brigitte had to stand on a stool to see into the top drawer. She flapped through file after file, looking for a printed copy of the People vs. Ulloa case from September 5, 2002. Brigitte wondered how a clippings file from 2002 already seemed to be missing, and why all the files in this cabinet were so untouched. The dim fluorescent lights near the doorway flickered, and Brigitte scowled at them, wondering why the partners of her advantageous law firm spent thousands of dollars on new designer suits every week instead of refurbishing their law libraries.

Brigitte knew she could've just looked up the People vs. Ulloa case in the electronic database on her computer, but she wanted a copy of it in her hand. Something about holding the actual copy of the proceedings itself made the case more authentic for Brigitte. As clumps of dust flew into her face, she chuckled over the fact that she was researching the precautions of her and her brothers' Google Chat conversations just as thoroughly as a case she would try in court. Brigitte of course took pleasure in winning every case she worked on or tried, but knew that finding this information on chat rooms and electronic murder plotting was far more important than any case she might be working on. She decided that if Nick, Joey and she fucked-up, it would be her fault since she, the family lawyer, should know better.

When she saw the words People vs. Ulloa and the correct date written on a manila folder in the back of the top drawer, she yanked it out and read the case facts at the top of the page: *Police in San Bernardino County were investigating a report that Ulloa had committed sodomy and oral copulation on a 15-year old boy. The victim told officers he*



*met Ulloa on the internet where they communicated via AOL Instant Messaging. In the course of their investigation, officers obtained a warrant to search Ulloa's home for, among other things, (1) correspondence "which appears to relate to the exploitation of children," and (2) "computers containing any of [such items]." While conducting the research, the officers seized Ulloa's entire computer system and searched it elsewhere, presumably at the police station. While doing so, they found copies of incriminating AOL Instant Message sessions between Ulloa and the victim. The officers seized the messages which were used against Ulloa at his trial. He was convicted.*

"Shit," Brigitte said aloud, and then flipped to the next page in the Ulloa file. When she read further, she discovered that Ulloa had contested the affidavit, saying that the warrant did not establish probable cause that he even had a computer in his home. The court, however, had ruled that Ulloa was saving his instant messages on his computer, thus granting probable cause.

"Why would he save it!? What an idiot!" Brigitte said aloud to herself. When she looked up, she saw a young male paralegal standing at a file cabinet near the doorway, staring at her. She smiled at him and said, "Oh, sorry! Not you."

The squatty paralegal retrieved a file from the cabinet he'd been thumbing through, and then scurried out of the room, like a pug afraid of his master. Brigitte ran her fingers through her hair, grasped the file, and hopped down from the stool. She realized that as long as she and her brothers didn't purposely save onto their hard drives any of their chat room conversations, there was essentially no proof that their conversations ever took place. They would also each need to delete the chat room copy that Google saved to their email account. After having done previous research on another case where two

people had plotted a robbery via email, Brigitte knew that the chances of a chat room conversation being retrieved from cyberspace were near-non-existent.

She shoved the Ulloa file under her arm and pranced around the towers of cabinets to another part of the research library. Another case popped into her mind that she'd read about previously, one where a woman conspired with her lover over IM to kill her husband. When she located the appropriate file cabinet, she flipped through the drawer, looking for copies of the Mich vs. Miller case from 2004. When Brigitte found the file, she yanked it out of the drawer and looked at a photo of Sharee Miller sitting on the witness stand. Brigitte's mind wandered back to September of 2004, and she remembered watching this case on Court TV after Tivo-ing it, and then laughing about it with her colleagues the next morning.

Brigitte could easily remember the basics of the case: Sharee Miller had convinced her lover, Jerry Cassaday, to kill her husband, Bruce Miller; days later, Cassaday's briefcase was found, containing a suicide note in which he also stated that he had killed Bruce Miller and that Sharee Miller had put him up to it; the briefcase also contained a transcript of an AOL Instant Message case where Sharee Miller had given Cassaday directions to where her husband worked, and also told him to shoot her husband inside the building in order to make the murder quieter; that Sharee Miller had promised Cassaday they would be together and have children once her husband was dead; and that Sharee Miller had began living with a third man after Cassady had murdered her husband.

"These people are so stupid!" she told no one. She knew that all she and her brothers had to do to remain untraceable was simply click that little 'X' box at the top of

their chat room screens, discard them from their inboxes, and continuously clear their caches. And lucky for her, Brigitte also knew that the only men in the world that she could trust completely *were* her younger brothers.

“Ridiculous Court TV. Give a break! It’s not that rich people get away with murder, it’s just that stupid people are incapable of doing so,” she whispered to herself as two studious female paralegals with pointy librarian eyeglasses traipsed past her, frowning at Brigitte while she talked to herself. Brigitte felt a golden halo appear above of her head, and knew that if she could see her reflection at this very moment, the halo would absurdly accompany the little red horns that so many partners of Boston law firms claimed grew out of “that Bridget Schneider woman’s forehead.”

She waltzed out of the research library and headed down the hallway towards her office, her new Manolo Blahniks carrying her swishy hips and meaty ass past dozens of male lawyer’s offices. Strutting past the ten-foot-tall windows and pre-war architecture made her feel like she was a sexy model, corrupting an office full of conservative Boston Puritans. When her assistant saw Brigitte approaching, she crept out from behind her desk, handing her a small stack of messages. “Walker White called for you. Twice.”

“That’s nice,” Brigitte sang as she snatched the small pink sheets from Stephanie. Before entering her office, she halted suddenly, and whirled around to face her assistant.

“Steph?” Brigitte asked.

Her assistant gave her a blank look and stood fig-leaved before her, her skinny arms dangling haplessly in front of her skinny legs.

“I mean...Stephanie.”

“Yeah, you’ve never called me Steph before.”

“I know.”

“Brigitte, why are you in such a good mood? You weren’t even in court today.”

“I’m just...” Brigitte smiled before proposing, “Why don’t you go take an early lunch and put it on my account. Take, like, three hours if you want!” Stephanie stood there blank-faced, acknowledging wholly that this had never happened before.

“Just go, it’s fine,” Brigitte told her, not even grimacing like she normally would have at Stephanie’s out-of-style, red-and-black-checked private school girl-esque outfit. Without another word, Stephanie grabbed her boxy purse from her desk and fluttered down the hallway and out of Brigitte’s sight.

Brigitte sat down at her desk and opened her Microsoft Outlook inbox to discover a new email from Walker, the third one today to which she would also not reply:

*Hey babe, where the hell are ya? You out sick or something? This is like my tenth email this week, and I just left two more messages with Cheryl or Cynthia or Susana or Sacajawea or Stevie Nicks or whatever the hell your secretary’s name is. She claims you’re in the office, but maybe she’s just supposed to say that when you’re really not? Anyway, I don’t have any trips planned this week, so how ‘bout we meet for drinks...and you know, a little bit more than drinks tonight? ☺ I’m sure you miss me, babe. Hit me back and let me know when you’re free. - W*

Brigitte shook her head back and forth and sang, “Motherfucker! Motherfucker! Motherfu—uhh—uhhh---uhhh—uhh—uhh---cker!” to the tune of the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah*, raising her hands above her imaginary horns and ironic halo. She researched for the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, progressively exciting herself more, and sporadically bursting into her *Motherfucker* opera.

## **Chapter 12: Dallas**

**heatherforever:** NICKY!

**ohhiitsmeNick:** hey baby!

**heatherforever:** hello i love you i miss you what are you doing!?!?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** i miss you too! i literally just walked in the door from work.

**heatherforever:** cool. i'm studying.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** hey, i'm supposed to meet brig and joey in a chat room in a few minutes but they're late – wanna come play!?

**heatherforever:** yea! I haven't talked to them in forever! I can't wait to see them in a few days!!!!!!!

**You've Been Invited to Join Chat Room 69473769671264586959**

**ohhiitsmeNick** has entered the room.

**heatherforever** has entered the room.

**heatherforever:** nicky, I'm gonna go grab some little study snackies, okay!?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** yeah, me too. or...I mean, a drink.

**heatherforever:** you alchy.

After slapping page 294 of her International Law textbook as though she were punishing it, Heather rolled back her chair and dashed through her bedroom door. She ran down the dark hallway and bounced down the stairs. As she neared the living room, she heard the gentle rumble of the television but all the lights were off. When she reached the doorway, she halted at the sight of her parents. Jurgen and Katarina were cuddled up on the sofa together, watching an old black-and-white movie that Heather didn't recognize. From where she stood, she couldn't tell if her mother was actually still watching the film or if she'd fallen asleep. Katarina's head was nuzzled into the curve of where Jurgen's

arm meets his shoulder, and his head rested against the top of his wife's soft, graying hair. Their sock-covered feet were so wrapped around each other's that Heather couldn't tell whose feet belonged to whom. Her mother's right hand rested in her lap, but her left hand was nestled in between her father's hands, warm and protected.

Heather often caught her parents curled up together like this, and was endlessly amazed at how two people could still be so in love after so many years. Even though Katarina knew that Xavier bought his entire staff lunch most days, she still woke every morning to make Jurgen a homemade brownbag lunch before kissing him goodbye. She cooked him breakfast every morning, too, and every night when he arrived home from work, his dinner was awaiting him on the table. Likewise, when Jurgen arrived home nightly, Heather watched her father wrap her mother in his arms, often followed by a massage, and every night Heather hoped that one day a man would love her just as much.

She had never seen the Schneider parents interact this way. For 27 years she had grown up comparing the two sets of parents, and in this respect, she now pitied the trio who had grown up next door. Never once had she heard Xavier and Sofia tell their kids they loved them; the most intimacy that Heather had ever seen in the house next door was a *Congratulations!* or a *Take care of yourself!*, often accompanied by a one hundred dollar bill or a greeting card.

As she watched her parents now, she remembered how she and Lukas had been so envious of the kids next door when they were young, over the rewards they always received from their parents, over the vacations they always went on, and mostly, over the ballooned importance that Xavier and Sofia had placed on them. Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef could compete maliciously far easier than they could accept a simple compliment.

Heather had always known that she wasn't like them. As a little girl, she and Lukas had always wanted to be the second Schneider princess and the third Schneider prince, respectively. During her childhood and adolescence, Heather had felt like she was boarding a rollercoaster car just by stepping through the Schneider's front door.

But not anymore. This sight of her parents – nearly every sight of her parents, nowadays – made her so thankful that she wasn't a Schneider, a member of the cursed, emotionless threesome she knew was destined for miserable success and wealth. She looked at her father cradling her mother's hand and wondered why she used to think that her parents were so plain and embarrassing. After Lukas's death nine years ago, Heather had feared that her parents would close themselves off and hate each other. She had worried that blame and resentment would invade their home, and that in addition to having a deceased brother, she'd also have two emotionally deceased parents.

As her eyes cased over her parents, these people who were married 48 years ago but still acted like newlyweds, she doubted she'd ever be able to explain the truly simple concept of love to the Schneider trio. Heather knew that basic, guttural, uncontrollable *love* wasn't complicated enough for them, even Joey, and she feared for their futures.

**red\_lawyer\_lady** has entered the room.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: hey Nicky.

**ohhiitsmeNick**: finally!

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: Sorry, I just left my office. I had a meeting run late.

**ohhiitsmeNick**: i'm kidding, i just got home a bit ago too.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: No Joey yet?

**ohhiitsmeNick**: of course not.

**soccerbigballs** has entered the room.

**ohhiitsmeNick**: speak of the devil.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: You're always the last one, Josef.

**soccerbigballs**: i'm not the devil.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: I've got more work to do at home.

**soccerbigballs**: so how y'all doin'?

**ohhiitsmeNick**: brig, you have no life.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: Oh shut it.

**ohhiitsmeNick**: ☺

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: So anyway, guess what, boys?

**ohhiitsmeNick**: what?

**soccerbigballs**: huh?

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: YOU MUST ERASE ALL OF THESE CHAT ROOM CONVERSATIONS! IF YOU SAVE ANY OF THEM, THEY CAN BE USED IN COURT. I SERIOUSLY DOUBT EITHER OF YOU WANT TO GO TO JAIL BECAUSE YOU'LL BOTH BE SOMEONE'S BITCH.

**ohhiitsmeNick**: cool, fine. i never save any of my chat convos.

**soccerbigballs**: yeah, cool. i am not somebody's bitch!

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: YOU MUST ALSO DELETE ALL THE COOKIES IN YOUR INTERNET HISTORY AND ALSO CLEAR THE CACHE EVERY TIME YOU CLOSE YOUR IM SESSION! AND ALSO DELETE THE SAVED CHAT CONVERSATION IN YOUR GOOGLE HISTORY. Do y'all know how to do that?!

**ohhiitsmeNick**: yep.

**soccerbigballs**: yup.

**red\_lawyer\_lady**: That way there will be no trace. Okay?

**soccerbigballs**: yup!



**ohhiitsmeNick:** yeah, well, anyway, i am so ready to do all this! i am completely serious. i caught kyle trying to move out yesterday! I HATE HIM!!!!!!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** are you kidding me?

**soccerbigballs:** what a jackass!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** yeah, well, Walker's been fucking half of America.

**soccerbigballs:** well, Misty stole all my money and told me she was pregnant.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** what?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, what are you talking about?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oh, and also i had to go visit kyle in the loony bin.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** WHAT?!

**soccerbigballs:** WHAT THE FUCK!?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Holy shit.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** okay, so what are y'all talking about?

**soccerbigballs:** it's a long story, dude

**ohhiitsmeNick:** well, i wanna know the story!

**soccerbigballs:** well now i wanna know both your stories!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Since none of us obviously have any idea what each other is talking about, why don't we all just send long emails to clear everything up. Just don't say anything about our conversations on here!

**ohhiitsmeNick:** okay, cool.

**soccerbigballs:** a'ight.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** so now what do we do? about...you know...

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Good question.

**soccerbigballs:** i wanna shoot Misty!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, from where do you think you'd possibly get a gun?

**soccerbigballs:** oh yeah.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** so i've been thinking...

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Thinking what?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** we're gonna be off in the bavarian alps, right?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Yeah, why?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** just think of the possibilities out there.

**soccerbigballs:** what do you mean?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Yeah, Nicky, it's like The Sound of Music out there.

**soccerbigballs:** hahahahahahaha

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oh please, you know it's like a big film set. deep within those big mountains can't just be all yodeling and a few of my favorite things.

**soccerbigballs:** ha!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Ha ha ha ha ha. True, but what's your point?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** my point is that i bet it's easy to get lost in there...and more importantly, easy to lose someone in there...easy for no one to notice if someone or three someones didn't come back out.

**soccerbigballs:** so what, we could shoot them in the alps?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Joey, we don't have a gun.

**soccerbigballs:** well maybe we can get one

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** We're so not gonna be able to get a gun. We also can't really plan this much. We don't know what kind of resources and stuff we'll have there to use.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** true. so then what?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Maybe we should just tell X what's going on with all of us and he'll just take care of it.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** NO! i don't wanna ask him or anyone else for help.

**soccerbigballs:** yeah, I wanna do it! and plus I doubt he'd even help us anyway.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Oh please. You know that if I told him what Walker's been doing to me that he'll go insane and do whatever I want him to.

**soccerbigballs:** yeah, he's whipped with you like he is with mom.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** yeah, well what about us then? what about kyle and misty?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Plus, Walker is like a really important person in this city, and sorry, but from what you've told me about your girlfriends over the past couple of years, I'm not sure that many people would even know that they're gone.

**soccerbigballs:** hahahahahaha – you said girlfriends

**ohhiitsmeNick:** true enough. on both the walker part and the girlfriends part.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** It sounds ridiculous, but I think we're just gonna have to wait until we're there.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** why yes, that does sound ridiculous.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Nicky, look. I'll keep looking at all the legal aspects of this whole IM thing because it still makes me a little nervous, and I'll also look at other murder cases.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** fine. WOAHA! i forgot to tell you! kyle does not have a passport and we leave in less than a week!

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** What, did he just not realize he needs one!?

**soccerbigballs:** dumbass. even misty got one made! her mom doesn't even have one.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** I KNOW!? anyway, he's getting a fake one made from his drug dealer friend or something. hope it works.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Nicky, that's actually awesome. If it works, he'll be untraceable, like he never went out of the country.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** ooooooh but i know!

**soccerbigballs:** so wait...what to do I do? Like...brig is playing the lawyer and nicky playing the producer or whatever...what the hell do I do?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Go work out a lot or something. You're the brother with the strength and brawn. 😊

**ohhiitsmeNick:** i am totally rolling my eyes right now.

**heatherforever:** what're y'all talking about?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** HEATHER!

**soccerbigballs:** hi heath! how'd you get in here!?

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Oh shit.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** oh right – um – i was talking to heath before y'all came online.

**heatherforever:** HI BRIG! HI JOEY! HOW Y'ALL DOIN?!?!?!?

**soccerbigballs:** hi heath.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** Goddamn it.

**heatherforever:** what is wrong with you, brig!?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** heath, were you in the chatroom the entire time?

**heatherforever:** no, i was downstairs.

**red\_lawyer\_lady:** No shit, but everything we've written is on here.

**soccerbigballs:** uh oh.

**heatherforever:** yeah, why?

**red\_lawyer\_lady** has left the room.

**heatherforever:** what the HELL is her problem all the time!?

**heatherforever:** she's mad just because i'm on here too!????

**heatherforever:** nicky? joey? where'd y'all go?

**soccerbigballs:** oh shit

**heatherforever:** will someone please tell me what is going on?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** heath, you've gotta promise me something.

**soccerbigballs:** oh shit

**heatherforever:** what?!

**soccerbigballs:** oh shit

**ohhiitsmeNick:** you cannot go back and read what we've written so far.

**heatherforever:** what? why?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** just because. let's just leave the chat room and talk privately.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** heath, you're totally already reading it all, aren't you?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** heath, are you still there?

**soccerbigballs:** oh shit. she won't say anything, dude. heather wouldn't do that.

**heatherforever:** of course i'm reading it! i wanna know what the hell is going on.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** well, whatever you read, we were all totally kidding.

**soccerbigballs:** yeah, we were just joking around

**heatherforever:** i don't understand all of this.

**soccerbigballs:** aww man, i gotta go.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** joey, i'll call you later.

**soccerbigballs:** cool, brothaman. bye heath, don't say anything!

**soccerbigballs** has left the room.

**heatherforever:** nicky, I don't understand. what does he mean? what is all of this?

**ohhiitsmeNick:** what do you want me to say?

**heatherforever:** that this is bullshit.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** heath, I can't wait to see you in a few days!

**heatherforever:** nicky, don't try to change the subject.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** FUCK - heath, kyle just got home. I gotta go.

**heatherforever:** this is weird, nicky.

**ohhiitsmeNick:** i know. i'll call you later, okay? just...like...i don't know? stop reading right now!

**heatherforever:** that is SO not gonna happen.

**ohhiitsmeNick** has left the room.

Heather read the chat room dialogue in its entirety. When she finished reading, she stared at her computer monitor, not really knowing what to think about her best friend and his siblings. After Lukas's overdose, death no longer scared nor intrigued her. She'd been indirectly subjected to death and violence her entire life, so she knew just as well as the Schneider trio that killing someone was just like a point-of-sale transaction, equivalent to running an American Express through a credit card machine to purchase a pair of jeans or some makeup at the mall.

As Heather cleared the cache in her Internet history, it wasn't the talk of guns and murder that upset her. Rather, what disheartened her was that her best friend had been keeping this information from her. Heather knew that she was in the Schneider family whether it was her surname or not, and now that Brigitte, Nick and Joey were finally embracing their legacy, she was so disappointed that they hadn't included her in their plans yet again.

### Chapter 13: Tampa

Mini clouds of smoke choo-chooed from Joey's mouth as he coughed from the giant bong hit he had just taken. The guy whose bong was being passed around had given a speech to everyone in the living room about how he likes to put a spoonful of Listerine into his bong because he thinks it's like smoking menthol marijuana. Joey did not know his host, but that didn't matter; this was just another random college party to him. Although Joey thought the Listerine burned his throat a little, after his hit he announced, "Wow, dude, that *is* kind of minty," and everyone surrounding him laughed.

Joey watched the Listerine guy chuckle in that way people do when they think they're in charge of everyone – more controlled and slightly condescending, with his vibrato deep and shaky and insecure – and then the guy passed along the bong to a pair of fresh-faced, freckled blond girls sitting on the floor. *Probably freshman*, Joey thought to himself since he hadn't seen them around before. His head was hazy from the pot, and as he looked around the room, he realized that he knew everyone else, not necessarily by name, but definitely by face. To him, everything was the uninspiring same at this party just like every other college party he had ever gone to. The same people in the same clothes talked about the same things. When he'd been outside on the patio earlier, the same people did keg stands as the same people watched and cheered them on.

When marijuana didn't make Joey laugh hysterically at nothing, it asked him to be more cerebral than he normally was. He leaned back in his chair and gazed around the room slowly, taking in his surroundings. The apartment living room of every UT party he attended had the same *Anchorman*, *Old School*, and *The Rules of Attraction* posters on

the walls, the same beer coozies laying around, and the same ripped and pirated CDs with the same songs that all his peers bragged that they had “discovered” before everyone else.

A short, chubby girl walked in from the kitchen holding a plate that she hovered before everyone’s face as she made her way around the living room. When she approached Joey, she offered, “Pot brownie?”

“Thanks!” Joey answered, selecting a medium-sized, obtuse chunk of solidified warm chocolate goop from the plate. The chubby girl smiled at him as he chomped into the pot brownie, chewing ferociously with his mouth open. A couple of Joey’s soccer player friends caught his eye from across the room, both of whom were also devouring pot brownies, and they all laughed aloud. The chubby girl fell onto the scratchy sofa next to Joey, and laughed at him too. He was used to this. Everyone laughed at Joey even if he hadn’t told a joke; they just expected him to, so most people who knew him just laughed prematurely, as if his presence was enough. He stuffed the rest of the brownie into his mouth and laughed along with everyone, not noticing the few dark brown crumbs that spewed from his lips.

Now that the pot was really affecting his senses, Joey scooted his ass towards the back of the sofa, sitting in an upright position with his clammy palms on his thighs, rubbing against his baggy, worn jeans. He sat against the back of the sofa, wearing a lippy smile to accompany his half-closed glossy blue eyes. A tone-deaf chorus of laughter filled the room, and when Joey realized he was bobbing his head up and down as his ass danced around on the sofa, he joined the laughter choir.

When his soccer buddies came closer to him and sat on the floor, Joey felt the bong being shoved back into his hands. He locked his lips around the top of the bong,



looked down towards the pot, lit the pipe piece, and inhaled. Days passed and then Joey exhaled, and this time a giant cloud escaped from his mouth and he coughed for a good two minutes. His soccer buddies chuckled so hard that they doubled over onto the floor, holding their stomachs.

Joey smiled at them, making a silly face with bug-eyes and his tongue sticking out. Then he burrowed his head into the back of the sofa, closing his eyes and swallowing the taste of marijuana that captured his taste buds. He felt something wet on his forehead, and when he opened his eyes, he saw amber hair dangling in his face. The chubby girl next to him had planted a big, sloppy kiss on his forehead, and although he inched away from her out of surprise, he also nodded his head in amusement.

When Joey noticed that he was grinding his teeth, he reached towards the coffee table and grabbed his full plastic cup of keg beer. He gulped down the entire cup and then stood up, now having trouble keeping his balance. His vision shook around as though he were a shuttlecock being thrown over a field of giggly stoners. These abnormal physical sensations didn't worry Joey, though; he took pleasure in the sensational escape of weed and beer, and was thankful whenever his brain went jetsetting.

As he walked towards the living room doorway and then into the hallway, he traded smiles with everyone he passed. Everyone knew who Josef Schneider was even if he had no clue what most of these peoples' names were. When he found a bathroom in the middle of the hallway, he was surprised that there weren't people lingering outside, waiting their turns to use it. He walked in, closed and locked the door behind him, and flicked on the light switch.

After taking a long pee, he closed the toilet lid and then sat down on the porcelain throne. He slid his cell phone out of his jean pocket, and when he tried focusing on the internal phone book, the indiglo face of his cell phone seemed to dance around, making him dizzy. Joey closed his eyes for a few seconds to regain control of his mind. He then managed to type the sentence: *I'm still kinda pissed-off and bored shitless at a house party. Whatch'all doin?*, and selected 'Siblings' in the Groups section of his address book. He hit the send button on his cell phone, and his eyes fell under a mesmerized, digital spell as the little envelope icon fluttered around until his text message had been transmitted to Brigitte and Nikolaus.

Just seconds after his phone provided him with a confirmation beep, he heard someone pounding on the door, screaming, "What the fuck, dude? Is somebody taking a giant shit in there!?"

Joey stared blankly at the door and bellowed back, "No, jackass, I'm taking a piss!" The pounding stopped.

He stood up and moved over to sink, laying his palms flat on the countertop and leaning forward to get a good look at himself in the mirror. His eyes had dark gray bags under them from a week of sleeplessness and anger. Joey looked at his 22-year-old baby face in the mirror and curled his lips into a snarl. He hated seeing himself angry, and he sighed heavily over his appearance. The pounding on the bathroom door began again, which caused Joey to fling open the door and find the Listerine guy waiting to use the toilet. Joey apologized to his host and then heard the text alert of his cell phone beeping.

When he hit the inbox button on his cell phone, there was a message from Brigitte: *Josef, I'm still pissed-off too, but we'll take care of everything soon, don't*

worry. Go have fun. I'm with some of my colleagues at a hotel bar, sticking my face into a giant scotch.

After all the complimentary smiles Joey had provided tonight, a genuine smile finally slunk across on his face, and he walked towards the back of the house. When he reached the doorway to the backyard, he headed straight to the keg, greeting people he knew as he approached them. Another of his soccer buddies filled a new plastic cup for Joey. He took a quick sip as he heard his cell phone beep again. When he checked his phone this time, the message from Nikolaus said: *Hey brothaman, I'm with some friends at a club, snorting lines off one of Justin Timberlake's FEMALE dancer's abs. You'd fucking love it! Calm down, have a drink for me at your party, and I'll call you tomorrow.*

Joey again smiled and proudly told everyone in his immediate vicinity that his older brother was in Manhattan, hanging out with Justin Timberlake and his dancers and drugs at a private party. He often heard stories like this from Nikolaus, and thought each one was so impressive that he always told all his friends about his cool older brother's celebrity meetings. Now that he'd heard from Brigitte and Nick, he knew he'd be okay for the rest of the night, or at least for a while. Somewhere, buried deep in his dense psyche, he knew he had really just texted Brigitte and Nick for instant gratification, the sibling support with which they instantaneously provided him.

"Are you serious!? What club is he at?!" a soccer buddy asked.

"Oh, I don't know, dude, he just sent me a text."

"That's so fucking cool."

"Yeah."

“Justin Timberlake is a big ol’ fag,” another soccer teammate stated louder than Joey thought necessary.

“Joey?” a familiar female voice said.

Joey blinked a few times while turning towards the edge of the patio, where he saw Misty leaning up against the wooden fence. Beer and pot clouded his brain, but he managed to slur together, “Huhwuhyouwann?”

“We need to talk,” she said, stepping away from the fence. Everyone else on the patio concentrated on their beers and cigarettes and looked away from Joey.

“You *always* fuckin’ say, ‘we need to talk’.”

“Oh, Joey...” she began melodramatically.

“Misty,” he answered, mocking a retarded person’s voice. Misty walked across the patio and grabbed Joey’s arm, pulling him off into the darkness of the backyard. He didn’t protest, and rolled his eyes, grunting loudly as he was pulled along.

“We’ve gotta talk before Germany. Something happened with my mom.”

“Huh?”

“My mom. I can’t find her.”

“What the hell are you talking about now?” Joey knew this pattern in her voice, the forced desperation of trying to hook him into a conversation.

“My mom’s...missing.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Joey!”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. Does this mean you’re not going to Germany anymore? You’ve gotta go. You gotta come with me. You *gotta*.”

“Oh, I’m still going,” Misty answered slowly. It was too dark for Joey to see the look of confusion that suddenly overtook her face.

“Good. Cuz we got a lot do there.”

“Joey, now I don’t know what *you’re* talking about.”

Joey didn’t respond, so Misty ran her palm down his cheek. When he realized the desperate begs he was mumbling, he shook his head away from Misty’s hand and looked down, losing himself in his beer.

“Joey, what do we have to do in Germany?”

“Nothing. I’m drunk and stoned. I don’t know why I said that. And...what the fuck? Where the hell did you go from the clinic the other day?”

“Oh, I was really upset so I left.”

Joey tried looking into her eyes to read some sort of deception, but it was too dark out. He could only make out the outline of her head. “Yeah, well, I saw the hours of the clinic, and they closed at five, which was, like, when we got there.”

“I know, Joey, I was upset. I still got it done, though.”

“What?”

“The abortion. I got it done. The doctors stayed with me later even though they had closed. I was the last appointment of the day.”

“I don’t believe you anymore.”

“Fine, don’t. But I’m not carrying your baby anymore.”

“Oh please, I bet you probably weren’t even pregnant. There were no cars in that parking lot. I’m not fuckin’ stupid, Misty. I waited there forever and know you didn’t come out, alone or with any doctors. Quit fuckin’ lying.”

Misty hung her head and huffed in defense. "Joey, I'm not going to talk about this anymore. You're not treating me very nicely." Misty reached to grab Joey's hand but he swat it away.

"Whatever, I'm out of here," Joey mumbled and began walking away from Misty.

"What, you're gonna drive like that?"

He turned back around and yelled, "Like what?"

"You just said how drunk and stoned you are."

"Like you give a shit. I'll be fine."

"Joey!"

"Oh, and I hope you 'find your mom,' whatever you're lying about this time!" He quieted down before saying sincerely, "Misty, how am I supposed to believe anything you say anymore?" With Misty's silence, Joey stormed off through the backyard, past a crowd of silent, eavesdropping college kids, as Misty dashed through the gate of the backyard, leaving the party. Joey chucked his beer cup towards a large trashcan that overflowed with plastic cups, beer cans and empty potato chip bags, but it ricocheted off the metal rim and beer splashed all over a window.

"Watch it, dude, that's my motherfucking house!" the Listerine host yelled as Joey disappeared down the hallway.

"What's that guy's problem?" the Listerine host continued, laughing at his own smugness and carelessly pulling the head of a freckled freshman girl towards his armpit.

Stopping in the hallway, Joey turned around, and yelled, "My problem – *DUDE!* – is that you're a fucking idiot! Who? The fuck? Puts Listerine into a *fucking* bong!"

Who!? Huh? *Who!? Who fucking puts fucking Listerine into a fucking bong!?* Try using it on your rank breath next time instead!”

“Fuck you, man! This is my house!” The Listerine guy pushed past a couple of Joey’s soccer buddies and stormed down the hallway towards Joey, who tensed up his body so tightly that he felt as though he filled the entire hallway. Before the Listerine guy reached Joey, he disappeared into the first doorway.

“Fuckin’ pussy,” Joey said loudly. People on the patio laughed, but then the Listerine guy reentered the hallway, this time carrying a small black handgun. The Listerine guy aimed the gun at Joey, who remained immobile, just staring at the weapon before him. Girls on the patio screamed and a series of male voices’ “Holy shits” and “What the fucks” triggered in from outside. Sobriety had never before introduced itself so quickly to Josef Schneider.

“You have a gun,” Joey said, wide-eyed, now in a trance.

“No shit I got a fucking gun. Who’s the pussy now, bitch?” The Listerine guy turned progressively redder and he used his other hand to keep fidgeting with his glasses, as though they were sweating off of his face.

“Dude, you have a gun. What kind of gun is that?” Joey stepped towards the gun that was aimed at his forehead.

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘what kind of gun is that?’” The Listerine guy trembled as a calm Joey approached him.

“I really want to know.”

“It’s a Glock 19. Why the fuck do you want to know?”

“Well, you wanna put it down first?” Joey took another step forward.

“It’s not loaded, you dumb jock asshole.”

“Even so.”

The Listerine guy lowered the Glock to his side and Joey grabbed his arm, seizing the gun away from him.

“You dick, gimme my gun back!”

Joey walked through the doorway from which the Listerine guy had emerged bearing this firearm just moments ago. The Listerine guy followed him, and when the hallway was empty, everyone on the patio heard the slam of the door to the small room that Joey had entered. Partygoers traded confused glances, and a few people approached the closed door to continue eavesdropping.

Joey sat down at the desk in the middle of the room, still clutching the Glock, fascinated, and asked, “What’s your name, anyway?”

The Listerine guy stood near the doorway, not moving. The spare bedroom in which they had secluded themselves was cluttered and dim. Old trophies were crammed onto bookshelves that were already overstuffed with calculus and investment banking textbooks and paper-crammed binders. In the corner was an industrial-sized printer with sheets of blank paper strewn about, next to a paper-jammed, blinking fax machine, and a few spare hard drives, most of which were in pieces all over the floor. The guy answered, “My name’s David. Why?”

“It looks like a garage sale for computer nerds in here.”

The Listerine guy flared his nostrils and looked away.

“Anyway, I’m Joey.”

“I know who you are.”



“Can you teach me how to use this?”

“What, the gun?”

“Yeah, of course the gun, what else?”

“Right now?”

“No. Sometime in the next few days. I need to know how to use one.”

The Listerine guy approached the desk, holding out his hand for his firearm. “I want to know why.”

“I just want to know how. I’m...um...just interested. That’s all.”

“I guess. That’s a little weird.”

“No, what’s fucking weird is that you just pulled a gun on me for spilling beer on your window. You need to chill the fuck out, David.”

“Whatever. Sorry.”

“Dude, keep that thing away from people.” He glared at David until David again concentrated on the floor. “Okay, so anyway, I’ll drop by for, you know...my gun lesson...sometime in a couple days. You gonna be around?”

“I’m always around.”

Joey rose and stepped towards David, leaving the gun on the middle of the desk. He extended his hand for David to shake, who accepted hesitantly.

“You gonna chill the fuck out, man?” Joey asked.

“Yeah.”

“Say it.”

“What?” David answered, backing away.

“Say, ‘I’m gonna chill the fuck out.’”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, man, say it.”

“I’m gonna chill the fuck out,” he mumbled under his breath.

“No, say it so I can hear you. Make me believe you’ll chill the fuck out.”

“I am going to chill the fuck out!”

“Good.” When Joey opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, he saw a small mob of people standing nearby. He ignored them as he walked in the opposite direction through David’s house.

Before getting into his Explorer, Joey checked his cell phone again to see if Brigitte or Nick had made another text effort. When he saw that neither of his siblings had texted him a second time, he read their previous text messages, and told himself to chill the fuck out.

## **Chapter 14: Boston**

“Great job, ladies and gentlemen! Again! Right jab! Left jab! Right hook! Left hook! Scissor kick left! Scissor kick right! Again! Right jab! Man! Brigitte! Who you mad at?! Girl, you crazy today!”

With every punch and kick she threw towards the mirror, it was obvious to everyone in the room that Brigitte did not see her reflection. Her punches were directed upwards instead of straight ahead, and every time her leg extended far above her head, Brigitte’s entire body snapped. She saw Walker’s face in that mirror, and was beating the shit out of him. Most of Brigitte’s week only guaranteed her unchanneled anxiety and stress at work, but for two hours a week – from eight to nine on Tuesday and Thursday evenings – Jackson’s class invited her to annihilate Walker with choreographed violence.

Luckham, Nortz and Hanzel, Attorneys at Law, paid for Brigitte’s membership at a gym near the office, but instead she opted to enroll in this particular class in Dorchester, on the outskirts of Boston. Here, she was surrounded by angry, middle-to-lower-class women, many of them covered in tattoos and piercings. She was one of the few white women in the class, but being surrounded by all these full-bodied, hard-punching ladies empowered her even more. Some of them were so muscled that Brigitte assumed they could kick their own husbands’ or boyfriends’ asses, and even the out-of-shape ladies confidently wore spandex pants and mid-drift tank-tops. These were not women who went to kickboxing classes in Central Boston or went shopping on Newberry Street, which made Brigitte feel even more dangerous.

“Say *YEAH!*” Jackson screamed through his microphone, his voice bouncing off the studio over the loud music.

“Yeah!” Brigitte screamed, not caring if she sounded like a pampered princess compared to the rough ladies surrounding her. She traded encouraging, flirty glances with her classmates, and one woman bellowed, “Alright, now, Texas!”

Brigitte had been awarded this nickname after many of the women chuckled about how she greeted them with, “Hey, y’all,” when she bounced into the kickboxing studio every session. For two hours every week, these ladies were Brigitte’s best friends, her intimate girlfriends with whom she shared more than just cosmopolitans at hotel bars.

Although Jackson and her classmates were really strangers to her, when they were all in the same state of ass-kicking vulnerability, with sweat flying off their voluptuous, imperfect bodies, they were all fighting on the same therapy sofa together. Like tonight, when it was obvious that Brigitte was kicking and punching harder than usual, everyone could see that she was mad as hell, which made them punch harder and faster too, until every woman released her last iota of hatred for whomever it was pissing her off outside of the kickboxing studio.

“Awwww, snap, baby!” Jackson again yelled at Brigitte, and they high-fived as he walked by. Other ladies screamed loudly along with Jackson, and he continued, “Right kick, down, slap that floor, again – up, ladies, up up up up up up! Right forward, down, slap, up! Alright....!” Normally, if she had been hopping around so intensely for an hour without a water break, Brigitte might’ve been struggling to catch her breath. But tonight she could not calm down. When Jackson stopped their last combination of the night for the cool down, Brigitte’s head dropped in disappointment. She tried breathing as deeply as possible, but her heart still beat rapidly. She wanted to keep jumping around so badly that her sweaty skin itched. Along with the rest of her class though, she slowly raised her

arms above her head, stretched to the right, to the left, and then she and her best friends applauded Jackson, each other, and themselves for the work they'd done tonight. Brigitte slung her backpack over her shoulder and wiped her face and hair with a towel. She guzzled water from her Evian bottle as she walked towards the studio's exit, and then waved goodbye to her best friends.

When her feet hit the pavement outside the studio, her brisk walking pace soon became a slow jog. Her ponytail swatted her head as her backpack swatted her butt, but even after such an intense class, Brigitte could not keep still. She raced off towards nowhere, and after running about ten blocks or so, she found herself passing through the gates of St. Augustine Cemetery. Brigitte didn't care that it was getting dark and cold outside. She just kept running.

Once she reached the center of the cemetery, she slowed and allowed the cool spring breeze to blow over her. In the middle of St. Augustine, the quiet calmed Brigitte. She listened to the sounds of her own rubber soles on the sidewalk, and the occasional snap of a tiny twig or patch of grass beneath her. When she reached a bench, she sat down and took solace in the fact that the only people surrounding her were corpses. Brigitte relished in the soporific effect that cemeteries had on her. She closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of moldy tombstones and hyacinths. She thought of Lukas Kastner, and for a few minutes, was at ease.

Seconds later, her BlackBerry voicemail beeped. She opened her eyes and retrieved her phone from her backpack. Walker's voicemail stated: *Hey babe, I still don't know where you are. I really have no idea why you haven't answered any of my calls or emails for over a fucking week now. At first I thought you were just being weird or that*

*something was really wrong. Your secretary told me that you're alive and fine when you wouldn't take my call at work yesterday, but now I just would love to know why you're being such a bitch. So anyway, I'm leaving for San Jose again tomorrow morning –*

*“Motherfucker.”*

*– but we definitely need to talk before I leave. So, whenever you get this, I'll be waiting for you at your apartment. I'm sure you don't mind, but I grabbed a bottle of wine, headed on over after work, and let myself in. So, you know, I'll be here when you finally decide to show up.*

Brigitte rose from the bench, again slung her backpack over her shoulder, and jogged out of the cemetery. She hailed a taxi on the street, and when she told the driver where she was going, he replied, “Lady, why you goin’ from Dorchester over to Newbury Street so late? Lemme guess...you got a man over there?”

She scowled at him in the rearview mirror, grunted, and wanted to vomit.

“Motherfucker.”

“Lady, what’d you say?”

“Nothing,” she growled. “I wasn’t talking about you. But now that you mention it, why the hell are all of you so talkative every time a woman gets into your car?” The cab driver said nothing more to Brigitte for the remainder of the drive to her apartment.

\* \* \*

When Walker heard the door to Brigitte’s apartment close, he stood up from the sofa and walked towards her. “So, you finally decide to make an appearance.”

Brigitte gave him an empty, close-lipped smile.

“So where the hell have you been?”

“Just been really busy at work, I guess.”

“For a week and a half?”

“Yeah. You know, I’m working on tons of cases right now.” She threw her backpack and keys on the bar, and appreciated the loud, supportive clunk they made. “Like...*really* big cases.”

“Aren’t you always?”

“I guess. But I’m taking vacation time all next week so I’ve been working even more hours.” Brigitte nonchalantly walked over to her refrigerator and grabbed a large bottle of water. She stood in front of the refrigerator, guzzled from the bottle, and then lowered it, grasping both hands around and choking it. Her face wore a spacey smile and she looked directly into Walker’s eyes.

“So I want to know why you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I just told you. Work.”

“Don’t give me that shit, I know something is up with you.”

She rolled her tongue around in her mouth, and then licked off the drops of water that had spilt onto her mouth. “Wanna drink?” she offered, replacing the water bottle in the refrigerator.

“Sure.” Walker sighed and dropped his arms to his sides, and then stepped back a few steps, away from the angry lioness that stood before him.

Brigitte yanked down two tumblers from an open cabinet and then slammed them on the wooden bar so loudly they echoed. She silently congratulated herself for not accidentally breaking the tumblers and then filled them halfway with ice. She poured gin into each glass, filling one halfway and the other only a quarter full. Her firm hand

extended the quarter-full glass to Walker, and she felt his hand trembling slightly when he accepted it. His fingers grazed hers but she pulled away quickly. Brigitte sighed heavily at his weak, forfeiting behavior, and held up her glass.

“Here’s to our Germany trip,” she said with the same spacey smile.

“Cheers,” Walker said, and clinked her glass loudly. He swallowed a sip of gin. Brigitte downed her entire glass and then returned to the bar to pour another.

“So I Googled that Bad Wiessee village that we’re staying at, where your family’s property is. Pretty swanky. Looks like a ski town in the winter or something. Lots of money there.” He har-har’d to himself before saying, “My kind of place, babe.”

“Yeah.”

“Brig, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Anyway, it’s really not important anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“No, believe me,” she laughed, “I am *totally* fine now.”

“So what was wrong then?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. In less than a week, neither of us will care.” She laughed subtly, but when Walker laughed with her, she stopped and chugged more gin.

“Sure you don’t want to tell me?” He raised his eyebrow and gave her a pity smirk, the type of smile that Brigitte knew a man gives to a woman when he wants off the hook or wants to feel like a savior.

“Positive.”

The two of them stood in silence for a few moments, and Brigitte thought how lucky Walker was to be separated from her by the bar. After managing to avoid him for



over a week, she knew she'd calmed down a bit since *that night*, but also knew that no matter how hard she tried to suppress her anger, poisonous venom floated around her in midair. She also knew that Walker had never before been so submissive to her, so careful with his words. She wondered if Walker realized that she knew what he'd been doing behind her back for all these years. Still, though, as bullets shot from her eyeballs into his skull, she surprised herself by keeping calm.

"So anyway," Walker continued, "I'll be back from San Jose on Wednesday night. Should I just come over to your place that night so we can go to the airport together on Thursday morning?"

"No." She hadn't meant to sound so abrupt.

"What?"

"I mean, you know how I pack. I'll have stuff spread out all over the place and be changing my mind about what to pack all night. You'll get no sleep at all if you're over here and just get pissed-off at me or something." A stream of bullets shot from her eyes when she followed up with, "I wouldn't want you to be angry. Let's just share a cab to the airport." She finished the gin and grabbed the bottle to pour a third glass.

"Okay...?"

The anxiety that usually lived deep within Brigitte was suddenly replaced with such a joyous feeling of empowerment that she couldn't stand still. "Well anyway, I've got work to do tonight, and then I've got to be in court first thing tomorrow morning..."

"Brig, are you sure that..."

"What?" Brigitte's smile disappeared and her face turned to steel. "What? Hmmm? *What?*"

“Nothing. I just...”

“So I’ll see you on Friday morning.” She set down her glass and sped over to the front door. Walker followed, and when he bent down to kiss her lips, she quickly turned her head away and his mouth landed on her cheek. When he tried to catch her eyes, Brigitte glanced down at the floor and strummed her hands on the doorknob.

“I’m, um...I’m still all sweaty and gross from my class. You know.”

“I’ve seen you all sweaty before,” Walker said. He chuckled at his sex joke.

Brigitte closed her eyes and flinched. “Well, *I* feel disgusted. *Disgusting*. I mean...disgusting.” She felt him staring her down but still she focused on the floor.

“Goodnight, Brig.”

“Night.” She still wouldn’t look up. The second that Walker stepped into the hallway, Brigitte pushed the door so that it slammed loudly behind him.

## Chapter 15: Manhattan

“NO, YOU MUST GET HERE NOW BECAUSE MY FUCKING SATELLITE FEED IS IN THREE FUCKING MINUTES!” Nick screamed through the phone to his production assistant.

“Shit! I’m running down Broadway as fast as I can! *Ouch!*” the PA shouted back.

“WHAT HAPPENED?! WHAT’S OUCH?”

“A taxi just hit me!”

“OH FUCK, ARE YOU OKAY?!”

“Yeah! Still running!”

“Okaygoodfuckinghurrybye!”

Nick hung up with his PA, punched the third line of his phone, and announced calmly, “Oh hi it’s me Nick.”

“Hello, Nick, this is Sheila Weinstein from Hannover P.R. We’ve got this hot new punk band I’d love for you to come check out! They’ve got a show tomorrow night at the Bowery Ballroom, but in the meantime, I can messenger over a press kit with a CD, stills, and some –” the publicist began.

“Okay great, Sheila, I’ll take a look, my assistant will give you the address, OKAYTHANKSBYE!” Nick punched the end button of the phone and screamed into the next room at Lisa, his assistant, “SOME CRAPPY P.R. WOMAN IS PITCHING ME SOME SHIT BAND – CAN YOU GIVE HER ADDRESS DETAILS?! THANKS, LIS! LINE THREE! OH, AND HEY – CAN YOU GO WAIT AT THE END OF THE HALLWAY FOR THE P.A.!? OUR FUCKING FEED GOES UP IN TWO FUCKING MINUTES!??!”

“Oh shit, really?” Lisa screamed back from outside Nick’s office, “I’ll go now – that woman can wait.”

Nick punched the fifth line of his phone and heard his supervising producer in Los Angeles ask, “Nicky, is that tape in yet?”

“Hi Michelle, it’s walking in the door now,” Nick lied peacefully.

“Well, where is it then?” she crooned.

“My assistant is getting it from the P.A. now. Don’t worry,” Nick lied. He heard Michelle hang up on him and then screamed, “FUUUUUCK!” When he glanced down at his phone again, every line was blinking with an incoming call.

“FFFFFUCK!” He slammed the phone back into the receiver and tore off running out of his office. When he reached the mile-long hallway, Lisa was sprinting towards him, and *waaaaaaaay* down the hallway, he saw the P.A. running after her.

“HOW LONG IS THE TAPE?!” Nick screamed to the P.A.

“LIKE 15-20 MINUTES?!”

“I NEED A SPECIFIC TIME!”

Lisa opened the case and read off of the label, “17 FUCKING MINUTES!”

“THANK YOU!” Nick grabbed the tape from Lisa and tore off running down another long hallway with Lisa and the P.A. trailing behind. When he saw two old women – ancient receptionists, he assumed – standing near the mini kitchen where the hallways merge, he shouted, “EXCUSE ME! SO FUCKING SORRY!”

The elderly ladies froze but stood so close to each other that Nick had to shove his arms by his sides and run through them sideways. When a group of shoulder-to-shoulder people emerged from another walkway, Nick screamed, “PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE

PLEASE PLEASE MOVE!?!?” and then crashed through them like a mini blond wrecking ball, accidentally ramming into one man and knocking him into the wall. “SORRY, SORRY, SORRY! I AM SO FUCKING SORRY!”

When Nick reached the satellite room at the end of the hallway, he ran inside and pushed the speakerphone button. He speed dialed the Los Angeles satellite office and when the engineer picked up, he screamed, “HI IT’S ME NICK IN NEW YORK, OUR FEED’S UP RIGHT NOW!?!?”

“Okay, Nicky, I gotcha, man,” the L.A. engineer answered calmly.

Nick pried open the tape box and threw it across the room. Lisa and the P.A. ducked when they entered the room, shielding themselves from the airborne tape box. Nick kicked a chair away from the satellite board, and then began punching buttons, putting the beta tape button to tape bars. Nick demanded into the speakerphone, “This tape is NTSC, it’s not PAL, so make sure you’ve got the right connection and machines!”

“Got it,” the engineer replied.

Lisa and the P.A. stood at the back of the satellite room, against industrial shelving units over-crammed with tapes, out of Nick’s way, watching him scaling the satellite boards like an arachnid, his ferocious fingers flicking switches, punching buttons, and turning knobs. After Nick was satisfied with the sound and picture quality of his feed, he stood away from the boards, his arms folded across his chest, staring at the largest of 20-something small television screens.

“Nicky?” another voice said through the speakerphone.

Lisa and the P.A. watched as Nick hurled himself desperately at the telephone, grabbed the receiver, and stuck it on his face. He answered quickly, “Hi Michelle.”

"We make the feed in time?" his supervising producer asked.

"Yes."

"This whole interview going to fit in the feed?"

"Yes, Michelle."

"Good job, Nicky."

Nick's shoulders relaxed as he answered, "Thanks, Michelle." He hung up the telephone, turned around to beam at Lisa and the P.A., and then collapsed onto a sofa near the satellite boards, breathing heavily.

"Is this for today's show?" the P.A. asked.

"Yes, of course. Why do you think we had to get it in so quickly? We're the only network who's got it today, too. Thanks for all your help, by the way. In case you didn't realize, you just helped break this story," Nick answered, still staring at the tv screen.

"No problem," the P.A. replied. "Is it always like this around here?"

Nick turned around, cocked his head, grinned, and asked, "Are you new?"

Lisa laughed, and then the P.A. answered, "Yeah."

"Yes. It's always like this. I'm afraid you've got to be masochistic to enjoy broadcast journalism," Nick answered, still grinning.

"Nicky tries to scare everyone," Lisa told the P.A. The P.A. and Lisa joined Nick on the sofa, the three of them sprawled out, on break, until the satellite feed finished.

After Nick goodnighted the P.A. for the day, he rose and told Lisa, "I'm going back to my office. If anyone calls in the next fifteen minutes, I'm not here."

“Is it that time of day?” she said, smirking like she ritually did every afternoon at this time. Lisa was never sure exactly what Nick did behind the closed door of his office for fifteen uninterrupted minutes daily, and she wasn’t exactly sure that she wanted to.

“Yeah. Just put people through to my voicemail, please. After all that, I need to fucking relax for a few minutes.” Nick swapped a clamped smile with Lisa’s mystified grin as he walked back into his office.

Nikolaus leaned up against the frigid metal door of his office and flicked off the light switch. He clamped shut his eyelids. Against Nick’s chest, his fingers weaved themselves into an enraged lattice, and he released an abysmal breath. Guilt beset him. When he opened his eyes seconds later, they dribbled syrupy tears and his small torso shook. As Nick crossed the room to his desk, careful to not knock over any of the meticulously organized stacks of segment producer assignment sheets and press release packets, he pushed the On button of the slim Brookstone stereo which rested at the desk’s edge. Die Toten Hosen’s *Ein kleines bisschen Horrorschau* was in the CD player, like usual. Nick selected the first track, “Hier kommt Alex” and then tapped the repeat button.

He knew this wouldn’t take long. It never did.

After untucking and unbuttoning his crisp indigo Oxford, Nick removed it and laid it gently on the back of his towering desk chair. Atop this he then placed his white undershirt. He kicked off his leather ankle boots, followed by his socks, and then slid out of his navy pinstripe slacks. Nick hiked down his uniformed teal, white-bordered American Apparel boxer briefs which he let fall to the coarsely carpeted floor.

His boyish body began to shake and tears flowed freely down his face. He flexed his thin arms until twisted veins surfaced, so visible he could yank one out if he wanted

to. Nick glanced down at the long azure-and-white lozenge Bavarian flag tattoo that streamed down his left arm, from his bicep to his mid-forearm.

From the center of his desk, Nikolaus and his siblings, Brigitte and Josef, beamed up at Nick, in a 5x7 photograph protected by a thick redwood frame; the Schneider trio was obliterated drunk outside at Einkehr zur Fürstenrieder Schwaige, an upscale biergarten in central Munich. In the photo, Brigitte's red mane shined in the sun, as did Nick's blond crown, while Josef's dark crew cut mellowed his tanned skin. Their cerulean doe eyes and ivory all-American smiles were identical, of which Nick was reminded each time the Schneider siblings watched him at the edge of his desk.

Nick glared back at himself and his siblings. Like spider legs, his fingers crept down to the right desk drawer and pried it open. After knocking out of the way a decade-old plastic-covered bar of promotional pink *Fight Club* soap, a bundle of commemorative *TV Guides* with JFK, Jackie O., and Oswald on the covers, and a stack of advance-copy Universal Music Group cds, Nick's hand landed on a cool, silver flask hidden at the bottom of the drawer. He unscrewed the smooth cap and downed half of the flask, his insides warming with Steinjäger. The taste of fermented pine marinated his lips.

From the base of Nick's stomach, a roar rumbled up through him, so deep he felt a stabbing sensation in his empty belly. He smacked his right cheek savagely. Then the left cheek. Right cheek. Left cheek. Right. Left. Right. Left. Nick's ears echoed and his face grew number with each crack. His breathing became erratic and uncontrollable. He screamed, over and over, wide-mouthed but silently, alone in his office, 23 floors above midtown Manhattan. Strong hands slapped his legs, his chest, his naked body in its entirety. Crack. Claw. *Crack*. Right. Left. Right. Left. Teeth grinded, nostrils swelled,



and once his face was battered and throbbing, Nick felt like his limbs moved independently. For 15 precisely monitored minutes, Nick was victim to his own iniquity.

Then, like every day at this time, he stopped himself. Like in a state of post-orgasm, he slumped back in his chair and battled to catch his breath. He looked up at the infrared lit ceiling. Then at the photo on his desk. Nikolaus smiled and exhaled.

He wiped his eyes like nothing had just happened, and stood up calmly. He walked over and flicked on the light switch. Before reopening his window blinds, Nick redressed, finishing this process by checking himself in the full-length mirror near his office door. Then he listened his voicemail, jotting down the names and telephone numbers of people he needed to call back – there were twelve new messages in only fifteen minutes, two of which were from Kyle, one asking Nick to pick up a pizza for him on the way home. Nick slammed down the telephone. He grabbed the flask atop his desk and downed the remaining Steinjäger.

Standing in front of the window, Nick swayed back and forth, high above Manhattan. Up on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, the pedestrians were so tiny and anonymous, and Nick loved all of them. His trip to Germany was just days away now, but what he looked forward to most was returning to Manhattan alone. He so badly wanted to be one of those anonymous, hopeful people below, racing down Broadway.

Nick had fully accepted the fact that he was about to commit murder. He wondered if his siblings had accepted and embraced this, too. Watching Broadway, Nick suddenly felt optimistic about his future as a prime Manhattan bachelor. The Die Toten Hosen song, still on repeat, to which he had been slapping himself across the face just moments ago, now thrilled and invigorated him.

# **PART THREE**

*2008*

## Chapter 16: Over the Atlantic Ocean

*American Airlines flight 719 from Dallas-Fort Worth to Munich with connections at New York City's John F. Kennedy Airport will soon begin the boarding process. Please report to the gate with your boarding passes ready...*

"Oh, of fucking course." Nick stood in a herd of overweight tourists at John F. Kennedy Airport, waiting for First Class to be called. Kyle sat on the floor beneath him, so stoned that his eyes rolled back into his head as he glanced slowly around the terminal.

"Huh? What? What happened?" Kyle mumbled.

"Did you not just hear that?"

"No." Kyle closed his eyes and leaned his head up against the wall.

"I don't know why, but I guess my father's secretaries decided to book us on a connecting flight with a bunch of fucking Texas people. At least my parents aren't on this flight. That'd be a *bit* too much if they suddenly appeared."

Kyle remained silent. Nick watched his skull bobble-heading up and down.

"It's bad enough that I've lived here for so many years and can't escape all these fucking tourist groups, but now I have to be on the same *In-ter-na-tion-al* flight with them. I wonder why the hell we're not just on a *normal* flight from New York!? Like...I think my father does this on purpose to try and lure me back home. I mean, Manhattan's not even part of the States. I think it just accidentally floated over from Europe one weekend, hundreds of years ago."

Nick heard Kyle snoring beneath him. He looked around Gate 24 and noticed that he and Kyle were the only passengers dressed head-to-toe in black. Nick's downcast eyes glazed over all the tourists waiting to board, most of whom he noticed were dressed in

colorful jogging suits, mass-produced blue jeans from Old Navy and the Gap, and matching athletic shoes. When two middle-aged men wearing cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats meandered in Nick's direction, he grunted in disgust. With this, he was actually thankful that Kyle was in such a narcoleptic state.

A hefty man to Nick's left complained, "mah breayekfayest ayet thuh Mayree-ott Mahrr-key thee-is mornin' sewwww smahll thayet Ah'm steeyell huungree! Yew know? Ah meayen, sheeyit! Thayet leetle dough-nut thang wuz, lahke, thuh sahze uv mah thuh-umb!" Nick watched the man clutch his fat belly as though he were a televised adopt-an-Ethiopian. He stood with another man and two large, cackling women, as Nick took note that their dark roots showed atrociously through their blond dye jobs. Nick rolled his eyes and ringed the straps of his Louis Vuitton carry-on bag so tightly that his fingers turned purple. He had forgotten how much he abhorred the sounds of prolonged vowels and single-syllable words that were stretched out into three or four or nine syllable words.

In the seating area sat two more middle-aged couples, both dressed in freshly ironed slacks, the women in cardigans and the men in blazers. Nick knew automatically that they were New Yorkers, and assumed that they were doing the same thing he was: praying that they wouldn't have to sit next to any of these loud farm animals. He watched the four of them gaze silently at the Texas-sized creatures grazing near them.

Nick knew that Manhattan residents' collective idea of Texas is a combination of the television show *Dallas* and collective anti-Bush family political views. He wanted to join the New Yorker couples as he thought of the fabricated stories he had told his peers when he had first moved to NYC: that he had ridden a horse to elementary, junior and high school; that his family ate their 'supper' on a chuckwagon every night; that he wore

boots, a cowboy hat, and chaps every day; that his chores at home included tending to the livestock; that, yes, it was his father who had shot J.R.; and that he had lost his virginity to his sister. His college friends had believed everything. And judging by the look on these two spooked-out New York couples, Nick realized that they too would probably believe him should he pop out his suppressed Texas twang and tell them the same stories.

Nick reached down and plucked Kyle's fake passport out of his hands. When he flipped open the little blue booklet, he was mortified by the fake name Kyle had chosen for himself. Printed under the words *United States of America* was Kyle's fake passport number and:

SURNAME:

*Goodman*

GIVEN NAME:

*Bergdorf*

Nick's hand clamped itself over his face and he squeezed his forehead. He wondered how any human being could do anything so moronic, let alone how the people at security had cleared him to board. Moreover, embarrassment overcame him because this also meant that when Xavier's secretaries had phoned their apartment when Nick had been at work one day, Kyle must have given them this name for the flight arrangements.

"We are now boarding all First Class passengers," the woman behind the American Airlines desk announced over the microphone.

"Kyle, are you going to be able to get on the plane okay?"

"What?"

“Kyle, they just called my boarding group. Are you going to be able to get on the plane okay?” He paused but Kyle offered no response. “Are you even going to be able to get up off the floor okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Uh-uh. I’m just a little sleepy. Help me up.”

“Excuse me?” Nick felt burning lava building up in his chest.

“I told you to help me up.”

Nick bent down behind Kyle, put his arms into Kyle’s armpits, and pulled him up. Without Kyle making any further demands, Nick dragged him over to an empty chair next to a hefty family, all of whom wore matching bright green hooded sweatshirts. The collective look on their faces told Nick that they were appalled by the human sacrifice with which he presented them.

“Hi!” Nick said to them.

“Uhm...hullo,” the father of the family said, crossing his arms and rising to defend his family from the homosexual looming before them.

“This guy just asked me to help him over to the gate. He’s in boarding group three. What boarding group are you guys in?”

“Uhm...we’re in group three, too.”

“Excellent! So can you guys make sure he gets on the plane! Thanks...I’m sure he’d really appreciate it.” Nick pulled Kyle’s fake passport and boarding pass out of the woven purse-thing he wore over his shoulder.

“His name is Bergdorf,” Nick told the family, wondering if his face showed that he was lying.

“Uhhh...okay?” The father of the family didn’t seem to mind helping Kyle get onto the airplane but was confused nonetheless.

“Bergdorf Goodman,” Nick over-articulated, holding out Kyle’s fake passport, embarrassed but slightly excited to have this small audience.

“Huh?”

“*That’s his name.*” Nick shoved the passport further into the man’s face as he restrained himself from cracking into fits of laughter over the ridiculousness in which he was required to participate. Both the man’s and woman’s faces dropped in confusion. “*What* a coincidence, huh?”

Nick turned back around, darted over to where Kyle had been sitting on the floor, grabbed Kyle’s small, badly worn suitcase, walked back over to him, and shoved it hard onto his lap. Kyle’s hands clutched it slowly, like an oversized teddy bear, while the family continued staring at him.

*Shit. These people are nice,* Nick thought. For less than a second, he almost felt bad for leaving Kyle with them. But he quickly got over it and said all in one breath, “Great. Thanks. That’s really nice of you. Have a safe flight!”

Nick adjusted his messenger bag, picked up his Louis Vuitton carry-on, and shot towards the gate, in front of sluggish tourists, many of whom were toting shopping bags from F.A.O. Schwartz or Macy’s, plastic bags full of faux designer purses, hats and scarves from Canal Street, as well as their own small children. *How fucking long was these people’s layovers!?*, Nick asked himself. He raced past one man who already wore his “My Wife Went To New York & All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt” shirt, and grunted at him as he sped by. As the ticket-taker ran Nick’s boarding pass through the

machine, he proudly presented her with his New York driver's license and an ivory smile. She smiled back at him, a fellow New Yorker, and told him to have a nice flight.

\* \* \*

As soon as Brigitte's bottom touched leather in her first class seat departing from Boston's Logan International Airport, she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. Walker sat next to her, snoring for most of the flight. Whenever he was conscious, Brigitte kept her headphones on, pretending to be interested in the inane in-flight blockbuster films, while simultaneously burying her face in a few months' backup of her subscription from *The Economist*. Walker would occasionally fight for her attention, stroking her leg or purposely grazing her right breast with his elbow, but she continued to ignore him.

The subtle gesture of Walker laying his hand on her thigh now repulsed Brigitte. His hands were different now – disgusting. From his long, boney fingers to his floppy blond hair to the faint smell of scotch on his breath, Brigitte could no longer see Walker as the sophisticated, debonair Boston-ite she had loved. To her, Walker was now a barbarian. A caveman, only capable of hurting her and hunting other women. She knew that this flight would be the longest nine hours of her life.

The rest of the First Class passengers were asleep, but she had far too much energy to join their slumber. She rose from her seat and scaled over Walker's mountainous body into the aisle.

In the airplane toilet, Brigitte stood before the mirror for twenty uninterrupted minutes. She brushed her hair and teeth, washed her face, and reapplied her lipstick. After sitting next to Walker, the thing, the creature that repulsed and betrayed her more than anything she had ever known, she needed to feel beautiful. She needed some balance,



some self-provided support to get her through the flight and the morning, until she was with her brothers.

\* \* \*

Once on the airplane, Nick found his seat in the second of five rows. He stood on the leather chair in order to shove his Louis Vuitton bag into an overhead bin. In the last row of First Class, a guy with a near-shaven head and an eyebrow ring spotted Nick and stared at him. With Nick's arms above his head, trying his damndest to shove the LV bag into the overhead compartment, the waistband of his 2xist underwear and his smooth belly were visible. The guy ogled the convex curve of the top of Nick's ass as it sunk down into his black pants. After his bag was finally shoved in, Nick's eyes darted left and he caught the guy staring at him. Nick shot him a fuck-you glare for staring, but when the guy returned his glare with a flirty smile, Nick's look of anger turned to one of befuddlement.

*This guy is not from Texas*, Nick thought. He climbed down into the aisle and sunk into his seat. He smiled, his eyes widened, and he put his hand over his mouth. Nick had forgotten what being innocently ogled felt like. He had stopped paying attention to anyone but Kyle, mainly because Kyle always gave him so many messes to clean up.

Seconds later, another oversized woman pushed down the aisle past him and ended his throbbing trance. Her ass rammed up against Nick's face, and when he leaned further into his row away from it, he wiped off his cheek like he had just been marinated in animal fat. But the woman did not progress down the aisle. The flow of passengers came to an immediate halt. Nick looked down at his watch and wondered how late the plane would now leave because of this beast. He looked up at her and saw that she

weighed at least twice her healthy body weight and had enormous fake blond Texas Hair, which Nick enjoyably re-identified for himself in his head: [(teks'es heir) *noun*. 1. hair that women and homosexual men in the state of Texas dye blond, blow-dry until it looks like a dandelion, and often tease 2. any head of hair that has been treated and poofed-up with so many chemicals that it could survive a Texas tornado]. Nick watched as the woman stood in the middle of the aisle, seemingly stuck, and overlapping onto both Nick and the man across from him, staring hungrily at her boarding pass like she was clutching a slice of fried cheesecake from the Texas State Fair.

"Ex-cu-huse may-ee" she belted to the guy in the fifth row. Nick and everyone else on the airplane turned around and saw the eyebrow ring guy's look of horror.

"Aah thank yeh-err ee-in mah see-eet," the large woman continued. Nick could feel and hear the large woman huffing and puffing behind him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the guy said, "I just glanced at my boarding pass and mistook a two for a five. I don't know how I did that? I'm really sorry." The guy got up and moved down the aisle for the big fake blond woman to get through. He wore ripped-up jeans with multiple patches and chains all over them, and a t-shirt that, if you didn't look closely enough at the optical-illusion-like design, made it look like he was bleeding all over himself. *Definitely not from Texas*, Nick thought again.

Multiple passengers situated themselves to watch the woman squeeze into the row, as if there was a circus performance occurring during the boarding process. Nick, however, looked away from her in disgust. He heard someone on the other side of the plane whisper, "I can't believe they didn't make that woman buy two tickets!"

Nick turned to the petite, smartly dressed woman who had whispered this comment. He overdramatically nodded his head in agreement and then whispered to her, "I know. And I have no respect for people who use peroxide. It's an insult to blondes. We're an endangered species, you know."

As the big faux-blond woman squeezed her way into the row, the pierced eyebrow guy caught Nick's eye. He was smiling at Nick again, this time chuckling aloud at the look of horror on Nick's face, but Nick did not laugh along with him. He rolled his eyes and shook his head back and forth, which caused the guy to chuckle even harder.

"Thay-ey shuuld ree-all-y mahake the-ese see-eats bigg-urr, hu-uh?! Aah mee-ean wee-ur lah-ike awll skwunched tuh-gethur, hu-uh?!" Nick heard the woman say to the poor medium-sized man now who had climbed into the row with her. Then Nick watched her laughed at herself, her breasts and all five chins jiggling up and down with her chesty laugh. Her row partner did not laugh with her.

"Would you gentleman like something to drink?" a flight attendant offered to Nick and the eyebrow ring guy.

"G and T, please," answered the eyebrow ring guy.

"Vodka. Belvedere on the rocks, please," Nick replied. His voice did that thing it does sometimes when he's anxious or nervous: it went up and down and then back up again, like he was still going through puberty. He cleared his throat and looked at the eyebrow ring guy, who laughed at him again. *Why does this jerk keep laughing at me?*

The eyebrow ring guy excused himself and scooted into the row past Nick. The flight attendant handed them their drinks and they each settled back into their leather seats while talkative passengers passed them by. The guy smiled at Nick once more and

then wrapped a pair of massive, ear-covering headphones around his head. Nick removed his iTouch from his messenger bag, inserted his white earbuds, and closed his eyes.

Moments later, he heard Kyle's screeching voice from the airplane doorway: "Oh, please, I don't even know who you are, why are you telling me that you gotta help me on the plane!? I am *fine*!" Nick's eyes shot open and he saw Kyle tromping aboard in front of the family with whom Nick had deposited him.

"Where did you go?" Kyle demanded.

"They called First Class," Nick answered calmly, hoping that very few passengers noticed that they knew each other.

"Oh. Well, why did you leave me!?"

"Because I had to. I just told you – they called my row. Look...Bergdorf, you are 27 years old. You can board an airplane by yourself."

"Don't disparage me! Why am I even going with you?"

"...because you wanted to?"

"God!" Kyle bent down and whispered, "It is so rude that you're flying in First and I'm back in Coach."

"Well then next time buy your own ticket. You know I didn't make the reservations. What am I supposed to do about it?"

"I don't know. I'm just telling you that it's rude. And I'm going to tell your father that it's rude too, since he made the arrangements."

"You know what? You go right ahead and do that, *Bergdorf*," Nick chuckled, envisioning his father stepping on Kyle like he might a ladybug. Kyle's eyes were still glazed over and he held onto the rows of seats to keep himself standing. Nick licked his

lips and took a long swig of his vodka, trying to make Kyle jealous that he too didn't have a drink. Kyle scowled at Nick and then proceeded towards the rear of the airplane as Nick turned up the volume of his iPod, shot the rest of his vodka, and shut his eyes again.

\* \* \*

When Brigitte and Walker transferred planes during their layover in London, she faked yawns as they deboarded. After they had cleared Customs, she left Walker in the American Airlines lounge at Heathrow and instead wandered around the replicated stores of the terminal, people-watching, and anxiously drinking cups of black coffee. When she passed by an arguing British couple, presumably her age, near Duty Free, she stopped a few steps away and watched them. She couldn't hear what they were saying; they weren't screaming at one another, but they spoke forcefully. When the woman's eyes caught Brigitte's, Brigitte smiled fiercely, supportively, and she didn't look away when the woman turned back to her male partner.

Brigitte watched as the man stepped towards the woman and bellowed, "You cunt!" *Cunt*. Brigitte loathed the word. She had lost track of the countless of times she had wondered why men angrily referred to women with their own anatomy. Particularly since she knew that most men didn't understand the analogous fragility and power of a cunt, anyway. *Cunt*. The word sliced into Brigitte's eardrums over and over, echoing and reverberating through her conscience. So many times she had been called this word by men, for doing nothing offensive to them. The *use* of the slang didn't make sense to her. Brigitte's anger ignited her to go defend this woman, but –

The woman picked up her bag from the ground and drove it vigorously into the man's chest. Brigitte watched him cower back a few steps from the blow but didn't come

back at her. Then the woman turned away from the man, and stormed off in Brigitte's direction. Too curious to look away, Brigitte again focused on the woman's eyes, beaming with euphoria over what she had just witnessed. To her surprise, amidst the woman's angry march across the terminal, she returned Brigitte's smile.

\* \* \*

Nick hadn't meant to fall asleep, but when he awoke, the First Class cabin was silent. He awoke with a start, and after he had nearly dropped his iPod on the floor, he looked to his left. The eyebrow ring guy was smiling at him again, but this time it was a peaceful, friendly grin instead of a come-hither smirk. He spoke.

"What?" Nick said, yanking off his headphones.

"I said hello."

"Oh. Sorry. Hi. My headphones were on really loud."

"I know. I heard them. Rinocerose, huh?"

"Yeah. Wow, they must've been really loud. Not many people know this band."

"I'm quite familiar with German music."

"Oh."

"What were you drinking earlier?"

"Vodka."

"Vodka with what?"

"Nothing. Just vodka. Why?"

"Just vodka looks too strong for you. What are you, like, 100 pounds?"

"No. I'm not. And no, it's not." Nick rolled his eyes even though he was secretly flattered. As a former fatso, he could never hear enough compliments about his thinness.

"You want another drink?"

"Sure, I'd love more vodka."

The eyebrow ring guy motioned for a flight attendant who was sitting on a foldout chair and flipping absent-mindedly through *Vanity Fair*. "Excuse me, miss, could we have another G and T and another vodka rocks?"

"Thank you," Nick told both of them.

"Sure. So do you know that guy who talked to you when he got on the plane?"

"Who? Oh. No. Why?"

"Don't lie," the eyebrow ring guy leered. "I heard you call him by name."

The flight attendant brought their drinks, smiling as her eyes ping-ponged back-and-forth. When she returned to the mini airplane kitchen, Nick heard her whisper to another flight attendant, "God, gay guys are so hot. It's not fair." Her fellow flight attendant looked wide-eyed in their direction, so Nick's face darted back to his left.

"Fine. Yes, I know him."

"Then why'd you just try and lie?" the guy asked.

"Because I don't know who you are."

"You lie a lot then?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm good at it."

"Apparently. Anyway, I'm just asking."

Nick backed up to the very edge of his seat. "Why? *Why* are you asking?"

"Sorry?"

“Well, you’re just, like, asking me all of these questions and I don’t even know who you are.”

“You’ve got to know who I am to talk to me?”

“Yeah. Actually, I do.” *Who is this idiot?* Nick thought. He wanted to know why this random gorgeous asshole was quizzing him. The guy kept smiling, and Nick wanted to grab this overly inquisitive guy’s lips and pull them back down over his teeth. The guy’s ears stuck out more than normal and he had such noticeably long eyelashes that Nick assumed the guy could probably catch rain on them.

“So, why are you flying to Germany?” the guy asked.

“Vacation.” Nick took a long swig of his vodka and looked away.

“You’re lying again.”

“Excuse me?”

“Why’d you just look away from me after you said that?”

“Okay, fine. I’m going to meet my family in Munich.”

“I’m from Munich.”

“Um...okay.”

“I live in New York now, though. I have for quite a while now.”

“Great.” Nick looked away and focused on the seat back before him.

“Where are you from?”

“I’m originally from Dallas. But I left there a long time ago.”

“A long time ago? You must be very old.”

“Yeah. Ancient.”

“You look about 18.”



“Well, I feel about 50.”

“You don’t have a Texas accent.”

“You don’t really have much of a German one, either.”

“I’ve got dual citizenship. I was shipped off to boarding school in Manhattan when I was a wee sprite of 12.”

Nick sighed heavily, looked away, and said, “That’s...fascinating.”

The guy leaned back and asked, “So how old are you, then?”

“Twenty-eight. Why? How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“My sister’s almost thirty. She doesn’t live in Dallas anymore either, though.”

The guy lowered his eyebrow ring and leaned towards Nick. “Uh...Is she on this flight too?”

“Oh. No. I don’t know why I’m talking about my sister.”

“Because you won’t talk about yourself.”

“I suppose.” He gulped vodka.

“At least you’re not lying anymore. I’m Dexter.” He extended his hand.

“Nikolaus.” He shook Dexter’s hand. When Dexter let his grasp linger longer than necessary, Nick felt the warmth and of his smooth palm. Then he yanked his hand away.

“So is that your real name or are you lying again?”

“Oh. Ha. You’re funny.”

“Then why didn’t you laugh?”

“I don’t laugh.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Good. So...like...I mean... Dexter...like...what do you want?”

“Yes. My name is Dexter. Ten points for memory skills. ‘Like...I mean...you know...’ All Americans talk the same.” He grinned.

Nick glared at Dexter and decided he wouldn’t even grace him with one of his fake grins that he gives to PR reps and celebrities. He finished his vodka and motioned for the flight attendant to bring another. She did so immediately, so Nick thanked her then began slurping it down.

“So where do you live in New York?” Dexter also motioned for another drink.

“Are you serious?”

“Huh?”

“You can think of a better question than that.”

“What if we live in the same neighborhood?”

“Then I guess we’ll pass by each other sometime.”

“Okay, why are you sitting in First Class but your friend’s back in Coach?”

“Because my daddy bought my ticket. Is that what you want to hear? Could you possibly think of more boring questions?”

“Alright. Why are you such a prick, then?”

Nick choked on a sip of his vodka and coughed twice before answering, “See, there you go. That’s much more interesting.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“How’d you get to be such a prick?”

“Practice.”

"Prick. You're a spoiled little prick."

"Oh fuck you."

"Maybe later."

"Maybe not."

"Maybe in a bit."

"Maybe *never*." Nick finally gave Dexter an obviously fake smile.

"You are gay, aren't you?"

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Why, are you offended?"

"No, I'm not offended. But yes, I am."

"I thought so."

"Well, you are too, right?"

"Yeah, but I was just asking. God."

"Sorry, but God won't help you with me. I don't like him or her or it too much.

Whatever. Just because I'm gay doesn't mean that I want to sleep with you. All fucking fags are the same."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind. Forget it. I'm not one of those asinine stereotypical Manhattan whores who will fuck anything with a hole, who desperately cruises around sex clubs or men's toilets in midtown every night, and who, somehow, fucking *moronically* thinks he's a naughty, predatorial, macho homo vampire."

"I wish you'd tell me how you really feel." Dexter laughed; Nick almost did, and then Dexter continued with, "Good. I'm not a homo vampire either." Dexter leaned forward again, lowered his voice a bit, and proclaimed, "I've got a very clean cock."

Nick's lips parted and he turned away. "Well...*thank you* for that."

"I'm just sayin'."

"Well, I suppose I do too, now that you mention it. Mine's very...exclusive."

"Ah, yeah, Nikolaus. Snobby Cock. I've got one of those too."

"I'm sorry... 'Snobby Cock'?"

"You're rather cute, Nikolaus."

"I hear that sometimes."

"So do I. All the time, actually." Dexter flashed his teathy smile again, and Nick restrained himself from shoving Dexter's teeth back in.

"Good for you," Nick told him.

"It gets annoying, don't you think?"

"What?"

"Don't you hate it when people compliment you like that?" Dexter asked.

"Actually, yes, I do. I hate compliments. I genuinely fucking *hate* them."

"Oh, I can tell, Nikolaus. You make that abundantly clear."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Maybe."

"Let's not do this 'maybe' shit again."

"Okay. No 'maybe shit'."

Nick had to fight his face not to smile.

"Hey, look at me for a second, will you?" Again, Dexter bent his tall torso down to Nick's short level and focused on his eyes. He quickly turned his eyes away from Dexter's gaze and instead concentrated on the diminishing liquid contents of his glass.

"Wow," Dexter marveled.

"What?"

"Your eyes. They are *so* blue."

"Yes. I know," Nick innately deadpanned. "I've seen them before. They're mine."

Dexter released a giant guffaw as Nick continued trying to hide his smile. Nick chugged the rest of his vodka and tried giving Dexter dirty looks, but Dexter just kept staring at him. *What the fuck is happening?*, Nick thought. His resident expression of teenage-serial-killer-like emptiness disappeared and he was grinning. Nick's big blue eyes turned into giant, sparkling disco balls in this herd of tourists.

"Another drink?" Dexter said between chuckles.

"Of course."

"You sure you're not going to be obliterated by the time we get off the plane?"

Dexter motioned for the flight attendant to bring more drinks, which she did promptly.

"Yeah. I'm positive. It takes a lot. Like...*a lot*."

"Food?"

"No. Thanks. I don't eat."

"What do you mean you don't eat?"

"Just what I said. I don't eat."

"You don't laugh and you don't eat and you suck at conversation."

"I 'suck'? What 30 year old says 'suck'? What are you, 12?"

“God, you really are 50, aren’t you?”

Again, Nick tried to reposition a frown on his face and speak with his favorite monotone voice, but couldn’t locate either one of them. He realized that since Dexter had started drilling him, he hadn’t thought about Kyle once. Dexter was operating him like a marionette, and Nick was shocked at how much he loved being dominated by Dexter’s simple, controlled gestures and cool speech pattern.

“You know...” Dexter began.

“What? What now?”

“You’ve got a very strong ‘fuck me’ vibe.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, it’s a compliment. You look very young and approachable.”

“*That’s* a compliment?”

“Yes.”

“Okay...I think...that you...are confusing a ‘fuck me’ vibe with a ‘fuck *off*’ vibe.”

Gin sprayed from Dexter’s mouth and onto the seatback in front of him as he laughed, which forced Nick to laugh too. When Dexter caught his breath, he said, “So, you want to go join the Mile High Club?”

“What? Excuse me? No. Didn’t I just say –”

“Calm down, I’m just kidding.”

Nick rolled his eyes again. He felt like Dexter was reaching into his chest and squeezing his inner organs, so much that he had to put his hand over his chest and take a deep breath. As Dexter kept grinning at him and licking his lips between sentences, Nick’s entire body became erect and beating dangerously fast. He suddenly felt his penis

hardening beneath his trousers. Nick nonchalantly adjusted his crotch and felt like he was going to shoot a wad clear out the top of his forehead. He had let Dexter invade him, inside of his brain, blood stream, and each of his senses, and it felt more climactic, more thrilling, and more orgasmic than any guy who had ever hit on him in the past. He subtly shifted his pants again, settling his large erection against his leg. All Nikolaus wanted to do was rise from his seat and climb atop his row partner.

When Nick's eyes quickly glanced southward, he caught Dexter adjusting his own crotch. Nick could tell he was making this guy's heart and pants pump harder than anyone else had recently, because Dexter's hands were fidgeting nervously with his glass.

"So you must be a spoiled little rich kid, huh?" Dexter said, beaming and breaking the horny silence.

"What?"

"Well, if your daddy paid for your ticket like you said."

"Well, why are you in First Class?"

"Cuz I'm a spoiled little rich kid too."

"Aren't you a little old to be a spoiled little kid?"

"Nah, you're never too old. Once a spoiled rich kid, always a spoiled rich kid."

"I guess."

Dexter paused and then asked, "What if I wasn't a spoiled little rich kid? Could you still talk to me?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm allergic to poor people."

"I could get you tissue."

Nick again tugged on his pants, re-crossed his legs, smiled sheepishly, and answered, "I might need one."

Dexter cleared his throat, guzzled a mouthful of gin, and then asked, "So what are you so stressed out about?"

"Who said I was stressed out?"

"You just seem like you are."

"Oh. Well, I have a lot on my mind about this weekend."

"Why?"

"Why do you want to know so much?"

"Just making conversation. This is a *loooooong* flight."

"Why are *you* flying to Munich? Going home to see your family?"

"Yeah."

"What are y'all going to do?" Nick asked.

"*Y'all?*"

"Oh shut up."

"No, it's...uh...it's cute."

"So anyway," Nick continued.

"I'm going to my stepdad's family reunion."

Without pausing, Nick blurted, "What?!"

"Yeah, it's weird, it's not even my family – it's my stepdad's."

Nick turned a full 90-degree angle. "Happen to know the family's name?"

"Yeah, Schneider. Why?"

"Holy shit. My last name is Schneider. My mother's maiden name is Dietrich."



“Holy shit is right.”

“Well, this is weird.” Feeling naughty, Nick felt his face crinkling up.

“I thought maybe you were German,” Dexter said.

“Why?”

“Oh, please. I’ve got Aryan nation sitting right next to me. Thick blond hair...big blue eyes...defined jaw line...”

“So how are *you* my family?!”

“My dad’s like a cousin or something. He grew up in Germany and met my mom when she studied at university in Munich, like over twenty years ago.”

“So then why are you in New York?” Nick asked.

“Because I live there. Why are you in New York?”

“Because I hate Texas. Where do your parents live?”

“Now in Bavaria, mostly in the Munich area. Why?”

“Well, at least we found out about all of this before...”

“Before what?” Dexter answered coyly.

“Nothing...I don’t know why I just said that.”

“Anyway, I’m not sure what you mean, but since he’s like your third cousin or whatever, and he’s my *stepdad* and all, you and I are *not* related.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, you Americans are so dramatic, all vying for your Oscar or something.”

“Well, sorry, it’s not like I get on an airplane every day and end up sitting next to a relative.”

“I just told you that I am *not* your relative.”

“Okay, but you know what I mean.”

“Why? Would it matter?” Dexter slowed his speech to say, “I mean, it’s not like we’ll be *sleeping together* any time soon, is it?”

“Correct.”

“I’m joking. So why are you so stressed about the reunion? It’s supposed to be like a big party, right? I mean, a party for old people.”

“Oh. I have to kill my boyfriend,” Nick said matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“Yeah. And also my brother’s girlfriend and my sister’s boyfriend.”

“I thought you would’ve stopped lying by now.” Dexter chuckled again as he finished the remains of his scotch. “So you’ve got a boyfriend, then?”

“Yeah, but not for long.”

“Is it that guy in the back?”

“Yes, that dumbfuck back in Coach.”

“Why not for long? You going to break up with him?”

“No, I’m going to kill him. I just told you.”

“I’d like to kill my ex-boyfriend.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Yeah. I wish. Whatever.”

“Yeah! Whatever! Why not?” Nick was bug-eyed and choking on laughter. For weeks now, he’d been so paranoid about planning and plotting with Brigitte and Joey, but he suddenly realized that no matter what he said, people probably wouldn’t even believe him anyway. Their conversation halted when a flight attendant announced that they were

preparing for landing. When another flight attendant came to make sure that they had their seatbelts on, she smiled, tilted her head like she was talking to two young boys, and said, "What's so funny?"

Between cackles, Nick blurted, "I'm going to kill my boyfriend!" He could barely breathe from gigglish disbelief.

The flight attendant started laughing with them, and said, "Sometimes I'd like to kill mine, too!" and casually walked away. Nick laughed even harder.

During landing, Nick and Dexter traded fearful glances and overdramatic armchair clutches in response to the airplane's jerkiness. When they were on the ground and the seatbelt sign blinked off, passengers stood up and began turning on their cell phones, opening overhead compartments, and talking loudly about how excited they were to be in Germany. And when Nick stood on his chair to retrieve his bag from the overhead bin, this time he extended his torso up further, exposing his underwear band and belly even more. He caught Dexter staring and grinning, but this time he didn't object.

\* \* \*

Two hours later when their flight landed at *Flughafen München Franz Josef Strauß*, Brigitte had to wake Walker. She couldn't bring herself to touch him, so she rolled up an American Airlines in-flight magazine and rapped his shoulder with it. He waggled his head awake, sighed heavily, and rose into the aisle, pushing her away. With her back towards him, Brigitte waited in the aisle to deboard. The airplane had begun to make her feel claustrophobic, and she needed to get away from him.

At baggage claim, Brigitte still did her best not to look in Walker's direction. He stood a few steps behind her, still sighing and yawning loudly, and with each sound he

made, another nervous lump formed in her stomach. When her large bag appeared first on the baggage claim belt, she stepped forward through the small crowd to retrieve it. Brigitte didn't even notice that Walker's bag was only three suitcases after hers. She stepped back through the crowd, towards the row of luggage trolleys. Towering over the travelers next to him, Walker watched his bulky bag begin making the loop around the conveyer belt and then Brigitte heard him grunt loudly. He turned around and complained, "Why didn't you get my bag, too!? It was right there!"

Brigitte zoomed at Walker and swung her suitcase so hard into his stomach that his tall frame toppled onto the conveyer belt. Then she grinned, just like her British idol in Heathrow had done three hours prior. The small crowd cleared away from the conveyer belt as Walker's body went around the loop, his long legs kicked wildly. When Walker was able to push himself off the conveyer belt, he just stood there, embarrassed and glaring at Brigitte. His face turned a bright rouge and his hair parted in three different directions. When the unapologetic look on Brigitte's face remained, Walker ran his fingers through his hair and smoothed his flat-front khakis against his legs. Then he walked around the crowd of exhausted, confused passengers to the front of the line, trying to regain some sort of masculine control of the situation.

When Walker approached Brigitte, he said under his breath, "What the fuck are you doing? What is *wrong* with you?!"

"You haven't seen shit yet."

Walker squunched his forehead towards his chin, his entire face wrinkling against itself. "What are you, a gangsta girl all of a sudden? I 'haven't seen shit yet'? What are you even talking about?"

She ignored him.

“Fraulein Schneider?” a heavily-accented short German man said as he approached Brigitte and Walker. He held a white cardboard sign with *Schneider* written in black marker.

“Yes?”

“I am driver,” he replied.

“Oh.” Brigitte paused to consider the brilliance of the driver’s timing. “Great!” she answered in German. She looked at Walker and said cheerily, “Let’s go.”

Since Walker didn’t speak German, Brigitte she told her driver, “This asshole is with me. You don’t need to open any doors, carry any luggage, or, really, do anything at all for him. He’s not a nice man, so let’s not do him any favors.”

The driver looked up to see Walker’s face in disarray. Then he took Brigitte’s bags from her and walked towards the exit. Brigitte followed her driver. Walker bent down to collect own his bags, and then began tromping out of the airport after them.

\* \* \*

As they exited the plane and walked down the walkway and into *Flughafen München Franz Josef Strauß*, Nick realized he had to tell Dexter goodbye and instead wait for Kyle. A hurricane of hatred for his boyfriend attacked Nick as he locked eyes with his airplane companion.

“You not coming to baggage claim?” Dexter asked.

“This is my only bag,” Nick answered, holding up his carry-on. “Besides, I have to wait for...”

“Oh yeah. The boyfriend. Well, I suppose I’ll be seeing you on Sunday anyway.”

“Yes. Of course, I mean, I’m sure I’ll be...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you.”

Nick’s lips curled up into a conquered grin, and he stuck out his hand for Dexter to shake goodbye. Instead, Dexter grabbed Nick’s shoulders, pulling Nick’s small body towards his own. He pressed his lips into the hollowness of Nick’s cheekbone, hard. When Nick didn’t pull away, Dexter moved his kiss slightly westward to Nick’s lips. Dexter delayed his lips for a moment, and then licked Nick’s top lip with his tongue, just slightly, just a touch, a taste. Nick still didn’t pull away, but felt his erection returning. And then, the kiss ended. Other passengers began walking by, but Nick didn’t bother checking to see if they were staring. Nick’s gaze followed his flight companion until Dexter disappeared into the airport terminal.

## Chapter 17: Munich

Misty pranced through the rotating doors of the Munich's Hotel Bayerischer Hof while Joey pushed his way through behind her, stuffed with their baggage into a pie-shaped slice of door. When the doors rotated, the baggage and Joey crumbled into the sunlit hotel lobby. Every staff member present turned to gawk at the noisemaker. Joey stood in the middle of the golden, four-star lobby wearing baggy jeans with rips, holes and frayed edges, a wide-collared yellow rugby shirt, a baseball cap and flip-flips. Near him, Misty glided along the sleek marble floor towards the edge of the staircase, her ass cheeks bulging out of her stringy, light-denim cutoffs. She gazed up at the crystal chandelier that hung high in the center of royal white columns, windows, and mirrors, all the while tugging at the purple hoodie that was left unzipped so her breasts could flop about freely beneath the tight hot pink t-shirt that proudly read *Bitch!*

Joey watched Misty wandering around, completely mesmerized with her surroundings. This setting of polished marble floors, bellhops, and gold sconces was the hotel world to which he had grown accustomed whenever his family vacationed. His parents wouldn't have felt comfortable elsewhere, nor accepted anything less – which he now understood. Joey had never felt like a snob; he accepted that people with money stayed at expensive hotels, just as people without money stayed in inexpensive motels. Unlike his siblings, Joey knew that he had no notions of grandeur. He just accepted things as they were. Whenever he traveled cheaply with Misty and his college friends for summer and spring break trips, they stayed at Motel 6s and Comfort Inns, which didn't faze Joey either. But now, looking at Misty wandering around the lobby, past priceless, original artwork and designer furniture with pillows on them that probably, Joey realized,

cost more than her entire wardrobe, Joey realized that this was the first time Misty had ever been anywhere....*nice*.

"It's okay, I guess," Misty bellowed across the lobby, loud enough for all hotel staff present to hear.

"Huh?" Joey answered, "This place is *really* nice."

"Oh, whatever, I've seen much better," she said even louder. This time she glanced over in the receptionists' direction to assure that they were listening to her complaints. Two receptionists, one male and one female, each wearing matching navy blue uniforms with gold buttons, peered in her direction, but then looked back down at their paperwork behind the desk, politely ignoring the tragic American on their premises.

Joey shook his head and walked over to the receptionists. "Hi. I'm Josef Schneider. Do you know if my parents...or any of my family have checked in yet?"

"Hallo, Herr Schneider," the male receptionist said.

"Hallo." Joey noticed that the receptionist was approximately his same height. The man's dark hair was so plastered to his scalp that it didn't move when the rest of his head did. When Joey looked at the female receptionist, he saw that she didn't look much different from the male one. The male had mini eyeglasses and big ears, and Joey wondered if the rest of his German relatives would look like this, too.

The receptionist flipped to a page in his gold-plated reservations book. "Yes. Xavier and Sofia Schneider checked in a couple of hours ago but that is all so far."

"My brother and sister aren't here yet?!"

"Um...?"



Joey looked at the receptionists, desperate for an answer. Slightly confused, the receptionist gazed down at his book again and then said, "For Schneider, we have a Nikolaus and a Brigitte to also check in today but they are not here yet."

"C'mon, I wanna go walk around," Misty echoed from across the room. She flapped her flip-flop on the marble floor, making a *bwowmp bwowmp bwowmp* sound that reverberated throughout the lobby. Joey noticed that the male receptionist seemed to want to rid himself of them as soon as possible; his rapidity in speech and the solemn directness of his approach made Joey uncomfortable. He wondered if the hotel staff knew who his family was. He wondered if the receptionist could magically read his mind, if this funny little man knew what Joey had been planning with his siblings. Then Joey reminded himself that, like always, he was just being paranoid. He cursed his conscience. Without turning his head around towards Misty, Joey dipped his head in her direction and said to the receptionists, "Sorry about *that*."

Both of the receptionists smiled and then the male receptionist asked, "Have you got any more luggage in the car?"

"Nah. The driver's already gone. This is it," Joey answered, pointing to the small pile near the rotating doors. The receptionists did not respond.

"So, how ya doin'?" Joey offered indigently to the receptionists.

Then the female finally said, "It's rare to see people of your...age...traveling through Munich. Unless it's Oktoberfest."

"Really? Why?" Joey was so relieved that someone besides Misty was conversing with him. He grinned and said, "Both of you two's English is excellent, by the way!"

“Many people in Germany speak English,” the male receptionist said. The matter-of-factness of his tone crushed Joey’s temporary excitement.

The female continued, “Well, most people who come to Munich...they are ...older. Mostly middle-aged couples, trying to research things about their ancestry. Not many people your age seem to...care?... about their family history just yet.”

“Oh, I care,” Joey promised. “I! Care!”

Both of them smiled at him quizzically and then the female disappeared into an office. The male handed a key card to Joey and said, “We’ll take your baggage up to your room if you’d like to see the property.”

“Geil. Danke,” Joey answered, wishing he could remember as much German as he was positive that his brother and sister could. He felt stupid. He wanted a beer. He wanted lots of beer. He wanted to drink all the motherfucking beer, all the beer in Germany, man. Joey wanted to go drink an entire 20-pack simply because he could. Instead, politician style, Joey leaned forward to shake the hand of the male receptionist, who reluctantly but appreciatively accepted and answered dryly, “Bitte.”

Joey watched the bellhops load his and Misty’s luggage onto a rolling trolley. Then Misty approached him, tugged on his arm and said, “Come on!” Joey felt the high ceiling towering above him, and he glanced up to see the emptiness of the balconies. He couldn’t wait to find the bar and hoped hard that the bar had good beers on tap. Misty pulled Joey over to the staircase and began walking up the marble stairs in front of him. His glance caught Misty’s ass oozing back and forth like two bulbous, mushy potatoes mashing into one another. To escape this, Joey looked down at the stairs’ burgundy carpet, watching his own feet progressing upstairs. At the top of the stairs, Misty stopped

and looked down, waiting for Joey to reach her level. He walked past her, into the upstairs lobby area. The vacancy of the room also disquieted Joey.

Standing behind Misty, he thought about how easy it would be to just push her down the staircase. If her neck didn't snap on the way down, he thought, he could rush down and quickly snap it himself before anyone noticed. A tumble down the stairs is completely natural, he told himself, thinking of how much pleasure it would bring him to yank Misty's frayed fake blond pigtails in opposite directions. *Just think how proud Nick and Brigitte will be that I started without them!*, he thought. But then Joey heard the receptionists' voices downstairs, and reminded himself about the concept of discreteness, a quality of which he knew he sorely lacked. He shuffled his feet together and fidgeted with his Abercrombie & Fitch cap.

"My son! It's my son! My son is here!" Joey heard an all too familiar voice calling from the center of the upstairs lobby. He looked towards an enormous window and saw his tiny mother seated at a table, clutching a mug of tea and a *NY Times* crossword puzzle book. She was almost invisible in the vastness of the illustrious, empty lobby.

"That's your mom?" Misty said behind him, in a combined tone of fear and judgment. Joey watched his mother swoop towards him. When Sofia reached him, Joey picked her up and dangled his mother in the air, twirling her small body around in a few circles. Out of the corner of his eye Joey could see Misty watching from the staircase, jealous and intrigued, not moving towards the perilous mother.

“Josef, put me down!” Sofia yelled, trying not to laugh or show how much she enjoyed the male attention she was receiving for the first time in months, since she had last seen her sons. No one made her feel as beautiful as her boys. Not these days.

Through deep-throat laughter, Joey obeyed, and replaced his mother on the carpet. She threw herself around her son, wrapping her arms around his strong back. Her short arms fit snugly under the curves of his armpits, and for just a few seconds, she burrowed her head into his muscled chest and thought she might weep from joy.

“Hi, Mom,” he said. Although they’d not been together since the prior Christmas, he said this greeting like he had just seen her a few hours ago, as if he had just arrived home from elementary school for the day. His tone reminded Sofia of the lesser importance that her children placed upon their familial visits. It reminded her how despondent and lonely she was without them, and of what supreme paramountcy she regarded her children’s visits. She was embarrassed.

“Where’s X?” Joey asked. He had forgotten the soft, slow, controlled, almost syrupy pattern of his mother’s speech. She always detailed every story she told as though she hadn’t spoken to anyone in decades:

“Oh, he’s upstairs in the room. Heather and her parents are upstairs too. The rest of the relatives aren’t coming until tomorrow or the next day for the reunion. There are some here but I doubt you would recognize any of them. We have such a lovely room. It’s very big. There are beautiful flowers everywhere! We have a suite, but I’m not sure what rooms have been reserved for you three. But ours is wonderful. Have you seen the rest of the hotel? It’s beautiful! There are different restaurants and a piano bar and some shops downstairs beneath the lobby and even a pool with a little café nearby and – ” and

then Sofia stopped abruptly when she saw Misty standing at the top of the staircase. The girl's hands rested uncomfortably on her hips; it was obvious that she was posing.

Sofia stared at her son's choice of girlfriend. She saw the too-tight denim cut-offs. The cellulite on Misty's unhealthy, unathletic 21-year-old legs. The worn flip-flops, the t-shirt with the curse word, and even from where she stood, Sofia could see the split ends of Misty's pigtails. This was whom her youngest son, her heterosexual son, had chosen as his companion. Sofia couldn't just see Josef's girlfriend, she could *see* Josef's girlfriend. Her fantastical imagination added props and costumes to her real view of Misty – in Sofia's mind, a huge pregnant belly, three cigarettes hanging out of this girl's mouth simultaneously, and a burning cross appeared above Misty's head.

Sofia gulped back a mouthful of wet revolt. Misty just stood here. *Does she speak?* Sofia asked herself. *This! This is who my son has chosen to replace me with!*

"Hello," Sofia said, coated in honey, stepping forward and extending a limp wrist to Misty, "I'm Josef's mother."

"I'm Misty. What's your name?" Misty said in monotone.

Sofia blinked but her facial expression did not alter. "Mrs. Schneider."

Misty continued to stare at this woman. She stared at the pink cardigan wrapped around Sofia's shoulders, which matched her pink flat shoes with the little bows on the ends. Misty was unimpressed by the pressed grey slacks that complimented her boyfriend's mother's eggshell-colored blouse. She wondered how much the silver pendant on Sofia's blouse cost and how difficult it would be to steal it should the old lady take a nap.

Sofia again wrapped her arm around Joey's waist, tighter this time, and Joey asked, "So Brigitte and Nicky aren't here yet?"

"Oh, no, I guess not, I haven't heard from them. You can ask downstairs if they've checked in yet. I would hope that they would come see their mother when they've checked in."

"Oh, I already asked. The dude said they're not here yet."

"Well, I'm sure they'll come find one of us...or dad...when they get here." Sofia glanced quickly over at Misty again, still wondering why the girl didn't speak. Joey looked over at Misty, too, wondering why she was actually quiet for once. Misty paced around the upstairs lobby, still secretly entranced by the hotel's splendor.

"So what's the deal for tonight?" Joey asked.

"Oh, we're all going to church."

Joey groaned, to which Sofia responded, "Oh, please don't start. The least you and your brother and sister can do now that we're all together is go to church with me. We're all going as a family. Then y'all are free to do as you please."

Joey groaned again and then asked, "And tomorrow?"

"It'll be an early morning. Did you not read the long email I sent to each of you?"

"Oh. Yeah. I did," Joey lied.

Misty walked over to a large window and pressed her face against it, looking at the few pedestrians down below. The sun shined through the glass, and Joey wished that Misty would melt quickly, like cheap candle wax. He watched as Misty stuck her hand clear up her shirt and adjusted her bra strap, and he hoped that his mother didn't turn around to notice, too.

Sofia caught his eye again and asked, "Are you lying to your mother?"

"No, I read it," Joey lied again.

"We've all got to drive down to the family Anwesen in the Bavarian Alps. I'm so excited for you to see it. It's gorgeous down there, just gorgeous! It's like being in a fairy tale, it's just my favorite place in the whole world!"

"Okay."

"Well, anyway, everyone is meeting us down there, you know. I mean, if you ever checked your email, you'd know," Sofia jested tenderly and looked at her son as he gazed off into the distance, maybe at his girlfriend, maybe into nowhere in particular. She didn't want to turn around to see what the girl was doing now.

To Sofia, her youngest born looked tired. Depressed, even. She wanted to nurse him back to his utmost health so he could once again be her sweetest, most optimistic, healthiest child, the one she often wondered if she loved more than the elder two. She often mistook his passive unresponsiveness for hatred of his mother. And whenever this happened, she was completely aware that she overcompensated with sugary dialogue. Josef looked like Xavier used to, she thought, *just like him*, before his bronzed muscles and toned carvings had turned pasty and obese.

With Joey, she often wondered if it was the challenge that drew her to him more. There was no fight with Brigitte and Nick. When she phoned them up in Boston or New York, they returned her phone calls immediately. If she emailed Brigitte or Nick a question, both of them would reply with a long list of factual information, examples of proof, and their opinions on whatever Sofia was pondering. But Joey was always so distant with her – he always had been. He was irresponsible and so easily moldable by

practically everyone he knew, which meant that she had to worry about him more. Sofia stood here now, wondering why Joey never called her back.

“I think I need to go take a nap,” Joey told her, stepping away from her a couple of inches. He took off his baseball cap and rubbed his eyes. Sofia’s hands nervously writhed against each other when Joey released her grasp.

“Okay, that’s a good idea. I want you awake for church!” Sofia reprimanded lovingly. “Do you know where your room is?”

Joey removed the key card from his pocket and waved it near his mother’s face.

“Well, also, find your father if you have a chance. He needs to talk to you three about some stuff.” Again, Joey just nodded his head.

“Are you going up to the room?” Misty called from the center window of the lobby. Joey shook his head with his eyes closed. Sofia put her hand on Joey’s back, slowing rotating him around to face the elevator corridor across the foyer. They walked towards the corridor as Misty followed.

When the elevator dinged on the third floor, Sofia leaned up to kiss Joey on the cheek and then told Misty, “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah,” Misty called back as the doors closed on Sofia’s face. In the elevator, Misty leaned against Joey and then reached down to unzip the fly of his jeans. As the elevator rose towards the ninth floor, she stuck her hand inside of Joey’s boxer shorts, but he was already falling asleep standing up, too distant and numb to stop her.



## Chapter 18: *Munich*

Nick stood next to Kyle on the side of Frauenkirche, awaiting the arrival of his siblings. He'd not seen his parents yet either, but from his hiding place, he had watched at least three dozen people – maybe his relatives, he wondered? – enter the church, some tall and pronounced, some round and waddling. Like Nick, many of them were blond-haired and blue-eyed, but he could not come to terms with how obese many of them were. For the most part, Nick could tell the overweight Texas Dietrichs from the South German Dietrichs simply by their globular figures. They looked like the loud woman on the airplane. They looked like his father. To Nick, they looked like the vision of butterball horror that he himself had once been, the very people who terrified him of his possible genetic future. What surprised Nick most was that many of the native Germans towered over him; he wondered how his family had ended up so short.

The other churchgoers weren't as plump but to Nick many of them looked unnecessarily serious. Angry, even. Nick wondered if these were his father's German business associates and how many of them there were. He wondered when he would get to meet them all and if they would think that he himself was respectable and powerful, too. Nick wondered if he would receive automatic respect at this reunion simply by sharing his father's surname, or if he would have to achieve his own status like all the celebrities he watched rise and fall daily. After a while of watching this line of people parading into Frauenkirche, Nick began to confuse the massive mafiosos with all the fat people from Texas. In his imagination, he watched a herd of large, stern farm animals stampeding into a Munich barn. Then, in the midst of blond heads with a few brunettes in the mix, Nick saw a mane of long red hair crossing Frauenplatz towards the church.

“Let’s go,” he said to Kyle, who leaned up against the church wall, chainsmoking menthol cigarettes. Nick bounded over to his sister, and when he called her name, she whirled around. Even in high heels, when Brigitte threw herself atop her little brother, she still stood a few inches shorter than him.

“Nicky!”

“Hey Brig!”

It bothered Nick when his sister wouldn’t let go of him. Only his mother clung to him and Josef like this; not his independent, strong elder sister. He noticed that she wore a black business suit even to church, as though she were going to trial rather than mass. Nick felt proud when he realized that his own dark suit was similar to his sister’s.

“When did you get into Munich?” Brigitte asked when she finally released him.

“Just a few hours ago.” Nick paused before answering, looking at the tall, gawky figure standing not far from Brigitte. He had forgotten the command of Walker’s large, long-bodied presence, even in an outdoor space. Nick considered the distance between his own height versus Walker’s, and worried if he would be capable of whacking into Walker’s head with a chainsaw, a knife, a baseball bat, a really big bratwurst – anything – without the assistance of a ladder.

“Really? Me too.” They paused, wondering what to say now, realizing there was a link missing in their short chain. They both looked around before asking at the same time, as if it had been choreographed, “Have you seen Joey yet?”

“No,” they both answered simultaneously. They laughed.

“I’m really curious to meet his girlfriend,” Nick proposed.

“Oh, I know. He’s been hiding her from us for years.”

“Hellewwww, Brigitte!” Kyle said, approaching the siblings, speaking to Brigitte like they had been best friends for centuries. Brigitte turned and grimaced, realizing that she hadn’t even noticed Kyle was standing there. Her eyes cased over the cheap short-sleeved shirt he wore, and she realized that she had seen it before: on Stephanie, her secretary. She wondered how this lost effeminate child could possibly be the manipulative monster her brother had repeatedly testified to her about, and how he deserved to be killed. Still, her eyes penetrated Kyle’s gaze and she knew that even she could take him down.

“Hello,” Brigitte replied. She stuck out her hand for Kyle to shake.

Walker watched Brigitte as she chatted to the little fag whom Nick had brought with him to church. Walker had met both of Brigitte’s little brothers, and didn’t consider them to be much different from each other. He hadn’t thought of Nick as one of those prissy fags he hated so much in Boston, but this little creature to whom Brigitte had just offered her hand was different. This creature, this *thing*, was a fucking faggot, Walker thought, the stereotypical kind he had made fun of in college, the kind he thought should be dragged into gas chambers like those disgusting faggots in the Holocaust. It made him proud to be in Germany right now. As Walker approached them, he could feel his in-flight meals revisit his esophagus. Walker could not believe that Brigitte was about to touch that thing.

But Kyle didn’t shake Brigitte’s hand. He rushed into her, grabbing her shoulders and pulling her towards him. Kyle kissed her right cheek, then the left one, while Brigitte tried her best to remain unfazed. When Kyle’s smooches stopped, the four of them stood in a silent square in Frauenplatz. Brigitte and Nick locked eyes while Walker glared at the

cross-dresser before him. Finally, Nick broke the silence and extended his hand to Walker, who accepted it begrudgingly. Nick said only, "Walker..." as he approached.

"Hello how are you how was your flight ours was okay how was yours?" Walker said quickly, his voice deeper than normal.

"Great," Nick answered, picturing Dexter Dietrich in his head and in his groin.

Kyle stepped forward and extended his hand to Walker for an introduction. "Kyle Ruziero," he said apathetically, as though Walker should know who he is just by reciting his famous name.

Walker backed up behind Brigitte, swinging his hands behind his back and defensively clasping them together. "Mmm-hmm."

The four of them turned when they heard loud feet pounding across Frauenplatz towards them. Joey blasted into their square, and when he reached Brigitte and Nick, he hopped on both of them at once. Misty walked quickly towards their quintet, wanting to join but afraid to at the same time. Brigitte, Nikolaus and Josef embraced, as their significant others look on, surrounding the siblings in a distressed triangle. Nick closed his eyes and when he opened them again, for a small second, he imagined blood trickling down the side of Kyle's face. If only, he thought.

Joey said hello to Walker and Kyle, and then Misty stepped up to him, grabbing his thick arm and holding it against her. She forced Joey's hand to dangle near her crotch. Brigitte and Nick paused and looked at the young woman that Joey had brought to meet them. Misty wore a purple pleather skirt with a slinky lavender top, giant purple hoop earrings, and see-through jelly purple heels.

Walker's mouth dropped open. He wondered if Joey was dating a drag queen, too.

When Nick had introduced Kyle and himself, Misty looked at him and said urgently and obviously rehearsed, “Omigod, I met this fag online once and he was from New York, right? He said that his apartment is, like, the size of a closet and that he pays like fifteen hundred bucks a month or something. Why would anyone do that? Why would anyone live there? Everyone who lives in New York must be a fucking idiot, right? Right?”

“Our apartment is much more than fifteen hundred dollars a month,” Kyle promised her.

“Really, like, how much is it?” Misty said, placing her hands on her hips.

Kyle began to speak but then realized that he didn’t actually know how much his and Nick’s apartment was. He turned to Nick for an answer, who said to Misty with a forced smile, “Let’s not... talk about that right now.”

“Well, anyway,” Misty continued, “I don’t know why that faggot lived there for so long in a closet. New York must be, like, suuuuuch a waste of money.”

Behind him, Nick could hear Walker chuckling. Then he heard Kyle chuckling, too, which he really didn’t understand. With that, Nick turned to Brigitte and mumbled so that only his sister could hear, “Am I hallucinating or is this girl really here?”

Joey looked down at the ground in embarrassment while Brigitte stepped forward to try her hand at introductions. When Misty tramped forward to shake Walker’s hand, he refused to touch this stranger, too.

Misty did not stop with Nick though, telling Brigitte, “Omigod, my friend at school? She has the worst – like, the *worst!* – red dye job. It’s, like, so bad. How often do you have to get your hair dyed?”

Brigitte said nothing.

Nick pondered how much Misty's body would twitch and shake should a bullet enter her chest. He could not halt his slide-show imagination from projecting fantastical images of her death: blood trickling, bruises forming, her horrified face a giant mess.

"Cuz, like, if there's some sort of product that you use to make it look, you know, more realistic, maybe you could tell me and I'll tell my friend. But, like, I still don't think that red hair looks good on really, really short girls. Cuz, like, something like a blond dye maybe would make you look a thinner." Misty flipped back her fake blond hair.

Brigitte stepped forward to Joey and put her hand on his shoulder. "Josef?"

"Yeah," he groaned, still looking at the concrete.

"Please take It away. Please. Now. I don't know where It came from or what It wants. But please, please, please take It away from us right now."

"Please," Nick seconded.

Joey looked up at his elder siblings and shrugged. The pathetic expression on his face seemed to beg, *See, I told you!* He grabbed Misty's arm and dragged her towards Frauenkirche.

"What was *that*?" Nick asked his sister.

"I have no idea."

"What is wrong with you guys' little brother?" Walker asked.

"Oh shut up," Brigitte demanded.

"That girl was, like..." Kyle began.

"Oh shut up," Nick told Kyle.

“There’s mom and dad,” Brigitte told Nick when she saw her parents walking by the fountain in the Frauenplatz.

“Mrs. Schneider!” Kyle shrieked, “Mrs. Schneider! Mrs. Schneider, Mrs. Schneider!” He paused and then told Walker, “This woman fucking *loves* me.” Nick and Brigitte both turned to give him an appalled glance. They knew their polite and liberal but slightly, if not innately, bigoted Texas mother could not even *see* people like Kyle.

Nick watched in horror as Kyle raced towards Sofia and wrapped himself around her tiny bones. Kyle’s and his mother’s similar spring-colored pastel floral patterns nearly matched, but Nick knew that his mother’s dress cost approximately ten times what Kyle’s petite rayon button-down did. When Sofia and Xavier approached their elder children, they hugged and discussed the mundane details of their journeys.

From underneath his arm, Xavier pulled three black three-ring binders filled with paperwork. He handed one to Brigitte and one to Nikolaus and then asked, “Where’s your brother?”

“He’s already inside,” Nick told him.

Brigitte opened the binder. “What is this?”

“It’s all the information you need to know about our trip. I had my secretaries compile everything for y’all. It has the information about the hotel, things to do in Munich, things to do in Bad Wiessee, a map of the Anwesen, precautions to take while walking through the Bavarian Alps –”

“X,” Brigitte stopped him. She knew this was her father’s version of *love*. No “How wonderful it is to see you,” no “I’ve missed you, my beautiful daughter,” and definitely no “I love you!” Brigitte looked down at the black three-ring binder filled with

tourist information she didn't want – which her father had just informed her that he did not even compile. Brigitte smiled tenderly. She still loved him, even if he did not know how to love back. “Are you aware that you just gave Nicky and me textbooks to read on our *vacation*?”

“Yeah, will we be quizzed after mass?” Nick asked.

“Smart alics. Just thought y'all could use some reading material for the drive down tomorrow. Learn a few things. Know your surroundings.” He leaned into his children and whispered, “People have died up in those Alps, you know. I just want y'all to be safe.”

“Really?!” Nick belted. With that, Brigitte and Nick both began flapping hungrily through their binders.

Sofia looked down at her watch and then announced to everyone, “Mass is about to begin!” She smoothed her floral dress against her side. Sofia supposed she was appreciative of the binder that she too had received from her husband, but could not fathom why he had brought them to church of all places.

“Please don't give that to Josef until after mass,” Sofia requested of Xavier, “He'll look at it the whole time. Remember when he used to sneak his Gameboy to mass every week?”

“Yeah. Sure. No problem,” Xavier replied. He looked at his wife, who was glaring at him while largely nodding her head towards their eldest children.

“What?” he asked.

Sofia scowled back.



“Oh yeah,” Xavier said, “I *really* need to talk to the three of you about some stuff later. Do y’all have plans after mass?”

Brigitte and Nick shrugged.

“Well, we’ll talk about it later,” their father continued. “Let’s all go inside.” Xavier offered his arm to Sofia, who instead turned to smile meekly at her children. She then began walking alone towards the steps of Frauenkirche, leading her family and those people they had brought with them.

Brigitte and Walker followed Nick and Kyle down the aisle of the church, who walked slowly behind Sofia and Xavier. Their walk down the aisle continuously halted as people kept stopping to hug or kiss Xavier and Sofia. Again, Nick wondered which of these people were his relatives and which were Xavier’s business associates. When some people even kissed Xavier’s hands, Nick realized what profound respect these churchgoers had for his father. He turned to look at Brigitte to make sure she was witnessing the same adorations. She raised her eyebrows in amused recognition of the praise their father was receiving. They were once again reminded that they truly had no concept of who their father was, only a paternal image of severe overprotection.

At the front of the church, Joey tapped his feet on the white stone tiles. He sat in a pew next to Misty, wondering when his family would join him. “Is that your dad or something?” Misty asked, her head facing the rear of Frauenkirche.

Joey turned around to see his father’s circular frame at the back of the cathedral, surrounded by small clusters of churchgoers. “Yeah.”

“Why does everyone want to talk to him? Is he like a celebrity or something?”

“No. He’s just...my dad.” Joey watched his family approach. He concentrated on his parents and elder siblings, thinking of them as successful genius savants walking down the aisle towards him, the loser son with the loser girlfriend. Joey reached into the pocket of his baggy slacks and removed a flask. He bent down against the dark wood of the pew in front of him, raised the lips of the flask to his mouth, and chugged a few mouthfuls of Jagermeister. When he leaned back, his head hung slightly over the back of the pew. Joey gazed up at the domed ceilings of the church. His eyes pulsed at the spiraled patterns of wooden beams on white walls and ceilings, and he felt small below all the royal white columns and gold detail that covered the whole of Frauenkirche. When his head veered forward, Joey focused on the crucifix at the front of the church. It meant nothing to him, really. He didn’t feel holy but he didn’t feel like a sinner, either. Joey just felt numb.

When Sofia led the family to the second pew where Joey sat, he rose and walked over to kiss his mother. After Xavier had greeted the people on the bench across from him – more relatives that his children did not recognize or had not met – the family entered the pew with Brigitte leading them. And there the Schneider couples sat at the head of the Frauenkirche congregation: Misty and Josef, Brigitte and Walker, Xavier and Sofia, Kyle and Nick.

Sofia had always dreamt of the moment when her children and their spouses would finally accompany her and their father to mass. And while her dream had not included a purple-clad whore and a silly Italian homosexual wearing women’s clothing, she realized that this moment may not happen again. She was aware and ashamed that her children did not share her beliefs and faith but that did not matter just now. They were all

in God's house together, in their home country, and to her, it was magical. Just magical, she thought. Her daydream was interrupted when Kyle leaned into her and said, "I'm very, very religious."

Sofia offered a weak smile and a tiny eyebrow raise and said, "Mm."

"You are?" Nick asked, "when have you ever been to church?"

"You just don't know," Kyle told him. He then turned back to Sofia to say, "Your son should go to church with me more often."

"You don't go to church! Only your born-again brother does," Nick said loudly.

"Shh! You're disturbing the Lord," Kyle butted.

"Really? Where is he? Show me where he is. I would love to see the Lord. Please direct me his way. What is the Lord wearing today?"

"Nikolaus, please stop," Sofia whispered.

"Sorry, Mrs. Schneider. Some people just don't understand the beauty of a service."

"It's a *mass*," Nick told him, "in the Catholic church it's called a *mass*."

"That's what I meant."

Sofia leaned forward and gave her elder son an austere look. Unbeknownst to Sofia, her other son and her daughter were passing a flask back and forth at the opposite end of the row. She had assumed they would eventually behave in God's house, but whenever they set foot inside of a church, out of boredom and disbelief, her trio still acted the same way they had when they were small children. Sofia looked towards the altar and did the sign of the cross.

“Nicky!” a familiar voice whispered excitedly from behind the Schneiders. Sofia turned around to see her eldest son jump up from the pew to embrace Heather. Her parents stood behind her. Sofia smiled at their reunion and then smiled at Heather’s parents, with whom she had lunched in the hotel a few hours prior.

“Heather, shh,” Mr. Kaestner whispered as he ushered his wife and daughter into the row behind the Schneiders. The Kaestners took their seats while Nick and Heather continued whispering to each other, words that Sofia could barely hear.

“Nikolaus, mass is about to begin,” she told her son fiercely. Heather grabbed Nick’s face and kissed him on the forehead once more, and then backed into her row.

Nick looked away from his mother and Kyle as a few more people approached the altar. They were mostly older, people his parents’ age, and again, he didn’t know any of them. Middle-aged and elderly men and women knelt at the altar, did the sign of the cross, and said quick prayers as they passed by. Nick wondered what they all could possibly be praying for. He had always wondered why his mother took religion so seriously since his well-opportune family obviously didn’t need to pray for anything.

When Nick saw a young, tall man approaching the altar with an elderly woman, he immediately recognized the man’s body. He had been thinking about this body since he had watched it walk away that same morning. Dexter Dietrich turned around to Nick, smiled, and mouthed silently, “My grandmother.”

While Dexter’s grandmother remained kneeling on the floor for a few more seconds, Dexter concentrated on Nick, looking him up and down in his suit, grinning. Nick could not help but grin back. Dexter wore a dark gray suit which Nick thought hung masterfully on his tall, slim body. To Nick, Dexter looked like one of those dangerous but

dapper characters he saw in British gangster films. He could smell Dexter's musky cologne from where he sat on the pew. After Dexter helped his grandmother up, he gave Nick a final grin and then helped the old woman to a parallel pew across the aisle.

Nick could not stop smiling. For a moment, he forgot that Kyle was even next to him. When Nick turned and saw Kyle with his eyes closed and his hands slapped together in prayer, he looked past his boyfriend to see his siblings leaning forward. Brigitte's and Joey's brows were both raised and they gave their brother similar looks of feisty intrigue, both of them pouting their lips in excited mockery. When Nick realized that they had witnessed his exchange with Dexter, he grinned sheepishly and shrugged. Joey made feverish air-kissing motions, which caused Brigitte to stamp her hand over her grin to hide her laughter. Brigitte slid back into the pew, and then Nick watched her hand grab Joey's collar, pulling him back against the hardwood bench.

Brigitte and Joey yelped and kidded throughout the entire first half of the mass as Walker and Misty watched them jealously. Neither of them wanted to be in church either, but without a playmate, desperate boredom overcame them. Walker spent over twenty minutes fidgeting with the buttons on his suit coat while Misty took mini naps.

When a tall, plump family presented the Eucharist to the priest and the altar servers, the congregation took a silence to pray. It was then that Sofia had to nudge her husband's elbow roughly to stop him from snoring loudly. Xavier snorted himself awake as his wife and children looked away from him in mortification. When Nick turned his head, his eyes again locked with Dexter's, who had been watching him from the opposite side of Frauenkirche. Nick watched as Dexter motioned with his head towards the back

of the church, but didn't fully comprehend Dexter's request. Dexter then motioned a *c'mere* signal with his index finger, and then rose from the end of his aisle.

Nick's heart thumped with curiosity. He looked at his mother, who still stared at his father in embarrassment. Kyle was once again exploring the kneeler, and now had his hands positioned above his head in prayer, in an attempt to show everyone in church how holy he was, through an Oscar-caliber religious performance.

Nick stuck his right leg into the aisle, hoping it would motivate him to move the rest of himself into the center of the church and towards Dexter. His head turned to look at the back of the church, where he saw Dexter in the center of the aisle, standing casually with hands in his trouser pockets.

When Heather caught Nick's eyes, she followed them to the back of the church with a quick head tilt. Upon seeing Dexter, she realized what was going on. Heather smiled to herself and then whispered softly but forcefully to Nick, "Go!"

Nick rose and began walking quickly but quietly down the aisle. On his descent to the rear of Frauenkirche, his palms began sweating and his mouth went dry. He was unsure of why Dexter had asked him to join him back there, which drove his curiosity even more. As he hurried down the aisle he listened to the congregation chanting, *May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hand, for all the praise and glory in his name, for our good, and the good of all his church.*

When Nick reached Dexter, he halted a few feet away from him, protecting himself even though he wasn't sure that he needed protecting. From just the few feet in between Dexter and himself, Nick could feel the majestic height of the church towering above him. The gold sparkled in the corners of his eyes and he felt dizzy. Just like he had

on the airplane, Dexter grinned at him mischievously. Dexter again waved a *c'mere* signal with his finger as he led Nick to the confessionals at the back of the church. He opened the door to one of the confessionals and Nick walked into the dark booth. Dexter followed him inside and shut the door behind them.

Outside the confessional, Nick had heard the congregation chanting *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...* He listened to the loud piano and string instruments that he had just been so close to at the front of the church.

Inside the confessional, this music and these voices seemed distant and muffled. The confessional was dim but not completely dark; Nick and Dexter could still see each other vividly. Grinning, Dexter whispered, "Hi." Nick did the same, now also grinning. Dexter bent down to kiss Nick, who grabbed his head and shoved his tongue into Dexter's mouth. Stunned, Dexter retaliated, accidentally shoving his head into the back of the confessional, making a loud thud. They both laughed quickly but then kissed again, harder, ferociously. Nick felt his erection spring up within seconds and then felt Dexter's hard shaft against his stomach.

They felt each other's chests, backs and rears. When Dexter started undoing Nick's zipper, he did not object. Instead, he reciprocated Dexter's move, and then took Dexter's long, hard penis in his hand. And when Dexter removed a condom from his pocket, Nick's cock pulsated more than it had in years. This wasn't just desire; Nikolaus *needed* this, and he knew it. When Dexter quickly slipped the condom onto Nick, Nick was positive that Dexter could feel his heart beating down in his cock.

“Where is your brother?” Sofia asked Brigitte after leaning across Xavier. “It is almost time for Communion!” Brigitte tapped Joey’s leg and both of them looked down the row to where Nick had been sitting not moments ago. After a few glances around the church, Brigitte peeked over to where Nick’s mystery friend had been sitting on the other side of the church. Using her eyeballs as pointing devices, she showed Joey that Nick’s mystery friend was also missing. They smiled wickedly at each other and then, after replacing their faces with expressions of confusion, turned to their mother and shrugged.

Nick heard a cult of people outside the confessional chanting, *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed*, and he yanked down the back of Dexter’s boxers and clasped his ass. He dug his muscled fingers into the flesh of Dexter’s sides and then pulled Dexter towards himself. Dexter bent downwards, allowing Nick to slide slowly inside.

From the kneeler, Kyle felt his shoulder being tapped. Sofia had been wondering what Nick’s odd companion had been doing down there for so long, but now she had choice but to disrupt him. She instructed, “It’s time for communion.”

“Huh?”

“Communion.”

“Um...” Kyle paused and stared at Sofia. “K?”

Sofia and Xavier rose to follow Kyle out of the pew. Walker and Brigitte did not stand, but as he was expected, Joey stood to follow his parents. He watched his mother look disapprovingly at Brigitte.



“Come on,” Sofia and Xavier both said under their breaths to Brigitte.

“No,” Brigitte whispered back, “You know I don’t believe in any of this.”

Sofia huffed at her daughter’s dismissal and turned back around to face the aisle before anyone else witnessed her daughter’s sacrilege. She prayed that no one else could see her own daughter refuse Communion. Xavier tried again but Brigitte dismissed him.

“You already know how I feel about all this,” Brigitte whispered calmly.

Upon witnessing Brigitte’s refusal, Joey sat back down. Xavier’s eyes widened when he saw his son follow Brigitte’s lead. Joey looked away from his parents. Xavier glared at his strong son’s profile, waiting for a response. When Joey failed to respond, Xavier turned back around and followed his wife towards the alter.

When Kyle reached the alter, the priest offered, “The body of Christ.”

Kyle nodded his head, stuck out his left hand, and said “Yes.” He took the wafer and popped it into his mouth like a Saltine. “Thank you so much!” he said, chewing.

Sofia looked at him in repulsion, and then approached the priest. The priest repeated the same offering to which she offered a desperate, “Amen.” After drinking a sip of the Lord’s blood, Sofia knelt at the alter and considered weeping. But when she felt Xavier’s hand on her meek shoulder, she remembered that she could not do such a thing. She could not weep in the house of God, not before all of these people who knew, hated, or idolized her family. For Sofia knew that she would have to wait until she was back at the hotel, away from her debaucherous children.

When Nick heard the Catholic cult inside Frauenkirch chanting, *We are one body, one body... I will live in you and you will live in my love*, he smiled while taking a second to consider the irony as he pumped himself into Dexter's slim, toned body.

When Sofia returned to the pew, she walked past Brigitte and Joey without looking at them. Xavier attempted to guilt them with a look of disapproval but they were unresponsive. Sofia joined Kyle on the kneeler and prayed with her eyes closed until she heard the Communion song come to an end. When she opened her eyes, the last of the Communion recipients were returning to their respective pews. Then, from the distance, she heard what sounded like a man groaning in the echoed silence of the church. She turned to her husband as they heard distant, muffled groans towards the church's rear: *Uhhh! Oooh! Oh, God! Oooh, God! God!!!*

"What is that!?" Xavier asked his wife.

"I don't know?" she whispered back.

When Kyle turned towards the back of the church, wondering where the noises came from, he saw that much of the congregation had also turned in the direction of the grunts.

Brigitte jabbed Joey's arm. "Holy shit."

"No way," Joey replied.

"Nicky's a ho! I can't believe they're..."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Joey whispered, "has he no shame?"

Then, by incorporating a third spy into their cover-up mission, Brigitte and Joey turned around to see Heather's face. She looked at them from the end of her row, shaking her head back and forth and giggling proudly.

And then Nick came. The grunting and groaning subsided. The panting came to an end. Nick felt like years of gruelling stress had just shot out of his throbbing penis. Dexter leaned up against the side of the confessional booth, so Nick lay his sweaty body against Dexter's back. Nick wrapped his arms around Dexter's front, and Dexter held Nick against him.

"What was that?" Xavier asked again once the groaning had silenced.

"Shh, I don't know," Sofia whispered. Then it hit her. Another one. Again. At home her hot flashes always came at such inopportune times, but never had one unwontedly visited her in church. She reached down into the pew and clasped a bible in her fingers. Her husband watched, slightly amused but also somewhat worried, as Sofia spread open the bible and rapidly fanned herself.

After Dexter carefully turned to face Nick in the cramped confessional, Nick removed the condom from his half-flaccid penis and stuffed it into his pocket. He and Dexter continued planting kisses on each other and laughing softly as they pulled up their pants and re-tucked their oxfords, smiling all the while.

"We can't go back out there now," Nick whispered.

“I know. We’ll just wait a sec. Don’t worry.” Dexter bent down to kiss Nick again. They stood there, resting against each other, waiting to re-join their families, but really, wanting to never leave the confessional.

Brigitte and Joey strove to muffle their laughter. They watched as the rest of the congregation began turning back around, so they too faced the front of the church. The priest again commanded the attention of the room with, “Let us pray.” Again, Kyle fell to the kneeler in performance, his floppy floral rayon shirt wafting in the air as he knelt.

When the mass was over, “Where has he gone?” Xavier demanded to Joey and Brigitte as they rose to exit their pew. His children shrugged exaggeratedly, their shoulders raised so high that Xavier questioned their responses. Xavier knew that the rest of the congregation would follow them out of the church the second they set foot into the aisle, so he stopped his inquisitions.

“I’ll go check the restroom,” Joey promised. He leapt over Misty and out of the pew. Misty gave Brigitte and Walker looks of forced disapproval now that she had to be alone with them. Joey raced down the left side of the church, towards the confessionals. Away from the crowd of people exiting through the rear doors, he nonchalantly flung open three confessional doors in succession, until he found his brother and the mystery man making out behind the last door.

“Eww. Dude!”

“Sorry, Joey,” Nick laughed.

“Y’all are safe, man.” Joey paused and then offered the near-empty flask to his brother. Nick took a sip of Jaeger and then handed the flask to Dexter.

“Thanks,” Dexter said, stepping out of the confessional booth as he took a long swig.

Relief overcame Nick when he saw his little brother extend his hand to Dexter and say, “I’m Joey.” Dexter introduced himself and they shook hands.

“Y’all are fucking crazy, dude.”

Nick and Dexter grinned as they followed Joey towards the crowd, mixing with the rest of the holy congregation, and knowing damned well that they were the only two churchgoers in Frauenkirche who had truly felt the power of God.

## Chapter 19: Munich

“So where did you tell your girlfriends you were going?” Brigitte asked. The siblings sat in a triangle around a round table in Falk’s Bar in the Hotel Bayerischer Hof. Joey’s pints of Hoegaarden disappeared almost as quickly as Nick tossed back his filthy Ketel One martinis and Brigitte downed her gin gimlets.

Nick rolled his eyes.

“What? You are, essentially, dating the same girl. I mean, I had met Kyle before, but now that I’ve met Misty...? Wow. You boys have more in common than you think. Really. It appears that y’all have the *exact* same taste in women.”

Joey laughed and then responded with, “I just told her that I needed to hang out with y’all. That we were talking about family stuff. But then she totally wouldn’t leave me alone. She tried to come with me. I hate her. I mean, I totally hate her, man.”

“I pretty much told Walker the same thing, just that I needed to talk to you guys.”

Nick started laughing until Brigitte asked him what was so funny.

“I told Kyle I would meet him over at that hideous Trader Vic’s bar near the lobby. He’s probably there right now, reciting speeches to everyone in the place about how angry he is and how horrible I am.”

“That guy is so fucking obnoxious,” Joey said.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed? And, like, omigod, like...your girlfriend? She’s...like...so worldly and classy. Like, omigod,” Nick jested.

They hadn’t noticed that Heather had walked into the bar to find them, nor had they noticed that she had ordered a drink and had been chatting with the bartender for at least five minutes. Heather watched them from the bar, once again in their own secluded

threesome, closed off from the rest of the world. She looked around the room at other bar patrons stared at them, taking note that Xavier Schneider's children were in their presence. Heather wondered if they even cared where she had gotten off to, and why she hadn't been invited to join them. She knew their minds must've been preoccupied with the trip, and considered that perhaps they were too jetlagged to think unselfishly. Her seclusion seemed to grow worse as the Schneider trio grew older, but she wasn't going to let that stop her from recurrently rounding out their quartet.

Now dressed more casually in skinny jeans and a slinky, low-cut shirt, Heather approached the Schneider trio. They had changed into more comfortable clothing, too, and she noticed that the boys were even wearing sneakers inside the posh bar. Heather wondered where their significant others were, but as she pulled up a chair from the next table, she was glad it was just them.

"Hey baby," Nick said when he saw her. He rose and wrapped an arm around her waist, his head coming just to her shoulders.

"Hey y'all, what's going on?" Heather asked. Brigitte and Joey pushed their chairs closer together so Heather could fit the extra chair in between the boys.

"Just chillin'," Joey answered.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Thankfully not here, but we're not really sure," Brigitte told her.

Heather tossed her Versace purse on the table and, before sitting down, held out her cosmo for a toast.

"To Germany, and, um..."

“To Germany...” they repeated, as Heather continued, “Germany, and um...hey, whatever goes down here.” They all listened to the ceremonial clink of the four glasses.

Now that she was amongst them, not even Heather noticed that most of the Falk’s Bar patrons were doing their best to pretend they weren’t watching her and the Schneiders in the corner of the bar. She took note of how well the long, oak and marble layout of Falk’s bar provided drinkers with an ideal voyeuristic view of Xavier Schneider’s children. Heather had long ago realized that the Schneider trio had simply grown used to being watched, so much that they rarely even noticed anymore.

Walker meandered down the empty hallway of the ninth floor, towards the elevator. When the lift came, he got on and rode down to the lobby. He saw the sign for Trader Vic’s, so he began walking towards the restaurant. Trader Vic’s gaudy, Polynesian-themed mecca was *not* Walker’s usual choice of bar, of which he reminded himself with a loud grunt. Rather, what drove him there was the idea that there may be young female American tourists to gawk at. When he walked into the reception area of the Trader Vic’s, a waitress in a skin-tight Hawaiian dress greeted him with a menu.

“Alooooooh-ha!” he told her, shaking his eyebrows and raping her with his eyes.

With closed lips, the waitress smiled at him uncomfortably and then asked in English, “How many guests, please?”

“Just me, babe.”

“Follow me, sir.”

Walker noticed only a trace of a German accent, much like most of the other people who had waited on or served him in Munich thus far, from the bellhops to the



convenience store clerk to the English-speaking priest at church. The waitress led Walker through the front part of the restaurant, which was surprisingly almost deserted for a Saturday night. Leis, tikki torches and fake palm trees loomed above Walker as he watched the waitress's ass shift back and forth beneath her colorful dress. When they entered the main room, Walker saw the two people he most wanted to avoid, sitting together at a table at the back of the restaurant.

"What are *you* doing here?" Misty yelled over when she saw him. The few people who were dining or drinking in Trader Vic's turned and stared at Walker. He was floored with humiliation, just from Misty having called his name. Misty and Kyle sat at a long table as far away from each other as possible, underneath long palm tree leaves, each of them sucking on cigarettes. Walker looked at the waitress for help. He didn't want her or any of the few other people in the restaurant to know that he knew these two heathens.

"I said, 'What are you doing here?'" Misty called again across the room.

Walker violently grabbed the menu from the waitress's hand and marched over to their table. "I am looking for Brigitte. Have you seen her?" he said under his breath.

"No," Kyle answered, "And I can't find Nikolaus, either."

"And Joey's fuckin' nowhere," Misty shot.

"That fucking Nikolaus. He's so late and now I'm stuck here with..."

"What? With who? With me? You're stuck!? You're not stuck! I'm the stuck one, faggot!" Misty stood at her end of the table, flapping her hand in the air.

To prevent them from making an even bigger scene, Walker sat down at the table and shushed them loudly, like a struggling substitute daycare teacher might attempt. He leaned over to the waitress and said reluctantly, "Glenfiddich on the rocks."

“I don’t know if we have that.”

“What do you mean? How do you not have scotch?”

“We serve mostly um...what is the word?...*tropical*...drinks here.”

“What?” Walker looked over at Kyle, and then to the opposite end of the table at Misty, both of whom were slurping from straws that led to fruity, icy beverages. Kyle had affixed his drink’s decorative mini pink paper umbrella into his hair, while Misty was finishing off the pineapple and other accompanying tropical fruit that had formerly rested on the side of her glass.

“Where the fuck am I?” Walker blurted.

“Trader Vic’s, sir,” the waitress said blankly.

“I. Know. *That*...But where the fuck did all this theme park shit come from?”

The waitress brushed her hair back and held her hands at her sides. After a few seconds she hesitantly held out a drink menu to Walker and said, “We have many rum drinks.”

“Rum? *Rum*? *That*’s pretty much not even a real alcohol!”

Again, the waitress stood defeated.

“This is good,” Kyle promised through sucks of his straw, “it’s called Peach Tree Punch. Tasty.”

“I have a Maui Fizz,” Misty mumbled from the other side of the table without looking up. Walker glanced back and forth at them, dumbfounded. He felt like an oversized white ball in the stupidest game of table tennis ever played.

“Why do you serve something called a Maui Fizz in South Germany?” Walker demanded from the waitress. “Fine. You know what? Whatever. Fucking fine. Just bring

me something.” When the waitress left, Walker slumped back in his chair. His kneecaps touched the bottom of the tabletop so he couldn’t even shake them in annoyance. He kept looking right to left at Kyle and Misty, who said nothing more about their drinks after his outburst. To Walker, they looked so small and childlike on opposite sides of the table. When Kyle made a loud slurping sound with the straw inside of his empty glass, Walker demanded, “So you two really have no idea where Brigitte has gotten off to?”

“No,” Misty told him, placing her palms on the table, looking like she was about to pounce atop him. “We just told you. We can’t find them either. That’s why we’re here. *Duh.*”

“Anyway, I haven’t seen that Heather girl, either. If we find out what room she’s in then maybe she’ll know where they all are,” Kyle proposed.

Walker pulled his BlackBerry out of his pocket to see if he had any missed calls, but more so to remind himself that there was life beyond this table.

“How was the Maui Fizz?” Kyle asked Misty.

She looked at him blank-faced and after a few seconds, answered, “Fizzy.”

“Did either of Brigitte’s brothers tell you where they’d be going after the church service?” Walker inquired.

“It’s called a mass,” Kyle corrected.

“No, Joey just told me that he had to go hang out with...” she swallowed disapprovingly before saying, “*those two.*”

“Really, that’s weird, cuz Nick is gonna meet me here,” Kyle bragged.

“Sorry to be the one to tell you, but I think you’re being stood-up, sweetheart,” Walker jested to Kyle.

The waitress returned and slammed a large glass down on the table in front of Walker. "Here," she told him, "It's called a Suffering Bastard."

Batting his eyes in offense, Walker slowly rotated his large head to face the waitress as Misty laughed under her breath. The waitress did not make eye contact with him and instead briskly fled the table.

Inside the Palais Keller restaurant, Xavier sat at the center of a long table amongst three of his Dallas associates, seven Munich and Bavarian associates, and some Dietrich relatives from Germany. He rarely saw these Dietrich relatives and associates; they had kept their distance since Maximilian had left the family business to him. Over 40 years prior, the Dietrich family's extended relatives had understood Maximilian's decision to remove their surname from the business, but Xavier knew that they had also doubted his own ability. Tonight, though, the Dietrich relatives had embraced Xavier, letting him know that his North Texas empire had succeeded beyond their beliefs. These men were already in celebration, even before tomorrow's reunion had officially begun.

To Xavier's left sat Jurgan Kaester. On his right was Leopold Zumvald, and next to him sat Karl Weschler. Across from Xavier sat Dagmar Dietrich, Sofia's second cousin, who headed the Bavarian branch of the family business. Although Xavier and Dagmar were in constant communication over the telephone, during every conversation they spoke only of the business. Dagmar had been *the* prime Bavarian instigator whom, for years, had doubted Xavier's abilities. Dagmar had seen the numbers of home sales and foreclosures in the Dallas area, but he and his associates knew only by rumor and from telephone conversations of Xavier's success in Dallas branch. And until tonight,

until Dagmar had finally congratulated Xavier in person, Xavier had felt like a partial failure in the eyes of Maximilian's family.

This was the first time in Xavier's career that the leaders of the Dallas branch were in the same company with the other German branches. Xavier knew he had amassed a fortune, and was proud that he had headed the company in doing so. He knew that he had not only continued Maximilian's prosperous business streak in Dallas's homebuilding and real estate market, but had improved upon it as well. Xavier knew better than to boast of his successes to his international business associates, but he also knew better than to grovel for praise. With Xavier's success over the past three-and-a-half decades in Dallas, he knew that he had cemented the family business as a legitimate operation in the eyes of the public, just as Maximilian had done years prior.

By looking around the table this evening, Xavier realized that these men truly *knew* that Texans statewide came to him when they wanted a new home, when they needed a loan for a home, or wanted a better life. He saw on their faces that they all knew Xavier Schneider provided, but he also saw their respect for him. Most importantly, Xavier knew that this group of men recognized that after he lent and created so much money through the Schneider Building Co., that he had maintained the value and honor of the family business. These men knew that he had killed, beaten and disciplined dozens if not hundreds of new Texan homeowners for the sake of the family business. For the first time since being given the company so many years ago, Xavier felt validated in not only the eyes of his peers, but by Maximilian Dietrich himself.

As a waiter approached the long table, he saw a collection of rotund, middle-aged men dressed in khakis, polos or short-sleeved button-downs, and loafers. He discerned

that they looked no different than any other group of 40, 50 and 60-year-olds who hopped off tour buses to see Munich. The waiter knew that every hotel and restaurant in central Munich hosted gangs of these tourist-types, most of them striving to discover their ancestry before they died. Although his boss, the Maitre D of the Palais Keller, had instructed him to give these men special attention, they bored him like any other group of tourists. Fat American slobs, he thought, like he did every other time he had a huge table of men like this.

“Kielbasa?” the waiter asked loudly as he stood over them. The men seemed to halt whatever presumably mundane business they were discussing, and then the waiter bent over Dagmar Dietrich to place the large platter of sausage in the middle of the table. He then placed a tall stack of plates next to the platter, and excused himself before other waiters brought more food over. He didn’t want to watch the Americans eat.

“Sure,” Xavier announced, taking a plate and pausing before saying, “but don’t tell my wife.” Everyone at the table laughed. Many of them repeated what Xavier said, as though they had meant to say the same thing but just didn’t think of it first.

When another waiter delivered a tray of tall half-liter glasses, he inquired cheerily, “Weissbier?!” Xavier made the same joke. Again, all the men laughed.

Xavier wondered if these men, some associates and some near-strangers, knew about his recent heart attack since they seemed to know everything else about him. He was comfortable being the accomplished center of attention but not of having weaknesses. He looked around the table, taking note that nearly all of the men present were as heavy as him, yet each of them dug into the food being offered, and each

accepted a beer. When another waiter brought over a box of cigars, Xavier said, "Don't tell my wife! Hey, don't tell my kids, either!"

Dagmar Dietrich asked, "Xavier, where are those kids of yours? I've been waiting to meet that son of yours, the one who lives in New York. My stepson lives there, you know."

"I'm sure they're off drinking somewhere. That's all they do these days."

"My son too. It's their age."

Jurgen Kaestner interjected with, "Heather went off to find them earlier and I've not seen her since, so I'm assuming she found them."

"Good," Xavier answered. He seemed to repeatedly find himself in judgment over his kids' exclusion of Heather, since he now saw more of her in Dallas than of his own children. She was his child, too, after all.

Once every man had food on his plate and beer on his lips, Dagmar Dietrich spoke loudly in German, over the rest of the table, saying, "I feel confident that we cannot fully discuss business matters here."

Xavier nodded, as did Jurgen Kaester.

"But that is alright," Dagmar continued. "From what I hear, Xavier Schneider's business in Dallas has remained very prosperous, perhaps even more so than that of my cousin, Maximilian, God rest his soul. Xavier, those who once doubted you, will never again doubt your abilities with the business."

"Besides, we are not all here for business. We are here for family. Let us all toast to family this evening, before our families reunite tomorrow afternoon in Bavaria, some of them meeting for the very first time. I know that I have waited for this day for so

many, many years, so we must celebrate. No business will be conducted.” Dagmar fixated on Xavier when he held out his glass and said heartily, “Prost!” Every man at the table waited for Xavier to raise his glass. When he did, every waiter and patron in the restaurant turned to hear where the robust “Prost!” had come from.

An orchestra playing Beethoven strummed loudly through the speaker of the clock radio at the head of Sofia’s bed. Her and Xavier’s two-bedroom suite had already given her privacy, but now that he was downstairs and thankfully away from her, she could do as she pleased. She didn’t have to act like the disciplinary, faithful wife who always came second to her husband and children, to Xavier’s business, to everyone. This evening’s mass had once again proved this once again, and she was disappointed by their immediate family’s reunion. Still, after 30 years of being a mother, Sofia knew that Xavier only pretended to be in control of his family. *She* was the one. She always had been. Being in charge took its toll and she knew it, because none of her children wanted to be her friend.

When she caught her reflection in the mirror, Sofia’s hips began gyrating to the symphony that filled her room, as though her movements were beyond her control. Her toes began tapping. She pulled the headband out of the dark hair she had just finished washing during a long bubble bath, and allowed her shoulder-length hair to collapse. A devious but prude smile crept across her lips. She could feel that the thick tie of her fluffy pink robe was itching, just itching, to embrace freedom. Swaying back and forth, she unknotted the robe tie, and when Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 8” picked up tempo, Sofia



flung the robe from her body to reveal a lacy pink nightie. She tossed the robe across the room, which caught at the edge of the bed but quickly toppled to the floor.

On tippy-toes, she raced into the front hall of the suite and yanked a large bouquet of flowers from a crystal vase. Beneath high ceilings of wood décor and off-white walls, replicated Grünewald paintings, and golden light fixtures, she felt like a teenager again. Maybe it was because she was returning to her homeland tomorrow for the first time since she and Xavier had taken a mini vacation there nearly six years ago. Maybe it was because her children were all together with her again. Maybe it was because of the family reunion. Or maybe it was just because she had just had an uninterrupted five hours of coolness without a single hot flash. But tonight, right now, she was a princess! Princess Sofia of Bavaria!

She pirouetted around the entirety of the suite, leaping from spot to spot, tondué plie-ing, coupes, passes, and developes. Beethoven played just for her, and before she knew it, she had climbed atop her king-sized bed and was jumping up and down, her pink nightie flying up to her waist. The countless seams of the quilted comforter patches prompted her to jump higher, and she squished them between her toes whenever she returned to the bed. Pastel blue, yellow, and red flower petals flew from her hands, all over her bed and the carpeted floor. As “Symphony No. 8” again picked up tempo, she thought of her children, their color-coordinated blues, yellows and reds, and she jumped faster and smiled more.

Moments later when the symphony came to a sudden stop, a German radio host began speaking, and Sofia’s dance also stopped abruptly. She stood in the middle of the bed and looked down at the bouquet of half-naked green stems she held in her pulsating

fingers. Carefully, so not to hurt her back and flare up her arthritis, she lowered herself onto the bed, lay down, and sunk her head down into a pillow. She took a long, deep breath. Then another. Sofia watched the bumpy, stucco'd ceiling above her. Then, after raising her hands to cover her face, she began to weep.

Inside the main room of Trader Vic's, Dexter Dietrich watched three loud Americans brawling at a large table in the corner. Since he had been in the restaurant, the Americans had had quite a few rounds of drinks, but none of them seemed any friendlier. Dexter was quite positive that he had seen these three characters with Nikolaus and his family during mass, so he wondered where Nick and his siblings had gotten off to, and why they weren't all together. He doubted they were with their parents. And he was jealous that Nick hadn't invited him.

"Dexter, I need to take grandma to bed," said the woman to his left when she recaptured Dexter's attention.

"Ok, mom."

"Do you know those people over there? You keep staring."

"Who? Oh, no, mom. Just looking. I think they're American."

"Probably. They're very loud." Dexter's mother leaned over to sign the credit card bill with her frail, veiny hand. He watched her form her signature, carefully and slowly, her long fingers grasping the pen tightly but not suffocating it. Sitting with his mother and grandmother – two such proper women of etiquette and stature – made Dexter feel at ease, like an admiring boy bubbling over with love. His entire life he had watched both of these women remain faithful and supportive to their longtime husbands,

and had admired them every time he was among these two generations of couples. Since he was a young boy, Dexter had acknowledged that Dagmar was a better husband and father than his birth father. Dagmar had been the love of his mother's life, and now, Dexter wanted one too. As an only child, Dexter had no choice but watch the romantic interactions of couples around him. He wanted the same thing that his stepfather had: to love someone so passionately yet effortlessly, so much that he was positive it didn't even matter whether the person loved him back as much.

His grandmother smiled at him from her seat and announced softly, "Time for bed, D." He smiled back and told her that he'd be up in a minute, that he wanted another beer. The old women kissed him goodnight. He watched his mother and grandmother leave Trader Vic's and then considered whether or not he should go speak to the Americans in the corner. Dexter disliked being alone.

After his mother and grandmother disappeared up the small staircase leading up towards the hotel lobby, he saw the tallest American, the blond one in the middle, stand up and start pointing and shouting at the smaller two. Soon, all three of them were standing and shouting, and a few waitresses rushed over to the table to stop the ruckus. Dexter reached into his jacket pocket and clasped his hands around a small metal object, positioning his index finger around its circular edge.

Brigitte, the boys and Heather were the only remaining patrons in Falk's Bar. A collection of 26 martini and beer glasses cluttered their table, as the bartender was not capable of making their drinks, delivering and clearing them, as quickly as they were of slurping them back.

“So can we talk about, you know, *it* yet?” Joey asked.

“What’s there to talk about?” Brigitte said.

“Well, what’re we gonna do?”

“Joey, nothing has really changed since we got here. We still don’t know what to do, and won’t know, until we get down into the Alps....and the river. And the lakes. And the Anwesen. I can’t fucking wait!” Nick smiled and looked up at the ceiling, beaming.

Heather listened to the three of them but her head was rushing. She didn’t feel faint but she was definitely inebriated.

“You okay, Heath?” Brigitte asked. She ran her fingers through Heather’s hair.

“Mm-hmm,” she promised, lying a little. Heather sat up and said, “Y’all are crazy. You can’t do...*you know*.”

Joey laughed overdramatically and bellowed, “Watch us!”

Nick and Brigitte both rolled their eyes.

“Heath, you know what?” Brigitte started. Heather knew that Brigitte only began a speech like this when she was unsure or disconcerted about something. She watched Nick and Joey lean forward, into their sister’s commands. Brigitte continued, “You’re right. Well, I mean, you’re not *right*. Because...we *can* do *that*. We just don’t know how yet. But just like you said when you walked in and toasted earlier, who knows what’ll happen. Maybe we won’t go through with it. Maybe it won’t happen.”

“What?!” Joey exploded.

“Yeah, what are you talking about, Brig?” Nick seconded.

“What I mean is that we’ve never done this before.”

“Are you drunk?” Nick asked.

“Oh, please, Nicky.” Brigitte cocked her head. “Are you?”

“What do you think? When have I ever been drunk with just *water*?” Brigitte pointed to Nick’s glass, acknowledging their agreed-upon definition of ‘water’: Heather remembered that, in college while sneaking drinks at family functions during the holidays, Brigitte and Nick had begun referring to vodka as ‘water’ and, years later, the liquid nickname had stuck.

“I’m just saying. We don’t really know what we’re doing. I was thinking about this on the airplane the whole way here. What if something goes wrong?” Brigitte said.

“Nothing’s gonna go wrong,” Joey told her.

“How do you know that?”

“Just like I know when everything’s gonna go right,” he promised again.

“No you don’t. You’re just imagining things.”

“Brig, what are you saying?”

“Look – nothing has changed. Just think about this more, okay? Tonight, tomorrow, whenever. We really do have to put more thought into this. If you think about it, we don’t really know what we’re doing.”

“Okay,” Nick told her, “We’ll think about it.”

“Yeah,” Joey confirmed.

“Plus, look. I just keep thinking about Walker. Everyone knows who he is! If he goes missing, then a major search will be conducted from Boston to Germany to the ends of fucking earth. It’s not fair. With Kyle’s fake passport, there’s not even proof that he was in this country. And Misty? I mean, really, at this point, who would really care if she didn’t turn up somewhere. Am I wrong, Joey?”

“Hell no. Definitely not. Even her mom hates her. They don’t even talk anymore.”

“See what I mean?” She threw her hands up in the air, nearly knocking into the collection of glasses on the table. “What am I supposed to do?”

“We’ll work it out, Brig,” Nick said.

“How? This really is not fair.”

“Guess you should’ve dated a moron,” Joey joked.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Brigitte asked. “Besides, you’re only as good as the company you keep, you know.”

“And what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” Nick demanded. “Only as good as the company we keep? Look at the asshole you’re with. Look at what he’s done to you.”

Heather held her breath as Brigitte retracted. Then Brigitte said, “I’m sorry. I’m just getting worried.”

“Hey, check this out,” a fifth voice said from behind their table. When they all turned around, Dexter Dietrich stood before them, holding out a digital camera.

“Hey!” Nick said, vodka preventing him from really knowing how excited he sounded, “Where’d you come from? Where were you? I mean, how are you?”

Heather, Brigitte and Joey waved their eyebrows and traded prissy glances.

“No, really, check it out,” Dexter said again, extending the camera towards Nick. Heather watched Nick accept the camera and he held the screen up to his face, so she leaned over to see the photo, too. Upon seeing the photograph of Walker, Misty and Kyle screaming at each other, Nick’s mouth dropped open in hysteria.

“What the hell?” he asked Dexter, looking up at him.

“There’s more,” Dexter prompted. “It gets worse. Or better, depending on how you look at it.” He bent down over Nick, wrapping his arms around Nick’s shoulders to manage the camera. Dexter rubbed his fingers over Nick’s, operating the scroll and zoom buttons of the camera to show him the additional snapshots he had taken.

“No way,” Nick remarked, “Y’all have got to see this.” He handed the camera to Brigitte, who responded similarly to him, and then handed over the camera to Joey.

“Yeah,” Dexter said, “I saw them when I was down there with my mom and grandmother. They got all crazy, screaming and shouting. The tall one picked up his chair and looked like he was about to throw it at the littler guy – the one I saw on the airplane with Nick last night.”

Nick rose from his seat and introduced Dexter to his siblings and Heather. They spoke for a few moments more, until the bartender interrupted to say he was closing. Dexter explained that he was sharing a suite with his parents and grandmother, so he had to say goodnight, but not until he kissed the girls’ and Nick’s cheeks and shook Joey’s hand. Nick watched Dexter vanish down the hallway. When he turned back around, his siblings and Heather all stood fig-leaved before him, mocking his unexpected boyishness.

“He’s so hot,” Heather said.

“Nicky. He’s wooooooooooooooooonderful,” Brigitte crooned.

“I mean, we don’t know him yet, so I dunno if I *really* like him. But brothaman? So far? That dude is fucking cool,” Joey thirded.

“I know,” Nick answered, blushing. He turned around to lead everyone out of Falk’s Bar and repeated, “Oh, but I know.”

## **Chapter 20: *En Route to Bad Wiessee, Bavaria***

A stream of black town cars flowed from the Hotel Bayerischer Hof at nine the next morning, exactly 30 minutes after Sofia had, the previous evening, instructed everyone to be ready to leave. She had even provided wake-up calls. Sofia and Xaver sat on the wide, tan leather back seat of the first car. Following them was a car carrying Brigitte and Walker, then one with Nick and Kyle, another with Joey and Misty, then the Kaestners, and four more cars of Xavier's employees, including Leopold Zumvald, his wife and daughter, and Karl Weschler and his wife.

"Why couldn't they at least have been ready on time?" Sofia asked the air. She had the window open, the air-conditioning blasting at her face, and was fanning herself with a Hotel Bayerischer Hof brochure she had seized from the lobby during her first hot flash this morning.

"We both knew they wouldn't be," her husband contested. Xavier leaned back into the leather seat cushion, closing his eyes and folding his hands onto his lap. "It's still early."

"Did you see the way they acted in church last night?" Sofia looked out the window and watched the white buildings of downtown Munich disappear as the car headed for the highway. She fanned herself quicker now.

"Of course, I was sitting right next to you."

"And what's wrong with them this morning? They were so testy."

"Our children have never been morning people."

"Well, I think they're all hungover. Who would go out drinking all night if they knew we had to get up so early this morning?"



Xavier thought of the five pints of Weissbier he drank last night. His stomach grumbled. He wondered if it was hunger, indigestion or a hangover. "I don't know?"

"Today is a very important day. The whole weekend is."

"I know, Sofia."

"Am I asking too much for them to just be respectful and behave?"

"Sofia, look..."

She tossed her hands on her lap and belted, "What?"

"They are what they are. You must accept that."

"Excuse me?" The hot flash passed and she stopped fanning.

"Would you rather them have settled and stayed in Dallas just like everyone they went to school with? Would you rather them have gotten married straight out of college and had children? Would you rather them have become adults as quickly as we had to?"

"We did not have children immediately. I worked, too," she said defending herself, "I worked in the Highland Park library for *years* after our marriage!"

"I know."

"So, no, that's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

"They can't just be...nice?"

Xavier turned to face his wife. "Sofia, they are nice. They love you. They love each other. So much. You can tell. Be thankful that they're so close."

"Well, why do they have to eliminate me?"

"I don't know how...they just know more than we do. They just do. They're never going to be the kids that did what they were 'supposed to do' by Dallas standards."

And especially not by Bavarian standards, like our immigrant peers from high school and college. They're capable of greater things and they want more out of life. You should know this by now. And we should be happy for them." He paused and took a deep breath before admitting, "I'm not sure that any of them should be involved with the family business."

"Well, I am sure that one of them needs to be," she stated declaratively. When Xavier did not respond, she asked, "Are they happy?"

"I don't know, honey. I don't know."

In the second car, rather than speak to Walker, Brigitte did her best to focus on a magazine that she had already read twice on the airplane. To entertain himself, Walker kept readjusting the air-conditioning vent that was blowing on the top of his head. When Brigitte looked up, off in the distance she saw a sign for a supermarket.

In German, she asked the driver, "Sir, would you please do me a favor?"

*"Ja, dame?"*

"Would you please – quickly – pull in front of the first car and drive towards that grocery store? I need to speak with my brothers." Brigitte could not see the confusion on her moustached driver's face, but he did as she asked. After the second town car replaced the first one in the lead, all of the black town cars followed it off the highway in succession. Brigitte opened her purse, removed her deep red lipstick, and reapplied.

"What is going on?" Sofia asked Xavier.

He shrugged and watched the first car turn underneath the highway bridge, wondering if something had gone wrong. Xavier jumped to conclusions, considering that Brigitte's driver had taken her hostage. He leaned forward as if his eyes could plummet through the windshield and halt Brigitte's car with his magic paternal superpowers.

When the eight cars pulled into the parking lot, Brigitte emerged from the back of the first car. Her black heels dug into the soft gray pavement as she walked to her parents' car. Still near the highway, so the wind whipped her long red hair behind her. She hugged her purse against her bosom so the wind didn't steal it away. As she began passing her parents' car, Xavier rolled down his window.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

Brigitte leaned over and pulled her brown, large-framed sunglasses to the tip of her nose. She spoke calmly and surely. "Everything's fine. I just need some things. I have to talk to the boys inside. Be back in just a few minutes."

"What do you need? We'll be there in just a couple of hours."

"I'll be right back, X." She smiled seductively. To Xavier, his daughter's lips seemed to glow like a commanding red stoplight. Brigitte walked towards Nick's car. Then Nick emerged, as did Joey when they reached his car.

When Brigitte had reached each of her brothers, she could feel Kyle's and Misty's angry, inquisitive eyes casing over her, but she did not reciprocate their glare. Comparatively, the looks of relief, salvation even, that each of her brothers wore when she temporarily saved them were completely analogous to those of their car partners, which thrilled Brigitte even more. She knew how uncomfortable Nick and Joey must've been, alone in each of their cars with Kyle and Misty. She knew all this because she felt

the exact same way. What Brigitte also knew, though, was that out of the three of them, only *she* had the power – the balls, the family jewels – to rally them up in order to survive the rest of the excruciating two-hour drive down to Bad Wiessee.

She led them over to the Kaestner's car. Jurgen rolled down the window and Brigitte asked, "Wanna come, Heath?"

"Sure!" Heather climbed over her father, out of the car, and joined Brigitte and the boys.

After Brigitte, Heather and the boys had been inside the store for at about ten minutes, Sofia turned to Xavier and said, "What do you think they're doing?"

"I can't imagine."

"After thirty years, why do you still let her boss you around?"

"Sofia, don't start."

"Well, what do you think they're talking about in there? Away from us?"

Another five minutes passed and then Joey emerged from the sliding doors of the grocery store, pushing a large metal shopping cart full of bottles, with Brigitte, Nick and Heather following closely behind. All four of them wore sunglasses, which Sofia thought looked ridiculous. As they walked past their parents' car, Sofia called out of the open window, "Is this really necessary?"

"They don't have grocery bags in this country," Nick told her.

"Yeah," Joey seconded, "they just told us that there's no bags cuz of the environment, so we had to use this big basket."

"But a whole basket? I can understand if y'all would like a beer or some juice...*or water*...for the ride down...but a whole basketful?" Xavier questioned.

"It's not just for the ride down, obviously," Nick said glancing into the overflowing basket. "We're stocking up for the next few days."

"The environment," Joey repeated. "This is good for the environment, man."

"What was so important that y'all needed to go talk about in the store...away from us?" Sofia asked, leaning towards Xavier's window so she could be seen and heard.

"Don't worry about it," Brigitte answered under her breath, still smiling.

They watched their mother turn away from them. After Brigitte, Heather and the boys had divvied up the bottles and mixers, they all got back into their cars. Xavier watched a feminine hand emerge from the car window in front of them, pointing for his and Sofia's driver to resume the lead. He watched a silver bracelet dangle as Brigitte shook her arm; it had been a birthday gift from him, five, maybe six years ago.

Sofia felt herself swerving against the side of the town car as her and Xavier's driver regained the lead position. She huffed under her breath and removed a crossword puzzle book from her purse, shaking her head in defeat.

Sofia's stomach had jumbled itself so much that she felt nauseous as her car neared the Dietrich alpine Anwesen nestled in the hills of the Bavarian Alps. Turning around to possibly catch a glimpse of any of her children's reactions would surely disappoint her. For years, decades even, she had looked forward to this day, this afternoon, this solitary moment in time when her trio stepped directly into the gorgeous living photograph of their ancestry. Instead, she watched the thick evergreens that filled

the crevices of snow-covered mountains of the Bavarian Alps. From her window, she looked between mountains and forest, wondering how deep the Alps really were. She wondered what and who else might be out there.

For over a decade now, she had heard stories from her elder children, especially Nikolaus, about going home to his friends' fabulous hometowns in the North East to experience New England. So many times, Nikolaus had called or emailed Sofia to boast about the wonders of exotic, constitutional lands like Connecticut, Vermont, Maine or New Jersey, and how different they were compared to sunny, newborn Texas. Over the telephone she would secretly roll her eyes about these places, but would always respond pleasantly and politely to his North Eastern findings. Sofia knew that she would be grossly underwhelmed should she visit Nick's pals' hometowns of Weathersfield, VT or Ogunquit, ME. For she had been to Bavaria.

As they approached Bad Wiessee, the immaculate little town hidden in the hills, Sofia became uncontrollably excited. She inched forward in her chair and sat erect, trying to see as much as she could through her window. Simply bathing herself in this atmosphere would not be enough for Sofia. She wanted the landscape of Bavaria inside of her; she wanted to be a part of her most beloved work of natural beauty. Xavier watched from his window, too, but mostly he watched Sofia. He knew how much she loved this place, how important it was to her.

Sofia and Xavier held their door handles as the car slowed along the spirals of the road leading down into Bad Wiessee. They drove into a large, fairytale clump of antique white and beige homes, shops and restaurants, each of them accented with dollops of Bavarian blues and golds. At this point of their journey, Sofia breathed heavily, *ooo's* and

*ahhh*'s, entranced with the polished cleanliness of it all. Memories of her girlhood and her father danced through her mind.

As the cars drove through the town center, passing charming window displays and fresh flower boxes, Sofia and Xavier traded memories about their first trip to Bad Wiessee, their honeymoon. Xavier reminded Sofia that, during their honeymoon, they had been younger than their children were now. When the cars turned onto a sunny street lined with clipped tulips, that was *it* – Sofia told herself that heaven could not possibly be better than this.

The sound of gravel mixing with soft pavement under the slow tires of the town car filled Sofia's ears. It was so peaceful, so different and comforting compared to the Dallas highways she knew back home. Through the Alps and past the town center, the cars drove closer to the secluded Anwesen. The large entrance gate had already been opened, so the cars streamed through slowly. When Sofia saw the remarkable spread of fourteen three-story herrenhausen, all built over 150 years ago for the Dietrich family, *her* family, not the Schneiders, but *hers*, another dose of memories visited her.

Sofia opened her car door quickly; there was no way she could wait for the driver to stop completely. The flat soles of her shoes pranced over the gravel dusting, towards the semi-circle of the first group of Dietrich Anwesen. Her worries from the drive down had subsided; now that she was here again, no one else's opinion or level of excitement mattered. Not even her children's.

Soon, she heard rapid footsteps in the gravel behind her. She felt an arm around her waist and then heard Joey's voice. "Mom, this is *amazing*!" Sofia hugged her baby back. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her other children approaching, and saw the

astounded looks upon their faces. Her trio was enraptured under Bavaria's spell. Satisfaction visited her for the first time since having landed in Germany the previous morning. And finally, the mommy was calm. Nick and Brigitte seconded Joey's proclamation, and then Xavier joined them. The five of them stood in a horizontal line before their family property.

Soon, when Joey turned around, he saw that everyone else had gotten out of their cars, too, and were basking in their surroundings; if not at the Answesen, then by the Alps. Everyone seemed taken completely aback by the simple presence of nature. Joey noticed that even Misty and Kyle seemed captivated. Neither of them spoke, but Joey could just tell from their aimless footsteps that they were spellbound by the storybook land of which they had suddenly become a part. Heather, meanwhile, was running and jumping around the forest, plucking leaves off the trees and flowers from the ground, swinging around everyone, grabbing their hands for twists and turns.

Seconds later, Joey turned back around to the Answesen when he heard a loud "Hallo!" He watched his mother run over to the woman who had just greeted everyone, and then watched the two middle-aged women embrace. From where Joey stood he couldn't hear their conversation, but soon, Sofia and the woman walked over to the small crowd. Sofia announced to everyone, "This is Franziska Dietrich, my cousin. She lives near here." She looked at her children and continued, "She and her husband Dagmar manage the property when no one is here."

Xavier stepped forward to embrace Dagmar Dietrich's wife and said in German, "Franziska, how have you been!?"



She walked forward and kissed Xavier's cheeks. Unsure of who all spoke German, Franziska Dietrich spoke in English to the Schneider family when she said, "I have all your room keys in the common room. Most people won't be here until tomorrow for start of the reunion, but please come in, come in!"

Xavier turned and motioned for everyone to follow Franziska Dietrich into the foremost Herrenhaus. Following his family and their companions were the Kaestners, Zumvalds and the Weschlers. He ushered each of them in, offering a jolly glance and a head nod of welcome for each member of their 'extended family.' As Xavier's children passed him, he looked each of them in the eye and said quietly, "Don't forget that I need to talk to y'all, so please don't go too far away."

Brigitte carried her own bag into her room, with Walker following close behind. She wasn't going to let him do her any favors and knew that he probably wouldn't have offered anyway. He ducked as he walked under the hard, oak doorway. After Brigitte lifted her bulky bag onto the edge of the bed with a soft grunt, she looked at Walker. His head touched the ceiling. She walked over to the window and looked out. Their room had a view of the Alps, which meant that her brothers had the same view, since they were staying in the same Herrenhaus as she and Walker, only on the two floors above them. She was so thankful that they had all been assigned to stay in the same Herrenhaus.

Brigitte and Walker's room was simple but contained the necessities of any other hotel room she had stayed in: a king-sized bed frame that was actually filled with two twin sized mattresses (which was the first thing Brigitte noticed and appreciated); thin, stringy beige floor rugs; a darker oak table with two matching chairs, each cushioned

with a paisley blue and white pattern; two oak mini-dressers; two four-paned windows covered with basic white curtains; and a door that led onto a medium-sized balcony.

Brigitte thought it lovely that there were also fresh flower arrangements in the room.

“There’s no television in here,” Walker stated.

“So?”

“This is a dump.”

“No it’s not. And don’t say that. This is my family’s property.”

“Let’s go check into the Hilton or something.”

“Did you *see* a Hilton when we drove through the town earlier?”

“Well, look around, Brig.”

Brigitte overdramatically did as her cavemen instructed her: she looked around the room, exaggerating every gesture. “There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s a nice, clean, European-style room.”

“I’ve been in much nicer places than this in Europe. C’mon, get your bag, let’s go find a nice hotel.”

“Walker, you just don’t like it because it’s not Americanized and commercialized enough to be a tacky chain hotel clone of everywhere else that you’ve stayed.”

“Whatever, I feel like I’m on fucking *Funny Farm*.”

“That’s impossible, Walker,” she said. “You’re not funny.” She sat down on the bed and removed her heels. When she got back up to open her suitcase, Brigitte stood four inches shorter. After a few seconds of pacing, Walker found himself near the windows, so he concentrated on the view. Glad that Walker had found something with which to entertain himself, Brigitte selected a pair of jeans, a more comfortable shirt, and

her sneakers from her boxy suitcase. She let herself into the bathroom to change instead of doing so in Walker's presence. Here she also put her hair into a low ponytail so that it was out of her face.

When she finished, she re-entered the bedroom and dumped her old clothes into her suitcase.

"What are we going to do for a fucking week in this place?"

"Relax," she lied. "Anyway, I'm going to go find my brothers and go for a walk or something. I'm tired of just sitting around."

"Fine," he responded, thereby granting her permission. "I'll be here." He pulled out his laptop and placed it on the table. "Think this place has wi-fi?"

Brigitte rolled her eyes and left the room. Without wasting time, she walked to the stairway that led to the floors above. She skipped two flights up the creaky, blue carpet-covered staircase. When she was upstairs, her rubber-soled sneakers pattered on the rug-covered hardwood floor of the third level. She knocked on the door and waited for a response. From the cutesy paintings to the antique family photographs to the old lamps and furniture, Brigitte was comforted that everything in the Herrenhaus was so homely.

Nick flung open the door. "What are you doing?"

"Getting away from Walker. What are you doing?"

In the same assured tone Brigitte had just used, Nick whispered "Getting away from Kyle." Then, loud enough for Kyle to hear, he said, "Kyle is very tired and wants to take a nap." Nick purposely over-enunciated his syllable in baby-talk. He pulled open the door a bit wider so Brigitte could see inside. Through the opening, she saw Kyle walking

through the room in a t-shirt and bikini briefs. His face was covered with an eye mask so he was having trouble locating the bed, with his arms extended before him like a zombie.

“Nikolaus, help me. I can’t find the bed.”

Nick focused on Brigitte and grinned as he responded. “Well, maybe, I don’t know, you could take off the eye mask until you’re actually in bed?”

“But I already put it on.”

Nick threw his hands up in the air and Brigitte backed into the hallway, trying desperately not to laugh at the latest pathetic game her brother was playing. Nick walked over to Kyle, grabbed his arms, and led him slowly towards the bed. Once Kyle’s knees touched the foot of the bed, Nick grabbed the room key from the table and bolted to his sister. When they walked back down to the second floor, Brigitte knocked on the door. There was no answer, so they headed outside.

When Brigitte and Nick set foot on the wooden porch, they saw Joey and Misty sitting with Heather at a picnic table near the Kaestners’ Herrenhaus. Misty had changed clothes too, into a skin tight baby blue jogging suit, similar to one that Brigitte had seen some of the women in her kickboxing class wear. Brigitte noticed that Misty still wore the purple jelly high heels that she had left the hotel wearing this morning.

“How ghetto fabulous,” Nick said under his breath as they approached.

Misty sat spread eagle on top of the table between Joey and Heather, smoking a cigarette and talking loudly to whoever would listen. On their approach over, Brigitte consciously optioned to listen to the bark, leaves and twigs snapping under her feet, instead of Misty’s grating voice.

Nick had rarely seen Heather wear the look that was currently on her face: one of such supreme annoyance that she looked like she was going to get up and leave. Of all people, Nick knew that Heather could get along with any living being on the planet, and if she couldn't automatically, she would die trying. The look on her face this morning, though, suggested that she preferred the latter option.

"Walk?" Brigitte suggested.

Everyone but Misty belted an enthusiastic "Yeah." Misty glanced around at the Schneiders and Heather, wondering how they got to be so nerdy and why they actually wanted to spend time with each other. All she wanted to do was fuck or eat. She told herself that she was, like, way cooler than any of them, but followed them off into the foresty Alps anyway.

## **Chapter 21: *Bad Wiessee***

From her Herrenhaus, Katarina Kaestner watched her daughter heading off into the mountains with the Schneiders and Joey's girlfriend. She envied her daughter. Katarina knew that Heather was far more sociable, more determined and unrelenting in her attempts to always be part of the Schneider gang, any gang really, than she had ever been. She also knew she could've befriended Sofia more over the years, but like her next-door neighbor, she too preferred her solitude. Part of her feared the entire human race. Even now, she partially wanted to follow her daughter and go exploring too. But she would never admit to such a thing to anyone else, even her husband. She was a mother and wife, and her own mother had taught Katarina that these roles were her only purpose in life. As her husband napped on the bed, Katarina sat by the window, watching the dark silhouettes of five bodies disappear into the Alps.

Nick led, looking for a trail to follow. His short legs stretched as far as his stride would allow, and he kept turning around to make sure Brigitte, the shortest of their group, was managing. To his relief, she stayed inches behind him as they climbed.

"Nicky, I don't think there'll be a trail near here. Remember, X said that there's nothing really over in this part of the mountain except the property. All of the trails must be closer to town," Brigitte told him, having to strain her voice over Misty's, who had continued talking nonstop since they had set out. They climbed the mountain towards the cloud-latticed sun, but the deeper into the forest they hiked, the denser and darker it became. An awning of dark green leaves shielded them from the sun.

Misty began ranting again: “I mean, you know? That hotel in Munich was, like, okay, but at least there was stuff to do around there. You know? There’s, like, not even a mall around here, is there? I mean what *the fuck* are we gonna do with just these little houses for a whole fuckin’ week?”

Nick kept trading glances with his sister, who now walked at pace with him.

“You guys don’t even know most of your relatives, anyway. Right? Am I right? I’m so right, aren’t I? And, like, if they’re the boring people who were in that church last night, we’re all in for a really boring week, then. You know?”

Nick turned around to see Misty continuously flipping her hair back. He wondered when there would be a pause in Misty’s string of complaints, but did not hear one thus far. He wasn’t so much listening to Misty as she was just hearing her – that whiny, unfaltering chainsaw of a voice, chirpy and whorish to his ears.

“I went to a family reunion once, too, right? And, like, it was totally the worst weekend of my life. And, like, my relatives? They’re all nice. I mean, like, classy ‘n shit. They all have like really nice pickup trucks and Cameros. But, like, just being around all those old people for so long, like, totally, drove me crazy!

“But, I mean, whatever. I’ll never have to go back to one of those things cuz, like, I ain’t ever gonna talk to my mom again, that bitch. And like, when Joey and me get married? I am totally not gonna come back to this boring place if y’all ever have one of these things again. I just want to tell y’all that now, ‘kay? I mean, we’ve been here, what, for like an hour, and I’m already this bored!?” She released a manly grunt.

“Hey, also, I really don’t think y’all’s parents like each other. Your mom – she’s like, all...Hallmark-y and shit. I don’t get it. It’s like Little House on the Mutha Fuckin’

Prairie or somethin’.” She laughed to herself. “You know what I mean, Joey? Yeah, you know. Anyway, I can’t imagine ever getting along with her, so once I’m in this family, y’all just know that I ain’t gonna do too much time with her. No offense, y’all, I’m just tellin’ it like it is. I can’t never be like that woman. And, sheeeeit, I don’t wanna be! You know what I’m sayin’?”

This time when Nick turned around, he saw Joey raise his arm to knock the back of Misty’s head, but Heather casually slammed it back against his side. Nick turned back around and grinned.

After about half-hour of walking and hearing Misty’s voice chattering on, Nick stopped when he saw a long, rotted old log. He sat down on a patch of moss and said, “I have no idea where we are.”

“What?!” Misty squealed. “You fucking got us lost?!”

“No, I mean, I know where we are, kind of. I’m sure we could get back. All we have to do is walk back down the mountain.” He began looking around. There was a pile of small, damp logs near them. A long-handled ax rested next to the logs, along with a large wheelbarrow. It looked like someone had been chopping firewood but had become discouraged when it had started raining, Nick thought. He could still see the remnants of raindrops on the curves of the rusty orange wheelbarrow.

“But you just said that you don’t really know where we are!” Misty bellowed again. Nick couldn’t take it anymore. He rose and walked over to Misty and poked her shoulder lightly, which made her shove forward and say, “What are you doing? Don’t fuckin’ touch me.”



Nick answered calmly, "I am *so* sorry. I just had to check again to make sure that you're *real*. I thought I was hallucinating." He then reclaimed his perch on the log.

"Huh? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Misty folded her arms and sat down on the opposite end of the log from Nick, pouting. He picked up a thick twig from the ground and squeezed it so hard he thought sap might pour out of it.

"God! I mean...your family could be a little bit more fucking hospitalable!"

Nick's face squunched up. He rose from the log. "*Hospitalable!?*" He said the non-word with so much disbelief that saliva flew from his lips. "*That's not even a word!*"

"Yuh-huh! Last night y'all left me with those two losers in that restaurant. And now, you've gotten me lost, in my nice jelly heels, in this fucking terrible place. Joey, what is wrong with your brother and sister?!"

Nick's gaze turned to Joey, whose head remained focused on the ground.

"Joey! I am talking to you! Josef Schnieder, I am speaking to you so you'd better fucking respond. You never treat me this bad when we're at home. I mean, you're definitely not the perfect gentleman that I need, but you never treat me like this."

Heather screamed. Not a sentence or a phrase, not even words. She just screamed.

Misty stared at her. "What the fuck are you screaming for? What is wrong with you, *bitch*?" She turned back towards Joey and pointed at Heather. "Joey, this girl is all fucked up, too. She treats me as bad as your brother and sister do. Aren't you going to *do* something about it?"

"I! Have! Had it!" Heather screamed again. Nick's eyes widened; he had never seen Heather react to someone this way. She raced over to Misty and grabbed a massive clump of peroxidized hair from the top of her head. Heather rotated around the edge of the

log, ripping Misty's hair towards her. Nick was surprised to be grinning as he watched Misty's right hand raise above her head in attempts to pry Heather's long fingers loose. In immediate retaliation, though, Heather just swat her hand away. Misty used her feet to match the tempo at which Heather dragged her, but kept stumbling as she faced the trees towering above. When her shoes slipped off, Misty tried digging her toes into the dirt for traction, but that didn't work either. Amazonian Heather was too strong for her.

As she was dragged along a jagged bed of bark, twigs and dirt, Misty fought with both hands to pry Heather loose, but could not manage. Heather had now grasped Misty's hair with both hands. When Misty clawed her fingernails into Heather's wrist, Heather halted. She bent down and bit into Misty's arm, so hard that the skin broke and a small trickling of blood sprung up from where Heather left teeth marks. Misty screamed now, perilously. She called Joey's name but wasn't aware of how far Heather had already dragged her. About thirty feet away, Nick and his siblings looked up towards Heather and Misty. Heather had confiscated Misty so quickly that they hadn't had time to react.

"Holy shit," Joey breathed.

Joey and Brigitte tore off running towards Heather, led by the sound of Misty's bare feet ferociously padding the ground between screams and grunts. Still appalled, Nick lingered behind on the log and watched his little brother from afar. Joey alternated so rapidly between looks of mortification and guilty, gleeful grins that Nick thought Joey's face resembled a cartoon. When Brigitte and Joey reached Heather, they watched her drop Misty, bashing her head into the ground.

“You fucking bitch!” Misty bellowed, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Misty rolled over into a seated position, spread eagle and enraged, and began massaging her scalp.

Nick could tell that Misty clearly thought the game was over. He watched Heather glare at Misty with unblinking eyes, her nostrils enlarged above the crease between her lips. He then watched as Heather waited only a beat before taking a running start at Misty, bringing her long leg behind herself to kick.

Heather screamed, “You do *NOT* talk to Josef that way!” Except, when Heather kicked Misty’s chest and rammed her knee into Misty’s face, Misty did not fly up into the air, as Nick assumed she would. Misty’s head flew back into the dirt, smacking the back of her skull onto the ground. Heather hobbled away a few inches and then shook out the sharp pain from her shin, while Misty lay in the dirt and groaned. Misty did not sit back up. Mesmerized, Nick watched Misty’s hands slowly clutch her stomach as she began coughing up blood. Heather didn’t stop, though. Like a giant, she circled around Misty, panting and deciding what to do next. Between gargles of blood, Misty again mumbled, “You fucking bitch, you fucking bitch.”

“Heather, move,” Nick said, now standing directly behind her. Nick glanced around, now well aware that his siblings and Heather now all stared at him instead of the beaten, bloody body on the ground. He gently placed his hand on Heather’s hip and pushed her away from him, and also away from Misty. Nick sturdied his feet in the damp dirt, kicking away extraneous bits of wood and rocks. Then, he raised his hands above his head, clasping the long-handled ax he had taken from the pile of firewood. With one swift, careful movement, he crashed the ax down towards Misty’s neck.

The cut was misdirected. Nick had just barely missed her neck and had instead brought the ax down into the middle of her face. Blood sputtered from the enormous gash that he had just created. The flesh on Misty's face had been separated into two halves but her body was still moving, writhing around on the ground. Nick realized instantly that although Misty no longer had a face, she was not yet dead.

"Fuck!" he screamed. Brigitte looked away but Heather did not. Nick watched his brother turn around from Misty's body and begin vomiting.

To remove the ax from Misty's face, Nick had to put his left sneaker on her torso to hold down her body while he pried loose his weapon. He watched Misty's right foot moving back and forth, like a bulbous pendulum stuck between a tick and a tock. After a small struggle, Nick pulled out the ax from Misty's face, and again held it high above his shoulders. He grit his teeth and closed one eye, struggling to achieve proper measuring and direction for his second blow.

Again, Nick slammed the ax down towards Misty. This time, he hit his target. Her body released a loud wheezing sound at the neck, like a balloon being slowly deflated through an uneven slit. But Misty's head remained on her body.

"What the fuck?!" Nick was wailing now, confused and dejected. "It won't come off!" When he looked towards Brigitte for advice, she wasn't looking at him. Brigitte now shielded her face with her hands, while also trying to block Joey's view. Nick asked, "Heath?"

"Huh?" Heather gasped.

He lowered his voice, locked eyes with Heather, and nodded towards Misty's head. "It...won't...come...off."

“Well? I don’t know, hit her again.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know what else to do? Nicky, this isn’t a cartoon, there’s a big bone in there! It doesn’t just pop off!”

“Oh. Okay, fuck. Alright.” He took a deep breath and again raised the ax above his head. Nick didn’t realize that he was slobbering on himself in desperation. A solid strand of drool unhinged itself from his lip and plastered itself against his shirt. Again, he shattered the ax into Misty’s neck. Still, her head remained. But now, her nerve endings had finally given out, and she stopped moving.

Joey vomited again so Brigitte tried turning him further away from Misty. Nick looked at Heather again. She raised her shoulders and said softly, “Again?”

Nick chopped into Misty’s neck twice more. No beheading occurred. Nick knew that she must’ve been dead by now, but his fantastical imagination controlled him yet again. He had lost control of what he was doing, and could now only concentrate on Misty’s decapitation. Raising his arms above his head once again, he winced and bellowed as he crashed the ax into Misty’s neck once more. Finally, Misty’s head snapped off and rolled backwards. Thick, moltenous blood waterfalled from the gaping hole where her head had been. Nick dropped the ax on the ground. He wiped from his forehead a dense film of sweat, and then slowly backed away from Misty’s body.

Heather and Nick watched Brigitte escort Joey back to the log they had been resting on just moments ago. Joey was now dry-heaving violently, barely able to stand up. Once Brigitte had sat Joey down, she began rubbing his back.

Then Nick and Heather turned again to look at Misty. They held hands tightly, their fingers weaved into each other's. Nick wanted to offer Heather an immediate unspoken understanding that the more they looked at Misty's decapitated body, the more ordinary it would appear. He silently told himself that they were just two friends, two regular people on vacation, and that these things happen all the time.

After five unbroken minutes of staring at Misty's body, nausea hit Nick as well. He turned and bent over while Heather held his waist. Nick dry-heaved with his entire body but nothing emerged. Then, he and Heather walked back over to Brigitte and Joey. Brigitte now stood before her youngest brother, holding him upright by the shoulders. When Nick approached them, he saw that there was vomit all over Joey's striped polo.

There were a few moments of silence. Then, Nick started, "Joey..." His brother looked up at him, finally. Nick knew that he had to say something comforting, but what that was, he had no idea. Finally, he said softly, "Joey, I'm sorry."

Joey carefully shoved Brigitte's hands off of him and stood up, with such a stern look on his face. Nick stepped back a couple of feet, convinced that his younger but larger brother was about to kill him, too. Instead, Joey walked up to Nick and wrapped his arms around him, bear-hugging his older brother.

"No, I'm sorry," Joey said when he pulled back.

"What?"

"This is what we came out here to do, right?"

"I...guess. Yeah," Nick muttered. When Joey stepped away, he smiled. Nick looked at Brigitte and said, "You're going to...kill me...for asking this, but what do we do now?"

She looked at him in disbelief. "Huh?"

"Well, don't we...have to get rid of it?"

Brigitte rubbed her temple hard, making Nick sorry for asking her for guidance. She sighed volcanically. "Yeah. Uh-uh. We sure do."

"So...?" Heather began. Joey looked at Brigitte now too, the three of them standing around her in an inquisitive semi-circle.

Nick interpreted Brigitte's glare as, *Why the hell do you think I know what to do!?!?*, but then she swallowed deeply and offered, "Someone go get that wheelbarrow." Nick supposed he should've known Heather would be the first to race to the wheelbarrow and grab the wooden handles. Heather stood in a runner's stance behind the wheelbarrow, panting and waiting for her next direction. She was so readily helpful that, even now, Nick found her comedic. Not out of spite, but out of recognition for Heather's inappropriate cheerleader-like gung-ho-ness about the whole situation.

"Someone has to lift the body," said Brigitte. Nick did not move. Nor did Joey.

"Guys, it's not like we have a choice," she continued.

"Maybe we could just...scoop it up?" Nick offered. He pantomimed, making full-bodied scooping directions, using an imaginary wheelbarrow to scoop up an imaginary dead Misty.

Brigitte's arms slammed against her hips and she cocked her head, staring at him.

"Well, I'm just trying to think of alternative suggestions," he wailed.

"Nicky...no...that so will not work," Heather interjected.

Joey picked up Misty's shoes from the ground and then walked over to the wheelbarrow. He tossed the shoes into the bed of it, and then took the long wooden

handles from Heather, who didn't fight him. He began wheeling it up the hill towards Misty's body.

"Joey!" Brigitte said, seconds before Nick topped her voice, also calling out their brother's name. Joey did not respond; he just kept pushing the wheelbarrow up the hill. Heather started up after him, followed by Nick and Brigitte.

Quickly, Joey bent over and grabbed Misty's body at the feet. With one heave, he lifted the heavy body and swung it into the wheelbarrow. A thin trail of blood leaked from the neck hole as Misty's body was swung across the ground. Nick again started to feel queasy at the sight of Misty's lifeless, headless body, dangling out of the orange wheelbarrow. Joey backed away from the wheelbarrow, holding his stomach with another wave of nausea visiting him.

After removing his jacket, Nick crept towards Misty's head. He tossed his jacket over the head and then knelt down towards it. Blood began to absorb through the edge of his jacket, so Nick inched his hand away from that part and approached it from another angle. Touching only his jacket, he bent down, picked up the head, and then placed it, jacket and all, atop the body. Brigitte picked up the bloody ax and placed it too into the wheelbarrow.

Joey felt everyone watching him as he stood at the helm of the wheelbarrow, clutching the handles. His eyes were a bit misty; it was obvious to Nick that his brother was trying hard to stay strong. Blank-faced, he asked, "Where does she...it...Where does this go?"

Brigitte answered, "We don't know yet. But we've got to find a place. Let's just get it out of here – all of it – before someone comes along."



"No one's going to come along," Nick blurted. He said it to calm himself just as much as anyone else. "It's not like the Alps are private property, but there's nothing else besides the family houses up here. This is like...our playground. Our backyard. Brig, you even said yourself earlier that there aren't even any trails up here!"

"Even so, Nicky, we can't leave all this out."

"Okay. Sorry. You're right."

"*Okay*. Let's go. Start pushing."

"Joey, let me know if you need to take over," Nick told his brother.

Nick, Brigitte and Heather followed Joey and the wheelbarrow down the mountain. Going down didn't seem as difficult as hiking up had, but Joey still had to maneuver the wheelbarrow slowly, being careful that nothing toppled out. Twenty precautionary minutes into their trek back down the mountain, Brigitte halted everyone. "Okay, now that we've gotten this far, we have to find somewhere to put...", she gulped, "*this*. Look – you can see the family property from here."

"We can't put it in any of our rooms," Heather clarified.

"Well, obviously," Brigitte answered, "this thing is going to start smelling soon, not to mention that it's still sort of...leaky."

After a long pause, Joey proposed, "Maybe we should just ask dad."

Simultaneously, Brigitte and Nick hollered, "No!"

"Joey, no, we can't do that," Nick paused, looking for an excuse, before offering lamely, "He's on vacation." And again, Nick felt his sister glaring at him. He continued, "Um...well...besides just vacation...he doesn't need to know about this. At least not

right now. Besides – we’re not going to ask X of all people for help about this. He deals with this shit all the time. This is our deal and we’re going to clean up the mess.”

“What about that shed, or little house thingie, whatever it was, near y’all’s Herrenhaus?” Heather suggested.

“We don’t have a key,” Nick told her. “There was a giant padlock on there, I saw it when we first got here. Actually, I was wondering what all was in there...”

“Heath, that sort of seems to be our only option right now,” Brigitte seconded. “C’mon, let’s go look at it. Look, this is what needs to happen. We’ll walk as close to the Anwesen as we can get without anyone seeing us. We’ve been gone, what, like two hours or something?”

“If that long,” Nick told her.

“So anyway, when we get close, Heather and I will go check out the shed while you boys watch the wheelbarrow.” Heather and the boys agreed with Brigitte’s suggestion and they resumed their descent down the mountain. When the trees became sparser near the plateau of the mountain where the Anwesen were built, they stopped. Brigitte and Heather walked further down the hill while the boys stayed in position, alert and protective of the wheelbarrow.

From a distance, Brigitte and Heather saw their mothers seated with Franziska Dietrich at a picnic table. Near the Schneider trio’s Herrenhaus was the shed to which Heather had made reference. Brigitte noted that it was about the same width as it was in depth, approximately 15x15 feet. She and Heather crept quietly around the side of the shed to look at the front of it. There was indeed a large steel padlock on the front. As they circled the shed, they found a window that was about six feet in the air.

“Brig, c’mere,” Heather whispered. She nodded towards the window of the shed. As Brigitte approached, Heather cupped her palms atop each other, making a stepping stool. Using Heather’s shoulders as a booster, Brigitte lifted her shoe into Heather’s hands and was lifted up enough to peer into the window. Mostly all she could see was darkness, but when she squinted, jagged contours of a series of long, pointy objects came into view.

After carefully lowering Brigitte back down, Heather asked, “What’s in there?”

“I can’t tell. We’re going to have to get the key, though.”

“K.”

“Heather, it’s very important that you act as normal as possible.”

“K.”

“*Seriously.*” Brigitte smoothed down Heather’s clothing against her front, and then did the same for herself. They checked each other’s hair and wiped smudges of dirt from each other’s face. Then they walked out from behind the shed.

“Hey y’all!” Heather bellowed loudly when her mother and the other women again came into view. She grinned from ear to ear, waving, sparkling like a beauty pageant contestant. Brigitte clamped her claw of nervous fingers into her own thigh. The older women smiled as Brigitte and Heather approached. For conversation’s sake, Brigitte brought up the weather. They all discussed the precious qualities of the Answesens and the property. They addressed how excited everyone was to see their relatives the following morning. After about ten minutes of formalities, Brigitte’s nerves told her that she could no longer engage in small talk.

“Franziska?” Brigitte asked.

“Yes, dear,” she answered in German.

Brigitte spoke in German, trying to make as few mistakes as possible. “Walker, my boyfriend...and I were wondering if we could possibly put our suitcases somewhere for the week? Just to get them out of the way, so we didn’t have to even think about them for a few days.” She giggled, so everyone else did too.

Franziska apologized politely, inquiring if Brigitte had enough space in her room. She suggested that Brigitte could put her suitcases in the foyer area of her and her brother’s Herrenhaus.

“Well, I saw that shed right over there,” she suggested as randomly as she could, pointing towards it. “I was thinking that, well, maybe, we could just toss them in there. This place is so beautiful that even I don’t even want to think about Boston right now! Even passing by our suitcases in the hallway would remind me too much of going back to America from vacation and I’d just get depressed whenever I looked on them!”

Again, all the women laughed along with Brigitte. Heather laughed much, much louder and harder than everyone else, slapping her thighs. Brigitte wondered why Heather was so desperately overcompensating for her own fibs, and wanted Heather to calm the hell down.

“I don’t think that would be a problem?” Franziska responded. “I’m not even sure what Dagmar keeps in there these days? Probably tools and things. Some of the other relatives may have some things in there too, but I’m sure it won’t be a problem.” She smiled at Brigitte, who smiled back appreciatively. Franziska placed her palms on the picnic table to help herself into an upright position. She carefully lifted her leg over the

bench where she stood, and then smoothed her ruffled skirt against her legs. "I'll be right back. I've just got to get the key."

*"Vundervoll! Danke!"* Brigitte gushed.

When Franziska left, Sofia turned to her daughter and asked, "Brigitte, are you sure you can't just keep them in your Herrenhaus? Why ask these nice people, our relatives, to go to so much trouble?"

Heather cut in. "Oh, Sofia, I'd love to put my bags in there, too."

"But Heather," Katarina said, "You have a whole room to yourself."

"Well, I know, but like Brigitte said, I don't even want to think about them while I'm here!" She folded her hands into a fig-leaf position and beamed. Brigitte glared at her, mortified, and silently willing her to stop speaking altogether.

"So what have y'all been doing since we got here?" Brigitte asked, changing the subject. Sofia and Katarina talked of having tea, looking at old photos, and then they discussed plans for the next few days.

Nick paced around next to the wheelbarrow as Joey steadied it, doing his best not to look down. Joey knew that if he caught sight of Misty's body or the jacket-covered head, he would most likely become ill again.

"Where the hell are they?" Nick asked. "What is taking so long?"

"Now it's your turn to calm down, dude."

A few minutes later, Franziska returned and said, "Here's the key, dear. Just be careful with it. Dagmar says it's the only one we have."

“Danke, Franziska. Kein klagen. Danke!” Brigitte said, waving the key around.

“And, please...” Franziska began, “I’m sure I don’t have to say this, but Dagmar asked me to ask you to not mess with anything in there.”

“*Nein* problem,” Brigitte told her.

“*Danke!*” Heather said. She bowed. Still mortified, Brigitte watched Heather bow repeatedly, like she was addressing royalty for the greatest gift she had ever received. Each time Heather lowered her head and folded herself at the waist, she repeated, “*Danke!*”

Sofia, Katarina and Franziska watched Heather, smiling and obviously confused.

“Okay,” Brigitte said, “let’s go get our bags!” Brigitte and Heather sprinted off in opposite directions, towards their own respective Herrenhaus. Once upstairs, Brigitte burst into her room to find Walker sleeping on the bed. She turned her suitcase over and shook it furiously, emptying out everything inside. When she shook everything from Walker’s bag onto the opposite side of the bed, onto Walker’s feet, he awoke with a start.

“What are you doing!?” he asked through heavy post-slumber sighs.

“I’m putting these into storage so we have more room.” She said it so speedily without looking at him. Then she followed up with, “*Don’t complain!*” She whirled around and flew out of the Herrenhaus as quickly as she had entered, to find Heather already jogging across the large courtyard towards her.

They walked quickly back to the shed. Once they were at the front of the shed, out of view from Franziska and their mothers, Brigitte ordered, “Go get the boys. Fast!”

Without answering, Heather dropped her suitcase and raced up the mountain. Brigitte shoved the key into the padlock and then ripped the padlock from the metal ring.

Dirt and dust flew against her suitcases when she tossed the heavy padlock onto the ground; it was even bulkier and weighed more than she had guessed. She walked into the shed. She stood amongst tall shelving units, all of which were at least five-to-ten feet higher than her. Slick, grey tarps covered the front of all the shelving units. Brigitte wondered what was behind the tarps but knew she didn't have time to fuck around. She placed Walker's and her own suitcases near the door, and then brought Heather's inside.

A few minutes later, Brigitte was shoved aside by the wheelbarrow entering the shed, with Joey still driving the handles. She backed up against the wall, out of the way. Once the wheelbarrow was inside the shed, she and Joey stepped back outside. Nick picked up the padlock from the ground, also struggling with its weight. He shoved the clamp through the metal loop of the lock, and then inserted the bolt into the hole. Brigitte slipped the key into her jeans pocket and then the four of them stood there, safe for the moment.

"What now?" Nick asked. Joey yawned loudly and the other three looked at him, wondering how he was possibly sleepy after such an event. Brigitte looked at his vomit-covered polo. Then she looked at Nick's muddy, blood-spattered shirt, which also now had traces of Joey's vomit from when they had hugged.

"You boys are disgusting," she said, smiling. "Now go sneak around to your rooms and get cleaned up."

Misty's raggedy purple suitcase was the first thing that caught Joey's eye when he walked into his room. It was open with a few articles of clothing sticking out over the frayed straps and rusted zipper. Joey approached the suitcase and hovered over it. A pair

of her panties caught his attention; he concentrated on the worn cotton and the loose threads. What bothered him most though was that now, back inside and away from the forest, he still felt as numb as he had since landing in Germany yesterday morning. It slightly elevated his spirits that he wasn't really all that upset anymore. The safety of the shed had calmed him, as had his siblings' confidence and promises. Misty's clothes were just things. Stuff that could belong to any girl. Joey hadn't been fond of her belongings just as he hadn't, really, at the rawest level of humanity, been fond of her. With his fist he stuffed the loose clothing back into the suitcase and zipped it up. He then tossed it leisurely by the door of his room and headed into the bathroom to have a shower.

\* \* \*

About an hour after they'd returned to their rooms, Brigitte again felt it necessary to rid herself of Walker and his complaints. His wireless internet connection wasn't working. He was hungry but he also had indigestion. He was bored. He didn't like the latest Dan Brown novel he had purchased that airport; none of the characters were powerful or intelligent or real enough for him. He couldn't find his toothbrush. He wanted this, that, and everything else that the Herrenhaus didn't offer. This time, Brigitte just got up and left the room without offering any verbal communication.

With the staircase giving Brigitte a sense of déjà vu from this morning, she raced up to the third floor. She knocked on the door and shouted Nick's name. No one answered. She knocked again and heard a loud "*What!?*" from behind the door.

"Nicky?"

No answer.

"Nickyyyy...?"



*"He's in the goddamn shower!"*

Irritated by the obnoxious yelp that had just assaulted her from behind the door, Brigitte stopped knocking and turned to leave. But then, from behind the door she heard footsteps approaching, and a voice muttering forcefully, *"God! Annoying bitch."*

The door was flung open and Kyle stood there in a blue-and-white striped sailor's shirt and cream-colored Capri pants, one hand on his hip, the other holding a Marlboro Menthol 100 up to his mouth. Brigitte faced him in the middle of the hallway.

He spoke to her as though she had a defective hearing aide. "He. Is. In. The. Show-wer. *Okay!?*" Kyle smirked at her. "Honey, if you want him you'll have to stop knocking and come back later. He hasn't said much to me since he returned from his little walk, so I dunno *what...the...fuck* is going on."

Kyle left the door open and walked back towards the balcony with his long cigarette. From the hallway, Brigitte watched him turn his back and lean over the balcony railing, shaking his head back and forth in annoyance. She watched a constant stream of cigarette smoke rising from the front of his face, and drift off into the air above.

Brigitte suddenly heard a tribe of savage banshees screaming a war cry inside of her head when she took a running start across the room and towards the balcony. When her hands shoved Kyle's small body against the railing, he started choking on a missed inhale and a large cloud of smoke hawked from his mouth. He lost his balance as he choked on his failed exhale. Brigitte could feel that Kyle was heavier than her, but his weight really wasn't much of a struggle. She lowered herself towards his thin, mushy calves and heaved him over the side. Once his head and torso were over the balcony railing, his lower half followed suit effortlessly. So caught off guard, he didn't even

scream on his way down. When his head hit the railing of the balcony on the second floor, Brigitte heard a barely audible thud. She knew the blow must've been rather hard though, since his entire body shifted outward, away from the building. But it was all so non-dramatic, she thought, nothing like she had just pictured in her head when the thought crossed her mind only seconds ago. For just a moment, Brigitte thought she may have to ask Kyle to come back upstairs so she could push him over again, just to get it right this time. Just to get it perfect.

His body lay motionless, face-up on the patches of grass and dirt below. Still, this wasn't enough for Brigitte. From the bathroom, she heard the shower cease and Nick humming softly. She bolted out of the room, zooming down the staircase, her red ponytail flying above her head.

When she walked out onto the porch, she slowed down to smile and wave to her mother and the other women who still sat with their tea and photo albums at the picnic table. She called to them, "It's gorgeous out today! I think I'll go for a jog now!" Brigitte stretched slowly. She retied her left shoelace even though it was already double-knotted. Then she waved again and jogged slowly in the direction of the forest.

As soon as she was out of sight again, she sprinted around the Herrenhaus to find Kyle on the ground. He was still breathing, but unevenly and hard, gasping for air. Brigitte clamped her hands on either side of Kyle's head. She looked left, looked right, and then in one acute movement, she snapped Kyle's head as far as it would turn to the right. The second his vertebrae cracked, his esophagus clogged and Brigitte watched Kyle's breathing terminate. Then she snapped his head hard to the left too, just to make sure she had finished him off.

Again, Brigitte looked around her, making sure she was alone. She slipped her arms through Kyle's armpits and began dragging him away from the Herrenhaus. He was heavier than he appeared, a bit thicker, especially now. To avoid being seen by her mother, Franziska, and Katarina, Brigitte had to drag Kyle's body the long way around to the shed. His feet bounded against long grass and kicked around dirt as she dragged him. Aroused with pride, she muttered, "Shhh!" to herself as she approached the door of the shed.

After fishing the key out of her pocket, she again plugged it into the padlock. This time though, she gently placed the heavy lock onto the ground. Brigitte dragged Kyle's body through the small opening in the doorway, an entryway just big enough for her to slip through without making the door look completely ajar. She let Kyle's body drop onto the cold cement slab, accidentally bouncing his head off of Misty's leg that draped over the edge of the wheelbarrow. Within a matter of thunderous seconds, Brigitte shut the door, replaced the lock, and stuffed the key back into her jeans pocket.

Sofia, Katarina, and Franziska turned to look at Brigitte in confusion as she again appeared in the courtyard.

"That was fast," her mother called, wondering why her daughter was acting so peculiar.

"I know. I think I actually just need a nap. I'm more tired than I thought."

"Maybe you shouldn't have stayed out so late last night, drinking with your brothers," Sofia chided, this phrase in English.

“Yeah, okay, mom,” Brigitte said, giving her mother a dismissive response like she would have done under any circumstance. Even she was impressed with her performance. The three ladies smiled at her and then resumed their conversation.

When she had walked back up to the third floor of their Herrenhaus, the door of Nick’s room was still open. He was dressed now, and was in the bathroom smearing Paul Mitchell wax through his spiky hair. Near the doorway, Joey sat on the bed near him, looking at Brigitte. His hair was still damp from his shower but he now looked clean – *relaxed* even, Brigitte thought. She smiled at him as she closed the door behind herself.

“I didn’t want to be alone,” Joey told her. “After...you know.”

“I understand,” she told him. Nick emerged from the bathroom and flicked off the light switch. Brigitte sat down at the foot of the bed next to Joey, so close their sides touched. She needed to collapse against something strong, and Joey would suffice.

“How are you now?” Brigitte asked Joey.

“I’m okay. Surprisingly I sorta feel relieved. I feel like I just took a monster shit.”

From the bathroom, Nick laughed at his brother’s comment. “Charming, Joey...”

“Nicky?”

“Yeah?” He leaned against the bathroom door, facing his sister.

Brigitte stalled only briefly before saying, “I am sorry, but I had to kill your girlfriend.”

## **Chapter 22: *Bad Wiessee***

In the darkness of her room, Heather sat Indian-style on the crack of the two twin mattresses that filled her king-sized bed frame. When she looked at the tiny red face of the digital clock on her nightstand, it read 11:49PM. She had awakened with a start, but assumed that she had been sleeping for much longer. Only forty-five minutes had passed since she had fallen asleep. 11:49 seemed far too early, Heather thought; she couldn't believe that she still had to endure an entire night of more nightmares. Heather could not manage to force out of her mind images of Misty's headless body, Nick holding that ax, and Joey wheeling of the decapitated body into Dagmar Dietrich's shed. She thought about Kyle's body now, too. Although she had not even seen it, grotesque fantasies filled her head, and she could not stop imagining the two dead bodies resting together in that shed, probably beginning to stink and rot away.

She had started it all, that she knew. The talk of murder weeks ago had not been instigated by her, but Heather consciously took the harrowing credit for dragging Misty up the mountain earlier this afternoon. Who knows if Brigitte, Nick and Joey would've acted out their wishes of killing if she hadn't started it all?, she asked herself. Heather sat there, alone in the dark, wondering if all of this was her fault.

She had never wanted to be a part of this! She was only helping her best friends, her family, the people who meant as much to her as her own parents did. And now they wanted her to lie. Brigitte and the boys wanted her to cover up everything and continue this charade for who knows how long? It's not fair, she told herself. Memories of her involvement with Schneider shenanigans of the past visited through her mind. Heather realized that she had always been under their control. She was the helper. The assistant.

But now that she was a player – a majorly *guilty* player – of this whole horrible excursion, she wanted to make some damned decisions!

She wondered if the boys were able to sleep tonight? And if so, *How!?* She wondered how Brigitte was coping with Walker, and what would become of him too? She wondered for how long this ridiculous passion play would continue, and how long she would be asked to lie and harm people?

Heather wondered what would happen if they were caught.

Worse, she knew that Brigitte and the boys would not stop this all from becoming worse. Heather knew the Schneiders would let it unwind for as long as possible, until everything blew up in their faces. And she also knew that she would be the one to suffer. When it all came down to it, she was not a Schneider. Her daddy wasn't in charge so she knew that she was not as well protected and thought of as immortal. Heather knew she could be harmed, just as her brother had been harmed eight years prior. She poked her fingers anxiously into the mattress beneath her.

"Fuck this!" she belted. Worried she might awaken someone, she slapped her right hand over her mouth. And then, she decided, whether the Schneider trio liked it or not: tomorrow she would tell Xavier what they had done. She would tell him everything.

Relieved with her decision but still too jumpy to sleep, she extended her legs in front of her and massaged her shin. Without light she couldn't tell if a bruise was forming from where she had pummeled into Misty's head, but it was still sore. As Heather raised her hands to brush back her hair, she heard a booming knock at her door.

## Chapter 24: *Bad Wiessee*

Walker stood inside the foyer of his and Brigitte's Herrenhaus, bending over to peek out of the light blue curtains that covered the window. They were all out there. All of *them*. All of the Dietrichs with their colorful friends, some of them dressed in silly German costumes that Walker thought made them look like Disney characters. The last thing Walker wanted to do right now was enter this mob of Germans. In 34 years, he had never had to attend an Irish White family reunion, so could not fathom why Brigitte was so adamant about him coming to her family's celebration. He had gone for the free trip. Her father had paid for Walker's first class ticket just as he had purchased his daughter's. Walker may have been financially sound, but he wasn't so stupid as to turn down a free trip. Now though, seeing them all cavorting outdoors, he wished he hadn't.

From his hiding place, he watched the Germans in judgment. When they laughed, they laughed loudly, putting their whole bodies into their jolly guffaws, bending backwards or slapping their hands on their thighs. But when they reacted affectionately or concernedly to something, Walker watched them sit or stand upright, their entire bodies concentrated and stiff. *At attention!*, he joked to himself. He was reminded of strict German soldiers, men and women alike, but these people's exaggerated reactions went from on-guard to lackadaisical within seconds. Walker decided that, like Brigitte and her brothers, all of *these people* were the same. Their interactions with one another were naturally dramatic, but none of them seemed outwardly ruthless or competitive. Just comfortable in and proud of their own skin – but *why*, he thought, they're ridiculous.

Qualities like loyalty, bravery and ancestral pride were practically chiseled into these people's faces, but they were not as posh as Walker, and he knew it. Walker may

have smelt money in the air when his town car had driven through Bad Wiessee, but none of these Germans were the cutthroat corporate monsters he knew how to be. To him, they all looked simple. Ordinary. Plain. Boooooooring.

Walker's gaze tilted off to the right when he saw heard two dogs barking loudly at the shed near his Herrenhaus. He wasn't fond of animals either, but noted that the loud mutts really wanted whatever was in that shed. *Probably more fucking food*, he thought. An adolescent boy walked over to the shed and shoed the dogs away, lightly kicking them in the direction of the crowd, and then racing off after them.

For a moment, Walker concentrated on Brigitte. She was being hugged and kissed by middle-aged and elderly couples who held serving plates, heaping with gelatinous homemade food. Worse, Walker saw that Brigitte looked genuinely happy amongst these common people, folks who somehow treasured trivial things like *family, tradition* and *love*. In Walker's mind, these things were fictitious. For years he had chosen to remain far removed from his family, and saw absolutely no reason to ever contact them again.

And for this reason, he had convinced himself that he was more powerful and important than any of these people outside. He told himself that all of those simpletons out there, *those Germans* embracing, laughing, and talking pleasantly, were pathetic. Including his little German girlfriend. Powerful Boston lawyer or not, at this moment, Walker once again reminded himself that Brigitte was capable of nothing more than standing over a pot of a sauerkraut, stirring away, and fielding whatever additional demands he shouted to her.

From the window, he even wondered where Misty and Kyle must have gotten off to. Not because he wanted to join them, but because he wanted to see how the other



outsiders were faring against these Germans. Then, Brigitte saw him peeking through the window. He had been caught. Walker had been captured by the Germans, which he knew meant that he had to go join them. He let the curtain flap back against the window and sighed defeatedly as he approached the door to emerge into the ludicrous party.

Once outside, Walker began his uncomfortable stroll towards Brigitte. He passed two old men yapping loudly in German; they kept joyously toasting their colorful, carefully designed beer steins after every sentence either of them spat out. The old men sat near a long table of desserts that Walker could recognize after years of having been dragged by Brigitte to Boston's few German restaurants: *Streuselkucken*, *Schwartwälderkirschtorte*, German chocolate cake, *Apfelstrudel*, *Bienenstich*, *Honig Brat Mandeln*, *Zwiebelkucken*. Walker felt a grumbling in his belly but told himself he was not really hungry, that he wanted nothing to do with these people.

As Brigitte saw him approach, she wondered how accidentally catching his eye in the window meant, *Please come join me!* After his complaints would not subside last night, she had fled her room to go sleep with Heather. Now, Walker's looming presence agitated Brigitte once again. She just wanted him to die, already.

"I'm sort of hungry," Walker told her when he had waded through the crowd. Brigitte stuck her arms out with open palms and made full-bodied, over-exaggerated circles, bluntly bringing to his attention that he was surrounded by more food than the entire town of Bad Wiessee had to offer.

"Please," he said. "All of this stuff is like a heart attack buffet."

"Well," she answered, "Guess you'd better walk into town then."

“What is your problem?” he said under his breath after he had leaned down closer to Brigitte’s ear.

“I have no problem. I’m at my family reunion. I’m having fun. I’m happy.” She whirled around and set off through the crowd, quick enough that Walker couldn’t keep up with her. Brigitte whizzed by the tables of food, games, photo albums, sign-in books, and other familial paraphernalia that stretched through the middle of all fourteen Herrenhausen. As she headed towards the rear of the party, she guesstimated that there must’ve been at least 250 people there. Brigitte found herself feeling strangely content, perhaps more so than she had ever felt. She didn’t feel like a feared corporate bitch, not like the red-headed devil lawyer nickname she had earned. Here, she felt no sense of competition with anyone, and realized that Walker’s presence was the only thing grating on her nerves. Brigitte wasn’t even that worried about the deposits she and her brothers had made into Dagmar Dietrich’s shed yesterday afternoon, but reached down and felt her thigh anyway, making sure the key was still safe in the pocket of her jeans. It was.

Towards the end of the mass of relatives, friends and business associates with their families, Brigitte found her brothers and Heather seated at a long table near a couple of elderly women, all three of them stuffing their faces. Joey had potato salad glopping off of his face while Nikolaus was doing his best to gnaw through a large doughy pretzel. Brigitte smiled and said in German, “You guys are pigs.” The old women at the table laughed and pointed at Joey.

In English, Heather said softly, “Brig, I’m totally just binge eating because I’m so nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?” Brigitte asked.

“Hrmmm. I have no idea,” Nick answered for Heather. He chomped off another large bit of pretzel. Brigitte rolled her eyes and swatted away a fly.

Joey leaned forward said, “We gotta get them outta there soon, right?”

“Yeah, I guess we should,” Brigitte answered. “Any ideas, though?” She folded her arms against her chest. Heather and the boys shook their heads.

Then Joey said, “Ask X?”

Just like they had done yesterday afternoon, Brigitte and Nick both shot an immediate, “No!”

“Where is X, anyway?” Heather asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him,” Nick answered. Brigitte and Joey both shrugged as their answer.

Brigitte stepped forward and glared at Heather. “Why do you need to know?”

“Just wondering,” Heather said. She wondered if she paused for too long. “I mean, I haven’t seen your mom around, either.” She looked down and concentrated on her food.

Brigitte sat down at the table and whispered, “We have to figure out what to do with Walker.” The boys nodded, so Heather nodded along with them.

“Let’s talk in, say, an hour?”

Again, her brothers and Heather nodded.

“Okay. I’m going to go find mom to see what she’s doing. How about we all meet in Nick’s room in an hour? It’s far enough from my room to talk.”

“Halllllllloooooo,” a fifth voice said. Brigitte, her brothers and Heather turned to face Dexter Dietrich. They watched his parents and grandmother walk off into the Anwesen behind him.

Nick blushed as he removed a large hunk of pretzel from in between his lips. “Where’ve you been all day?”

“Oh, you know, making nice with the family. Grams wanted to brunch somewhere in town with just the four of us, since, you know, except for my stepdad, we’re not really...”

“Related?!” Nick blurted, grinning.

“Exactly.” Dexter leaned forward and planted a big sloppy kiss on Nick’s cheek. As the old women at the table next to Nick traded appalled glances, Dexter then went in to smooch Heather and Brigitte, too.

Joey joked, “Where’s mine?” Dexter put his palm over Joey’s lips and bent down to kiss his own hand, as though he were playfully smooching Joey’s mouth.

Joey offered a look that was half amused, half repulsed. “Thanks, dude.”

“So. Nick’s room in an hour?” Brigitte asked again.

Heather and the boys agreed. Brigitte rose from the table and began walking away. Heather and Joey resumed filling their stomachs as Dexter asked, “So. What are we all doing in your room in an hour?”

The instant Brigitte saw a large group of women of all ages circled around her mother, she could already hear the barrage of stock questions with which she would be assaulted. She grimaced just thinking about. Young ladies her age, in pastel or floral

sundresses, sat hand-in-hand with their mothers and grandmothers. Wives of Dietrich men and business associates were huddled into a gossip group, each of them occasionally peeking out of their circle. On her approach over, Brigitte wondered if the women kept peeking around the property because they *didn't* want anyone to hear their gossipy statements, or because they were making sure that someone most definitely *did* overhear.

Sofia turned and saw Brigitte standing beside her. Her daughter's hands were stuffed into the back pockets of her jeans, completely analogous and un-lady-like compared to the rest of the cross-legged young women of the group. Sofia released a gargantuan exhale. Every woman in the circle turned to focus on Brigitte, who didn't even notice that the social spotlight had been pointed at her. She put her arm around her mother's waist and whispered, "Going crazy yet?"

One woman immediately asked in German, "Brigitte! Are you married yet?"

"Nope," Brigitte replied without a smile.

"Engaged?!" another woman asked excitedly.

"Uh-uh."

"Will you be getting engaged soon?" a third, younger woman inquired.

"I really hope not."

"Really? How old are you now?" the same woman asked, shocked.

"Forty-seven," Brigitte responded as seriously as possible. None of the women knew whether to laugh, so Sofia stepped in to say, "Brigitte and I have discussed that she doesn't need to get married so young."

Every woman in their circle leaned forward, their faces bunched together as if they had just heard the most preposterous information of their lives.

“Brigitte’s a very successful lawyer in Boston,” Sofia continued. No response.

“At only twenty-nine, she’s the youngest lawyer in her firm. *And* the only female attorney in the group. She’ll probably make partner soon.” Sofia paused to look at her daughter. “Right?”

The circle of estrogen stared at mother and daughter, blank-faced.

Sofia tried another approach. “She has a long-term boyfriend from Boston.” With that, a series of questions about marriage and babies were thrown at Brigitte. Someone asked “Is he here!?”

Brigitte replied with a hard *No*, and pried herself loose from her mother. She gave Sofia a kiss on the cheek, whispered, “Good luck,” and walked away.

When Heather found Xavier sitting amongst a group of burly men, all of them dressed similarly in short-sleeved plaid button-down shirts and different shades of khaki, she knew they were his associates. She could just tell. The Dietrich family relatives were dressed similarly but they didn’t have such a standardized look to them. Xavier’s associates always appeared too cheery, too ready to listen to what she had to say. Heather could tell that many of them wanted to fuck her, but that wasn’t why they were so attentive. At least that wasn’t the only reason. She knew that they were not particularly excited to listen to whatever she had to say. It was that they were always ready to fight, always prepared to move. Even her father acted this way many times, and she hated it.

Standing behind Xavier, she put her hands on his shoulders. He sat on a thick metal lawn chair, the plastic-weaved bottom of which dipped so low it nearly touched the ground. When Heather lay her hands upon him, she watched some of the other men trade

dangerous glances, suggesting to her that she was some kind of Lolita. Disgust filled her belly; the thought of acting flirtatious towards Xavier was incestuous to her. She leaned down and said, “I really need to talk to you.”

Xavier knew that Heather rarely, if ever, came to ask for his help with anything. Still, he concentrated on the large plate of meat and chunky, mayonnaisey salads that rested on a table before him. “Can it wait until we’re finished with lunch?”

“I don’t think so,” she told him.

He turned around and looked at her. Heather could tell that he really did not want to leave his chair. But then she said the magic words: “It’s about your kids.”

When the door of Nick’s Herrhaus room burst open, the last person Brigitte and her brothers expected to see was their father.

“What have you done?” Xavier demanded. Heather stood behind him, cowering, her face focused on the uneven panels of the wooden floor. Joey lay on the bed, Brigitte sat at the foot of the bed near Joey’s splayed legs, and Nick sat at the table near the open balcony – each of them silent.

“Answer me.”

Heather stepped forward and said, “I’m sorry. I had to tell him. We didn’t know what we – ”

“I want them to tell me.” Xavier’s hard blue eyes drove straight through his children’s gazes. “What have the three of you done? Tell me now.”

Brigitte looked past her father, glaring ferociously at Heather.

“Don’t look at her. Heather was right to come to me. You have a problem, you come to me. You’ve always known that. Now. What *the hell* have you three done?”

Brigitte tried looking at her father as intensely as he focused on her but could not. She said, “You obviously already know.”

“You’re goddamned right I know.” His massive arms remained at the sides of his stiff, round body. “What *the hell* were you thinking? What – *WHAT!?* – made you think that this was okay to do?! Why did you think that *you three* could do this!?”

“Maybe for the same reasons that you do...?” Nick offered.

“*WHAT!?*” Xavier took a step towards his eldest son, which made Nick smush his entire body against the wall. Xavier watched his son, chair and all, inch away from him.

“I do not kill people just because I *want* to kill them! Who do you think I am!? I thought we had been over this enough! How do you insult me this way!?”

“No offense, X,” Joey began. When he focused on his father’s face, he spoke softer. “We obviously don’t know enough, then.” Brigitte found herself surprised to hear Joey raising his voice to their father, as he continued with, “This has nothing to do with you. That’s why we didn’t ask you. We didn’t need your help.”

“Well, obviously you do need my help! I cannot *believe* this happened. How did you – . Where did you – . What did you use to – . Never mind. I don’t need to know right now.” He paused before looking up to the ceiling and announcing aloud to only himself, “My children killed people.”

“So has our father. Lots of times,” Brigitte said.

“But it’s different. That’s for business. The three of you...What would possibly possess you three to do such a thing?” None of his children offered a response.



“No, really. I want to know. What have these people done to you that’s so horrible?” Like a collective machine gun, increasing from quick to quicker, Brigitte and the boys spouted off a series of *Lied to me; Cheated on me; Stole from me; Took advantage of me; Hurt me; Slandered me; Endangered me*; Xavier listened to their list go on and on.

“And you let them?”

“What?” Nick spouted.

“Have you no judge of character? Have your mother and I not taught you better, taught you to stay away from people like this?”

“Are you serious?” Brigitte asked. “After five years of being with someone, how the hell was I supposed to know that Walker was fucking half the globe?” She stood up. “X, you’re the last person I thought I’d be hearing this from. Walker’s still alive, and I want him dead too. And right now, I don’t even care what you say. You’re standing here, telling your own daughter that it’s *her fault* that her boyfriend was unfaithful and treated her like shit for five years.”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying at all. You come to me.”

Nick stood from his chair. “Now *this* is something we’ve been through. Years ago. We’re not retarded, X. We can take care of ourselves.” He stepped closer to his father while Joey moved towards the edge of the bed.

Xavier’s breathing became heavier and more intense. “But you don’t know what you’re doing! You don’t have experience with things like this. You have *screwed up*.”

“SHIT!” Heather screamed behind them all. Xavier and his children turned around and stared at Heather.

“Listen to yourselves!” She looked at Xavier. “I thought coming to you was going to help but now I’m not so sure! You’re as stubborn as they are! Listen to yourselves!” She lowered her voice. “There are two dead bodies in that shed down there. There are 250 people on this property. There are dogs that want to eat those bodies, I saw them racing around the shed before we came up here. Are you four stubborn jackasses going to help each other or not?” They all stared at Heather in disbelief over the outburst that the perky cheerleader-next-door had just performed.

Xavier asked, “The bodies are *where*?”

“In Dagmar’s shed. Right next to our Herrenhaus,” Nick told him. His father slowly closed his eyes and shook his head back and forth.

“Oh, whatever, you kept a guy’s head in our freezer,” Nick said.

“I’ll take care of them,” Xavier said as he opened his eyes. He walked over to the empty chair across the table from Nick and pulled it towards the edge of the bed. Then he sat down slowly and faced Brigitte. “Now.” He paused and slowed his speech. “What did that fucking Irish asshole downstairs do to you?”

Brigitte told him everything. She disclosed pieces of her personal life to her father as her brothers listened intently, even though they had already heard the story once before. As she neared the end of the list of Walker’s wrongdoings, a few unwelcome tears slipped from her eyes. Surprised, she started to wipe them away. She wasn’t crying because of what Walker had done to her. Those tears were gone by now, all dried up on Newberry Street. Brigitte was teary-eyed because of the concerned look on her father’s face. She cried because of how cathartic telling him these things felt. She cried because it felt so wonderful to empty herself out into the conscience of a man who really did love

her. A man that wasn't either of her younger brothers, the boys she loved infinitely but of whom she knew she would always be the caretaker. She cried because the man listening to her was a man who respected her as much as she did him.

When she finished speaking, Xavier wiped the few remaining tears from his daughter's cheeks and said only, "I'll take care of him, too."

Joey stood up from the bed and approached his father. Brigitte watched her father lock eyes with his youngest son. Joey said, "I want to help." When Xavier did not reply, Joey stammered for a second, saying, "I want to do it. Let me do it."

"Fine." With his eyebrows lowered and his lips pinched, Xavier gave his son a look of approval. Joey did not back away. Before he had lost their attention, he again turned to face them and said, "We're not finished talking yet. I've been meaning to discuss something else with y'all since I saw you yesterday. Find me later."

When Xavier walked out of the room, Joey followed him step for step down the stairs and to the door of the Herrenhaus.

When Xavier pulled Dagmar Dietrich aside, the men strolled into the Alps, with Joey following close behind. They didn't go into the Alps as deeply as Joey had walked the prior day, just far enough to have a private conversation away from the family revelers. Xavier knew that Dagmar would not require him to tell him the whole story of what had happened. He knew that he was a respected man now and thus no longer had to explain himself. Dagmar told Xavier of the Bad Wiessee funeral director with whom he was friendly for such occasions as these. He informed Xavier of the crematorium that the funeral home owned, and the many times he had given the funeral director large

envelopes stuffed with stacks of crisp bundled Euros. Xavier and Joey learnt from Dagmar that not too many people die in beautiful Bad Wiessee, and that the funeral home struggles with income anyway, so they're always happy to help a member of the Dietrich family for a reasonable amount of funds.

"You forget that I too have a child now," Dagmar told Xavier. "But even I do not have a daughter, so I can only imagine what rage you're feeling."

With that, Xavier knew that he needn't explain any more.

Walker was fuming. *Fucking Brigitte*, he muttered forcefully, uncaring of who heard him. She was nowhere to be found. He hadn't wanted to be in the company of these people, but at least she could do him the decency of not running off so much, he thought. After pushing his way through the crowd of Dietrich family, friends and associates once more, Walker walked towards his Herrenhaus. As he neared the Herrenhaus, he saw Xavier, Brigitte's hetero brother, and some other man leaving the forest area and approaching the Anwesen. Out of obligation, he waved in their direction, but the men didn't wave back. Brigitte's father instead seemed to point at him, followed by a nod from the other man. Walker grumbled to himself and walked up the stairs of the Herrenhaus.

Once he was in his room, Walker walked into the bathroom. He unzipped his khakis and spread his legs a bit, getting into position to empty his bladder. When there was a heavy stream of piss shooting down into the toilet, he released a heavy sigh, and then hacked up a mouthful of spit. Still urinating, he bent over and spat a large blob of

mucus into the bowl. When a bulky shovel slammed into the back of his head, Walker fell onto the toilet, into his own piss, and was knocked unconscious on the first blow.

Joey leaned forward to check that Walker was definitely unconscious, but also to make sure that he was still breathing. He was. It had worked. Joey grinned, finally proud of himself since this whole fiasco had begun. He couldn't wait to tell his father that he had succeeded at his task. Him, the one who always felt like the extra one, the fuck up, had done precisely what his father had asked of him. When he looked at the back of Walker's head and his long, limp body, Joey felt energized. He wanted to do more.

After turning off the lights in Walker and Brigitte's room, he exited the Herrenhaus and crept over to the shed, careful not to be seen by any of the guests who were still celebrating nearby. His father stood near the shed, huddled together with a few men, all of them in front of a large town car that had backed up all the way to the door of the shed. Joey watched the trunk of the door slam and then the shed door being closed. Then the padlock was reaffixed. It all happened so smoothly that he had missed the fanfare of which he'd been sure he would be a part. From the moment his father had found out what was going on, Joey was so impressed that everything was taken care of within minutes.

"Everything's fine," Joey told his father, trying not to smile too big. Xavier nodded in return. Joey then watched his father turn towards Dagmar and the driver of the town car, motioning towards the Herrenhaus. The car drove forward a few meters, but then backed up and turned around in the direction of the Herrenhaus.

"Is the room unlocked?" Xavier asked. Joey nodded. As the car began driving towards the back of the Herrenhaus, two of the taller men with whom Xavier had been

conversing walked towards the Herrenhaus's front door. When Joey turned back to face his father, he felt a nervous, swelling sensation in his throat when he saw Dagmar approaching them. Dagmar put his hand on Joey's shoulder.

"Would you like to come with me?" Dagmar asked.

Joey looked at his father. Xavier shrugged, prompting Joey to make his own decision but signaling that the shrug meant it was alright. Joey looked at Dagmar and nodded yet again. Joey whispered *bye* to his father, and then followed Dagmar.

Behind the Herrenhaus, Joey saw two men carrying Walker out of the back door of Brigitte's room. He looked into the trunk and asked, "They're all gonna fit in there?"

Dagmar chuckled and said in broken English, "The trunk is very large. We have fit much more into these trunks." After the trunk was clamped down for the second time, Dagmar opened the passenger door and looked to Joey to get inside.

The interior of the Bad Wiessee Funeral Home did not look much different from the many funeral homes Joey had been dragged to for wakes and rosary services during his childhood years. When he followed Dagmar Dietrich into the parlor entrance, a simple waiting room with four red velvet-covered armchairs and a bare wooden coffee table awaited them. Smaller, nondescript rooms with blinds drawn on all of the visible windows surrounded the waiting room. Joey assumed that these were offices, but he didn't really care. He was ready for the crematorium tour. The rest of the place was so empty that, except for the reception area, all of the hallways were dark.

The funeral director sat down in the parlor and offered seats to Dagmar and Joey. When they began speaking sharply in German, Joey could only understand chunks of

their conversation. After only a few moments of speaking, Dagmar handed over a large, bulky envelope to the funeral director. From Dagmar's conversation with his father that he had overheard earlier, Joey knew immediately that this was cash. The director pointed to Dagmar's car outside, and then Joey watched him point away from the parlor entrance, towards the back of the building.

"Let's go," Dagmar told Joey in German. This time he understood the simple statement, and again, did as he was told. When they climbed into the rear of the town car, Dagmar instructed the driver to pull around to the back of the building. As the car's tires rolled along uneven gravel, Joey watched the bright day turning to dusk.

Joey wasn't sure why, but Dagmar did not ask him for help when they had reached the rear of the building and the trunk had been reopened. The funeral director wheeled out a long steel stretcher. Then another. Then a third. Joey struggled not to turn away as Dagmar and the driver lifted Walker's body onto the first stretcher, carefully so that Walker did not awaken. The funeral director wheeled the stretcher away, and then Kyle's body was lifted next. When Joey saw Nick's jacket with the large head-shaped bulge underneath, and then Misty's shoes being lifted from the trunk, he had to turn away, if only for a couple of seconds. When he turned back, Dagmar and the driver were wheeling the second and third stretchers into the building. Needing to participate in some way, Joey raised his hand to the trunk and slammed it down. He then turned and followed Dagmar, the driver, and the stretchers into the funeral parlor.

Inside the crematorium, Joey looked around at the sterility and coldness of the place. Funeral parlors and services he had been to, too many to remember, but he had never watched a cremation. The large copper doors of the dual cremation chamber were

open now, waiting to consume whoever was sacrificed into the fire. He walked over to an open door and looked inside. Already a fire roared, the red and orange flames burning with hunger for a feeding. Joey wanted to impress Dagmar by asking in German, "How hot does this thing get?" but all he managed was *How hot?*, asking, "*Wie heiß...?*"

Kindly shooing him away from the hot doors of the chamber, the funeral director told him, "1,600 Grad." Joey glanced over to Dagmar in confusion.

Dagmar smiled and answered, "I think 870 Celsius. Which is about 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit."

"Woah." Joey could not help but watch. Dagmar helped the funeral director push the cart with Kyle's body towards the open door of the chamber. Kyle was deposited inside of the open door, magically, as though he were just dropped into a garbage shoot that went straight to Hell. Misty's trip inside was next, for which Joey also forced himself to watch. Dagmar and the director wheeled her over to the same door in which they had deposited Kyle so effortlessly. After placing her body inside, Joey watched Dagmar chuck her jacket-covered head into the roaring fire as though he were passing a basketball to a teammate. And then she was gone. It was so easy it didn't even pain Joey to watch.

Dagmar spoke in English when he said to Joey, "Usually only one body per chamber. But they are small." He pointed to Walker. "This guy is not so small. He needs his own chamber." Joey nodded his head in agreement. From where he stood, Joey could see Walker's chest and stomach moving up and down.

The funeral director approached Dagmar and Joey as he held out a small bottle of formaldehyde. Dagmar motioned with his head towards the bottle and asked, "You want to...how do you say it?... Do the honors?" Joey seized the bottle of formaldehyde.



Dagmar ushered Joey over to Walker's stretcher. With his open palm, Dagmar fiercely slapped Walker's cheeks. Walker's face barely changed expressions, just a couple irritated twitches. Joey held the bottle of formaldehyde up to Walker's nose, inching it forward until the tip of Walker's nose touched the mouth of the bottle. The funeral director approached the stretcher and began wheeling it towards the chamber's open door. Joey watched as Dagmar again slapped Walker's cheeks, while Joey held the bottle to his nostrils. He was strangely beginning to enjoy himself, but didn't know whether or not to feel guilty for this excitement.

The epiphanic second that Walker opened his eyes and grunted away the odor of formaldehyde, Joey and Dagmar quickly helped the funeral director to overturn Walker's body into the cremation chamber. As though it were rehearsed, the funeral director slammed shut the copper door and clamped down a long bolt that sealed the chamber closed. Then the three men stood silently, listening to Walker's paralyzing screams.

Joey looked towards the copper door in horror, thankful he could not see inside. From behind the door, the screams became even louder – higher pitched and even more atrocious. The thunderous sounds of Walker beating heavily against the sides of the chamber, struggling desperately to escape, fascinated Joey now more than frightened him. Joey had never heard such exquisite agony, not even yesterday with Misty's screams. Just picturing in his mind the image of Walker's skin, fat and muscles being melted like butter into a saucepan was enough grotesqueness for Joey. The threatening scent of formaldehyde still lingered in his nostrils, but he told himself that this was far better than having to smell the fragrance of Walker's burning flesh.

He almost felt sorry for the guy, even now that the screams were subsiding. But when Dagmar approached, he put his hand on Joey's shoulder and said casually, "How old is Brigitte?" Joey again thought of his sister's wellbeing, and suddenly, Walker's screams seemed much less important, almost humorous in a pathetic sort of way.

On the short drive back to the Dietrich Anwesen, an overwhelming sense of pride lit Joey's heart. He was his father's son. And these dudes were like his new fraternity! Joey relished that he was the strong, noble son of the man who had effortlessly solved his and his siblings' enormous problem, the man whose hands people kissed in church two nights prior, the hero so many people came to for help in order to better their lives. Still, *he never wanted to do this again.*

After nearly six extended years of failing college classes and kicking a soccer ball in the direction of nowhere, Joey realized that he still didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. And after what he just saw, he did, however, know that he did *not* want this life for himself not now, and not ever.

\* \* \*

Although it was now dark outside, Joey could see the outlines of two short people standing next to a taller figure near the entry gate of the Dietrich Anwesen. As the town car rolled closer and the headlights shone on the three figures, Joey saw that his siblings and Heather awaited him. The town car parked among the few other remaining cars near the entrance, and then Joey and Dagmar emerged from the backseat. When they approached Joey's siblings, Nick stepped forward to shake Dagmar's hand. "Danke. Danke, Dagmar, danke."

Dagmar smiled and in German said, "We are family." He leaned over and kissed the cheek of Brigitte, who also thanked him, and who then introduced him to Heather. Dagmar then walked back towards the reunion.

Without going into too much detail, Joey told them what had happened. They didn't need to congratulate him or tell him that he done well. Joey could already tell by the impressed, impassioned looks on their faces. He had done his part, and they knew it.

And then there was silence. The Schneider trio and Heather stood in the darkness near the entry of the Anwesen, in startling acknowledgement of everything that had happened during the past 48 hours. For now, it was over.

A few moments later, Heather announced, "I am freakin' starving! I mean, this afternoon I was just eating because I couldn't sit still. But now I feel okay. And I'm hungry!" The Schneider siblings agreed and the four of them set out to find their parents.

They walked lethargically along the tunnel of food tables, occasionally picking off remaining trinkets of German cuisine. Compared to the 250 people that Brigitte had guesstimated earlier, she now decided that only about 50 to 60 guests had lingered late. Most were drunk and growing tired, the former of which Brigitte was definitely looking forward to being. In the dimness surrounding the Herrenhaus, Brigitte now thought the gaslight lamps around the property seemed to have a romantic, calming glow. She had never felt such stress detox before this moment. Seated in the middle of a long picnic table near the edge of the buffet tables were Xavier and Dagmar. They sat next to each other, facing the small crowd, each of them with heaping plates of food before them. Xavier's children were surprised to find their father with just Dagmar at the end of the

night, and assumed they were wrapped up in private conversation. They approached nonetheless. In a line, the three of them and Heather sat down across from the two men.

“So everything’s fine...” Xavier said outrightly.

Heather and Brigitte both nodded while the boys gave a soft, “Yeah.”

“People will look for Walker,” Brigitte told her father quietly, immediately getting right down to business. She could leave no detail ignored.

“I know. We’ve taken that into consideration. He is flying back tomorrow,” Xavier told her.

“Excuse me?”

“Walker White’s ticket has been changed. He will be returning to Boston’s International Logan Airport tomorrow morning.”

“X, what are you talking about?” Brigitte asked. She watched Dagmar smirk pleasantly, as if these topics of conversation were normal scenarios with which he and her father dealt daily. For all Brigitte knew, and from what she had just witnessed today, situations like this really were the norm.

“A tall blond employee of Dagmar’s and a little passport photo tampering are not difficult things to come by. Have you forgotten how long we’ve been doing this?” her father asked. “Look around. Finding a tall blond man with Walker’s features in Germany is not a hard thing to do.” He and Dagmar smirked together this time. Brigitte actually thought they looked cute, like obnoxious school boys playing pranks together.

“What about the other two?” Xavier asked, addressing his sons about Kyle and Misty. Nick and Joey raised their shoulders and frowned.

“Kyle disappears all the time, so I don’t think I’ll need to –” Nick started.

Joey interjected, "Yeah, I – "

"Okay," Xavier said. "We'll worry about that when – and if – it happens. You know, a lot of people have gone lost in those Alps. This is definitely not the first time."

"Dagmar's employee will take Walker's suitcase back to Boston." He looked at his daughter. "Brigitte, do you have keys to his apartment there?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

"In my purse."

"We will need those as well. Walker's bag and passport will be replaced in his home. If there is an investigation to occur, it will be in Boston. You will not be there until the end of the week, so you'll have nothing to do with his disappearance."

Brigitte could not believe she was listening to this. These were lies that she usually worked hours to uncover through questioning witnesses and research. But now, and did not judge. She knew she was in no position to.

Xavier looked at his sons. "As for you two. I will need your friends' suitcases from your Herrenhaus. Dagmar will take them back to the funeral home tomorrow to be cremated. If anything should happen, you will let me know immediately. You know now to do that. If people look for Kyle or Misty or if you are questioned, you will alert me immediately. And we will take care of things. Is that understood?"

Brigitte watched her brothers nodding vigorously. After a long, careful silence to see if he was forgetting anything of immediate attention, Xavier looked down at his plate and then began eating again.

Then, Nick, random as always, asked, "So what is it that you keep wanting to talk

to us about? You've said that you wanted to talk to us at least four times since we got here."

"I should let you talk," Dagmar said in German, addressing Xavier. "I have my own child around here somewhere." He patted Xavier's back supportively before rising from the picnic table bench and walking away.

"Not now," Xavier said to his children. He cut and then took a large bite of Weinerschnitzel.

"Why?" Joey asked. He continued with a sarcastically doofish tone, "I *really* want to talk about something else besides what happened the past couple of days!"

"Fine." Xavier put down his fork and knife; he wanted to get this over with just as much as his children had needed their monstrous dilemma solved. He lifted the blue napkin that lay across his lap and wiped his mouth. When he took a deep breath, his children and Heather all leaned in towards him.

Xavier told them about his heart attack. He told them about his hospitalization and his medication. When he discussed the new heart wellness diet he was supposed to be following, he looked down and shrugged at the large plate of fatty food. When Xavier paused after unloading his recent medical trauma into his children's banks of trust, he bent down slightly to cut into another of the sausages that rested on his plate.

Brigitte slammed her hand down onto her father's, and with little fight, due mostly to Xavier's surprise, she confiscated his knife and fork. Nick stood up, grabbed the plate of fatty food away from their father, whipped around, and marched the plate over to a garbage can that already overflowed with paper plates, scraps of food, and beer and wine bottles. When Nick returned, he stood above everyone, his hands folded into his

chest. Heather and the Schneider siblings glared at Xavier. In an effort to break the tension, Joey said, "You're grounded."

Xavier chuckled weakly and said, "Well, yes, you're right. Actually, I am."

"What do you mean?" Heather asked.

"I'm not supposed to be working anymore. My doctors have grounded me. Your mother has grounded me. For my health, I've been told to retire."

Joey sat upright so quickly that he nearly shook Brigitte off the bench. "So what does that mean?" he sputtered.

Xavier looked first to Brigitte and tilted his head. She leaned back and pointed to herself in question. The words came flying out: "X, I don't have a husband yet, remember? I'm not married. I may *never* get married. Maybe I don't want to get married. Maybe I'll *never* want to get married! Maybe I don't see myself ever being happy with one person for the rest of my *entire* life! So I'm afraid that there's no son-in-law to hand down your company to like grandpa did. I remember what you said that year at Thanksgiving about how my husband is supposed to inherit all this from you. How could I not remember? I think about it all the time! I remember all the rules...or whatever. But you can't keep waiting for me to get married." When her speech was over, she folded her hands into a lumpy pyramid on the table, making it clear that she was finished.

"That was Grandpa's rule," Xavier said. "I originally had planned to follow it."

"And now?" Nick said.

"Well..." Xavier began.

"I don't want it!" Joey belted. "I don't want it!"

"Me neither!" Nick seconded, his voice topping his brother's.

Brigitte took turns looking at both of them and then looked back to her father, who, through chuckles, said “Well, don’t fight for your inheritance or anything. Y’all can keep testing me. But I’ve already made my decision. And your mother agrees.”

Brigitte watched her brothers exchange fearful glances. Both of them stopped breathing as they waited for their father to speak again.

Heather leaned forward. “Well, who is it?”

“First of all,” Xavier began.

“Yeah?” Joey spat, still so nervous that he was wringing his hands together in plain view above the table.

“Let me finish, Josef. First of all... If any of you ever – *EVER* – act the way you did today?” He paused shortly before raising his voice again, “I don’t even know what I will do. You cannot do such things just because you are my children.”

Based on the lingering horror on their faces, this time Xavier believed their nods of agreement. He had had to bail them out. He also knew that they all hated asking for help and that they all probably felt like failures when it came to murder. Xavier knew that when his children weren’t good at something, that they just didn’t do that something ever again. They concentrated on their talents and successes, and pretended that they had never failed to begin with. He knew that to a certain extent, their so-called failures of this trip would be forgotten, or at least ignored, and soon, his trio would resume their lives without continued nightmarish guilt. He continued his speech. “Heather came to me when the four of you needed help. That’s what we do in this family.”

Heather smiled up at him for her compliment. With both elbows on the table, she took great concern on deciding which arm to rest her head upon, trying each side with



equal opportunity. She was so exhausted that silly things like this were her priority. Mostly, she just wanted to go to sleep. Heather was only listening halfway when she heard Xavier say: “I am leaving the business to Heather.”

After a stalled reaction, Heather’s chin dropped as she gazed into her Xavier’s eyes.

“I mean, if she’ll have it. Only if she’ll accept. ”

“What?!” Brigitte cried, unable to contain her unexpected explosion. She brushed back her hair to make sure that her famed red lawyer horns hadn’t appeared above her head.

“Is that a problem?” Xavier asked sternly.

“No,” Brigitte said, calming back down. “I just...no offense, Heath. I just...I would *never* have guessed that you’d leave it to...a woman.”

Xavier pointed over to a couple near a table of coffee pots and liquors. “See her?”

They all turned around and saw a woman, presumably in her mid-30s, dressed in stylish bootfit jeans, a strappy top and open-toed heels, with her long blond hair wrapped into a dangly fall atop her head. Her male companion was deep in conversation with her and the two smiled frequently. Joey soon found himself staring unashamedly at her perky breasts. When Brigitte saw where Joey’s eyes were locked, she knocked his elbow, and then they all turned back around to face Xavier.

“She’s in charge of the Hamburg branch of the business. Women chiefs are not so uncommon in Germany. Especially these days.” With that, all four of them turned back around for a second glance. Joey’s second glance lingered longer than the others.

“But why?” Heather asked. This was a question for which Xavier had not prepared an answer.

“Is it because I’m the only one who lives in Dallas?”

“No,” Xavier responded. “That’s only a formality. A bonus, really.”

“Is it because you would’ve left to my brother? Because Lukas should’ve been the one?”

“No. Heather, what I’m about to say is not an insult to your brother, but...you’re a far better choice, a more capable leader, than your brother would have been.”

Heather was very hesitant in responding. “So...what would I have to do?”

“We can discuss all that back in Dallas. Don’t worry about that now.”

“How can she not worry about it?” Nick snapped.

“Nikolaus, was I talking to you?”

“Sorry.”

“Do my parents know?” Heather inquired.

“Of course. Your father is very proud. Fearful, but proud. Look, Heather. You’ll have to think about this for a while. I don’t need an absolute answer right now. Have fun the next few days. Take your time. We’ll talk when we get back to Texas.”

Xavier’s head tilted upward when he saw Sofia approaching their table. When she stood behind her children, she said, “Are y’all talking about me again? Why am I always left out?”

Nick stood up and wrapped his arm around his mother’s shoulder. She smiled brightly and gazed down at her other children. “I’ve been visiting with so many relatives

and old friends today that I haven't even been able to spend much time with my children."

They all stared up at Sofia, not a one of them knowing how to respond. Sofia continued, "What have y'all been doing all day? Enjoying the weather? Where are all your...friends? I hope you've all gotten enough food. It was excellent."

When Sofia still received no response, her face began squirming together, the few visible wrinkles that she did have combining into a jumble. "What? Why are you all staring at me? What has your mother done to all of you *now*?"

From behind Sofia, a hearty, drunken group of people began chanting *Zwiefacher, Zwiefacher, Zwiefacher!* Instantly, Sofia's confusion turned into a gaping grin and she whirled around in the direction of the band. Most of the remaining Dietrich family members were assembling a line down the long space between the food tables.

"You're coming with me," Sofia said to Nick, who still had his arm around her shoulders. Before he had a chance to protest, Sofia had grabbed his hand and was doing her best to pull her son towards the crowd. At the end of the crowd of Dietrichs, Sofia gently aligned her son next to an old man in full Bavarian dress complete with lederhosen and thick red suspenders. Sofia then stood across from Nick, signaling that he was her dance partner. She looked down the row to see Katarina and Jurgen Kaestner standing a few pairs away from them, also in preparation to take their first step. Katarina waved to Sofia from where she stood, so Sofia waved back, her face aglow.

"Oh hi," a voice said on the other side of Nick. He jumped and then turned to see Dexter standing next to him.

"Why are you always doing that?" Nick asked.

“Doing what?”

“Coming up and scaring the shit out of me?” he said softly enough so his mother couldn’t hear him curse.

“Guess I can’t get away,” Dexter shot back. Nick blushed but this time he didn’t turn away. He then introduced Dexter to his mother. On the other side of Sofia stood Dexter’s grandmother, who Dexter also introduced to Sofia.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Dexter’s grandmother told Nick. “I’ve been doing this dance for decades before you were even born. My bones still work, boy.” Nick and his mother returned the smiles of Dexter and his grandmother.

“My parents are down there,” Dexter told Nick, signaling a ways down the line of dance partners. As Dexter’s big, teathy grin wafted down the pairs of Dietrichs, Nick thought that Dexter looked like a proud little boy at his first school dance.

Sofia stood in position with her right foot forward, and then asked Nick, “You remember how?” Fighting a smile, Nick rolled his eyes and nodded. Joey suddenly appeared on his Nick’s side while Brigitte stood across the line. Nick watched his siblings mirroring each other, both of them attempting to look serious and professional as they haphazardly practiced the steps of the Zwiefacher before the song began. Stomping and kicking towards each other, it was apparent to Nick that Brigitte and Joey had forgotten most of the steps, since they fell atop each other, laughing hysterically. As they toppled to the ground, they fell into Dexter and took him and Nick down with them. Through deep-bellied laughter, the four of them began untangling from one another while attempting to stand back up and realign themselves.

From the picnic table, Heather and Xavier laughed loudly while watching their family struggling to get back into their spots before the music began. Xavier turned and locked eyes with Heather. He could tell that she was still unsure about his proposal. Regardless, he said to her softly, "*Mein geliebt Tochter.*"

Heather gulped down a mouthful of trepidation as she fell into her Xavier's exalted gaze. She knew that there was nothing more to consider before she returned to Dallas at the end of the week. Her decision had been made. Just as the band began playing *Du, Du, Liegst Mir im Herzen*, Heather stood and extended her hand across the table to Xavier. Slowly, he rose from the bench, walked over to her, and accepted her invitation to join their family in the *Zwiefacher*.