



*Damage from
a Recent Storm*

A Novella

*Historical
Fiction*

John E. Harper

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A RECENT STORM**

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Damage from a Recent Storm

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Acknowledgements



This book is dedicated to my children, Alison, John Jr., and
Megan.

They were just little ones when I wrote the first draft of this story of Gretchen, with pencil and yellow legal pad, over 25 years ago, in the parking lot, where I worked as a draftsman. Time goes by so fast and then one day they're not little ones anymore. "You three mean the world to me. I'm so proud of everything you've done with your lives so far.

Thank you for the beautiful grandchildren."

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CHAPTER 1



Berlin, Germany

A small face peered out of the second floor window into the dark winter night, watching the tiny ice balls ricochet off the flashing of the overhang below the bedroom window. A steady, cold, hard rain pelted the old two-story brick house, washing away the remaining snow barely covering the roof and the yard. The sky let loose with a barrage of hail the size of quarter-inch marbles. The noise it made against the windows and the metal gutters echoed throughout the house.

Gretchen and her four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Helene, had the entire second floor to themselves. It consisted of a large bedroom and a small bath off the hallway. Their sleeping quarters were almost twenty-four feet square with a nine-foot ceiling that made the room seem spacious and imposing. Gretchen wasn't complaining.

The child's bed was in one corner, Gretchen's old queen size bed in another, and an antique dresser with a mirror in between them against the wall, next to the entrance door. The floor was covered with a large gray and blue oval braided rug. The dark oak flooring beneath it was always cold because the iron radiator next to Helene's bed barely put out enough heat to warm the huge space.

After checking to make sure Helene was tucked in and sound asleep, Gretchen sat at the end of her bed, wearing a heavy white cotton robe with nothing underneath. She grabbed a pack of cigarettes from her purse, which lay on the bed next to her, lit one with a cheap, green, plastic disposable lighter, took a long drawn-out puff, then began sobbing. She sat there for a few minutes, crying, as she had done on many evenings before going to bed, trying to cope with her seemingly helpless situation.

Living in her older sister's home and having to abide by her brother-in-law's rules made going to work at the Manheimer Baden Haüs even harder than it already was. If her sister, Marthe, ever found out she worked there, Gretchen

was certain she would have to move out. She didn't make enough money to afford that.

Though she was young, Gretchen's twenty-three years had been filled with numerous emotional ups and downs. Her parents were shot to death when she was sixteen, during a robbery in the drugstore they owned. Gretchen ran with a rough crowd during those teen years and was never close to her parents, who adopted her when she was just an infant and they were in their forties.

When Gretchen was ten, her parents told her she was adopted. The story was that after her older sister Marthe was born, they found they could have no more children. Seventeen years later, as her parents explained, they had a chance to adopt baby Gretchen, and jumped at the opportunity to raise another daughter.

Over time, Gretchen grew to hate and resent her adopted parents for refusing to reveal the true identity of her birth mother. She begged them endlessly for the information, but they refused, always finding some excuse to put it off.

When her parents were killed, Gretchen did not attend the funeral. She felt nothing and blocked the whole shoot-

ing incident from her mind, and then ran off in her sister's old '64 Volvo. She moved in with her boyfriend, Kurt, an eighteen-year-old high school drop-out and drug addict. She never told Marthe where she was.

The relationship with Kurt went sour quickly the following year when Gretchen became pregnant. Kurt beat her on several occasions and eventually left her for someone else while she was still carrying the baby. She had to quit school to support her self and ended up staying at night in various homeless shelters in some of the worst areas of Berlin, or sleeping in her Volvo in the park.

During the day she did whatever odd jobs she could get, such as cleaning homes, until the baby was due. The humiliation and abandonment were more than she could bear at times. She wasn't seeing a doctor, and she didn't have a clue what she would do when the baby was born.

She faced each day with dread and was depressed and lonely. When she reached her lowest point, she finally contacted her sister and asked her for help. Marthe was shocked to learn her younger, adopted sister was carrying a

child, but she took Gretchen in without question, even though her husband, Dietre, was dead set against it.

Months later Gretchen delivered a baby girl she named Helene. The child was healthy, with no apparent ill effects from her father's drug addiction. Gretchen and Helene left the hospital and went to live with Dietre and Marthe.

The sisters had little in common. Marthe was seventeen years Gretchen's senior and was very religious. She lived her life by the words of her Catholic prayer book, which always was no farther than an arm's reach from her. She attended St. Michaels Catholic Church just down the street, and volunteered her spare time to help Father Philipp Kraus at the rectory.

Gretchen never wanted to impose on her sister's life, but she knew Helene needed a safe, secure home. She accepted her sister's offer to live there only for Helene's sake. She had no way of supporting the two of them on her own. Marthe told Gretchen that she had always wanted a child with Dietre, but at forty she saw little chance of seeing that dream come true. Marthe loved having Helene there.

Gretchen, though she tried hard, had few maternal instincts. She loved her daughter but felt uneasy holding the child, leaving almost all of the baby's care to Marthe, who was more than happy to do it.

Over four years had passed since Gretchen and Helene moved in, and Dietre was still not happy with the arrangement. He spent most of his time at work or with his friends, drinking and playing cards at the corner tavern. Marthe had her hands full, pacifying her husband, motivating Gretchen, caring for Helene, and working with Father Philipp at the church.

To most people, Gretchen's demeanor was tough, rigid, and even cold, but inside was a shy, frightened, and fragile young girl. She was pretty, at times beautiful. Her looks were simple enough that she did not stand out in a crowd. Her hair was auburn, with more hints of red than brown, and her thick, dark eyebrows accented a pair of stunning blue eyes. She tried to curl her hair in the mornings before she went to work, but it rarely held. She usually became frustrated and pulled it back into a braid that ran down her neck and reached below her shoulders.

Gretchen was petite, but seemed taller than her five-foot-three-inch frame. Her shapely shoulders never needed the embellishment of shoulder pads in the garments she wore. Her posture was like a fashion model on a Paris runway, straight upright, her back arched, with her chest pushed out to barely show off her small, firm, round breasts. Her body showed no signs of ever bearing a child.

Gretchen's long legs were perfect for the tight skirts she often wore. Her fingernails were always painted to perfection with cheap drugstore nail polish. Her sister thought she wore her makeup too thick, she applied it carefully to highlight her cheekbones and pretty smile, though the stress of living with her sister and brother in-law, though, gave her little to smile about.

It was cold that March evening. The temperature was barely above freezing. The weather forecast predicted a major winter rain and sleet storm to come through within the next few days. But it had come sooner. The late winter rains brought much flooding in that part of Europe the year before, washing out roads, flooding farmland, and wreaking havoc on the German countryside. The storms

had proven to be deadly in the past, and this year's seemed to be shaping up to be a repeat.

Gretchen stood up from the bed, moved towards the chest of drawers, and stubbed out her barely smoked cigarette in the black ceramic ashtray sitting on the old mahogany furniture. She opened the top drawer, pulled out a pair of white silk bikini panties, closed that drawer, then opened the one below it and found a heavy cotton nightgown.

After letting her robe fall off her shoulders onto the floor, she stepped into her panties and pulled them on. She lifted the nightgown over her head and quickly pulled it down over her till it came to a stop a few inches from her ankles.

Gretchen noticed that the hail outside had subsided, but the rains continued. "It's so cold in here," she whispered to herself. She walked over to the radiator and placed her hands near it, but felt no heat.

"*Mutti*," came the whining voice of the child who occupied the small bed next to the cold radiator.

Gretchen went to her daughter quickly and kissed her cheek. "It's okay, Helene, *Mutti's* here. Go to sleep," she qui-

etly told the little girl, who was probably only talking in her sleep.

Gretchen climbed back into bed and slid under one flat sheet and three layers of thin wool blankets and tried to go to sleep. She heard the front door open then slam shut. It was Dietre coming home from a late night out playing cards with the men from his factory. She listened as Marthe woke up and began bickering with him about the smell of wine on his breath and his staying out late in the hail storm.

Gretchen smiled to herself, thinking it rather funny that the man she had come to despise so was getting chewed out pretty good by his little wife.

She returned to the matter at hand, a good night's sleep, shutting out the dialogue downstairs by placing her pillow over her head. Gretchen was a light sleeper who was often awakened by Helene's restless nights, and this night wasn't any different.

It was dead quiet in the room, except for the sound of the rain outside. The sounds downstairs subsided, and Gretchen struggled to fall asleep.

Just then she heard the door to her room slowly open, letting out an eerie creak. She heard the sound very well through the pillow and thought the door was caught in a draft. She heard it again, but this time she heard the sound of someone standing right next to her bed, grumbling. She wasn't afraid because she knew it was Dietre and figured he was just coming in to check the radiator like he had done a few times before.

He didn't leave, though, like she thought he would. Instead, Dietre kneeled on the floor, resting his elbows on the edge of her bed. She didn't take the pillow off her head, hoping he would think she was asleep.

Dietre was a large man, over two-hundred twenty-five pounds, six feet tall, and was built like a man who, years earlier, had lifted weights regularly. Now, at forty-seven, sporting a massive beer gut and receding hairline, Dietre could no longer attract attention from the female persuasion like he could twenty years previously, and he knew it.

His skin was oily gray, and he had scars on his arms and neck from wounds he received from accidents at the factory where he worked. His hands were never thoroughly

cleaned, and he always seemed to have a growth of stubble on his face, even though he shaved every morning.

Gretchen lay still as she felt Dietre's large hand move across the covers and onto her hips. She noticed how careful he was, but still clumsy in his movements. She stared into the pillow, fearing where his hand would go next. She didn't have to wait long before the nightmare began. He lifted the blankets and found the soft cotton nightgown. Following her leg from her rear-end to her feet where the gown stopped, his fingers walked under the garment and slowly crawled back towards her hips. She could smell the alcohol on his breath. His breathing was heavy and his hand only inches from her panties.

Gretchen wanted to discourage him from going any further but didn't want him to think she was awake, so she gently rolled away from him. She could hear Dietre standing up, moaning in disgust. But instead of leaving, he sat on the edge of the bed, then lay down in the spot that she had just moved from. He wasted no time finding Gretchen's panties again with his large, cold hands.

Why is he doing this? Gretchen thought to herself. What if Marthe were to walk in? Isn't he afraid I might scream and awaken her?

It seemed not. The man was determined to explore her body and wasn't giving up.

Dietre placed two fingers under the elastic around the leg of her panties and moved them toward the inside of her thighs. She squeezed her legs together tightly to keep him from getting inside her. Frustrated, he had to have known she was awake, but didn't bother talking his way out of the situation.

Dietre meticulously pulled the gown up to her waist, reached in, and grabbed Gretchen's left breast, squeezing and rubbing, as though he was trying to arouse her. She could only bite her lip while growing more and more worried as to how far he was going to try to go.

Gretchen, figuring it was worth an embarrassing scene, finally reached under her gown, quickly grabbed his hand, and pushed it away. She then sat up, much to Dietre's surprise, and stared with a hateful look at the shadowy figure lying next to her.

“Go away, Dietre. *Bitte!*” she whispered, angrily.

“Come on, girl, lay back down, I only want ...”

“*Nein!*” she demanded. “You must go. Marthe will find you here. Go, *bitte.*”

“All right,” the big German mumbled, “I will go, but I’ll be back another night. You’ll see! You’ll see!”

Dietre slowly stood up and stumbled out of the room, not closing the door behind him. Gretchen quickly hopped out of bed, pulled her nightgown down to her feet, then dashed across the room, closing the door and securing the small bolt latch above the handle.

She got back under the covers and took a deep breath, emotionally exhausted. She lay quiet for a moment then felt her breathing become more rapid. A claustrophobic panic came over her and she cried into her pillow until eventually she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2



The Manheimer Baden Häus was located on the east side of Berlin near an industrial park filled with textile and garment manufacturers. The streets were unkempt and there was no sign of greenery anywhere. The building the baden häus occupied was formerly a men's gymnasium and health club that had closed down ten years earlier. Gretta Manheimer's husband owned the club and she inherited it when he died. Gretta was a socialite who had amassed enough support from her female friends to turn the old gym into a baden häus for women only.

As the decade passed, Gretta struggled to make ends meet. The baden häus began attracting a rougher crowd of women from the mills and factories in the area. Many of the clients were lesbians. Gretta's friends no longer patron-

ized her establishment when word got out that the place had become a lesbian massage parlor. The old brick building was becoming dilapidated and needed a facelift.

Gretta was aging as well. Undaunted, she saw a way to keep the business open by catering to the lesbian community. The Manheimer Baden Haus, though frowned upon by the religious population, soon became a thriving business, well known throughout the city of Berlin.

Gretchen found a job there after answering an ad in an underground entertainment newspaper for a “masseuse intern/trainee.” Gretta liked Gretchen immediately. She was sympathetic of her financial situation and her unwed mother status. But Gretchen had no idea what she had gotten herself into.

“I have a very special customer coming in this afternoon, Gretchen,” Gretta said one day after Gretchen had been there only a short time. “I want you to make sure she gets the best of care.”

“Ja, Frau Manheimer.”

“Her name is Hilga Litch. She’ll be arriving at three o’clock. It’s important for you to understand that she may

take an interest in my business. With the type of money she has, it could possibly mean a new investor, and I don't have to tell you this place is sorely in need of repairs."

"*Doch, ja*, Frau Manheimer," the girl responded.

"Gretchen, do whatever she wants. Do I make myself clear?"

"*Ja*, Frau Manheimer."

"You should also know that she is a very sophisticated woman. Oh, *ja* ... and extremely wealthy."

"May I ask how old she is?" Gretchen inquired.

"What difference does that make?" the woman snapped back.

"Oh, I guess it doesn't," Gretchen said. "It's just that most of the ladies I've seen since I've been here have been quite young."

"You and every girl employed here must be aware of only one thing: we perform a service for anyone who comes through that door and pays us. Do you understand me?" the woman scolded. Gretchen nodded yes.

“We don’t care how old they are, the color of their hair, or their skin. But, of course, I would prefer that they all be as wealthy as Frau Litch.”

“She is an older woman?” Gretchen asked again.

“Gretchen, she’s fifty-nine. I’m fifty-seven, my darling, and I do not consider myself old or ancient.”

“*Nein*. That’s not old. I didn’t mean ...”

“What is it that you do mean, dear?”

“It’s just that ...”

“It’s just that you, young lady, are to do as you are told. Do I make myself clear, Gretchen?”

“*Ja, ja* ... I ... I was just wondering, Frau Manheimer. I don’t want to sound like I’m complaining,” Gretchen softly explained.

“Well, that’s exactly what it sounded like you were doing. Listen to me, Gretchen. Frau Litch is just like all the others who come here to the Manheimer Baden Häus. But because of the amount of money the woman has, and all that she could do for this business, I expect you to keep her happy. I’m counting on you.” The woman reached out and put both hands on Gretchen’s cheeks. “You’re the prettiest

girl I have working here, and I know you will be just what Frau Litch wants.”

Gretchen smiled. “*Danke*, Frau Manheimer.”

“I promise you it will be okay, Gretchen. Don’t get yourself all worked up. You can handle it.”

“I’m fine,” Gretchen reassured her boss.

The woman touched Gretchen’s forehead, brushed away a stray strand of hair, looked her square in the eyes, and asked, “You won’t let me down, will you?”

“Oh, *nein*,” Gretchen said, enthusiastically. “I promise.”

“Just make sure you aren’t making promises you can’t keep,” Gretta told her.

“*Ja*, Frau Manheimer.”

“All right then, that’s settled. Now, you go on downstairs, take those braids out of your hair, put on a bit more lipstick, and then get into your uniform.”

Gretchen nodded, then walked down the short flight of stairs that led to the locker room with the steam room just down the hall. When the eager twenty-three-year-old started at the baden haüs a week earlier she had no idea what would be expected of her. She assumed that she could

fake her way through anything that might confront her. Up to this point, everything had been going smoothly and she had not experienced any of the things that she'd heard rumors about.

Gretchen needed money to pay Marthe and Dietre room and board so she and Helene would have a place to live. Her situation meant not questioning what was right or wrong, at this point. She had made up her mind that she would do nearly anything to get enough money so she and Helene could leave one day and live on their own.

As she stood in front of the mirror unraveling her braided hair, Anna walked out of the shower, patting herself with a large, white towel. She was the only girl at the baden häus Gretchen trusted enough to talk to.

Anna and Gretchen were the same age, had the same sense of humor, and got along from the day they were introduced. Gretchen was envious of Anna's long blond hair, high cheek bones, broad shoulders, and long, beautiful legs. She found it quite hard to understand why Frau Manheimer would think that she was prettier than Anna.

"Hallo, Gretchen."

“How are you, Anna?”

“Oh, pretty good,” the blond answered as she walked toward Gretchen, rubbing the towel thoroughly on her head in an attempt to dry her long blond hair. She wrapped the towel around her body, tucking it in at the top to hold it in place. She picked up a brush from the vanity and began brushing her hair, which made her co-worker more envious than ever.

“*Ach*, this damn hair,” Anna complained.

Gretchen looked at her new friend with disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding, Anna!”

“Who’s kidding? Knowing that I have to face this mess every day makes me sick.”

“I don’t believe you,” Gretchen said.

“Look at me, Gretchen, just look at me,” Anna said, putting her hand on her hip.

“What? I’m looking! You are beautiful. I’d do anything to have what you’ve got. Especially your hair. Look at mine, will you?” Gretchen complained, tugging at her wrinkled auburn hair. “Yuck!”

Anna paused, looking at her friend's mane. "Oh, you do have a point Gretchen," she joked.

Both laughed like children. That sort of kidding around never bothered Gretchen. She had always been able to laugh at herself.

"Who's watching Helene today?" Anna asked.

"Marthe, as always," Gretchen moaned.

"Does she mind watching her?" Anna asked.

"She doesn't, but Dietre gets furious when she offers," Gretchen complained.

"Ooh, sounds like a real fun guy," Anna said sarcastically.

Gretchen stared at herself for a moment in the mirror. "Nein," she said. "He's a *scheißker!*"

Anna looked over at her friend's reflection, with a look of concern, and mumbled, "Oh? So what do you really think of him, Gretchen?"

"Well ... my Helene loves both of them, and she's so good when she's with them. I just wish I could find someone else to watch her. I feel like I'm imposing on them." Gretchen looked at Anna. "You know what I mean?"

“Well, if your *schwester* doesn’t want to watch her she should just say so,” Anna suggested.

“*Nein*, she isn’t the type. She’s a good person, not the kind to tell anyone what’s truly on her mind. She just wants to be sure everyone is happy. I mean she reads her prayer book all day long,” Gretchen jokingly shuddered.

“*Wirklich?* Really?” Anna asked.

“*Ja!* It’s scary, isn’t it? She takes Helene with her to St. Michaels while she’s doing work for Father Philipp.”

Anna looked out of the corner of her eyes at Gretchen and said, “So, your *schwester* is being kept by the good priest, is she?”

“What? What do you mean, ‘kept?’” Gretchen asked.

“I’ve heard those Catholic priests are celibate on Sundays, but come Monday through Saturday they’re getting it on with the quiet little housekeeper,” Anna said.

“*Ach*, that’s absurd. What a horrible thing to think about my *schwester*. You’re wrong, Anna,” Gretchen scolded her. “Marthe wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“That’s just the stories I heard about your saintly Catholic priests,” Anna explained.

“They’re not my priests,” Gretchen said.

“Well, then, your *schwester*’s priest,” Anna said.

Gretchen thought about it for a minute then asked, “Do you seriously think they might be doing it together, Anna?”

Anna realized Gretchen believed her and started laughing, “*Ach*, you are so gullible, girl. I doubt your *schwester* and Father Philipp are screwing each other. Besides, you told me yourself she’s happily married.”

“Well,” Gretchen said, “she is married, that’s for sure. I’m not so sure she is ‘happily’ anything.” Gretchen paused for a moment again, then asked with a giggle, “Priests really do it with their housekeepers?”

“Gretchen, you are so naïve, that’s why I like you,” Anna told her, as she started laughing again.

They joked and laughed together for a while longer and then the two made their way over to the lockers and slipped into the skimpy outfits that resembled Roman togas.

“Don’t you think these uniforms are silly, Anna?” Gretchen asked.

“Oh, I’ve always thought they were kind of cute,” Anna replied.

“I think they’re silly. But I guess right now I would do about anything for money,” Gretchen said as she adjusted the shoulder strap. “I have to take what I can get. I’m broke.”

“I’m like you, Gretchen. Anything for money,” Anna said.

Gretchen paused and looked at her friend, “Anna, can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure, but just don’t ask to borrow any money, because I’m broke too.”

“*Nein*, it’s not about money,” Gretchen said.

“Then what?” Anna asked.

“Well, I feel I have some good reasons for working in a place like this ... but ... I just don’t understand why someone as beautiful as you ... I mean, the money is not that great.” Anna continued dressing but did not answer. “I’m not too good for this sort of work or associating with people like ... well, you know ... like Frau Manheimer, for instance,” Gretchen continued. “I can’t figure her out. She’s a strange sort, don’t you think?” Anna still didn’t respond.

“I respect her because she’s strong-willed, but she’s so cold on the surface. Do you think she has a soft side?”

Anna glared at the girl and said with a suspicious smile, “Gretchen, what in the world are you babbling on about?” Then, trying to evade Gretchen’s question, she quickly closed her locker and started to walk upstairs.

“Wait, Anna, did I say something wrong?”

Anna stopped and turned around. “*Nein*, Gretchen.”

Gretchen walked over to the stairs where Anna had one foot on the first step. “Listen, Gretchen,” Anna explained. “It’s just that I happen to like this job, and I’ve met many very nice people here, like you. I know that you’re as straight as they come, but you can’t be so dumb that you don’t realize why most of the women come here.”

“Well, Anna, I haven’t encountered any yet, but I have heard some of the women are ...”

“Lesbians!” Anna interrupted.

“*Ja*,” Gretchen giggled nervously.

“Most of the girls are lesbians, Gretchen. Just like me!” Anna added.

Gretchen was caught off guard. “Oh, uh, well,” she stum-
bled, “that’s fine. I don’t have a problem with that.”

“*Ja, ja* you do, Gretchen,” Anna accused her. “I can tell
by the look on your face.” Now it was Gretchen’s turn to
remain silent. “Let me tell you something, Gretchen, some-
thing I have never told anyone before.”

“Tell me what?”

“The only reason I’m working here is because of Frau
Manheimer.”

“Well, me too, Anna. I answered an ad in the paper and
Frau Manheimer hired me.”

“*Nein*, Gretchen, it’s different with Frau Manheimer and
me. We were lovers.” Gretchen stared blankly at her friend,
not sure what, if anything, she should say.

“I met her when I was vacationing in France last year,”
Anna explained. “We stayed at the same hotel in Paris.”
Anna brushed a strand of hair away from her face and con-
tinued, “She was all alone. You know, she used to be
straight. When her husband died, she found compani-
onship in young women. They make her feel youthful.”

“*Wirklich?*” Gretchen asked.

“*Ja*. Anyway, I met Gretta while I had just ...”

“Gretta who?” Gretchen interrupted.

“Gretta Manheimer. That’s her name. Gretta. Where was I? Ah, I had just broken up with a guy I had been engaged to marry. I was looking for some comfort and Gretta just happened to be the one who gave it to me.”

“So, it was just a one-time thing, *ja*?” Gretchen asked.

“*Nein!* Like I said, we became lovers,” Anna said.

Gretchen thought for a second. “Anna, you don’t have to justify what you do, not to me or to anyone. Besides, I had a feeling that Frau Manheimer was that way. I mean, well, of course, it really doesn’t matter to me. I certainly ...”

Anna broke in, “It’s all over now between us. She has other interests. But she gave me this job and said I could keep it as long as I wanted it.”

“That’s wonderful!” Gretchen said, smiling. Anna smiled too and they touched hands.

Gretchen looked at her watch, putting an end to the awkward moment. “Ach, I’d better get upstairs, Anna. Frau Manheimer asked me to take care of an important cus-

tomer who should be here this afternoon. I still have to get my room ready, and I'd like to sneak a cigarette."

"Important? What do you mean, 'important?'" Anna asked, pretending to be jealous.

"Anna, come on now, it's just some old lady with a lot of money," Gretchen whined.

"Do you mean money as in big money?" Anna's curiosity was piqued.

"I imagine so," Gretchen teased.

"Those are my favorite customers. Do you think you might want to trade this afternoon?" Anna hinted, "My tips have been pathetic lately."

"*Nein, danke,*" Gretchen interrupted, laughing. "I can handle her."

CHAPTER 3



Gretchen's curiosity grew more intense. Her second cigarette burned down to a small butt only a few minutes after being lit, but finally three o'clock rolled around.

She sat in the ten-by-ten-foot room staring at her surroundings. It was a small, sterile room with light blue walls, no windows, one picture of some unidentified scenery, and a lamp and a small dish of mints on a coffee table in the corner. A black push-button telephone took up the remainder of the space on the tiny table.

In the middle of the room was a waist-high massage table with a three-inch pad on top, wrapped in a crisp white sheet. Gretchen sat on the only chair, a high-back, Queen Anne-style with blue embroidered doilies on the

arms. She rested her feet on the edge of the cushion with her knees pulled to her chest.

Without warning, the door opened. “Gretchen?” inquired an unfamiliar voice.

As she jumped to her feet, Gretchen quickly put out her cigarette on the inside edge of the candy dish, and answered, “*Ja, ja*, Frau Litch, come in, *bitte*.”

“*Hallo*. I’m Hilga Litch. Call me Hilga, *bitte*” the woman talked in rapid-fire succession. “I have little time to spare today, so shall we get on with this?”

“Well, all right, Frau Litch,” Gretchen answered.

“Hilga!” the woman demanded.

“*Wie bitte?*” Gretchen asked.

“I told you to call me Hilga,” the woman smiled.

“Okay, Hilga, why don’t you follow me downstairs to the locker room so you can put your things away, and then we shall have a soothing steam bath. I’m sure you will enjoy it.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.” She raised her eyebrows and, with her dark German eyes, scanned Gretchen’s thinly clad body.

Gretchen’s charge wore a powder blue silk blouse that revealed the tops of her large, pushed-up breasts. The

blouse was tucked into a black cotton skirt that fell just below her knees. Her black high heels contrasted with the flesh-colored hose that barely disguised her white legs. Her outfit was accented with a sparkling diamond pendant necklace with matching earrings and bracelet.

The woman's hair was shorn above her ears and collar. A slight perm gave it some body, and she didn't try to hide the gray. Gretchen also noticed that Hilga Litch was very attractive for her age and seemed well kept.

She escorted Hilga to the stairs leading to the locker room. When they got there, Gretchen stopped at a row of lockers.

"Here we are," she announced in a bubbly, upbeat tone. "Use whichever one is empty. The steam bath is just down the hall, across from the showers. When you're all done here, you'll find me back upstairs in the room we just came from, waiting to give you a relaxing massage. If you need anything else, just pick up this phone," she grabbed a black phone on the wall, "and dial five. The phone in my room will ring, and I'll help you with any of your needs. Do you have any questions?"

“*Nein*, Gretchen, everything is just fine.” She paused for a moment then said, “Except for one thing.”

“What is that, Frau Litch? I ... I mean, Hilga!” Gretchen smiled politely.

“I want you to stay with me while I go in the steam bath,” the woman grinned.

“Oh, well, um, well, I guess I can do that, but, uh ... could you excuse me for just a moment, *bitte*?” Gretchen stammered.

“Well, I suppose, *fräulein. Los!*”

The young girl backed away from the woman, smiling nervously. “I’ll be right back.”

Gretchen continued smiling, then quickly turned away and dashed up the stairs to the lobby and stopped at the front desk.

“Frau Manheimer, Frau Manheimer, I need to talk to you,” Gretchen said in a panic, as she placed both hands on the counter where her boss was reviewing an appointment book.

The baden haüs owner looked up from her work, “*Ja*, what is it, Gretchen?”

“Uh, Frau Litch has asked me to join her in the steam bath. That hasn’t been the normal procedure since I’ve been here. What should I do?”

“Stay with her,” the woman told her.

“Oh,” Gretchen answered with a disappointed look.

“Remember, Gretchen, this client could mean a lot to my business.”

“*Ja*, I remember,” Gretchen whimpered.

“Where is Frau Litch now?”

“Downstairs, waiting for me,” Gretchen answered.

“Well, I recommend that you get your ass downstairs right this second!”

“*Ja*, Frau Manheimer.” Gretchen frowned and walked to the steps with her head down.

“And, Gretchen ...” The girl turned around and waited for another command. “I expect you will do a very good job. I promise it will be worth your while. Just do as she asks.”

The confused girl nodded and walked back down to the locker room to her customer. When she got there, the

woman asked her, “Gretchen, how long have you worked here?”

“Wha ... oh, uh, what?” She didn’t want to look at her client, so she leaned against the lockers, staring into nowhere.

Hilga undressed, draping her expensive clothes across the door of an opened locker. Gretchen had never seen a fifty-nine-year-old woman naked before and was not jumping at the chance.

“Why are you so nervous, *süße?*” the woman asked.

“I’m sorry,” Gretchen apologized.

“Don’t be sorry. I understand. Here now, look at me.”

Gretchen did not oblige.

“Come on, darling, look at me,” she said, moving directly in front of her and standing there, stark naked.

“I know I’m not much to look at, Gretchen. I’m old, getting very wrinkled, and certainly I’m not as desirable as I used to be. But I hope that I’m not totally disgusting to you.”

Gretchen, out of curiosity, gave in and found herself looking at the older woman’s nude body.

“Pretty sad sight, huh?” the woman pouted.

“*Nein, nein*, Hilga,” Gretchen confirmed.

“You don’t think so?” the woman asked.

“*Nein*, not bad at all,” she timidly offered, taking a deep breath.

“You know, Gretchen, I was once as pretty as you.”

“Me? Oh, I’m nothing special,” Gretchen stated quietly.

“Of course you are. Your skin looks so soft, so delicate. I envy you.”

Touching herself on the cheek, Gretchen fished for more compliments. “Do you really think I look good?”

“Well, I haven’t seen everything yet, darling.”

The woman reached out, putting her fingers on the button that held Gretchen’s uniform in place at the shoulder. Gretchen quickly moved her hand away, wincing, as though she were in pain. Hilga eyed her quizzically, then, embarrassed, she immediately moved away.

Gretchen apologized, remembering what Frau Manheimer had told her, and unbuttoned the garment herself. “Here, here, Hilga, I’m sorry. I’ll do it.” The uniform fell to the floor. A pair of blue lace panties followed.

“*Da*,” she stated proudly. She picked up a towel lying at her feet and covered herself quickly. A smile filled the face of her customer, and seeing that the wide-eyed woman was moving toward her, Gretchen quickly sidestepped her.

“Now follow me, Hilga,” she said, pointing to the steam bath while holding the towel tightly to her chest.

The woman followed, wrapping a towel around herself too. They walked into the unoccupied steam-filled, dimly lit, white room.

They sat across from each other not saying a word while steam filled the room, making it nearly impossible to see anything. Gretchen was still nervous and hoped the remainder of the woman’s time was coming to an end. She stared through the steam at the strange-mannered woman who had her head tilted back and her eyes closed while she enjoyed the bath.

As the steam cleared a bit, Gretchen could hear Hilga breathing heavily and moaning slightly. Gretchen looked down and saw she had moved the towel away from her thighs and had placed her hand between them. As Hilga

pleasured herself, Gretchen sat nervously. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Excuse me. Hilga?" Gretchen said when she stopped.

"What is it, Gretchen?" the woman said, seemingly out of breath.

"You did say that you were in a hurry. If you like, we can go upstairs now and I can give you a massage."

"Darling," the woman said kindly. "I know I said I was in a hurry, but I still have some time to spare." Gretchen tried to think of something else to say, but couldn't.

"What's wrong, *fräulein*?" the woman asked. "Have I done something wrong? Tell me why you sound so sad." Gretchen did not answer, although the woman was right on the mark. They sat quietly for at least ten minutes. As the steam dissipated, the woman stood up. "I'm ready, Gretchen. You can do the massage now," the woman said, as she wrapped her towel around herself.

Without Enthusiasm, Gretchen secured her towel around herself, then led the way out of the room past the lockers and up the stairs. She never liked the idea of parading by the front desk with the customers, because a small

audience was always sitting there staring with their eyes glued to her chest or crotch. It made her very uncomfortable. Five female patrons eyed her as the pair passed by.

She held the door open for Hilga then closed it behind her.

“Lie up here on the table on your stomach, *bitte*, and I will begin,” Gretchen instructed her.

Hilga smiled as she climbed onto the table. A small stool gave her the boost she needed.

Lying gently on her back, she waited for Gretchen to attend her.

“Uh, let me see, you can go ahead and turn over on your stomach so I can give you a good rubdown,” Gretchen said clumsily, knowing exactly what the woman was up to.

“*Nein*, Gretchen, I want you to massage me this way,” Hilga said in a lilting, merry voice as she opened the towel, revealing herself a second time to the frustrated girl.

Gretchen, remembering again what her boss had told her, succumbed to the rather awkward situation. The older woman closed her eyes as Gretchen’s nervous hands gently rubbed and massaged her from shoulder to toe, carefully

and quickly passing over her chest and crotch. The woman reached out, grabbed her hands, pulled them to her, and placed them on her breasts before Gretchen had time to react.

“Here, Gretchen, this is what I like,” she moaned.

She started Gretchen’s hands in a circular motion over her breasts and sighed softly. Her eyes rolled back into her head as she slowly closed them. “Oh, Gretchen, darling, that feels so wonderful,” she said.

The woman’s nipples hardened under her trembling palms. Gretchen had had enough. She looked at her watch and reminded Hilga of the time. “Frau Litch, it’s getting very late.”

The woman took a deep breath, opened her eyes, then squeezed Gretchen’s hands back onto her breasts, enjoying the chill that filled her body.

“*Ja*, Gretchen,” she said. “We must be going.”

“We?” She moved her hands away, relieved it was over.

“*Ja*, I want you to come with me so we can talk.”

What now? Gretchen thought.

“Let’s both get showered and dressed, then I’ll come back up to talk to Frau Manheimer about letting you take the rest of the day off.” She got down off the table and wrapped the towel around herself.

“Well, I’m not too sure Frau Manheimer will let me leave right now, Hilga. I really don’t ...”

“You let me take care of Gretta,” the woman interrupted. “I’ll give her a very good reason to let you go with me.”

“Where are we going?” Gretchen asked nervously.

“Let’s both get dressed and I’ll tell you on the way.” Hilga stared back at her with a devilish grin.

Gretchen didn’t like this one bit. She was getting worried as to how she might gracefully extract herself from this situation. “Oh, all right then,” she replied, hoping to buy time.

They both walked out of the room past the front desk then back down to the locker room. “You know, Gretchen, I hope to be having many more meetings here with you after today.”

“That’s fine, Frau Litch,” Gretchen moaned, disheartened.

“I know you don’t understand now, Gretchen, but after tonight I’m sure you will. Oh, by the way, do you have your own car?”

“*Ja, ja*, it’s parked out front.” Gretchen had an idea. “Shall I follow you?”

“*Nein*, my driver will handle that chore. Just leave your car here, and I’ll drop you off when the evening is over.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, Frau Litch, but I have a young daughter, and I must get home after work. Maybe tomorrow evening I could go with you,” Gretchen explained. “*Meine schwester* has been watching Helene all day, and I couldn’t just go off without ...”

“Now stop it. I demand that you call me Hilga,” the woman interrupted. “You are such a stubborn *kind*. Tomorrow will be fine. I’ll pick you up at this time, so don’t be late.”

“Ah, well, all right, Hilga. I’ll be here, but will you talk to Frau Manheimer? I don’t want her to be angry with me.”

“I said I would, Gretchen. Now come shower with me.”

Gretchen was frustrated. “Well, you go ahead, Hilga,” she sighed, “I showered this morning. You go on by yourself.”

Finally Hilga realized what she was putting the girl through and turned and walked into the shower alone.

CHAPTER 4



Dietre, Marthe, and Helene weren't back from his mother's house yet when Gretchen pulled into the driveway that evening. She breathed a sigh of relief.

The first thing she did as she entered the house was to find a dish towel to wipe off her wet shoes, then she quickly wiped up the footprints she had tracked across the floor. She didn't want to give Dietre an excuse to get angry and berate her.

It was after nine and Gretchen hadn't eaten anything all day. She went to the kitchen, made a pot of tea, and toasted some sourdough muffins to satisfy her hunger. She made sure no crumbs were left on the counter. Dietre hated that.

Back in the living room she sat on the sofa and rested her feet on the ottoman to listen to the final news report of the

day. The weather forecaster showed video of damage from a recent storm that moved through the surrounding countryside. She frowned as she listened to the unchanging dismal forecast. *Will it never end?*

As she sipped her tea, Gretchen heard Dietre, Marthe, and Helene get out of the car and come up the walkway. The front door opened and they trailed in. The metal blinds clanged as Dietre secured the door behind him.

“We’re back!” Marthe shouted in a pleasant voice.

“*Mutti, Mutti!*” Helene yelled, her small voice filled with excitement.

Dietre, grumbling, walked past all of them, took off his wet coat, and hung it in the closet. “Damn this rain! I’m sick of this weather. Someone could get killed out there.” He walked into the kitchen.

“Oh, Dietre, it wasn’t that bad,” Marthe said, trying to be cheerful. “Spring will be here soon.”

Dietre came out of the kitchen holding a pan, glaring at his sister-in-law. “When we left here this morning this kitchen was spotless. Do you plan to clean up your mess?”

“Come on, Dietre, leave it,” Marthe interrupted. “I’ll get it in a minute.”

“It’s her goddamn mess,” he stated firmly, pointing in Gretchen’s direction.

Gretchen felt her face turn red with anger. She quickly hopped off the sofa, snatched the pan from Dietre, and moved around him into the kitchen.

“*Scheißkerl!*,” she shouted. “It’s a pan I used to boil some water for tea.” She dried off the pan, opened a cupboard door underneath the sink, and flung it inside with a loud clang. “You’d think I cooked a three-course meal.” She turned and glared at him. “*Da*. Are you satisfied, *dumpfbacke?*”

“*Ja, danke!*” He spat at her, his words dripping with sarcasm. Dietre looked at his wife, shook his head in disgust, and went into their bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Marthe simply stood there. She had said nothing to quell the argument.

Gretchen went back to the living room. “Come, Helene, let *Mutti* take off your coat.”

The little girl hurried to her mother. Marthe took off her own coat and hung it in the closet. “How was your day, Gretchen?” she asked carefully.

Gretchen ignored her question, continuing to tend to her daughter. “Were you a good girl at *oma’s*?” The little girl shook her head yes, and Gretchen gave her a tight hug.

Marthe didn’t pursue her question. Instead, she changed the subject. “By the way, Dietre’s *mater* wanted to know if it would be all right if she kept Helene for a few days.”

“Oh? Why?” Gretchen asked.

“She’s going to take her shopping at the new toy store in the village and maybe buy her some new clothes. You know, treat her to something special.”

“You mean, give her things that I can’t?” Gretchen said *bitterly*. “The woman spoiled her with all those toys she gave her for Christmas.

“Gretchen, why are you that way? She loves Helene. She’s the grandchild that Dietre and I never gave her. I wish you wouldn’t always take these things the wrong way.”

Gretchen looked down at her little girl and thought for a moment. “Well, I suppose that would be a good thing for her,” she sighed.

“Don’t feel bad, Gretchen, I’m sure that one day everything will work out for you and Helene. The Lord is watching over you. You’ll see, one of these days.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes. “*Ja, ja*, one of these days,” she mumbled as she looked at the clock over the fireplace. “My goodness, Helene, it’s nearly ten o’clock. You need to be getting to bed.”

“Stay up and talk with me for awhile, Gretchen,” Marthe urged. “I really need to talk with you.”

“Not tonight, Marthe,” Gretchen snapped back. “Come on, Helene, it’s very late.” She grasped the child’s hand and guided her up the stairs to their room.

Helene went to sleep right away, and Gretchen wasted little time getting into her own bed. It was terribly cold and damp outside, and the blankets were the perfect remedy to warm her body. Thinking of her meeting with Hilga Litch the next day made her more restless than usual. She tried to

get everything out of her mind as best she could. Eventually she relaxed and dozed off.

During the night, without any warning, a hand stroking her hair woke her. She opened her eyes, but couldn't see a thing in the dark, though she knew who was there.

“Dietre, *los!*” she whispered forcefully.

He didn't respond. Instead, he continued gently running his fingers through her hair.

“Dietre, *bitte*, I'm very tired,” she begged in a friendly tone. He brought his hand down toward her hips.

“*Bitte nicht*. I'm warning you!” she said.

“Don't you tell me to stop. You tell me nothing!” he whispered back, as his hand gripped her leg tightly.

“That hurts, Dietre. That hurts!” she moaned quietly, trying not to wake Helene.

“I will do whatever I want. This is my house,” he whispered.

“I'll call Marthe,” Gretchen threatened.

“*Nein!* You will not.” He stood up and let the pajamas he wore under his robe drop to the floor. “Move over, Gretchen.”

“Dietre, get out of here, now!” she demanded as her whisper grew angrier.

“Shut up! If you don’t give me what I want I’ll have to tell my wife a little secret about you.”

“What are you talking about?”

He sat on the edge of the bed. “I’ve followed you to this place you call work. My friends tell me it’s a warehouse for lesbians. Are they right?”

“*Nein*, that’s not true!” Gretchen lied.

“I had my suspicions about you, girl, and they were right. You are a fucking whore for those high-class dames, aren’t you? That makes me sick to my stomach. Do you really think Marthe would want to hear about that?”

“Don’t tell her, *bitte*” she begged, realizing what he knew might destroy her God-fearing sister. “It’s not what you think, Dietre.”

“Don’t tell her, *bitte*” he mocked. “I’ll tell her everything if I fucking want to. Now move over!”

Doing as he said, she slowly moved to the other side of the bed. Dietre stroked her body, which trembled to his

touch. “Relax, girl,” he ordered, as he placed his hard flesh against her side.

Quickly she turned over with her back facing him. He tried twice, unsuccessfully, to pull her back around.

Tears filled her eyes as he lifted her gown up over her hips. His cold hard fingers worked their way into the back of her panties. Without thinking, she jerked the lower part of her body farther away.

Dietre reacted with violence, but quietly, hitting her with a sharp, sudden blow to the back of her head. It was all she could do to keep from screaming in pain.

Again, Dietre pulled down the back of her cotton panties and clumsily fondled her soft skin. She began sobbing into her pillow.

“Shut up!” he mumbled into her ear, irritated by her behavior.

“Go away, Dietre. You mustn’t do this to me, or to Marthe.”

“Marthe? You mean that cold fish sleeping in my bed downstairs? I do nothing to Marthe because she won’t let me. She makes all the rules in bed.” His words came *bitterly*,

with vengeance, as Gretchen realized this was Dietre's way of getting back at both her and her sister.

What seemed like hours, though was only a few minutes, Dietre forcibly entered her from behind, moaning and slobbering with each violent, hard thrust. She had no way of freeing herself from his clutches until he finished. She just lay there, trying to block what he was doing to her out of her mind, listening to the hard winter rain pelt the window. When he was finally through, Dietre kissed her on the back of her head, then got up and walked out.

The muscles of Gretchen's arms and legs ached from trying to resist his assault. She put a pillow between her thighs and squeezed them together tightly to quell the fiery burning pain his violent thrusts inflicted. When she felt the semen he left inside of her seeping out onto her legs, Gretchen frantically tried to wipe it off with the blanket, gritting her teeth and swearing under her breath as she spread his wrath on all the bed clothes. She began sobbing uncontrollably and her cries woke Helene.

"*Mutti, Mutti!*" the child called out. "Why are you crying?"

Gretchen quickly pulled herself together as best she could and answered in a calm, but trembling, voice, “*Mutti’s* okay, *süße*. Lie back down, go night-night! *Mutti’s* okay.”

As the child lay back down, she murmured, “*Mutti* isn’t supposed to cry.”

Gretchen did not have to work the next day, but remembered she had to meet Hilga Litch in the parking lot of the baden häus at five. Her tears flowed until a gloomy morning light peaked through a space between the bottom of the shade and the window sill. She was exhausted, frightened, and very confused.

CHAPTER 5



Gretchen woke around two-thirty in the afternoon the next day and went downstairs to check on Helene. A note on the kitchen table in Marthe's handwriting said she and Helene had gone grocery shopping. Gretchen looked out of the kitchen window at the endless driving rain storm.

She soaked in the bathtub for an hour before getting ready for her meeting with Hilga. She scribbled a note on the back of Marthe's, advising her she would return around eight-thirty that evening.

The beat-up '64 Volvo was on its last legs and Gretchen's mechanical aptitude was limited to knowing how to put gas in it and turning the key to start it. Her fingers shook nervously as the engine turned over. While the car idled, She opened her small gray purse, took out a tube of lipstick,

and positioned the rear view mirror to apply it. She spread it heavily on her top and bottom lips then searched impatiently for a piece of tissue to blot the excess. Satisfied with the results, she stepped on the gas and headed to the baden haüs. It was ten minutes to five when she pulled into the parking lot. It was still daylight and the rain was teeming. Gretchen had kept her window cracked about an inch so she could have a cigarette, but as the rain pounded that side of the car, it splashed through the opening, getting her dress wet. She rolled up the window and waited in the parking lot until Hilga arrived.

Fifteen minutes later, Gretchen sat in the back seat of Hilga's chauffeur-driven Mercedes. The sleek vehicle moved quickly through the city traffic. She figured her boss had gotten what she wanted, just as it seemed that Hilga was getting what she wanted.

Gretchen stared out the side window, trying not to look too nervous, as the car drove towards downtown Berlin.

"I guess you're curious about what's going on, *ja?*" the woman asked.

The girl turned her head instantly and looked at the woman. “Well,” she said. “I’ve never done anything like this with any of the other customers.”

“Don’t worry, *kind*. The benefits will be plenty if you decide to ... let me just say ... work for me.”

“Work for you?” Gretchen asked with a puzzled look on her face.

“*Ja*, I will tell you more over dinner.”

“Hilga?” Gretchen asked with a concerned look.

“*Ja*, dear, what is it?”

“Do you think I’ll be able to make it home by eight-thirty? You see, *meine schwester* is watching *meine töchter* again and I would hate to be late.” She asked this, thinking her request would be denied, always expecting the worst.

“That’s fine,” the woman reassured her, as the car pulled up to the front door of one of Berlin’s finest restaurants. “Everything will work out just fine,” the woman repeated. “Come on. It’s almost six o’clock and we don’t want to rush a wonderful meal to get you home on time, now do we?”

The driver got out of the car and walked around to open the door for them. Hilga and Gretchen stepped out, walked

into the plush establishment, and handed their coats to the young woman behind the counter.

Gretchen looked around at the ornate surroundings, in awe of what she saw. “This place is beautiful,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“*Ja*, it is splendid, isn’t it?” Hilga said, smiling. “Let me make sure they have my reservation.”

As Hilga walked toward the maitre’d, she saw a familiar face. “My, oh my, Renee. It’s my neighbor, Renee.”

Gretchen stood by as the two women embraced affectionately. “Renee, when did you get back?” Hilga asked.

“Oh, I’ve been back for weeks, Hilga. Of course, you would have known that if you came around once in awhile. I haven’t seen you much these past few months.”

“Well, probably because you’ve been on vacation, that’s why ...”

“*Nein, nein, nein*,” the woman scolded, “I’d only been gone one week and that’s all. I haven’t seen you for at least a month. *Ja*, at least that.”

“*Ja*, well, I would love to talk with you longer, but as you see, I have a guest for dinner tonight.”

“Oh, *ja*, she is a lovely young *fräulein*, Hilga. I can see now why you don’t come around anymore.”

Gretchen stood still, embarrassed that the two women were admiring her. The dark blue, low-cut dress she wore hugged her thighs with a hemline as short as it could be without revealing too much. Her hair hung loose on her shoulders, but she wore a silver clasp to hold back her bangs. As always, her makeup was applied thickly, but impeccably.

“Renee, this is a business dinner. Gretchen works for me. I’m very busy, you know,” Hilga explained.

“*Ja*, I know that,” the woman’s friend said jealously. “Are you being a bad girl, Hilga, my love?”

“Ach, Renee, we must be going now,” Hilga said. As if to make her point, she grabbed Gretchen by the hand and pulled her along.

“Good-bye, Hilga. Come see me soon, *bitte*” Renee pleaded.

“I will, I will, very soon, Renee,” she responded looking over her shoulder as she and Gretchen followed the mai-

tre'd into the dining area. "Oh, that stupid woman," she mumbled aloud.

"She's not a friend of yours?" Gretchen asked.

"Well, *ja*, I suppose she was an old friend. She is a very jealous woman, and that has caused a strain on our relationship."

"Oh, I see," Gretchen said.

As the two sat down, Hilga explained. "We have been neighbors for many years. When Renee's husband died last year, I did my best to comfort her. She knew that I slept with many different women, and I think her mental frailty at the time caused her to reach out for anyone she could latch onto for support. I realized that she tried to use me as a replacement for her husband. I wasn't physically attracted to her at all, but she seemed to want to have a love affair with me."

Gretchen listened intently, her elbows at the edge of the exquisitely set dining table. The waiter lit two candles that sat in the middle of a floral centerpiece.

"Anyway," the woman continued, "Renee was hurt incredibly by the loss of her husband. She simply was

crushed, but I couldn't be intimate with her. It just wasn't in the cards, as they say. She was rather embarrassed when I turned down her offer to share her bed. And that's the reason I don't see her anymore. It's just too hard for me. I mean, we were very good friends, but just friends, and that's all it could ever be. Except now she wants more."

"My goodness, that poor woman," Gretchen said. She wasn't sure why, but she felt sorry for Renee.

"*Ja*, it's a shame." Hilga changed the subject. "Now then, what will you have to eat?" Gretchen shrugged her shoulders. "All right then, I'll order for both of us," Hilga smiled.

An hour passed as they savored their meals, sipped some wine, and enjoyed dessert. When they were finished, Hilga lit a cigarette, then lit one for Gretchen and offered it to her.

"Gretchen, I guess you're wondering why I brought you here, *ja*?" Hilga took a long drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke out of the right side of her lips, away from the table. Gretchen nodded yes.

"Frau Manheimer has offered your assistance to me," Hilga continued, "and in return I will give her the financial help she wants for her business. With that said, let me stress

that you are free at this point to tell me not to go any further and, if that is what you choose, I'll take you back to the baden haus and we'll never see each other again. Shall I divulge the details of my offer of employment to you?" Hilga asked. Gretchen said nothing, not sure if she should answer.

"You need time to think about it?" the woman asked.

"*Nein, nein,*" Gretchen answered immediately. "Tell me more *bitte*. I have no reason not to accept a job that will allow me to make extra money."

"You are so right, you have no reason whatsoever," Hilga observed.

"Can I ask how much this position pays?" Gretchen carefully asked.

Hilga smiled, gratified for the girl's interest. "*Gewiss!* Certainly, my dear."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a small color photograph and a pen. She turned the photo over, scribbled a figure on the back of it, then slid it across the table.

Gretchen's eyes widened when she saw the amount. She was dumbfounded.

“You’re surprised?” Hilga asked.

“I’m shocked. What type of job can you have for me that pays this much money?” she asked.

Hilga was growing impatient. “Do you want the job or not?” she demanded.

Gretchen didn’t answer immediately. She covered her mouth with her fingers as she thought for a moment. Though still not sure, she gave an answer anyway. “*Ja*, I want the job!”

“Good. Come closer,” the woman said.

Gretchen scooted as close to the table as she could and leaned forward to listen.

“I want you to be my companion and my lover,” Hilga whispered.

“Excuse me?” Gretchen raised her eyebrows. She was confused and not sure she had heard Hilga correctly.

“I want you to be my lover,” the woman repeated, licking her lips. She took a long drag on her cigarette and stared at Gretchen, waiting for a response.

Gretchen’s jaw dropped. She had heard the request right the first time. She sat there, silent and flabbergasted.

Finally Hilga could wait no longer. “Now, I know you have never been with a woman before, Gretchen. But in time, you will come to love me and care for me,” she stated with confidence.

Gretchen put her hand over her mouth and stared blankly into the flame of one of the candles on the table.

“I am a very wealthy woman, Gretchen. We both have something to offer each other. You need my money, and I need the companionship of a young, beautiful woman like you.”

“But I couldn’t ...”

The woman patted the photo with the dollar figure written on the back of it. “You need the money, Gretchen. You can’t refuse.”

Gretchen decided to try another tactic. “Why me?” she asked, trying to keep the desperation out of her voice.

“Well, I have my criteria, and you meet it. Gretta Manheimer is to be commended for her choice. She’ll be rewarded, too, for the service.” A long moment of awkward silence ensued before Hilga continued.

“I promise I will be gentle with you, Gretchen.” Her voice was uncharacteristically soft. “I want you.” She reached out and turned the photo face up then slid it towards Gretchen. “Here, *kind*, this is for you to keep. We can share many things together.”

Gretchen reached for the picture and looked at it. It was a snapshot of Hilga lying nude on violet satin sheets on a brown Victorian bed, her legs spread wide apart. Another woman was lying between her thighs, her face pressed against the “V” her legs formed. Hilga’s hand’s grasped her own breasts, her eyes were closed, and her lips formed the ghost of a smile. She looked euphoric, as though she were having an orgasm.

The photo disturbed Gretchen. Hilga’s lesbianism was no surprise but something else bothered her. She wasn’t sure if she loathed her or was just disappointed in Hilga’s perverse pleasure in having someone watch her with another woman, and then take her picture or the fact that she chose to share it with Gretchen. But the sight of it, and the thought of someone else watching and what might happen next, almost made her sick to her stomach. “What is

going on here? Who took this picture?” she asked in a panic.

“One of the many pleasures of life we shall share, my love,” the woman said.

“Take me back to my car, *bitte*, Frau Litch,” Gretchen blurted. She tore the photo into several pieces, threw them on the table, and stood up so fast she almost knocked over her chair.

“Surely you’re not afraid?” the woman asked. “You must trust me on this.”

Gretchen felt weak, as though all the energy had been drained from her body. “Take me back to my car, now, *verdamm!*” she shouted.

“Sit down, *kind*,” the woman ordered, looking around the room. “Not so loud, for god’s sake. People will hear you. You’re making a scene.”

“*Nein!* I want to go home. Now. I don’t want your money,” Gretchen said angrily, as she began sobbing. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Hilga leaned back in her chair and took another long draw on her cigarette. “You pathetic little piece of trash.

You don't know what you're doing. You will lose your job over this!" she snarled.

"If you aren't going to take me home, I will call for a taxi," Gretchen cried.

"All right, you little snot. My driver will take you back," Hilga shook her head back and forth in disgust and looked around the room.

Gretchen stood silent at the table, tears running down her face. "Go on, get out of my sight," she told Gretchen. "I wouldn't bother going into work again if I were you. Your boss won't like what you've done. I hope you have another job waiting for you, you stupid, ungrateful little bitch."

After Gretchen retrieved her purse and coat, she glanced back at Hilga and saw her driver get up from another table nearby. She had not noticed him there earlier. He and Hilga spoke for a moment, then he leaned over and kissed her deeply on the lips. He walked back towards Gretchen, passed her, and continued outside to the car. Gretchen followed cautiously.

It was pouring. When she got into the back of the Mercedes, the man turned to her and said, "These rains are

common for the winters in this area. It's a torrential down-pour, it is." She returned a puzzled look to the mild mannered German and wiped away the tears.

The driver added, "My wife, Hilga, usually gets her way."

Gretchen was stunned when he made the statement. "Your wife?" she sighed, wondering what other secrets Hilga harbored.

"You really shouldn't have made her so mad, young lady," he continued. "She is not very happy with you right now. It's not easy being married to a woman like that, you know. She's very particular, as am I. Now we must begin again."

Gretchen shivered in disgust as the full magnitude of Hilga's subterfuge hit her. Now she knew who took the picture and what likely happened next. The two rode back to the baden haüs parking lot without saying another word to each other.

When they reached the parking lot, Gretchen quickly hopped out of the Mercedes, got into her car, and drove back to her sister's house. She followed the dark, dimly lit pavement that wound through the inner city like a maze,

barely able to see through the driving winter rain and sleet and the tears still running down her cheeks.

A bolt of lightening, a rarity during winter storms, streaked across the sky, down to the ground in the near distance, startling Gretchen for a moment. “Why doesn’t this damn rain stop?” she cried.

CHAPTER 6



Gretchen returned to her sister's house. As she pulled in the driveway she let out a sigh of relief when she saw that Dietre's car was gone.

When she got out of the car she didn't notice that the living room lights suddenly went out. She made her way up the porch steps and, as she turned the knob, the door seemed to open itself. Still, Gretchen wasn't concerned. She thought maybe she forgot to close it tightly before she left. She intended to head straight for the upstairs bathroom because she'd had to go from the time she left the restaurant.

She felt her way into the dark living room to find the lamp near the china cabinet and reached for the pull chain under the shade. As her hand searched clumsily, her fingers

found, instead of the chain, a familiar hand already holding it. Gretchen choked back a scream, knowing who it was. He did not turn on the light.

“Dietre, turn on the light. I can’t see a thing,” she told him in a frantic whisper.

“You guessed it was me?” he responded, laughing like a madman.

“Who else? Turn on the light. Now!”

“*Nein*, I don’t think I’m going to do that,” he said.

“Where are Marthe and Helene?” she asked in desperation.

“I sent them to my *mater*’s house this evening. It seems the old woman had a bad fall off a stool, so I offered Marthe’s assistance for a few days. With the storm hitting harder up that way, it looks like they’re going to be stranded there. None of the roads are passable according to the weather reports. They’re all flooded. Helene will be fine with her.”

“I hope they’ll be all right,” Gretchen said as she reached back under the lamp shade, trying to pull the chain. But Dietre’s hand still guarded it.

“Turn on the light. This is stupid. I can’t talk in the dark,” Gretchen demanded. “Come on now, turn it on!”

“You needn’t sound so desperate, Gretchen,” he said.

“What do you want, Dietre?” She pulled her coat together tightly, trying to conceal her breasts pushing out of the low-cut dress, though she knew he couldn’t see her in the darkness.

“What’s the matter, Gretchen? I thought you were getting to like our little get-togethers,” he laughed, as he reached out to touch her hair. When he found it, she turned her head away quickly. He reacted by grabbing a handful of her locks and violently pulling her backwards.

“*Ach! Verdammt,*” she cried out, “Stop it, Dietre, you’re hurting me. Stop it!”

He held onto her, jerking her head again. “You smell so good tonight, Gretchen,” he cooed. “Is that for one of your ladies?”

“Let me go, *bitte*” she begged.

“Marthe never smells good, but you always do. Do you mind if I kiss your neck?” Slowly he moved closer to her

body, releasing her hair and placing his face between the collar of her coat and her neck.

Gretchen jerked away from him and rammed her knee into his groin. He fell to his knees, bent over in agony. “*Scheißkerl*,” she shouted.” She side-stepped Dietre and dashed up the stairs to her bathroom, locking the door behind her. She could hear him moaning in pain downstairs where she’d left him. She pressed her back against the bathroom door, trying to catch her breath.

“You come back down here, girl,” Dietre yelled. “I demand that you come right down. Do you hear me?” Gretchen heard something that sounded like glass shattering against the living room wall. “*Hure!*” he screamed.

Gretchen’s legs collapsed and she fell to the hard, tiled bathroom floor. She curled up against the door as if to use her body as a barricade and waited for Dietre’s next move.

A sinister quiet loomed throughout the house as she sat guard. The pressure on her bladder was giving her cramps. Cautiously, she stood up and moved toward the toilet. Her ears were honed on the downstairs as she strained to hear the slightest movement. The only audible sound was her

urine thrashing in the toilet. She pulled off a few inches of tissue from the roll on the edge of the tub, used it, then began to cry.

Gretchen wondered if Dietre had fallen asleep on the couch. *Maybe he went to the tavern*, she thought, although she had not heard the door open or close to indicate that.

She unfastened the straps of her high heels, pulled them off, and scooted them away from the toilet. She carefully stood up and tried to regain her composure.

After removing her coat, she dropped it on the floor then looked in the mirror that was hinged to the medicine cabinet and let out a sigh of frustration as she cried again.

Gretchen stood amidst the uneasy quiet, seriously worried about her safety, not knowing how far Dietre would try to go. Her mind drifted for a moment. She thought of Helene and hoped the child was having a good time with her sister.

The loud bang of the bathroom door as it tore open interrupted her thoughts. For a terrifying moment, Gretchen felt as though her heart had stopped. She covered her mouth to keep from screaming and stared at the dis-

gusting hulk lurking in the doorway. Not a word was spoken as neither moved for a moment.

The radiator was not giving off any heat and the small room was icy cold. Gretchen trembled inside as the crazed man took his first step towards her.

“The choice is yours,” he proclaimed. “Give me what I want or you’ll leave me no choice.”

“Dietre, I don’t understand why you’re doing this to me. I’m sorry for whatever I’ve done to you,” she said.

“You should be,” he hissed. “Your *schwester*, my lovely, darling, Bible-toting *frau*, says if I don’t fix my problem soon she will divorce me. So, since you’re my problem ...”

“I’m sorry, Dietre,” she interrupted. “I’ll move out. I’ll leave tonight. I got another job,” she lied. “Let me go, *bitte*,” she pleaded.

“Do you think I’m going to let you go without giving me what I want? *Keineswegs!*” he said. She swallowed hard and said nothing. “Oh, come on now, it’s not that bad. I know I’m not the most handsome man in the world, but ...”

Gretchen wiped the tears from her cheeks and continued to cry.

“*Verdammt*, girl. Shut up! I hate that stupid whining,” he shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her violently. “Stop crying! *Nicht doch! Nicht doch!* Do you hear me?” he yelled at her as though she were a disobedient child.

“Come on now,” he said lowering his voice. “I want to take a bath with you. Turn on the water.” Gretchen did not move.

In an instant, Dietre let loose with a blow to her right ear with his open hand. The blow knocked her to the floor. She grabbed her ear in pain. “I said fix the bath, *verdammt!* You’re not listening, girl. I can’t understand why you’re so stubborn.”

Gretchen slowly got up, wailing in pain and fear, and did as he said.

While the water filled the tub, Dietre plotted his next move and Gretchen waited, shaking and sobbing.

“Is that water hot?” he asked. She didn’t answer. He raised his fist and punched her in the stomach. “I said, is the water hot?”

She doubled over, moaning in pain from the blow. Now she couldn't answer if she wanted to. "Is the water hot? Damn it, woman, answer me," he shouted.

Gretchen quickly nodded yes. Then to be sure, shaking nervously, she bent over and put her fingers in the water flowing from the faucet.

As she did this, Dietre smiled menacingly as he inspected her rear end and the back of her legs. When the water had filled the tub, about nine or ten inches deep, she turned off the faucet then turned back around towards him.

"Take off your clothes," he commanded.

"Oh, Dietre, is there some other way?"

"Shut up! Take off your clothes. Do it!" he shouted.

Obediently, Gretchen unbuttoned the five small plastic buttons from the middle of her cleavage down to her waist.

Dietre moved in front of the medicine cabinet, opened it, removed an old-fashioned straight razor, then pulled out a can of shaving cream.

Gretchen stopped undressing as she watched him skillfully drag the razor across his foam-covered face.

He noticed she had stopped. “Go on, continue. Don’t mind me. I just want to get cleaned up to go play cards at the tavern when we’re through here. I wish those guys from work would start the games a little earlier,” he said, as though he were carrying on a conversation with himself, oblivious to what he was putting her through.

Gretchen stared at him, biting her thumbnail and trembling. She hated him.

He looked at her reflection in the mirror. “Come on, now, I don’t have all fucking night. Get your goddamn clothes off and get in the tub. You aren’t going to get out of this, so you can forget that.”

“Why must you do this?” she asked again, her eyes, fiery red, filled with tears.

“You owe me!” he sneered.

“What do you mean, ‘owe you?’ Owe you what?” she asked. She took a deep breath to keep from crying again, but the tears came anyway. “I give Marthe money each week for food and rent.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” He laid the razor on the edge of the sink, grabbed a towel from the rack to wipe his face

clean, then moved directly in front of Gretchen as he unzipped his trousers and let them fall to the floor. “Will you stop the fucking whining?” he demanded.

He moved her dress off her shoulders and helped it fall to her ankles.

Gretchen continued crying. “What do you mean, I owe you?” she asked again, sobbing, hoping to delay the inevitable.

“You are just as ignorant as your *schwester*, do you know that?” he asked. He reached over to the sink and grabbed the straight razor, placed it between the bra’s cups, then used it to cut the material apart. Quickly, she grabbed his hands to stop him from continuing. Gretchen’s eyes begged for mercy, but Dietre proceeded to move the elastic cups apart, allowing her breasts to fall free. Her arms hastily covered them. He turned and laid the razor back on the edge of the sink, then moved back towards Gretchen, pulling her arms away from her breasts. His eyes found them, then his hands followed. He fondled them as he continued talking.

Gretchen's face turned a bright beet red, her face flushed in embarrassment. Tears fell continuously on her cheeks and her nose drained over her top lip.

"*Nicht doch! Bitte nicht!*" she whispered. She eyed the razor on the sink and hoped for an escape.

Dietre looked up, realizing what she was looking at. He glanced over at the razor then back at her. He whispered in her ear, "Don't even think it. I'll break your fucking neck and dump your body in the river. No one will know you're missing. I've thought it all out," he said proudly. "You don't want to mess with someone like me."

Gretchen moved her head away from his face, disgusted by his closeness. She saw the open bathroom door, gave Dietre a quick shove with as much power as her small frame could muster, and tried to dash out of the room. Dietre immediately grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her. A searing pain ripped through her shoulder and she screamed in agony. "*Nicht doch!*" she cried.

"You see," he let go of her arm then calmly continued, "all I ever wanted was a woman to take care of me. That's something I have never had, Gretchen. No matter what

Marthe thinks, I haven't had that, because you were here. Marthe has made you her number one priority." He stood her up in front of him again.

"*Nein!* Not me, Dietre. It's Helene, not me!" she moaned.

"You're wrong. It's always, 'Gretchen this' and 'Gretchen that.' I'm sick of it. This is my goddamn house and I demand some respect!" He stared at her nipples as his fingers tried to arouse them again. "You have denied me a full woman by taking all of her attention for yourself. You always come first," he paused for a moment, looked into her eyes, then continued. "You might say that this is my way of letting you repay me."

He quickly grabbed both of Gretchen's wrists and brought them together. While holding them with one hand, he reached down to the floor with his other, for her bra. In rapid succession, he wrapped the straps tightly around her wrists, then hoisted them above her head.

"*Nein, nein,*" she begged. She couldn't believe this was happening to her.

Dietre said nothing. On the wall, about a foot over Gretchen's head, was a metal robe hook where he hung her

by her bra straps, as though she were a carcass in a meat packing plant. *Da,*” he said proudly when he was certain she was secure.

Gretchen’s moans were quieter, like a sad kitten’s purr. “This is so wrong, Dietre, so wrong.”

He shook his head in disagreement. Then, as though he assumed she had no objections, he pulled her panties down past her knees, enough to cause them to fall the rest of the way to the floor. His body filled with excitement as he eyed her bare skin. Moving closer to her, so their chests touched, he reached down with his right hand and pulled her leg up by placing his fingers under her knee, then propped her foot on the edge of the tub. His other hand’s two fingers moved between her thighs and spread her apart as he guided himself into her. She closed her eyes and winced as he violently thrust into her.

He moaned and panted and fondled her breasts again as his hips moved back and forth, punishing Gretchen’s thighs. His awkward position caused him to slip out a few times but he quickly found his way back where he wanted to be.

Tears continued to flow from Gretchen's eyes as her sister's husband leaned back so he could watch his hardness assault her. The pain was unbearable. When it seemed he was almost finished, Dietre carefully slowed down and grasped Gretchen's rear end tightly to keep her from moving, while between her legs he kept himself from moving inside her. Then, after a few seconds, he began again. Harder and harder he plunged into her, as slobber escaped from the side of his mouth.

"*Ach, bitte nicht!* You're hurting me. *Nicht doch!* It hurts! It hurts! *Nicht doch!*" she begged and begged, to no avail. Her cries fell on deaf ears.

Minutes later, Gretchen's eyes widened as a cold terror gripped her. She let out a long, blood-curdling scream. She could take no more abuse and blackness surrounded her as she fell into unconsciousness. Her limp body hung on the hook while the madman continued his assault.



CHAPTER 7



She awoke in her bed but had no idea how long she'd been there. She checked the clock. It had been several hours since the assault, and Gretchen's body ached all over. She focused her eyes on the square glass light fixture that hung from the middle of the ceiling. She had never noticed the finely detailed flowers painted so delicately around the edges. She heard Helene's voice, along with the TV and clanging pots and pans, resounded from downstairs.

Gretchen looked down at her wrists and saw the red abrasions caused by the bra strap that had secured her to the hook the night before. It wasn't a nightmare as she had hoped. *It really happened*, she thought.

Slowly, she hoisted herself out of the bed and rubbed her ear. It was still sore from Dietre's blow.

Gretchen was wearing her robe and pajamas, though she had no recollection of putting them on. She made her way out into the hallway. When she got to the bathroom door, she carefully looked inside. Nothing was out of place nor were there any signs of what she remembered had happened in there. She covered her mouth with her hand when she saw the robe hook and began to sob. Her eyes burned from the tears she'd cried the night before.

Marthe came to the foot of the stairs and shouted up, "Gretchen, are you okay, *süße*?"

Gretchen turned around, still crying, and looked down the stairs towards her sister.

"You come on down here now, Gretchen," Marthe said. "No one's going to hurt you ever again. I promise."

Helene came to Marthe's side and looked up at her mother, "*Hallo, Mutti*. I love you."

Trying to force a smile for the child, Gretchen thought to herself, *What does Marthe mean? Where's Dietre?*

"Come on down and get some breakfast, Gretchen," Marthe said. "It's going to be okay now. Don't cry, *süße*."

Gretchen carefully walked down the steps. When she reached the bottom she noticed that the carpet was wet. Next to the railing sat an empty metal bucket with a scrub brush inside. She was thinking fast, trying to figure out what was going on, as she followed her sister's voice into the kitchen.

Marthe saw the puzzled look on Gretchen's face. "Sit down, *süße*."

Without speaking, Gretchen sat at the table while Marthe went to the counter and brought back a cup brimming with hot tea for the girl. She returned to get herself a cup too. Helene played in the living room with her dolls.

"Dietre won't ever hurt you again, Gretchen, I promise," Marthe stated firmly. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"It was you who put me in my bed, Marthe?"

"*Ja*. I cut you down off of that awful hook," she admitted. Her voice began trembling as she tried to hold back tears. "Let me fix you something to eat, *bitte*. I've got sausage and eggs."

"*Nein*, I want you to tell me what happened, Marthe. What happened last night?"

“Well, you see,” Marthe explained carefully. “Helene and I were on our way to Dietre’s *mater’s* house. We were turned back by *die polizei* who said a main bridge had washed out because of the storm. Everything was flooded.” Marthe stirred her tea and continued. “We turned around and headed home. When I came into the house, I heard you crying upstairs. Helene was sleeping so I took her into my bedroom, laid her on my bed, and closed the door. I came back out and stood by the foot of the stairs. I just stood down here wishing he would stop hurting you.” A tear drop fell from Marthe’s eye. “Then, all of a sudden, you let out a horrible scream. So loud. *Oh mein Gott*. It was awful.”

Gretchen sat without a word and listened. “I waited for another sound but there was just dead silence. I think you passed out. A million thoughts raced through my mind. What had Dietre done to you? I prayed he had not killed you.” She paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “I should have done something long ago. I knew that he was going into your room at night, but I didn’t do anything. I was afraid to confront him. I feared he’d make you leave.

I'm so sorry, Gretchen," Marthe wiped her tears. "Will you ever forgive me?"

They both began crying. Gretchen reached for her sister's hands. "Go on, Marthe. Then what happened?"

"I turned on the lamp, went to the coat closet in the living room, and took Dietre's pistol from a shoebox on the top shelf. I had never held a gun before. It was so frightening. After *Mater* and *Vater* were killed, I swore I'd never go near a gun."

"I didn't even think anymore after that. I tiptoed up those steps towards the bathroom door and found him fucking your unconscious body as it hung on that hook, fucking you and fucking you and fucking you!" Marthe whispered the filthy words that had never crossed her lips before. She did this with manic precision as she pounded the table with her fists.

Gretchen squeezed her hands tighter around Marthe's to stop her from hitting the table and to calm her down. They sat in silence for a short moment. Gretchen insisted, "Tell me what you did, Marthe. What did you do?"

Marthe looked up with a blank stare. “I said, ‘*Los!* Get away from *meine töchter.*’ Then Dietre looked at me with a cruel, twisted expression on his face and laughed at me. I raised the gun, pointed it at his head, and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit him on the left arm. He winced in pain, grabbed a towel from the sink, and tied it around his wound. Then he picked up a straight razor and moved towards me, waving it at me.”

Gretchen interrupted, “Wait, Marthe. Wait a minute. You said ‘*meine töchter.*’ You meant ‘*schwester,*’ right?”

“Let me finish, Gretchen. I will explain everything. I should have told you years ago.”

“What?” Gretchen asked again.

“Let me finish,” Marthe said.

Gretchen felt her anxiety growing. “Okay, then. What did you do after that, Marthe?” she asked nervously.

“I slowly backed away, out into the hallway, holding the gun with one hand, while searching behind me for the railing with the other hand. When I found it, I backed down each step carefully, while pointing the gun up at Dietre. He said exactly what you said, ‘What do you mean, your

töchter? Gretchen is your *schwester*, not your fucking *töchter*.' That's the way he said it. 'Gretchen is your *schwester*, not your fucking *töchter*.'" she repeated. Gretchen listened patiently as Marthe continued.

"I told him you were not *meine schwester*, that you were *meine töchter* who I gave up for adoption to my parents twenty-three years ago."

Gretchen's eyes grew wide and filled with tears as her stomach began to churn. She didn't move or make a sound. She wanted to hear it all.

"Dietre stared at me as I told him what I had hidden from everyone all these years. I told him, 'When I was seventeen, I fell in love with Philipp Kraus, a young seminary student. It was before I met you, Dietre. We did a stupid thing and went further than we ever should have. I found out I was pregnant with his baby the day after he left to take his final vows for the priesthood.' Dietre's eyes grew wild with rage as he listened to me."

Marthe continued speaking as though she were talking directly to Dietre. "I told him, 'I let my *mater* talk me into giving them the baby, to keep from ruining Father Philipp's

career. We all agreed to keep the secret to protect Father Philipp. A few years passed and I lost contact with him. He never knew about the baby. I met you, Dietre, and, though I never loved you, I accepted your proposal. I just felt so hopeless and lonely after Philipp left. I thought having you in my life would make me forget him. I didn't.' That's what I told Dietre," Marthe said in a sad, sorrowful tone.

"Are you telling me that you are my *mater* and Father Philipp here at St. Michaels, right down the *straße*, is my real *vater*?" Gretchen cried.

"I have tried to tell you many times, but I just didn't have the courage, Gretchen," Marthe sobbed.

"*Mein Gott*," Gretchen said. "It all makes sense. All of it." She stared blankly at the kitchen wall.

Marthe continued, "Dietre couldn't make any sense of what I was telling him. He shouted hateful things at me. He called me a *hure*. I told him he never should have laid a hand on you," Marthe slowly whispered. "He swore at me and called me terrible names."

Gretchen held her hand and asked Marthe, "What did you do then?"

“Dietre said, ‘Give me the gun, Marthe.’ I said, ‘*Nein*, Dietre. You stay away from me.’ He kept coming towards me, waving the razor. I was so scared. I slowly backed down the steps. He stood there, naked, glaring at me with such hatred. His arm was bleeding yet he continued to swing the razor towards me. *Mein Gott*, Gretchen, I hated the sight of him. It made me sick to my stomach.” She continued crying.

“It’s okay,” Gretchen whispered. “Calm down. Tell me what happened next.”

“Dietre started talking to me in a quiet, soothing tone. He said, ‘Come on now, darling, give the gun to Dietre. Give the gun to Dietre.’ By that time, I was more than halfway down the stairs. I watched his every move as he stopped at the top step. Then he shouted, ‘Give me the fucking gun now, you stupid bitch, or I’ll kill you!’”

“I don’t know what I was thinking. I pulled the trigger again. The bullet hit him in the forehead, above his right eye, and a stream of blood flowed onto his face within an instant. He stood frozen for just a moment, with this horrible, frightening stare on his face. Then he dropped the

razor and fell forward. I was afraid he would fall on me, so I pressed myself tightly against the railing as his body tumbled down the steps past me, then down to the floor.

His blood quickly saturated the carpet, but I was able to get out all of the stain. I've been scrubbing all morning. I'm sure I got all of it out." She paused for a minute, then cried out, "I killed my husband, Gretchen! *Oh mein Gott*, I killed him." Marthe lay her head on her arm, which rested on the table, and continued crying.

Gretchen softly patted her on the back. "Tell me, what did you do with his body, Marthe? Where is he?" she asked, in a calm but anxious voice. "Look at me. Tell me." Gretchen grabbed her by the chin and lifted her face.

Marthe sat up, licked the tears that ran down onto her lips, then turned and pointed to the door that led out of the kitchen onto the back porch. "He was so heavy, Gretchen. I had to drag him all the way out there. He was so heavy."

Gretchen looked at Marthe, her mind racing, then at the door. She stood up and walked slowly over to peer out the small window in the door.

Marthe stood up from the table and said, in a strange, faraway voice, “I think I’m going to go into the living room now to read my prayer book, Gretchen. I called Father Philipp. He’s coming soon to take the body away. He said he would take care of everything.” She sobbed, “I-I just wanted Dietre out of my house.” Abruptly, she stopped. “I need to go pray now. I will answer any of your questions later. I’m sure you have many questions.”

Gretchen’s sad eyes peered out of the window to the porch’s wooden floor. She couldn’t see anything so she opened the door and gently stepped outside into the cold, damp air. To her left, placed against the house, was a large bundle that looked like an old carpet rolled up in a heavy canvas tarp.

She bent down, very slowly, her hand trembling and opened the end of the tarp. Inside she saw what she thought she might: Dietre’s blood-soaked scalp. Her fingers froze still for a moment, as she looked at the black bullet hole in the corpse’s forehead. After she let the tarp fall back in place, she stood up straight and rubbed the wounds on her wrists. An empty sadness came over her.

Just then she heard a car drive up to the back fence in the alley and stop. Father Philipp Kraus stepped out. Gretchen recognized him and watched him carefully. He was tall, with a gentle air that belied his strength. For the first time Gretchen noticed his hair was the same color as hers. He strode towards the rear of the car, opened the trunk, then headed through the gate and up the walkway towards her. Gretchen stood, mesmerized, on the porch. He looked at her, gently touched her arm, and whispered, “Everything will be all right, *meine kind*. I will see to it. I will see to it.”

Without missing a beat, he moved towards the corpse, wrestled with it for a minute, then hoisted it over his shoulder, and struggled out of the rain-soaked yard, back through the gate and into the alley. He tossed the body into the trunk, slammed the lid shut, then looked back towards Gretchen. He calmly smiled and lifted his hand to wave goodbye to her. Gretchen returned a half wave with a limp hand.

She watched the priest drive away then remained on the porch, pausing to reflect upon all she had been through. She tried to sort out her thoughts and everything that had

led up to that moment. How would she and Marthe explain Dietre's disappearance to the police? She hadn't a clue, but she knew instinctively things would be better now than they were before.

The sun glimmered off wet puddles left in the yard by the torrential rains. Gretchen forced a smile, let out a deep breath she could see in the cold air, and hugged herself. She stood under the bright morning sky, tears streaming down her face.

She heard Helene inside the house, calling out for her. "*Mutti, Mutti*, where are you? Where are you, *Mutti*?"

Gretchen looked down one last time at the place where the corpse had lain on the porch, then glanced back towards the alley. She turned and went back inside to find her daughter and comfort Marthe. "*Meine mutter.*" She said the words aloud. They sounded strange yet comforting to her.

It seemed, at least for the time being, the storm was over.

The End

German/English translations:

ach: oh

bitte nicht: please don't

braüthaus: tavern

die polizei: the police

doch, ja: why, yes

dummkopf: idiot

dumpfbacke: dumb-ass

frau: mrs.

fräulein: miss

gewiss: certainly

hure: whore

keineswegs: no way

kind: child

kirche: church

los: get out; go on

meine frau: my wife

meine töchter: my daughter

mutti: mommy

mater: mother

nicht doch: stop it

oma: grandma

oh mein gott: oh my god

scheißkerl: son of a bitch

schwester: sister

straße: street

süße: honey

vater: father

verdammt: damn it

wie bitte? sorry? pardon?

wirklich? really?



*“The author”
(photo credit Kayla Siedle).*