

## Chapter 1

The death troubled him. Mostly because the operator's seven-year-old daughter, Marthe, had seen the body fall. That upset Ariel, as he read the Googled account on his iPad. On a come-to-work-with-Dad day, Hans Chielding, the crane operator at Autoverwertung Gottzman, Hamburg, had tried to dissuade seven-year-old Marthe, explaining how dull it was watching old cars lifted, crushed, and loaded onto flatbed trucks for shipping. But Marthe loved her father, with his strong inked arms, and wanted to be with him where *he* went, on the days she attended school.

So, Hans and Marthe were in the new Sennebogen, "the green one, *Vati!*" It was already warmed up as the night shift had just refueled and prepped it. On the second lift, an old blue BMW 2800, the round magnet made good contact with the car roof, so Hans began the lift, while easing the cab gently right, when the weight shifted and the rear trunk opened. An adult female body dropped like a heavy rag doll from the car. Hans didn't know if Marthe was stunned by the body or the nakedness. Or was she stunned into silence by the fact that the female form was headless?

\* \* \*

Ariel read this about eighteen hours after it happened. By then he was at Pearson International Airport in Toronto awaiting the boarding call for his flight to Zurich. Ariel was appalled to be back in an airport. At only 08:15 this morning, he had donned sunglasses and sandals to walk to the freshly combed sandy beach. He was staying in one of the lodge suites at Isiah Tubbs, a resort near Sandbanks in southeastern Ontario.

It was mid-September, his favourite vacation time, as summer weather still prevailed while the world had returned to work or school. He'd arrived the afternoon prior, spent the early morning reading, thinking, and drinking coffee, and thought he'd sun and swim a bit before showering. He had been interrupted from his reading by the tractor that dragged the sand rakes, a mechanism he had never seen before. Adjusting one of the beach loungers to sit steadily amongst

the furrowed sand, he was just getting comfortable when he heard the telex sound of an incoming text. He figured it was Helene or Lydia, but it was neither.

The text was from Deiter von Auxmeier, a man he knew of but had never met. Ariel was surprised and curious for about 10 seconds and then he was dismayed: *Ariel, You may not remember me but I knew your father...and I need your help. Please phone me at this number... It's urgent. With thanks, DvA.*

Ariel had no choice, so he called Auxmeier from the beach chair. And as he heard the Euro ring, he suspected his sorry ass would remain on the beach for about the duration of the call.

DvA: Ariel

Ad'A: Herr von Auxmeier.

DvA: Deiter, please. As I recall, you have the same finite range of patience as your father, so I'll lay out the facts quickly.

Ad'A: Thank you.

DvA: One of my sons is a Bundesliga midfielder presently playing for Hamburg. He received a blackmail video and a demand for one million euros. The video shows Erik in a group sex scene. If that gets to the media, he will be suspended. Or worse. Not only does Hamburger SV depend on him, this is tearing him to shreds. Do you understand?

Ad'A: I understand. What do you wish me to do?

DvA: I wish you to organize our side of this battle...for that is what it is. My recollection is that you know your way around the back alleys of a lot of cities, and that you know men who can keep you alive in such contexts. It may come to that.

Ad'A: Your understanding of my background is exaggerated but because you have been so kind to us... (he had trouble finishing the sentence so skipped it) I will help. What do you wish me to do?

DvA: Come to Hamburg as soon as you can manage. Where are you?

Ad'A: Southeastern Ontario, about three hours from Pearson International Airport in Toronto.

DvA: I'm sorry, are you vacationing?

Ad'A: Deiter, I'm on my own. I can travel. I'll be at the airport by midafternoon.

DvA: The ticket will be there. Air Canada has a flight departing 16:50 for Zurich. Fifty-five minutes after landing you fly to Hamburg. If I could beat their commuting time, I would. A driver will be waiting at the baggage area. His name is Johannes. He has an image of you and will make himself known. I'll see you at about 9:45 tomorrow morning, Hamburg time, yes?

Ad'A: You will, sir. Until then.

DvA: Ariel. Thank you. Already, it is clear to me that you are your father's son. Goodbye for now.

And he rang off thinking it was an unfair compliment because Dieter didn't know Ariel's mother.

Ariel had made some calls, re-packed, checked-out, and driven through the hellish east end of Toronto's Highway 401, the largest cross section of highway in the world. He parked his car in long-term storage, grabbed his bag and headed for the gate.

It was at the gate that he started his research and made two more calls.