

Set For Life



Norman Way



A "New Woman" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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SET FOR LIFE

By Norman Way

Prologue Southern Germany, 1944

SS Colonel Hermann Kleinholtz stood with the two engineers behind the barricade at the end of the short railroad siding southeast of the German town of Strausburg. It was a warm, sunny afternoon, with clear skies and a slight breeze blowing out of the southwest.

Colonel Kleinholtz was glad to be assigned to this top-secret operation in small, out-of-the-way Strausburg. After the Germans had failed to stop the Allied landings in Normandy, things had gotten a bit rough around German High Command Headquarters, where he had formerly been assigned. The increased Allied bombings had not yet been a problem down here, largely because this particular section of German railroad was not used very much.

The three men began walking east through the high grass to the tree line. They continued walking to the end of the tree line until they came to the rocky ridge near the border of the city. Two hundred yards east of where they were standing was an open field.

“The Jew laborers will be housed there in tents while they work here,” said one of the engineers as he pointed in the direction of the open field.

Kleinholtz asked no questions as the engineers looked around some more and then walked back to the short siding. He followed them to their staff car parked nearby.

“It’s perfect,” commented one of the engineers. “The laborers and equipment will be here within a week. When they arrive, please notify the Fuehrer that work has begun.”

Both men snapped a Nazi salute. “Heil Hitler!”

Kleinholtz returned their salute. The engineers got in their staff car and drove away.

As he walked back to his hotel, Kleinholtz wondered about this top-secret project, the security of which had been entrusted to him. The war had not gone well since the Allies had landed at Normandy, and the future did not look very bright for the Fatherland.

Fortunately he had managed to get his wife and his young son Carl across the Swiss border to safety. He had made plans for his own escape too. As soon as this project was completed he was going to join them, and then they would begin their new lives together as Swiss citizens. They might even emigrate from there to another country, somewhere in Brazil or Argentina perhaps. America was also a place to consider. There

were many fine countries a man or a man and his family could begin a new and comfortable life in.

One thing was certain: they would have no future in postwar Germany, particularly because he had been in the SS. That would make him a marked man. If Germany lost the war he would be prosecuted for war crimes, which could lead to his execution or life imprisonment. After that happened, his family would be left to fend for themselves. They were going to have a very difficult time of it. He and his family really had no choice. They had to relocate for their own safety and well-being, even if it was before the war ended.

Yes, they would have to leave Germany—but they would never abandon their devotion to the great ideals of National Socialism, and to the advancement of the Master Race. Kleinholtz's wife, Walburga, was as devoted as he, and young Carl was showing great promise. It was a shame that he and Walburga had been unable to breed any more future leaders of the Master Race like Carl, but that could not be helped, any more than it now appeared the defeat of Germany could be avoided. Still, even if Germany were defeated, the Master Race must never be defeated!

The next week a train carrying the Jew laborers arrived and started to work. A path was bulldozed through the cleared area to the base of the ridge where the mining equipment would drill the cave for the secure storage of the priceless treasures to be hidden there. When the path was finished, a 20-foot wide by 20-foot high cave was drilled into the rocky ridge, with the rock and dirt being hauled away by trucks.

The two German engineers and Colonel Kleinholtz inspected the work periodically. Everything was progressing on schedule just as planned. German soldiers from the local garrison just south of the ware-

house complex kept prying eyes away from the construction site.

Tight security had to be maintained for this project, with no margin for error, under direct orders from the German High Command. Few people outside of the Fuehrer even knew about it, since the Fuehrer had planned it himself and had trusted its completion to only a very few people outside of the German High Command. No one except the engineers could get close enough to see what was going on.

Inside the newly constructed cave, nine three-foot by four-foot holes were dug along the walls on both sides of the cave. Six more holes were dug down the middle, where the railroad tracks were going to be laid. A small space at the end of a short corridor at the rear of the cave was carved out to serve as an office. It would only be used until the cave was sealed. Once sealed, it would look as if nothing had been done in that area. Except for those who worked on the project, no one else would know of its existence. Drawings and specifications for the project would be destroyed on its completion.

After another inspection by the engineers, the laborers began laying railroad tracks from the barricade to the very end of the cave. A military wrecker truck was parked at the rear of the cave near the office. When it came time to re-open the cave, the truck would be used to remove the bombs once the demolition squad had defused them.

When the tracks were finished, an engine pushed a flatcar with 24 250-kilogram aircraft-type bombs into the cave. A soldier operated the wrecker truck that lifted the bombs off of the flatcar and placed them carefully in the nine holes on each side of the cave.

Next, as the train backed out of the cave, a bomb was placed in each of the six holes that had been dug between the tracks. These six holes were directly underneath each of the six boxcars that would be parked in the cave.

The following morning a demolition team arrived. They wired all 24 bombs together. As soon as they finished, Colonel Kleinholtz went to the army garrison headquarters building. There he phoned the German High Command in Berlin from the front office switchboard. "Please tell the Fuehrer his accommodations have been completed and we are awaiting the shipment of his furnishings," he said, and then hung up.

A week later, after midnight, an engine pushed six boxcars into the cave. This train had traveled only at night, due to the chance of Allied aircraft blowing it up before it could reach its destination. The increased presence of Allied aircraft had made transportation of anything more difficult, and this train load was one that Germany could not afford to have destroyed, so it had been given top priority over all other nighttime traffic.

It turned out that the tracks through the cave were on a very slight incline. For this reason, the wheels of each boxcar were chocked with a concrete block to insure that they would not begin to roll downhill towards the entrance.

In the morning the laborers fabricated a wooden façade across the front of the cave, leaving only a small opening on the left side. Special materials were mixed and then sprayed over the wooden façade. When it dried, the front of the cave looked exactly like the surrounding rock.

The demolition crew came back; the bombs were wired up to several trip wires on both sides and across the front of the cave. After they finished the job, they exited the cave through the small hole on the side. The small hole was then covered with a wooden façade and sprayed with the same material that was covering the rest of the cave's opening.

Colonel Kleinholtz and the two engineers surveyed the completed work. The material had hardened and it looked just like the black-grey rocky ridge that surrounded it. If you didn't know where the cave opening was before, you couldn't tell where it was now.

Last, the Jew laborers laid rolls of sod from the top of the ridge to the bottom, covering up part of the finished façade. Everything that had been done blended in perfectly with the rest of the ridge and the surrounding area from any direction. Even aerial surveillance would be useless to detect it.

The two engineers were quite pleased with the way things looked, and with the fact that all of the work had been completed ahead of schedule. After another Nazi salute, they both departed the area and returned to Berlin with their mission accomplished.

That night Colonel Kleinholtz phoned the German High Command again from the army garrison's headquarters: "Please tell the Fuehrer his furnishings have arrived and are all in place."

In the morning the Jew laborers began ripping up the railroad tracks. When they finished, the ground was smoothed out and rolls of sod were put in place. The barricade was reinstalled at the end of the short siding, just as it was before the cave was constructed.

The sanitary pit at the rear of the tents had been enlarged. The Jew laborers were then lined up and

executed. Their bodies were dumped into the pit and covered up. Kleinholtz felt a slight twinge of unease at the sight. Members of inferior races, of course, could be executed at will by those of the Master Race—but Kleinholtz had never quite understood why Jews, who might be quite as white as, say, the Fuehrer himself, were not considered members of the Master Race. Of course it was an opinion that he had always kept strictly to himself since the rise of National Socialism. Still, if ever he were the Fuehrer, he would surely enlarge the definition of the Master Race to include, not exclude, the Jews.

Soldiers packed up the bedding and then they dismantled the tents. Army trucks hauled everything away, leaving the field and the general area almost exactly as it had been prior to construction. It was almost as if nothing had happened there at all.

Sunday night, after the evening meal, Colonel Kleinholtz stood on a platform next to the garrison's commanding officer and before the assembled army garrison. He cleared his throat and then addressed the assembled soldiers in front of him: "The Fuehrer has asked me to commend you on the outstanding job you have done for the Fatherland. I am pleased to inform you that he has authorized an additional month's pay, and all of you will have thirty days paid leave before being reassigned. The paymaster will give you your money now, and in the morning a convoy of trucks will be here to take you to dispersal points so all of you may go home."

Kleinholtz stepped back and the garrison's commander stepped to the front. He dismissed the men and they quickly began eagerly lining up at the tables to receive their pay. This was almost the only good news they had since the Allies had landed at Normandy; they couldn't wait to go uptown and spend

their money. The way the war was going, it might be the last chance any of them would have to party.

Before leaving the base, Kleinholtz picked up the mail at the garrison's office. The mail was in two groups, one including business and military mail, the other the soldiers' personal mail. He took the business and military mail to the postal station. The soldiers' personal mail he took back to his hotel.

Standing in front of the hotel's fireplace he tossed the soldiers' personal mail, several letters at a time, into the flames and watched as the fire consumed them. The German High Command didn't want to take the risk of any soldier writing home about this construction project or the fact that they were being re-assigned.

Later that night Kleinholtz made the rounds of various nightclubs and drinking establishments. He shared drinks with some of the soldiers and wished them well. Everyone was in a jovial mood. In the morning they would all be going home to spend time with their friends and families. Only the colonel knew that, in the morning, the convoy bringing in the replacement soldiers would not be taking these men to dispersal points. They would be trucked to the Russian front. They would simply be told that the Fuehrer had changed their orders at the last minute and that they would be needed elsewhere.

He doubted if many of them would survive to talk about the construction project they had been guarding, since in all likelihood they would probably die fighting either the Russians or the Americans and British who had been advancing at an alarming rate. There had been rumors of a massive offensive through the Ardennes later in the year, but that hardly seemed possible at this late date. Following the debacle at Stalingrad and the Allies landing in

France, there seemed to be no stopping them. Hitler's Germany and its Third Reich, which was supposed to last a thousand years, appeared to be doomed.

For all intents and purposes the war was lost, and it was just a matter of time before Germany had to surrender. To continue to fight until the very end was pure madness. Kleinholtz doubted if he was the only one that had begun to question the mental capabilities of the Fuehrer.

In July, shortly after the Allies came ashore at Normandy, he had slipped across the Swiss border with a forged passport and an attaché case with fifty thousand Swiss francs, which he put in a safety deposit box in one of the local banks. The Swiss bankers were not any smarter than other bankers, but they did know how to keep a secret. When things got bad he would head for the border to join Walburga and Carl. They would begin a new life together with that money and other forged documents.

He was glad that his escape plan for his family had gone off without a hitch, and he was looking forward to rejoining his family as soon as he could arrange his own escape. For now he would just have to see how things went here. It would only be a short time before he would be able to put his own escape plan into action and leave all of this behind him.

Turning up the collar of his full-length leather coat, he began walking quickly back to his hotel. He was several blocks away when two figures in dark clothing walked out from an alley and confronted him. Startled, the colonel took a step back as one of the men raised his right arm.

There was no sound as the silenced pistol discharged. The 9mm bullet struck the colonel in the

forehead and he toppled backwards. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The shooter jammed the pistol in his coat pocket as both men rushed forward. They grabbed the dead colonel's body under the armpits and dragged him back into the alley where their car was parked with its trunk open. After depositing the colonel's body in the trunk, they slammed the lid shut and drove off into the night.

Chapter 1

My story, I think, begins like most all transgender people's stories. I knew there was something wrong with me even as a very young child. That thing between my legs didn't belong there. I wasn't who I appeared to be. I wanted to wear dresses, not pants. I loved the color pink and wished for pink finger and toe nails.

What was wrong with me? Why did I have these feelings of femininity? Did God do this to me? If so, why? Was this God's idea of a bad joke? I asked myself over and over again. And why me—or for that matter, why anybody?

Like most children, I suffered in silence. I was afraid to talk to anyone about this. Would my mother understand? I doubted it, but then who would? Nobody, of course. I was alone with this singular problem of being a female in a male body. Was I going to be trapped forever like this? Had I died in some previous life, and was this my hell?

Early on I learned there were two worlds: Masculine and Feminine. I was in the masculine one by virtue of my biology. But I knew I didn't belong there. I was in essence a prisoner in my own body.

Like any prisoner I wanted out, not only of this body but the male life that I was heading into without being asked if this was the life I wanted. I had been stuck here. Perhaps this was God's idea of a bad joke. If it was, I certainly didn't think that it was very funny.

I knew I was going to have to do something or go crazy. As a child, of course, there were no options open to me. As I grew older maybe, by some miracle or other, there might be an answer—but for now I couldn't even imagine what it might be. I could only keep hoping that there was going to be one and I would be able to find it.

The question was, what was I going to do until then? When would I be able to resolve this situation and get started on the life I wanted and deserved to have? Or would I be forever consigned to be miserable in a body that was not mine?

I knew that there might be a point where I would no longer be able to “suck it up” and just live as a man. What would I do then? Killing myself didn't seem to be the worst possible option, but I wasn't sure. Someone once said “Death solves all your problems”—but of course that person hadn't yet died and found out whether it was true or not. I decided not to take the chance.

Mom had divorced my dad before I was born. She never talked about him much, except to say he had been found dead in his pickup truck camper on a California beach some weeks after their divorce had been finalized.

She remained in Minnesota, where I was born, and worked in human resources at a computer software firm. She made good money, but had to put in longer hours than most of the other employees. That meant

I had a lot of time to myself. I used it wisely, studying hard and earning good grades.

I would not describe her as a “health nut,” but she and I made good use of the treadmill and stationary bike in the basement of our duplex. When the weather was nice we jogged, biked or walked in the parks in the surrounding area. We both enjoyed the silence and solitude of the great outdoors.

You could say that the silence and solitude were my saving grace. There was never a lot of conversation between us. I kept myself busy with household cleaning and laundry chores as well as my outside chores of mowing, raking, and shoveling the snow from the sidewalk and driveway.

“Everybody works, everybody benefits,” she had once said.

I continued to struggle with my feelings. The internet provided me with information about resources and treatment, though as a minor I was not able to utilize any of it. I thoroughly enjoyed the websites that sold bridal, bridesmaid and prom dresses as well as other formal apparel.

Fantasizing about wearing those beautiful dresses consumed a good deal of my free time. I also enjoyed those internet retail sites that sold what were called “sissy dresses” and accompanying accessories like ruffled panties, petticoats, high heel pumps, French Maid uniforms, etc.

I thought about how much fun it would be to be able to wear such feminine apparel while mincing around coquettishly in those high-heeled shoes. Listening to the click of my high heels on the hard floor and the rustle of my petticoats under my satin or taf-

feta puff sleeve French Maid mini dress as I walked was both a visual and audible fantasy.

In addition I dreamed of being able to enjoy luxuriating in a perfumed bubble bath, scrubbing myself with perfumed soap and, after toweling my self dry, generously dusting myself from head to foot with sweetly scented body powder.

These were all very “girly” and very feminine dreams. The thought of them one day coming true would have to remain just a fantasy for now. Nevertheless, they kept me going. Sometimes dreams and fantasies are all you have to hang on to.

Imagining myself wearing pretty lingerie and sitting at a pink well-lighted vanity applying creamy lipstick, powdered blusher, eyeliner, eye shadow and mascara was another of my favorite fantasies.

Just how I would look in make up was something yet to be determined, but I was confident that I was going to make a pretty girl if I ever got the chance. At this point God only knew when that chance might come.

A news program about the Kentucky Derby got me wishing I could wear one of those fabulous floor-length gowns and big floppy hats I saw the women wearing. Wishes and dreams were all that seemed to be a big part of my life to date.

I also thought about wearing foundation garments, sheer stockings, a lacy camisole with a matching half slip under a very frilly, feminine blouse tucked into a slim tailored skirt and high heel pumps, working as a female executive’s receptionist or personal secretary. Combining working en femme and living en femme would be an ideal lifestyle for me.

Sometimes it was hard to concentrate on my studies or whatever else I was doing when these thoughts of femininity seemed to overpower my thought process. On one occasion mom waved her hand in front of me and said “Earth to Michael, Earth to Michael, HELLO.”

I managed to snap out of it with the excuse that I had been preoccupied with something at school. Still she had looked at me and asked:

“Is everything OK?”

Naturally I replied “Of course, mom.”

At puberty my voice didn’t change much. I knew if I could ever be a girl someday I wouldn’t want to have a strong masculine voice, so I had always spoken softly. Voice is the one thing that couldn’t be altered very much, so I talked very little and, when I did, I kept my voice modulated.

I stuck with our healthy diet and exercise routine. Down the road, I knew, the better physical shape I was in, the better I would be able to withstand the rigors of the surgery I thought I was going to need, as well as the hormonal effects my body would be going through.

Looking in the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door after showering one night, I thought that my nearly hair-free body, with hormone treatment, could result in a fairly attractive female. With both hands I pushed up under my nipples, and thought it wouldn’t take too much to give me a decent set of breasts.

Due to my short stature, mom had enrolled me in martial arts at a young age. I guess she could see that by the time I was in high school I could be a target for



bullies, and she wanted me to be able to defend myself. I applied myself enthusiastically and soon became good at it.

Sports never really interested me. I would have much rather been taking ballet and dance lessons in addition to my martial arts classes. Of course there was no hope of that ever happening, as much as I would have liked it.

I saw myself in my little pink ballerina costume wearing pink nail polish, blusher and lipstick as I pranced around the stage to the delight of my parents. It was a very nice pipedream, but of course that was all it was. It seemed like pipedreams were all that I was ever going to have until I could find a way out of my predicament, or “conundrum” as one internet site put it.

Ballet and dance lessons were just some of the things that had passed me by, which I had no hope of getting back. I was left without hope of recouping those things, except of course in my dreams and fantasies, but that was little consolation as far as I was concerned.

In my spare time I continued to enjoy those internet sites I mentioned. It was a form of “release,” I guess you could say. Those websites and my dreams were the only things I had to keep me going.

The fact that the internet had provided me with a lot of information about this “condition,” for lack of a better word, as well as the knowledge that there were many others like me out, there didn’t help much to alleviate the stress that I was feeling.

As long as I lived with mom, I knew, I was never going to have an opportunity to cross dress or apply makeup, so there was no point in buying anything

just yet. That would have to be for some time in the future—but still I was getting impatient for the chance to see my “feminine side” as someone once put it.

I didn't have long to wait to be living in an empty duplex. After finishing my sophomore year, I turned sixteen that May. Mom and I had planned a hiking vacation to Yellowstone Park. There would be plenty of beautiful outdoors for us to enjoy there.

When we got back I would start a summer job at a local golf course and country club. Mom knew somebody there and had gotten me an interview before school let out. I wanted very badly to start earning my own money.

The trip was never made because a former employee returned to work with a gun and began shooting.

Mom and I had thought she worked in a fairly secure building—but it turned out it was not secure enough. The man entered the lobby just as several employees were leaving for lunch and opened fire on them. Mom and two others were shot dead, and three more were wounded, before he was shot dead by security.

The company described him as a “disgruntled employee.” I wondered why more steps had not been taken to insure that he would not be able to do something like this—but it would serve no purpose. Three people were dead, three more were hurt, and nothing they could do was going to change that.

I delayed starting my summer job by a week. A friend of mom's from work helped me with funeral arrangements and contacted a local attorney to help me with the legal details.

I was glad when it was all over so I could start my summer job and get on with my life, such as it was. More importantly, I wanted to begin to find a solution to my problem as soon as possible.

I wanted to keep busy. The job would keep my mind off my situation and, more importantly I guess, my “feelings” and what I was going to do about them. I was alone now, and the only help I would be getting was from me.

The country club clientele was a good one and the tips were generous. You worked your ass off for sure, but I was taking home more from one weekend than some of my classmates were making in two weeks at a pizza or burger joint.

I didn't report all my tips, of course; nobody did. If I made less than the “average,” I reported that; if I made the “average” or more, I just reported the “average.” My “mattress money” began to grow to a significant amount.

Sometimes this lonely life did get me down. I kept trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It would be two years before I could see a therapist and start hormones. I would just have to stick it out until then. In the mean time I just put my energy into my studies, my job and my physical workouts.

I wasn't sure just what I was going to do after graduation. The guidance counselors tried pushing me into registering for school, but without a clear idea for a career path I didn't want to attend school just yet. I could be stuck with a degree and no job just as well as not.

My dreams and my love of the solitude of the out-of-doors were keeping me sane. I felt that inside I was a very strong person, and while I had never

thought of giving up, there were times when it was hard to get up in the morning. I would have to just keep hoping that I would be able to find a solution, and that I was going to be financially and physically ready to employ it when that time came.

I remembered watching a TV talk show where a comedian related a humorous story of a man who wanted to be not just “fixed,” but fixed for life—fixed in the sense that he wouldn’t have to work the rest of his life, and he could live the life he wanted to live off someone else’s money. He wasn’t lazy, but he believed in the old saying “Hard work never killed anybody—but why take the chance?”

The only alternative to hard work in his little farming community was marrying the one girl in the class who was extremely rich. Her father owned a huge farm and made plenty of money. The problem was that the girl was short, weighed about 300 pounds, was butt ugly, and wore thick glasses, plus she had BO you could smell practically a mile away. The only thing she had ever attracted was flies and, not surprisingly, she attracted quite a few of them.

Summing up his courage, he asked her out a couple of times and then proposed marriage. She accepted, and after the honeymoon they moved into the hired hand’s house on her fathers’ huge farm.

The day she announced that she was three months pregnant with twins, the bank repossessed the farm, while her parents had disappeared and were nowhere to be found. He certainly was “fixed” for life, but not in the way he had originally imagined.

I had to laugh at that story just as the studio audience had laughed. Nearly every kid or adult at one time or another had thoughts like that but, like me, didn’t always have an idea of exactly how they were

going to go about securing their own future. Working yourself to death for someone else didn't seem to be much of an answer either.

Following graduation I continued working at the club and saving my money. I enjoyed my job and continued to add to my stash. I was fortunate in that respect; I knew that many people didn't look forward to going to work, as they didn't particularly like their job or the people they work for.

I knew at some point in the future I was going to need money for the surgery, and lots of it, as not many insurance companies were willing to pay for this kind of medical expense. I was still covered under my mother's old policy for a while yet, but soon I would have to buy my own. With rising medical costs I wasn't sure just how much coverage I would get, as well as how much of a balance I would have to pay on my own. It could very well be a princely sum, and I could be forced to put surgery off for awhile.

I began seeing a therapist. After several sessions I attained the first big milestone on my journey: I was castrated. She also got me started on hormones, and I began electrolysis. I had only a light beard, and the technician said it would not take many sessions before my face and neck would be hair-free. I felt good about that, though there were certainly no shortcuts down the path I was going to be traveling down. I knew that having a feminine appearance was just as important as anything else, and I couldn't wait to see the results as well as everything else.

Several months went by and I still didn't see much difference in my body. The therapist said to be patient, as changing my body chemistry would take time. "I'm afraid you're not going to be able to get a job at Hooter's anytime soon," she told me. We both had a good laugh over that.

I continued to monitor my appearance closely though, to be honest, at this early stage of my transformation it seemed to be a waste of time. My therapist was right: I should be more patient.

At the six-month level I noticed some tenderness in my nipples, but as yet I hadn't really "blossomed" much. I kept my nails and hair short, as I was still living as a male. I felt I still had to maintain some semblance of a "male" appearance.

I still wore only male clothing, though I desperately wanted to buy lingerie and wear dresses, skirts, makeup and heels. Those things would just have to wait, and I was getting tired of waiting. It was almost as if I were waiting for some good news that would never be coming.

About a year into my treatment, my beard was almost gone. My skin had begun to take on a softer look. I still was not shaving my legs or underarms. There was some rise in my breast area, and my therapist said that in another six months or so I should start wearing a bra.

I was looking forward to wearing only feminine apparel because that is what I should be wearing. I had always felt uncomfortable wearing my male clothing; it made me feel "out of place" and something of an imposter, for lack of a better way of expressing my feelings about it.

I began taping my chest over my tee shirt to avoid the appearance of growing breasts. To date no one at work had said anything to me about the change in my facial appearance. I was hoping to continue my charade as long as possible.

Looking at my naked body in the full length mirror on the back of my bedroom door, I could see that

overall my skin did have a much softer look. It felt much softer and more feminine too. I seemed to be making some progress—though, as my therapist had cautioned, it would be slow in coming.

I was gradually getting closer to my ultimate goal of being a whole woman though it would probably be some time before my transition was complete.

I started to shave my legs and underarms even though I had very little body hair. The results were very pleasing to the eye, at least to my eyes, compared to the way my body had been in its male form.

My therapist referred me to a salon at the mall called Sheila's. It was a makeup salon that also sold wigs. I had been keeping my hair and nails short to maintain my masculine appearance. She told me that the staff there was very accommodating when it came to crossdressers and transgender people like me.

I felt a bit intimidated when I showed up for a late evening appointment. My heart was pounding in my chest as I checked in at the counter. The sales lady was very gracious. I purchased a good-quality shoulder-length wig that matched my dark brown hair color. It seemed to be just the right style and color for me.

When she first put it on me, I was thrilled at the pretty girl staring at me from the mirror. I knew right then that this was who and what I was supposed to be. I hated the fact that I would not be able to wear it all the time, at least not for a while yet.

In addition to the wig, I was given a makeup guide. I didn't want to start using makeup until I had completed my transition. I wanted to be "complete" first. Makeup was strictly a girl thing and, as much as I

was looking forward to it, the time was obviously not right yet.

There were also brochures on caring for my wig and how to use the other utensils like nail files, eye-lash curlers, and hair care products like shampoos, conditioners, curlers, styling guns, etc. that as a woman I would have to learn how to use.

These things gave me quite an insight into all the things a woman had to do to keep up a proper “feminine” appearance. For a woman, her looks were everything, and I was going to have to work hard at maintaining the look that today’s society expected of me. Our society had long ago forgotten that a woman—or a man, for that matter—shouldn’t be judged on the basis of looks. That probably wasn’t going to change a whole lot, at least not anytime soon.

Because longer hair required more “work,” so to speak, to keep it looking nice, I decided for now to keep my own hair short. I only wore the wig at home, of course, but I always felt so much better with it on. It made me feel much more feminine, much more the real me. I continued to ache for a real feminine wardrobe.

As far as that feminine wardrobe was concerned, I felt it could be delayed until I had healed up from surgery. There was no need to rush out to buy a bunch of clothes and shoes right off the bat. I didn’t even know when that surgery might be, so I might just as well save my money for now.

I was certain that after the surgery I would probably lose some weight too, so buying a wardrobe should be put off until my surgery and post-operative period was completed. Even then it would only be a

few basic items, as my budget was going to be strained as it was.

The therapist had also referred me to a store at the mall called “Party Time.” This store specialized in party dresses for young women, pageant dresses for little girls, and cocktail dresses for older women. As at Sheila’s, the manager was sympathetic to the transgender and crossdresser community too.

Party Time was one of the stores, in addition to the formal apparel store at the mall, that I had often sat outside when I was growing up. Instead of playing video games at the arcade or watching a movie and then grabbing a soft drink and a slice of pizza, I was there daydreaming about wearing the dresses they had on display.

I knew that with one of those dresses on, makeup, and a pair of high-heeled shoes, I was going to make a very pretty girl—to say nothing of the way I would feel when I was fully dressed and ready for a party. I had no doubt I could make a lot of girls envious with the way I looked.

I also thought men would find me attractive. As a male I had never felt any attraction to men in general—but now, with them seeing me as an attractive female, I wasn’t sure how I was going to react or handle myself in a social situation.

Also I was looking forward to enjoying the frivolity of feminine companionship as we went shopping, or when we stood in front of the ladies restroom mirror as we put on fresh lipstick and blusher, or after shopping when we would have lunch and talk girl talk like any group of young females.

I wondered if perhaps I was a lesbian in a man’s body, or if the hormones and subsequent surgery

were going to change all of that too. It was certainly food for thought, but not really relevant for the time being anyway. Perhaps, as my therapist was saying, I should be more patient, and things would work themselves out naturally.

The display of dresses in the window at the Party Time store were mostly short-hemmed, puff-sleeve dresses, some of which were flared out with petticoats. They were made of shiny fabrics like satin or taffeta. I knew that they would feel so good next to my smooth, hair-free girly skin.

They made my daydreams so much fun, and I ached to spend a day trying on all of them. I saw myself twirling around as I modeled each one of them in front of a group of young women, who gazed up at me with approval as I did the catwalk strut in front of this all-female audience in my stiletto-heel pumps with one hand on my hip in typical runway fashion.

I resigned my job in May of the following year, using “medical issues” as my reason for leaving. I had filled out quite a bit and, though I still did not have a feminine wardrobe, I had continued to tape my breasts down until my surgery was completed.

My breasts were still not very big, but my therapist continued to tell me to be patient. If I was still not satisfied, there was the option of breast enhancement surgery, but with my financial situation that was still far in the future.

My surgery took place and I spent the summer recuperating. The electrolysis tech did my eyebrows and I now had a very feminine face and body. My records were all changed to reflect my new status as Michelle not Michael Clark.

It was not the hassle I thought it would be. No one questioned what I had done or why, for which I was very grateful. In this day and age I was not looking forward to have to explain myself. I was happy to be done with everything. I now felt ready to begin my new life as Michelle Clark, the woman I was supposed to have been in the first place.

Michael had died on the operating table. I pushed the memory of him as far back in my consciousness as I could, though I knew he would always be there. I was fully intent on living my female life as best I could, without any references to the past or the nightmarish life I might have had without my surgery.

Someone once said you should live your life looking through the windshield, not the rear view mirror. I fully intended to do just that. What was in the past was going to stay there, and for me it was going to be full speed ahead into my feminine future.

Chapter 2

The last appointment with my therapist concluded with her lecturing me. I would no longer be seeing her, and I was a bit concerned as she had a very serious look on her face when she spoke. It was almost like it was more of a warning than therapeutic advice.

“You have completed your transition in good time and in excellent health. I know you are going to have no adjustment problems at all. However, there is one thing we haven’t discussed, and that has to do with your own personal safety.”

“Safety?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“I am talking about your demeanor, not your deportment. You have become a very feminine female but you still a bit naïve about what it means to be a woman, at least on a day to day basis.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t. You see, you are used to leaving your home, driving anywhere to do anything you want at any time of the day or night. Aren’t you?”

“Well yes. I guess so.”

“That has to stop. You have to begin to always be very aware of your surroundings. Whenever you leave your home or the shopping mall, look around first. When you leave a restaurant or nightclub, whether it is day or night, but especially at night, always look to see if there is anyone else around your car or in the parking lot. When you walk to and from these places, keep your keys in your right hand or hold one of those small purse-size containers of MACE. Look around before getting in or out of your car, no matter where you are. It pays to be watchful and cautious about your surroundings. You should never take anything or anyone for granted.”

“When you were a man it didn’t matter to you if there was someone walking towards you or behind you, no matter where you were or what time of the day it was. As a man it didn’t concern you. That is no longer the case.”

“You are a woman now and that means you are a potential target, a potential victim. From now on be extremely careful about who you are with, where you are going, and who else knows you are going to be there. You can never be too cautious—especially when you begin dating men.”

“You are right. I guess I never thought of things that way.”

“That’s because you were a man. Now you are a woman. I am being very honest with you in telling you this, because I don’t want you to wind up in ICU or, worse, the morgue. I do want you to enjoy your new life as a woman, and all the positive things there are about that, without becoming a statistic.”

“Thank you, doctor. I will be more careful in the future.”

With that I left her office. At the building’s front door I looked over the parking area where I had left my car parked. There was no one around so I walked to my car and drove home, occasionally glancing in the rear view mirror to see if anyone was following me. I didn’t want to let myself get paranoid, but I was going to do my best to change my ways.

That night I thought a great deal about what my therapist had said. She made a lot of sense. It became very clear to me that this had been part of a woman’s lot that I hadn’t given any thought to. I just figured my life would continue much the way it had been except that now I would be in lingerie, dresses or skirts. I guess I had always felt that nothing else in my life was going to change, so my therapist’s advice was right on the money.

How wrong I had been. That night I had an uneasy sleep, but I vowed to follow her advice to the letter and not become a statistic. In some ways it made me sad that some men would see me as a target. Not all men would—surely not!—but nevertheless I knew my therapist was right. Better to be safe than sorry.

I bought my lingerie at Party Time. The manager was very helpful to insure I had the right fit. My bra

and panty sets made me feel even more feminine. The rest of a basic wardrobe was purchased at thrift and box stores.

There was no need to buy a large wardrobe for now. I had school and living expenses ahead of me, so I wanted to manage my money very carefully and buy only what I needed until I had graduated and began working.

After an evening appointment at Sheila's I left wearing the minimum blusher and lipstick. My make up case contained a starter supply. I also purchased a bath set and that evening thoroughly enjoyed my first perfumed bubble bath.

It made me feel good about being a girl. I had been through a lot, and come through all of it, without any disasters in either health or finances. I was now pretty much home free. It made me feel proud of myself at what I had accomplished, primarily I guess because I had done it all pretty much on my own without assistance from anyone else.

Splurging the week before I had bought some baby-doll nightgowns off the internet and a set of pink polyester satin sheets and pillow cases. Sliding into my pink cocoon that night was the most enjoyable experience of my life to date, even better than my first perfumed bubble bath.

My finances had been drained considerably, but I still had some money left from my mother's estate as well as my "mattress money" from my job at the club. I knew I had to find employment to pay for school and my living expenses, so I went back to the club and applied for a waitress position.

At the interview the same female manager who had originally hired me looked at me quizzically, but then

proceeded with the interview. At its conclusion I thanked her; then I put a single finger to my lips and said one word: “Michael.”

She immediately straightened up in her chair and grinned at me. I smiled back at her, then turned and left her office. She called me the very next day to say I had been hired and then gave me a start date. Of course I was thrilled to be able to return to work there, as I knew I would be making good money.

Registering for school proved to be no problem. I took some general courses since I wouldn't have to declare a major for two years. I was still unsure as to what I was going to do, but that two years would give me plenty of time to think about it.

Between work and a college-level curriculum I was kept plenty busy. I didn't want to join a sorority, and my socializing was usually with a few classmates after school or after the game on weekends.

My monthly hormone shots continued. The doctor was quite pleased with my development and so was I—but still, the waitress job at Hooter's was definitely out of the question, at least for a while yet.

I took great pleasure in dressing each morning in my lingerie, blouse and skirt. Sitting at the vanity and applying my blusher and lipstick made me feel even more like a real woman.

I was proud of my body too. By now there was a big difference in the way my body looked and the way the texture of my skin felt, due to the hormones finally giving me the body I always wanted and should have had in the first place.

You could say that essentially I had “arrived.” I was now living a totally and completely feminine life,



just like as if I had been born the female I had now become. I was now happier than I had ever been in my life, and hoped that my future would continue to keep me that way.

I felt like I was as much of a woman as any natural-born woman was, in spite of the fact that I was a “surgically created” woman. I had no doubt that in the eyes of the general public we would be seen as one and the same, at least I hoped so.

Working at the club, I continued to make good tips. It came as no surprise that many of the male customers I waited on, whether single or married, enjoyed flirting with me. I knew most of them, as I had worked there before as a young man. I often wondered what they would think if they ever found out who I used to be.

I was back on an even keel financially after a little less than two years. I was happy about that, as there were many students struggling just to keep ahead of the cost of living and the high cost of a college education.

In January of my second year, classes had just resumed after the Christmas –New Year’s break. I was coming out of the library when I collided with another student.

I guess I had my mind on other things. He grabbed me to keep me from falling. I looked up to see the

most wonderful pair of blue eyes you ever saw. Surprised at the collision, I was stuck for words, but finally managed to blurt out:

“I’m so sorry,” I stammered. “I guess I wasn’t watching where I was going,”

“That’s quite all right. My name is Eric Stein,” he said as he extended his hand.

“Michelle Clark,” I replied nervously as I took his hand in mine and regained my balance. I had almost said “Michael Clark”. My new name was something else I had almost forgotten about. I was going to have to be more careful in the future about that too.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” he asked, a bit nervously.

“Well, I guess so,” I answered just as nervously.

My heart was pounding as we walked to a coffee shop nearby. He bought two cups of decaf and we took a table near the window. My pulse was up, as I had never been alone in a social situation with a male before. I had always socialized with a group of friends.

Our conversation was mostly about school and the chilly winter that had encumbered us. I tried to keep from being nervous, but it probably showed. This was my first one-on-one date since my surgery, and I wanted desperately wanted to make a good impression.

It was hard not to keep staring at those gorgeous blue eyes, wondering just what kind of man was behind them, inside the tall, strong-looking, manly body so close to mine. My therapist’s warnings were not far in the back of my mind as we talked.

I wanted to be on my guard, as now I was on the “other side of the fence” so to speak, but it was hard not to feel at ease sitting across from him as we sipped our coffee. I found myself enjoying his company and our conversation.

I had never been attracted to men before. I even spoke to my therapist about that. The two years of hormones and my surgery seemed to have changed me in that regard. As we talked, I began to relax and feel more comfortable being with him.

We finished our coffee and went our separate ways. Later that week I found he was in both my history and psychology classes. I smiled when I saw him, but I always sat apart from him. I guess it would be honest to say that I was still a bit unsure of myself.

My therapist's words about being careful were still ringing in my ears—but those words were overridden by my desire to see him again. I wanted, needed, absolutely *had* to get to know the man behind those gorgeous blue eyes.

The thought that this might lead to a long-term relationship, and at some point a sexual one, began to weigh heavily on my mind. I was worried about whether or not this was going to be a possibility, particularly since I was sexually inexperienced—at least on this side of the fence. And what if Eric wanted to marry me at some point—and to have children? What if he found out I couldn't have any—and found out *why* I couldn't have any? Would he be offended, sickened, outraged, if he found out I wasn't a natural-born woman? I was afraid he might—but I couldn't stop seeing him because of it. I couldn't stop seeing him because of *anything*.

Before the semester was out we were seeing each other more frequently, but irregularly, since we both had work and classes plus homework time. Our schedules were hardly what you would call compatible. I began to look forward to our scarce, but precious, times together more and more.

We got to know each other better, and I felt I could trust him—at least to know many things about me, though not all. I told him about my parents' divorce and their deaths, but of course I never mentioned my previous life as a man. That was one thing I was never going to divulge, to anyone, under any circumstances—least of all to Eric.

Eric was an exchange student from the small town of Strausburg, Germany, which was located southwest of Munich. He wanted to become a teacher. Outside of school he, like me, enjoyed hiking and backpacking in the great outdoors that the state of Minnesota had to offer.

As we got to know each other, we spent most of our free time exploring the outdoors and the many trails in Minnesota's plentiful parks. In addition, I enjoyed poring over maps in my geography and history classes. Comparing old maps and current ones of the same area gave you a good idea of how things change over time, not unlike people who look at family pictures from years ago and then current pictures that they recently took.

I was enjoying school, but exploring the outdoors seemed to be much more fun than academic work, especially now that I had met someone with whom I shared a common interest—actually, more than one common interest. As the semester went on, I was actually starting to imagine that Eric might be as fascinated by me as I was by him.

I was convinced of it when, on one of our outdoor walks while we were taking a break from studying for final exams, he put his arm around my waist and looked deep into my eyes, almost oblivious to the path ahead. I was almost frightened by the intensity of his gaze, but my heart and my whole body could not help responding, even though Eric had never

spoken of love. He still did not speak of it; he did not need to. He clasped me tightly to himself and kissed me deeply on the mouth; I responded as a woman would respond.

I knew what this would mean. I was afraid—after all, I was a virgin as a woman—but I could not back off now, and I didn't want to.

“Oh, Michelle!” Eric murmured when the long kiss was over at last. “You're the greatest! We've got to see more of each other after the exams are over!” I knew exactly what he meant: we needed to see each other in the nude, and make love.

“Oh, yes!” I said softly. I was going to do it. Eric was irresistible.

But please be gentle; I'm a virgin! I almost said it, but I stopped myself. I didn't have a hymen. Not all virgins did, I knew, but I didn't want Eric even to imagine I had lied to him if he found it was easy to enter me.

Soon I was incredibly glad I hadn't said it. Eric started asking questions I found it hard to understand at first. “You're *ready*, aren't you?” he asked me.

“Oh!” I said. “Well, uh—yes, I think so. I—I certainly hope so!”

He seemed to think I didn't understand. He wasn't asking me if I was emotionally ready, or anything like that. “I mean,” he said, “are you all prepared? Have you taken the necessary precautions? You know what I mean?”

I was still too obtuse to grasp his meaning. “Uh—I'm not sure I do,” I admitted.

“You know,” he said, “to make sure there will be no unpleasant surprises?” On seeing the blank look on my face, he must have thought I was awfully stupid.

“You know how, when a man and a woman come together, if they don’t take the necessary precautions, there may be an unpleasant surprise—like about *nine months afterward?*” he asked, making his meaning unmistakably clear to me at last.

“Oh!” I said. “Oh, *that!*” I honestly hadn’t thought of it, although surely any natural-born woman would have. I rushed ahead, not very carefully considering my words: “Oh, yes, that’s all taken care of! I—I’ve had everything done! I’m fixed for life! There will be *no* unpleasant surprises!”

Eric’s gorgeous, masterful blue eyes opened wide. “Fixed for life!” he echoed. “You really mean that? You’ve had your tubes tied already?”

He didn’t look at all displeased at the thought. I didn’t want to lie to Eric, but what else could I do? Either he would think I was a natural-born woman with her tubes tied, and not a virgin, or there would be total disaster: he would find out I hadn’t been born a woman at all. Now I realized the narrowness of my escape: if I had told him I was a virgin, I would have had to claim I was a virgin who had already been sterilized! How incredibly unlikely was *that?* How incredibly *likely* would he have been to guess the truth, and perhaps to be outraged by it?

“Yes,” I lied, quietly but distinctly. Eric would be pleased by the answer, and it wouldn’t really be fair for him to be displeased at the thought that I wasn’t a virgin, since he wasn’t seeking a virgin bride. “Yes. I’ve had everything done. I’m—I’m totally ready.”

The thing I had said I was totally ready for happened, as expected, soon after final exams that spring. By then I wasn't nearly so sure how ready I was. I wasn't at all sure I could be a satisfying lover for Eric. Still, I knew it was going to happen, and I had to make the best of it.

Eric and I shared snacks and wine in his apartment. Before we had finished the wine, he was kissing me deeply on the mouth again—only this time he was stripping off my clothes as well. Soon his hands, and then his mouth, were caressing my bare breasts. He seemed satisfied that these, at least, had never been a man's puny flat things.

Now came the acid test of my womanhood. Eric's hand descended between my thighs. Would he detect that I didn't have an erect clitoris, that my vagina wasn't dripping with love juice, that all my female parts were inferior to what a natural-born woman had, because they were merely manufactured by human hands and surgical implements?

If so, he sure didn't show it. Eric's masterful looks were more than matched by his commanding prowess as a lover, and he made it perfectly clear that I was fully a woman—the woman—for him. Almost as soon as he entered me, I knew I was going to have an orgasm. I trembled beneath him and let him overwhelm me, bringing us both to the fullest and most amazing climax I could ever have imagined.

Afterward we lay long together, savoring the warm and wonderful feelings. Neither of us spoke for many minutes. At last Eric murmured, "Oh, Michelle, you're the greatest! You're the only woman for me!"

"Eric, I'm so glad," I told him. "Thank you so much! I'm totally thrilled!" It was perfectly true—but I could never let Eric know *why* I was totally thrilled. It was

because I had passed the acid test of my womanhood with flying colors.

Our relationship deepened and we became good friends as well as lovers. I was very happy spending time with him, whether it was out of doors or nestled in his muscular arms. It would be honest to say that, if there was such a thing as a soul-mate, then I certainly had found one in Eric Stein.

Two years to the day after we met, Eric asked me to move in with him. I agreed without any hesitation. We finished college as a couple and subsequently we both enrolled in our respective master's programs.

During the holiday break, on Christmas Eve, he asked me to marry him. Of course I accepted. We flew to Las Vegas and got married on New Year's Eve. I finally got to wear one of those white satin dresses that I had always fantasized about when I was a kid at the mall seeing them on display in the windows of the formal apparel stores.

If I thought I had "arrived" before, it was nothing compared to the feeling I had when I wore that gorgeous white satin dress, veil, and white high-heeled pumps. If this was a dream, then I never wanted to wake up and rejoin the real world that I had been living in. I doubted if I was the only woman who ever felt that way on her wedding day.

To date there had never been a time when I had felt more feminine or "womanly." I truly believed that I was now as complete a woman as I was ever going to be, and there was nothing that was ever going to change that.

The life that the two of us would be sharing was not unlike that of a million other couples who were starting out their married life just like the two of us.

We truly had become not only husband and wife, partners, but soul-mates for life.

Back in Minnesota we set up housekeeping and began school again. His budget was as tight as mine before we were married, but now we could both set aside a little savings. I worried a lot less about finances than I had before.

I did not mention my stash of “mattress money,” though. I had overheard my grandmother once say to my mother, “men don’t have to know everything.” I was not going to tell him of my past for the same reason. The money was an insurance policy—and I didn’t want my past to be the reason I could lose him.

Why could I lose him if he knew? Would he be sickened, revolted, nauseated, if he knew I had been a man? Would he think of me like the fat, ugly, stinking bride of the man who wanted to be “fixed for life”—only without the twins? I didn’t know, but I sure didn’t want to find out the hard way. Far better, I thought, simply to conceal the truth—and, if strictly necessary, even to lie.

Both of us discussed a trip back to Germany to meet his family, but agreed to put it off for at least two years. By then we would both have our master’s degrees, and hopefully would be working full time in teaching jobs. I, more than Eric, wanted to be on firmer financial ground before we splurged on anything like a European vacation, even if it was to meet his family.

We finally earned our graduate degrees, mine in geography and his in history. Our practice teaching was completed, and by a real stroke of luck we were both hired within about a week of each other. He would be teaching at a high school in Bloomington, Minnesota, and I would be teaching in the suburb of

Eden Prairie. I felt a real sense of relief that we would no longer have any financial worries with both of us now working.

A two-bedroom duplex on the edge of Bloomington was almost equidistant from the two high schools. I found it hard to believe that things had turned out so well. Believe me, you have no idea how profoundly grateful I was. To call it a dream come true would be a vast understatement.

My life was now 180 degrees different from the one I had as a child. In my wildest dreams I could never have imagined that things would turn out this way. There certainly was no way to describe how grateful I was at having everything work out as good as it had.

No matter what the future held, I was going to be able to deal with just about anything—especially now, since I had a partner who would always be with me and be supportive as well in anything that I wanted to do, except perhaps to reveal the truth about my past. You could not ask for anything more than that—now, could you?

Chapter 3

It took us two more years before we could see our way clear to make the trip to Germany. Our student loans had been pared down enough and we were caught up on our other bills. This enabled us to breathe a little easier.

I was genuinely looking forward to the trip. I had never flown before and was a bit apprehensive about it, but Eric just laughed and calmed my fears.

“They usually only crash once,” he said with a grin. “And besides, only the good die young.”

I didn't find his attempt at black humor nearly as funny as he did, but I laughed anyway. With all the tragedies involving transportation these days, neither air, bus, nor train seemed to be particularly safe to me—but in this instance, of course, I didn't have much choice. It was either air travel or no travel at all.

Still, the thought of us hurtling through the air in the confines of that aluminum tube, at six hundred miles an hour seven miles up, wasn't exactly bolstering my confidence. As much as I loved technology and how it has made our lives better, this was a part of it that maybe in the long run I could certainly do without. Then again, boats sink, trains go off the track, and buses crash too, so I guessed it didn't matter anyway.

Our plan was to leave after the Fourth of July and return in about two weeks. This would give us plenty of time to unwind from the trip and get ready for the next year of teaching, with a couple of days to spare before in-service week and then the start of classes.

I had researched Eric's hometown and the surrounding area of southern Germany. I was looking forward to hiking there as well as meeting his family. We had met and chatted briefly on our webcams nearly every Sunday afternoon. I got the feeling that his parents, as well as his brother Mark and Mark's wife Lynn (an American like me, but from Oregon, not Minnesota), had accepted me as one of the family just as I did them. With no family of my own, at least now I had become a part of one again, and I felt very good about that. Since neither one of us wanted children, it was for me an ideal family situation, if there was such a thing. I knew Eric felt the same way, and that was going to make both of us very happy indeed.

Mark and Lynn lived near Strausburg in the town of Lansburg. Like us, they had no children, although they were several years older than Eric and I. Mark was obviously Eric's brother, a big man with blue eyes and blond hair, though not quite as perfectly handsome as Eric; Lynn was short and buxom, with short dark hair and a plump, pretty face. Both of them, like Eric and me, were lovers of the outdoors. Except for an occasional movie or TV show, none of us liked being indoors.

Once while we were chatting with our webcams, Mark had proudly showed off his collection of artifacts he and Lynn had found with their metal detectors. It had sounded like an interesting hobby, so Eric and I each bought one too.

The school year couldn't go fast enough so we could make our trip, but it was finally over and done with. We took time off to be outdoors and relax. Learning to use our new metal detectors, we both had a good laugh over some of the "junk" we managed to find.

Finally the time came for our departure. I still had butterflies about the flight, but once again Eric calmed me down, this time without the black humor. The time it took us to get through security, boarding the flight, waiting on the tarmac to take off, and the long flight sitting in that cramped aluminum tube was arduous for me to say the least.

I was so happy when we landed, but exhausted. Mark and Lynn met us at the Munich airport, and drove us to our hotel in Strausburg. After we were all checked in and unpacked we went out to eat.

It was good to be able to finally relax, and especially to be among friends. By the time we got back to our hotel I was ready for bed. I don't even remember

my head hitting the pillow. I slept right through to when Eric's cell phone alarm went off.

Both Eric's parents and his brother wanted us to stay with them, but Eric and I insisted we stay in a hotel. We were going to be there for about ten days, and you know that old saying about fish and company! We just thought that separate quarters would be best for all concerned—especially for Eric and me, since we wanted some time to ourselves as well.

This area of southern Germany was beautiful country, and we had a good time sightseeing. German food was quite different, but for the most part I enjoyed whatever we ate. I must say, though, that German beer is much stronger than its American counterpart, so I decided to stay with wine.

One morning we were exploring a ridge just northeast of Strausburg. Mark had driven some back roads and had parked near the rocky ridge that bordered the north and east side of the city. He and Lynn hadn't explored this area, so it was going to be new territory for all of us.

We began by walking along the base of the ridge, swinging our metal detectors. Near the end of the ridge we were in sight of the railroad tracks that ran on the south side of the city. Except for a few beeps that turned out to be what are called "hot rocks" and a well-rusted belt buckle, we didn't find anything.

Next we began exploring the area at the top of the ridge. We began at the backside, near where Mark had parked the Jeep, and worked out way to the front, where once again we were in sight of the railroad tracks. I was really enjoying this warm sunny afternoon. How anyone could want to be inside on a day like today was beyond me.

As we were walking along the ridge near the western end, near the southeast end of the city, Eric let out a shout as he lost his balance and began sliding down the steep slope on the north side. We all rushed over to try to give him a hand.

Near the bottom, in an effort to stop his slide, he swung his hatchet into the sod to try and slow himself down. He stuck there, only about two feet above the ground at the bottom, as we slowly made our way down to where he was hanging.

“Are you OK?” I asked as I got close to him.

“Yeah, I guess so,” he replied as he worked the hatchet loose and slipped the remaining two feet to the ground with an unconcerned look on his face.

While he dusted himself off, I picked up some powdery material that had come loose when Eric had yanked his hatchet free.

“This stuff isn’t rock or sand,” I said.

Mark picked up some of it and rubbed it in the palm of his hand. “I know what it is,” he said. “I worked my way through school for the local theatre group, building sets and scenery backdrops. This stuff is applied over a cardboard or wood frame. You can make it any color, and when it dries it resembles rock. It’s a product that has been in use as long as there have been movies or theater productions. It’s pretty good stuff too by the way.”

“So it is used to make or cover a façade, right?” I asked.

“Right you are. When you see an actor running along a mountain where the boulders are crashing down, they don’t haul a couple of two-ton boulders

up the side of that mountain and let them go, putting the actors at risk. Even stuntmen would be leery of doing something like that! On a theater stage, when you see an outdoor scene, they don't haul in two-ton boulders to make it look like the real outdoors. Those rock-like structures are assembled before the play begins and brought on stage as they are needed."

"So then this is a cover for whatever is behind the false front, right?"

"Apparently so," replied Mark as he turned to look at where Eric had stuck his hatchet.

My heart began beating faster as I began to wonder just what we had stumbled upon. Whatever it was, the people who put up the false front must have thought it was worth the effort to conceal it very carefully. *As carefully as I conceal the fact that I was once a man*, I thought for a moment—but I brushed the thought away and turned my attention back to the task at hand.

Mark began hacking away with his hatchet at the façade. Eric joined him, and in about a half an hour they had knocked a small hole in the side of what we had thought was a rocky ridge. It was just big enough for us to crawl through.

I felt a pang of apprehension, as you never know what you might run into when something like this has been uncovered. There had to be a reason why whatever we were going to find inside had been put there, and kept secret from the outside world. It could be something good, or something evil—or both.

"I'll go in first; Eric, you follow me. You girls come in last, just in case anything happens," Mark ordered. With a small flashlight in one hand, Mark got

down on his hands and knees and began crawling slowly into the hole.

My pulse suddenly began accelerating with fear. This was World War II country. God, and a lot of dead Nazis, were the only ones who knew what might be hidden behind this façade. I wasn't so sure we should continue our foray into the unknown.

Periodically there had been many stories on the internet of unexploded bombs and other ordnance being found during excavations, as well as bodies or parts of bodies. I wondered if by chance we had stumbled unto something like that—and, if we had, would any of us live to tell about it?

As soon as Mark was inside, Eric got down on his hands and knees and began following Mark inside the opening, holding his small LED flashlight in one hand as well. It was very quiet as we waited our turn to follow them inside.

Lynn and I waited outside breathlessly. None of them had said anything for what seemed like an eternity. I was getting very anxious. It would be a shame to have come ten thousand miles, only to be killed finding something we shouldn't have found in the first place.

“Stop! Give me your handkerchief,” shouted Mark in a loud and alarming voice.

My heart almost stopped beating. Now I was worried. There was no sound for several minutes. I was now even more concerned about just what might be waiting for us inside.

“Okay. Come on in,” said Eric.

With my heart beating furiously I crawled inside, with Lynn right behind me.

Just inside the hacked-out opening we both stood up right behind Eric and Mark. The air smelled damp and musty. All of us panned the area with our small flashlights. We were totally and completely surprised at what we were looking at.

What we saw before us was something out of a thriller movie. Just exactly what we had found was still unknown, but it wouldn't take us long to find out.

"Watch your step," commanded Mark as he pointed at the ground.

He had torn his and Eric's handkerchiefs into strips, and tied them to some wires running in front of us and around to our right. Apparently these were trip wires attached to booby traps elsewhere inside the cave. This was going to be more dangerous than I had first thought.

Now I knew for sure we had stumbled onto something we shouldn't have. This adventure of ours had very nearly gotten us all killed. So far we had been very lucky, and only that. To call it a "close shave" would be much more accurate.

I had to wonder just how many other booby traps there might be, and where they were hidden. If there were more, they wouldn't be hidden underneath the rock floor of the cave, that was for sure. But I was hoping we weren't going to find one or more of them the hard way.

Once again my pulse was racing as we looked to our right. Six boxcars stood on a short stretch of tracks in the middle of the cave. They stood mute be-

fore us, like six sentinels from the distant past, with no way for them to explain why they were here and what was inside of them.

Suddenly I felt short of breath. Despite the foulness of the air, I took several deep breaths as we stood there looking at what we had found. I had no idea what we were going to do next, but I had this overwhelming sense of fear that all of us were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We made our way carefully over the wires and began walking along the left side of the cave. My heart continued to try to pound its way out of my chest as we passed nine holes along the left side of the cave wall—each one containing a bomb.

All the bombs in those holes were coated with rust. We didn't find any additional trip wires as we made our way slowly to the back of the cave, watching ever so carefully for any more trip wires or anything else that might look like a booby trap.

Each one of the large bombs resembled the kind that planes dropped on the enemy in a war. There were more wires running under the boxcars and along the other side of the cave. My sense of foreboding was growing worse and worse.

It looked like they had rigged it so that, if even one wire was tripped, the whole place would go up with one gigantic bang, and everything in the cave would be blown to bits. That meant the contents of those six boxcars must have been extremely valuable to somebody.

I was getting creeped out, to say the very least. This was not a thriller movie; this was reality. We could die here. I just wanted to get the hell out of there and go back to the hotel. For the rest of our

lives, I hoped and believed, we were never going to say anything to anybody about this. Even better, we should go home and try to forget what we had just stumbled into. Then again, maybe this whole thing was a nightmare, and I was going to wake up soon safe and sound in my hotel room, or back home in Minnesota.

We walked carefully to the back of the cave without encountering any more trip wires. At the very end of the cave was a military-style wrecker truck sitting on four flat tires. Behind it was a corridor that led to an alcove where there was a desk and chair. On the wall behind the desk was a large portrait of Adolf Hitler.

Seeing his picture made my pulse accelerate again. All this was definitely a remnant of the Second World War, left by some person or persons unknown, for a purpose that would never be fulfilled in their lifetime. It was forgotten in time, sheltered from all of the things that had changed since May 8, 1945—a long-lost secret of Germany's Nazi past.

Lynn sat behind the desk and opened the drawers. They were pretty rusty and squealed when she opened them. There was nothing inside any of the drawers, so we went back out to the boxcar that was closest to us. I was still afraid, but tried not to show it.

We looked the boxcar over carefully to insure there were no more wires except for those attached to the bomb underneath. Mark tried to open the door, but even with Eric's help the handle wouldn't budge. Using the flat head of his hatchet, Mark banged the handle twice before it eventually broke loose.

"Do you suppose there might be booby traps in inside?" I asked with fear in my voice.

“I doubt it,” replied Mark. “The people who loaded these cars probably wouldn’t know who was eventually going to unload them. They wouldn’t want their own people to be hurt or killed in the process. Besides, how would anyone get these doors open if they were booby trapped? Only the ones who made the booby traps would know how to do it—and they might not be around when the time came for these doors to be opened.”

I believed Mark was right. There was probably little or no danger in getting any of the doors open, so we could see what someone had gone to such great lengths to keep secret.

Eric and Mark stood together. With both hands they began pushing the door open. It groaned in protest against moving after more than 70 years of sitting still. Finally Eric and Mark managed to get it open a little more than halfway, so we could get inside to examine the contents.

Large wooden crates on each side of the aisle were the first things we noticed, except for ten metal cans in the middle of the aisle. “They used to call them “Jeri cans,” said Mark. “They were made to carry liquids, primarily gasoline and diesel fuel.”

“Be careful,” I said. “They too could be booby-trapped.”

With his hatchet head Mark banged the cap and managed to unscrew it. He bent over, sniffed the contents, then looked up at us and nodded his head.

“It is gasoline, all right, but after 70-plus years I don’t know how volatile it might be.”

He replaced the cap and we inched our way further down the aisle, staring at the crates in amazement.

They were marked with the names of Picasso, Renoir, Monet, and other famous artists. No doubt they contained valuable works of art that the Nazis had stolen, probably from Jewish families or museums. It was almost impossible to imagine just how valuable those paintings would be in today's market, should they be put up for sale.

We made our way to the next boxcar. It contained more of the same, plus some sculptures. The next two boxcars were stacked high with gold and silver bars. There were no Jerry cans in either one of these two cars.

Apparently, if this place were to go up, the gas would ignite a fire which would destroy the paintings, while the explosives would blow to pieces anything that wasn't burnt as well as the rest of the hidden treasure. To judge from the size and amount of explosives used, if they did indeed go off, the biggest piece of all this hidden treasure that anyone might find could probably fit in the palm of their hand, and would have very little if any value.

The four of us were speechless. There wasn't much to say as we looked over what would probably be considered the greatest art treasure find since the end of World War II. That much gold and silver at today's prices was a sum that was unimaginable.

I was shaking my head in disbelief as we walked to the last two boxcars in the line. They contained large boxes of fabulous jewelry, watches, and other ornaments. There were also several large crates of what appeared to be stones. This find had me and Lynn very puzzled, until Mark spoke up.

"Uncut diamonds," said Mark.

“My God, there must be millions of dollars’ worth of stuff here,” I commented.

“More than that,” said Mark. Right now gold is selling around \$1500.00 an ounce. You’re looking at around six to eight tons of the stuff. Silver isn’t as high, but based on today’s prices the gold alone would be worth about 400 million dollars—give or take a bit. Those paintings are priceless, but at least a million or more each. The silver and uncut diamonds are 150, or maybe 200 million. The jewelry, who knows what a current appraisal would be, but figure another 50 million. That’s enough to buy your own country.”

“Or start a Fourth Reich,” said Lynn with a knowing smirk—or rather, half smirk, half grimace—as if she were thinking of someone or something yet unknown to me.

“That’s for sure,” I said, though as yet I had no idea who wanted to start the Fourth Reich. “I wonder how Hitler was planning to get it out of here if he lost the war.”

Mark shrugged. “The tracks have been ripped out, so it would have to be trucked out of here unless they laid new rails. Maybe, from their new home in Brazil or Argentina, they were going to arrange for some so called ‘mining rights’ and then secrete it out of there a little at a time. With so much at stake, I doubt if it would be hard to arrange something like that, with or without bribes to the appropriate officials.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “This place gives me the creeps.”

We carefully made our way back to the small hole at the front.

Outside in the noonday sunshine, almost unbearably bright after we emerged from the gloomy cave, Mark and Eric carefully put some of the pieces back into place to cover most of the hole. They did a good job. When they were finished, you could hardly tell that there had been a hole there.

“Look over there,” said Lynn, pointing to the east of us. “There is a clearing and a pile of logs. Let’s eat our lunch over there.”

We walked over to the clearing and sat down to eat our sandwiches. There was no conversation as we ate. I could only assume that everybody, like me, was thinking about what they would do with a fortune like we had just found, or perhaps I should say with one fourth of what we had found.

I couldn’t help but think of all the people to whom this vast treasure horde had once belonged, and if any of their relatives would ever see this stuff again. I doubted if “justice” would ever be done. In cases like this, I thought, it seldom is. When wartime booty like this is found, governments and individuals could fight for years just to get a small piece of the total value that they were, or claimed to be, entitled to. Where something of value was concerned, there would be people coming out of the woodwork to make a claim. Lawyers would be scouring the countryside, and the world for that matter, just to find one client on behalf of whom they would be able to file a claim—and of course collect their percentage for representing them.

Exactly what each one of us would get, before the German government and all the claims that would be put in would get their cut, was difficult to imagine. Whatever Eric and I did manage to retain would probably be taxed by our government too, if we lived long enough for everything to be settled. I had my

doubts if the four of us could eventually see even ten percent of the value of what we had found, and that was before US taxes. Still, it would certainly be enough to provide all of us with a very nice retirement.

The strong possibility that we might not live long enough to see it all inventoried, and then cross-checked against the lists of people and institutions it had been stolen from, was pretty apparent. Even our descendants (if we were going to have any) might not see anything from this vast treasure horde.

Another possibility was that there were still persons alive who knew about this, and would be very unhappy at its discovery. If they decided to get even with the people who found it, and made the news public, our lives could be in jeopardy.

Mark finished eating first and took his metal detector to the end of the field. Metal detecting was an interesting hobby because you never knew what you were going to find, even if you didn't happen to descend into a cave containing untold wealth. The prospect of finding something rare or very valuable was always in everybody's mind. That seldom happened, but of course it sold a lot of detectors, thereby keeping the dealers and the manufacturers in business.

Since our arrival in Germany, all of us had found a few things: lots of bullets and bullet casings, pieces of shrapnel, a GI canteen with water still in it, and a Nazi helmet with a bullet hole in one side. I shuddered when Lynn held it up while wagging her finger through the bullet hole, thinking about the soldier who had been killed wearing it.

“Hey!” shouted Mark.

We looked to see him waving us over. I swallowed the last of my sandwich and picked up my gear. We ran over to where he was standing. He had a rather ashen look on his face as he waited for us to get to close enough to see what he had unearthed.

He had excavated about eight inches down and revealed a human skull. The grinning death's head stared up at us. A gold tooth in the upper jaw had set off the detector. Between the eye sockets was a small hole in the skull's forehead. "I don't think this was part of a methodical mass murder during the Nazi era," Mark said. "The Nazis were very thorough about removing valuable metals from dead bodies, especially those of their mass murder victims. This was more unusual—maybe a single murder, who knows when, that was never solved."

"Jeeze," I said. "Now we are going to have to call somebody."

Mark nodded and picked his cell phone. He spoke rapidly in German. When he hung up he looked up at us. There was no expression on his face. I wondered what was going to happen next. Our vacation had suddenly turned into something that neither one of us had ever imagined.

"We don't have to mention anything about what else we found, do we?" Lynn asked.

None of us said anything. I looked at the others and just shook my head. I had no idea what we were going to do, and it had to be a "we" decision, that was for sure. For right now we were going to have to contend just with the discovery of this skull and nothing else.

Shortly we could hear the "HEE-HAW" of the German-style sirens on emergency vehicles, getting



louder and louder as they got closer and closer to our location. I began to wonder just how long the authorities were going to keep all of us here.

A white SUV with a flashing blue light pulled into the clearing and stopped a few yards from us. Two uniformed men got out. Mark spoke to them in German. I showed them my passport, and then the two men walked over to where Mark had found the skull.

To my great relief, the authorities let us go about half an hour later. We left the area and hiked up the ridge. There was no conversation among us. We all seemed to be alone with just our thoughts as we made our way back to the Jeep.

Back in Mark's jeep, I was still feeling creepy as he drove us back to our hotel. I was still feeling very apprehensive at what the four of us had found. None of us said anything on the way back to our hotel. It was a very quiet ride.

If this was the end of it, we could go home and resume our lives, with the German government none the wiser. However, Mark and Lynn knew also. Would they come back and try to excavate the treasure by themselves, without anyone's knowledge? They would then have it all to themselves—but how would they dispose of it? Money, I knew, can sometimes do terrible things to a family or a successful business relationship.

At our hotel I didn't have much of an appetite. Finding a vast fortune and then a dead body a short distance away was a little too much for me in one day for me. I just ate a sandwich with my beer, while trying hard not to think of what might be ahead of us in the next couple of days.

That night, on the English news broadcast from the Armed Forces station, we saw some excavating equipment enlarging a ditch. A half a dozen bodies had been recovered so far, and they were still digging. Maybe, as Mark said, the skull had not been that of a mass murder victim—but it seemed we had found it at the site of a mass murder after all. I figured it might be some time before we could get back to that area, now that one little skull with a bullet hole in it had turned into a mass grave.

The next morning the news reported that more bodies had been found. We ate breakfast and then walked around a city park for a while. The nightly news reported that a total of 40 bodies had been removed and were being transported to Munich, where DNA testing would begin.

Eric and I spent the next two days with his parents in Munich. We stayed there overnight with them and had a marvelous time seeing all the sights. Munich was a truly beautiful city. It was a relief not to be thinking about the mass grave and what we had found, even for a short time.

“And now,” Eric’s father said after supper on Wednesday night, “I will show you something you absolutely must see before you leave for home. My dear, you have seen all this before,” he said to Eric’s mother; “I will not ask you to see it yet again.” Eric’s mother promptly left the room in silence.

I looked up at him, wondering what he was talking about. Eric’s father—“Herr Stein,” as Lynn politely but not affectionately called him—was a tall, white-haired, ramrod-straight elderly gentleman with sharp-looking, masterful blue eyes much like Eric’s eyes. He had so far seemed to be a man of few words, but he obviously expected those few to be listened to attentively. He spoke them well, in English

(at least while I was around), though with a much stronger German accent than Eric or even Mark. "Let us go," he said.

Eric and I got in his parents' car without question, though I noticed a strange look on Eric's face: something like a pained grimace, but mixed with a smirk, like the expression on Lynn's face when she had talked about somebody starting a Fourth Reich. It seemed that he knew where we were going, though I did not.

A short time later I noticed that we had left the main part of the town and were going down some side streets. The street lights were fewer and farther between. I began to wonder what we needed to see in what appeared to be a more run-down part of the town.

Eric's dad pulled into a parking lot next to a two-story building. There were no lights outside the front door, only a small overhead light inside the foyer. Once again I got a creepy feeling as we walked through the front door.

What I found there was something you had to see for yourself to believe. If someone told you about it, you would just shake your head and later wonder if they weren't pulling your leg. In this day and age it was inconceivable that something like this could even exist, except maybe in someone's nightmare—and yet here it was, fully real.

Leading the way, Herr Stein took us down a wide staircase on the left-hand side of the main hallway. It too was dimly lit, as was the hallway at the bottom of the steps. At its end, two muscular young men opened a large pair of double doors for us. Their posture was as ramrod-straight as that of Eric's father—and they were wearing Nazi uniforms.

Inside I stopped dead in my tracks. Walking behind me, Eric pushed me forward into a large, well-lighted room. Once my eyes adjusted to the brightness, I was startled—or rather appalled—at what I saw. It was something straight out of one of those thriller movies that everyone liked but no one really believed.

There were huge pictures of Adolf Hitler, Goering, Doenitz, and Eichmann. A massive Nazi flag hung from the back wall, and many more Nazi flags hung along the adjoining walls. Nazi flags, uniforms and assorted memorabilia were on tables and available for sale—by Nazis in uniform, of course.

“No thank you,” I said to myself.

On one side of the room were tables and chairs with small screens where you could view the whole history of Hitler’s rise to power from the early thirties to his death in a bunker. Included were scenes from combat, air, sea and on land as well as the holocaust. Loud military music was blaring from the speakers.

I thought I was going to be sick. Eric put his arm around me and we continued to walk between the exhibits that lined the other side of the room. Some of them sold Nazi books, pamphlets and other assorted propaganda items, glorifying the so-called “Master Race” and touting the rise of the Fourth Reich in the very near future. I didn’t see who was going to be their new Fuehrer, their new Hitler—but presumably they had one, if they thought the Fourth Reich was coming soon.

“Have you seen enough?” asked Herr Stein.

“Yes, more than enough,” I said. “Please, let’s get out of here.”

We left the building, returned to the car, and drove home in silence. When we arrived, Herr Stein asked us to join him in his study for a drink. At his request, Eric's mother served us each a generous helping of fine cognac in a large bubble glass, and then withdrew.

"As an American, Michelle," Herr Stein said after inhaling the vapors and taking a sip, "you may be repelled, and even sickened, by the spectacle you have seen tonight. Is it not so?"

"It sure *is* so," I assured him.

"That is quite understandable. And you may have thought that National Socialism, known as Nazism for short, was suddenly dead and gone forever when Germany was defeated in 1945. Did you think so?"

"Well, uh—I'm not quite so sure about that."

"It was not—but the antique form of National Socialism from the 1930s and '40s now has few adherents, especially since it is against the law in Germany. Likewise in America, I believe, you have American Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, people who defiantly display Confederate flags, and so on—but they are fairly few in number, even though their activities are not against the law there. Is not that right?"

"Yes—yes, I think that's right. I *hope* it is, anyway."

Herr Stein took another sip, put his glass down, and raised his eyes. "The antique form of National Socialism," he said, "which perished with the Third Reich and now has few devotees, will never return to power. But the *essence* of National Socialism, which is the glorification of the Master Race as supreme—this must and will return, and is returning soon! There will be no swastikas, no maniacal

Fuehrer, no raving about so-called 'Aryans,' no irrational exclusion of Jews from the Master Race, which is the white race. But there will be a Fourth Reich, vastly different in appearance from the Third, but equally intent on restoring the supremacy of the race that needs and deserves to be supreme."

I stared at him, speechless. He was serious. I didn't want to be needlessly impolite to my father-in-law, but I wondered if I should speak out against what he was saying—and, if so, what I could possibly say.

He gave me little time to think about it. "This will come about in America too," he said, "and it is even now coming about. Americans will return, and are returning, to their great tradition of white supremacy. I have given much attention to America, which (together with its allies) conquered Germany. Some Americans do not recall that even their great hero, Lincoln, favored the supremacy of the white race, and wished to induce the blacks to return to Africa if it were feasible. In your Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the only complaint of Douglas against Lincoln on that point was that Lincoln was not *strongly* enough in favor of white supremacy. Douglas maintained that your country was founded *by* white men, *for* white men, on a totally *white basis*—and he was right!"

I began to wish I had majored in history instead of geography. What Herr Stein was saying didn't sound right to me, but I couldn't refute it. Eric's degree was in history—but he was silent.

"A proof of the inferiority of blacks, and of the mongrel races," Herr Stein went on, "is that they co-operate in their own destruction, killing each other off with gang warfare and mindless conduct of every kind. A still more convincing proof is that they ea-

gerly accept the portrayal of themselves, in what remains of white-controlled mass media, as stupid, vicious, sex-crazed idiots who have no knowledge of anything but guns, drugs, money, insane songs about men who commit incest with their own mothers, and irrational lechery, with the result that their females pump out endless streams of future black criminals to repeat the cycle and drag all around them into the depths of degradation. Incredibly, some of them even display a perverse loyalty, and even bigotry, in favor of their own inferior race to the exclusion of others! This occurs in America to this very day. I have seen it all in your mass media. Is it not so?"

I was still speechless, and totally shocked. Herr Stein—and perhaps the mass media too—seemed to be mixing truth and falsehood so thoroughly that there was no way I could answer either “yes” or “no.”

“The Fourth Reich is coming soon,” Herr Stein repeated after I had failed to answer his question, “and so is its counterpart in America. A halt must be called to race mixing, inferior races running wild, and all such evils. This is the inevitable march of history, toward the glorious future in which the superior race will reign supreme. Countless stores of wealth, acquired by the German government during the Third Reich and securely hidden, will soon be brought forth at the right time, for the use of the new Fourth Reich. There will then be a new blitzkrieg—this time, above and before all else, a blitzkrieg of publicity for the advancement of the Master Race—and it will succeed.”

I could hardly believe my ears. “Countless stores of wealth”? Did Herr Stein know about the treasures we had found? Was he part of the plan to bring them forth and use them to help establish the Fourth Reich? And, if so, was there any way to stop him?

“You, Eric, and you, Michelle,” he was saying, “may be called upon to play a vital role in the future Fourth Reich. Eric, as you know well, you are a perfect specimen of the manhood of the Master Race—and now you have a stunningly beautiful wife, also of the Master Race, whose coloring is much like that of the Fuehrer of the Third Reich. I beg you, do not co-operate in the suicide of the white race! You know how appalled I was, and am, at what Mark has done in marrying Lynn, of all people. It is the lowest depth of the suicide of the white race. Such things should be reserved only for the inferior races, as one of many means to prevent them from breeding. I beg you, Eric, and you, Michelle, do not go down the path of racial suicide. Breed leaders for the Master Race—many leaders, the more the better—and earn the gratitude of white men and women for many years to come!”

I couldn't stand it any more. I tried to be polite, but I had to get out of there. “Herr Stein, I assure you, Eric and I will do everything we *can* do together to breed leaders for the Master Race,” I said—which was perfectly true, as far as it went. “But now we must return to our hotel and rest. Please let me thank you for an extremely enlightening evening.”

“You are most welcome,” he said. He was obviously very pleased with me—far more than I was with him.

Not until we arrived back at the hotel did I start to ask Eric the burning questions in my mind. “Your father was talking about countless stores of wealth for the use of the new Fourth Reich,” I said. “Do you think he knows about what we found?”

“I'm pretty sure he doesn't know we *found* it,” Eric said. “You and I didn't tell him, and Mark and Lynn sure wouldn't. They don't have the most affectionate relationship with him, to say the least. But I'm pretty

sure he does know those treasures are there—and he’s probably in on the plan to use them.”

“Is there any way to stop him, and the other people who are in on the plan?”

“I don’t know—but, if there is, I’m pretty sure Mark will find the way. He really loathes this Fourth Reich crap. I know he’s also very concerned that, if the Fourth Reich pushers ever came to power, he and Lynn would get in big trouble for contributing to the so-called suicide of the white race.”

“What? Just because they don’t have any kids?”

“Well, that’s not all there is to it. You see, Lynn’s not just some regular woman who, for whatever reason, doesn’t have kids. Lynn used to be a man.”

My mouth opened wide. I felt as if I were blinded by light, just as when I had emerged into the sunlight from the hiding place of the buried treasure. Groping my way forward, I stammered, “*What?* Are—are you serious?”

“Perfectly serious. My dad was outraged when he first found out about it. He accused Mark and Lynn of deliberately trying to kill off the white race. See, my dad believes that everything that interferes with breeding—like contraception, abortion, sterilization, homosexuality, and of course transsexuality—should be reserved for the so-called inferior races and race-mixers, so they will die off, while the white race should breed like crazy and gain total control. Nowadays, Mark, Lynn, and my mom and dad are all reasonably polite to each other—but no more than polite.”

“Oh.” I had to know what Eric thought about this, and I couldn’t wait to find out. “So, uh, what do *you* think about Mark and Lynn’s marriage?” I asked.

Eric smiled. “It’s no different from ours,” he said. “By getting your tubes tied, you contributed just as much to the so-called suicide of the white race as Mark and Lynn did. You’re basically no different from a transsexual, if you don’t mind my saying so. Did you ever think of it that way?”

I sat in shocked silence for a moment. I had lied to Eric for *nothing*. He would have been just as pleased to find out I was a transsexual as he had been to believe, falsely, that I was a natural-born female with her tubes tied. Now I would have to admit I lied, and tell Eric the truth—but not quite yet. The new light into which I had emerged was still too blinding, and still too *new*.

“Well,” I said slowly, “I guess that’s right. I have to admit I *am* basically no different from a transsexual.” I laughed nervously, getting quite as close to admitting I had lied as I was yet comfortable with getting: “So I guess you wouldn’t mind even if I *was* a transsexual, would you—just like Lynn?”

Eric laughed heartily. “I wouldn’t mind at all,” he assured me. “One way of ruling out the unpleasant surprises—or, in other words, contributing to the so-called suicide of the white race—is just as good as another, as long as it’s totally effective.”

I could not yet admit the truth, but I breathed a deep, secret sigh of relief. I would only need to find the right moment to admit I had lied—and Eric would surely forgive me, and accept me just as I was, for the rest of our lives!

Chapter 4

On Thursday evening, Mark and Lynn joined us for supper at a local restaurant. I had a feeling that they wanted to discuss the discovery of that treasure. So did we. I was more than a little apprehensive about the disposition of this massive treasure we had found. Who was going to get what, and under what conditions, kept me guessing.

“I was thinking about that cave,” Mark said. “You know, when it was being dug, there had to be another way in, not just the entrance. Like a back door or something.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” I said.

“Look, the war was going badly for the Germans. No doubt, like Lynn said before, these treasures were enough to fund the start of the Fourth Reich. At some point, some people who survived—or their successors in the Nazi secret underground that would endure after the war—were going to come back here. Rather than try to dig their way in the large front entrance, they would enter another way, just to check on the condition of the stuff they had stored there.”

“So, uh, somebody has been keeping an eye on that treasure all this time?” I asked, thinking of Eric’s dad.

“I’m pretty sure. There’s probably somebody who’s nearby, but who’s in touch with Fourth Reich plotters maybe throughout the world—here in Germany, someplace in South America, Switzerland, the United States, or God only knows where.”

“Do you think they’ve heard about the mass grave we uncovered—right near the site of the treasure?” Eric asked.

“I’m sure they have. It wouldn’t take much investigating to find out about *us*, either. All of us could be in jeopardy, if they think we might have stumbled onto their treasure cave.”

My pulse increased at the thought of fanatical devotees of the Fourth Reich setting out to find us—and making sure we were never going to talk to anybody about anything again. I shivered and gulped down the last of my beer. Our discovery had certainly thrown a monkey wrench into our vacation plans. *Some vacation*, I thought to myself. *This whole experience could wind up costing us our lives!*

I was almost afraid to speak, and yet I had to. “What if one of those Fourth Reich plotters who knew about the treasure,” I said, “was your dad?”

Alarm and anger flashed out from Mark’s blue eyes. “Do you have some reason to think he is?” he asked. “I mean, other than just that he lives near here, and raves about the Fourth Reich and the Master Race?”

“He took us to the Nazi hellhole last night,” Eric responded for me. “After that, he not only started talking to us about the Fourth Reich and the Master Race, but he said there were countless stores of wealth waiting to be retrieved, *soon*, for use in establishing the Fourth Reich. What else could he have been talking about?”

Mark slammed his elbow onto the table, and his head into his hand, shaking his head violently. “Nothing,” he said at last. “That must be it. We’ve got to do something to stop this.”

“Agreed!” said Eric. “But what?”

Mark clenched his fists and stared straight ahead. "I think I know," he said. "There's only one way. Of course you realize we could never make off with those boxcar-loads of gold and everything—but we need to go back to that cave again. By this time the authorities are finished with the mass grave area, and there is no reason for them to think there is anything else they should be looking for."

"That sounds right," said Eric. "Tell us what you want us to do."

"I'll pick you up Saturday about one p.m. and we will approach that rocky ridge from the back again—only this time let's see if we can find another entrance."

Eric and I nodded in agreement. We paid our bill and left the restaurant.

That night I had an uneasy sleep. Mark hadn't divulged anything about exactly what he was going to do. I guess he just trusted us to go along with whatever he had in mind. Personally I thought it would be better just to let sleeping dogs lie, and forget we ever stumbled across it. Then again, how would the four of us ever forget about stumbling into that immense fortune—or about the horrifying prospect of it being used to establish the Fourth Reich?

I wished we could all go home and take this long-lost Nazi secret to the grave with us. No harm, no foul. The world didn't need to know of this. The war was over. Let's not dig up the past; let bygones be bygones. In my mind it would be like peeling back a well-healed scab and allowing it to start bleeding again. I thought of all the families whose memories of lost loved ones would be re-ignited—all those people having to relive the terror and horror of those years, as well as the pain of their relatives' financial losses

from the confiscated or stolen treasures. Additionally, there would no doubt be a public outcry and demands for reparations to all the parties involved, who had relatives currently living, for the losses they had incurred. That could be quite a quagmire in and of itself. Lord knows how long that would take before things would be settled to everyone's satisfaction. But then—I thought with a shudder—if we didn't notify the authorities and let all those things take their course, would we deserve part of the blame for allowing the Fourth Reich to triumph?

Promptly at ten minutes to one, Mark and Lynn picked us up at our hotel. I still had bad feelings about this—but, being the dutiful wife and friend, I decided to keep my mouth shut. This was not the time for a discussion to turn into a heated argument between relatives.

We arrived at the back end of the rocky ridge in about an hour or so. Instead of parking on the shoulder of the road, Mark shifted into four wheel drive and drove the SUV through the high grass and small saplings to the base of the ridge. There he turned around and backed the Jeep up as far as he could.

We got out of the SUV with our gear and walked to the base of the ridge to survey the area. A cool afternoon breeze came up as we spread out a little at the base of the ridge. "Winds of Change," I thought to myself, or perhaps "Winds of War"?

"I am trying to picture just where the back end of that office could be," said Mark. "The air in that tunnel was pretty stale, so I don't think there was an air vent, at least not that we could see easily from here or the cave's entrance."

“Let’s get started. We have about six hours of daylight left to do whatever it is we’re going to do,” said Eric.

We spread out and began swinging our metal detectors. I was hoping we wouldn’t find anything. That way Mark would give up his plan and we could go home. Better to be safe than sorry, as far as I was concerned. Then, after Eric and I were back safe at home in Minnesota, Mark and Lynn could notify the authorities of our find, and the Fourth Reich plotters would be deprived of their treasure.

All of us had a great life and a great future. I didn’t want to see it get screwed up over this treasure hunt that could very possibly get us all killed, either now or perhaps sometime in the future. This was no wild goose chase. We had found this treasure accidentally, but I didn’t want it to be the end of all of us.

Eric was walking just ahead of me, to my right, and about halfway up the ridge when his detector beeped. It was a very loud and distinct signal, indicating what he found was big. My pulse jumped as the three of us made our way over to where he was standing.

Using collapsible camper shovels, Mark and Eric took over half an hour to remove most of the sod and grass covering what appeared to be a small metal door, about four feet high and three feet wide.

Lynn and I spared the two of them. We continued to clear away 70-plus years of sod and undergrowth. In the back of my mind I was still considering the possibility of some more booby traps, but my concerns turned out to be unfounded.

When the door was finally clear of everything, we just stood staring at it while catching our breath. This had to be the back entrance. There was no other

reason for it to be there. The only thing left for us to do is open it up and see what was on the other side.

“What if this door is bobby-trapped inside, like the area around and under those boxcars?” Lynn asked.

“I don’t think so,” replied. Eric. “Remember when you sat at the desk there was only a picture of Hitler on the back wall. There were no wires anywhere in that alcove.”

The metal door had a long handle that flipped up to open it, similar to the ones on the boxcars. I watched breathlessly as Mark banged on it with the flat head of his hatchet until it finally broke loose.

I wasn’t relieved at all. I was hoping the door would stay stuck and we all could abandon Mark’s plan and get the hell out of this place. My creepy feelings about this place hadn’t changed since we had found it, nor would they probably ever.

Mark gripped it with both hands and flipped it up then pulled hard. The door wouldn’t budge.

“I don’t think you are going to open it, even if the two of you try,” I said, hoping fervently that it was true.

Eric and Mark each put one hand through the loop of the handle and pulled with all their might, but it was still no go. It was as tight as if the door had been welded shut. It appeared that there was no way we were going to get that thing open, at least not manually anyway.

“This thing’s immovable,” said Eric. “We would be better off getting in the other way.”

Mark shook his head. “Not for what I had in mind. Wait down there at the base of the ridge,” he ordered.

He walked back to the SUV. After tying a length of heavy rope around the trailer hitch, he paid out the rope around a large tree and then straight up the ridge to where we were. He secured the rope to the open handle and walked back to the SUV.

Mark started the vehicle and edged it forward until the slack in the rope was taken up. Next he depressed the accelerator. Dirt and grass flew up from the four wheels digging for traction, as the rope tightened up and let out a noisy protest.

The three of us stood back about twenty feet from the tight rope just in case it snapped. That whip-lashing rope could cause a very serious injury or maybe even kill one of us. I had read stories of men serving on aircraft carriers, who had been badly hurt when the arresting cable that stopped the landing aircraft had snapped. I didn't want anything like that to happen to one of us.

A serious injury would be bad enough, but there would be much worse to come. At the hospital, when we had to explain to the authorities what we were doing there, the cat would leap out of the bag at once, clawing and shrieking. Then the authorities would have a reason to detain us indefinitely while they investigated that cave and its valuable contents—and, when the Fourth Reich plotters found out about the incident, they would be sure to come after us.

A loud bang broke the late afternoon stillness as the door came loose. Mark backed up a little and shut off the ignition. He untied the rope from the trailer hitch while Eric untied the other end from the door handle. One of the hinges had broken off and the door hung to one side.

After coiling up the rope, Mark took it back to the Jeep. When he got back, we all stood staring at the opening in front of us while he caught his breath.

I tried to picture in my mind just where this tunnel was going to exit in the cave. Could it possibly be someplace we hadn't noticed when we entered the cave the first time through the front? Maybe there was a secret panel that would magically slide open to provide an entrance and exit from the office or elsewhere in the cave?

We could see inside the corridor, but not very far. We all turned on our flashlights and followed Mark inside the corridor on our hands and knees. Once again that creepy feeling engulfed me as we inched closer to the end of the tunnel.

I had always loved the outdoors, and never liked small places or being closed in. Fortunately the corridor was a short one, and it wasn't long before Eric was at the end of it. He reached out and touched what looked like the wall in front of him. "It feels like paper or maybe rotted canvas," he said.

"Cut through it with your hatchet," Mark ordered.

When he did so, the rotted material came away quite easily. "It is the back of the office, just like Mark thought," said Eric.

"Good. Now let's go inside, but watch for wires," cautioned Mark.

We crawled our way past the torn picture of Hitler and dropped down to the desk that was below us in the office.

Once inside the office, all of us could see that we had broken through the picture of Hitler, which we

originally thought had been hung on the back wall of the office. Instead, it had been used to cover up the entrance of the corridor we had just entered through.

“Okay, Mark, we’re here. Now what did you have in mind?” asked Eric. “It is getting late, almost dark. Will it take long?”

“No. Now please come with me,” he answered.

We followed him out to the military-style wrecker truck. I still had no idea what Mark had in mind, but it had better be good, whatever it was. All four of us were in jeopardy if it didn’t. All I could do now was to cross my fingers and hope for the best—“the best” meaning we would all get out of here alive, Eric and I would be able to get back to the States in one piece, and we would *not* spend time in a hospital or with the German authorities, answering a steady stream of questions about what we had been doing here and why.

From the back of the truck Mark pulled out the spare tire that had been lying on the bed of the truck under the crane. He bounced it several times and rolled it back and forth. Unlike the four truck tires that had gone flat after seven decades of sitting there without being driven, the spare was still inflated.

He rolled the tire back to the cave wall and then looked at his watch.

“Eric I want you to walk alongside the tire with me as it rolls to the front of the cave. I am going to time it to see if we have enough escape time for my plan to work.”

I watched as Mark lined up the tire against the back wall between him and Eric. He gave it a push to get it rolling; then he and Eric began walking along-

side of it as it rolled down the slight incline to the front of the cave, with Eric's flashlight showing the way.

As they got close to the trip wires at the front of the cave, Mark stopped the tire and pushed the button on his watch. "Forty-eight seconds," said Mark. "That's barely enough time. There is going to be very little margin for error, but I think it can be done."

What can be done? I wondered frantically. And what will happen if it can't?

Lynn and I watched closely as the two men stopped near the trip wires at the front of the cave, and then proceeded to roll the tire back to where we were standing at the back end of the cave. With a sudden shock I realized what Mark was planning to do—and what could happen if it took even slightly too long to do it.

"Mark!" I cried. "No! You're not going to try to blow this whole place up!"

"Oh, yes, I am," Mark said. "It's the only thing that can be done."

"But—why can't we just tell the authorities about this? Wouldn't that stop the treasure from going toward the Fourth Reich just as well as if you blew it up? And you're not going to be able to blow up those bars of gold and silver, anyway!"

"We can't tell the authorities," Mark said, as if explaining something very elementary to one of the children he didn't have, "because it would seal our death warrant for sure. If it became known that we found the treasure and prevented it from being used to establish the Fourth Reich, the plotters would know who we were, and they would be sure to take

revenge. This is our only chance. We can hope the explosion will appear to be accidental and we didn't have anything to do with it. As for the gold and silver, the authorities will still take care of it, but we'll have some hope that the plotters won't take care of *us*. Do you understand *now*?"

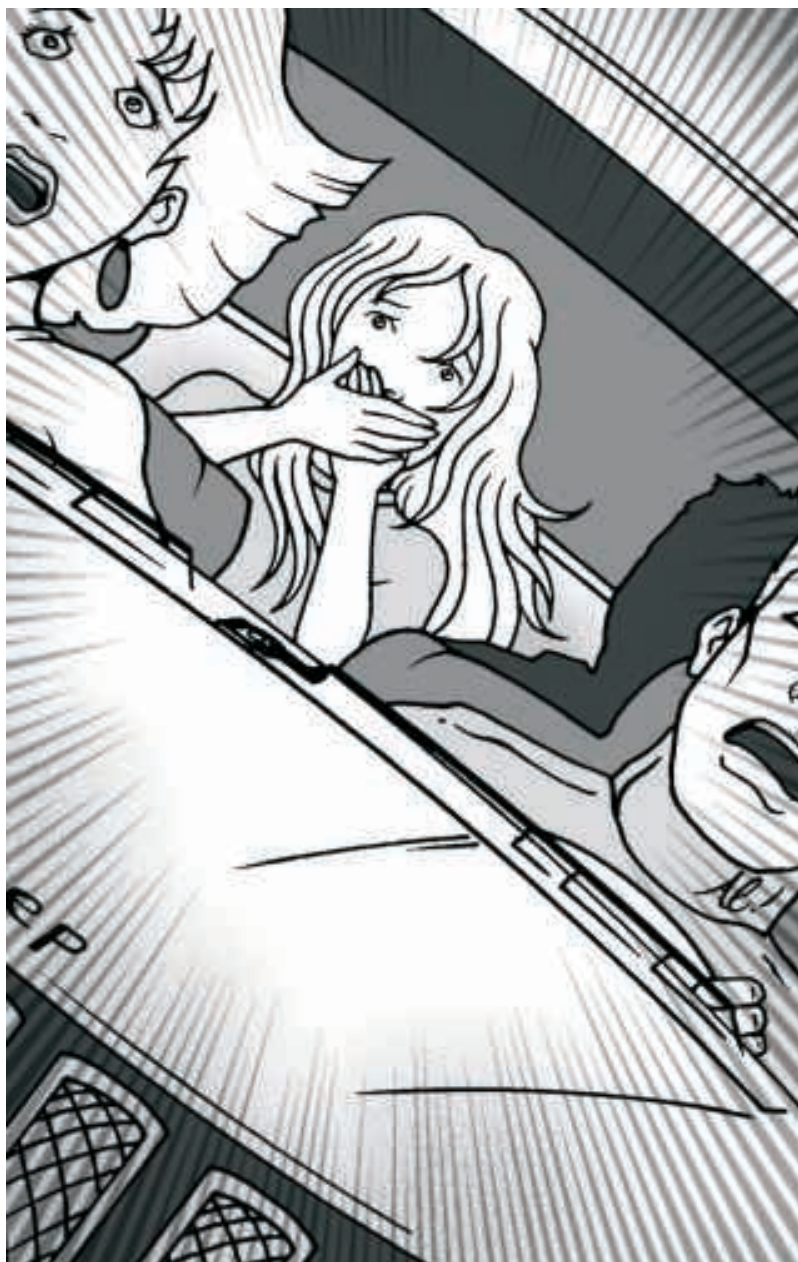
I stared at him. I knew he was right. None of us was going to get anything out of this after all—except our lives, and our freedom from the tyranny of the Fourth Reich. "Yes," I said, almost in a whisper. "I understand."

"Okay, then," Mark said. "You three go back to the SUV. Lynn, you get in the driver's side and start the engine. When you see me coming, put the SUV in gear, but keep your foot on the brake. As soon as I get inside, floor it and get us the hell out of here fast."

In my mind I saw how he was going to accomplish his plan. The tire would roll down the incline and hit one or more of the trip wires. By that time Mark would be back in the truck with us and we would have vacated the area—at least if nothing went wrong.

If the detonators and explosives still worked, the whole place would go up. Everything in that cave that *could* be blown up would be blown to smithereens—and we would too, if we didn't get out of there fast enough. All of a sudden I felt very cold. There was so little margin for error here. I could only hope his plan would work.

The three of us made our way back through the corridor and into the SUV. Lynn got in the driver's seat and started the car, while Eric and I got in the back seat. Back in the cave, I knew Mark was getting the tire rolling; then he was running to the office, climbing on the desk, and crawling as fast as he



could through the corridor. My eyes were fixed on the entrance to the corridor. I was terribly afraid he wouldn't make it out in time; there was so little time to spare.

Suddenly I saw Mark running like a deer towards us. Lynn pushed open the passenger-side door and Mark, breathless, got in. He checked his watch as Lynn floored the gas pedal. Dirt and grass flew as we jerked forward and headed towards the gravel road in front of us. I had my fingers, eyes, and my legs crossed, praying to any god who might be listening, to let us live through this so we could all return home safe and sound.

"Faster!" Mark commanded. "It's going to blow up in just a few seconds, if that old stuff hasn't rusted away to the point where it no longer works. If it doesn't—then I'm not sure what our next move should be."

Lynn kept the accelerator to the floor in four-wheel drive, causing a whole lot of gravel to hit the underside of the SUV when we exited the wooded area and Lynn headed down the gravel road. I thought the gravel was making a lot of noise, but it was nothing compared to what was soon to come.

Sure enough, the old wires and explosives were still in working order. The late afternoon semi-darkness was turned into the brightness of midday, almost as if someone had thrown a switch. The shock wave that came next was like a giant fist striking the side of our Jeep. It pushed the SUV over onto the two right side wheels, jostling us inside. I let out a girlish scream and covered my mouth with both hands as we bounced back down on all four wheels. The thunderclap that followed, almost instantly, was one I will never forget. I had been through many thunderstorms in Minnesota, but I had never heard a thun-

der-banger like this one. It was loud enough to rattle your teeth and shake a person right through to their bones, maybe even loud enough to wake the dead, Nazi or otherwise.

“Everybody OK?” asked Mark.

“Yes,” we all answered almost in unison.

Lynn slowed down on the gravel road, and brought the SUV to a complete stop where the road met the blacktop highway. She glanced around for traffic, and then floored the gas pedal again when we were on the highway. We headed back towards the main highway, but drove away from Strausburg to Mark and Lynn’s place in Lansberg.

Even at this distance, we could still hear the sounds of sirens as the locals began to respond to the explosion. I couldn’t help but wonder what they were thinking had happened to break the calm and serenity of this sleepy little town.

When we arrived at Mark and Lynn’s apartment, I was still shaking inside. It took several glasses of wine and a large helping of pepperoni pizza to get me to calm down. It could have been a much closer call than the one we had just experienced, I thought. I was just glad that all of us had come out of it unscathed.

It was hard not to think of what might have happened had Mark not noticed the trip wires when he had first crawled into that front entrance to the cave. With an explosion that large, it was doubtful the authorities would find even pieces of our bodies.

We watched the news that night with anticipation. No film had been shot, as it had been almost dark when the explosion had occurred. The only thing

they could report was that “authorities are investigating the scene of a horrific explosion just southeast of the town of Strausburg. The cause of the explosion is still unknown.”

Eric and I slept on Mark and Lynn’s rollaway couch that night, but it was a restless sleep. We were scheduled to leave the next afternoon. I was hoping there wasn’t going to be any connection between us and the blast that was going to keep us in Germany any longer than we had to be—or have some even more disastrous effect.

After breakfast Mark and Lynn took us back to our hotel and we said our good-byes. I still had not been able to relax. It wasn’t as if my nerves were shot, exactly; it was just that I had never come that close to being killed before. I just wanted to get packed and leave for home ASAP.

When we entered our hotel the desk clerk looked up and motioned for us to come over. He had a concerned look on his face as we approached.

“The police were here asking about you. They knew you might have been hiking in that area after you found the mass grave. I will call and tell them you are both OK.”

“Thank you,” I said. I was relieved that they hadn’t asked us to stay around, though that was still a possibility, but I was also disturbed that someone thought we might have been hiking in the area when the explosion occurred. Surely the proponents of the “Master Race,” if they had anything like the superior intelligence they claimed to have, were capable of putting two and two together.

We went back to our room and began packing. Our flight was later the next morning, and we wanted to

leave early for the drive to the airport as well as the security check in. I didn't want to miss the flight and be stuck here in Germany any longer than necessary.

After lunch Eric drove us to a department store in the downtown area. I was puzzled, as we hadn't planned on doing any shopping. This was to have been a trip just to meet Eric's family and do some hiking and backpacking in the German countryside.

We had only casual vacation clothes with us. Jeans and sport shirts were all we were going to need for our treks into the outdoors. I couldn't imagine just exactly what he was up to, especially since we would be leaving in the morning anyway and certainly didn't need any more clothes.

In the women's department he was very insistent that I buy a dressy pants suit, blouse, and black leather pumps with two-inch heels. I was going to protest, but he just put a single finger to my lips and shook his head as if to stop me from asking any questions.

"Trust me, dear," he said with a smile.

Eric bought a sports jacket, tie, white dress shirt, slacks, and plain-toe dress shoes in the men's department. I said nothing as we took our purchases back to the hotel. I had no idea what these purchases were about, but I had no doubt I was going to find out very soon.

We watched a movie on one of the cable channels and then went out to eat supper. I was still a bit curious about the additions to our wardrobe, but once again, as the dutiful wife, I said nothing.

The news that night had film of the aftermath of the explosion. The footage had been shot from a heli-

copter. It showed a massive black hole just east and south of Strausburg. It looked like a meteor had hit the area, completely obliterating the countryside and leaving only a large black hole, parts of which were still smoking.

Emergency vehicles with their flashing blue lights were everywhere. The parts of the ridge that were still smoking were being doused with water from one of the fire trucks.

There were military as well as civilian personnel all over the area. In fact, it almost looked like a war zone in the aftermath of an attack by some unknown enemy—or perhaps, in view of recent events, a terrorist attack. Another scene showed houses and buildings on the town's east and south side, with their windows blown out and black holes peppering their sides and roofs.

How this happened without anyone being killed or injured was beyond me. It was safe to say that good fortune had smiled upon all of us, and there was no way to express how grateful I was for that.

South of town a railroad crane was lifting a set of wheels from one of the boxcars and putting it in a hopper car behind it. The rail yard too was strewn with bits and pieces of wreckage of the six destroyed boxcars and their contents. The gold and silver bars had been found, of course, and German government authorities had promptly moved in to take charge of them.

I was sure that it was going to be quite a while before all of this mess would be cleaned up. Hopefully, by then, Eric and I would be back home safely in the USA. If so, I didn't anticipate that we would take another vacation in Germany any time soon—if ever!

With the remnants of this vast treasure horde being strewn over such a wide area, I couldn't help but wonder if any of it other than the gold and silver bars would be found intact and therefore identifiable—not so much the paintings and sculpture, which were surely ruined beyond repair, but the jewelry. If so, would their discovery lead to another investigation about what else might have been stored there? Could the truth about what we had found eventually come out? Would the authorities want to interview us again, trying to find a connection between us and the blast? I hoped not. When we got back home, I figured, I would probably investigate whether the German authorities could extradite us for that purpose, or require us to answer any questions.

The report stated that, despite the immensity of the explosion, no one had been killed or injured in the blast, and that authorities were continuing their investigation with the help of the German and American military personnel.

Reports from the nearest airport and military radar stations had already ruled out the chance of the explosion being caused by a meteor hit. The reporter also speculated that it wouldn't be long before someone would bring up the possibility of an attack by UFOs. Of course that statement would probably bring every screwball in the planet out of the woodwork, clamoring for answers from both the civilian and military personnel who were involved in the investigation, and predictably alleging that there must have been a cover-up of the facts surrounding the explosion, its true cause, and the motives of the perpetrators.

When I heard that, I figured it could be a year or more before any of the investigation's details would be made public, and perhaps some of it would not be made public at all. Any possible connection between

the blast and the mass grave that had been found nearby would remain shrouded in obscurity, perhaps forever.

“Now that the explosion is common knowledge, whoever is still alive that knows about the cave, and what was in it, also knows that the whole works has been destroyed in that blast, except for what the German authorities took control of,” said Eric.

“I have no doubt of that,” I replied. “I also think that, when this investigation is over, it won’t be hard for them to get a copy. It would be fairly easy to find out that we were the ones who found the mass grave. Then they might easily think about the possibility that we might have stumbled unto their long lost secret, and blown it up. But they probably wouldn’t come after us to kill us,” I added hopefully, “since everything has been blown to smithereens or seized by the government anyway. Killing us would serve them no purpose, except possibly for revenge.”

Eric nodded. “I sure hope you are right about that,” he added. “What I don’t know is how highly they may value revenge.”

In the morning Eric insisted we wear our new purchases for the return flight home. I did as he asked. In the back of my mind I was still curious about this, but I didn’t want to say anything until we were back home safe and sound in Minnesota.

We left our luggage at the desk and then ate breakfast at the hotel. We checked out and drove to the Munich airport. The closer we got, the more apprehensive I became.

Just before we got there, Eric stopped at a rest area. When we returned from the rest rooms and got into our rental SUV, he turned to me with a big grin

on his face. I knew something was up, but this was an odd place for him to surprise me with anything.

From his jacket pocket he held out a pair of clip-on earrings. The clasps were gold, and dangling from each one-inch-long gold chain were two huge tear-shaped diamonds.

“Put them on,” he said with a grin.

I nearly gasped as I clipped them to my earlobes.

“Where on earth...” My voice trailed off as I remembered the crates we had seen, filled with the most beautiful jewelry that I had ever seen or even imagined had existed. Now I began to wonder what else he and Mark may have taken from those boxes.

Next he leaned over and attached a beautiful brooch to my jacket lapel. It was a solid gold oval on which was a beautiful rose. The green stem and branches was studded with diamonds. The rose petals were adorned with red rubies. I was about to say something when he placed a single finger to my lips again.

“Close your mouth, dear,” he said with a smile.

I sat there speechless, trying to think of how valuable this stuff was, as well as what was going to happen if the authorities at the airport here or back in the USA were to question me about them. I was never a very good liar—except, perhaps, when it came to convincing Eric that I was a natural-born woman with her tubes tied—and it wouldn’t take a stern investigator long to wring the truth out of me.

Reaching inside the other pocket he held up a Rolex watch. Putting his other watch in the suitcase behind him, he smiled again and slipped on a man’s

diamond ring. The diamond was huge and it shone brilliantly. It looked big enough to be a boat anchor—a very rich man’s boat anchor, that is.

I was flabbergasted, and now I felt even more apprehensive. When I appeared very nervous, and my mouth dried up if I had to speak, would the two of us would be asked to step aside by airport security?

That was not a pleasant thought. Would we be forced to wait for some customs officials to come and talk to the two of us? Maybe letting us sweat it out in one of their back interrogation rooms would be their plan before interrogating the two of us, separately of course, to the point where we would confess to our crimes.

“Mark took some stuff for himself and Lynn too, but remember, mum’s the word,” Eric said with a big grin on his face.

I simply nodded as he turned to the front and started the engine.

We turned in our rental and checked our baggage. Security didn’t blink as we passed through the detectors, though I was as scared and nervous as I had ever been. I tried my best to be as nonchalant as possible, and I guess it worked, at least so far.

Sitting at the gate, I felt my pulse racing. I was waiting for custom officials or security to come running down the aisle at the last minute. They would make a scene of putting us both in handcuffs and dragging us off of the plane, just like you see in the movies. Then we would be put behind bars to await our trial and sentencing.

To my great relief, that didn't happen. We boarded our flight. After a surprisingly short wait, we took off and headed back to the good old USA.

Chapter 5

Even after we were airborne, I just couldn't get myself to relax. Sleep was hard to come by on the long flight home. I kept thinking that we were going to get caught, one way or the other. Our teaching careers would be in prison, teaching other inmates to prepare them for life on the outside, while coming to grips with the fact that the rest of our lives would be lived out inside the gray walls and steel bars of a prison.

Our story would be in the front-page headlines in Minneapolis. Even worse, if we ever did get out, some member of the Fourth Reich would hunt us down and kill us in revenge for what we had done to their hidden loot. Those murders would do doubt go unsolved. They would be just a part of Minnesota's history of unsolved crimes not unlike so many others in the annals of crime.

Arriving in Minneapolis, we passed through customs with no problems. My pulse was still racing even when we entered our house. I guess I was still expecting to hear sirens and then be surrounded by a dozen armed men who would take us into custody and then downtown for booking.

That didn't happen either. I even began to be pretty sure it was never going to. We were back in our own country safe and sound. I couldn't have been happier or more relieved to be so. Now maybe I could settle down and really relax.

After a day of resting up, we took everything to three different jewelers to get appraisals for insurance purposes. I had a pretty good idea but it would be nice to have something in writing to keep with them in our safety deposit box.

I was completely astounded at the values we were quoted. My earrings were worth \$50,000.00, the brooch almost twice that. Eric's ring was about \$25,000.00, but his Rolex watch was valued at a really unbelievable amount. Rolex had invented the first self-winding watch in the early thirties. Eric's was one of those, but decorated with diamonds and in almost pristine condition. Being in possession of such valuable items was almost a little frightening in and of itself.

Our last stop of the day was the credit union, where all of the jewelry was placed in a safety deposit box along with the appraisal estimates. These valuable possessions would certainly provide a nice addition to our retirement—if we managed to live that long. They could also be a quick source of cash if we got into a real financial bind and needed money fast. I was also thinking just one of those items would make a sizeable down payment on a house, as well as giving us the ability to furnish it with just about everything we had always wanted to have.

School started again and we settled into our routine. It was good to get back to work again and be busy. We both enjoyed our jobs as well as our time together in the outdoors. Eric was a good husband and partner, and I was grateful to be able to have someone like him to share the rest of my life with.

The memory of our enjoyable, but of course never forgettable, summer vacation was never far from the back of my mind. Considering everything that had happened to us, how could it not?

Eric continued to find coins and jewelry with his metal detector, as well as a whole lot of worthless junk, though it was always fun to dig the stuff up. We always had a great time, no matter what, as we spent our spare time in the great outdoors.

There was no doubt Eric and I were never going to find anything that would even come close to what we had brought back from the massive treasure we had found in those boxcars. Nevertheless, it was always enjoyable to be outdoors, no matter what we found, or if we never found anything at all.

From the time we first got back, I would occasionally have a nightmare about being in that cave again—only this time the booby-trapped bombs blew up in our faces, which would wake me up with a start.

Once I dreamed that Eric and I were being held in a Gestapo jail. The SS guards were going to take turns raping me after I refused to answer any of their questions, but Eric had woke me up before they got started.

Sometimes the dream was about the brown-shirted storm troopers, with their red, black and white swastika armbands, breaking into our home at night and taking both of us prisoner, then driving us off to an unknown location where we would be placed in a cell. At their leisure they would torture us just for their amusement, since their treasure was already lost and couldn't be reclaimed.

Eric would always comfort me by telling me that it was just a dream and that I should relax and stop worrying. It was reassuring to have a partner with me at times like that, especially after suffering through a terrifying dream that seemed so real. Sometimes it

would take me quite a while before I could finally calm down and then drift off to sleep again.

A year passed and the nightmares gradually ceased. I was sleeping much better, and Eric thought I had become a more relaxed person. I felt better too as I thought less and less about the vacation that had gone bad but was now behind us, though I must admit not totally and completely out of my memory.

There had been nothing further on the news about the blast. Eric would periodically check his hometown paper on the internet, but there had been nothing there either since we got back.

I wondered if no news was good news, or if things were being kept secret until a later date that hopefully would not involve us in any way. My hope was that we would be seen as just a couple of wandering tourists who had stumbled onto that mass grave but nothing else.

We also kept in touch with Eric's brother Mark and his wife Lynn, and even his parents, via the webcams on our home laptops. Mark and Lynn never mentioned our treasure find, and I didn't bring it up. I guess you could say that, as far as the four of us were concerned, it never happened. Still, I felt lingering fear that almost any day now German investigators would drop down on us, followed by a horde of reporters making us international news. "Local couple arrested in theft of stolen jewels," would have been the appropriate headline.

Eric, of course, pooh-poohed this idea. "They will probably be finding bits and pieces of that stuff for many years to come," he said with his usual big grin.

I could only hope that he was right. The longer the time since the blast, the less the chances were that

we would be contacted by the German investigators—or, God forbid, a member of that secret “Fourth Reich” demanding to know if we had taken anything from their secret stash. I still shuddered at the thought of the latter.

They say that time heals all wounds. The four of us had not been literally wounded, of course, but emotional scars from the frightening experience we had shared could be just as deep and troubling. Lynn had mentioned once in an e-mail that she too had some bad dreams for a short time after the blast, but that they were no longer occurring. It was good to know I wasn’t the only one bothered by what we had been through. It seemed that her emotional scars, as well as mine, were being healed at last.

Why, then, did I still feel a sense of unease, of incompleteness, of needing to do something long undone, even when I had become fairly confident that neither the German investigators nor the Fourth Reich fanatics would trouble us?

I tried to dredge my mind, searching for what was missing. Did it have something to do with German investigators, or Fourth Reich fanatics, or both? After some fairly diligent dredging, I remembered thinking that the German investigators would have little trouble wringing the truth out of me, for I had never been very good at lying—*except* about the one thing I had successfully lied to Eric about. It was something the Fourth Reich fanatics would loathe me for, as Eric’s dad had loathed Lynn. It was the *one* thing I had ever lied to Eric about—and, to this day, I had failed to tell him the truth.

This could not, must not, would not go on. “Eric,” I said to him in the evening of the same day when I had successfully dredged my mind, “you’ve always been

so good to me; I need you to forgive me for something.”

Eric’s beautiful blue eyes opened wide in astonishment. “*What?*” he said. “I can’t imagine what you could need me to forgive you about.”

“I lied to you,” I said. “You thought I was a—a natural-born woman with her tubes tied, and I said I was. It wasn’t true. I’m really—uh—just like Lynn. I was born a man, as she was.”

Eric laughed out loud. “Well, you sure could have fooled me!” he said. “You *did* fool me! But why on earth did you think you needed to lie about it?”

“Well—I was afraid. I was thinking how some men would think it was perfectly fine to marry a natural-born woman with her tubes tied, and yet they’d be repelled, even sickened, at the thought of marrying a woman like me, who used to be a man.”

“Well, that would be awfully irrational of them,” Eric said. “You didn’t really imagine I was that irrational, did you?”

“Well—I didn’t *think* so, but I wasn’t sure. I guess I didn’t know you nearly well enough, back then.”

“But now you do,” Eric said, gazing deep into my eyes. “And you always will.” He kissed me deeply on the mouth, just as on the evening when we first made love.

I knew he was right. I did know him well enough, now, to be free from fear that he could be that irrational—and I always would.

Our life together continued, and we were both very happy—just as happy in our teaching careers as in

our life together as well. I couldn't have picked a better partner to share my life with.

Eric became an American citizen. We continued to enjoy the great outdoors in our spare time. Life was wonderful.

Thinking back to my childhood, I never would have thought that I would ever be this happy and content as the two of us were. I guess sometimes dreams do come true.

I still kept my stash of "mattress money" a secret from Eric, heeding my grandmother's advice to my mom. Periodically, I still worked part-time at the country club, which added to that stash. While no employment, even self-employment, is totally secure, our financial future certainly was.

One night after a little too much wine, I related to Eric the story from the TV talk show about the man who had always wanted to be "fixed for life" and ended up just the opposite. We shared a good laugh over it.

"I could never be really fixed unless I was with you," was his remark.

Realistically speaking, the two of us had managed to do what that man in the story had not. We both had good jobs and a very bright future as we had settled into our married life. You could honestly say that the two of us were pretty much "fixed," but in a very good way. In fact, you could even say that both of us were now "Set for Life."

THE END

Epilogue

Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 2016

It was a warm mid-morning when a nondescript sedan entered the parking lot of a large nursing home facility. A well dressed young man in his late twenties got out and walked into the building's front entrance. He stopped at the reception desk.

“Carl Kleinholtz’s room, please,” he said.

The woman looked up the name in her computer register. “He is in 204.”

“Thank you,” replied the man.

A few minutes later the man walked into room 204 to find it empty. He walked back to the center nurses’ station.

“I am looking for Carl Kleinholtz. He is not in his room,” stated the young man.

“Try the back veranda, down the right-hand corridor all the way to the end. Many of our residents are out there enjoying the sunshine. Mr. Kleinholtz recently suffered a stroke and has difficulty speaking. He is still a bit weak, so please do not stay too long.”

“Thank you very much, I won’t.”

The well-dressed young man followed the nurses’ directions and walked to the back veranda, where he found Carl Kleinholtz sitting off to one side in a wheelchair. His face was drawn, and he gave no sign of recognition as the young man took a chair next to him.

“Good morning, Herr Kleinholtz. I am sorry to learn of your recent illness. I am here to give you the quarterly report from our district commander.”

Carl Kleinholtz reached for the cup of water to his left. His right hand began to tremble a bit as he brought the bent straw of the cup to his lips and sucked in some of the fluid.

“Yes, I understand, go on please,” he said with a raspy voice.

“The explosion near Strausburg has been thoroughly investigated. The official reports were inconclusive as to the exact nature of the blast. However, there are some details have never been revealed to the general public. Our sources tell us that a group of hikers had been in the area and found the mass grave of the executed Jew laborers who had worked on the project. There appears to be nothing to connect them with the blast, however. It is possible that over time the wires and/or fuses deteriorated to the point where ignition occurred. As of this late date nothing further can be determined, as the authorities have concluded their investigation, at least as far as the general public is concerned. Herr Stein, who has followed the whole matter at close range, will keep us appraised if anything new develops.”

The face of 82-year-old Carl Kleinholtz was without expression as he heard the news. He took another drink of water and then cleared his throat. “What about the others?” he asked.

The young man smiled and began again. “The secret bunker under the Eagles’ Nest is still undiscovered. The area has become something of a tourist attraction now, but the items in storage beneath the nest have been recently inspected and are in good shape, ready to be removed at our discretion. The

older mini U-boat loaded with documents from the heavy water experiments, as well as the future designs of the V-3 missile project, plus a small amount of gold and silver bars, is going to be left sunken in about thirty meters of water in a far northern Norwegian fjord. True, those technology documents have become obsolete since the nineteen fifties, and Dr. Von Braun went to work for the Allies to build multi-stage rockets—but since the war ended several countries now have the technology for nuclear weapons that we had been researching. If needed, the gold and silver bars can easily be removed by divers when needed. Our funds in the Swiss bank accounts are still viable and are growing with the expansion of the world economy. Those funds will be converted into cash for the use of the new Fourth Reich when the time comes. We receive quarterly reports from the bankers and despite the world economy's ups and downs we have a readily available source of capital. The bunker in the jungles west of São Paulo, Brazil, is still a well guarded secret. No one outside the Fourth Reich has a clue that it is even there. It also contains a little more than the value of what we lost in the blast at Strausburg.”

“You suggest that the loss at Strausburg was not disastrous?” Carl Kleinholtz asked, wrinkling his aged face into a frown.

“This loss, as large as it was.” the young man said, “has not deterred us from our mission. It is a setback, to be sure, but not one that is unbearable. We shall continue to build for the future as our Fuehrer would have wanted us to. The membership in the Fourth Reich continues to increase with each passing year, and many members of the Master Race throughout the world are claiming their superiority to the inferior races. I have no doubt that we are going to be able to return to our former greatness in a very short period of time. Then we will be able to truly

honor the Fuehrer and his loyal comrades for the society that they had started to create, in which the Master Race would reign supreme.”

The well-dressed young man got up and shook Carl Kleinholtz’s hand. “I want to thank you,” said the young man, “for all the work you have done here on behalf of the Fourth Reich. I wish also to pay tribute to your father, SS Colonel Hermann Kleinholtz, who oversaw the security of the Strausburg project, and who died fighting the Allies to keep it a secret.”

The young man left. Alone again, Carl Kleinholtz reached for the cup to take another drink. With the cup halfway to his lips, his hand trembled again and he dropped it. His head fell back on the wheelchair headrest, and his sightless eyes stared up at the clear blue sky.

Outside in the parking lot, the well-dressed young man got into his car and drove away.

Bonn, Germany, July 2016

The investment banker sat drumming his fingers on the top of his desk. He checked his watch. From the bottom left-hand drawer he removed a book. Opening the book, he removed a cell phone from the hollowed-out middle of the book.

In a few minutes the phone vibrated. “Ja,” he answered.

“Quarterly reports are completed,” said the voice on the phone. “Everything is going according to our plans. The Strausburg loss was a surprise, but not one which would cripple us. We are still quite financially secure, thanks in part to your investment strategies.”

“Very well,” replied the investment banker. Call me again next quarter.”

With that the investment banker pushed the end button on the cell phone. He replaced the phone inside the hollowed-out center of the book. He got up from his desk, walked to the shelf behind him, and placed the book back on the shelf. Then he took his seat behind his desk and turned his attention to the day’s work ahead of him, confident in his belief that the imagined Fourth Reich would arise despite all obstacles and setbacks. History could repeat itself, like a bad dream.