

Black Forest Reckoning

A Hardy Durkin Travel Mystery

By Blurette Matthey

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[MAP](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

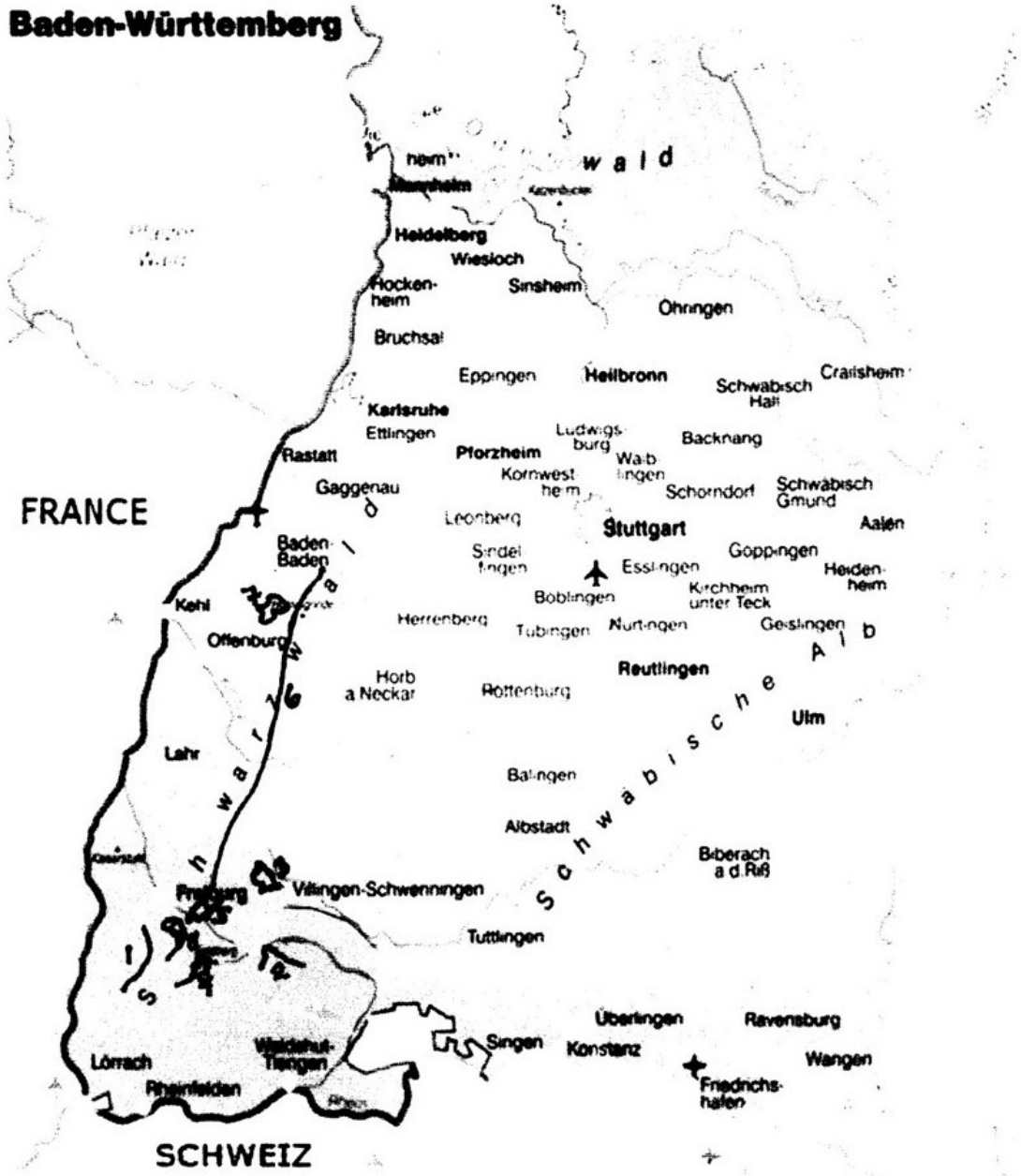
[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[COMING SOON: DALMATIAN TRAFFICK](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

Baden-Württemberg



- Day 1 Margrave's Land
- Day 2 Wutach Gorge
- Day 3 Schonwald & Clock Factory
- Day 4 Belchen
- Day 5 Jesuitenschloss
- Day 6 Baden-Baden
- Day 7 Sasbachwalden
- Day 8 Münstertal

A page from Hardy Durkin's Diary

PROLOGUE

*Hardy and company are visiting the Black Forest area of Germany, staying in the guest wing of a local castle, Schloss Haeflin. In the midst of hiking the Black Forest, enjoying all things Swabian, and spending a day in Baden-Baden, the hikers find themselves at ground zero for coeds disappearing from the nearby University of Freiburg and foul play is suspected. Unresolved personal issues of several members of the group threaten the tour's cohesion, and Hardy discovers the Baron who owns the schloss has stolen someone's identity as well as his fortune. Ever the sleuth, Hardy untangles the web of deceit, madness, and murder in *The Black Forest Reckoning*.*

CHAPTER 1

After some time the gray-haired man came, took his candle, looked at the girl and shook his head. When he saw that she had fallen into a sound sleep, he opened a trap-door, and let her down into the cellar.

‘The Hut in the Forest’ by the Brothers Grimm

He finally found the one he wanted by driving around the university in Freiburg. It was one of his favorite areas to troll for quarry. He’d noticed her in Café Einstein, alone, savoring a cup of coffee with her nose in a book, and had waited for her to finish. It wasn’t so much the color of her hair or how she looked or dressed, as much as the fact that she was alone, on a Friday night. Waiting for him. Forty minutes later, when she left the coffee house, he’d pulled alongside the curb and let his car do the baiting.

“That book bag looks awfully heavy... can I give you a ride back to campus?” he would ask oh, so innocently. And she would look not at him, but his Aston Martin V8 Vantage S Roadster, and jump in without a second thought. Hooked, but the hook wasn’t set, so his next ploy, after nearing her destination, making small talk all the way, would be the “Say, you wouldn’t care to join me for dinner, would you?” routine. Perhaps even throw in the “I’m a new professor at the University of Freiburg... philosophy... and am just learning my way about the place” angle. It usually worked. This time was no different. So, she’d decided they would eat sushi and directed him to the Basho An, a traditional Japanese restaurant in the heart of the small university town.

After he had plied his dates with booze they invariably jumped at the chance to see where he lived when he modestly mentioned that he lived on a private estate. This young woman was no different, so along about ten o’clock, when it was dark, he drove a confusing circle around Freiburg’s outer streets before heading to his schloss, deep in the Black Forest. The girl, Benta was her name, was so ga-ga over his car’s dashboard he could be driving her to the moon for all she cared.

This night there was no moon, at all, and the drive up to the house was in total darkness. The headlights from his Aston cast giant, lurid shadows in the trees overhanging the road. By day the long, curved driveway wound through idyllic parkland, by night it suggested a forest inhabited by werewolves and witches who ate unsuspecting children. His house, when it appeared round the last bend in the road, took her breath away, and she gasped.

“This is where you live?” she asked, incredulously. “In a castle?”

His ancestral home rose from a clearing in the surrounding pine forest like a giant white sepulcher, its massive size impressive, especially in the dark. The schloss consisted of three large, rectangular wings of three stories each, plus attic, juxtaposed together to form a three-sided, squared-off U-shape with an enclosed, flagstone courtyard in front. Other smaller rectangles had been added on at various periods in the life of the castle and appeared to meander out from the main buildings.

Stoically built, the foundation was quarried stone, the walls gleaming, white stucco seamed together at precise ninety degree corners, with polished stone blocks mounting the corners for three stories as an accent to their precision. Several hundred windows of

all shapes and sizes broke the monotony of the vast exterior walls and allowed great quantities of light to flood the interior spaces. Several towers rose over the roof line at intervals around the perimeter. Three such towers, slender and octagonal in shape, were topped by graceful, sloping rounded caps with brass spires in the shape of a cross. A fourth tower, blocky, square, and uninspiring, sported a steeply sloped, red-tile roof to match the rest of the castle's covering.

He always derived a smug satisfaction from the reactions of his guests when they first saw his house, but tried to play it down in false humility.

"Um, yes. Big old place, isn't it?" he tossed off, casually. "Been in the family a good while. As the eldest male heir it came to me and I've been here, oh, thirteen years or so."

"Who are you? Are you really a philosophy professor?"

He toyed with the idea before responding. "More a philosopher," he said in amusement. It was all a game, wasn't it?

She had her first inkling of fear then. More a doubt. He felt it, and let her squirm with it for a minute before brushing it away.

"Do you like dogs?" he asked, changing the subject. Animals always seemed to disarm one's fears, he thought.

"Y... Yes," she answered a bit uncertainly. "But not great big ones," she added.

He thought about his Deutsch Drahthaars and wondered if she would consider them big dogs and what would happen if she did.

The entrance to his private wing was around on the west side of the complex, so he drove past the vaulted entrance that led to the main courtyard and continued on until an old, narrow archway appeared on his left, overgrown with lilac-flowering vines. With little clearance on either side, since it was intended originally only for horses, he kept the steering wheel steady and shot through the aperture into a smaller, grassed courtyard and parked before a weathered oaken door that was virtually round, flanked on each side by large brass carriage lights and nine-foot-high narrow windows that were more like glass slits. The effect was somewhat foreboding, and for a moment Benta hesitated to get out of the Aston.

"Where, exactly, are we?" she wanted to know.

He stood by her door, which he had gallantly opened, and with a flourish of his large right arm and slight bow said, "My private entrance to the area of the schloss I call home."

Flowers cascaded down from planters that lined the iron railing around the entranceway. Two perfectly straight Italian Cypress trees stood as sentinels on either side of the door, mimicking the shape of the windows. Extending his hand, he guided her out of the car and up the enormous, single, rounded-stone step, his left arm loosely encircling her waist. This was the first physical contact he'd had with Benta, and his body tingled in all the right places.

The door was unlocked and swung open on smooth, quiet hinges. Even though the door had a six-foot diameter he had to stoop to step inside. Benta was apprehensive but at the

same time overcome with curiosity. A part of her brain was flashing red-alert signals, but the warnings were repressed by her sense of adventure and a natural desire to explore such wealth. She followed him into the castle and, once inside, the large round door swung shut. She turned to see who had closed the door behind her, but saw no one.

Her host flipped some switches and recessed lighting did a little to lessen the shadows of the foyer where she stood. The interior gave one the impression of being in a fortress. The walls were large, fitted polished stones, broken vertically every five or six feet with a dark, horizontal oaken beam a foot thick. Tapestries of hunting scenes hung over the walls, and the stone floors were covered with layers of oriental rugs crafted in wool and silk yarns. She removed her shoes and let her feet sink luxuriously into the deep pile of the carpets.

“Something to drink?” her host asked.

“I’d love a scotch,” she replied. “Neat, with a slice of lemon.”

All of a sudden there was the sound of scuffling, followed by padded feet racing toward the sitting room where they stood. Benta looked up, alarm showing on her face. Stephen held off fixing the drinks as the pattering drew near. His full attention was on Benta’s face.

“What’s that?” she asked loudly, her fear increasing.

He pretended not to understand at first. Then, “Oh, the dogs, you mean?” At that precise moment, two hunting dogs, wirehaired pointers weighing about sixty-five pounds each, bounded into the room and stopped, abruptly. They looked up at Stephen, eyes alight, stubbed tails wagging.

“Hello, you two,” he said affectionately. They both wriggled with joy that their master was home and danced around him. “This one is Kurz; he’s the male,” he explained, bending down to stroke the gray-bearded head that had thrust toward him. “And the charcoal one is Loki, Kurz’ lady friend.” He straightened to look into her face. Benta’s lips were quivering; she was terrified but trying not to show it. “Kurz, Loki, say hello to Benta.”

The dogs turned to face her, their stubbed tails moving slightly, not sure of how she would respond to them. Benta said nothing. She wasn’t moving. Both dogs cocked their heads to one side as if trying to read this frightened female. Kurz took a step toward Benta in good faith, but she shrunk back, letting out a shriek. Stephen immediately called to the beasts, and they obediently followed him to the entranceway and went outside when he opened the door for them.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized. “I didn’t realize you were afraid of all dogs. We’ll just leave them outside, shall we?” He turned back to pouring their drinks and fixed her an extra-large scotch, which she took with shaking hands.

The inside of Benta’s eyelids felt like sandpaper, her tongue was thick and dry. She fought to open her eyes but her lids were leaden. What a headache! As her aching body struggled to awake she became more and more aware of her surroundings and realized

something was wrong. She couldn't move her right arm; it was fast somehow. Her senses sent feedback to her brain. Hard surface. Damp. Musty-smelling air. Dreadfully wrong.

She was fully conscious now, and her eyes flew open. Overhead, the ceiling was vaulted but low near the walls, and all were made of stacked stone. The floor was flagstone, littered with straw and cold to the touch. An iron link chain held her manacled right wrist fast to a large iron eye screw near the bottom of the wall. The skin on her wrist was already rubbed painfully raw from its harsh imprisonment. Was this a joke? A bad dream? It was difficult to see much in the tomb; shadows loomed everywhere.

Benta smelled the moldiness of old straw and was able to make out several bales stacked randomly nearby. She blinked her eyes, hoping for a change of scenery but it only got worse. Cruelly, a single light had been left burning so that when she turned onto her left side she faced an emaciated, dressed skeleton with straggles of filthy brown hair caked and tangled against its skull. The expression on the skull almost stopped her heart beating: it was the face of a death in torment. The lips were pulled back from the teeth, and the mouth was twisted open in one final, agonizing scream that no one had heard. As hers would not be, too, she knew.

She sucked in her breath. No! That was the wrong way to think! She had to get a hold of herself... had to have hope. "Dear God," she prayed aloud. "Help me!" Her voice echoed away, and she was alone.

CHAPTER 2

It was the kind of summer day perfect for lying in the silky tender grass that stayed softly limp from growing in the shade of giant, overreaching trees. Dappled light, really.

Zsu-Zsu had spent a busy morning dutifully making her rounds about the estate. She liked routine and since no one ever gave her chores to do or required anything of her she created her own regimen. It followed a set order which she adhered to meticulously: she first went round to the kennels to give each of the hunting dogs a stolen scrap from the larder and a pat on the head, then on to the chicken coop to count the eggs hatched since the morning before. She made bets with herself to guess how many of the speckled, tan orbs she would find, but she never gathered them, only counted. The gathering was left for cook's assistant. From the hen house she wandered over to the stables to count noses in the warm-smelling, hay-fragrant barn as the occupant of each stall stretched its head over the stall door to see if she'd brought carrots or lumps of sugar that day. Zsu-Zsu loved the velvet gentleness of the noble muzzles, the enormous eyes that served as a mirror for her face yet penetrated deep into her heart, judging if she was frail or stout of soul. But the final stop on her daily pilgrimage was the rabbit hutches, and it was also her favorite. She could spend hours stroking the soft fur of these delicate, timid creatures, holding them just firmly enough so that they couldn't escape, while she felt the rapid beating of their tiny hearts.

This morning's visit to the hutch had taken on a very different mission. She'd heard cook telling her assistant that rabbit was on the menu that night, so Zsu-Zsu's objective in visiting the rabbits had been brief and to the point. She'd opened the doors to the hutches and allowed all the bunnies to run free. Docile as they were, she actually had to chase several of them into the dark safety of the forest, but at last they were all gone, rescue complete. A busy morning.

So now she was stretched out in the grass on the edge of the park-like lawn near the rim of the tree line, pulling the petals from a wild daisy, silently saying her love-me/love-me-nots. She paused in the denuding of the flower to gaze up through the branches of the trees towering overhead, her right arm acting as a sun shield above her eyes.

In a public school fourteen-year-old Zsu-Zsu would undoubtedly have been given the label of 'special child' and placed in a program for the mentally challenged. But she wasn't in public school. She lived on a vast estate, of which she had free run, and had a nanny to see to her needs, simple as they were.

She had no parents, really. Her mother, a drug addict, had died from a drug overdose when Zsu-Zsu was a baby. Her father had abandoned mother and daughter and was long gone. Traumatized from witnessing her mother's death, Zsu-Zsu had never been heard to speak a word, and it was assumed that she was mentally deficient and treated accordingly. Her mother's brother, Uncle Hermann, had opened his home to this pathetic niece and, although he rarely spoke to her and had little to do with her, he used the family fortune at his disposal to provide for Zsu-Zsu's material well-being and salve his conscience for his lack of involvement in her life.

“Zsu-Zsu! ZSU-ZSU!!” Her reverie was broken at the sound of someone calling her name. ‘That’ll be cook,’ she thought, the ghost of an impish smile at her mouth and in her eyes. “ZSU-ZSU!!” The open rabbit cages had no doubt been discovered. It hadn’t been the first time she’d let loose dinner. “ZSU-ZSU!!” Cook had rounded the vegetable garden and was heading her way; it was time to disappear. With the agility of an acrobat she sprang to her feet, poised, deciding which way to go. She opted for the pine forest on the other side of the main drive and, without giving it further consideration, gazed off in the direction of the tall, stately trees.

CHAPTER 3

Hardy Durkin, owner and head guide of Durkin's Tours, swept the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter passenger van up the long, forest-lined drive to Schloss Haeflin. Trained in soldiery and spy technology in the military, Hardy had started a tour outfitter company as a means of escaping the monotonous life of techie working in a rabbit-warren for a geo-software manufacturer in New England several years earlier. His clients were generally mid-level management people or small-company execs who wanted to unwind from the stresses of their jobs via remote wanders in Europe. Hardy used his dual, American-German citizenship and his fluency in three languages to grow his hiking tour company into an enterprise that provided a great quality of life for him and allowed him to be his own man.

The Schloss, their home for the next ten days in the southern Black Forest, was located about twelve miles southeast of the city of Freiburg, an old commercial, cultural, and ecclesiastical center for the Upper Rhine region of Germany. The Mercedes van was a cocoon of comfort and luxury for the hiking group as they traveled from Frankfurt airport to their destination on a Saturday afternoon. Strains from the Eagle's hit "Hotel California", where you could check out but never leave, played boisterously from a CD. Hardy had opted for German Oompah music but he'd been voted down by his hiking clients, who wanted to hear *The Best of Eagles*. Some people were bent on dragging their culture with them when they traveled to foreign lands.

The lyrics blasted from a Bose speaker system, which included a subwoofer with surround sound. The hikers sang and shimmied to the music in a communal karaoke, led by fellow-hiker Chuck Halls, who insisted on being the center of attention with loathsome regularity. He swayed to the rhythm as he stood in the van, gripping a pretend microphone, singing for all he was worth. Hardy slowed the van perceptibly as they entered a long curve with a slight rise.

Suddenly, Hardy hit the brakes, hard. An elfin figure leapt, seemingly from nowhere, across the drive in front of the van and disappeared into the pine forest on the left side of the road, a filmy, gossamer-like garment billowing in her wake. The vision vanished, but not before pausing, mid-vault, to look through the van's windshield and stare directly into Hardy's eyes. He was mesmerized; then she was gone. Caught completely off guard, Hardy sucked in his breath and thanked his Maker for quick reflexes.

"What the hell was that all about?" Chuck demanded. He had been thrown to the floor of the vehicle when Hardy hit the brakes, and was furious that his performance had been interrupted.

"It looked like a wood nymph," breathed Monica Statler. The Black Forest, setting for fairy tales and legends, had a reputation for enchantment, and Monica caught her first whiff of intrigue.

"Well, you almost broke my arm!" Chuck snapped. It was always about Chuck. Chuck's wife, Jackie, tried to soothe his bruised ego with her fawning and petting. Tall, slender, and blonde, with a runner's body, Jackie's vocation in life was to make Chuck look good.

Her friends would describe her as loyal to a fault; to anyone else she was seen as a gullible ditz. Chuck allowed himself to be mollified by her attentions.

Troy Ackton, a New England pragmatist from Woodstock, Vermont observed, "It was a young girl, I'd say, about fifteen years old. She just up and ran across the road. We almost hit her. Would have, if it hadn't been for Hardy's split-second reaction." He threw a pointed look at Chuck who at least had the sense, for once, to keep his mouth shut.

Troy's eighteen-year-old son, Bobby, who'd had his eyes closed with his iPod playing Wagner, had looked up when Chuck fell to the floor beside him, wondering if the guy was drunk. He'd almost given him a quick kick with his toe but thought better of it and gave him a hand up instead.

"Pretty little thing, wasn't she?" Abby Gellert commented. Abby was an attractive divorcée, forty-nine years old, who was petite, blonde, green-eyed, and worked as a physician's assistant.

"You O.K., Chuck?" Hardy asked, watching in his rear-view mirror. Chuck nodded, albeit begrudgingly. "Going forward, I must ask you all to remain in your seat with your seatbelt fastened whenever the van is moving," he announced. "You never know when we'll come across more fairies or dwarves," he added with a smile. Chuck huffed and mumbled something under his breath, but otherwise made no comment.

A throat cleared toward the back of the van. "Point taken, Hardy," a voice said, "but we all know, don't we, that there really are no such things as fairies or dwarves."

Inwardly Hardy tensed, outwardly he sighed. Reardon Dressler, the self-proclaimed spiritual guru on the tour, had spoken. Smug. Self-righteous. A former Seventh Day Adventist who had decided to become a Messianic Jew and now had all the answers. It was going to be a long tour. Hardy released the brake and continued along the drive, parking under a vine-covered, arched portico where a brass plate next to the door engraved with the words 'Guests', 'Clients', and 'Gäste' indicated they'd arrived at the correct entrance to the schloss.

A young woman stood primly at the bottom of the steps which ascended to the entrance, her shoulder-length brown hair with a slight flip at the ends neatly combed and held back from a high forehead by a narrow, black leather band. She wore a gray-striped seersucker skirt and matching jacket over a fine, pale-blue voile blouse. Her high cheek bones, turned-up nose, and very matter-of-fact mouth belied her youth, which Hardy set at about nineteen. She stepped forward as Hardy exited the van and sauntered over to where she stood.

"Is this the Durkin Tour group?" she asked. "I'm Hedda Hunziker, head housekeeper and administrative assistant to Herr Haeflin," she explained, with the stress on the first syllable of her name.

"Hardy Durkin, and yes, this is the Durkin hiking group," Hardy responded, taking her hand, which she offered in a perfunctory shake. "Hedda, you said?" he asked, making sure he got the name right. People could be funny about their name. On a tour in the Pyrenees years ago he'd once called their bed-and-breakfast concierge, whose name was Bechette, 'Bichette' for an entire week. One of his hikers finally pulled him aside and discreetly told Hardy he'd been calling the poor woman 'little doe', and she was anything

but petite. Embarrassed, Hardy had since that incident made an extra effort to get names correct.

“That’s right,” she replied and, seeing his grin, added, “my grandfather was a Hedda Hopper fan.” She smiled at the hikers as they disembarked the van. “Welcome to Schloss Haeflin. My name is Hedda, and I’ll be your go-to person during your stay with us. If you have any questions or issues, please see me.”

When the passengers had collected their personal belongings and luggage from the van, Hedda addressed them. “Dinner service starts at seven; casual attire with a jacket for men is acceptable, and ladies... well, you know best, I think.”

As she turned to proceed up the steps she added, “Now, if you’ll just come with me, I’ll take pleasure in showing you to your rooms.”

CHAPTER 4

“What a fabulous room!” Jackie Halls proclaimed. “It must have cost a fortune to redo this old castle to these standards. I wonder how many rooms there are in this wing.”

She stood in the middle of a very large suite with high ceiling, done in rich, textured, paprika-colored wallpaper. Matching floor-length drapes were tied back from a large, recessed window overlooking a rolling lawn and dark, brooding, pine forest beyond. A huge painting depicting a scene from what looked like Rapunzel hung over the plain oaken desk, the maiden in despair cut off from escape after her long plait had been shorn by a cruel stepmother. Several overstuffed armchairs covered in printed chintz were grouped around a small oak tripod table holding two glasses and a demi of sparkling white wine icing in a silver bucket. The colors in the chintz picked out and complimented those hues in the wallpaper, drapes, painting and honey-colored, wooden furniture. The king-sized bed, constructed from solid oak, was made up with crisp, white cotton sheets, topped by two plush eiderdown comforters.

“I think we should check out the bed,” Chuck said, suggestively. He sat on the comforter and the mattress gave way in sumptuous softness. He leered at his docile wife and patted the bed expectantly. Obediently, she sat beside him and gave herself over to his embrace and pawing, but the expression on her face, as she looked over his shoulder, was anything but loving.

A soft footfall nearby awakened her senses from the continual stupor of an unquenched, ravaging thirst and dull hunger that gnawed, mercilessly, at her diminishing existence. Was her vision going? Was she hallucinating? She blinked her eyes and tried to refocus, but saw the same spectral vision: that of a delicate, bird-like figure not ten feet from her, poised to flee at the slightest provocation. She tried to speak and only croaked instead, her throat irritated from her screams and the chalk-dryness of her mouth. She cleared her throat and tried again.

“Are you real?” No answer.

“Please, help me,” she begged, her hoarse voice barely audible.

The slight figure inched closer, eyes alight with interest and horror.

“Please,” Benta whispered, “help me.”

Now a willowy hand came forward, touched Benta’s free arm, and drew quickly back in fear. The sprite-like figure prepared to flee, but stopped. Turned, slowly. Compassion painted over the fear in her face. The hand, quivering, reached toward Benta again, this time to comfort, reassure. A gentle stroke on her cheek; a firm pat on her arm.

Tears erupted from Benta’s eyes; she’d despaired of ever knowing human touch again. In spite of the damp cold of the dungeon a warm flame flickered in her soul and the life-giving spark of hope was reborn. Emotions surged through her body at dizzying intensity. She fought to contain them lest she become manic and frighten away her salvation. She closed her eyes, trying to breathe evenly. When she had gained control she opened her

eyes and tried to smile; it felt more a grimace... was the skin on her face cracking already?

She spoke. "My name is Benta. Please help me." The spirit-child stepped back, turning to leave. Panic so strong it forced bile into her throat gripped Benta. "Please! Don't leave me. I need water! Please!" But the sprite was already gone and Benta wondered if she had ever existed at all, or was she approaching madness?

"The room's pleasant enough," Reardon observed. And it really was. It was a clean-cut, modern room with a huge, built-in bed frame and headboard done in blond ash. Switches for the lighting, window blinds, and sound system were at fingertip control on night stands that were part of the bed's framework. The walls, washed in a pale lemon yellow, were sunlight-dappled in the mid-afternoon light. Good quality woven area rugs were scattered over the parquet floor, and several interesting paintings served as focal points. He plopped on the bed. "And the bed is great. These duvets are light as a feather." He watched as his efficient wife inspected the room down to the minutiae. "Does it pass?" he finally asked her.

"It'll do," she huffed. She fussed about everything, and it was all about convincing Reardon how much he needed her. She prowled around the suite, cat-like, her trim, muscular, five-foot-five body moving like it was on springs. She paused to stare out the window, flicking her shoulder-length, dark-brown hair behind her ears as she did so. Her lips, normally a thin line, were pursed in thought, her nostrils slightly flared.

Suddenly, she twirled round to her husband, hands on her hips. "I'll bet Hardy's room is nicer than ours. He probably has a huge, luxurious suite all to himself. And we're paying for it," she spat. With that, Susan donned a straw hat to guard against the sun and pushed their room key into the front pocket of her Gramicci shorts. "Coming?" she asked. Reardon hoisted himself off the bed and followed her out the door.

The Dresslers decided to take a stroll through the park-like grounds immediately surrounding the schloss. Most of the one hundred hectares which were part of the schloss were forested in European native Norway spruce, Douglas fir from America, and White Pine. The perimeter around the castle consisted of grassy lawn areas, naturalized wild flowers, several formal gardens, and three specialty gardens comprised individually of roses, grasses, and bonsai specimens.

It was all the domain of a groundskeeper by the name of Heinrich Bauer, a grizzled man in his fifties who moved with a slight limp and lived in bib overalls. His bald pate had little hair but what there was of it was silken and white with a suggestion of chestnut, and looked like spun copper when wet with sweat in the sunlight. He wore it rather long and combed it low over his forehead, off to one side. A frayed canvas cap, pulled down over his brow, completed his work attire.

A man of few words, Heinrich was everywhere and heard everything that went on at the schloss, and he kept it all to himself. Heinrich had worked for Herr Haeflin for just over a decade, and one thing he'd learned was that Herr Haeflin appreciated a man who minded his own business, which is exactly what he did. He kept his rather long, crooked nose out

of everyone's affairs and contented himself with his two joys in life: hand-rolled cigarettes and his compost pile.

Heinrich watched as Reardon and Susan Dressler moseyed through the rose garden, now in full bloom. 'What an old mother hen,' he thought as Susan almost manhandled her husband along the walkways. 'And he's a ninny to put up with it,' he added in disgust. Heinrich had never married. Marriage was, in his opinion, an institution designed to socially castrate all able-bodied men, and he had literally run from any and all attempts to rein him into the 'blissful state.' No, he'd kept all his filthy habits, thank you, and relieved himself with an occasional leg-over on some unsuspecting farm girl.

His attention was side-tracked by a blurred movement off to his left, and he just caught a glimpse of a sheer, pale floral pattern wafting out of sight. 'That'd be Missy,' he affirmed, as he called Zsu-Zsu. He was fiercely protective of Herr Haeplin's ward. 'Wonder what she's been up to now,' he thought, and was consoled by the fact that, like him, she kept her knowledge to herself.

CHAPTER 5

Dinner that night was a gay affair. Rabbit on the menu had been replaced by braised Swabian pork ribs with sauerkraut and potato dumplings.

“This pork is the most succulent meat I’ve ever eaten,” Abby gushed.

“That’s because it’s Swabian pork,” Hardy explained. “The meat is unique for its incredible juiciness. It is also low in bad cholesterol and high in good cholesterol and Omega-3 fatty acids. The breed is protected by the European Union, and Germany refuses to allow the pig to be imported into the United States. The breed, Swabian Hall, was created by King Wilhelm in Germany, in 1821. His goal was to get the perfect balance between meat and fat, so he crossed the Chinese Meishan with the Russian Wild Boar, which was indigenous to Germany. They originated in Baden-Wurttemberg, just up the road. Some farmers let their swine run loose in the forest, where their main food source is acorns.”

“A match made in heaven,” Monica declared.

“A toast to the pig,” Chuck proposed, his wine glass raised. Amid “Hear, Hears” the small party paid homage to the Swabian swine. “A toast to... what’s his name... the guy who invented the swine?”

“King Wilhelm,” Reardon supplied.

“King Wilhelm,” Chuck parroted, and they all drank again.

Jackie prodded him playfully in the side, “Any excuse for a drink, eh Chuckles,” she kidded.

He prodded back, but it wasn’t playful. Jackie winced, caught herself, and the Stepford Wife smile was back in place. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed her discomfort and saw Monica look quickly away but not before Jackie read the look of contempt she aimed at Chuck. Normally, she would have run defense for Chuck, but tonight she let things be. If she were honest with herself she would have framed Chuck’s behavior in terms of ‘asshole’, but she wasn’t there, yet.

Her thoughts wandered, and she found herself wondering why she’d even come on this trip. She didn’t speak German and she didn’t like anything German, except chocolate cake. The answer, of course, was sitting beside her. Chuck had insisted. She’d given in. So here she was, using two weeks of her vacation and hard-earned money to keep Chuck happy. Her mood soured, noticeably.

She was jolted out of her funk by the lights going dim, and looked up as Hedda wheeled in a cart carrying a glistening Black Forest Torte, resting majestically on a crystal cake stand, along with pots of steaming coffee. Hedda’s entrance was followed by “Oohs” and “Ahhs” when the group saw the gastro-treasure she brought with her.

“I’m sure you’ve all had Black Forest Torte before,” she began. “It is a very special, regional cake which was invented in this part of Germany.” She began to cut the cake into generous wedges and served it as she explained. “We also call it Schwarzwälder

Kirschtorte because of the Kirschwasser or cherry schnapps used in the cake. Kirschwasser is a clear, colorless fruit brandy traditionally made from double-distillation of cherries. It is said that the best Kirschwasser is made from our locally grown cherries, as the Black Forest region is the only place where the right kind of cherries for the schnapps can be successfully grown.”

Hedda had finished serving the torte and went around the table pouring coffee for those who wanted some. When she was done serving the coffee she stood politely back from the table, with her hands clasped in front of her chest.

“Well, what do you think? Do you like the torte?” she asked guilelessly.

Abby paused from eating the dessert. “Oh, my gosh! It’s incredible!”

“Is this whipped cream for real?” Reardon asked. “It’s totally decadent! But I’d love some decaf coffee.”

Hedda smiled and wrinkled her nose as she answered, “Yes. We have very happy cows in the Black Forest.”

Troy Ackton turned to his son, “What do you think, Bobby? Do you like it?”

Bobby was shy, and everyone’s eyes on him made his pale face color with embarrassment, hiding the freckles scattered over the bridge of his nose. He took a second to wipe his mouth with his napkin and clear his throat.

“It’s really excellent,” he replied. “The only other time I ever tasted Black Forest Torte was a frozen one by Sara Lee and I didn’t like it. But this...” he sighed, “I could eat this every day.” It was the first time he’d spoken all during the meal and the effort of his speech made his palms sweat. He gave an awkward smile and his wan coloring made him seem frail. The shock of sandy-colored hair standing tousled atop his head made him look rather like the Swedish Chef Muppet.

The resemblance wasn’t lost on Monica. She stifled a giggle and instead, said, “Amen to that.”

“Is this your first trip to Germany, Bobby?” Abby asked. He was the only young person in the hiking group, aside from Hardy, and Abby knew he must feel slightly self-conscious about it.

He nodded. “The trip is a graduation present from my parents,” he explained. “I’ve always wanted to visit Germany, so Dad let me choose which region I most wanted to see. There’s always been something about the Black Forest that drew me... I love a good mystery...” He ran out of words, and retreated into eating his dessert.

“Well, isn’t that just special,” Chuck mumbled under his breath.

Jackie heard him and hissed, “Stop acting like a jerk!” She’d said it without even thinking, and Chuck was completely taken aback. She smiled coolly. ‘That felt great!’ she thought. She just wondered how high a price Chuck would make her pay for her ‘loss of control’, as he’d call it, later.

“Has anybody seen our host, Herr Haeflin?” Reardon asked the group at large. Eyebrows raised and heads shook as the hikers responded.