

PERPETUAL CHECK



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F. NELSON SMITH



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To George, who in his lucid moments thinks I'm clever

perpetual check /pə-ˈpet-ū-əl ˈtʃek/ *noun* in chess, a situation in which one player's king is continually placed in check by the other player who may thereby claim a draw

ONE I

JUNE 1985, STUTTGART, GERMANY.

The man standing in the hallway outside Ida Schiller's door looked more like a Sumo wrestler than a policeman. His bulk strained the seams of his suit to crucial levels, and when he used his handkerchief to mop his damp face, she swore she heard the seams creak. She backed into her neat front hall as Sumo Man stepped in and seized the space. Face red, sweat stains marring his jacket, his breath made whistling noises through his teeth from the effort of walking up the flight of stairs to her apartment door. For a second, she wondered if he might have a heart attack.

Another policeman, this one in the immaculate green and tan uniform of a municipal police sergeant, managed to squeeze by him, and she learned Sumo Man was Herr Mueller from the *Landeskriminalamt* or *LKA*. Miss Schiller compared the face on the ID card with the one before her. His eyes, almost hidden in the upper folds of his cheeks, regarded her with ill-concealed impatience, so she deliberately held the card an extra few seconds to show him that she may be a spinster *privatsekretär*, but she was not intimidated. Finally, curiosity took over, and she returned his worn leather folder. "What do you wish, Herr Mueller? Important items are waiting at the office. I don't wish to be late. It sets a bad example for the others."

“Please, Miss Schiller, I think we’d be more comfortable if we sat.” He studied her face, and she grimaced, not hiding her distaste for dealing with a *Krijo*. “If you don’t mind?” His voice was surprisingly tenor for such a big man.

Floorboards screaming, he followed her into her sitting room and waited while she sat in an armchair, its seat covered with embroidered velvet upholstery.

Mueller declined to sit, perhaps noticing her lack of hospitality or not trusting the chair to remain in one piece. The young sergeant stood with military correctness by the door to the hallway.

“Your employer is Joseph Dittmahn, vice-president of Redstadt Elektroniks. With offices in the Schlossplatz.”

Ida nodded in reply, though the statement made it clear he wasn’t looking for confirmation. Mueller’s bulk spread out in front of her, his expression that of a jovial shopkeeper about to take her order.

“You said he’s away. Where was he supposed to be, please?” Fingers like sausages held his pencil to his notebook.

Her chin jerked-in reflexively to the question. She raised her eyebrows then cinched them together between her pale blue eyes. “He’s in Munich. Until the day after tomorrow. Friday.”

Mueller waited, as though expecting her to ask the obvious. Abruptly, he smiled, showing an unexpected array of white, even teeth. “His wife accompanied him?”

“No. She’s visiting relations in England,” answered Miss Schiller, her eyes glinting. “Has something happened to her?”

The policeman pursed his fat lips in a gentle reproof, then let the air wheeze through them as though regretful of what was to come.

“Not his wife, Miss Schiller. We were unable to locate her,

and that's why we've come to you. Early this morning, Herr Dittmahn was found in his car. Unfortunately, dead."

He waited, watching shrewdly from under sleepy lids. Miss Schiller's face turned white. One hand reached out as if to push his statement away. Her grip tightened on the arm of the straight-backed chair.

"In his car?" she mumbled, snatching at the detail.

"A highway maintenance crew found him at the side of the road, forty miles north of Stuttgart." He inhaled another labored breath and added, "He'd been shot twice in the head. At close range."

Miss Schiller choked off an incredulous cry. Her face twisted at his blunt words. "No! He's in Munich. He had reservations on the train from Stuttgart." Her expression obstinate, she repeated, "No. It's a mistake."

"There is no mistake," said the detective, his tone gentle now.

She endured his sympathetic murmurs with the same impatience of one forced to listen to a bad sermon. He required her help. Time was important. Robbery could be a motive. Did she have objections to a few more questions?

"Did Herr Dittmahn carry large sums of money or other valuables on his person? Was he in the habit of picking up hitchhikers?"

"Robbery!" Ida Schiller dismissed the word like a puff of steam. "But whatever was he doing in the North?"

Mueller waited while she stared at her hands, forehead creased.

Finally, she sighed. "Perhaps he did pick up someone and offer to drive out of his way. It would be like him. Charitable, but foolish." She pressed her thin lips together. "Well, a robber wouldn't get much. Herr Dittmahn carries little money. He uses

credit cards. Easier to account for his expenses if the banks do his bookkeeping for him.”

The policeman shifted on his dusty shoes. “Miss Schiller, you’ve been with the company how long?”

“Twenty-one years.”

Mueller’s tone turned admiring. “I imagine Dittmahn left many things in your care, and you must know a great deal about the company’s affairs. Everything was going well there?”

“You suspect a person in the company shot him?”

“I’m trying to get a background, that’s all. Every possible angle, you understand.”

Miss Schiller gazed back at him with penetrating eyes. “Everything is operating smoothly at the company.”

“The company deals in electronic components only?”

She nodded.

“You do not deal in tractor parts?”

Her hand waved the remark away. “Tractor parts? Of course not.”

“Yet, there have been shipments of tractor parts that disappeared after they’d arrived at their destination.”

Miss Schiller’s expression cleared. “Ah, you have tractor parts confused with electronic components. Herr Dittmahn mentioned that a shipment of computer components went to our subsidiary in Austria by mistake. But somewhere along the way someone had stolen the equipment and filled the crates with sand. It’s odd, but . . .”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.” Miss Schiller slumped in her chair. “It’s nothing to do with us. Herr Dittmahn . . . I can’t grasp it. It seems impossible.”

“Indeed.” He stared at her for a moment longer. “Maybe

something else occurred to you? About the shipment of components, perhaps.”

Mueller pushed his head forward and sideways, exposing his right ear to her as if waiting for an answer from an addled toddler. It was patronizing even if encouraging, and she resented it. She pursed her mouth, looked past him, and ignored him.

He tried again. “Redstadt Elektroniks receives shipments of computer components from Britain and the United States, does it not, Miss Schiller?”

Miss Schiller shrugged, then as if realizing the direction of his questions, narrowed her gaze on him. “Why are you asking these questions, Herr Mueller?”

He held up his pudgy hand, palm outward. “Please, Miss Schiller, only a few more minutes.” His voice hardened. “The company’s business is computer components. Yet some of the customs declarations on shipments arriving from Britain and the US state the containers hold tractor parts. You are perhaps not aware that your company forwards these particular crates on to Austria. It is strange, is it not, Miss Schiller? Now you say one of the same shipments contains only sand. Shortly thereafter, Herr Dittmahn is murdered.”

“Rubbish!” She smiled, mocking him. “You are saying there is something untoward going on with the shipments. Secrets. But he doesn’t approve of secrets. You don’t know him. He believes in fairness and justice. Always. I would know if it were otherwise.”

Suddenly aware that she was speaking of her employer as though he were not dead, emotion boiled up. She pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth to keep her jaw from quivering.

“What was Dittmahn’s business in Munich?” persisted Herr Mueller, either oblivious to, or ignoring her obvious discomfort.

“He told me he was going to meet with a representative from head office,” she said, regaining control.

Mueller raised his eyebrows and licked his pencil again. “He told you? You don’t arrange his appointment book?” He didn’t so much as a glance up from his notebook.

She flushed. “It was last minute. He took the notification himself and then told me. Did you think there was something furtive about it?” When his flickering eyelids betrayed his line of thought, her lips twitched an almost imperceptible smile at catching him off guard.

She answered the rest of his questions—Dittmahn’s business acquaintances; the address of his wife’s relations in England.

Only when she was sure the two policemen were not coming back did she permit herself to shed bitter tears. After a phone call to the office, she did an uncharacteristic thing. She slipped into her bedroom like a ghost and pushed the door closed behind her with the very tips of her fingers, listening for the soft click of the latch. After a moment, she moved to the bed where she stretched out and stared at the ceiling, uncaring that her shoes marked the white bedspread.

Later that same evening, she went downstairs and found a bulky brown envelope on the floor under the mail flap. She took it into the sitting room and with a small knife from her corner desk, slit the envelope in the same way she had opened a thousand like it before. Turning it upside down, she tapped the open end on her palm. A letter with the handwriting of her late employer slid out. Another shake of the brown envelope and a wad of money, followed by a square of microfiche, tumbled to the floor at her feet.

The letter explained the envelope’s contents and outlined detailed instructions of what she was to do. A scant two hours

later, she backed her Volkswagen from its parking place and sped off into the darkness. For the first time in her life, she knew real fear.

Far across Stuttgart at that exact moment, in a hotel suite with windows facing a spacious green park, a man spoke on the telephone. Thin parchment-like skin barely covered the knuckles which stood out on the hand holding the receiver. The same economy of skin, covering high cheekbones, stretched the man's mouth to a thin slit. Lustrous brown hair combed back from his forehead only served to emphasize his death's head appearance.

"Nothing was found in the office?" His quiet voice faded as he paused to listen. "And you searched his home . . . ? No—my informant is certain the document was in his office two days ago. . . . He didn't go near a bank. You found no receipts for packages or envelopes?" This time he listened a moment longer. "Ah, so? Herr Dittmahn was shrewd, but how careless to not destroy an invoice for a microfiche. A thick package becomes a thin package. Now, where would he hide it . . . ? He has a secretary who's disgustingly loyal. In love with her employer, I suspect." His lips twisted in a sneer.

Then his voice sharpened, the words insistent. "Go to her place. But be sure you have the documents before you tidy up the loose ends. Do I make myself understood . . . ? *Gut*. I will await your report."

The man replaced the receiver then poured two drinks from a crystal decanter placed on the sideboard. He picked them up and offered one to his companion.

TWO 2

DANI MORDEN WATCHED HER AUNT LUCY walk a vague line toward the immigration area at London Heathrow Airport terminal. Her manner gave the impression a navigation mistake might have brought her to England, but now here, she would make the best of it. Two businessmen, fellow passengers off the airplane, came forward and guided Lucy to the line for passport control. In a frame of mind somewhere between derision and amusement, Dani ambled along in slow pursuit.

“Cute. Real cute,” she muttered, moving up to stand beside Lucy. “Anyone would think you’d never traveled in your life. I’m glad Mother can’t see you now.”

Dani grinned at the prospect. *A real twit*, was her mother’s favorite summation of Lucy’s character. Aloud, she said, “You’re not alike at all, are you?”

Lucy slowly turned her hazel eyes toward Dani and looked down her nose, as if she had suddenly been accosted by a strange man looking for company. “I should hope not,” she said, voice dripping with ice. She opened her handbag and peered into its depths. A plump arm plunged in, almost to the elbow. “Drat. I can’t find my passport.” She extracted a guidebook with *Britain* printed in bright red letters on the cover. She handed it to Dani. “Just hold these a minute, would you, dear?” Next followed a large pair of scissors, more suitable for cutting ceremonial ribbon

than anything else, and a puffy makeup bag. The two men standing behind them shifted forward, curious.

Lucy continued to talk, her conversation a confusing mixture of thoughts spoken aloud and words directed at her niece.

“Nobody ever accused your mother and me of being alike. Helen spent her life shouting about women’s rights.” She pulled out her reading glasses and put them on, making her round face rounder.

Peering more confidently into her bag, she pulled out a street guide to London and gazed at it as if it hid the route to her passport. Finally, she pushed the map at Dani. “I never could see the advantages, myself.”

The corners of her mouth turned upward, and her eyes twinkled as she peeked over her glasses at Dani. “Too many drawbacks. Imagine, always being destined to carry your own luggage.”

In spite of herself, Dani burst out laughing. Lucy handed her a small bottle of brandy.

“Aunt Lucy, how could you?” Dani’s laughter turned to dismay. “You’re supposed to drink it on the airplane.”

“I didn’t want it then, dear,” replied Lucy, intent on the contents of her bag. “Seemed a shame to leave it. It may come in handy sometime. Here we are!” Rings sparkling, Lucy waved her passport. A small tin of hard candy fell out of her bag, followed by an orange, both going on a roll between the feet of the passengers in front of them.

The men moved back in line. “Wonder why she bothers with a suitcase,” one said to the other.

Dani bit back a retort. Face red, she retrieved the orange and tin. The line crawled forward. She gazed at four girls over in the blue line in their mid-twenties, all chatter and excitement. A

familiar feeling of aloneness flooded through her. *My first trip to England, and I get stuck with Lucy.*

The thought of spending the rest of the four-week trip with her old aunt didn't exactly conjure up images of exciting adventures. Lucy's letter asking for her company on a grand tour of Britain had come when Dani was in low spirits—dissatisfied with life. Any vacation, particularly one out of the country, was a welcome diversion. She was tired of Edward too, bored with his predictability. Nothing exciting there, just the same old dates. Dinner out—a movie. Now and then, a live concert in Calgary. A variation of their middle-aged fun. More nights than most, he'd end up impatient with her quickness of mind.

"You could at least let me state my next thought before telling me what it is," he'd say and smile indulgently at her. He should have been her mother's boyfriend. An image of Edward and her mother as partners prompted a choked-off snort. Then again, he sent more flowers to her mother than to Dani, saying it was only polite to keep in good with his future mother-in-law. Her mother said it showed old-fashioned respect. Dani accepted the explanation at the first bunch he brought, but by the arrival of the third delivery, the words bribery and collusion leaped into her mind. Still, she had hesitated about the trip with Lucy but had let her mother persuade her. Irritation flooded her. Why did she allow her mother to make her decisions as if she were too juvenile to make her own? No, her mother's life's purpose was to arrange Dani's. She could still see her mother's shocked face, as she had yelled the accusation at her.

"That's not true, Dani," her mother had answered. "I only try to help when you can't make up your own mind."

"Don't hang that one on me," Dani had shouted, letting it all pour out. "Go on! Admit I'm a disappointment. I try damned

hard to be who and what you want, and I never succeed.” Dani laughed a wild bitter laugh. “Have you ever tried to live someone else’s dream, mother? Pushed into doing what they were afraid to do themselves? I can’t give you the rewards you think you never had, don’t you see that?”

“I see more than you know.” Her mother’s set face was ashen.

No, thought Dani now, when she looks at me, she only sees herself. Her own image. Now she’s angry because I didn’t turn out to be the daughter she thinks she deserves. We’ve failed each other.

Dani forced her derision down into the pit of her stomach where negative thoughts regarding her mother dwelled, feeding on each other.

Lucy touched the back of her elbow to coax her forward. “Our turn.”

“I know,” Dani snapped, transferring her resentment to her innocent aunt before realizing who she was talking to. If Lucy was offended, she didn’t let on.

Passports and documents inspected at Immigration, they headed toward the baggage pickup carousels. Dani caught her suitcase on the first round. Lucy made an ineffectual reach as her own tumbled down the luggage chute, and she heaved an exasperated sigh as they both watched the bag start another journey around the carousel.

Lucy ignored Dani’s grin, turning away to stare with curious interest at the people milling about. Her hair, still bright with natural gold and red highlights, shone as she turned her head.

Dani rubbed her neck with one hand and stuffed the other in her pocket. She softened her gaze and let out an imperceptible groan. *Lucy isn’t so old, she conceded. Is she even fifty yet? Her pretended confusion is fun too. Maybe this trip won’t be so bad if I just ease up.*

Her eyes followed Lucy’s stare to a woman wearing a rumpled

but fashionable suit of superior cloth, standing beside the girls. She had to be European to be in that line. German most likely. She seemed restless, impatient with waiting. Periodically, she'd lift herself up out of her shoes to glance further down the luggage carousel then scan the surrounding area. Her eyes flickered over one individual before inspecting the next. Was she searching for someone? Dani watched as the woman reached up to tuck a stray piece of faded blond hair back into the bun she wore. Her pale blue eyes met Dani's, who lowered her head, dismayed at being caught staring.

"She's frightened."

"What?" Dani turned to her aunt.

"The woman in the camel suit," explained Lucy. "She's frightened. And a man is watching her. Over by the pillar."

Dani stared in that direction. People swarmed about the baggage carousel talking to others and rolling claimed luggage away toward the customs doors. Everything from understated suits and ties to blue jeans and bright shirts. A customs official? She saw nobody in uniform.

She shook her head, decided. "She's just a tired traveler."

"No. He was watching her." Lucy leaned closer, her voice insistent. "He kept comparing her to a picture."

"This is a restricted area, so he must be an airport official." Dani made her voice melodramatic and wiggled her fingers. "A policeman looking for a fugitive."

"I'm not wrong, Dani, in spite of your theatrics. When she looked his way, he disappeared so she wouldn't see him."

"You noticed all that?" said Dani.

"People who live alone notice other people all the time," replied Lucy. "It's our way of becoming involved socially, I suppose."

Do lonely people also imagine stories about the people they . . . notice? Would Lucy? Disturbed, Dani glanced at the woman now busy sorting out her baggage, at her confident manner as she searched for the correct customs hall, then marched toward it. *Nonsense*, Dani decided. The man had probably looked past the woman's shoulder at someone else. Travelers always watch other passengers at airports. Turning her attention to the carousel, she recognized Lucy's bag and made an ungraceful dash for it before it began a solitary second trip.

"Thank you, dear." Lucy smiled. "I quite forgot why we were standing here. Ah, there we are, the green door I think." She unhooked one end of the strap from her suitcase and walked off, pulling it behind her.

In spite of herself, Dani's eyes slid toward the pillar and searched around it for someone out of place in the crowd.

"Lucy always was a puzzle," she heard her mother's voice. "She was the brightest of all in school, and why she puts on that helpless act is beyond me. But don't let her fool you, her brain is ticking over all the time. I couldn't be bothered myself," her mother's characteristic expression rang in her ears. *I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard her say she couldn't be bothered. Too bad she couldn't be bothered giving me advice.* Warning herself to cut off those destructive thoughts, Dani straightened up and followed her aunt.

The customs officer smiled at Dani. "Anything to declare miss?" He inspected her customs declaration.

"Well, I came through the green door," she replied, then bit her lip. Instead of emerging as a joke, it sounded sarcastic. Ahead of her, waiting, Lucy let out an exasperated sigh.

The friendly grin faded from the officer's face. "Are you carrying any food, cigarettes, or drugs?"

Red-faced, Dani shook her head and wondered if she should have mentioned the bottle of brandy in Lucy's bag. She shook her head again at his question of the amount of cash.

He motioned her on and turned to the next in line.

A fine beginning, thought Dani, almost running down the corridor following the arrows toward outside.

"You aren't alone, you know," she heard Lucy say from behind her. "I did things like that too."

Dani only gave her aunt a scornful glance and quickened her step. "Right," she breathed.

Lucy sped up too, her suitcase teetering on its wheels. "Believe me, the first time I left home, I outdid anything you can think of. Things that still make me shudder when I remember." Lucy's suitcase fell over on its side. "Dani—slow down, for heaven's sake! I feel like a Pekingese running alongside a giraffe."

Her niece stopped in her tracks and swung around, almost bowling Lucy over.

"There, you see?" Lucy righted her suitcase, while she regained her breath. She fanned her face with her hand. "If you had waited, we could have found a luggage carrier, dear."

Dani blinked at her aunt's logic before a round of guilt washed over her for the third time since they'd landed. This was going to be a long trip.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Lucy," she said. "It's not that customs guy. It's me. I feel like a damn fool, always lousing up. I promise to lighten up, okay?"

"Take it all in stride, dear. Things are never as dire as we want them to be."

"What?" Dani asked, but Lucy gave a regal wave to a porter and spent a fussy few minutes handing over their luggage. They continued along the corridor toward the exit.

Dani's five-foot, nine-inch frame reached over Lucy's by at least six of those inches. She shortened her steps to match her aunt's now leisurely stroll, while Lucy ignored the suggestive hurry of the tall porter striding before them. An onlooker might have smiled at the *Mutt and Jeff* picture they made.

The German woman, hurrying along behind, did not smile.

The man, intent on watching the German woman was not concerned with them at all.

Lucy marched toward the head of the taxi area, all the while smiling and ignoring the ominous rumble in the long, impatient line. A man, luggage at the ready for an approaching taxi gave one despairing look at Lucy and handed her into the next one that came along. Dani stumbled in after her, resisting an insane desire to giggle.

"*Ach*, one moment, please. I overhear your hotel destination. Might I ride with you as that is my destination also?"

It was her. The woman they'd been watching. She didn't wait for a reply. In one hasty movement, she thrust her bag in front of her, sprang into the taxi and pulled down the little jump seat. The taxi tore off with that swift, sure speed only London cabbies can manage. The woman craned her head, staring out of the window at the terminal behind them. She pressed her thin lips together as though biting back a protest.

Aunt Lucy was right. She's really scared.

The woman turned from the window and closed her eyes. In a moment her head, nodding in motion to the taxi, drooped to her chest. Lucy and Dani kept silent; Dani watching the streets of London fly by in a dizzying whirlwind, and Lucy contemplating the sleeping woman. With a moan, the woman gasped and opened her eyes, her head swiveling in startled awareness.

"My dear," said Lucy, leaning forward, her hand reaching

out, ready to help, “are you ill?”

The woman glanced at Lucy, appraising her—the plump figure, the genuine concern worrying at hazel eyes, mouth tucked in at the corners, ready to smile. Next it was Dani’s turn. She met the woman’s suspicious stare with directness of her own brown eyes. The woman looked Dani up and down, taking in her trimmed nails, clear polish; no jewelry, only a watch. Her expression seemed to approve the classic lines of Dani’s shirtwaist dress, open at the neck.

The woman’s pale eyes swept to Lucy again, and she smiled. What could only be relief, washed over her face.

“No, no,” she said, “I am fine, thank you. Only that I am tired from three days traveling. Also, it is hot for so early in June, *ja?*” She considered Lucy’s spring print with the frilled collar and sleeves, then looked down at her own rumpled suit. “My clothes are not appropriate. For business yes, but not for the tourist.”

Lucy weighed the woman’s statement for a moment, then smiled. “I suppose you had to leave in a hurry?” The woman stiffened, but Lucy continued her chatter. “Starting a holiday is so hectic, isn’t it? A dozen things to do at the last moment. There’s never enough time when you have to catch a plane. And you’ve come all the way from . . . ?”

“*Ach*, you know how it goes, yes.” She relaxed again. “I started from Stuttgart.”

“The city of incredible greenness,” said Lucy, “parks, forests, and mineral waters.”

The woman’s eyes lost their wary expression. “You are both here on holiday? Americans?”

“Canadians.” Lucy’s voice remained soft, but decisive.

“Oh! I beg your pardon. I know Canadians shouldn’t be mistaken for Americans.”

Lucy's eyes crinkled at the corners in appreciation. "My name is Lucy Trumble. I'm from Montreal. This is my niece, Dani Morden. She lives in Alberta."

"A teacher, yes?" replied the woman. "The pale skin tells me you are a bookworm, *ja*?"

Dani nodded, not sure how to politely respond to such a question.

"So! I have a sister in Canada. She is there for twelve years already. In a place called the Moose Jaw. You know it? Such a big country is Canada. Oh, I forget to introduce myself. I am—" She broke off and patted her escaping hair again then looked at her lap and fumbled for her purse. "Ah, here is our hotel. Perhaps we shall meet again."

Dani reached into her handbag.

"No, no," the German woman said, "you have been most kind. Please, I pay the driver. I insist. But please, you may send a porter for the luggage? I take care of everything here." She seemed used to giving orders.

Obedient like well-trained poodles, Dani and Lucy marched up the steps of the hotel.

The German lady's smile faded as she watched them go. She searched the street in both directions, then turned and gave brisk orders to the bellboy who appeared at her side.

The suite Dani and Lucy had reserved wasn't ready. A harried reception clerk advised them it would be at least an hour yet. He snapped his fingers at the bellboy, pointing to where to deposit the luggage, then suggested they have lunch in the restaurant.

"I can't face another cup of tea," said Dani, not caring if she sounded ill-humored. "It may be lunchtime to him, but for us, it's the middle of the night. I noticed he didn't turn away the German lady."

“She only wants a single,” replied Lucy. She took out her map and pointed a finger at their location. “What about a walk? Holly Tours isn’t far. We can check on our tour. After, we’ll have plenty of time for a nap before dinner.”

Dani brightened at the prospect of fresh air. “Hey, I’m with you.”

They started down St. James’s Street, crossed Pall Mall, walking down Marlborough Road toward St. James’s Park. Dani gazed around and let her problems fade into the background. The multitude of noises, the swarming traffic, even the smell of gasoline fumes brought excitement. *London*. She was at the start of two weeks touring the West Country, then two weeks back in London: theatres, art galleries, museums, and history. Lots of history. She turned her face to the sun and felt the heat flood her body.

A police constable pulled her back to the sidewalk as she and Lucy were about to cross The Mall. “Look right, *then* left,” he admonished, grinning with good nature. “If you don’t, you’ll be looking up.”

They entered a path leading into St. James’s Park. Ducks paddled in the lake, and people strolled along beside masses of spring flowers. They stopped to enjoy the antics of two children playing with a small terrier scrambling between their legs, barking furiously. From a nearby bench, a woman cautioned them to stay within shouting distance.

“Yes, Grandmother,” they chorused and fell into a fit of giggles. Their grandmother tried to affect a stern presence, then gave up and grinned at Lucy.

“Wish I could bottle all that energy, I could do with a bit myself.” She picked up a book from her lap and opened it. Dani and Lucy crossed a low arched concrete bridge, admiring the

bird life and pelicans on the water. Halfway, Lucy pointed out a large building to their left, much of it hidden by trees. Dani consulted her map.

“That’s the Horse Guards Parade,” she said.

“Lovely,” agreed Lucy. “When we come back to London, we’ll take a closer look.”

Thirty minutes from starting out, they emerged at Birdcage Walk and continued around Queen Anne’s Gate to Tothill.

At the tour office, a middle-aged man in a pinstriped suit with a white rose in his lapel, eyed Lucy and took over from his clerk. He introduced himself as Mr. Holly, the manager, and ushered them into his private office. Half an hour later, they emerged loaded with sightseeing documents and explicit instructions regarding time and place of their tour.

The manager spoke to Lucy in steady, careful tones. The way he stressed each syllable, emphasized to Dani his doubts about her aunt’s ability to manage so much information at one time. Dani’s suspicion was confirmed when he whispered the same instructions to her as they left his office.

“Is that going to happen every time we meet someone?” she asked when they were outside. “How are you not irritated?”

“Pay no attention.” Lucy patted Dani’s arm. “They would be so unhappy if I let on that I understood them the first time. How could I cheat them of the satisfaction?”

Dani gaped at Lucy. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Later, dear . . .” A puzzled expression appeared in Lucy’s eyes as she studied the space beyond Dani’s ear.

“What’s wrong?” Dani twisted her head to stare behind her, half expecting to see Mr. Holly running after them with some forgotten folder.

“I’m sure it was him,” began Lucy. “I mean, for a moment I

thought . . .”

Dani squinted at her aunt, trying to make sense of her mumbles.

Lucy shook her head as if to clear it. “Never mind, he’s gone. Now, are we ready for that nap? I’m feeling the effects of jet lag. Thank goodness we still have a day before the tour leaves on Monday.” Her eyes turned in the direction of the imagined sighting one last time before pushing the tour documentation into Dani’s arms without warning. Dani’s knees dipped as she struggled to keep the unruly bunch together.

“Lead on. I’ll try to cope,” she replied and followed Lucy across the street. “How come Sir Galahad never materializes around me?”

“Damn and blast.” Lucy heaved up the brown case and headed into the sitting room.

Dani dropped her tour folders on the couch, startled into attention by Lucy’s uncharacteristic outburst.

Lucy held up the case. “These dreadful hotel people have sent up the wrong luggage. This belongs to that German lady.” She put the suitcase down and went to the phone. “First our room wasn’t ready, and now this. It’s too pathetic. Hotels have deteriorated in London. Years ago—”

“It can’t be too far away,” interrupted Dani. “Maybe the bellboy mixed them all up when he brought them in from the taxi. Hang on, I’ll straighten it out. She may have even tried to return it while we were out.” Dani left, carrying the suitcase.

Twenty minutes later, she was back, this time with Lucy’s case. “That’s what happened, all right. She couldn’t apologize enough, even though it wasn’t her fault. She was as shocked and

surprised as you were.”

“No harm done, I suppose,” said Lucy, relieved. “Still, I don’t like it. The name tag is plain enough.”

“Well, it’s not the end of the world,” said Dani. “She couldn’t open it without the key anyway.”

Lucy averted her face from Dani’s hard stare too late. Daylight dawned.

“You didn’t lock it. Couldn’t find the key, I’ll bet.”

Lucy drew herself up and with her down-the-nose attitude said, “The taxi came before I had time to lock it.”

Dani put her hands on her hips, returning Lucy’s indignation a moment longer, then grinned. “Well, you’re lucky. As usual. She said she hadn’t even noticed the switch. She took a nap the minute she got in her room. Poor thing was exhausted.” Dani bent and picked up a travel folder, adding as if in afterthought, “The next time you see her, don’t let on how upset you were.”

This last comment piqued Lucy’s interest. “Does it matter?” Dani didn’t seem compelled to answer the question. Lucy persisted. “There’s something you haven’t told me.”

“Her name is Miss Schmidt, and she’s booked on our tour. We had a long talk. I tried out my German on her. It’s impossible for her office to bother her if she’s on a tour, and she wants privacy to enjoy her holiday.” Dani paused, her smile fading into a puzzled frown. “Miss Schmidt says she doesn’t know a soul in England, but I just remembered—there was an Englishman in the lobby. He knew she was German. I wonder how?”

Lucy peered into her opened case. “What was that about?”

“Well, when I asked the clerk for her room number, a man pretended to know me. He said we’d met before when I was with my friend, the German lady. I dusted him off for trying to pick me up, but now that I think about it, he knew she was German.

You don't suppose he may have been genuine after all?"

Lucy straightened. Her stare sharpened on Dani. "What did he look like?"

"In a word . . . a big freckle. Red hair, and covered in freckles."

Dani dismissed him by opening a tour folder. "No. It was only a fishing expedition."

"A what?"

"You know, the old pick up routine. Hey, it's okay," she said, laughing at Lucy's worried expression. "I told him we'd met her at the airport and didn't even know her name. I offered to get her for him. At that, he decided she wasn't the right person after all." Dani bent her head to the folder, still smiling. "Some people aren't original thinkers, are they?"

Lucy said nothing in reply. For a long moment, she contemplated a picture of Tower Bridge hanging above the sofa, then switched to ponder the telephone. She sighed and decided she needed a nap.

Awake at once, Lucy stared at the ceiling. For a puzzled moment, she thought she was in her apartment in Montreal and had fallen asleep again in front of the television. She turned her head to peek at Dani, asleep in the other bed; dark hair tumbled across the pillow.

Youth. They take themselves so seriously. What's gone wrong, that the ability to laugh at themselves has disappeared? Has the world become so arrogant that humor, the one thing which breaks down barriers and binds people together, is snatched away?

Dani shifted, turned on her side to face Lucy, sighed, and slipped back into an easy sleep.

Lucy thought about the call from Helen, asking her to include

Dani in her plans for a trip to England. “Someone or something has to shake her out of the life she’s living, Luce. She’s intelligent but doesn’t want to use it. All the time she was growing up, she buried it, to be like other girls so they’d accept her. It never lasts, and she blames me because I try to steer her to places and people she would appreciate. She’s holding herself back with no purpose, and her decisions always make her unhappy. Mark my words, Luce. Someday, one of those wretched decisions will bring her to disaster. I’m at the end of my patience, and I’ll go screaming bonkers soon. Please, say you’ll take her.”

Lucy sat up and punched at her pillow then laid back again. She hoped Dani’s mood at the airport was behind them. Still, Lucy was fond of her and glad she’d agreed to Helen’s pleas. Lucy yawned and inspected the small travel alarm on the bedside table. Three o’clock.

Her first feeling of something having woken her persisted. Perhaps someone in the adjoining room? Wide awake now, she stayed still and listened. Whatever it was, it wasn’t repeated. Well, she may as well find something to read, or she’d lie there the rest of the night and be drowsy and irritable by morning. *And irritable is just what I must avoid on this trip*, she thought, looking at Dani again. Sighing, she fumbled for her dressing gown and slippers and headed for the sitting room.

Aided by the pale light coming through the window, she could just make out the travel folders piled on the small glass-topped table in front of the couch. Shivering, she fumbled with the lamp switch then closed the window drapes, shutting out the outside. She missed her comfortable sitting room at home, with its confused and cozy chintz.

This time, the sound was clear. A soft thump-bump, ending in a dragging scratch.

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Someone was outside the door. Lucy's heart scudded across her chest. Her eyes riveted on the doorknob, she walked forward and put her hand against the door panel, peering through the small peephole. Nothing. For a moment she stood, then grasping the handle of the door, she turned the lock wincing at the small *snick* it made.

Taking a deep breath, she turned the knob and pulled the door inward, intending to open it only a crack and peer into the corridor. Her grip loosened from a solid counterbalance on the other side, forcing her back as the door flung open.

Miss Schmidt fell at her feet. Protruding from her chest was the metal-edged, black handle of a knife.