



FAKE

A HP Mystery

Morgan Schatz Blackrose

Morgan Schatz Blackrose is a storyteller performing in International and bilingual schools throughout the world. She travels with her husband, visual artist Roman W. Schatz and her teenage daughter Moriah. Any resemblance between HP and Moriah is an act of revenge on behalf of her mother. (Oops that's not what I meant to say. I should have said, is a happy co-incidence). As for other characters resembling 'real' people then I'm sorry, but I did change your names! This is the first novel of HP's adventures, but its not the last. If you're a kid whose parents drag you to different countries round the world, maybe you'll find some familiar places and people in her adventures. But for this one: Welcome to Switzerland.

This story is dedicated to the 'real' Zaninis: Giulia and Lorenzo Giacomazzi

Fake!

**A HP Mystery
by
Morgan Schatz Blackrose**

Fake! : A HP Mystery

**Tell Me Books
PO Box 60
Port Macquarie
NSW 2444 Australia
www.schatzblackrose.com**

© Morgan Schatz Blackrose 2011

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968, for example a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism, or review, no part of the book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. Copyright owners may take legal action against a person or organization who infringes their copyright through unauthorised copying. All enquiries should be directed to the publisher at the address above.

Copying for educational purposes

The Australian Copyright Act 1968 allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of this book, whichever is the greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Ltd. under the act.

ISBN 978-0-9805362-6-3

Cover Design & Photography by Roman W. Schatz

CHAPTER 1

HP IN A PICKLE

Hippolyte Penthesilea Molpadia Brown, known by her friends as HP and her enemies as Hippopotamus, Penicillin Mouldy and other less witty monikers, was in a quandary. For those of you who don't know what a quandary is, then you are either very lucky, or as I said, you don't know what it is. I suppose I should explain, because it's unlikely that you've got a dictionary with you.

A quandary is when you are in a pickle, and I don't mean the sort you pick off a hamburger and feed to your dog. I mean a dilemma; where you have to make a choice and it's a tricky one, because whatever way you turn, there's going to be trouble.

For HP the trouble came in the form of the witch in Number 2; also known as Frau Koch. After the last attack, HP and her friends, Gina and Angelo had taken to spying on her.

It was Monday, when the three of them were on the swings in the Hochhaus playground, and the long term Hochhaus resident and self-styled guardian of the playground yelled at them from her balcony. Gina and HP giggled at her and Angelo waved his hand in front of his face.

Frau Koch disappeared inside and the children moved onto the see-saw and discussed how mean she was, and that they had a perfect right to play there because HP was living in the Hochhaus and Angelo and Gina lived next door. They were so engrossed in their conversation they didn't notice their antagonist's arrival.

She swooped down from her eyrie on the first floor and was upon them before they knew what was happening. Gina jumped off the see-saw and ran. HP thumped to the ground and hearing Frau Koch's voice, ran after her friend. Angelo, realising he was standing alone to face their opponent, ran too. But with surprising agility, Frau Koch flung her walking stick at the boy's legs and tripped him up. He landed with a thud, then scrambled to his feet just as the old woman reached out to grab him. She clasped his left arm in an iron grip, but Angelo twisted out of her clutches and was across the grass before she could stop him.

'If I ever see you at the playground again, I will get Herr Müller, to deal with you,' she called after the fleeing boy.

Later, in the safety of the Zanini's house, the three children talked over the events of that afternoon. Gina was the first one to call Frau Koch the *Hexe*, the German word for witch. She reasoned that it was only a small step from threatening kids to catching them, cooking them and eating them, which is what witches do.

When HP told her parents that they suspected Frau Koch was a witch who ate kids, she wasn't surprised at their response. She knew they wouldn't act like other parents and organize a mob of concerned citizens to march around to her door, threaten to tie her to a stake and burn her alive in the Hochhaus playground. After all it wasn't the Middle Ages. But they could be relied upon to give HP one of their infamous 'little talks.'

I'm making a few assumptions here and possibly I shouldn't, because you don't know who I am. So let me introduce myself. HP is my favourite niece (that's right I'm her aunt, well to be precise, I am her great-aunt, sister to her grandmother, on her mother's side), and I think she is rather like I was when I was a girl, only much braver. My name is Lizzy Brown. And you can call me Lizzy. I am assuming you are HP's friends, or would like to be; otherwise you wouldn't be reading this story.

Therefore, I shall refer to her by her preferred appellation throughout the tale; HP. And, if by some slim chance, Thomas Butler, the name caller who teased HP from Grade 2 to Grade 6 should be reading this, then I hope you realize what a contemptuous little toad you've been. You don't need a dictionary to know that this is an insult! But I digress; let us return to the results of that 'little talk' by HP's parents.

In a nutshell, HP was given a lecture on compassion and tolerance, which is only to be expected when your parents are artists and armchair philosophers. Only later she pondered the fact that she was the only kid she knew whose parents enlisted the Dalai Llama as a parenting guide. His words were written on a piece of paper and handed to her at the end of the talk. She was to carry it with her for the next week and whenever she had 'unkind thoughts,' she was to read it and recite it to herself.

'Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them.'

Since receiving the paper she had helped Frau Küpfer carry her shopping up the stairs, she had helped the pregnant woman who was new to the Hochhaus, by pushing her little boy on the swing, and she hadn't killed a single mozzie. She had been truly compassionate and kind until now. And this was where the quandary came in.

Gina and Angelo planned to tell the world that an evil *hexe* lived in the Hochhaus, by writing graffiti on the playground seats. She, HP Brown, the champion of compassion, was to be on lookout not only for Frau Koch's eagle eye, but Herr Müller or anyone else who might see them committing this criminal act.

More than likely she could have convinced them that graffiti wasn't a good idea, but her heart wasn't in it. She wanted the world to know how mean the old witch was, well at least any other kids who sat on the seats in the Hochhaus playground. But this was completely against the principles of compassion and kindness. She liked the good feelings that came from being kind, on top of the compliments and praise, and sometimes a 'reward', but then there was also the excitement of getting away with a daring accomplishment. If you could call graffiti that.

HP sat on the seat and waited for her accomplices to come. There was one piece of graffiti that was stencilled on her brain forever. Two actually. *'Be alert. We need more lerts'*, and *'Atimetus got me pregnant'*. The first she liked because it was silly and HP liked silly things. The second was a phrase uttered by her mother whenever the subject of graffiti came up in their household. It was graffiti uncovered by archaeologists on the walls of a building in ancient Pompeii. Apparently there was a lot more but it wasn't suitable for HP's ears, or so her parent's believed.

Grffiti was as old as the hills, and according to her father, a recognized art form; a view not shared by any one else's parents at her school. But then, her parents weren't like anyone else's.

When her father offered to organize a Grade 6 art project; tagging the brick wall in the school playground, the Parents and Citizens Association refused to buy the paint and said it would only encourage vandalism. So he came in to the school and did a power point presentation about New York graffiti artists from Basquiat up to the present day. The students thought his presentation was 'cool', especially the boys, who saw tagging as an opportunity to express themselves. But the principal vetoed it on the grounds that it wouldn't promote the best image of the school, as 'graffiti is a community concern and we don't want to appear to be condoning it'. His exact words.

The following week when the school was tagged, a number of parents thought HP's father was responsible and subsequently HP's family had a visit from the police, who went through all of his art materials. He tried to sell them a few of his more

conceptual artworks, but without any success, but they didn't arrest him, which was all her mother was worried about.

'Why should dad be arrested?' HP asked her mother, after the police had gone.

Her parents looked at each other and assumed the smiles of people who have a secret.

'No reason Hip,' reassured Wilhelm Kunz, stepping in and giving HP a cuddle, 'just your mother's paranoia from the old days.'

'What's ancient history got to do with it?' she asked.

'Not those days, Hippolyte,' replied Hera Brown. 'I may study the ancients but I'm not that old. Your father's referring to our days as political activists, when we'd get arrested at demonstrations, carrying out acts of civil disobedience, which I maintain is the right of every citizen living in a democracy.'

HP sensed the excitement in her mother's voice, and her father had settled himself into the 'thinking chair.' This could only mean one thing. They were gearing up for one of their philosophy talks.

'I just remembered I haven't fed the dog,' said HP, and scurried out of the room.

'We haven't got a dog,' said Hera, calling after her daughter, 'have we Willy?'

Hera was suddenly uncertain about whether they did in fact own a dog. It wouldn't be the first time her husband and daughter had acquired something without her knowledge.

'I don't believe in a dog,' said Wilhelm.

'Very funny,' said Hera, 'But I don't suppose there's any need for us to worry about her having an imaginary pet. Is there?'

'I think I know HP's strategies for avoiding a conversation,' replied Wilhelm, 'and feeding an imaginary dog has got to be one of her more creative ones.'

CHAPTER 2

PRINCIPLES AND PENCILS

HP watched as the Zanini kids walked towards her.

‘Hoi zämme,’ HP called. ‘Hoi HP,’ they replied in unison.

They sat down on the seat beside HP. Gina removed her shoulder bag gave a sweeping look around the playground and opened the bag to reveal the graffiti equipment. HP looked on in amazement.

‘You weren’t seriously thinking of using these were you?’

‘They’re Caran d’Ache,’ said Angelo, ‘the best in Switzerland.’

‘That’s Russian for pencil you know,’ added Gina.

‘Yes,’ said HP, ‘and that’s where the problem is.’

‘You don’t like that they’re Russian?’

‘No,’ said HP, trying to keep the frustration from her voice, ‘they’re pencils. Who does graffiti with pencils?’

‘But they’re the best ones,’ pleaded Angelo.

In the heat of the discussion none of the children saw Herr Müller striding towards them.

‘Hoi mitenand,’ he said, resting a bag of compost beside the seat.

The children jumped and the tin of pencils fell off Gina’s knee.

‘Grüezi Herr Müller,’ said HP. ‘Grüezi Herr Müller,’ said Gina and Angelo together, as they bent down to pick up the pencils.

‘Caran d’Ache,’ he said, eyeing the tin, ‘the best in Switzerland.’

‘See, I told you,’ said Angelo, staring at HP.

‘Are you going to draw some pictures outside?’

‘Sort of,’ said Gina, looking around.

‘We were just seeing if the seat would be comfortable to draw on,’ said HP, smiling at the Hochhaus Hauswart.

Both Angelo and Gina’s mouths dropped open.

‘I think a sketch book would be better for drawing on than a seat,’ he said, and laughed at his joke.

‘We were just going to the *Coop* to get one’ said HP.

‘Tschüss Herr Müller.’

The Hochhaus caretaker shook his head and smiled. Swiss children would not be so familiar as to say ‘Tschüss’ to him.

HP stood up and motioned the Zanini’s to follow her.

‘Adieu Herr Müller,’ they said.

‘Tschüss mitenand,’ he replied, picking up the sack of compost and walking down to the heap at the bottom of the playground.

‘Now what do we do?’ asked Angelo, as they walked across the playground to their house.

‘Get a sketchbook,’ said HP, ‘and draw a picture of the Hochhaus *Hexe*.’

‘And we could sell them,’ said Gina.

‘Them?’ asked HP. ‘You mean we draw more than one picture of her?’

‘Why not? We could draw lots.’

‘Like Andy Warhol?’

‘Who’s he?’ asked Angelo, ‘does he live in the Hochhaus?’

‘No the Friedhof,’ said HP.

‘Is he dead?’

‘Of course he’s dead, you don’t live in the cemetery unless you’re dead.’

‘So why will our pictures of Frau Koch be like Andy something?’

‘You know Marilyn Monroe?’

‘No.’

‘That perfume Gina got from *Otto’s* for your mother’s birthday. It had a picture of her on the front.’

‘She doesn’t look like Frau Koch.’

Gina listened in to the conversation and rolled her eyes.

‘There’s lots of pictures and posters of her in different colours,’ HP explained.

‘He printed them. Well he got other people to do it in his factory. You know screen-printing. Where you print the same picture over and over again with different colours. He did it with all sorts of people from Mao Zedong to Mickey Mouse.’

‘I thought Mickey Mouse was a cartoon.’

‘He is.’

‘Then how can he do printing?’

‘Pictures of Mickey Mouse, silly.’

Gina began to laugh, but Angelo continued to ask HP questions.

‘And people bought the pictures?’

‘They still do, even though he’s dead.’

‘Do you think people will buy our pictures when we’re dead?’

‘They’re cheaper when the artist is still alive. That’s what my dad says, when he’s trying to sell his stuff. “Prices will skyrocket when I’m dead”, he tells people, but I don’t think they care.’

‘Maybe your dad can help us sell the pictures?’ interrupted Gina.

‘My dad is not very good at selling art,’ said HP, ‘if he doesn’t like the buyer he won’t sell them anything, because of his principles.’

‘Can’t he leave his principles at home?’

HP thought about this for a moment then took a deep breath and explained.

‘I was going to say that if you forgot your lunch your mum would bring it to school, but in Switzerland you all go home for lunch so that doesn’t work, so let’s say you went to school one day and left your shoes behind. Your mum would find them and bring them to school for you.’

‘Nei!’ said Angelo. ‘No one would leave their shoes at home, unless they were...’

Angelo waved his hand in front of his face to demonstrate being crazy.

‘You’re right. This is Switzerland and your feet would freeze off. What I’m trying to say is that it’s not just my dad who has principles; it’s my mum too. So if my dad decided to leave his principles at home, my mum would be there to remind him he’d forgotten them.’

All three children removed their shoes, jackets and scarves as they went inside the Zanini’s house. Angelo raced up the stairs into the kitchen and straight to the guetzi tin, scrummaged around and fished out an assortment of homemade Christmas biscuits. He handed them out to HP and Gina and the three sat down on the couch and munched away.

‘What are principles?’ asked Gina.

‘A list of ways to do the right thing. A guideline for you to follow.’

‘Like the ten commandments?’

‘Yeah, but you make them up yourself.’

‘We could have a Principle’s club, and everyone has to write down their principles and you have to follow them to be part of the club,’ suggested Gina.

Without a word, Angelo flitted out of the lounge room and down the stairs.

‘Where’s he going?’ asked HP.

‘Probably to get the drawing pad.’ ‘So we don’t need to buy one from the *Coop*?’

‘No, we’ve got one, but we could go to the *Coop* and get some *Maoam*. I want some sweets to chew.’

‘Pooh what’s that smell?’ said HP holding her nose.

Angelo bounded back into the room.

‘Frau Koch cologne,’ he announced and sprayed the *Marilyn* perfume around the room.

Gina immediately wrested it from him and marched with it back downstairs to her parent’s room, and placed it on her mother’s dressing table. She returned upstairs and berated her brother

‘Angelo du schtinksch! That’s Mami’s birthday perfume and you wasted it!’ she yelled at him. ‘Come on we’re going to the *Coop*.’

She grabbed HP’s arm and led her to the door.

HP watched while Gina put on her shoes.

‘Isn’t the Brocki open today?’ she asked. ‘Yes,’ said Gina, ‘do you want to go there?’

‘I’ve got to get my mum a birthday present and that’s the best place for me to get it,’ she replied.

HP loved second hand shops, and Switzerland had some great ones. The best was the Salvation Army in Arbon, but last year it closed. Not enough volunteers to run it, which was a shame because that’s where they got their best winter coats and shoes. Every time her family went in, the old women would come over and say ‘it’s the Australians back again’. Now there was only the *Chapel Brocki* left in Arbon, but it wasn’t as good. It smelt and the women who worked there weren’t as nice as the ones from the Salvation Army. They never gave anything away for free, and they were more expensive, which her father said wasn’t very socialist, even though they were supposed to be.

‘So we go to the Brocki first and then the *Coop* and then we do the pictures of Frau Koch,’ Gina declared.

‘Its dark at five,’ HP reminded her, ‘so we do the pictures tomorrow then?’

‘OK, lets go. Angelo we’re going.’

Angelo jumped down the stairs, flung his jacket around his waist, slipped on his runners and joined the girls as they set off.

CHAPTER 3

DEAD OR ALIVE

‘Ready,’ said HP.

The Zanini’s nodded their heads and all three children took a deep breath and held it as they ran up the path that ran beside the Friedhof. When they reached the end they exhaled loudly and gasped for more air.

‘Why do we do that?’ asked Angelo, who had been told a number of times before, but didn’t really understand his Australian friend’s idiosyncrasy of holding her breath whenever they went past a cemetery.

‘Because we’ll live longer,’ said HP.

‘Angelo won’t if he wastes Mami’s perfume again,’ said Gina.

But Angelo had scampered ahead of the girls and didn’t hear his sister’s comment.

Da doo da doo da doo blared the siren.

‘Angelo,’ screamed Gina and ran along the footpath. HP jogged behind her, confident that the siren wasn’t for Angelo, though he was probably chasing after it.

Next minute the ambulance whizzed past her and Gina, turned the corner and drove into the Altstadt, the old part of town.

This was where the Brocki was, so the girls followed. Ahead they spotted Angelo, disappearing into the side street that led to the Brocki. He perched himself on a low wall and watched the action.

The ambulance attendants climbed out of the van and ran up the steps into the Brocki. A minute later they returned, opened up the back of the van, took out a stretcher and went back inside.

When HP and Gina arrived, Angelo told them what he saw, and added that whoever was being brought out of the Brocki should have held their breath before they passed the Friedorf.

‘You mean there’s a dead person in there?’ said an incredulous HP.

‘How do you know they’re dead?’ asked Gina.

‘Because they took in a stretcher and a blanket,’ he said.

‘That could just mean they’re cold and tired,’ said Gina.

‘Nei,’ exclaimed Angelo, ‘when I’m cold and tired the ambulance doesn’t come. They’re dead.’

HP knew an argument was brewing between her friends. She could just march up the steps of the Brocki and ask if someone was dead, then come back and settle the argument before it heated up. But she didn’t have to. The ambulance attendants emerged carrying a stretcher with a man lying on top of it. Angelo ran to his side.

‘Are you dead?’ he asked.

The ambulance attendant brushed Angelo aside.

‘Can you hop out of the way while we take this man to hospital please?’

‘So he’s not dead?’ Angelo persisted.

‘Is this your Opa?’

‘Nei.’

‘Then let us do our job.’

‘But is he dead?’

The man on the stretcher turned his head and hissed at the boy.

‘I am not dead. Now vamoose.’

Satisfied, Angelo called to Gina and HP to hurry up and go into the shop. As they climbed the stairs they heard a siren wailing as it continued its journey to the hospital. Angelo accompanied its unique sound as he clambered up the stairs.

‘Da doo da doo da doo,’ he sang.

‘Es schtinkt,’ said Gina, holding her nose.

‘Just this room with the old clothes and material,’ said HP.

‘Come on upstairs to the kitchen stuff. I’ll find something there.’

The girls climbed the stairs and walked into the main section of the Brocki.

‘Two dozen fondue sets, one hundred Möhl cups, eight gugelhupf tins and twenty nine vases, at last count,’ said HP.

‘You counted them all?’ asked Gina.

‘Last time, and I doubt if anyone’s bought any since. If we ever lived in Switzerland permanently, my mum said we could get everything we needed from Brockis,’ said HP.

‘Don’t you buy any new things?’

‘Yeah,’ said HP, examining a vase, ‘underwear and runners.’

‘Würlich,’ said Gina, whose family also bought things from the Brocki, but not everything.

‘Yes really,’ said HP. ‘We even buy souvenirs from other countries at the Brocki. If we go to Spain or Poland or France, we don’t buy souvenirs there because they’re too expensive. So if we see something we like in a Brocki, like this vase, which looks Greek to me, then we buy it.’

HP held the vase up to the light and turned it around in her hand. It was old, but it didn’t have any large cracks in it. Their trip to Greece had been cancelled, so as well as being a birthday present it could double as a souvenir... even if they didn’t go.

‘Think I’ll get her this vase,’ said HP to Gina.

‘It looks a bit old and dusty and it’s not very pretty’ said Gina.

‘Maybe it’s like those bottles of wine that they keep the dust on to show that they’re really old?’ mused HP.

‘Not in Switzerland they don’t,’ said Gina, ‘my Oma would have them dusted before you could say Chuchi Chäschtli.’

‘What about your Nona?’ asked HP. ‘Is she as big a cleaner as your Omi?’

‘Yes, but she makes sure everyone eats first and then she cleans,’ said Gina.

Angelo appeared in the doorway in the company of a weeping woman.

‘Oh oh,’ said Gina, ‘what’s he done now?’

Gina rushed over to the woman and apologized for whatever Angelo had done and promised he would never do it, whatever it was, again. The woman dabbed her eyes with a tissue and held out a tin towards Gina. Between her tears she pleaded with her to take some. HP watched and waited to see what Gina would pull out of the tin.

‘Gummi bears?’ said Gina, staring at the contents of her hand.

‘Mmm, hab lots,’ said Angelo, his mouth filled with the sweet treats.

HP wandered over and stood at a slight distance and listened as the three of them talked. She could understand most things people said in in Schwitzerdütsch, well in this part of the country anyway, but with everyone’s mouths stuffed full of gummi bears it was a bit harder. Suddenly the woman turned to her and held out the tin.

‘Grüezi und danke,’ HP replied, and reached in and took a fistful of gummi bears.

She popped one into her mouth and the others into her pocket, then thought she would try and find out whether the man on the stretcher had anything to do with the woman being upset, or whether it was Angelo.

‘What happened to the man who got taken away in the ambulance?’ HP asked. The woman wiped her nose and swallowed a gummi bear.

‘That was the manager, Herr Stein, and he slipped and fell on the stairs and broke his leg,’ she said, ‘and it’s all my fault.’

She burst into a flood of tears and Gina reached into her pocket and extricated a tissue and gave it to her.

‘Did you trip him?’ Angelo asked.

‘No, silly boy,’ she answered, and smiled. ‘I polished under the mat at the top of the stairs and I was so proud of the floor. It looked so clean and shiny.’

‘And slippery?’ HP cut in.

‘Yes,’ said the woman, giving HP a knowing look. ‘That’s what happened. One step and the mat flew out from underneath him and down the stairs he went, like a sack of potatoes.’

HP couldn’t wait to tell her mother this tale. It would confirm all her fears about the dangers of Swiss house cleaning.

‘It’s not your fault you are such a good cleaner,’ HP comforted the woman, ‘you’re programmed for it.’

The woman gave HP a confused look and turned to her friends. Gina responded with her usual reply when people were puzzled by HP’s reasoning.

‘She’s Australian.’

It seemed a satisfactory explanation of her strangeness. HP realised that she had an important reason for coming to the Brocki in the first place and held out the vase.

‘I want to buy this vase please,’ she said.

The woman took it and looked a little flustered.

‘It hasn’t got a price tag because I think it was one of the items Herr Stein was unwrapping. I’m not supposed to sell anything without a tag,’ she explained.

‘It’s not as if it’s a priceless antique or anything is it?’ HP asked.

The woman looked unsure. Sometimes they did get valuable things through the Brocki. Once there was a clock that was worth two hundred francs, and it wasn’t unusual for antique dealers to visit and scour the place for hidden treasures. She knew that some people came across the lake from Germany, to see what they had, but Herr Stein usually attended to them. But he wouldn’t be able to this afternoon, and this was the day Herr Grimm, one of the regulars from Germany, would visit and take away a few trinkets, or maybe a vase or two. They were his speciality. And Herr Stein’s last words between his moans were that she show Herr Grimm the back table, and let him take whatever he wanted.

‘You didn’t get this off the back table did you?’ the woman asked.

HP looked around at the assortment of tables. Depending on where you stood in the room, the table where the vase came from could be considered the back one, which might mean that she wasn’t allowed to have it. Gina came to her rescue with a quick answer.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it was on the other table.’

‘All right then,’ she said, ‘how much money do you have?’

HP reached into her pocket. She knew exactly how much money she had. Five francs, in two, two franc coins and a one franc coin.

‘Three francs,’ she answered, and pulled out two coins.

‘All right,’ said the woman, and took the coins. HP took her rucksack off, unzipped it and placed the vase inside.

‘Danke,’ she said, and signaled to the Zanini’s that it was time to go, before the woman started crying again.

‘Auf Wiedersehen und danke,’ they chanted together, and made to leave the room.

‘Wait,’ commanded the woman, and walked over to the staircase and removed the mat lying askew on the top step.

HP felt sorry for her as they walked slowly down the stairs, and she stopped at the bottom and looked up at her, holding the guilty rug in her hand.

‘It’s not your fault you know,’ she said, but couldn’t think of anything else to say, so left the sentence hanging.

‘Whose fault is it then?’ asked Angelo.

‘The manager’s, for not looking where he was going,’ said Gina.

‘What about the rug?’ countered Angelo.

‘It was the woman for polishing under it,’ said HP.

‘You just said it wasn’t her fault,’ said Gina.

‘I felt sorry for her,’ said HP.

‘What about the polisher?’ demanded Angelo, ‘isn’t it guilty?’

‘This is starting to sound like one of my parent’s conversations,’ said HP, and scowled at her friends.

‘Let’s go to the *Coop* before it’s closed,’ said Gina.

And the three hurried through the altstadt, down to St Gallerstrasse, where the town’s largest supermarket stood.

CHAPTER 4

A GRIMM TALE

The trip from the city of Ulm in Germany, to the small town of Arbon, in Switzerland, was both a pleasant and a lucrative one. He had undertaken it once a month for the past year, and as a result, earned far more money working for ‘the organisation’ than he ever would have as a librarian.

‘Who said crime doesn’t pay?’ he muttered to himself, thinking of the treasure that lay waiting for him. The ferry rolled from side to side as they entered the harbour. It had been bumpy sailing, but he’d experienced far worse on the forty minute crossing from Friedrichshafen to Romanshorn. One time it was so rough that he’d fallen off his chair. Luckily he landed on a fellow traveler and not his rucksack, which contained a priceless Etruscan pottery chalice. Since that near miss, he’d taken to transporting his ‘Brocki booty’, as he liked to call it, in a hardshell suitcase with wheels.

After disembarking, he walked the fifty metres along the walkway to the train station, to wait fifteen minutes for the train to Rorschach. Seven minutes on the train and he was in Arbon.

A walk across the road to the *Metropol*, check in, and then off to collect the treasure. And this was his week’s work. Never again would he work day in, day out, with that annoying little Professor who watched his every move, and was always telling him what to do. Now, although he still had a boss, he’d never seen him, and what was better, he got his orders once a month to do the weekly pick-ups, and the rest of the time he could do as he liked. He chuckled loudly to himself, and a woman walking beside him to the *Metropol*, stepped aside to let him go ahead.

‘Welcome Herr Grimm,’ said the concierge, ‘I hope you have had a pleasant journey.’

‘A bit rough on the ferry,’ he replied, ‘but nothing I can’t handle.’

He puffed his chest out and smiled at the concierge.

After Herr Grimm deposited his suitcase in his room, he took out his rucksack, put it on his back and left for the altstadt. It was dark and cold but he was dressed warmly, and looked forward to the brisk walk. He felt a rumbling in his belly and knew he would soon satisfy his hunger with seasonal fare. He walked through the passageway dividing the *Metropol* from the *Migros* and headed down to the lake. Congratulating himself on his local knowledge, he could hear the chestnut seller before he saw him.

‘Heisse maroni, heisse maroni.’

The chestnut seller scooped up the roasted chestnuts and poured them into brown paper bags.

Herr Grimm lined up behind a group of kids who bought one bag between them.

Herbst. Autumn. Fall. Call it what you like, it was Jakob Grimm’s favourite time of year. He munched happily on his bag of hot chestnuts as he climbed the steps into the broki. He greeted the sales assistant, who was ushering the last of the customers out of the shop.

‘Where is Herr Stein?’ he asked.

‘I am so sorry to say that Herr Stein had an accident and fell down the stairs, but he asked me, Herr Grimm, to tell you to go to the back table and see if there was anything there that you liked,’ the woman said.

‘Thank you,’ he replied, and immediately went to the table and surveyed the collection.

He had been given a description of the vase he was to collect. But he couldn’t see it anywhere. He picked up three ordinary dinner plates and handed them to the assistant.

‘I’ll take these,’ he said, handing them to her. ‘You don’t have any vases in today, Frau uh?’ he asked nonchalantly.

‘Nadig, Frau Nadig. Well I only sold one vase today, which I don’t think came off that table,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘was it colourful?’

The sales assistant shook her head and smiled at him.

‘Dear me no. It was old and brown, rather ugly if you ask me. You know like the tourist souvenirs you get when you go to Greece.’

‘Do you remember who bought it?’

‘A group of kids who came in just after Herr Stein’s accident. The girl bought it for her mother’s birthday. She was an Ausländer, but the other two were locals. I’ve seen them around. Let me think... it’s been an upsetting afternoon for me.’

Jacob Grimm shifted uncomfortably on the spot and waited for her to come up with an answer. The Swiss were known for their ability to distinguish accents. Frau Nadig knew Herr Grimm was German, but she couldn’t quite make out where the girl was from, although she recalled the Swiss children saying she was Austrian, maybe.

‘Do you know where the local children live Frau Nadig?’ he asked.

The woman tapped her fingers on the wall and looked up at the ceiling, ignoring his question.

Jacob Grimm was feeling frustrated. He had to get that vase, or risk not only losing the money that he would receive for the transaction, but possibly the trust of his employers. They had told him when he began this work that if anything went wrong, not to expect any help from them.

‘Zanini’s,’ she answered, a triumphant grin on her face. ‘But I have to go now,’ she apologized, ‘I’m sure if you want to look at that vase you could find out their address in the telephone book.’

Jacob Grimm thanked her and left. He would not to be foiled by a group of kids.

Tomorrow he would find the kids and offer them money for it. He consoled himself that they wouldn’t know its true worth or where it was from and would happily give it up for twenty francs.

CHAPTER 5

A WOLF AT THE DOOR

Always a mistake to underestimate the intelligence of children and the power of folktales, as you shall see in the events that transpired from Herr Grimm's visits to HP and her friends. Perhaps our villain should have familiarised himself with the story of the 'Wolf and the Seven Kids' in his namesake's seminary work *Hausmärchen* before he put his plan into action.

Herr Grimm found the Zanini's address in the phone book. Fortune was on his side, as it was Wednesday, and the kids would have the afternoon off school, as was usual in Switzerland and Germany. He hoped that their mother would be out for the afternoon, and if all went according to plan, he would be back in Ulm later that night.

He went to the printer and had his card made up, placed it inside the plastic slip that hung so officially from the chain around his neck, and with his suitcase in tow, went to the children's home. He knocked on the door and a small face peered through the door at him. He held the business card up to the glass and spoke.

'Is your mother at home?'

'Nei', Angelo answered.'

'Is your father at home?'

'Nei.'

'Can I speak to you about the United Nations Vase Collection?'

'Show me your card.'

'Open the door and I will.'

Angelo opened the door and Herr Grimm handed over his official UN Vase collector card. Angelo looked at it and handed it back.

'Are you collecting vases?'

Herr Grimm smiled at the boy in front of him.

'Yes I am. They go in my case here and I take them to Geneva and we auction them off and all the money goes to help the poor children of the world.'

'We have vases but my Mami has flowers in them.'

'We pay twenty francs for a vase and that will buy your Mami lots of flowers.'

'For any vase?'

'Only old ones.'

Angelo ran up the stairs and within moments returned with three vases in his arms.

'Yes, these are the sort. Like the ones you get at a Brockenhaus.'

Herr Grimm took the vases and opened up his suitcase and placed them inside.

'Now you give me twenty francs each,' said Angelo.

'Naturally.'

Herr Grimm reached into his wallet and took out a handful of twenty-euro notes and handed three over to Angelo.

'I'm afraid I only have euros,' he said, and grinned at Angelo.

'Now before I go, I was wondering whether you might have any more vases? Or perhaps your friends do, especially ones from the Brockenhaus?'

'My friend HP got one yesterday for her mother's birthday.'

Herr Grimm tried to keep the excitement from his voice.

'Now where would your friend live?'

‘In the Hochhaus, over there,’ answered Angelo, pointing in the direction of the tallest block of flats in Arbon. ‘But she’s not home today because she’s gone to Zürich with her parents, but she’ll be home tomorrow.’

‘And what number does she live in?’

‘Number seven. Ciao.’

Angelo shut the door and ran upstairs to answer the phone. Gina beat him to it, and after hearing her mother’s instructions went to the lounge room to begin her homework. The table was covered in flowers.

‘Angelo,’ she yelled.

Her brother bounced into the room flashing his newly acquired money in his hand.

‘Where did you get that money and where is Mami’s vase?’

‘I sold it to the United Nations man to help the poor children.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Gina grabbed her brother by the shoulders of his shirt and pushed him onto the couch. She sat on him and demanded an explanation for what had happened in the ten minutes she had been in her bedroom listening to music.

‘We have to tell HP before he goes over there and steals her mother’s vase,’ said Gina.

Angelo was indignant.

‘He didn’t steal the vases. He paid for them with Euros which are worth even more than Swiss francs.’

Gina was confused.

‘I know, but it doesn’t seem right. And now you’ve told him where HP lives, we have to warn her.’

Gina took out her phone and sent an SMS to her friend. A short time later she received a reply. HP was allowed to catch the train back to Arbon by herself, if she could stay at Gina’s until her parents got home later that evening.

The children huddled together on Gina’s bed and discussed the events of the day. HP had been relieved to have an excuse to come home early. At the age of twelve, she had seen more museums and art galleries than most adults ever would in a lifetime.

She found it difficult to share her parent’s enthusiasm for an outing to yet another one; even if it did have the best collection of contemporary Swiss milking stools! But she had gone with them, and that evening they were to attend a vernissage at a gallery in Zürich. HP knew they would rather be there without her, because of ‘the sulk’, a facial expression she had cultivated for attending places she did not want to be at. It’s appearance caused her mother to hiss and bare her teeth, which her father said ‘transforms your mother into a premenstrual Medusa.’ This comment created further animosity between her parents, particularly when her father asked if he could photograph his wife in her ‘reptilian state.’ Sulking was such a simple ploy, but it worked.

The first time it happened, came very naturally for HP. She accompanied her parents to the opening of the world’s most boring art exhibition of all time. The walls of a gallery were freshly painted with white paint and people were asked to watch the paint dry. Her father tried to make a joke of her expression by calling her his ‘installation of tweenage discontent.’ But one of the gallery owners thought he was serious, and loudly announced his offer of a public exhibition of ‘the discontented

girl' at his gallery the following month. HP's father was tempted to take up the offer, until he saw his daughter's demeanour change from a sulk to a snarl, and feared that an exhibition of a more violent display might be in the making. He reluctantly declined the opportunity to show 'his greatest work' as he called her.

When Gina's SMS came, saying that the vase was in danger and she should come home soon, it gave HP the perfect excuse to not go to the exhibition. She told her parents they had some secret birthday business to attend to and winking at her mother, asked if they would put her on the train at Zürich station, then she would be fine to go home via St Gallen. She could even stay the night at Gina's and see them in the morning, so they could have a lovely night out... just the two of them. An irresistible ploy, HP thought, as she waved them goodbye from the station.

After Angelo told his version of the events and Gina hers, HP cross-examined them both. She congratulated Gina on her action in alerting her so quickly, and Angelo for earning sixty euros, even if he did give out her address. It seemed that these Swiss kids needed a lesson in stranger danger. A few hours with her Granny and they'd have nightmares about being kidnapped, enslaved and murdered, and never trust a stranger again, let alone shake hands with them and say hello, as was the custom in Switzerland.

'I trust this man about as much as I trust a wolf,' declared HP. 'In fact I probably trust a wolf more than I trust him. I think he's a dangerous character.'

Angelo remained unconvinced about him being a dangerous character.

'Just because he gave me euros instead of francs? Mr. Wolf isn't dangerous, he's just stupid.'

'Why don't you just give him the vase and get twenty euros and then you can buy something really good for your Mami?' ventured Gina.

'Because the vases aren't worth twenty euros each, and if we go to the United Nations site on the internet we won't find anything about an auction of second hand vases to raise money for children,' HP answered.

'How do you know for sure?' Gina asked.

'Because he could just go to the Brockis and buy a whole lot of vases to sell,' said HP. 'But let's look up the United Nations anyway.'

The trio left Gina's bedroom and went to the computer. After twenty minutes of searching, nothing had come up about UN vases. However, they had managed to find information about bogus collectors for various charities. Creating an official looking ID card was simple. Make up the card on a computer, with a photo, text and logo, and either take it to a print shop or print it out yourself. Slip the card into a plastic sleeve and attach it with a clip or chain.

'Like this,' said HP, removing her own business card from her purse and showing it to her friends.

HP: global citizen, friend and traveller it read, and beside it was a photo of her.

'Dad and I made it the day before yesterday, and he printed it off this morning.'

She handed them each a card.

'So the thing is,' she said, 'Mr. Wolf, which I think is a very good nickname for him Angelo, wants the vase, and will pay a lot of money for it. But why?'

'Maybe there's something inside it?' offered Angelo, 'like a treasure or a map. If we break it we will find it and become rich.'

Gina rolled her eyes.

'Angelo has such a good imagination. Always looking for treasure.'

‘But this time he might be right,’ said HP.

Angelo poked his tongue out at his sister.

‘So we will go over to your place and break the vase now?’

‘No,’ HP answered, ‘I don’t think there’s anything hidden inside it. I’ve already looked, but what we will do, is go and play a leprechaun trick on Mr. Wolf,’ said HP, grinning at her friends. ‘I’ve got an idea, but we have to get moving. First we go to the studio of my dad’s friend and get the tins. Then we have to go and get that really strong gaffer tape.’

‘Like the one Papi has in his workshop?’ Gina said.

In a flash Angelo had disappeared, off to his father’s workshop.

‘And we have to go to the *Coop* and buy up twelve little vases.’

The girls went downstairs to the door and put on their outdoor clothes. Gina was just about to shut the door that her brother left open in his hurry to get the tape, when he burst through with an armload of gaffer tape.

‘Angelo, that is all of Papi’s tape. We don’t need that much do we HP?’

‘The more the merrier,’ HP replied, and the Zanini children shrugged their shoulders. Understanding their Australian friend wasn’t always easy.

CHAPTER 6

A LEPRECHAUN'S TALE

Later that evening the children sat on the lounge room floor of HP's flat and surveyed their work. HP took out her camera and photographed their efforts.

'Its an installation,' she said, 'and my dad will be thrilled when he sees it. Maybe too thrilled.'

HP remembered the time they built their own world out of leggo and he was so proud that he took the entire assemblage to a 'happening' in Melbourne and one of the other artists drenched it in lighter fluid and set fire to it. She watched as her creation melted in front of her. Since then she had been wary of showing her father her artwork, but he had also been more wary of the artists he worked with.

Paulo was an artist and a friend of HP's parents. He was happy to hand over a dozen empty paint tins to HP and her friends. He didn't ask why she wanted them, which suited HP. Paulo never asked questions, because he maintained that if he didn't know, then he wasn't responsible. Her parents explained to her that his attitude came from his experiences during the war. HP didn't ask which war. As far as she was concerned all war was bad and that was all she needed to know.

They'd carried the tins to the Hochhaus in sacks, dropped them off and went to the *Coop* to buy the vases. They brought them back, sat them on the floor and began their work.

They placed a vase in every tin, jammed the lids on with the help of a hammer and then wound the gaffer tape around and around and around each one, until they'd used all the tape. They left them on the floor and returned to the Zanini's. HP told them the story which gave her the idea.

It's only right that I tell you the story myself, because it was me who told HP the tale in the first place. So come with me to Ireland for a few minutes, where it is common knowledge, that if you catch a leprechaun, that's one of the wee folk, they have to show you where their gold is.

Now there was a farmer, who, one day, took a rest in his field and woke to the tap, tap, tapping sound of a hammer hitting nails. It was a leprechaun sitting on a tree stump fixing his boots. He stopped every now and then to take a sip from the jug of beer he had nearby. And for all the world, thought he was out in the warm sunshine all by himself. The farmer, seeing an opportunity to catch the little fellow, sneaked up behind him and grabbed him by his shirt collar. He was so pleased with himself, because, now he reasoned that he was going to be a rich man. He made the leprechaun take him to where the fellow had buried his pot of gold. It was a long walk and finally they came to an expanse of hills and valleys filled with ragwort. That's a yellow weed that blooms very prettily in the springtime.

'There you go,' says he, 'my treasure is right here. Did you bring your shovel?'

Now of course the farmer, in his excitement, didn't bring a shovel, which meant that he would have to return home and get one. Now he feared not knowing exactly where the treasure would be when he came back, but he had an idea. There was a red ribbon decorating the leprechaun's vest, so he says, 'take that ribbon and tie it to the ragwort which marks the spot where your gold is buried.'

The leprechaun did exactly that and was bound by the laws of magic not to remove the ribbon or change it in any way while the farmer went to get his shovel.

So the farmer went away home and got his shovel and returned just as the sun was setting. What he saw was the hills and valleys covered with a bright red haze. As he approached he saw that it was not the sunset that made the country red, but tied to every ragwort was a red ribbon fluttering in the breeze. And although he dug and dug and dug in those hills and dales, he never did find the leprechaun's gold.

HP got an SMS later that evening, saying that her parents had considered coming home after the exhibition, but changed their minds and were spending the night in Zürich, and would be back home for lunch tomorrow, so she was to stay the night with the Zaninis and come home in the morning and do some homework. Her mother would bring käse flade for lunch. HP smiled to herself. That's what she was doing anyway. Parents were always repeating themselves.

If Mr. Wolf came to the Hochhaus early, as HP suspected, her parents would not get to see the installation, but she did have the pictures. It was eight o'clock and she waved goodbye to her friends as they tromped off to school. She twisted the red ribbon that she wound around her wrist, crossed the Hochhaus playground and walked up the stairs to her flat.

After entering the flat, HP examined the light dusting of flour she had scattered on the floor. An idea she remembered her parents using when she was a little girl, to show that the Easter Bunny had visited during the night. For years she believed that he came to their house while she slept, until she discovered the paw template in her father's workshop and realised that she had been duped. But there were no Easter Bunny footprints here, or Wolf ones for that matter. No one had broken in to steal the vase.

She went to the kitchen and took out the hand brush and shovel and swept up the flour. Next she went to her room, placed the chair next to the wardrobe door, stood on it and opened the top cupboard. The vase was still there but she would have to take further precautions if she was to get to the bottom of the mystery.

She reached up and took it down, examining it carefully. It was a stubby looking vase with two handles, not very big, or colourful, and definitely old. She took out her pen torch and pointed it into the vase. She reached inside and ran her hand around the interior. Definitely no treasure or map inside, or stuck on the bottom, that she could see or feel. She stood up on the chair and placed the vase back in her secret hiding spot. Her mother's fear of heights ensured that she would never get up on a chair to look around up there, and her father never showed any curiosity about her personal things. Probably frightened he might find 'womanthings' as he called anything to do with periods. She shut the cupboard door, but knew she would need to find another hiding spot tomorrow.

HP walked back down to the kitchen, just as the doorbell rang. *Ding Dong*. It was the loudest doorbell she had ever heard, probably because most of the tenants in the Hochhaus were old and deaf. Some of them had lived there since it opened, fifty years ago, like Frau Koch.

HP went to the window and peered out. There he was; Mr. Wolf. She opened the door and smiled at Herr Grimm.

'You must be the man from the United Nations collecting vases,' she said. 'My friend said you'd come so I've got them all ready for you. Wait here.'

Herr Grimm fingered his identification card and looked perplexed.

'All?'

He watched as HP trotted back and forth between the door and the lounge room carrying large bundles of what appeared to be black oddly shaped bricks and laid them at her feet.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I think you’re mistaken, I want old vases not bricks.’

‘But the vases are inside them,’ said HP.

‘They were a surprise for my mum. Each one has a vase in it. There’s twelve in all.’

‘A vase from the Brockenhaus?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes. I did get a vase from the Brockenhaus. But I don’t know which vase is in which. So I’m selling you the lot at twenty euros each, and you can sort them out. If you really want the vases?’

HP gave her widest smile.

Herr Grimm sighed and reached into his wallet and plucked out the notes and handed them to her.

‘I’m not sure whether they’ll all fit in my case,’ he said, ‘do you have some bags?’

‘Sure,’ she said and took out the *Migros* carry bags. ‘This ought to do it. And if you want more vases, there’s a nice old lady down in number 2 who is sure to want to donate a vase or two. Gotta go now. Auf wiedersehen.’

HP shut the door and listened as Herr Grimm loaded up his suitcase and bags and struggled away with them. She figured he would go somewhere safe to open his loot, but when he found out he’d been duped, he’d be back in some other guise, and next time he might not be so nice.

CHAPTER 7

HIDE AND SEEK

Before this fiasco Jakob Grimm had never felt anything more than annoyance with children. They were like yappy dogs, which you could shut up by giving them a sly kick, when their owners weren't looking. But now he felt murderous; these kids were plotting against him. They'd done him out of three hundred euros and what did he have? A room full of masking tape, old paint tins and cheap vases, not to mention cuts and scrapes all over his hands from trying to open the stupid tins. And it was lunch-time already.

Time for the Pied Piper to make an appearance. He pulled a business card from his wallet, removed his UN identification and replaced it with this one.

Everyone welcomes a pest exterminator into their house. He'd used this identification on a few occasions in the past, to enter the homes and businesses of the boss's clients. Off to the supermarket to buy a pair of overalls and then he would be ready to go. But wait, that girl would recognize him for sure. Time to bring out the wig.

He didn't always travel with a full set of disguises, but found the wig invaluable. It was a different colour to his own hair and depending on the hairstyle, he could make himself look older or younger. Tomorrow he would be a young and groovy Pied Piper, and that horrid girl would lead him straight to where she'd hidden the vase.

HP was standing outside the Zanini's house when they returned for lunch.

'Hoi zämme.'

'Hoi HP.'

'Mr. Wolf came this morning and took the tins.'

'Did he give you the money?'

'Yes,' she answered, 'but I know he'll be back and he's determined to get the vase. So I don't have a choice. I have to give it to you to hide.'

'We can't hide it at our place. Mami will find it,' said Gina.

'But what about school?'

'We aren't going to school this afternoon. We're going to the Schloss Museum for a school excursion.'

HP's eyes opened wide and exclaimed, 'of course! You can't see the forest for the trees.'

'Is this a story your auntie told you?'

'No. It means that you hide something in a place where people see it all the time but they don't take any notice of it because they think it should be there. Like in the museum, there's old vases and artefacts and stuff like that and if we just slip it in there, no one will take any notice of it.'

'But what about the workers at the museum?' Angelo interjected. 'Won't they know?'

Gina and HP looked at Angelo in astonishment. Sometimes he asked very clever questions and this was one.

'Angelo is right HP. Frau Müller works at the museum, and Mami says she's older than some of the things in there.'

'But that doesn't mean she'll know if we put something else in, does it?' asked HP.

‘When Mami was in school they went on an excursion there and she told them that she knows everything and where it is in the museum. So when they dared Marcel Hoff to disappear and hide somewhere in the museum, she found him in three minutes. She went straight to the old engine and dragged him out of the boiler where he was hiding, because she could see that the door wasn’t shut quite right.’

Gina shook her head.

‘It won’t work,’ she said emphatically, ‘she’ll see it. It will have to go somewhere else.’

‘You could bury it in our garden,’ Angelo suggested.

‘And have your neighbours see me, and then what if Mr Wolf goes and asks them questions and they tell him they saw me digging. He’ll come over in the middle of the night and dig it up. Its too big a risk.’

Tat tat tat tat tat tat.

‘Is that a woodpecker?’ asked HP.

‘Yes,’ they replied in unison. ‘He likes that tree next to the bird box. You don’t have them in Australia do you?’

‘No. All the birds in Australia are really quiet, like the kookaburras and cockatoos and the wattle birds.’

Gina and Angelo stared at their friend.

‘Kookaburras are the noisiest birds in the world. You told us yourself,’ they said.

HP laughed an imitation kookaburra laugh.

‘I was only joking. But you’re right, we don’t have woodpeckers or bird boxes.’

‘Why don’t you just tell your parents about the vase?’ Gina asked.

‘Tell them what? A man wants to buy the vase that I got from the Brocki and I think he’s a villain.’

‘What’s a villain?’

‘A baddie.’

The children were all silent.

‘We need more evidence before we tell my parents,’ said HP, ‘so they won’t think we are making things up.’

‘Do you really think he will come back again?’ asked Gina.

‘Anyone who pays three hundred euros to get an old vase won’t give up after one try.’

She turned to Angelo and grinned.

‘Remember you said you had some of that powder? Could I have it now? But make sure it’s in something that won’t spill. I’ve got an idea.’

Angelo went into the house and returned with a packet jammed into a jar.

‘Have fun,’ he said, handing it to her.

Claudia Zanini appeared in the doorway and called out to the children to come in for lunch. HP declined the invitation and waved goodbye, promising to let Gina and Angelo know whether Mr. Wolf made a return visit.

She ran back to the Hochhaus with Angelo’s powder and spread it around the top cupboard. Her parents had SMS’d her to say they would be late and that she could go to the bakery and get herself some flade. That gave her some time to ready herself for the next visit.

She left the flat with the vase tucked away in her backpack and made her way to the spot she had decided would make the perfect hiding place for the vase. The door to the storage shed was unlocked as usual, so she slipped inside, removed the

vase and deposited it into the bottom of the food box. She then continued on her way to the *Coop*.

Six old-fashioned mouse-traps was all that she needed. HP wasn't interested in humane ways of trapping mice. It was a rat she was after. Whatever guise he came in, she would be ready to lead him into her trap. She would have preferred a rattrap, but they were too hard to set and she didn't fancy getting her fingers jammed in it.

She took the last mouse-traps off the shelf. Unlike her home in Australia, there was not a big call for mousetraps here, or cockroach baits or other vermin destroyers. She'd never seen a spider, let alone a cockroach in Switzerland. Too cold for them, she mused.

On her way to the checkout she stopped at the *Coop* bakery, where she picked up three lauge gipfeli's filled with salami and cheese. It was Thursday and HP knew there wouldn't be any flade. Friday was flade day.

No matter how many years they had been coming to Switzerland there were some things her mother just didn't get. The language for starters. She was forever getting her grüezi's and danke's mixed up. When she told people she only knew a 'bitsly Switzerdeutsch' they immediately spoke loudly to her in high German, which she didn't understand either.

Kissing people. You did it three times, left, right, left, just like looking before you cross the road in Australia. And washing. You did it once a week, not every few days. But then, they were Ausländer so it was expected they would get the Swiss customs and way of doing things wrong.

After setting the traps she set the table. How unSwiss. They were having lunch and it was nearly 2 pm! The door opened and HP's parents lumbered through the doorway, laden with shopping.

'We went to the big Brocki in Zürich and got a few things,' HP's mother announced, dumping the bags on the floor. 'You got us some lunch. You are a great girl. I'm hanging out for a drink of water and a coffee, and I refuse to buy water in Switzerland.'

Hera Brown went to the kitchen, filled a glass with tap water and slaked her thirst.

'Some of the cleanest water in the world and the Swiss insist on buying bottled water. All those plastic bottles they use.'

HP smiled at her mother, who never missed an opportunity to campaign for the environment.

'They have the best recycling here Mum,' she said.

'That maybe so but the process of making plastic in the first place damages the environment. Its not like the water here isn't drinkable.'

'I liked that plastic bottle sculpture we saw in Nice,' HP's father interjected. 'I've been thinking about doing a site specific sculpture here on the Bodensee.'

'I did an installation with the Zanini's last night,' said HP, but I sold it this morning,' said HP.

She took out her camera and showed the pictures to her parents.

'Brilliant,' said her father. 'But who bought it.'

'This man who came to the flat this morning who wanted to buy vases and I told him there was a vase inside each one.'

'You lied?' asked her mother.

'No. There was a vase in each one,' said HP.

'Like the Russian matryoska dolls?' offered her father.

'Yes, exactly,' she said.

HP's mother wrinkled her brow.

'I smell a rat,' she said. 'This sort of coincidence only happens in novels. Did this man strike you as peculiar in any way? You know about stranger danger, and I'm not too happy that you opened the door to this fellow. I don't care if this is Switzerland, there are men who want to hurt children everywhere.'

Wilhelm Kunz took his wife's arm and sat her down.

'HP is safe and you are right, there are evil men in the world but we can't stop living our lives because of fear. I'll get a chain lock for the door so she can open it and still be safe. Now let's sink our chops into those lauge gipfelis.'

'No flade?' said HP's mother.

HP and her father gave each other a knowing look and answered together.

'Friday is flade day!'

Hera Brown laughed and shook her head.

'Silly me. When will I remember? Now when is sausage day again?'

And on cue her husband and daughter answered.

'Every day is sausage day!'

CHAPTER 8

A VISIT FROM THE PIED PIPER

Wilhelm Kunz kissed his wife and daughter and left with two bottles of Spanish wine in his backpack. He was off to see his friend Paulo, for a serious discussion about art and philosophy.

Hera Brown gave the flat a cursory glance and decided it was clean and tidy enough. She took out the two emergency tea towels and placed them on the bench. They had never been used so still had that freshly ironed look. It was a hint her American friend Tammy, had passed on to her, for impressing Swiss visitors. Even if the place looked a mess the ironing was done, right down to the teatowels, displayed, ready for use.

As an archaeologist Hera had spent years of her early life dusting, sweeping and brushing the dirt off artefacts discovered on digs. She figured she had spent enough time cleaning to reveal ancient junk and had no desire to while away her days revealing today's junk. Instead she would wash things. So the household chores were divided into wet and dry. She washed the clothes, bathroom, floors and dishes while Wilhelm did the rest. Cooking was a shared experience and ironing was non-existent.

She was looking forward to seeing Tammy, who had recently moved to Scotland, but regularly returned to Arbon to visit her children and grandchildren. She asked HP if she wanted to come, but HP declined, saying that she had better get stuck into her French homework. Hera was worried. This didn't sound like the girl they dragged around the world with threats of 'next time we will leave you in Australia with your great aunt on her farm in woop woop.'

That reference to 'great aunt living in woop woop,' is of course me. And I would be happy to have HP come and stay with me any time, but I fear she may be a bit bored with life on the farm. Young people tend to like their own company, so I think she's better off with the Zanini's or making new friends online, even if she is bound to get into trouble, as you shall see.

'No mum, its fine,' HP reassured her mother. I do have to get this project done and I'll see Tammy next time. You go and have fun and if I'm not here when you get back, I'll be at the Zanini's OK?'

'As long as that's all right with Claudia. You don't want to wear out your welcome.'

Hera kissed HP goodbye and gave her one final warning about stranger danger, as she left the flat.

HP laughed and said that danger was her middle name. Hera Brown frowned. Her daughter's words did nothing to calm her fears.

HP closed the door with more force than was required and its sound echoed through the flat. It was hard for her to get used to the heaviness of the doors, and she was forever being reminded to be a bit quieter.

It was the Swiss and their quiet times, still observed between the hours of 12.15 and 2 pm each day and all day Sundays. Some shops even closed for lunch and they all closed on Sundays, even in Zürich. Her mother said it was just like growing up in a country town in Australia, except that here you could get good bread.

It would be two hours before the Zanini's were home from school and HP wasn't sure if and when Mr. Wolf would come. Maybe she was wrong all along.

Ding Dong. The world's loudest doorbell rang. HP smiled to herself.

'I'm never wrong,' she whispered.

She peered out the window at a man in white overalls and a baseball hat. His hair was tied back in a ponytail. She had to admit that if she hadn't expected him, she may well have been fooled by Mr. Wolf's disguise, except for the ears of course. Ears were notoriously difficult to change, unless you wore false ones.

HP opened the door wide and gave the man the once over.

'Grüezi,' she said.

'Guten Tag Fräulein. Sind deine Eltern Zuhause?'

HP answered his query with a shake of her head.

'Pied Piper Pest Control', he said with an air of authority.

'English words,' said HP. 'But we don't have any rats.'

Herr Grimm took a torch and a can with a picture of a rat on it and pointed inside the house as he stepped across the threshold into the flat.

HP spread her hands and let Herr Grimm into the flat, pointed out her bedroom upstairs.

'I hope there are no rats in my secret place in the wardrobe,' she said, in her best German.

Herr Grimm smiled to himself as he reached the top of the stairs, then walked into HP's room. He saw the wardrobe and opened the doors. He could see a chair was needed to examine the space at the top of the cupboard, so left the room and went downstairs to the kitchen table and took one of the chairs.

'My special things are in the top cupboard,' she called to him, and in a quieter voice added, 'I've got my own ways to catch rats, you know.'

Herr Grimm could barely contain his excitement as he pushed the chair against the cupboard and stood up on it. He was certain that this Klugkopf Mädchen would hide the vase up here. She had as much as admitted to doing so.

He rolled up his sleeves and reached up into the cupboard. He bumped his hand against something and felt a snap on his fingers and an immediate pain. Something had caught his hand. He reached up with his other hand to remove whatever it was and triggered another snap and as he pulled both his hands free, he saw attached to the ends of each one, a mouse trap. Cursing, he removed the traps from his hands and felt an unbearable itch travel up his arms. He climbed off the chair and ran down the stairs, shouting for water to wash his hands in. HP directed him to the bathroom sink that she filled with methylated spirits.

'My dad said this is good for itching. His Opa used to rub it on his legs'.

Herr Grimm plunged his hands and arms into the clear liquid but quickly pulled them out again, scrunching up his face as he scratched his arms now felt as though the itch was burning. HP ran out the door and called for Herr Müller to come and help. Sensing the imminent presence of the Hauswart, Herr Grimm, unsure that his Pied Piper Pest Control persona would be believed, immediately left, saying that he couldn't find any evidence of rats in the flat.

HP shut the door behind him, now convinced beyond a doubt that whoever Mr. Wolf was, he would stop at nothing to get the vase. But would her parents believe her?

CHAPTER 9

FIRE

HP's mother promised herself a day with her favourite ancient history mystery writer. She had discovered a treasure horde of English books at a Brocki in St Gallen, and settled down on the couch to indulge herself.

'You know a good book HP, is like having a good friend,' said Hera, as she spread open the first page.

HP rolled her eyes.

'I know mum,' replied HP, 'you've only told me this a few hundred times before.'

'I've told you a million times, not to exaggerate HP,' Hera quipped, then laughed at her joke.

'Well I've got a ton of homework, to do... well, half a ton', said HP, 'musn't exaggerate eh, so I bags the computer.'

'Fine with me schätzli. Your father's out with Paulo today so we can have a quiet day at home, just the two of us.'

'OK, but I've got a funny feeling it may not be uninterrupted.'

'Is there something you know that I don't?'

'I'll let you know at the end of the day, OK?'

'Fine with me, but you know your father and I don't like secrets.'

'Because you can't keep them.'

'I don't want to keep them. Secrets are an unnecessary burden.'

'Yeah, I know.'

Hera looked up from her book and gave HP a puzzled look.

'Is there something you want to tell me HP?'

HP smiled at her mother and licked her lips.

'Maybe later. Just read your book and don't worry.'

Being told not to worry, by her daughter, always made Hera Brown anxious, but she had learnt that all that was needed for HP to spill the beans, if there were beans to spill, was patience.

'OK. And you know you can tell me or your father anything and we'll listen.'

'Yep. I know. How do you spell gullible?'

'Where's your dictionary?'

'It's not in the dictionary.'

'Ha ha,' said Hera, 'now do your homework and let me read my book.'

The 11 o'clock bells rang, just as HP finished off her maths project. She stretched out her arms and stood up from the table.

'Perhaps Mr. Wolf would not make an appearance after all,' she thought, as she put the computer to sleep. Her mother was still engrossed in her Egyptian mystery when a siren sounded and a moment later the doorbell rang.

'What's going on?' Hera demanded, as she opened the door.

HP went to the door and was greeted by a man wearing a fluorescent safety vest, helmet and sunglasses.

'Fire evacuation officer,' he announced, 'please leave the building and assemble in the carpark.'

'What did he say?' asked Hera.

HP translated for her mother.

‘Passports!’ Hera shrieked and ran to the drawer in the kitchen, extricating them and the two hundred francs emergency money. She turned around to see the man standing beside her. He directed her to the door and asked to check for other people in the flat. Hera looked for an explanation from HP, who watched as the fire evacuation officer mounted the stairs to her room.

‘He’s checking to see if there’s anyone else here,’ she said.

‘Tell him there’s no one else here. He should go and help the old people in the other flats. Tell him,’ begged Hera.

‘I’ve got my collection in the top of the wardrobe,’ HP yelled, and then grabbed her mother’s arm and went outside. There were a few other residents making their way along the Hochhaus pathways to the carpark underneath.

‘Can you see any smoke?’ asked Hera.

‘No,’ said HP, ‘and you might notice that there’s no fire brigade either, even though we’re right next door to them.’

‘Do you think this is a practice evacuation then?’

HP and Hera joined the others who had gathered in the carpark. HP heard Frau Koch before she saw her.

‘Who set off the alarm?’ she demanded.

Her eyes met HP’s and she pointed one accusatory finger at her. HP shrunk in a mixture of horror and embarrassment. Hera looked perplexed as she realized that all eyes were on her daughter.

‘Nei,’ said HP and shook her head vigorously.

‘What are they saying?’ asked Hera.

‘They think I set the alarm off,’ said HP.

‘But you didn’t,’ Hera exclaimed, and turned to face everyone and in her struggling Swiss German, stood up for her daughter.

‘Ausländer,’ muttered a few voices in the crowd.

‘Xenophobic bünzli bürgers,’ exclaimed Hera and having established that there was no fire, took hold of HP’s arm and walked back up the stairs.

‘What did you tell that supposed fire evacuation officer?’ asked Hera, ‘and where is he?’

‘I think that maybe we should get dad to come home,’ said HP, ‘just in case things get a bit hairy.’

‘What have you got yourself into HP?’ Hera demanded.

HP shrugged her shoulders.

‘I’m not sure really, but I think I need your help to get out of it. And I’m not sure whether we should go back into the flat just yet. It could be a bit tricky.’

‘What do you mean tricky? Is this fire evacuation officer, this man threatening you?’ Hera asked with concern.

‘I’m not sure if he’s just stupid or he might be... dangerous,’ said Hera.

‘Have you got your phone on you?’ asked Hera.

‘Always,’ said HP.

‘Then ring your father and ask him to come home straight away. No ask him to come to the Zanini’s. Tell him we can’t go home.’

HP did as her mother asked, then the two hurried across the Hochhaus Spielplatz to the Zaninis.

‘How do you know this man?’ Hera asked HP.

‘Mr. Wolf,’ she answered, ‘I could tell from his ears.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He wants a vase I bought from the Brocki for your birthday.’

‘He’s been to the flat before?’

‘That’s the third time. But he disguises himself, very badly. The ears are the give away.’

‘And you didn’t tell us?’

‘Well I did tell you about the vase buyer.’

‘Do the Zaninis know about this?’

‘Well Gina and Angelo know, but their parents don’t.’

‘And this vase. Where is it?’

‘Somewhere that Mr. Wolf can’t find it.’

The pushbike slid to a halt in front of them and Wilhelm Kunz leapt off it and grabbed his wife and daughter in a hug.

‘What’s going on? What are we doing at the Zaninis? I was just on my way home when you rang.’

Riccardo Zanini pulled up in his car just as his children ran up to the door. He climbed out of the car and walked towards Wilhelm.

‘Ciao mitenand,’ he said and smiled at everyone.

‘Ciao Ricco,’ everyone chorused.

‘Mangare?’ he asked.

‘Danke Ricco,’ said HP, ‘we have some news to tell you.’

Riccardo Zanini looked at Wilhelm, but Wilhelm shrugged his shoulders and turned up his palms to show that he knew as much as he did.

Gina and Angelo crowded around HP.

‘Mister Wolf?’ they asked in unison.

HP nodded. Claudia Zanini opened the door and surveyed the crowd before her. It was a good thing she had listened to her instincts and cooked two packets of pasta.

‘Gruetzi mitanand, come and eat,’ she said and after exchanging a three kiss greeting to Hera and Wilhelm, led the way into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 10

CARDS ON THE TABLE

Claudia Zanini set the dishes on the table. A standard Swiss meal of hörnli, apple mousse, grated cheese and meat sauce. Wilhelm Kunz smiled weakly. He hadn't liked this meal as a kid and he still didn't like it, unlike the rest of the gathering, who were all eager to tuck in.

Riccardo set a bottle of süssmost, the children's favourite apple cider, on the table, beside two bottles of suser, a red wine made from the first fermentation. This low alcohol wine was enjoyed by adults and children alike, but Claudia wasn't sure about Angelo and Gina going back to school in the afternoon with wine on their breaths. Some Swiss traditions were not as acceptable as others.

After satisfying the first pangs of hunger and exchanging gossip, Wilhelm asked HP to explain to everyone what had been going on.

'Time to lay your cards on the table,' he said to HP and Hera.

HP swallowed her cider and explained to Gina and Angelo what her father had said. Angelo leapt up from the table and ran out of the room, returning a few moments later with a pack of cards.

'Tschau Sepp! he announced slamming the pack on the table.

'Nei Angelo,' said Wilhelm and explained the English phrase to Angelo.

'Mister Wolf,' said Angelo and nodded his head at HP.

'Who is this Mister Wolf?' asked Riccardo.

'He gave me sixty euros,' said Angelo, 'for Mami's vases.'

'I was wondering what happened to them,' said Claudia. 'You sold them Angelo, to a man called Herr Wolf?'

'We don't know if that's his real name, we just call him that after the story of the wolf and the seven kids, and how he is always disguising himself to get inside. But HP got two hundred and forty euros from him for her vases,' he announced proudly.

All the adults looked at HP in awe.

'But he didn't get the vase he wanted did he HP?' Angelo continued.

'No,' said HP. 'I've hidden it somewhere safe, I think.'

'What vase?' asked Wilhelm.

'My birthday vase,' said Hera.

'You know what's going on?' Wilhelm asked Hera.

'Only that this creep set off the fire alarm at the Hochhaus and came to the flat today pretending to be a fire evacuation officer and he went inside out flat and told us to go,' said Hera.

'Did he take anything?' asked Wilhelm.

'I hope so,' said HP.

Angelo and Gina giggled.

'Die gaggi sammlung,' said Angelo.

'What's he talking about HP?' asked Hera.

'My collection of gaggi,' said HP.

'I gather you aren't talking about army clothes, so for some reason you are collecting persimmons,' Hera said.

HP smiled.

'That's kaki mum. Kaki is Swiss for persimmon. Gaggi is poo,' explained HP.

Hera gave Wilhelm an accusatory stare.

‘Has this poo collection got something to do with one of your art projects?’

‘I’m not Chris Ophelia,’ said Wilhelm, ‘but I’m sure HP has a good reason to collect poo, so lets hear it HP.’

‘Who’s Chris Ophelia?’ asked HP.

‘He uses elephant gaggi to make art,’ said Wilhelm, ‘so what are you doing with poo and who’s poo is it?’

‘Oocholino, Lucky, Nerino, Lilo and a few other four-legged friends, and I think that Mr. Wolf may now be the owner of a box of their poo.’

‘Why would he want to own a box of gaggi?’ asked Claudia.

‘Because he thinks the vase I got is in the box,’ answered HP.

‘But what’s so special about this vase?’ asked Riccardo, ‘that he would pay three hundred euros to get it.’

‘And set off a fire alarm,’ added Hera.

‘But HP got him with the mouse traps and Angelo’s itching powder,’ said Gina.

‘Was it the really itchy one?’ asked Riccardo.

‘The best,’ boasted Angelo.

‘So he came to the flat more than once?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘Three times,’ said HP, ‘and once to here.’

‘And you’re sure it was the same man?’ Wilhelm continued.

‘He came as a UN vase collector, the Pied Piper pest control man and a fire evacuation officer,’ said HP, ‘but the ears gave him away; his lobes aren’t attached, he’s got a nick out of the left one and the right one has an earring. People can change their hair colour, put on wigs, false moustaches, coloured contact lenses or dark glasses, but they always forget their ears,’ she said with authority.

Claudia looked to Wilhelm for a translation of HP’s lecture.

‘But the pest?’ she said, shaking her head, ‘who has the pest these days?’

‘OK,’ said Hera, unable to comprehend Claudia’s disbelief. ‘I admit we’ve never seen a cockroach here in sanitary Switzerland, but surely a pest exterminator isn’t unheard of?’

Riccardo and Wilhelm both laughed.

‘In German, pest means plague,’ Wilhelm explained. ‘Pest control is an English expression for getting rid of mice and rats.’

‘Aah,’ both women nodded their understanding.

‘But we better get going,’ announced Wilhelm, ‘I want to see this vase and check out the flat as well.’

He got up from the table and Hera and HP followed suit.

‘Danke Claudia fur die essen,’ said Hera and the two women kissed each other goodbye.

Wilhelm and Riccardo shook hands and HP waved goodbye to her friends, with assurances that she would see them after school.

HP and her parents walked back across the spielplatz to the Hochhaus, Wilhelm walking his bike. HP suggested that they have a quick look around the perimeter. Behind the garage at he back she found a discarded fluorescent vest and picked it up.

‘Probably his,’ she said.

They continued their walk and then climbed the stairs up to the flat. HP told her father that Frau Koch accused her of setting off the alarm and that she heard some people complaining about Ausländer. He promised he would speak to Frau Koch and clear HP’s name, although he couldn’t promise that she’d believe him.

The door to the flat was closed, but not locked. They walked in and HP went straight to her room and checked out the top cupboard. The poo box was gone but nothing else. She heard her father curse from the kitchen.

‘Passports and money gone,’ he said.

‘No honey,’ said Hera, ‘I took them and the money when we left.’

Wilhelm breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Anything else out of order?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Hera, ‘I think we’re very lucky. And now we’ve got that sorted I think its time we had a look at that vase HP.’

‘OK,’ she said, ‘but maybe we should go somewhere else to look at it, just in case Mr. Wolf comes back here? And it’s not here anyway, we’ll have to go and pick it up anyway.’

Wilhelm Kunz was indignant. He didn’t like the idea of any man frightening him in his own house, but then again, it wasn’t just him here. There was his wife and daughter and who knows what sort of mad man he was dealing with. Anyone who steals a box of dog poo and sets off a fire alarm was either desperate or insane. Either way, he had to agree with his daughter.

‘It’s been a while since we’ve all visited Paulo HP. Why don’t we get the vase and we can look at it in his studio? I’m sure we could even leave it with him for safe-keeping,’ Wilhelm suggested.

‘Great idea,’ said Hera, ‘let’s go get it.’

CHAPTER 11

THE MEETING

Ms Black couldn't help but feel disappointed at the incompetence of the runner. He had phoned her with the news that the vase had disappeared due to Herr Stein's accident and assured her that he would have it by the end of the day. But two more days had passed and he still hadn't retrieved it from the girl who bought it at the Brockenhaus. It was obvious her expertise was required.

'If you want a job done properly, do it yourself,' she said, packing her bag.

Her mother had often said that to her when she was growing up, but in this business, it was safer to let others do the job, while you collected the money. She found the best way to deal with these situations was to tell a truthful story, or at least an essentially true story. At school she played a game where you told a true story that had to have one lie in it, and the listeners had to discern the truth from the fiction. Of the many things she learnt from school, the lying game was the most useful to her career. But would it work on this girl and her family?

Please allow me to intervene at this point in the tale, and explain about the lying game. It is a worthy exercise for all writers, politicians and other assorted liars to undertake, not only to exercise their imagination, but as an excellent entertainment for others. For, as you know, everybody loves a good story, and we must never let the truth get in the way of telling it!

For assistance in the creation of such tales, I suggest the following resources: The Guinness Book of World Records, if you want extraordinary truths, the works of Baron von Munchausen or other tall tale tellers, for outrageous lies, and the tabloid newspapers for half truths. But if you are like our Miss Black, then you probably need no assistance at all. To return to our story ...

The train pulled up at the station in Arbon. Ms Black crossed the road to the *Metropol* hotel and booked in. She enquired about the presence of Herr Grimm and the young concierge raised her eyebrows.

'Do you know this man?' she asked, with concern.

'Why,' said Ms Black, taken aback by the concierge's question.

It was virtually unheard of, for the staff of a good hotel to pry into the business of others. The concierge was obviously uncomfortable, as she lowered her voice and went on.

'Its just that this man has some rather messy and dirty preoccupations.'

'Oh,' said Ms Black, 'do go on.'

'He has boxes, lots of boxes with tape, and...'

'And?'

There was a long pause and finally the concierge spoke again.

'Animal excreta,' she said, 'he collects animal dung... fresh animal dung.'

'Well he's probably a student of scatology,' said Ms Black abruptly, 'now please phone his room and tell him to meet me in the restaurant now.'

'Yes Ms Black,' said the concierge, who immediately set about ringing Herr Grimm's room.

Ms Black settled herself at a restaurant table with a view of the lake.

‘Doggie doo indeed,’ she muttered to herself, ‘the organization did not need someone who attracted that sort of attention. In fact, it didn’t need any attention at all.’

She ordered a macchiato and sat down by the window to look at the lake.

‘Arbon was a beautiful little village,’ she thought, as she sipped her coffee and let her thoughts wander.

From here she could see Austria and Germany, and all she had to do was jump on a train or ferry and she’d be there, and she could be carrying a fortune and no-one would be the wiser. The entry of Herr Grimm interrupted her daydreaming. She didn’t stand to greet him, but held out her hand for the customary shake.

‘Guten Tag,’ Herr Grimm, she said formally.

‘Guten Tag, Frau Black,’ Herr Grimm returned, a little nervous about being in her company.

He knew she wasn’t the big boss, but she was certainly higher up the ladder in the organization than he was. He’d heard about her ability to get things done; efficient, calculating and ruthless, were all words attributed to Frau Black’s methods. There were even rumours that she was responsible for a series of ‘tragic accidents’ that befell people who failed in their duties to the organization. But he didn’t like to think that a possibility. After all, it was just one vase that he hadn’t been able to secure, and he had a good track record. Surely a person was allowed to make one mistake?

At times like this he liked to eat. Herr Grimm ordered a café latte and his favourite Swiss pastry. He looked to his companion and she pursed her lips and shook her head at him. He should have known that a woman like her would never eat pastries. Now he felt even more uncomfortable and ordered another Nussgipfel.

While Herr Grimm gobbled down his morning snack, and ordered more coffee, Frau Black explained what she intended to do to retrieve the vase. Between mouthfuls, Jacob Grimm nodded his head in agreement with her plan, and complimented her on her ingenuity.

He was half way through drinking his third cup of coffee and deciding whether three delicious nutty pastries were too many to eat in one sitting, when Frau Black rose from her seat and dismissed him. He was to stay at the Hotel *Metropol*, refrain from collecting any more dog dung, and wait for her call.

Herr Grimm’s face reddened. How had she found out about the last embarrassing trick that girl played on him?

‘Auf Wiedersehen Herr Grimm,’ she said.

‘Auf Wiedersehen Frau Black,’ he replied, and sat back down at the table.

He looked around at the people in the restaurant. A waitress came towards him.

‘Noch etwas?’ she said.

‘Did she know about the dog dung too?’ he wondered, and then answered her question.

‘Ein Nussgipfel bitte,’ he said, ‘und ein café latte.’

He would just have one more pastry and one more coffee and then he would stroll down to the lake and forget about the vase. Let Frau Black get it from that horrid girl!

CHAPTER 12

THE EVIL QUEEN

Frau Black climbed the stairs of the Hochhaus to the first floor where the Kunz Brown household had their flat. She walked along the balcony and noted the stairs at each end. Always good to know the nearest exits, just in case, she reasoned. The one good thing about being a girl guide when she was young was taking the motto to heart; Be Prepared. It was unfortunate that the Guiding organization had expelled her for gambling and various other misdemeanours, but it had taught her a valuable lesson... never get caught!

She knocked on the door of number seven, and it was opened by a man who was obviously the girl's father. He looked her up and down and greeted her in Swiss.

'Grüezi,' he said.

She decided to take a chance on the language.

'Sprechen sie Englisch?' she asked.

'Yes,' Wilhelm Kunz replied, 'if you can call the Australian dialect English.'

'Australian,' said Frau Black, and smiled broadly, flashing a mouthful of straight, white teeth. 'Kangaroos and Ayres rock.'

'That's the one,' said Wilhelm, 'although we call the world's largest monolith by its Aboriginal name, Uluru.'

'And do you climb it?' Frau Black asked.

'About as much chance as crawling over St Paul's Basilica,' he said, 'not that I'm religious, but I do respect sacred sites.'

'Mmm,' said Frau Black nodding her head. She had found a way to introduce the topic.

'Then you understand the value of things, both sacred and sentimental?'

Wilhelm Kunz was entranced by the conversation with this thin and immaculately dressed woman he opened the door to, and stepped out on to the outdoor corridor. Was she going to sell him a bible or ask for money? He would find out soon enough.

'Not all our values are the same,' he challenged.

'Exactly,' she answered, 'which is why I have come to see you.'

'I'm all ears,' said Wilhelm, and remembering his daughter's lecture on ears, tried to apply this information, only to realize that this woman's hair completely covered her ears.

He looked forward to telling HP about the flaw he discovered in her hypothesis.

'It seems that your daughter purchased my client's vase from a local second hand shop. It was mistakenly donated by my client's rather eccentric brother, who, I have heard, has been employing the most ridiculous attempts to retrieve the vase, including impersonating various characters.'

Wilhelm Kunz chuckled to himself.

'You mean, like a vase collector from the UN and the Pied Piper?' he said and smiled.

'Exactly,' Frau Black said. 'Don't ask me why he didn't come right out and explain that he had made a stupid mistake and that his sister was very upset about him giving away her priceless vase.'

'So its valuable then?' Wilhelm asked.

‘What value can we place on sentiment?’ Frau Black retorted. ‘My client, who prefers to remain anonymous, is of course, willing to reward your daughter for her honesty with a sum of money, for its return.’

‘Well I don’t think that will be necessary, seeing your client’s brother has already paid her for her art installation,’ Wilhelm declared.

‘Oh,’ said Frau Black, wondering what exactly he meant, but deciding that this information was not important.

She had hooked the Australian, and now it was time to reel him in.

‘Nevertheless,’ she continued, ‘I’m happy to hand over a hundred francs on my client’s behalf, in exchange for the vase.’

Frau Black stood by expectantly.

‘Well that’s very generous of you Frau er.’

‘Black,’ she offered.

‘Frau Black, the trouble is, my daughter and the vase aren’t here at the moment,’ Wilhelm explained.

Frau Black breathed deeply through her nose and gave a tight-lipped smile.

‘That is a shame,’ she said, ‘but I’m happy to wait.’

Wilhelm Kunz felt trapped. In one way he wished that Hera and HP were here and that they could just hand over the vase and that would be the last they would hear of it. The woman’s tale sounded true enough to him. But then again...

‘Look Frau Black, I would love to invite you in, but I have to go and HP and my wife won’t be back till later tonight.

‘I’m happy to come back this evening,’ Frau Black volunteered.

‘But they’re um visiting friends in Zürich and won’t be back till late... very late. So if you’d like to come back tomorrow morning, say around ten o’clock, I can guarantee the vase will be here, ready and waiting for you,’ Wilhelm Kunz explained.

Frau Black could tell he was lying. His eyes kept looking away and down, as he made up the story. But she chose not to alert him to her knowledge. Better he suspected nothing. She gave him a toothy grin and held out her hand.

‘I shall look forward to it Mister Kunz,’ she said, ‘schöne Tag.’

Wilhelm Kunz watched her walk briskly away to the end of the corridor and disappear down the stairs. He hadn’t introduced himself, and yet she knew his name and wished him a lovely day in perfect Swiss German. He listened to her footsteps fade in the distance and turned around to the sound of HP’s voice.

‘Papi,’ she yelled, emerging from the stairwell at the other end of the corridor.

Wilhelm turned to see HP and Hera walking towards him. If they had been any earlier they would have met the enigmatic Frau Black.

‘What are you doing out here schatz?’ asked Hera.

‘I just had a visitor,’ Wilhelm answered, smiling as his wife called him the common Swiss term of endearment.

Mother and daughter gave each other knowing looks.

‘Mister Wolf,’ said HP.

‘No,’ said Wilhelm, ‘unless he is a brilliant female impersonator. Come in and let me tell you what happened?’

They all went inside and sat down at the table and listened as Wilhelm recounted his meeting with Frau Black. HP and Hera restrained themselves from asking any questions until Wilhelm had finished his tale.

‘So,’ he said, ‘I thought her story was plausible, but after what’s already happened I didn’t want to take any chances, so I thought I’d wait till you came back to find out what you think about her?’

‘Snow White,’ said HP.

Hera and Wilhelm gave their daughter a puzzled look.

‘Remember when Auntie gave me the book of *Grimm’s Fairytales*, what my favourite story was?’

‘Snow White,’ said Hera.

‘Right,’ said HP, ‘and Papi has just met the Evil Queen.’

‘How so?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘Remember she disguised herself, and Snow White trusted her and was tricked every time.’

‘I couldn’t see her ears by the way,’ said Wilhelm.

‘Because she’s cleverer than the wolf. She doesn’t need to have a disguise because you believed her story.’

‘Well it sounded true to me,’ Wilhelm defended himself.

‘Because most of it probably is true. That’s how the best lies work,’ declared HP.

For a moment or two, HP’s parents sat quietly and pondered the girl’s words. Was their daughter an expert liar? They looked from one to the other.

‘Well I don’t know about you two, but I’m not going to sit around and wait to choke on the Evil Queen’s poisoned apple,’ HP declared.

‘You’re right girl,’ said Hera, deciding that if HP had told her the odd lie or two, it didn’t matter.

She wasn’t lying about the vase and she had an uncanny ability to know about the character of adults.

‘So you think this Wolf Man and the Evil Queen are in cahoots then?’ asked Wilhelm.

HP nodded.

‘Well I think its time we saw our Zürich friends your father told her about,’ said Hera.

‘But we don’t have any friends in Zürich, do we?’ asked HP.

‘Oh,’ said Hera, ‘there is one who would love to see us and take a look at the er vase.’

‘But what about the wicked witch?’ demanded Wilhelm.

‘Evil Queen,’ corrected Hera. ‘Probably best if you stay here, and when she comes in the morning, tell her that we are staying a few extra days in Zürich, and will bring the vase to her next week. You could ask her for her card and apologise profusely and say that there’s nothing you can do, but tell her we’ll contact her when we return.’

‘And you will be?’

‘Seeing Herr Jäger of course. He answered my email this morning and has asked that we bring the er vase to his home for him to check out. So we’ll all go to Paulo’s first thing in the morning, pick it up and get the train to Männedorf.’

‘Männedorf?’ asked HP.

‘A little village on the Zürichsee, where Herr Jäger, my old Professor and mentor lives,’ explained Hera. ‘But we will pack a case for a few days stay, as he might have to do some tests on it.’

‘But can’t Papi come too?’

‘Best if he’s here and can keep an eye on the flat.’

‘But what if he gets scared?’

‘Don’t you worry about me Hip, I’m not scared by any evil queens.’

‘Well just don’t let her into the flat or accept anything from her to eat or drink,’ warned HP.

‘Or any corsets or combs,’ Hera joined in.

‘Especially combs,’ Wilhelm said, patting his bald head.

All three chanted in unison, ‘give a bald man a comb and he’ll never part with it,’ and then they laughed and HP hugged her father.

‘Papi,’ she said, ‘you know the Evil Queen probably learnt your name because it’s on the business card on the name plate on our front door.’

Wilhelm Kunz looked at his daughter with pride.

‘HP, you are amazing,’ he said and hugged her again.

‘But it’s not there now,’ she added, ‘so she probably googled us by now.’

‘Well we’ve got nothing to hide,’ declared Wilhelm.

‘Except an old vase,’ said HP.

CHAPTER 13

OLD PEOPLE

The thing about old people is that they're just like anybody else, but they're old. But what is 'old' anyway? Old clothes are faded and old bread is stale. And yet old clothes can be comfortable and old bread useful for making breadcrumbs. People love old cheese and old wine, giving it names like 'mature' and 'vintage.' Old people themselves are forever going on about the 'good old days.' And most kids HP's age are excited about getting older. So if old is so good, how come old people get treated so badly?

HP sat opposite her mother on the train that took them around Lake Zürich. They were going to meet Herr Jäger, who, her mother informed her, 'lives in a nursing home.'

HP rolled her eyes. She had to admit she was also guilty of thinking bad thoughts about old people. Perhaps it was her experiences with Frau Koch that shaped her feelings, or the times her mother took her to visit their elderly neighbour in the nursing home in their hometown. She still shuddered as she remembered the smell, grasping hands and hungry eyes that greeted her every time she visited. Her mother explained that these old people never got to see children, so that was why they clustered around her trying to touch her.

Knowing why they were like this didn't help HP. At about the same time she developed mysterious stomach-aches, that coincided with the days her mother intended to visit the nursing home. And now they were going to another nursing home. HP wasn't sure whether she had the stomach for it.

'They call this the Gold Coast,' Hera explained to HP, as the train pulled up at Männedorf station, and they alighted.

'Doesn't look very sunny to me?' said Hera.

'It's a bit different to the one in Australia,' said Hera, 'they have real gold here.'

'So, if the old man lives here, and it's a rich area, then what's he doing in a nursing home?' asked HP.

'I think you'll find it's a bit different to the nursing home where we used to go and visit old Mrs Lauder,' said Hera, 'there's a waiting list as long as your arm to get in here, and for 100,000 francs a year we could be residents.'

'That's nice,' said HP, clearly not impressed.

'Yes,' said Hera, smiling, 'your father and I were thinking of putting our names down, and you can pay for us to live there.'

'Very funny,' said HP, 'but I am definitely not looking after you when you're old.'

'We don't expect you to darling,' said Hera. 'You belong to a generation who have no obligation to caring for their elders.'

'That's not true, Asian kids my age are respectful of their elders and they still believe in looking after them,' said HP indignantly.

'They do, don't they?' said Hera.

HP realized that somehow her mother had managed to make her feel that she was mean and selfish.

'I'm sorry, I just don't think I could cope with you both when you're seventy, and I don't know if I would be able to afford a nursing home on Lake Zürich, but I'll do my best,' HP said.

Hera laughed.

‘Seventy! Why we’ll be just gearing up then,’ she declared.

‘Your father and I have talked about setting up an old artists commune to spend our winter years, somewhere like Auntie’s farm.’

‘But you’ll wear clothes won’t you?’ HP asked.

‘Of course we will,’ Hera replied, and paused, ‘except when we go swimming.’

‘Yuk, stop it mum, you’re frightening me,’ said HP.

‘Right,’ said Hera, stopping outside an imposing grey mansion, I think we’ve found it.’

‘Strewth,’ said HP, staring at one of the grandest houses, she had ever seen, ‘this is a nursing home?’

The door was opened by an elegantly attired woman.

‘Grüezi, Hera Brown and her daughter to see Herr Jäger,’ said Hera.

The woman responded in perfect English.

‘One moment and I shall see if he is receiving visitors.’

She ascended the mahogany staircase before them and returned a few minutes later.

‘Herr Jäger will see you in the library,’ she announced, ‘follow me.’

HP noticed a frail old woman pushing a mobility walker, over to a table where the business section of the *Financial Times* was laid open, beside a large magnifying glass. She looked towards Hera and HP and smiled.

‘Ms Dawes is the President of Ethical Investments, and welcomes anyone to speak with her about their portfolio. She doesn’t get many visitors, especially English speaking ones, so if you have extra time after your meeting with Herr Jäger, I’m sure she would love to meet you,’ said the secretary.

The door opened to a large room whose walls were lined with books. However, there were computers, photocopiers, scanners and other IT equipment also housed in the space. Herr Jäger sat in a wheelchair at one of the tables and beside him was a young Korean woman in her early twenties.

‘Guten Tag Herr Jäger,’ said Hera, extending her hand to shake the old man’s hand.

‘And *gooday* to you my young friend from Australia,’ he replied, ‘welcome to Zürich’s number one hotspot.’

Hera blushed. Even if he did put on an Australian accent, her teacher and mentor had called her ‘friend’.

‘And this is your beautiful daughter, named after the Amazon queens,’ he continued, and extended his hand to HP.

‘Call me HP,’ she said, and shook the old man’s hand.

‘I think you may already have met my granddaughter when you were in Korea,’ he continued.

‘Grace Lee,’ the young Korean woman said, and shook hands with Hera and HP.

‘I know you,’ said HP, staring hard at the woman before her, ‘you’re Jihan’s big sister.’

‘And you’re Happy Girl,’ said Grace, beaming at HP.

‘How’s Jihan? What’s he doing?’ asked HP.

‘Studying hard at a school in Seoul,’ she said.

‘All Korean kids study hard,’ said HP and laughed, ‘not like Australian kids.’

‘And you Happy Girl, is it your school holidays in Australia?’

‘Not yet, but it will be by the time I get back,’ HP answered.

Hera thought it appropriate to add that HP was doing her schoolwork while they travelled. She hated the idea of Australians being thought of as a ‘lazy’.

‘You know they can fine the parents for taking children out of school here in Switzerland?’ said Herr Jäger.

‘I know,’ said Hera, but it varies from canton to canton. Fines can be up to CHF 200 a day. Its all discretionary really, and as you know Herr Jäger, if you’re rich you can afford to do whatever you like.’

‘It is one of the perks of being wealthy, but there are other things that I would happily trade my money for’, he said, and wheeled himself to the table. ‘But for now lets get down to the business of the vessel. I have invited Grace to be here not only because she is my granddaughter, but she is also my secretary and has just finished her doctorate on archeology in the Song dynasty. I thought it may be of interest to her to see this vessel you have come by.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Hera, looking around the library. ‘Is here the best place do you think?’

‘Are you worried that others may see it?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ said Hera, ‘let’s just say that we aren’t the only ones interested in the stamnos.’

‘Ah,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘the black market is thriving as always, and you are right to be suspicious. That business attracts some particularly unscrupulous people, who will sometimes stop at nothing to get what they want.’

HP strode over to the windows and gazed out over the grounds and wondered why her mother had called the vase a stamnos.

‘Anyone could come in here,’ she said.

‘That’s right,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘but they are under constant surveillance.’

‘Are we,’ asked HP looking around for hidden cameras.

‘Of course,’ said Herr Jäger.

‘By who?’ asked HP.

‘Your aunt, for one, and a number of others who you don’t need to know about right now,’ he replied.

Hera was flabbergasted.

‘Not Auntie Lizzie?’ she asked.

Herr Jäger laughed.

‘The very same.’

CHAPTER 14

THE METHUSELAH CLUB

It is probably best that I step in and explain my involvement in this affair. Neither my niece or grand niece know I am a member of the Methuselah Club, and if they did they would assume, as many people do, that we are a group of grey haired geriatrics who spend our afternoons knitting and napping.

The truth is, that many of us do knit and have afternoon siestas, both highly recommended activities, if I do say so myself. However, we come in many varieties; some of us have white hair, and others none at all. But what we all have in common is an excellent brain and a commitment to fighting international crime.

I'll just give you a minute or two to digest this information, as it may come as a bit of a shock to you. After all, when was the last time you imagined an old person as a crime fighter? Look how we are portrayed in the newspapers and on television; poor, helpless old ladies, at the mercy of thugs and shysters, or doddering old men who don't know what direction they are going in.

If you want to think of us all as being like that, then you do so at your own peril! Now to return to the matter at hand, the vase which was responsible for alerting Hera and HP to my crime fighting work.

HP placed her backpack on the table and unzipped the outer pocket. She removed the vase that she had wrapped in a protective cloth, and placed it on the table. Herr Jäger and Grace Lee both slipped on surgical gloves and gazed at the offering. Herr Jäger pulled a pair of slim forceps from his pocket and plucked a feather that clung to the rim of the vase.

'How interesting,' he said, peering at it, 'one wonders where it has been stored?'

'Oh,' said HP, 'I think I can solve that riddle. I hid it in the feed bin of the big bird cage in town, so Mr. Wolf couldn't get his paws on it. I was going to put it in a bird box but it was too big.'

Herr Jäger squinted at HP and then turned to her mother.

'An imaginative child or is she blessed with the ability to speak in metaphors?'

'Both,' said Hera, 'however, her actions are warranted, because she has been accosted by a man who has tried every trick in the book to get hold of that vessel, and we believe he also has a woman accomplice, who we also had a visit from.'

'Therefore 'wolf' is an accurate appellation then,' Herr Jäger replied, 'but I am not surprised at their determination. What do you think Grace?' he asked, turning to face his granddaughter.

'This is not my field Grandfather,' the young scholar answered, 'but on first glance I'd say Etruscan, and I think your friend Mr. Eisenberg would be very interested in this piece.'

'Exactly,' replied Herr Jäger, 'I'm waiting for his reply to my email. I forwarded on the pictures you sent Hera, and I have to say that I am surprised that you haven't hazarded a guess as to the painter.'

Hera shifted uncomfortably and licked her lips.

'One of the things you taught me Herr Jäger,' she said, 'was to gather my facts before I make my assertions. What good would it do me to say that I think the stamnos was painted by the Volterra Caeretan painter, if I have no proof?'

Herr Jäger grinned broadly, exposing a large set of pearly white teeth.

‘All mine,’ he said, to HP, ‘although you young folk don’t really appreciate the merits of having your own teeth.’

‘It’s OK Herr Jäger,’ HP said, ‘I don’t want your teeth. I’m happy with my own.’

The old man laughed loudly and turned back to Hera.

‘Your guess is a good one, my dear, as I too think this maybe one of his.’

‘I thought you said it was Greek vase,’ said HP.

‘No,’ declared her mother, ‘you thought it was Greek, and if you recall I said nothing. It is also called a stamnos, not a vase.’

HP thought for a while. She had always assumed it was a Greek vase because it looked Greek, and it looked like a vase, but then she wasn’t a student of ancient art.

‘So who were the Etruscans anyway?’ she asked.

Herr Jäger looked from Hera to Grace and when he saw that neither was prepared to give a lecture, turned to HP and said, ‘Its all Greek to me,’ and laughed. ‘Perhaps another time for a lesson in Etruscan antiquities, but for now I think its time for some refreshments.’

Grace sat down at a desk and pressed an intercom button and spoke.

‘Could you please bring in lunch Gabriel?’

Within ten minutes a table was laid with a spread to rival a Chinese banquet. HP sat down and surveyed the food. She identified dishes from at least four countries.

‘Oh HP, won’t your dad be upset missing out on the kimchi?’ mused Hera.

‘Do you like kimchi?’ Grace asked Hera.

‘Who doesn’t?’ replied Hera, munching on the Korean pickled cabbage.

‘Me,’ said HP, and turned up her nose.

‘What about our German equivalent?’ asked Herr Jäger?

‘Sauerkraut?’ said HP.

‘Is that more to your taste?’ he continued.

HP felt obliged to point out a few things to the old man about the eating habits of Western children.

‘I’m twelve Herr Jäger. I hate pickled anything and I hate broccoli and cabbage in any shape or form. In fact, I don’t like green vegetables at all, except the spinach in spanakopita. My parents say my taste buds haven’t matured yet, so when I’m fifty I might like cabbage, but I don’t think so.’

Herr Jäger smiled.

‘Rest assured my young Amazon, when you are in the prime of your life, I will not be here to pass judgement on the maturity of your tastebuds,’ the Professor said.

He wheeled his chair to the other side of the table and pointed to a platter.

‘But for now, perhaps a sausage roll or a mini meat pie with ketchup may be more to your liking? Gabriel specializes in pastries, and when I told him Australians would be dining with us he prepared these iconic Australian dishes.’

HP smiled politely and said ‘Danke Herr Jäger,’ as she picked up one of each offering from the platter.

‘It’s a shame Aunt Lizzie can’t be here to share noodles with us,’ said Hera, between slurps of the Korean speciality.

‘It is, but we can at least see if she’s able to be cyberpresent,’ said Herr Jäger, and wheeled himself over to the desk and pressed a few buttons. A large screen appeared on a far wall and an image of HP’s favourite great aunt appeared on it.

‘Just activating skype,’ he said.

It is at this point that I'd like to enter into the proceedings, after all I do come into the tale here, so better that I let you know what transpired from the meeting with Herr Jäger and Grace Lee, in my own words.

Naturally, I wasn't the only one tuned into the meeting. The Methuselah club members gave up their rights to privacy a long time ago, but that is one of the sacrifices you make if you are an international crime fighter. In the old days people called it spying. And technically, I suppose that's what we do, but we don't just watch what goes on in the world, we are committed to preventing crime and alerting appropriate authorities to the fact. If you see the world as our neighbourhood, then we are the world's largest neighbourhood watch group. I'm not sure whether that makes you feel safe or scared, but it doesn't matter really, it's what we do. And in this case we were watching an innocent family stumble into the illegal trade in antiquities. But I'm jumping ahead of myself. Let me clarify a few points.

A number of our members displayed an interest in the case that was unfolding before us, because we have an interest in art, books, antiquities and the preservation of cultural artefacts. The Methuselah club is full of retired librarians, curators, academics and horticulturalists.

Since time began there has been cultural theft, appropriation or as I like to call it simply, 'smuggling', of various precious works or art. Many of the perpetrators of these crimes are very respectable people, not unlike myself! However, I will state here and now categorically, that I am not a smuggler. I have never cut out sections of a sacred book and placed a marble statue in the space, nor have I hidden papyrus scrolls inside travel brochures, and I most certainly have never hidden geranium cuttings in my underpants and gone through customs. But there are people that do all of these things. I can tell you why too. Do you know how much money one small but ancient statue, cup or vase can be worth? That's a rhetorical question so you don't have to answer it. Suffice to say, a lot! As for rare manuscripts, scrolls and books... but I knew you'd want to know about the geraniums. What's a geranium cutting worth? About two hundred and twenty Australian dollars if you get caught trying to bring one into Australia. Let this be a warning to you Mrs Stutz, don't do it again! (Mrs Stutz is my neighbour who regularly goes back to her home country and likes to bring things for her Australian garden back in her underpants).

But I digress. After lunch was eaten, Herr Jäger received an email from his friend Mr. Eisendorf, confirming his suspicions. The 'vase' was an Etruscan red-figure stamnos by the Volterra Caeretan painter painted 350-325 BC and had, up until quite recently, been in his collection. Last year it had been sold for \$85,000 to a museum in Switzerland with a number of other pieces, and to his knowledge, they had been received and were on exhibit at the moment.

Mr. Eisendorf posed the question of the vessel's authenticity, and suggested that they had possibly encountered a forgery ring! So the first thing to do was to see whether this was the real vessel that was supposed to be on display at the museum, or a fake one.

I said my goodbyes and wished everyone well on their adventure. It was midnight in Australia and I was in need of my beauty sleep, so I said that I would check in early the next morning.

Grace called for the driver to be ready in half an hour, while the group prepared for their journey into Zürich.

HP texted her father with the news of what was happening. She was going to yet *another* museum. As if she could get away with going to a city with either of her parents and not go to a museum! But at least they were only going to look at one thing; to see if the vase, or stamnos as she now had to get used to calling it, was a fake or not.

She was in a dilemma about it, because if it wasn't a fake then didn't it belong to the museum? Which meant that she'd have to hand it over to them. And if it was a fake, then it wasn't worth \$85,000, and she'd have to hand it over anyway, probably to the Swiss Police. Either way, she wouldn't have the vase or the money, just that warm fuzzy feeling that comes when you know you've 'done the right thing.'

Grace led the way out of the library. They passed Ms Dawes, the Ethical Investor, pushing her four wheeler to the lift. She waved to them as they walked out.

'Enjoy the museum,' she called.

Hera turned to Herr Jäger and glared.

'Is everything and everyone under surveillance in the place?' she asked.

'Not at all, Hera,' he replied, 'I mentioned to Dorothy earlier that I was having visitors today and that we would be visiting a museum later.'

'Oh,' said Hera, 'I'm still a bit shocked by this Methuselah club business and my aunt's involvement.'

'Now that you know, it's a great relief to her, not having to hide her activities any more to protect your sensibilities,' Herr Jäger reassured her.

Hera took a deep breath and smiled at HP.

'I'm glad someone's relieved,' she said.

CHAPTER 15

THE MUSEUM

This was one museum HP had never been to, and she expected to line up with the hoi polloi as per usual, get the tickets and make her way in. But this time was different. She had come with royalty! Well, that was what it felt like.

Herr Jäger's driver, Mr Kim, was Korean, and wore the finest driving gloves and a chauffeur's hat and suit. He opened the door for her and HP climbed in. She found herself sitting in the most extraordinary black Mercedes limousine, complete with tinted windows and television screen.

When they arrived at the museum half an hour later, she was reluctant to leave, having found a marathon of *Sponge Bob* episodes to tune into on the television.

Grace Lee left first and returned ten minutes later with directions to go to the delivery entrance, which was easy for a wheel chair to negotiate and it avoided the crowds.

They were met by a short balding man wearing John Lennon glasses.

'Herr Meier,' he introduced himself, extending his hand to each in turn.

Herr Jäger explained his relationship to each individual in the group.

'Grace Lee is my secretary, Hera Brown, one of my most promising students, and this is her daughter.'

Herr Jäger seemed to have run out of words and HP stepped into the breach and immediately shook Herr Meier's hand and introduced herself as 'HP'. The Museum curator showed them to his office, which, HP noticed, was cluttered with statues and vases, that given the opportunity, she would never have bought in any Brocki.

'Why do so many statues have the noses knocked off?' she wondered out loud.

'Good question young lady?' said Herr Meier, 'and it is the subject of ongoing research in Egypt, particularly as there is discussion about the killing of a soul, which we could talk about in great length.'

The museum curator looked eagerly toward Herr Jäger, who stared sternly at Herr Meier.

'But we won't go into that now, seeing that the pieces you are referring to here are not Egyptian. Simply speaking, the nose is the weakest part of a statue's integrity. If a statue falls forward that's what hits the ground first. Mind you there is other evidence of vandalism as noses aren't the only protuberances that have been damaged...'

Herr Meier's lecture was interrupted by the pointed throat clearing of Herr Jäger.

'Pierre we are here to see a piece you bought last year from Eisendorf,' he said.

'Oh you must mean the Volterra Caeretan Painter's stamnos,' he said, 'with Artemis driving the biga chariot.'

'But isn't Artemis the Greek Goddess of the Hunt?' asked HP.

'Yes, she is,' said the curator. The Etruscans called her Artume and technically, because this is an Etruscan stamnos then the depiction is of Artume.'

'Same Goddess, different name,' said Hera.

'We've been calling it a vase not a stamnos,' said HP. 'Are they the same thing?'

‘You could say it’s a type of vase but technically it’s a form of Greek pottery used to store liquids. Its much squatter than an amphora and it has two handles high on its sides. But I don’t need to describe it to you, I’ll take you right to it,’ he said

Herr Meier led the party to the main exhibition room where HP spotted an exact replica of her vessel, behind a glass case. Technically the stamnos didn’t belong to her, but being entrusted with its care over the past two days engendered a feeling of ownership. When Herr Jäger had wanted to put it in his own bag, she refused his offer, saying that she had looked after it up until now and would see the job through. Although she did concede that putting it inside a hard plastic shell before wrapping it in the cloth and putting it in the backpack, was probably a better way of ensuring it’s safety. Everyone crowded around the glass cabinet the stamnos was in, and stared hard at it.

‘You have had it authenticated?’ Herr Jäger enquired casually.

‘Yes,’ said the curator, ‘Frau Schwartz took it to our fellow just last week and he gave it the thumbs up.’

‘Thermoluminescence testing?’ Herr Jäger continued.

‘Yes,’ the curator answered, ‘and we have the papers here. A bit of a rush job to get it done in time because it’s a highlight in this exhibition.’

‘You didn’t have it authenticated when it arrived?’ asked Hera.

‘Mr Eisendorf has all his pieces authenticated upon purchase, so there was no need to,’ he answered.

‘So why did you get it redone?’ asked Herr Jäger.

Herr Meier sighed.

‘I must say, I feel like I’m being interrogated and I’m not sure why,’ he said.

‘Quite right,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘we are very rude and should tell you the truth about our visit. So let us go back to your office.’

Herr Meier led the way back to his office and ordered refreshments. Hera took HP’s arm and directed her to a glass cabinet along the way.

‘HP, will you look at that,’ she announced loudly, and directed her voice to the others. ‘We’ll be along shortly. I know the way. I just wanted to show HP these amphoras.’

Hera pulled a reluctant HP over to the cabinet and spoke softly. ‘When we go back to the office, don’t mention anything about the stamnos in your pack. You just keep quiet and let Herr Jäger do the talking. OK HP,’ she said looking into her eyes, ‘trust me.’

‘Sure,’ said HP, ‘if you can’t trust your mum, who can you trust?’

Mother and daughter walked back down the corridor to the curator’s office. They were ushered inside and seated at a large table where afternoon tea was being served.

‘Coffee und Kuchen, wunderbar’ said Hera, and gave her broadest smile to Herr Meier.

‘It’s the authentication process we are interested in Pierre,’ said Herr Jäger, addressing Herr Meier.

‘Well that’s not really my field at all,’ the curator said, between sipping his coffee and taking a large bite of the Linzer torte. ‘You should talk to the scientists.’

‘We have been,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘and the problem seems to be, that there are some authenticators who aren’t living up to their name.’

‘But we have been using *The Lab* for a number of years now. They have subsidiaries in London, New York and Beijing. And if I’m not mistaken it was Mister Eisendorf who directed me towards them.’

‘Hold on Pierre,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘I’m not suggesting that they are the problem, for I have never heard a word against them in any conversation about authentication. But as you know, the antiques and artefacts trade is growing, and spawning a lot of very good copyists.’

‘So what has this to do with the stamnos by the Volterra Caeretan Painter?’ he asked.

HP was eager to hear what Herr Jäger would say about their purpose for coming to the museum.

‘All right Pierre, I’ll be honest with you,’ he said. ‘That stamnos is not the only one of its kind, purporting to be authentic.’

All eyes were on Herr Jäger.

‘We know of at least a dozen other replicas of this particular stamnos, all with authentic papers,’ he said.

‘No,’ exclaimed Herr Meier, dropping his coffee cup.

‘Yes,’ countered Herr Jäger.

HP didn’t have to worry about following her mother’s orders to keep quiet. Like Hera and Grace, she was speechless, at hearing Herr Jäger’s announcement.

‘Which naturally required a visit to see the ‘real stamnos’ and ensure that it was properly authenticated,’ Herr Jäger continued.

‘Unglaublich!’ said Herr Meier.

‘Yes,’ said HP, ‘it is unbelievable.’

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

‘A dozen?’

‘Not really,’ said Herr Jäger, ‘there have always been skilled copiers. We just have more today and they are better at what they do.’

‘But what about the technology to prove them fakes?’ asked HP.

‘There are numerous ways of dating pieces and one of the most popular is thermoluminescence testing, or TL as its called in the trade, but it still takes time and these laboratories aren’t on every street corner.’

‘True,’ said Herr Meier, ‘but I am at pains to see how they could have achieved so many authentications. It’s a shame Frau Schwartz isn’t here to join our conversation. She is my assistant, and took the stamnos to the lab for them to take the sample,’ said Herr Meier.

‘And is this the usual procedure?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘Regula has been employed by us for ten years, and she is my most trusted staff member. She is responsible for the authentication of all our pieces. She personally transports them to the lab and to all intentions, looks like your average businesswoman going about her work. Never attracts any attention and never falters in her purpose; a truly admirable and extraordinary woman. But, if anyone did mess with her, they might find themselves the worse off.’

‘She knows martial arts?’ asked Hera.

‘I don’t know about that, but she does carry a gun, and I believe that she wouldn’t be afraid to use it,’ said Herr Meier, unable to mask his feelings of pride.

‘So why don’t you hire a security firm to transport the pieces to and from *The Lab*?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘And tell the world that there maybe a priceless item ready for the taking?’ said the curator.

‘But what about her life? Aren’t you worried about the risk posed to her safety?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘Of course I am,’ the curator replied, ‘but I can’t stop her. She’s brave and fearless and I can’t argue with her logic about the effectiveness of our strategy.’

There were a few moments of silence and Hera and Grace looked at each other and raised their eyes. HP could not read their meaning, but sensed there was something peculiar about the relationship between the curator and his assistant.

‘So where is Frau Schwartz today, Pierre?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘She is having a few days off. But I remember the day she took the stamnos over to *The Lab*. She said that nothing out of the ordinary happened. She took the travel case and caught the tram in the morning and stayed with the stamnos while they extracted the sample and then she brought it back on the tram. It was never out of her sight the whole time. She put a rush on the test and the certificate of authenticity arrived four days later.’

Herr Jäger nodded his head and bit his lip.

‘That all sounds correct, but you didn’t say why she wanted it done in the first place,’ said Herr Jäger. ‘I am assuming it was Frau Schwartz who wanted the test done.’

‘Yes,’ said the curator, ‘she’d heard talk about proper authentication procedures not being followed in some museums and because the piece is a feature in our current exhibition, she thought it precautionary to carry out our own authentication here in Switzerland.’

‘She’s very conscientious isn’t she?’ said Herr Jäger. ‘You’re very lucky to have her as your assistant.’

‘I know,’ said Herr Meier. ‘One day I hope she will be more than that.’

Herr Jäger looked at his watch and frowned. He felt around in his coat pocket.

‘Damn,’ he muttered. ‘Didn’t bring my afternoon tablets. Pierre you’ll have to excuse me, but I fear I must be going. Getting old and forgetful. But thank you so much for taking the time to show us the authentic stamnos and if we hear anything about these wretched copiers we’ll let you know. Good luck with the exhibition.’

Grace Lee appeared at the side of the curator and shook his hand and murmured quietly to him. Hera and HP followed suit and gave their thanks and bade farewell to him. There was a feeling of urgency about their departure, which HP attributed to the desire of Herr Jäger to get his pills.

‘Adieu Herr Meier,’ HP said, and picked up her backpack, which had lain casually in a corner of the room, throughout the meeting.

CHAPTER 16

ROUND TABLE TALK

HP was surprised when the limousine did not head back along the Lake road.

'Maybe they were going to call into the *Migros* or the *Coop* and get bread and milk?' HP thought.

'What's happening?' she asked no-one in particular.

'A quick visit to *The Lab*,' said Herr Jäger, 'just to clarify things, and then a round table talk back home.'

'But what about your tablets?' asked HP with concern.

'Ahh, the tablets,' he murmured, 'Grace can you pass me one?'

Grace handed a box of Ricola throat lollies to Herr Jäger. He plucked one out and popped it in his mouth then passed the box to HP, who also took one of the famous Swiss herbal pastilles.

'Did you know the Dalai Lama also carries them with him?' he said.

HP was confused.

'No I didn't, but I thought you needed proper tablets for your heart or something?' she said.

'Ooh I hope not,' said Herr Jäger, and laughed.

HP slouched in her seat. She couldn't help feeling as though the old man had tricked her.

'Let me tell you something HP,' he confided, 'people will believe what you want them to believe, if you set the scene correctly.'

HP wanted to give the old man 'the sulk', but she couldn't help respecting his ingenuity.

'You wanted him to believe you are old and forgetful and sick,' she said.

'That's right,' he said.

'But why?'

'Never let the enemy know your strengths until you intend to employ them.'

'But I thought Herr Meier was your friend. You even called him by his first name.'

'Pierre and I have known each other a long time. We have a great love and respect for antiquities, and I like him.'

'But?'

'How shall I put this so you will understand it?'

Herr Jäger searched for words and in the meantime, Hera interjected.

'Herr Meier is in love with Regula Schwartz and is under her spell.'

'Dummkopf!' HP exclaimed.

'He would not be the first man to love unwisely,' said Herr Jäger.

'Not Herr Meier, me,' said HP.

'Why is that darling?' asked Hera.

'Because she's the Evil Queen,' said HP.

'I don't understand,' said Hera.

'Her name is Schwartz,' explained HP. 'Remember your German colours mum.'

Hera began reciting a colour rhyme HP taught her for learning the rudiments of German.

'Rot is red, Weiss is white...' she muttered.

'Schwartz is black, like my cat,' said HP.

‘Frau Black,’ said Hera, ‘and she has a gun. We’ve got to warn your father. He can’t be there when she comes in the morning.’

Herr Jäger turned to Grace Lee.

‘I think we should contact your friends at the school to escort Herr Kunz to a safe place?’

Grace Lee took out her ipad and began messaging.

‘You’re going to send a bunch of school kids to protect my Papi?’ asked HP, and tried not to pull a face.

‘Its OK Happy Girl, they are from the Taekwondo School, not the high school,’ said Grace.

‘How good are they against bullets?’ asked HP.

‘The brain is faster and stronger than a bullet Happy Girl. Do not worry, your father will be in safe hands.’

‘I will ring Wilhelm,’ said Hera, and took out her mobile.

After trying for a few minutes, she stopped.

‘He’s not answering,’ she said, ‘I’ll try Paulo.’

HP texted her father and waited for a reply. None came, and the limousine pulled up outside a nondescript building in an area HP had never been to before.

‘I suggest Hera and the happy Amazon girl wait here with Mr Kim, while Grace and I confirm Herr Meier’s story,’ said Herr Jäger.

He and Grace climbed out of the limousine and went to the door of *The Lab*.

‘I’ve left a message on Paulo’s phone. I’ll try your father again,’ said Hera. ‘Why is it whenever I want to contact him I can’t?’ she said in frustration.

HP decided to text Gina on the off chance that her father could be visiting the Zaninis. Even if he wasn’t, she should tell Gina what was going on and see if she or Angelo would go over to the Hochhaus and see if he was there. It wasn’t like her father to have his phone switched off, especially with what was happening with the Evil Queen and Mister Wolf.

Gina rang back and HP told her to see if her Papi was home and to tell him to leave the Hochhaus and ring them urgently. Gina said she couldn’t go over because she had a flamenco lesson but she would send Angelo over to find him and give him the message.

CHAPTER 17

ARTISTS INSTALLED

A change of tact was called for. When Regula Schwartz received a call from Herr Meier excited because he was about to receive a visit from Herr Jäger and one of his old students, now residing in Australia, she put her alternative plan into action.

Her research into the lives of the Kunz Browns revealed that they weren't as silly as they looked. They appeared to live a bohemian lifestyle, with regular incursions into political and social turmoil, however they seemed to have some well regarded connections and credibility with various archaeological and art organizations that, in the past, had saved them from serious trouble with the law.

'Pity', she thought, 'they're on the wrong side.'

It was safe to assume that they knew exactly what they had in their possession, and that retrieving it would require devious thinking and quick action on her part. First she had to get the artist out of the way and then she would use him as a bargaining tool for the stamnos.

After collecting the key from Herr Steinlager on the pretext of being an official museum researcher, she bought a bottle of Rioja from the *Coop*, then walked to the Hochhaus. It hadn't taken her long to discover that the old man had a key to the bunker. Herr Steinlager had once been the caretaker of the bunkers that had been built along the edge of the lake during the war. The clerk at the Council offices told her that his services were no longer required but believed that he still had a key to them.

By the time she reached the door of Number 7, she had every contingency worked out. All that remained was for him to be home. She had no doubt that he would do everything that she asked.

Wilhelm Kunz opened the door to her knock.

'Frau Black,' he said, astonished at her presence, 'I didn't expect you until tomorrow morning. My wife and daughter still aren't home.'

'Herr Kunz,' she began, 'let me apologize and be straight with you. I'm afraid I wasn't quite truthful when we met earlier today. And don't worry I'm not here to see your wife or daughter or even to get the stamnos.'

Wilhelm Kunz smiled.

'So the vase is a Greek artefact then?' he replied.

'Of course it is, and then again, it isn't,' she continued. 'You may as well know now that I work for the museum and we've been trying to deal with the trade in fakes. The stamnos your daughter has is one, and we're trying to get it back without the media finding out and...'

Regula Schwartz moved from one foot to the other.

'Look, I don't really want to be standing out here on the balcony telling you this. And there was something else I wanted to show you. But before that, please accept this bottle of rioja as an apology.'

Wilhelm took the bottle out of the carry bag and looked at the label.

'Very nice,' he said, and turned to call inside, 'hey Paulo look what we have to drink tonight.'

Regula Schwartz winced. Wilhelm Kunz had company. A large European man came to the doorway and extended his hand.

'Grüezi ich heiss Paulo,' he said, and shook Regula Schwartz's hand.

'Frau Schwartz,' she said, and turned to address Wilhelm, 'or Ms Black for my English speaking friends. Are you an artist too Paulo?'

‘It is how I live my life,’ Paulo answered, and bowed his head.

‘As opposed to, it is how I make my living,’ joked Wilhelm, and then took the wine and placed it on the table inside.

‘Well there are some artists who are making a living copying artefacts and selling them to unsuspecting collectors for very large sums of money.’

‘Faking is nothing new,’ said Paulo.

‘You are correct,’ said Frau Schwartz, ‘and that is what brings me here. We could not be sure that you, Herr Kunz, were not part of this organization of copiers, so we told you various stories in the hope of retrieving the stamnos without creating too much suspicion.’

Wilhelm Kunz laughed.

‘Well you didn’t succeed there, Frau Black, because my daughter had you down for the Queen of Evil,’ said Wilhelm, ‘and that other fellow as the big bad wolf.’

Regula Schwartz pursed her lips and suppressed a sneer.

‘What an imagination’ she said dispassionately. ‘But there is something I wanted to show you that I hope will inspire the artist in you.’

Both Wilhelm and Paulo gave her their full attention.

‘You know the bunker by the lake. It will soon be taken away. It seems that there is a desire to remove all evidence of the war and that bunker is one of the last ones positioned around the lake. At the museum we would like to give it a fitting send off by showing it’s artistic potential.’

‘Are you telling us that it could house an exhibition?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘The Museum’s outreach programme, of which I am the co-ordinator, is very interested in landmarks such as the bunker, for bringing art to the people,’ said Regula Schwartz. ‘And because you are a contemporary artist and this is your hometown, I wondered whether a project like this may be of interest to you and Paulo, if you like to collaborate?’

‘As a matter of fact Paulo and I have been talking about an installation down at the lake, and that bunker would be perfect, but we don’t know who has the key to it,’ said Wilhelm.

Regula Schwartz slipped her hand in her jacket pocket and pulled out a large iron key and smiled broadly at the two men.

‘But I only have it for an hour, so I suggest you come with me and look inside.’

‘Hold on,’ said Wilhelm, and turned to Paulo, ‘what do you think?’

‘Let’s ride,’ said Paulo.

Wilhelm Kuntz looked at Regula Schwartz and shook his head.

‘You don’t have a bike do you?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘I am happy to borrow one,’ she said.

‘You can take Hera’s,’ he said, then went back inside to the flat. He picked up his bag and checked his keys, phone and wallet were inside, and then locked the door.

The three walked down the stairs to the bike racks and each took a vehicle and rode in single file towards the lake, unaware that they were being watched.

CHAPTER 18

THE INVASION

Frau Koch had always believed that the invasion would come from the East; after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and all the former United Socialist Soviet Republic countries got democracy. They'd all come swarming in to Switzerland, to get their leather jackets and fancy cars and take away all the good things that the true Swiss people held dear.

Switzerland had always had guest workers, especially in a town like Arbon. In its heyday the town employed thousands of people through companies like Saurer. But why couldn't they go back to their own countries when they'd finished working here? And now they were coming from further and further east. Not just Turkey, but Sri Lanka and now, this was the last straw; the Chinese had invaded Switzerland.

She was standing on her balcony when she saw them coming. At least a dozen of them marching straight towards the Hochhaus. Duty bound she picked up the phone and rang Herr Schmidt. He would know what to do. She went back to the window, but they had disappeared. She opened her door a crack and peered outside to see the last of them climbing the steps onto the first floor, and disappearing along the corridor. They were as quiet as mice. Frau Koch took her stick and climbed the few stairs from her flat onto the first floor corridor. She should have known they would be squatting outside the Ausländer's flat.

Trouble. Ausländer attracted trouble. First that girl had set off the fire alarm and now her parents were organizing the Communist Chinese to take over Switzerland!

Frau Koch made her way back down the stairs and into her flat. She would wait for Herr Schmidt to decide what action to take.

Hera Brown couldn't decide whether she was angry or worried. Why did her husband have his phone turned off? HP assured her that the Zaninis would check on him and tell him to contact them. Any minute now they would get a call from him and everything would be fine. After all, hadn't Grace organized for the Korean taekwondo team to look after him?

They both looked up as Herr Jäger and his granddaughter climbed into the vehicle.

'All OK?' asked HP.

'As we thought,' said Herr Jäger, however Grace has just had a call from her friends to say that your father is not at the flat. She told them to wait for him, so they will remain there until he returns.

'Probably gone to get some wine,' said HP, and patted her mother's arm, 'and anyway Gina said she would send Angelo over so maybe he saw him.'

'Of course you will stay with us in the guest room tonight,' said Herr Jäger interrupting their conversation.

'Thank you,' said Hera, 'we would be delighted.'

HP rolled her eyes and whispered in her mother's ear. 'I can't say I'm delighted to stay in an old people's home mum, but you can see if this is really where you and Papi want to live if the artist commune doesn't work out.'

Hera Brown smiled and sent another SMS to her husband. HP decided she would see if the Zaninis knew where he was, so she rang their house. Her mother listened in and picked up a few familiar Swiss words.

‘Polizei?’ she asked alarmed.

HP said goodbye to her friend and turned to her mother.

‘Maybe we should go back to the Hochhaus. The police are there and it sounds like there’s some sort of demonstration outside.’

Grace Lee sitting on the seat opposite them, put down her ipad and spoke.

‘The police were called to the Hochhaus because the taekwondo team were seen to be loitering. A complaint was made by residents about their presence and a group of them voiced their anger by demanding that the taekwondo team leave Switzerland and go back to China,’ she said, looking puzzled. ‘They said something about an invasion.’

‘Well I bet I know who made the complaint,’ announced HP. ‘The wicked witch in number 2.’

‘But your father should be back by now,’ said Hera, ‘especially if there’s a demonstration. He’d want to be taking photos.’

Hera Brown took a deep breath and calmed herself.

‘I think we should go back and then we can sort this out ourselves,’ she said.

‘I’m not too sure whether your Swiss German is up to sorting this out mum,’ said HP, ‘especially the invasion by the Chinese.’

‘What Chinese?’ asked Grace Lee, very confused.

‘There aren’t any Chinese. It’s just that old witch who sees anybody Asian and thinks they’re Chinese,’ explained HP. ‘It happens a lot with Westerners.’

‘But Korean’s don’t look Chinese at all,’ said Grace.

‘True,’ replied HP, ‘but we have to decide on whether to go back to the flat or not because we’re coming up to the Bahnhof.’

‘We go back to Arbon and see your father,’ said Hera. ‘Herr Jäger, we have decided to return back to Arbon tonight, so if your driver could drop us off at the train station that would be great.’

Herr Jäger, who had been engrossed in his book looked up and answered Hera.

‘I don’t think that’s a good plan my dear,’ he said calmly.

HP felt a shiver of fear run down her spine, and for a moment imagined that he was the villain in this whole adventure, and that they had been tricked by the old man.

‘Much better that we come with you and drive,’ he continued, and turned to HP and smiled. ‘If that’s all right with you Amazon girl?’

HP breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Of course it is Herr Jäger,’ she said. ‘Do you like *Spongebob*?’

‘Ah the animated character on television?’ he said. ‘Weren’t you watching him on the screen before?’

‘Well yes I was, and I was just wondering if we are going to drive to Arbon, whether you would mind if I watched it?’

‘I have here a copy of a classic Swiss children’s book if you would like to read it, instead of watching the television,’ he offered.

‘I’ve read Heidi, if that’s what you were going to give me, and it’s a great book if you’re a kid, I mean a young kid,’ HP said.

‘Oh forgive me,’ he said, ‘I try and keep up with what interests young people. I am not always on target, but I thought that you might like this version of Heidi.’

Herr Jäger handed her the book and HP grinned as she opened it up. *Heidi and the Wolf Pack of Planet Eiger*. ‘Not what I was expecting,’ she said. ‘Do you like reading mangas?’

‘Technically this book is a ‘manhwa’ because it is Korean, not Japanese. And as you know, the comic books are just as big in Korea as Japan. But Westerners tend

to call them all manga. Sandwiched between China and Japan, Korea is still a country that Europeans know very little about.'

'I hate to interrupt,' said Hera, 'but the train station is here. Are you sure you want to take us Herr Jäger?'

'It would be our pleasure, wouldn't it Grace?' said Herr Jäger. 'Please make a booking at the hotel in Arbon. Three double rooms should be sufficient for our needs.'

'The *Metropol* is the only hotel in Arbon and it's four star and pretty expensive,' said HP. 'Are you sure you've got enough money, or are you going to do a bunk in the morning?'

Hera Brown gave her daughter a disapproving stare, and Herr Jäger looked amused.

'By bunk do you mean that we might sneak out in the morning without paying our bill?' he asked.

'Well I didn't mean to say that you would do that, it's just that three rooms there will probably be at least a thousand francs,' said HP.

'More money than a worker in a third world country will make in a year,' said Herr Jäger.

'Its not fair is it?' said HP.

'No it's not,' said Herr Jäger, but if we are the fortunate few who have money, then we should put it to good use.'

'I don't know whether staying in a fancy hotel is putting your money to good use,' interrupted Hera.

'But I do believe we won't be the only guests staying there with an interest in the stamnos,' said Herr Jäger.

'You think the Big Bad Wolf and the Evil Queen are there too?' asked HP.

'Where else?'

'And what are we going to do when we see them?' asked Hera. 'I mean what are we going to do, full stop?' she asked. 'Why doesn't your father ring? Have you contacted Gina yet?'

'She said that she couldn't get hold of Angelo, cause he was playing somewhere down the creek with his friends, but he always comes back for dinner,' said HP.

'But that doesn't mean anything if she hasn't seen Angelo to give him the message. Couldn't she go over to the flat?' asked Hera.

'She's afraid of the dark and she's only a kid,' explained HP. 'Stop worrying. He's probably gone to Paulo's and left his phone behind.'

'Don't be ridiculous HP,' snapped Hera. 'He never goes anywhere without his phone.'

'Well, he's probably charging it or somewhere that he can't get reception,' HP offered.

'We're not in Australia now,' said Hera, 'there's no problem getting reception anywhere in Switzerland.'

'What about Sântis? Maybe he and Paulo have gone up to the top of Mount Sântis? I think its hard to get reception there,' HP continued.

But her efforts to calm her mother's anxiety were wasted.

'When I see your father I'm going to kill him,' said Hera.

If he's not already dead, thought HP to herself.

CHAPTER 19

THE SEARCH

Again its time for me to put my twenty cents in. Naturally we were all worried by the disappearance of HP's father. The fact that no-one actually said he was missing didn't mean that he wasn't. Trying to make excuses about his phone not being charged and being off with his friend was simply a way of holding onto hope. The taekwondo team had been to Paulo's house and had scoured the supermarkets, lake area and other known haunts, but to no avail.

I had been awakened by a message from Grace, informing me what had happened. Five o'clock is my normal time for being awake, hence another reason for the afternoon siesta. It was 1900 hours Zürich time or 7 pm, and Wilhelm should have been somewhere drinking a glass of good Spanish wine, as was his penchant. The fact that the taekwondo team had not found him, or his friend, was particularly worrying.

I felt that although the team was doing a good job searching, there was someone who had information about his whereabouts, who had been overlooked.

I was right of course, as I invariably am... except once when I wasn't, but now's not the time to talk about that. Like old people who are often 'invisible,' which sometimes suits our purpose, kids can be too. One kid in particular knew a lot of information about the whereabouts of HP's father, but no one had asked him until HP arrived on his doorstep.

Riccardo Zanini's opened the door.

'Grüezi Ricco,' she said, 'is my Papi here?'

'Come in HP and nei your Papi isn't here. I haven't seen him since you came over for lunch,' he answered.

'We have some friends from Zürich with us. Can they come in too?' she asked.

'Of course,' he said and peered out of the doorway and the group who had just arrived.

'Grüezi Hera,' he said and kissed her cheeks, 'I'm sorry I don't know where Willy is.'

He shook hands with Grace and Herr Jäger and Mr Kim then led them inside. There was an awkward moment as Riccardo surveyed the stairs that led up to his kitchen.

Mr Kim crouched down with his back to Herr Jäger and the professor climbed onto it and the driver piggy-backed him up the stairs and sat him on a chair at the Zannini's kitchen table.

Claudia introduced herself and within minutes the table was laid with a full coffee pot, jug of tea and selection of cheese, meat, bread and savoury biscuits.

HP realized that she hadn't eaten since the museum, and proceeded to make herself a large sandwich.

Claudia sat down at the table and opened the conversation with the latest events at the Hochhaus.

'The police, demonstrators and a group of Asians were all there.'

She had arrived home just before dark and it appeared that a group of people with placards had gathered down in the bike port underneath the Hochhaus. They were chanting and she thought it was a demonstration of some kind. When she went closer she saw the local SWP candidate was addressing the crowd, some of them she

knew to be residents. She recognized Frau Koch and Herr Schmidt. As for the Asians, she wasn't sure why they were there, but they seemed to be upsetting everyone, just by their presence. And then the police came and spoke to one of the Asians and the SWP speaker and a few others and everyone seemed to disperse.'

Everyone listened as Claudia spoke and at the end of her explanation Gina told her story.

'I got back from flamenco and I saw everyone there, so I went over and I hid behind the pole near the door and I heard Frau Koch say it was all the Ausländers fault in number 7, and I was going to tell her off, when I saw Mami and I went over to her. And then we came back here together.'

'You didn't see my Papi anywhere?' asked HP.

'Nowhere. I was going to tell Angelo to go over but I couldn't find him,' Gina said.

'Oh my God,' exclaimed HP, 'where is Angelo?'

'In the shower,' said Claudia. 'He'd been playing down the creek with his friends and came home dripping wet, so I sent him to the bathroom an hour ago.'

'And here he is now,' announced Riccardo.

Angelo surveyed the strangers in his house and went over to the couch and slid under it.

'He's after Nerino,' said Gina, addressing the puzzled looks of Herr Jäger and Grace Kim.

Angelo emerged from under the couch with a squirming, black fur ball in his arms.

'Felis catus,' said Herr Jäger.

'Nei. Nerino,' said Angelo.

'Have you seen my Papi today Angelo,' asked HP.

'Jo,' said Angelo.

Everyone turned and stared at him.

'When and where?' demanded Hera.

'Wann und Wo?' translated HP.

'On the Velo, this afternoon,' he answered.

'What direction was he going?' Hera continued.

'Zum See, abe,' said Angelo.

'He was going to the lake,' said his father.

'Was anyone with him?' Hera continued.

'Jo, dä Künstler und a Frau,' he said.

'The artist would be Paulo but who's the woman?' asked Hera.

Herr Jäger interrupted and questioned the boy in Swiss German.

'Did you follow them and keep well hidden?'

Angelo nodded.

'Very good,' said the old man and smiled at the boy. 'Did you see where they went to?'

'I couldn't keep up, but they went down to the lake and then to the playground and that's where I stopped, because I saw my friend Erkan there and we played and then I saw the woman riding Hera's bike by herself. And I didn't see Willy and the Künstler any more.'

Hera jumped up from the table in anger. 'She took my bike that evil.'

'Queen,' interrupted HP. 'And she's taken my Papi and hidden him somewhere.'

'And Herr Paulo,' said Gina, 'but he is very big to hide.'

‘The taekwondo team searched around the lake, but found nothing,’ said Grace.

‘Did they look in the boats that are moored there? There’s not many now because winter is coming but there are still a few. Although how she would get those two men into a boat I don’t know,’ said Riccardo.

‘She has a gun,’ said HP.

‘What do you mean a gun?’ he asked.

‘She shoots people,’ said HP.

‘We don’t know that HP,’ said Hera, ‘she probably just has it to threaten people.’

‘And if they don’t do what she says, she’ll shoot them,’ said HP.

‘We must not jump to conclusions,’ said Herr Jäger. ‘First we must establish where your father and his friend are. Grace have you contacted your friends?’

Grace Lee had been busy relaying information to the taekwondo club via her ipad. She informed everyone that the team were currently making their way along the lake and rechecking the boats, but if anyone had information about possible hiding places around the lake, this would be helpful.

‘Well they could be locked in the top of the tower,’ said Hera.

‘Washing dishes,’ said HP.

‘What are you talking about?’ said Hera.

‘There’s a restaurant at the top of the tower, so they wouldn’t be up there. But maybe they’re in the tower in the museum?’ she said.

‘I’ll get the team to check,’ said Grace.

‘But it’s locked and it’s night time,’ said Claudia. ‘How will they get inside?’

‘They are very good at getting in and out of buildings,’ she said, and smiled at Claudia. ‘Don’t worry, they are trained for these types of things.’

‘There’s the church too,’ said Riccardo. ‘Maybe they’re locked in the vestry?’

‘But someone would hear them surely,’ said Claudia.

‘Not if they were tied up and gagged,’ said HP.

‘Or somewhere that no one would hear them,’ said Riccardo, ‘like a crypt.’

‘But there’s no crypt in the church is there?’ asked Claudia.

‘No, but there is a one place that’s as cold as a crypt and if you got put in there you could yell your head off and no-one would hear you.’

‘Oh my God,’ screamed Hera, ‘she’s buried them alive.’

‘No, no, my dear,’ comforted Herr Jäger, ‘I’m sure our friend here has somewhere else in mind.’

‘The bunker,’ said Angelo, ‘that’s where I would go and hide, if I had a key.’

‘Is there a bunker here?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘Not for much longer,’ said Riccardo. ‘I heard there were plans to take it away.’

‘I will tell the team to check it out,’ said Grace Kim.

‘Well what are we doing here?’ demanded Hera, let’s go.’

‘I’m coming,’ yelled Angelo.

‘Me too,’ said Gina.

‘There won’t be enough room in their car,’ said Claudia.

Herr Jäger gave a surveyed the group. I think we’ll all fit,’ he said, ‘and hopefully there’ll be room for two more.’

‘So you have a people mover Herr Jäger?’ asked Riccardo.

‘Of sorts,’ he answered. ‘Shall we go?’

Everyone readied themselves to go in search of the missing artists.

After Mr Kim carried Herr Jäger down the stairs, they all made their way to the limousine. Mr Kim opened the doors and they piled in and drove off to the bunker. Mr Kim parked the car by the pushbike hostel and they were greeted by the taekwondo team on arrival.

‘We cannot get in,’ the team leader said, ‘but we have heard tapping from inside. There is definitely someone in there.’

‘Get the Mayor,’ said Herr Jäger to his granddaughter, ‘and Mr Kim, can you bring me a tyre lever please?’

The group descended on the bunker and Herr Jäger began to tap on the wall of the solid concrete building. An answering series of taps came back.

‘OMG,’ said HP.

‘No my dear SOS, three short, three long, three short,’ said Herr Jäger and tapped three long, then one long, one short and one long.

‘OK,’ he explained to HP.

Within twenty minutes the mayor had arrived bearing a key, which he promptly turned in the lock and opened. Two large torches were shone inside to reveal the huddled figures of two men, shivering in the corner. Blankets were brought in and wrapped around the pair, as they were led out of the bunker.

‘This must not be public knowledge,’ Herr Jäger whispered to the Mayor. ‘We are in the midst of a case with international implications, so I appreciate your confidence. We are very sorry to have caused such an inconvenience. Your assistance will be gratefully compensated at a later date.’

The Mayor bade his farewells, mounted his *Segway*, and silently cruised off, while the artists and their rescuers returned to the Zanini’s to prepare for the next chapter of the stannos adventure.

CHAPTER 20

AN ARTIST'S RANSOME

Claudia and Riccardo Zanini set about preparing their favourite remedies for exposure to the cold. The men were wrapped in doonas, their feet plonked into steaming tubs of eucalyptus oil scented water and they were each handed the respective cures.

Claudia made hot mint tea and added the herbal schnapps, *Appenzeller*, and Riccardo filled mugs with coffee to which he added home made grappa. Herr Jäger also partook of the coffee and schnapps and listened with the others as the two men told their tale.

‘So she had no need to use her gun then?’ he asked at the end of their story.

‘She’s got a gun?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘I told you she was evil,’ said HP, ‘and smart. So now maybe you’ll believe me.’

Wilhelm Kunz called his daughter to his side and cuddled her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘you were right, and I’m just your dumb dad.’

‘So, what now dumb dad?’ she said.

Wilhelm Kunz looked towards Herr Jäger and signalled him to talk.

‘I expect the Evil Queen, as you so aptly term her, will come to the flat tomorrow morning as arranged, to seek you and your mother out, with an offer of exchange. The stannos for your father. She’ll give you the key and you give her the stannos,’ he said.

‘Sort of like a ransome,’ said HP. ‘But what if she goes to the bunker to check on them first?’

‘We hope she will see no need for that, because you cannot get in or out of it without the key, but just to be sure, a taekwondo class happening right outside the bunker, might be a good deterrent. I’d say from 6 am onwards,’ he said.

Grace Lee immediately relayed the message to the taekwondo team to be present at the bunker from 6am onwards to ensure no-one went inside.

‘So this plan relies on her thinking that we are still inside that bunker freezing our füdle off,’ said Wilhelm.

‘Yes it does,’ Herr Jäger replied, ‘so on no account must she know that you are free.’

‘We aren’t,’ said Paulo.

‘Aren’t what?’ asked HP.

‘Free!’ said Paulo, and drained the last of his tea.

‘Oh oh,’ said HP, ‘I’ve seen this happen before.’

‘Shock?’ asked Herr Jäger.

‘Artists,’ answered HP, ‘it happens to my parents a lot, when they’ve had some alcohol, they start talking philosophy, and before you know it, you won’t be able to get any sense out of them.’

‘Then we had better move things along,’ said Herr Jäger. ‘The artists must stay here and not be seen, but this is a small house. However, it is Friday night and there is no work for you tomorrow Riccardo, so why not take your lovely wife out and enjoy the delights of the *Metropol* for tonight? We have a room already booked for you, and you can have whatever you like on room service. I suggest that the rest of you stay here. And you two, Hera and Hippolyte, be at your flat by 9 am so you are prepared for the meeting with Frau Schwartz.’

‘But are we going to hand over the vase, I mean the stamnos?’ asked HP.

‘Just for a short time,’ said Herr Jäger.

‘But she’s a thief and a fraud and why should we?’ demanded HP.

‘So that when she is arrested, she will have the vessel on her person as evidence. Be caught red-handed,’ the Professor explained. ‘Yes, that’s just what I was thinking,’ said HP and yawned.

‘Sleep is a good idea, Amazon girl,’ said Herr Jäger. ‘Now if you would like to come with us to the *Metropol*, Riccardo, Claudia, then we will contact the rest of you in the morning with an update. Have no fear, all will be well,’ he said, and instructed Mr Kim to take him away. As he left he turned to Paulo and addressed him, ‘The truth shall make you free, but first it shall make you angry.’

‘You and Willy have our bed Hera,’ called Claudia as she bundled a bag under her arm and kissed her children goodnight. Sleep well.’

‘Danke Claudia, du au,’ said Hera, in one of the few Swiss phrases she had mastered.

Paulo pulled the doona up over his head as the sound of the television reverberated in his head. He had slept through the churchbells but not this. What man could sleep through this racket?

‘Spongebob Schwammkopf, Spongebob Schwammkopf, Spongebob Schwammkopf,’ the television blared.

Paulo growled at the boy who had made a nest of doonas at the foot of the couch.

‘Angelo, you’ll wake up Paulo,’ a girl yelled from the stairs.

‘He’s already awake. I heard him fart,’ Angelo replied. ‘And he stinks.’

‘Who stinks?’ asked HP as she descended the steps. ‘Hey the *Spongebob* marathon is still on, fantastic.’

The girls joined Angelo and dug into the piles of doonas. Paulo raised himself up onto the couch and snarled at them.

‘Bear,’ they yelled in unison and dived under the doonas.

The artist climbed out of his bed and lumbered out of the room in search of the toilet.

Two members of the taekwondo team scouted the area and reported that no-one resembling the Evil Queen or Big Bad Wolf were spotted in the vicinity of the Hochhaus. It was safe for Hera and HP to walk across the playground and up to their flat.

They had been given instructions earlier on by Grace Lee on how to hand over the stamnos. Now all they had to do was wait for their visitor and appear suitably worried about the disappearance of Wilhelm Kunz.

At 10 am on the dot, the doorbell rang and Hera opened it to Regula Schwartz. She stared at the woman before her.

‘Do I know you?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry madam,’ Regula Schwartz answered, ‘I do not believe we have met before, however, I do believe you have something of mine that I require immediately. In exchange, I have something that you may have lost. Perhaps we can come to an agreement?’

‘You want the stamnos and I want my husband. He’s gone missing. Do you know where he is?’

Regula Schwartz reached into her bag and pulled out the key to the bunker.

‘Bring me the stamnos and you can have the key,’ she said simply.

HP appeared at the door with the stamnos wrapped in a sarong.

‘Unwrap it please,’ said Regula Schwartz, and watched as HP removed the folds of material and revealed the stamnos.

‘Very good, little girl,’ she said, ‘now wrap it up again and place it in my case here.’

HP opened the shell case to reveal a foam structure already in place for the stamnos to be placed within. She laid it in the shell and took out a small metal hammer she had placed in her pocket.

‘Hand over the key to my mother now or I’ll smash this vase,’ she said.

Hera and Regula Schwartz were both horrified at the potential destruction of the stamnos.

‘Don’t you dare, you little brat,’ Regula Schwartz commanded.

‘Tell us where my Papi is and give my mum the key,’ HP demanded, ‘or I’ll break this stupid vase into a million pieces.’

HP raised the hammer and Regula Schwartz considered taking out her gun and shooting this monstrous little beast right there and then. However, the thought of spending the rest of her life in gaol because she’d killed a child, made her reconsider, and she pursed her lips and breathed through her nostrils.

‘Now now, there’s no need for violence,’ she said. ‘Your Papi just spent the night with his friend in the bunker down at the lake and I think he might be in need of warming up,’ said Regula Schwartz, shutting the case. ‘I’m afraid I have to be off now. Better take a blanket and a warm drink for your Papi.’

Regula Schwartz turned on her heels and walked along the corridor to the stairwell. HP and Hera watched as she disappeared from sight.

‘Why did you threaten to break the stamnos?’ asked Hera as they walked back inside.

‘Because you weren’t even going to ask what the key was for?’ HP answered, ‘and I have a reputation to uphold.’

‘Well yes, I suppose you’re right, because I knew it was the key to the bunker, I didn’t think to ask her what it was to. An oversight on my part. But what reputation do you have?’

‘I’m a smartie pants kid remember,’ she said, ‘and I didn’t want her to think that I was going to give up so easily.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Hera, ‘now lets hope the police catch her with the stamnos.’

‘Herr Jäger thinks she’ll take it over to Germany on the usual route, so the Border Police will pick her up there,’ said Hera.

‘Lets hope he’s right,’ HP mumbled.

CHAPTER 21

REAL FAKE

Of course Regula Schwartz, aka Ms Black, aka the Evil Queen was picked up by the German border police and arrested for carrying a stolen artefact. And you are all wondering whether she went to gaol for the rest of her life.

Let me tell you right now, that she didn't. In fact, she was held for questioning and released on the same day, because the so-called artefact she was carrying was a fake!

You think that the stamnos that HP bought at the Brocki was a fake? Well it wasn't. Here's what happened.

Naturally, all the resources were focused on the Evil Queen. After all she did have the stamnos. It wasn't certain whether she would take it by train or car to Zürich or over the lake to Germany. On the advice of Herr Jäger, she was kept under surveillance from the time she left the Hochhaus. She walked to the *Metropol*, where she checked out and then crossed the road to the train station, just in time to catch the train to Romanshorn. There she boarded the ferry that sailed across the Bodensee and she alighted at Friedrichshafen in Germany, where she was arrested.

She had timed everything perfectly. It was as though she knew exactly what would happen. Except for one thing. Angelo!

Angelo ran into the *Metropol* foyer and began his search for a lost earring. Claudia and Riccardo had come back to their house that morning and Claudia discovered that she had lost her favourite earring somewhere at the hotel. Angelo had made it for her. In a flash he had taken it upon himself to go to the *Metropol* to find it.

When he walked in to the foyer he noticed an odd looking woman sitting on a chair. He watched as she stood up and walked to the toilet, wheeling a suitcase. She was wearing a dress but she didn't walk like a woman. When he saw the woman he knew as the Evil Queen, come into the room, he hid behind a large, leafy plant. The Evil Queen was wheeling a similar suitcase to the strange looking woman and she also went into the toilets. He waited, and a short time later the Evil Queen came back out. It was then that he felt the short, sharp taps on his shoulder.

'The *Metropol* foyer is not a place for a game of hide and seek, young man,' the concierge said, as he escorted the boy to the door. Angelo was considering whether to try his luck and get back inside, when he saw a flash on the ground. There, in front of him was the lost earring. He could have jumped for joy as he picked it up and pocketed it.

Just then the door opened and the funny looking woman, came outside. Angelo ran to the sculpture on the lakeside of the *Metropol*, crouched down and watched as she walked down the path towards the lake. There was something not right about her, so he watched her movements.

She sat down on a bench that looked out onto the lake and checked her watch. She stretched out her legs and looked around. Angelo ducked behind a chestnut tree and waited until she got up and ambled back towards the *Metropol*. She went through the door into the restaurant and sat down at a table. The waitress arrived and she ordered coffee and nussgipfels. Angelo slunk into the restaurant and crept towards the table where the strange woman sat.

The waitress carried a tray to the table and set down coffee and two nussgipfels in front of her. As she lifted the pastry to her mouth, Angelo noticed the hairs on the backs of her hand.

‘Wolf,’ he cried, jumping away and running outside.

The waitress watched the boy disappear and smiled to herself. It wasn’t the first time she’d served transvestites at the *Metropol*, but usually they made a bit more effort with the hair removal.

‘Don’t worry Madam, rude children are everywhere,’ she said, ‘please accept another coffee and nussgipfel for your inconvenience.’

‘Danke Madam,’ said the deep-voiced woman at the table.

Angelo ran like the wind until he reached his home. HP and her family were talking to his parents in the loungeroom.

‘I saw the Wolf,’ he announced and he’s dressed up as Grandma and he’s got a big suitcase.’

‘What’s he talking about HP?’ asked Hera who couldn’t understand the boy’s Swiss German.

HP translated, the story, but Hera still wasn’t sure what he meant. Her phone rang and she answered it. Angelo’s story was put on hold while Hera listened to Grace Lee relay the latest news about Regula Schwartz.

‘That was Grace,’ Hera said, ‘the police have picked up Regula Schwartz in Friedrichshafen, with the stamnos.’

‘But what about the Big, Bad Wolf?’ asked HP.

‘He’s only a small fish isn’t he?’ said Wilhelm, ‘the uh Evil Queen’s the one they want, isn’t she?’

‘Well why is he dressed up like a Grandma?’ asked Gina.

‘A fake Grandma Gini’ said HP, ‘just like in the story of Red Riding Hood, waiting to trick her and eat her.’

There were a few moments silence as they all pondered the question.

‘Did you say he’s got a suitcase?’ asked Riccardo.

‘Yes,’ said Angelo, ‘the same sort as the Evil Queen.’

‘You saw her there too?’ asked HP.

‘Yes. She came in and went to the toilet after the fake Grandma and came out and then went away and the taekwondo man was following her.’

Angelo decided he didn’t need to tell everyone that he was taken out of the hotel by the concierge.

‘Then I went outside and found the earring,’ continued Angelo, ‘and the fake Grandma came outside and I knew there was something wrong with her because of the way she looked and the way she walked, so I followed her and she had a nussgipfel and that’s when I saw her hairy hands and I knew she was the Wolf.’

‘And the Wolf has a suitcase,’ said HP, ‘and I bet I know what’s in it.’

‘Gaggi?’ said Gina.

‘The vase,’ said HP.

‘But didn’t you say that they’ve got the Evil Queen and the stamnos?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘Yes,’ said Hera, ‘a stamnos, but not necessarily the real one.’

‘How do you know it’s not the real one?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘You don’t until it’s tested,’ Hera answered. ‘And that might take the rest of the day. But it looks like they’ve done another switch.’

‘They’ve substituted another fake for the real one in the toilets at the *Metropol*. And while everyone thinks the Evil Queen has the real one, the Big Bad Wolf has it, and will get it away without anyone knowing,’ said HP.

‘Is Herr Jäger still there?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘I’m ringing now,’ said Hera, pressing the call button on her phone.

The Zanini’s and the Kunz Brown family arrived at the *Metropol* restaurant in time to see Herr Jäger introducing a large oddly dressed woman to a pair of International Police Officers. They watched as she was escorted out the door in their company.

They made their way into the restaurant and sat down at Herr Jäger’s table. The professor called the waiter over.

‘Lunch?’ he asked the group before him.

‘Yes please,’ said HP, ‘and I think I am speaking for everyone here.’

Two tables were joined together and HP and her friends sat down. The vacant chairs placed at it were soon filled with members of the taekwondo team, Grace Lee, Mr Kim and Paulo.

Herr Jäger motioned for two more officers to remove the large suitcase that had been beside him. He then stood up, walked behind his chair and tapped a wine glass with a spoon.

‘And there, my friends, goes the real Volterra Caeretan stamnos of Artume,’ he announced, ‘off to its rightful home at the Museum in Zürich,’ he said.

HP’s jaw dropped as she listened to the Professor address his lunch guests. She turned to her mother and hissed.

‘He’s been faking it. He doesn’t need that wheelchair at all does he?’

‘Apparently not today,’ Hera whispered back, ‘but multiple sclerosis is a disease that can have you paralysed one day and walking the next. The Professor is definitely the real thing.’

HP felt foolish and immediately asked the Professor a question that had been worrying her.

‘What about the Evil Queen?’ asked HP.

‘I am afraid we haven’t heard the last of her,’ he said. ‘I just received a phone call from Herr Meier who was very upset about the arrest of his loyal secretary. It seems that Frau Schwartz uncovered a trade in fake artefacts and was exposing it when she was wrongfully arrested by the German police. Naturally she knows nothing about this transvestite fellow who was caught with the real stamnos, nor how he managed to get hold of it in the first place.’

‘She’s dumped him right in the Gaggi all right,’ said Wilhelm.

‘I did ask him, the one you children call the Big Bad Wolf, that badly disguised transvestite the International Police took away, about the stamnos switch. But he’s just a runner, someone who moves the antiques and artefacts from one party to another. He doesn’t know who the big boss of the show is or even how it all works. I’m guessing that at least one copy of the stamnos was already made and exchanged on the tram between the museum and *The Lab*,’ said Herr Jäger. Probably in the same way it took place at the *Metropol*.’

‘You mean by having two identical cases, one with the fake and one with the real one,’ said HP.

‘So the one in the museum at the moment really is a fake?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘Yes,’ answered Herr Jäger.

‘And there are a dozen more fakes?’ asked HP.

‘Perhaps not a dozen, but it doesn’t hurt to befuddle your enemy every now and then,’ he said, and gave a broad grin.

‘So how do you convince the befuddled Herr Meier that Frau Schwartz is really a crook?’ asked HP.

‘Love is blind,’ said Herr Jäger, and ordered two bottles of Swiss white wine, two bottles of Spanish red wine, a jug of Süssmost and a pot of green tea for his guests.

‘You mean men are stupid,’ said HP.

Hera shot her daughter a disapproving frown and Grace Lee smiled at her.

‘And that is why we seek out clever wives and secretaries to see us through,’ said Herr Jäger, and smiled at his granddaughter.

‘The man speaks the truth eh Ricco?’ said Wilhelm and embraced Hera.

‘No argument from me Willy,’ Ricco said and smiled at Claudia.

‘When I grow up I’m going to marry a clever girl,’ said Angelo. I’m going to marry HP.’

‘Ewwww. Don’t be disgusting,’ chorused HP and Gina.

‘Only joking,’ said Angelo, ‘I’m going to marry Nerino.’

It’s only fitting that I have the last word. You may have some unanswered questions, so let me attempt to satisfy your curiosity:

Was there a reward for the restoration of the real stamnos to the museum? NO. Did Claudia Schwartz change her evil ways? NO. Has the trade in forged antiquities stopped? NO. Did HP’s parents stop philosophizing? NO. Did Frau Koch stop hating children and foreigners? NO. Did Frau Nadig stop polishing under the mat? YES. Did Angelo marry a cat? How do I know? He’s still a kid. Did HP get into more trouble? YES. But that’s another story.

Oh and in case you’re wondering what happened to the fake stamnos in the museum, last Christmas I received a very nice present from my favourite niece. I gave it pride of place on top of the mantelpiece. It came in a padded box with a certificate to prove that it is a genuine fake!

THE END