

Doomed to die hard

(A global thriller)

Werner Kellner

Hi,

I'm Stephan Vettel, a global acquisition manager in the weaponry business, and I'm going to tell you the story of a smart life being turned from easy going to worse and ending up in a disaster.

Starting with a retro perspective I shall not omit how my own and my family lives were toppled upside down after the catastrophe of a strange airplane crash.

It was the last in a series of hostile events. Before that life was always nice to me, especially when, not so long ago and as a real upheaval of my career like a windfall profit, a slice of an attractive partnership in my father-in-law's firm came along. Maybe Karl Had considered this as conspiracy of silence when I stumbled about something ugly, and he wanted to squelch my curiosity. In retro perspective that was the time when my troubles started and while I happily focused on the obvious, the important things were sliding out of my hands and my life changed from an exciting gamble into a vicious spiral.

I do hope that I can finish my story, but anyway I could not stop my wife, Laura, to join me in telling her view by interrupting my narrative and you know women as usual have the right for the last word. Don't overestimate her #metoo claptrap. Sorry to say, but Laura could not escape the dynamics I had kicked off, and so she was also drawn into the vortex of violence and aggression without getting to know about before it happened to her. I hope you are as emotionally wound up as we were when it came to the show down.

Enjoy and have fun

Stephan

PS and final remark: Don't worry, it's all fiction!

Chapter I, The 'Halloween' Party

Saturday, 29th October, 22:30, 2016, Odenwald

It had been an unusual hot autumn day, and the night was still comfortably warm under a star spangled sky. It was dead calm outside the lodge where the sounds of music coming from the big living room downstairs were only faintly displayed as a soft rhythmic booming.

The bunny masked prey quivered with fear and the growing pain made her stumbling aimlessly through the dark hallway in the attic of the hunting lodge, where the hunters had chased her up into their gameplay. Inside the house the rhythmic and hard basses of metallic music blasted, which for hours dulled her will and paralyzed her brain.

When her mack had brought her with the darkened panes van to the hunter's party arranged by one of the hunters late last evening, she was expecting a straining and boozy night, as he had organized for her many times since her arrival from Romania a month ago. But she never ever endured such a nightmare of abuse, force and brutality before. The brawny driver had stopped at a small turning-point in the middle of the forest, and a guy his face concealed behind a bear mask had already awaited her and accompanied her along the short forest path under huge, dark spruces to the hunter's lodge, while the mack turned the van around and the red lights of the car disappeared in the darkness of the forest. The spacious house lay in the midst of a large forest clearing and in front of the lodge were spread out the dead game of the day essentially wild hogs neatly lined up with the mandatory spruce branch through the snout.

But today the trophy the hunters were looking for had nothing to do with the wild hogs lined up in front of her.

She shuddered.

Next to the house locked in a fenced kennel, the hunting hounds had barked endlessly and jumped up and down at the grate. Mawkish statues were placed in the four corners symbolizing hunting scenes.

The twilight had come down on the lodge and sunset was nearly finished. Inside, the house illumination was low and on the ground floor a large living room occupied half of the house's area while the other half was filled with a nice and well equipped bar. A wooden flight of stairs lead up to the

attic's landing on the first floor. She shivered with her tank suit like bunny costume, high heels and bunny-style face mask, which the guys had demanded as her outfit, and goosebumps marked her worry in realizing the alien scenario.

At the age of fifteen years and three months ago she had been abducted from an orphan asylum at Bucharest in the dead of the night, and upon arrival in an unknown City in Germany she had been handed over into the control of her also unknown mack, who as a first things to do demonstrated the power he had on her and immediately cashed-in her passport and money. During the following months she had been drugged and forced to satisfy all kinds of strange preferences and to help perverted and disgusting guys at all ages to give them relieve as demanded, but the gage and the ample tip that the gentlemen were willing to spend for fucking a tiny Lolita did not at all compensate her for the shame she felt. She was accustomed to blank out her feelings during such nights. She had been ordered to appear in this bunny costume, which she found a funny Halloween idea, but she was plunged into a hunter's party, unaware what the agenda was and that they were waiting for their last fresh game of the day. She didn't know that those parties happened regularly and this year it was her turn to be exposed to the hidden wishes of the gentlemen, who were driving up their perversions more extreme than before, otherwise her expectation would have certainly been differently.

It was the intent of the guys to share jointly and several, like their business attitude, this kind of illegal activities to replace trust with fear of being extorted by their friends. None of them trusted the other one but still they made successful business and had become immensely rich with their killer mentality and ruthlessness which linked them together. Towards the outside world or any possible witness like the bunny in front of them they were extremely shy and determined to keep their anonymity by using coded names and email addresses if they would communicate with each other on special issues.

During the former hunting-party nights they were overindulging every time more in their sexual abnormalities. This year a guy, called with his code name *Volk*, had announced a surprise trophy event which was supposed to top their list of past cruelties. The guy, who was grown up in an archaic environment where female's life depended on their owner's will or despotism, who accepted only total subordination to his desires. And tonight a deadly flame was about to burn down the few mental barriers which were left in their boozed up brain. What sounded to be totally out of control and an irrational party set up, was in fact a detailed plan in a

dirty game orchestrated from the background by the *Volk* to give him a lever to get the *Lynx* under his control by pushing him into a deadly trap. Indeed, neither the *Lynx*, who was this year the principal organizer of the usual after-hunt party, which they regularly used as close-out of their profitable business deals, nor his cronies, were aware before they started clinking glasses what would come up. They were keen to hear and cheered when he told them that today's party had been topped with fresh game and some nice rules allowing everybody to live out their desires to the extreme and especially that he was not expecting they had to return their game this time in healthy conditions.

It goes without saying that the *Lynx* was also not aware that he was supposed to be the real victim tonight and the young game was just the bait. Anyway he would end up similarly boozed and drugged as their prey and would not notice what happened around him and with him.

The fellow, who looked like a *Bear* and was called accordingly, had accompanied the girl to the place, had pushed her without a word into the living room and happily joined the group although he had a lower status in the team. The girl watched the group with a certain unease, since her clients were disguised, better said they were 'casual' dressed and their faces were covered with masks of carnivores and some were already half naked or even displaying some strange tattoos. She had seen the pattern for the first time on the shoulder of her mack when he demonstrated her future duties in detail. They had certainly been drinking hard until now to get into this agitated and violent mood, and a cloud of vodka haze and the sour breath of the boozed up bozos struck her as she was received with a loud hello. She stumbled on her high heels helpless to the group and before she could think about her best reaction she felt being drawn on the couch, offered a large glass of vodka to be emptied in one gulp and it should not be the last one that night. She could distinguish a mix of English with an Estonian and even French pronunciation and a German dialect she did not understand very well, but she was not here to chat but to meet the desires of the greedy clientele who started to fill her up.

She counted at least six men, who took her right after the first glasses of vodka, without introduction, and cummed into and onto her. Together with the vodka she had been certainly drugged, since she could gradually only and as per slow motion realize what happened with her. And while she was grabbed and taken by the first and handed over to the next one either on the sofa, the soft rug or the hard table, they ripped off her costume, except for the rabbit mask with the long ears.

When they all have had their first round of fun and the gentlemen had shot their first powder, the real ordeal began and she was leashed, chased, beaten and humiliated for hours through the dimly illuminated house. Again and again she felt being penetrated from re-strengthened masked predators ruthlessly until exhaustion. A variety of bedrooms lined up in the dark upstairs hallway and two bathrooms at the end of the aisle. The hunters continued drinking, and off and on one pulled her into one of the bedrooms, she realized fixations and suffocated while being abused and sometimes her actual tormentor fell asleep and let her go until the next one continued. She felt in spite of the mist in her head that the pain was constantly increasing despite the sedatives and painkillers she had been forced to consume, and whenever she felt unleashed and tried to hide herself quivering all over, one of the tormentors with a smeary grin pulled her out of her hiding place and outlived his cruel fun maltreating her tortured body again. The guy with the strongest stamina should have the right for the final shot and the trophy.

She could no longer concentrate and remember what had happened in the last hours, and anguished she perceived her environment in a retarded manner and as through thick fog. She had since long lost the feeling for time, the music boomed incessantly, when she sought her salvation in the bathroom upstairs, utilizing a moment when the latest one to plague her got tired, crawling exhausted along the hallway to the room at the end of the aisle. She moved carefully on.

Her bloody fingers felt a door frame and she leaned heavily breathing against it when she felt again gripped by strong arms, dragged into the room and thrown on the bed. She wanted to cry out and defend herself, but she could neither grasp a clear thought nor fend off the hunter. And she was not alone in the bed with her tormentor, she felt a body lying next to her and heard heavy snoring. While she looked at the unmasked guy with the *Lynx* mask lying next to him on his pillow she felt a massive body squeezing her down and she felt the powerful thrusts with which the man, pierced something into her. It felt as if her body was burning from the inside out and she lost consciousness again.

Chapter II, Died to survive

Stephan's story

1

Sunday, 2nd July, 01:30, 2017, Chicago, Arlington Heights

The weather has changed overnight.

I tried to orient myself in the flickering darkness of an area I had never seen before, and I cursed my decision having left the umbrella in the hotel. When I had stepped out of the Tilton hotel shortly after one o'clock in the morning, a gusty wind was blowing through the canyons of Chicago and dark clouds flew low above the city, but it didn't look like rain.

As soon as I had approached on the interstate-90 to the scene of the accident, rescue vehicles, police cabs and fire brigade trucks took me over, while on the opposite lane ambulances with their shrill wail of sirens were heading towards the city. I had parked the car about a mile off the crash site in walking distance, was in direct contradiction to what was going on around me.

The wind had rapidly increased in strength and developed into a vigorous storm, which I had been fighting for a few minutes, and which almost took my breath away. A fine, warm rain stung with needle tips and hard drops my face. The hands buried deep in the pockets of my trench, I struggled with clenched teeth against the choppy wind.

It may have been five hundred meters to the supermarket.

The state of intensity barely loosened its grip the closer I came to the scene of the crash.

I felt as if my power supply was running on emergency systems. I noticed every detail, every movement and every sound, but the processing was done through a time lag and obscure filter. Stunned and with a tunnel-type vision I perceived the hectic bustle in front of me in slo-mo and felt the closeness of death. My sarcasm and coolness, with which I would normally have controlled the situation, had given way to kind of fear which kept me firmly clutching and constricting my thoughts.

At first I had only heard the heavy noise of the rain and in between the wailing sirens of emergency vehicles, and now I noticed other sounds too, and a ghostly illuminated scene popped up. In the entire district, the lights were off, and countless headlights turned the ruins and the area into an unreal scenery.

The blue and red lights of the emergency vehicles flashed all around, and from the shredded construction of the supermarket into which the jet has plunged, there were still wreaths of smoke surging, even though a thick foam rug covered the debris. The supermarket was located in the middle of the business area of Arlington Heights, parallel to Road 14, right on the edge of a residential area. From the front of the pinkish building were broken out large wall parts, the roof made of reinforced concrete was also broken, and the steel beams and columns of the support structure, on which the billboards with their now dead neon lights were mounted, have been bent like matches, as if a giant fist had slammed them. The cockpit of the airplane and a large part of the fuselage carrying the first class cabin were nose down on the ground and massively distorted covering the parking lot in front of the market, with the rest of the fuselage being slashed and ripped apart like a sardine can inside the market hall. Apparently, parts of the reinforced concrete structure and the steel supports of the innumerable billboards on the flat roof had cut the fuselage at the impact of the aircraft in pieces tearing it apart. The engines had abruptly set fire to the wings with the full tanks integrated into them, and the fire obviously gave little chance to the few survivors of the fatal impact. Metal parts and masonry were blackened by blaze marks of the fire that had raged here, and which now had been nearly extinguished.

In Arlington Heights, mainly populated by people who could afford to live a little outside in an upscale location and yet close to the city, the bungalows and the spacious gardens revealed that the architects and landscape designers in charge understood their business.

Flying parts of the flight impact crashed into the residential area without appreciating the person's reputation and living style, and a number of bungalows had been set on fire. As I passed by, I observed like watching a movie the residents standing outside in small groups with umbrellas, wrapped in dripping rain coats tossed over jammies and excitedly confounded.

Although the police had blocked the accident scene extensively, I was able to pass relatively easy through the chaos and to gain access close to the

emergency center of fire brigades and technical assistance services, which were engaged in the first rescue work.

The more and harder pouring rain dampened all the noises and demanded the utmost efforts for the rescue teams in trying to locate and salvage survivors. With tense and sweaty faces over smeared jumpsuits, they struggled to get out the dead and more important the heavy injured or dying survivors.

I climbed over shredded sheet steel and bent construction steel parts and went through between houses where firefighters in glaring orange jumpsuits eliminated the last fire nests, and continued towards the supermarket and the wreckage of the downed flight.

The fire brigade's control center was set up at the parking lot just in front of the totally destroyed supermarket, from which parts of the building and the wreck were removed and dismantling with heavy equipment had started.

I walked like a dreamer, and I was still awake in a strange nearly remote mode, as if I were in the eye of a hurricane with everything swirling around. The airplane wreckage was largely burned out, and the glistening light of cutting torches, with which helpers cut open the way to the trapped and burned victims, flashed up like stroboscopic light over the blinding headlights, which plunged the chaos into a radiant brightness. Aircraft parts, of which the larger ones were to be marked for later investigations, were far apart, and inspectors of the Federal Air Inspectorate had begun their work in search of the black box.

Teams were searching with dogs and gadgets in search of victims and survivors across the wreckage of the plane and the broken down building structure involving the surroundings. On the edge of the parking area in front of the supermarket, a tent has been built, and in the glaring spotlight I assumed corpses and dismembered parts of corpses of victims of the crash covered by blankets and lined up.

People were running back and forth and carrying some valuables, the injured were first taken care of in a medical tent, and for an observer it was difficult to see a coordinated rescue operation in all the confusion.

If Robertas, my unlucky flight partner, was among the victims and had already been found, he should be there. The idea that my corpse was not covered under a white sheet in this tent, just because of a spontaneous reaction, was chasing me goose bumps over my back and I chuckled quietly at this thought.

I turned in the search for officials toward the operational center trying to figure out the names of the fatally accident victims. A young, exhausted police officer tried to dismiss me politely but insistently. At my urging, he went with me to the operational vehicle of the chief of the emergency operation. When I cited Robertas' and my name, he denied briefly, what could have meant anything, but clearly he did not want to take any official position, and requested me again to leave the scene of the accident.

I did not step back either and continued asking how many survivors had been rescued so far, and to which hospitals they had been brought. There were just less than a dozen survivors, and he could not tell whether they were passengers or crew members, and he refused any further information. There was no list of hospitals. He responded more and more unfriendly and to my lie purporting to be a family member, he did not even elicit a single statement. He referred to the press release scheduled for eight o'clock in the morning and asked me to leave immediately the accident area if I wanted to avoid serious troubles.

I drove back to the hotel after an hour and, among other things, I was ruminating over the issue whether I should call hospitals directly to find out something about Robertas.

A thousand thoughts shot through my head, of which everyone was right and wanted to steer me in any direction. Breathing deeply I forced myself to rest. Hectic actions had never helped me before. It was certainly reasonable to wait until the press conference and the chances for a decision were better, what I should do next.

My wristwatch showed shortly after half past three o'clock in the morning, and I was still in this strange nightmare conditions, in which I seemed more like an observer than an affected one. I unconsciously pinched my arm, but the pain was as real as the cars that passed by.

I decided to return to the hotel and driving into the car park the long rows of unlit headlights of the parked cars were staring at me like the eyes of the dead. The elevator arrived on my floor when I was flashed by my erroring nerves thinking that I forget to pick my keys at the reception. While I stood hesitantly, following the pulse to return to the lobby, I realized that I had still the key in my pockets since I drove off.

For some unknown reason I pressed anyhow the lobby button and the lift was quietly humming and heading downwards.

2

Saturday, 1st July, 2017, 22:30, Chicago O' Hare

Having the noise in my ears of the people passing by hastily, slaloming through the mass of electric driven carts, and pedestrians hurrying to their flights or to the baggage claim and hearing the unbreakable loudspeakers, made me aware where I was. Like in a large organism the life pulsed on O' Hare, unfolded in a colorful range of movements, sounds and colors without revealing the motives, origins and destinations of the masses of people flowing across the airports pathways.

It was now just after nine o'clock p.m., and as I saw the situation, there was nothing more I could do but get me a hotel room.

On the way out of the departure hall, I checked the best options to get into the city without losing too much flexibility.

The rented car which Marianne had booked in advance, with the option for a cost-free no-show, to go from the airport to the hotel with the intent to return to the airport tomorrow morning for the originally booked connection flight to Seattle was a medium size car which I would probably upgrade to a nice limousine.

With the small-sized boarding baggage I carried with me, and because of the still clogged highways at that time, the Rapid Transit Trains plus the Chicago Elevated would have been the fastest means to get me to the hotel, but with the category of passengers expected around that late hour, that was not my choice in Chicago.

Annoyed as I was, and with my adrenaline level high, the furious mood made me go faster, until I almost ran into a young woman with two small kids. I pressed an apology, took a deep breath and tried to take a normal pace and calm down.

The arrivals hall was crowded with people, and I looked around looking for the rental car counters. I saw the yellow car-rental shield shining from afar and headed straight for it.

A totally disinterested young lady with heart refreshingly glaring colors in her face did not bother to reconcile the interests of her employer and her own, and with her irritating style she put my anyway itchy nerve costume on another test. It was obvious that she had no desire to get her clients happy. Maybe her shift change was delayed.

I asked for an upgrade of the mid-size car and my angry mood increased while she sluggishly checked whether the type of car I wanted was available. And it was not.

I was just waiting for the moment when she would start to paint her fingernails, so bored she drove me nuts. Last not least, in concrete terms after thirty minutes, everything was regulated after having paid with my private credit card of my Bahamian bank account which served as my fail safe payment mode, and left her to the next patient customer.

I checked out the assigned parking deck and number of the parking lot where I would find the car. Leaning back in the car's driver seat, I had a lot of pensive time to cool down because despite of the late time of the day I squeezed myself for two hours in the dense traffic flow into the city.

Out of the blue and later I would really wonder why I did so, I called the Tilton Palm House from the airport to check the availability of a room for that night just as the more comfortable alternative against the economically preferred Waterfall Place Hotel which Marianne had reserved as an option two days ago. Only much later I should realize that the change fitted seamlessly into my future scenarios which should dance thereafter through my mind.

I had stayed at the Tilton Palm Hotel many times and loved the luxurious and comfortable style and flair of the oldest of all Tilton hotels, where the entrance hall with beautiful frescoes and columns with stucco and paintings on the walls reminded me of the old Europe. The carpets were discreetly tuned to the design of the huge lobby and dampened the noises of the entertaining guests, who were lost in the small corners with red plush groups of sofas.

I strolled between the antique-looking columns to check in at the reception, and waited until it was my turn.

The girl at the reception took my personal data, accepted a cash payment for the next three nights and asked me kindly how I would feel. We chatted casually, and after handing me the key, she bade a good night.

I went to my room first to fresh up. On the way to the hotel I had a short stop at a supermarket to buy at least the essentials like pajamas and underwear and sweat shirts to change since my luggage had gone unaccompanied. I placed my toothbrush and my shaver carefully below the huge mirror in the bathroom and carefully the clothes in the cupboard in entrance hall of my suite.

The fridge was well stocked, and a Jack's Daniel tempted my unobtrusively. I put three ice cubes in the jar and gave me a double. While

I was gently moving the glass, the ice melted under fierce crunch and cracking.

Until the whiskey had the right temperature, I put myself under the shower and showered alternating hot and cold, as if that would help to calm me down again.

Slowly, very slowly I felt like a human being again. The whiskey tasted excellent, and feeling much better I let the first sip flow appreciatively over my tongue.

I turned the TV on and scanned quickly the various channels where dumb shows and sports broadcasts were alternating in a boring spectrum. The TV screen itself did not seem to enjoy great popularity with room service, dusty as it looked like. I could not refrain my hygienic urge and with a paper tissue I cleaned the screen so far that the image was halfway sharp. Baseball wasn't really my thing and there was no desire to watch the nervy talk and stupid game shows, and while I continued clicking myself through the channels to find a pay-tv, I caught a news channel. I had to switch back because I had already moved on to the next channel until my brain had processed the images and the message which scurried for a few seconds on the screen.

News reported about the crash of Flight XU 2463 from Chicago to Seattle over Chicago's suburb at Arlington Heights shortly after departing at about 21:45.

I blinked and pinched my eyes together with fright.

I opened my eyes again, but the message went on undeterred.

There have been no findings about survivors and until now, a few flight victims could be recovered from inside the wreckage and even in the vicinity of the impact site, without indicating the status. And there were some fatal casualties and an unspecified number of injured among the late shift employees and visitors of a shopping center. Even among the residents of the adjacent residential area where the flight had downed casualties had been occurred.

Some witnesses were interviewed who had heard a loud bang, others spoke of a hissing sound, as if air escaped from a car tire, and then the airplane had fallen from the sky. The pictures from the scene of the accident were horrible, and there was still fire ablaze in many places. The massive support of fire brigades, ambulances and heavy technical equipment focused to salvage the victims did not allow yet for a full picture of the extent of the accident and could not be communicated.

A help desk phone number was displayed at the bottom of the screen, announcing that information about the names and state of the passengers

would be available earliest in the late morning next day. A short call confirmed that my name was on the provisional victims' list as well as the name of Robertas Schmittat.

I leant back and listened to the news, but without being able to concentrate on any specific detail and perceiving the voice of the speaker as low as a distant tone.

Finally my nervousness forced me out of the room, I left the hotel and ran through the city until I somehow came across Michigan Boulevard, ran through the Grand Park to Lake Michigan and sat on the shore of the lake. I had not digested the earlier received mail message which put my life upside down, and its consequences yet, when the next blow hit me.

With thoughts lost and like being in the middle of an evil dream I stared at the dark water of the lake and tried to concentrate.

The new situation had come too suddenly and unexpectedly, and was too numbing to allow me focusing on a clear thought.

I did not like at all being tricked by the events of the last weeks, and almost I would have crashed in the execution of an unwanted and squeezed-into task and being sorted out right after of my so far profitable life.

I shove the pictures back and force but the facts remained and also how the situation would appear to the outside world.

Obviously, I would be considered having suffered a catastrophic and fatal accident which was about to be officially confirmed.

This airplane crash, which I had missed without intention and incidentally, seemed to be a turnaround of a course which had downed my life in the last weeks and months.

Whether now either fate or force majeure or a higher being had decided to spare me from a spontaneous death did not really bother me, I was more concerned about the next steps to be taken and in what direction to go.

I was lately definitely not in control of my life but now it seemed I've returned to the lucky side. I shook off the imminent anxiety of being caught in a trap or centered in a battue.

I felt the change and that made me breathe with deep relieve.

The thoughts dancing through my neurons equating the state of "being dead" with "being free to play" worked so fast that it frightened me first but quickly my rescue genes dominated.

Indeed I was free and the cards at hand did not look too bad.

How cool.

I felt that I was as free as I've never been and maybe never would be again. Inhaling deeply the fresh air lifted the misty clouds from my brain.

Still quivering, I realized that a feeling of malicious joy in me germinated and then gradually overwhelmed the worries from before. The glee I felt about the fact that not everything ran according to Matthias Tamm's calculus was marred only by the death of innocent passengers and also of Robertas Schmittat. Although, I wasn't too sad concerning Robertas' disease due to the hostile role he played in the upcoming intrigue behind my back.

More and more the mist following the shock of the crash event cleared and I saw my situation as a way for me to escape the looming scenario that hovered over my head and return to my easy life I liked so much. I had tortured my brain for a long time for a possible way out of the continuously tied up tighter mesh around me, and that surely was one. With this new escape chance in front of me, I freed my mind from the question marks and concerns banging upon me earlier from all sides.

Fresh breezes ruffled the lines of waves sweeping the graveled beach to my feet and low clouds floated across the sky. Turning up my collar and feeling chilly despite the balmy summer night.

My path had always been relatively predictable, and I had interpreted this predictability as my strengths. Easygoing and smoothly strolling along a success road always being ready to harvest the low hanging fruits without sweat and difficulty was motto I liked.

But lately, too much has happened. And that drastically reduced my willingness to book this disaster as another simple case on my account for failures. I felt like I was running on a collapsing bridge, forcing me to run and run.

My problems with Laura had started with her increasing criticality and ended with open resistance to my business plans driving me more and more out of my comfort zone. The conflicts spilled over from business into my private life and the growing mistrust was accompanying us. Caused to a good piece by Matthias Tamm who had targeted and mobbed me since he joined the company. Teeth gritting I saw him striving to change my wife into a willing helper in destructing me. Maybe I wanted to see it like that as excuses for my own infidelities, my fair neurons piped up.

My mind moved into an emotional roller coaster mode.

The pleasantry of having survived boiled down to the fact that I had escaped a sudden death and also my handcuffed business life, and I felt I could stop the bridge from collapsing unabatedly.

I did really had a respite bitterly necessary.

My self-pity forced me into thinking about the reaction of those I was going to leave behind me, and bewildered I reviewed the reaction of my family, friends and important influencers of my life.

My brain formed images, and the images became sequences. As if I was invisibly observing each of them in different places, when on Monday the news would have reached them, possibly.

Laura popped up. Laura the straight forward, lively and humorous mother of my kids with wits and smartness but lately more frustrated with me than in marital harmony would have called my time-out request an escapade, what I wanted to see rather as a door opener.

When I had met Laura for the first time following an introduction by her father, and although she was at that time not the sexiest woman at the place, she had tempted me to light her fire and finally I grabbed the chance to marry into a posh and wealthy entrepreneur's family. And the outlook to be part of one of the richest families in Germany encouraged me to reduce my benchmark to sleep with a woman who was a bit off my dreams of a stunner. Interestingly Laura became after every birth of our kids gorgeous and sexy. Our sexual life developed accordingly well and I enjoyed the way Laura spoiled my little man and my lust and Laura didn't get the short end of the stick burgeoning with the years to come.

Her father-in-law, driven by the hope I would comply with the recommendation being a high-potential, offered me after the marriage a job in the purchase department which was not bad but also not a big thing to be proud of. To climb up the career ladder the head of the purchase department had to suffer a lethal accident with his motor bike ending up under the wheels of a heavy truck and I was the best of the rest to step into his shoes.

Depression followed with being re-positioned as a one man acquisition show reporting to the freshly hired Dr. Matthias Tamm who was as board member in charge of all sales activities. Being motivated and instructed to acquire weak suppliers as possible market openers I acted with a lot of freedom but not necessarily with the lucky hand he expected from me.

It was imminent that he mobbed me from day one onwards and played dirty games with me.

What worried me more and more in my actual situation was the question whether Laura shared his mindset about me and might have been involved and privy into this latest conspiracy? Our critical debates and the hidden feedback I got from others on the job, were all adding up hints, and they increased in number and importance.

Out of the blue I grasped eight months ago a chance which should give me access to the family assets and had nothing to do with my business success. On that very day, which still was a mystery for me, I've been asked by Karl to pick him later in the night from a party with too much alcohol involved, because he did not like any public knowledge or even gossip about. Those were his words.

I could smell a shameful event reading in the rearview mirror his desperate demeanor and expression when he sat quietly in the back seat. Two days later when I met him at his usual early hours in the office, I had offered my help to eliminate any trace of the nightly event being quite innocent and without knowing that I was just stirring up a hornet's nest. I got the impression that he not only wanted to hide something but for a moment I thought he looked frightened at me. My intent was only to assure him I would help him in closing down whatever it was. Instead of any direct response he asked me to keep quiet about the scene and without a break he offered me a five percent share of his firm which was at that time already in the range of two million Euros. He did not come across really warmhearted when he made the offer and I misinterpreted his detachment totally. I overheard how neutral his tone was and without giving me a second glance he had waved me out of his office. I needed a second only to realize my chance and I took it. Reminiscing I'm still surprised how quickly he won his poise back and offered me a package stepping up my life. He was always a tough guy and pressurizing Karl made him mainly dangerous. And it was obvious that Karl's attitude in general changed to the worse after that mishap.

I tried to calm my unrest pretending it did not matter whether my efforts or my skills boosted my life style or if my smartness helped out at the right moment, but I also ignored completely all signals which had drawn me thereafter in a power play game which was not really mine.

Maybe I should have watched out and listened more carefully when he jokingly opined me, without declaring it openly, on the side of the bad guys in his business network since then.

The suspicion, Matthias could have something to do with the dark cloud shading Karl's fate and that he was now lashing out for me, was as new for me as it was obvious.

Pity was that I had neither clue nor evidence for the invisible underlying motifs. What I saw in black and white was that this no-name group with my boss being directly involved was going to have Karl under their control and maybe even Laura.

I knew Robertas had Estonian roots as well as Matthias Tamm but I did not link them so far with a joint strategy behind the latest alarming occurrences. And now with Robertas being dead it was even more difficult for me to dig out the truth.

The mission which sent Robertas and myself travelling to Seattle, and which we could not comply anymore, was far too important and the consequences were inestimable for my direct boss, Dr. Matthias Tamm that he would change or stop his hostile activities.

The mail message occurred to me again.

The direct threat as well as the other stuff I got to know by a lucky moment from Robertas' laptop that turned my idyllic world upside down.

I've reread and analyzed back and forth the emails I've copied to my account and it was only clear that Karl was involved and I had to wait patiently for his reaction. I could only hope that he was able to act freely and that he also wanted to confide in me which was not to be taken for granted.

For this idiot Matthias who wanted to derail me and take over what was mine I would never work again.

Arranging and re-arranging the few puzzle pieces I had on hand warned me that he was just a puppet on a string and both the puppet master and the puppet were aiming for influence and power on the market place against or through our company. The insight that I and maybe not only I were obstacles in their path was not surprising.

I caught my fists, and it took me quite a while to get calmer.

But perhaps everything would develop differently now and the rules of the game worked out in my favor if I played the cards right.

Since Dr. Matthias Tamm had announced to finish up my future and he confirmed once again to be my enemy number one, my anger turned into a desire to hit back.

But without a plan and resources my hands were bound and there was no free space for further mistakes to be made. And even worse a counter fight from my former position would bring me back into a situation I had to get rid of.

I was not only going for a hide away or a time-out now, instead I could use the wild card I've got so unexpected to make a full restart. Well knowing, once I really took this risky chance to escape, then it would probably be irreversible.

The pressure to decide spontaneously for one of two possibilities caused me more head ache than the glee gave me joy.

In fact, I hated situations where emotions took the lead. I hated it when common sense was turned off. I got up and shook off the worries, to see my future bright again.

Two hours after the news hit me, I found myself in a vicious circle in which all the considerations were turning my mind further towards unsafety and chaos like a merry-go-round. I needed someone to listen to me and maybe cheer me up and fasten the break. I went back to the hotel and decided to leave behind the past and to step up to the plate.

My problem in the company was not solved by the crash, and Matthias Tamm would slaughter the situation without scruple in his favor. I could not undo his decision to destroy my existence.

And I was desperate that Laura couldn't or worse wouldn't help me in this situation either. I shivered, although it was definitely not coming from the outside cool air temperature. I was cold from the inside out.

At the hotel I made my way to the bar, which seemed to me at that moment the most harmless place to get rid of my down turned spirits. My eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness quite quickly, but the loud music made every conversation impossible. I sipped the whiskey I had ordered, and walked towards the elevator at the reception. When I asked the sleepy-looking night porter if he could recommend someone nice and submissive with whom I could have a casual chat, he grinned dirty, but he regretted not being able to help me. I would not have dreamed of this possibility under normal circumstances, but spontaneously and now I liked the thought because I was sure that a paid listener could afford my chit-chat patiently and maybe give me some relaxation by doing so. She wouldn't make any claims to me to prove me a predator. Even if I was totally failing, she would let it happen without a comment. I shoved a ten dollar bill over the counter, but he pushed it back shrugging his shoulder. Well, then. I went to the elevator and drove up to my room.

Was Laura right now the right choice to talk my problems through?

Or would Devushka be on the phone when I called her?

I was less jealous than concerned about the manipulation of her ending in abuse. I could damage more than get the help I needed.

The phone was there, I just needed to pick up the handset.

Smartness normally helped me out overcoming crisis scenes, why shouldn't it work this time? But it would be more difficult this time to upheave my nagging concerns with desperate humor into courage.

Weighing the pros and cons I pondered the whys of calling her.

Nope, what should I really tell her?

That she was wrong in questioning my life style, my plans or about the man-hunt which I had escaped so luckily without knowing whoever was involved in it. That she was also in danger and being chased without being aware of it? Or about the menacing risk of a strong blackmail cornering Karl?

Professional correctness was never my preferred way of life, I simply preferred the effortless way to make the money and the comfort required for an easygoing life style. Until our crisis culminated with her break-out two days ago, which had probably been suppressed for some time, I did not spend too many thoughts on her complaints about my unsuccessful business life.

I took a shower and tried to sleep afterwards. Although I should have been dead tired from the time lag, I could not fall asleep for some time. Driven by constant restlessness I switched the news on again, but the situation was the same as reported at 21:30, although it was in the meantime just after midnight.

The news spokesman apologized promptly for missing actual details since the accident site had been hermetically sealed off and no new announcements were made public. Rumors have already been circulated that the accident was not caused by technical or human error, but that a terrorists' attack might have hit the flight. The speculations ranged from fundamental Islamic forces to disguised secret service activities targeting high ranked White House staff among the victims.

Local politicians gave their statements as well as two conservative congressmen, who expressed themselves very cautiously. I listened and watched for a while, undecided about what I should do. Then I turned off the TV and dressed up again. As the crash site was only twenty-five miles away from the center, I decided spontaneously to check the place.

3

Saturday, 1st July, 2017, 17:00, Chicago O' Hare

When I awoke, I felt lost in time and space. I lay still and threatening thoughts came back slowly and painfully. I felt a slightly different mood since the monotonous background noise had pushed me into a light sleep.

Before I had fallen asleep, I had tried to empty my brain and to shove away the thoughts of the painstaking program, which awaited me during the next days, into a distant corner of his consciousness. In the afternoon I had worked through the blackmailing arguments with which I had been forced to handle the company's restructuring program. It was not sure at all whether it would help me to maintain my fuzz-free way of life, which I had been able to step up long ago by coincidence.

After completion and saving the final report on the planned cost cutting program, in fact I did not like how things had developed. Normally, I would be able to dive quickly away into a short and dream-free resting sleep being carried away by the movements of the flight. This time I was captured by an inner restlessness which did not let go. It seemed as if I was going to lose the orientation about my mental conditions. I felt that something was going on around me with my control mechanisms waning without providing any reason for.

I was tired and inwardly tense. For two weeks, the preparation of the trip had fully taken me up, and the alternating feelings during the many strange facets of a recent decision making processes had scratched my nerve costume.

Again, sleep overmanned me, and the faint sounds of my surroundings dampened my thoughts.

When I woke up again, I was sure something would go wrong. Although the monotonous vibrating of the engines had a soothing effect, something was not right. I took off the eye mask and blinked into the warm brightness as the flight suddenly tilting into a narrow curve. A wave of fear flooded me, and I listened hard to the engine's noise, but there was no discernible reason for alarm. Everything sounded normal, and the stewardesses also stood chatting and relaxed in the little galley.

The large screen on the back side separation wall to the first class area showed the current the flight data. The air flight symbol turned towards the international airport at Chicago o' Hare. The distance to the destination was indicated with 125 miles, and the flight descended slowly and evenly.

The landing approach had begun. Closing my eyes I leaned back sighing. The pilot steered the low cruising flight into the landing approach over Lake Michigan to the Chicago airport in nice weather, and the glass fronts of downtown skyscrapers reflected the rays of the low sun.

The lake was littered with a multitude of white dots, which, the deeper the flight went during the landing, turned out to be an armada of sailboats. It

was Saturday night, and anyone who could somehow set it up enjoyed the beautiful weather outside on the light waves of the lake.

The flight had obtained the landing permit without waiting time and, after a short approach loop, headed for the runway, where the pilot landed butter-softly. The almost two hours of delay, which we lost in Frankfurt at departure, the pilot could only partly catch up and landing at O' Hare in Chicago at 17:30 was only one hour late.

As usual, we hung around at the immigration desk for more than one hour before we could continue to the baggage claim and pick up the luggage. We had precisely chosen the slowest queue with the fussiest officer. Robertas, my assistant colleague for the management meeting in Seattle and flight partner, with his impressive human knowledge had suggested to take this queue because the number of Muslim type travelers was less than in the other ones giving a shorter checking time. Regretfully, our officer took all the time he needed in checking immigrants meticulously. Instead of continuing with the original plan to take the morning flight we decided unanimously to proceed with the next available flight with scheduled departure time at 19:30 to have more time in the morning available for the difficult negotiations in front of us.

The repeated glances at my watch, driven from the fear to be late for the envisaged connecting flight did not let the guy check the queue faster. Stubbornly he stayed at his pace and beckoned the people with his index finger crooking provocatively. We lost more minutes when he was replaced until he had handed over his desk to his successor, who could not make up for the delay.

Finally we arrived at the baggage claim, picked up our luggage from the conveyor belt, and hastily headed to the shuttle train, because our envisaged connection with Transways Airlines was to depart from Terminal 2. The fainting hope was that this flight was also delayed.

On the way to the station for the shuttle train we checked on the first departure screen we discovered the actual situation of our intended flight. The flight did not show up anymore, and our chance had vanished.

"Shit," shouted Robertas.

"Let's see, by when the next flight to Seattle is scheduled?" I said.

We went through the running list of various domestic American Air Carrier, and the first and only one we found was a flight operated by American XpressUnited.

"Have you ever flown with them?" asked me Robertas, and I negated.

"All right, then we'll try to rebook the whole thing," groaned Robertas.

"When are they going to board?" he asked looking again at the screen.

"Terminal 3 and boarding of XU 2463 is scheduled at 20:45 and departure time forty-five minutes later, might be tight again?"

We approached the transit ticket counter to check the availability of two seats. The flight was almost fully booked, and we were lucky to get our two seats and checked in. Of course, there was only one place left in business class, and they accepted my gold card membership from the Universe Club to get a first class upgrade.

While the shuttle train moved ahead, I stowed two folders with the print outs of documents from my pilot's briefcase into my suit case to give room for a bottle of good whiskey and some small items from the duty free shop beside my laptop and ePad. Passport and ticket I shoved into the chest pocket.

They had placed XU counter at the extreme end of Terminal Hall 3.

"Seems to be a large carrier," said Robertas dryly. I picked the ticket and we went with our luggage to the XU counter. It was half past eight o'clock, and we still had enough time to have a drink in their VIP lounge.

After all, it has been more than six months since I joined the last half year controlling meeting with the management of IAS LLP in Seattle. And maybe I got the chance for an extended weekend in Seattle with Joe and Mary. A nice car had been booked at Seattle airport and waited there for being picked up.

We have been sitting in the VIP lounge for quite a while, Robertas checking his emails while I thought about the arguments to explain the IAS guys our mission, when the first call for boarding indicated it was time to get our stuff together. Yawning, Robertas stood up stretched and putting his laptop on his trolley. He needed to pee and left.

Suspicious as I was I forced myself into an action I would earlier not even have thought about. I opened his portable and searched the mailing list of his in- and out-box for interesting emails. Scanning them through I scrolled down and the first eye catching one was subjected as '*Halloween Party*', and it was a fresh one from yesterday. Attached to it were some jpegs. I opened the mail.

It was a direct hit, and I saw it was a chain mail with a few forwards and responses the first one has been sent on 28th June only. I recognized not only the photo I saw for a moment on the hotel screen in Heidelberg but at least a dozen other photos all showing either erotic or violent activities. Everything was difficult to identify in detail, and I had not enough time to scroll them through. I quickly read a blunt 'blackmail' request from a no name sender's initials reading *BA01* directed to a *Hulk* and a *Bear* called addressees.

The content focused on the shares of a US Company to be transferred to the sender of the mail. To be done soon and frictionless. There was no signature only initials *BA01* which had nothing to do with our company's IT nomenclature and were unknown to me. Without spending a further thought I forwarded the chain email to my private email account which took a few seconds thanks to the high speed Wi-Fi in the lounge area.

Before I could flip through the rest of the emails or read any other mail further down I read a subject line of an email which Matthias had sent to Robertas this afternoon with the subject '*Change of strategy!*'.

Before I could open it, I saw from my eyes corner that Robertas had left the toilet and stopping in front of a newspaper stand he scanned the newspapers.

I deleted from his outbox the email which I had forwarded a second earlier to myself, closed the files and clapped his laptop with a quick hand.

Still arranging his zipper fly he seemed pretty relieved and, after looking at his watch, he suggested a last drink for the road before we made our way to the gate.

He went for the whiskey while I had another canned beer and I continued reading my emails. I was just reading the second time a strange mail sent around by Laura questioning the correct status on the RESUS project as an input needed for her planned press release, and it read as if she was trying to track down rumors about the uncontrollable non-profitability of the project and an announced strategy change. Quickly I typed and sent my response to Laura as a query about the information hidden and in-between the lines, and I wanted to know what was behind the indication of strategy change?

Time was running and after properly logging out of my laptop I uploaded the boarding ticket on my ePad to be ready for the boarding scan.

"Stephan, if we didn't have to be in Seattle tomorrow, I wouldn't hesitate and rebook again." I stared at him with surprise.

"I was seriously thinking to change to the next flight back to tomorrow morning, as we originally had planned, especially since we have to take this low quality carrier," he added.

I classified his remark just as a press release since he apparently was mentally with his flirt on the flight to Chicago.

"If you need it, just stay here," I mocked.

"Too bad it doesn't work, although the little bitch was a real sunshine, and we would have had a lot of fun together. What a pity," and he cheered with his glass lifted.

The ice cold beer did well and ran wonderfully through the throat.

We drank, and he still raved about his missed out sex adventure when a last call announcement for boarding reached us.

"Well, before we even miss the next flight, let's just get up and go," I said, emptying my glass.

Five minutes later, we arrived at the XU counter where an unbelievable and noisy turmoil was stimulated by the crowd of shouting people gathering around a red haired young employee.

The neat but totally nervous girl and apparently a trainee, the name plate outed her as Dorothy, caused a mess. Supervised by an elder colleague without real support, she tried to enforce a certain order in the boarding sequence for the first and business class queues while the guys from the economy class pushed from the other side, but hardly any one cared about her. Some rough and Stetson hatted Texans gave her a hard time and had a lot of fun in fretting her. Robertas, in the express boarding queue just behind me, could not withstand trying his flirt strengths and he turned her on which also did not exactly contribute to her managing capabilities. When, for what reason ever, her supervising trainer had disappeared to resolve a complaint issue with a guy, who still insisted in an upgrade, the chaos threatened to escalate.

Laughing, Robertas showed her the boarding pass for the scan, while mine was already scanned, and with an empathically whispered flirt attempt Robertas intensively tried to win her attention like 'I do love your humid eyes.' He got it and while Robertas locked with her beautiful large, dark and indeed humid eyes.

Her blushing showed she was not unimpressed.

That was the moment, when I realized I missed my commitment to Matthias Tamm, and I stood petrified right in front of Robertas and the queue pushed me forward to enter the aisle to the waiting flight.

I cursed not having followed my normal workflow and being distracted due to screening of Robertas' mail list. I definitely did not want to miss my commitment forgetting to send my final report immediately upon arrival in Chicago to Matthias. I didn't feel like giving Matthias another argument for lashing out at me.

He would run havoc, if he hadn't the fucking report on his computer now. The disconcerting email exchange with Laura and the info I gathered from Robertas Laptop had confused me and blacked out my commitment to forward it. Once I had diligently completed the report on the flight to Chicago, reread and modified it appropriately, I should have sent it right after arrival. Of course, there was plenty of time to get it done waiting in the VIP lounge.

It would be a job of a less than a minute to forward the email from my ePad with the strong Wi-Fi connection in the lounge but on board it would be difficult and the American Air Carrier were pretty restrictive with internet operations during prep of departure.

I turned round and called at Robertas abruptly that he should proceed while I was fishing the ePad out of the suitcase and squeezing the briefcase in his hand. His incredible look told me he did not understand what happened.

“Robertas, just go ahead, I need ONE minute to finish a commitment, please”, I shoved him forward and weaving my way through the crowd I headed to the waiting area.

The boarding had anyway just started and I should have sufficient time to drop in again after having sent what had to be sent. Seeking eye contact myself now with Dorothy, or rather, I tried it, but more than a hasty reaction I could not establish, since the mob continued pushing forward hard. She lowered her lashes checking out the next boarding pass and simply went on while I wedged myself out of the boarding zone. My message for being back in two minutes had obviously not been registered because of the forward pressing flow of unhappy calling out passengers.

I saw Robertas still gesturing, then I disappeared into the adjoining waiting zone. Opening my ePad and attaching the report to the email message for Matthias Tamm was a matter of seconds, and I saw in the mail inbox that Laura had not yet answered my request, but instead Marianne had forwarded something classified as important and confidential fifteen minutes ago.

A message that should send me into free fall.

I had already pressed the ENTER key to forward my final report, and another minute later I opened the email. The devil knows how she had come to this strictly confidential info, which she had deemed important enough to forward it immediately.

The message was addressed to Robertas Schmittat, written and sent by my dear boss Matthias Tamm, and looked like the one which I scanned minutes ago on Robertas' laptop with the subject reading as *'Change of strategy!'*

It was the same one I could not cross check because Robertas returned from the toilet earlier as expected.

I read it now with growing bewilderment:

Robertas,

Reverting to the brief con we had on Wednesday, it will be you to prepare in Seattle the legal side to transfer the owner-/partnership of the unit as our friend wants us to do.

I'll take care of the necessary preparations at the head office to put also our esteemed owner at rest. He has smelled something since he is running havoc across the company and we got to take care.

I will personally make sure that SV is out of the game. LV is getting closer now and keen to help.

Make sure that everything is dealt with strictly confidential until I'll join you to settle the deal. I will step in at the final round by end of next week for negotiating with the bidders (to be politically correct), signing the agreement with our friend. I'm going to arrange the "best price" myself.

Besides, I expect you to send me a daily flash report on your progress

MT

I read the text over and over again.

There were still a few minutes left to the scheduled departure, but I sat there petrified. I paled and once again Laura's warning words came to my mind which got a different significance now.

I sat stunned in the waiting area of the XU boarding zone without really perceiving my surroundings. Being distracted by my thoughts and trying to understand and analyze the corner Matthias Tamm has pushed me into. The blow had struck me completely unprepared, and I struggled to make up. Up to now I had considered Matthias behavior as mobbing, but this email message, together with the assault on Karl two days ago and the other emails I got to know today, I read as a physical threat. I knew he was a trophy hunter abundantly owning killer genes, but I was not aware that man-hunt was part of his target list. While I was relaxed expecting the typical mobbing obstacles on my road map only, the situation seemed to slip completely from my grip and I felt being suffocated.

Until last week there was no indication of a plan for selling off IAS LLP at all and my reaction to Matthias plan was rather a complaint mode than a need to defend my life. The agreed procedure on director's level was to initiate a restructuring program with a broad band of deep and harsh cost cuts, whereas I wanted to prune only the loss bringers and to grow the prospering sections of the branch. I've in the final meeting formally accepted Matthias plan against my originally preferred extended growth program, but I was still pursuing my way having my original program only slightly modified.

Only on Wednesday late Matthias had thrown his alternative plan on the table to sell off the fillet parts of the US Company and close down the rest. Now, when I read his mail correctly, he wanted even go further down by 'transferring' the shares to the unknown competitor of Karl even at a zero-price.

I had no idea how he would convince Karl of that bullshit because Karl would consider this as an unacceptable affront and a hostile act and fire him. I was pretty sure about.

So, there must be something else he would use as a selling argument for his plan. Something Karl had to consider as a benefit for himself but my imagination was not good enough to find out what that selling argument could be. At least in the very moment of mental stress I did need some time to link the alarming signs of the last days in the correct sequence.

Again, the words which I had heard unwanted at the meeting at the fair hotel in Heidelberg erred through my brain puzzling around with the blunt extortion request 'to transfer that bloody company to me!'

At that time I had no idea what company was meant but now after having been able to look in their email con it got clearer. It had to be my baby IAS LLP they were talking about.

And what if Matthias and Robertas were jointly acting in a swamp of illegal cases? There was no other interpretation possible.

And there was somebody else behind them. Though I tortured my brain to identify a name or face with the person Robertas has talked to so friendly on Wednesday about plans for their next Halloween party, I could not.

I checked whether I had in the meantime received the copied email and I did.

What I read was one thing, but what I understood was something else.

Not only that the senders of the chain email had used coded names they also put their messages in cryptic wordings. Clear was only that the two named *Bear* and *Hulk* should manage a share transfer using incriminating evidence they had collected and attached targeting a guy called *Lynx*. Since they referred to a share transfer and the company targeted was the US branch we had acquired a couple of years ago there was not much room left, who *Lynx* could be. Robertas was for sure either *Bear* or *Hulk*, but who else was there? Matthias.

I thought I could join the dots, but I had no prove and needed more info. And the head of the group abbreviated as *BA01* remained unknown, and I interpreted that he was sure that *Lynx* had no choice but to play their game.

On the other hand, there was no direct clue in all the documents attached to the email pointing to Karl Leiner who was the major partner both in the holding as in the IAS Limited Liability Partnership.

I recalled my visit at the hunting lodge which indeed was a kind of 'Halloween' party eight months ago and the similarity was self-explaining. Reading the chain email again I found something else in Robertas' email which left me concerned.

The simply sentence saying 'Don't lose the focus on the whole job to be done and speed up getting along with your fucking Devushka' thrilled me and my first thought was related to Laura. Could she be the 'girl' of one of my best buddies in the company and getting closer to him?

That was all so strange and I stopped poking about in a fog.

When I yesterday had thought that the few puzzle pieces I've been seeing are falling in place to give a picture, that was apparently no longer the case and the pieces did not match anymore after the nearby accident in which Karl remained unhurt. Still being far from a resolution, I failed to imagine the whole and complete picture. The closer I looked the more often changed the picture. Especially Karl's behavior and mistrust gave me new head ache. I was confused.

Could a mafia type antitrust approach be the missing link to one of the bosses of the glorious BIG5 who met and ended up in a conflict?

To figure the rules of the game and the strategies behind clearly meant that I would have to dig much deeper into that nearly forgotten party incident way back in the forests of the Odenwald. Where a Cupid statue and a Russian Orthodox Church tattoo were woven within the story book of a weapon and arms business. All I knew was that I did not want to be game or prey targeted neither by any 'soft' war room method nor by an assault weapon of some insane hunters. Not being able to clearly discard a possible involvement of both Laura and Karl and the risk that they would be involuntarily or not on the hunters side gave me a fresh adrenaline kick which quickly disappeared after some thinking.

And now I was walking a risky tightrope, if I talked to the wrong side.

How could Karl have misinterpreted my messenger role as being directly involved in his enemies' alliance, if Matthias and Robertas were the enemies in the family and Karl knew it? Maybe he was since long or no longer in control of his firm.

To clarify the situation I had to go top down and first of all position myself to regain and crosscheck on his trust by sending a clear signal and see whether the response would match my expectation. Then only I would feel comfortable to convince Laura. If Matthias and his invisible string-puller

were targeting Karl, I would be anyway only the secondary aspect in their game play.

The read-before email turned my believe into certainty that Karl Leiner's relationship with Matthias Tamm must be quite tense and would become even tenser being directed against Karl's interests.

I had promised Laura on Wednesday to talk to her father about the conflict, in which she saw me stuck, and also to fill him in with detailed background info from my point of view. But instead he had called me on Friday and this call, although I challenged him with some suggestive remarks to get clearance, did not bring me any further. He ignored the few hints I gave him on the blackmail what really had bothered me.

This external extortion approach triggered by Robertas and Matthias changed the picture completely, and Karl was unaware about it and should be surprised from the developments in the company. I was so much wavering between the roles Karl could play in the puzzle.

Calling him now again to fill him in was not the right time neither physically nor practically.

Finally I decided to send him an email and I did so. Detailing down a little bit more what kind of niceties happened behind his back by Robertas and Matthias I did put some text together and simply forwarded the email I had copied from Robertas account to mine and summarized the fractured conversation I listened to. I thought it would be the best just to ask for his advice in case he would be able to untangle the cryptic message dealing with share transfers and I repeated my offer to help, if he wanted my help.

Somehow the mafia-like actions added up to a critical mass and Karl was not the guy to drink the Kool-Aid of a blackmail request that easy.

Although I was not in a position to understand what was behind their deal, I was pretty sure that Karl would immediately understand how the issues were linked together, and if he would be on my side I could expect a reaction.

Refocusing to Laura, I recalled her remarks during the last days and weeks which could imply also another facet of the problem which was similar threatening. Was it possible that she was accepting even involuntarily or even worse helping Matthias Tamm to get rid of me?

If I would now enter the flight to Seattle, I was trapped. It was so crystal clear that in such a case my professional and private life would go down the drain.

And that was pretty much the last thing I wanted to get into. Somewhat shaky I entered the washroom and rinsed my mouth. The water was tepid, and I didn't feel any fresher afterwards.

I looked at the watch and for the first time, defiance was germinating in some parts of my mind. Eased by the decision to stay in Chicago I needed to rethink my next steps carefully. I strolled back to the lounge to have another whiskey. I drank in small sips and watched on the monitor relaxed the last phase of the start preparation of the Flight XU 2463 to Seattle.

To create pace and time to think, I had to take this time-out right now. The fact that I had left Robertas my briefcase with all basic documents and even my laptop was unpleasant, but could not be changed.

So, I sat without luggage but after all with my ePad, my passport, some bucks from the advance plus the amount from the cash-out station and my private Bahamian credit card in Chicago.

When I ordered a second bourbon on the rocks, the lounge had received new passengers in the waiting mode and those for XU 2463 had left. The ice cubes clinked and the amber liquid exerted a soothing effect on me.

With my eyes closed and head leaning back, I ruminated again and again about the email message that Matthias Tamm had sent to Robertas and I felt very swampy ground under my feet. Blind and ignoring all the signs I had walked the mud, without realizing it. In my preparation of the project I was unable to see severe mistakes. I should have been suspicious before. The whiskey smoothed my concerns, and I emptied the glass and ordered another one.

I leaned back, folded my arms behind my head and my thoughts slipped away, without me wanting it, in the past. I have been working for fifteen years in the company of my father-in-law, and with my thirty-nine years I was proud to have reached eight years ago a position as direct report to the board of management.

In retrospect, what followed was perhaps the best time of my professional life. As a head of procurement I had the power to move and I moved a lot without being squeezed into some rigid company corset kicking my self-confidence steadily against all voices badmouthing the achieved results. Although I felt that my easygoing style was disliked to some extent, I ignored the hostile voices which got over time more and more painstaking and let my frustration grow. I classified them as envy pure and forgot about.

The nice share package in my bank depot was sort of calming my unrest and I used to look relaxed into my bright shining future. Three years ago, Karl Leiner started to extend the company and the management to

generate growth by increasing core competence capacities and by acquiring special know how or market access. He was the typical, hands-on entrepreneur, who had developed his business practically on his own based upon the good military contacts. He had brilliant engineering skills for the high end components which he developed, manufactured and sold worldwide. I've seen him acting quite ruthless, if he needed to. But he kept me out of his networking activities and relations and I felt he was watching me.

Although he accepted my demand to take over a more responsible Job, and in fact I meant with that to succeed him as CEO, I was forced to warily see him hire Matthias Tamm three years ago who had just successfully restructured a competitor to our business by introducing the up to date numerical controlled assembly robots. Apparently the recommendation to hire him came from one of his buddies outside the company, from one he must have trusted fully and without hesitation and detail background check, or I was simply not aware of. He hired him as a chief sales officer being a new board member and the following year he heaved him into the role, which I expected for myself, as the new CEO. I recalled vaguely that Robertas Schmittat was a direct import of Matthias, who entered the same day the company, and Robertas was since then acting as his personal assistant. Both had Estonian roots and were obviously liaised. And with Matthias Tamm taking over the chairmanship of the board my father-in-law changed into the supervisory board still being the fully liable associate and senior partner of the ICAS KGaA and pulling all strings in the billion Euro business.

I thought he would never dare to do that since in my eyes my succession was clearly set. Challenged with my question why he bypassed me when nominating Matthias Tamm as CEO, I considered his intent as a bluff to strengthen the operative business until I would be ready to take over.

Instead, I was more pushed than offered by Matthias into the role of the newly created position of an acquisition and branch operations manager. Since that time I was directly under the command of Matthias Tamm, staying in remote contact with Karl, still with the firm believe to succeed him one day.

My relationship with Karl was not as heartily as preferred after he had promoted me. The relationship cooled further down when I pushed through some in his views risky decisions, which at the end did not materialize as I wanted, and what he obviously did not forget. He also did not hesitate to share his resentments in a subtle way with Laura,

consequence of was that I perceived her stiffening more and more in our relationship than before.

The following years with my partnership share package slightly increasing and the chance to transfer from time to time enough money to my fresh established private account on the Bahamas to build up assets on my own, I felt still quite comfortable seeing no need to change my behavior.

On the other hand, I had a confronting and disrupted relationship with Matthias Tamm from day one onwards, facing an ongoing process where he put obstacles in my way, wherever he could. We have never had a trustful cooperation, and there were some voices who spoke behind the hand that I deserved that due to my provocative risk taking style endangering the company. He bragged to comply with his task to have radically cut cost and gotten the company back on financially sound track after having drastically downsized the work capacity of the complete firm and its abroad subsidiaries. Purporting to have only profitability on the screen everyone could see how quickly he fired someone who was even starting to oppose him. Opposition had many reasons but the major one was caused by fact that the situation of the company worsened with time and under his leadership.

He openly mobbed any opponent and especially me although he knew very well that I was untouchable for the time being. He remained unaffected of any scruples and increased the pressure steadily hoping may be I would give up from my side. What a dreamer, despite my frustrations lately I would never leave my cash cow family voluntarily.

One of my first tasks in the new role, in which Matthias pushed me, was the acquisition of the US based, concrete in Seattle WA., manufacturer specialized in radar and laser controlled assault weaponry named as "Intelligent Arms Systems" which we were registering as a Limited Liability Partnership giving us broad room to hide partners and Karl was the fully liable partner of the society. Thus IAS LLP had been transferred into a hundred percent branch of our German mother company and holding ICAS KGaA. Large-scale customers of IAS LLP were in particular suppliers of the military forces in the USA and the Asian market, and it was our aim to extend both our portfolio with the additional product range and also our global market share by selling these products worldwide. The IAS LLP should add design and patents as well as production, and the mother company took over the marketing, distribution and shipping of the produced goods along with the associated logistic and shipment services. The American company was at that time we bought it in a severe liquidity and always on the verge to file for chapter 11, since they had to fight off

a strong competition against producers in Israel and Asia and they had a high valued number of litigation cases to defend against patent infringement on the balance sheet.

To take them over was an easy exercise, and since the investment involved was rather low and the accruals they had as risk provisions booked were quite high the controllers did not really show interest in the case.

The business result of the new company was subject to strong fluctuations in the following years from very red to red and had reached a pink-reddish zero in the second year though I anticipated a black zero in the first year, but the sales result despite a slight rise did not meet the target.

But in relation to the economic development of the competition, which had also a massive decline in orders, I found it was a respectable result in the fiercely competitive market in the USA.

I would never have dreamed that the situation would develop in a way that Matthias Tamm would shred my achievements purporting his conservative criteria, hiding a real threat he was apparently confronted with, and initiate a process to get rid both of IAS LLP and of me as well serving as a scapegoat for the unlucky deal. I regretted that I had not carefully checked as I should have done, checking out the financial and accrual situation since Matthias allegedly had skimmed off all tangible provisions to offset the mother company's liquidity situation.

I was just too naive. And now the guy was determined to out boot me in such a lousy way, and maybe he had set up this activity just for testing his power and his standing toward the family.

I cringed when the girl brought the whiskey, the clink of ice cubes called me back to reality. I shook the glass lightly, with a faint grin cheering on Matthias Tamm and Robertas I wished them drop dead.