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Haines Manor

New Hereford, Connecticut

30 January 2009

PRESENT DAY

The heavily armored, dark emerald Rolls Royce Phantom navigated the treacherous serpentine county road that hugged the mountainside and led visitors out of downtown New Hereford to the gated haven of Crown Hill. Spring and Summer rewarded drivers with the lush green view of Litchmont County's Iron Valley and the distant jagged skyline of the Iron Mines to the west. In the fall, that same valley presented a collage of orange, yellow, and brown. In both instances, there were half a dozen small rest stops for photo opportunities. In the winter months, the climate formed dangerous ice patches that deterred many from the spectacular winter land scenery. During this time of year, two of the six families that lived on the hill were abroad in warmer climates.

Charles Fischer, unfazed by the dangerous road, leaned back and stared out the window at the white-capped hills and snow-covered valleys. The Phantom sported customized snow tires, and his driver, the most experienced in the motor pool, was familiar with the route. The visit was necessary. His partners needed to hear the information he just received. He held one of his favorite cigars, a Hadelsgold from Arnold André in one hand. In the other, a report from his field office in D.C. He placed the cigar between his teeth and glared at the single sheet of paper.

Charles read it for the fifth time on this trip. The Rolls glided under the exquisitely crafted stone archway that officially separated Crown Hill from the rest of the world. He completed the reading, slid the report inside a mahogany leather folder

on the seat to his left, took a long pull from the cigar, and savored the aroma. The Phantom approached a huge iron gate, the driver rolled down his window and inserted a metallic looking, gunmetal gray card into the slot above a polished oval speaker.

“You’re early,” A disembodied male voice announced after a few seconds.

“Eight for eight-thirty,” The driver replied.

“Good...” the voice answered, “...come around to the carport.”

The heavy iron gate groaned as it opened, the Phantom lurched forward and eased along the path to the left side of the main house. Charles nodded to the squad of armed guards on his right, stationed by the gate should anyone fail the word code. The massive house stood defiantly on the vast wintry landscape with a slightly smaller building, of similar colonial design, behind it. The smaller building was an ultramodern gymnasium that replaced the greenhouse favored by the women of the family.

As the first settler’s on Crown Hill, the Haines’ plot was much larger. The others, save Garrison, compensated the disparity with extravagance. Apart from the huge ‘H’ on the front gate, the Haines’ lack of overt opulence in the landscape reflected the family’s practicality by their mantra – *‘we are not here to impress.’* When the Phantom reached the carport, there were two more armed guards posted around the side entrance. The Phantom stopped, and one of the guards quickly opened the rear passenger door for Charles.

Fischer stubbed out his cigar, grabbed the folder, and exited the Phantom. He stood his full height of six feet, four inches, and inhaled the cold air deeply. At seventy-nine, he held himself to a rigorous workout and diet that fooled many into thinking he was as much as ten to fifteen years younger. He kept his dull white hair close-cropped out of habit, a throwback to his paramilitary youth. His icy blue eyes scanned the grounds out of habit, and then he leaned into the car.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be so shut her down and grab something hot in the kitchen," he said to the driver then nodded to both guards. The side door to the manor opened, and a fit, middle-aged man appeared. Not as tall as Charles, he was of medium build with a striking military bearing. More pepper than salt was visible in his hair, and though his posture seemed frosty as he stood at parade rest, his gray eyes sparkled.

Charles bellowed. "Robert! You, old sod."

"Charles, what in blazes?" Robert extended his hand as Fischer approached. "The roads are dangerous this time of year."

"I've news I need to share with my betters," Charles waved the leather folder with one hand, accepted Robert's hand with the other, and jutted his chin toward the house.

"That bad?"

"Bad and getting worse."

Robert welcomed him inside. Fischer stepped through the doorway and instinctively ducked.

Robert snickered. "They removed that beam five years ago, Charles. We thought you'd have a concussion."

Charles looked around and smiled. The modest foyer had not changed save the beam removal. The kitchen was still on the left; the aroma of tea and coffee filled the air. The room next to the kitchen had monitors and communications equipment for the Head of House. A vast array of photos on the wall near the communications room that dated back over sixty years. Several featured Charles when his hair was blond, standing with David Haines and members of the Iron Club, the county's small but powerful gentleman's club. "How's Tommy?"

"Thomas is training. We're installing him here as a squad leader this fall," Robert

replied proudly at the mention of his family's role as the Haines' protectors.

"He's back from his tour already?" Charles shook his head. "Times flies quickly, eh?"

"Yes, it does, Charlie, yes it does," Robert pointed down a hallway and chuckled. "You know the way; they like bad news sooner rather than later."

Charles fired off a salute to Robert, turned on his heel like a Prussian officer, and marched down the carpeted hallway. After a minute, he veered left and pushed against a panel, hidden within the vertical wood grain design of the wall. An unseen door, flush against the wall, unlatched with a muted clank. Charles shouldered through it, climbed the hidden stairway to another panel door. He checked his breathing and his hands. Both remained steady. With a shove of his forearm on the panel, Fischer entered the enormous office.

He came through the doorway on the office's western wall, flanked on either side with bookshelves that stood from floor to ceiling. Opposite him was another identical panel door flanked on both sides with more bookshelves of equal height. To his right, portraits of older men covered the southern wall, all the patriarchs of the family. To his left was an enormous window with an impressive view of the grounds, and before it was a massive, expertly crafted desk of English Oak. One partner sat imperiously behind the desk. Another paced slowly by the window. Between the three of them, they oversaw an international empire with ruthless efficiency, for the last forty years.

"You look as though you know why I'm here," Charles nodded to both as he walked toward the three chairs opposite the desk.

"Time has given us wisdom, Charles, but not omniscience," Eleanor Haines began with a warm smile. She gestured for him to have a seat then tilted her head to the man pacing behind her. "Barney mentioned you had a concern, something that needed

a face-to-face.”

“My concern...” Fischer sat in the center of the three chairs after he placed the leather folder in front of Eleanor. “...is putting it mildly. I fear all we worked for is in jeopardy.”

Eleanor reached for the folder, opened it, read the contents quickly, and handed it to Barney Upshaw. When Barney finished reading, he stared at Fischer with the same skeptical glare as Eleanor.

Upshaw, at eighty-five, still supervised overall security for the Haines family. His son Robert became Head of House two decades ago. His grandson Thomas would eventually command the company of house guards that David Haines created in the late forties. He was an older model of Robert, lean and sinewy with piercing gray eyes that became ever more vigilant and emotionless over the decades. He kept his white hair as short as Fischer’s and preferred tactical apparel, utility trousers and tops, boots, and wristband watches.

Eleanor kept her striking appearance through a rigorous swimming routine in the gym’s indoor pool. Years ago, she convinced Barney to do the same. She dressed conservatively in dark pantsuits, kept her silver hair in short elegant styles, rarely entertained guests, or ventured from the manor unless it was a matter of grave importance. Barney Upshaw was her constant companion, apart from the occasional visit by Charles or a few grandchildren.

“Charles, are you sure this is accurate?” Barney asked carefully.

“That’s what my boys discovered,” Charles replied defensively. “I had them verify it twice before I brought this to you.”

“I have a hard time believing it,” Eleanor leaned back in her chair.

“A month ago, Ryan Cassidy found two Litchmont Communications technicians

snooping around one of the cell towers near New Hereford," Charles began. "He suspected them since they were hired and asked what they were doing."

"Why did he suspect them?" Barney asked.

"He didn't say. The kid has a knack for sniffing out people like that," Charles replied. "Their answer didn't scan with him, so he and William Baumann took them out of the county and asked them again."

"What did they say?" Eleanor asked.

"Nothing," Charles answered. "Defiant to the last. Ryan sent them down the Rabbit Hole to the Brickhouse and went through Litch Comm's roster again. He found five more technicians with questionable backgrounds."

"What did Brickhouse get out of them?" Barney asked.

"Five more?" Eleanor said with alarm.

"Brickhouse doesn't work like that, Barney; you should know better," Charles replied, then addressed Eleanor. "Yes, five more. Ryan held them for a week until Brickhouse finished with the first two. He had the video shown to the five technicians, one turned out to be an ex-con, and the other four confessed to being investigators for Senator Richard Berkeley."

"Where does he get the nerve..." Eleanor snapped.

"Berkeley's been after the Aedis investigation since the nineties," Charles said. "When he said he had an informant here, we all dismissed it. During the previous administration, the vice president kept him and his team at bay. Now, it's gotten worse."

"This report says the informer can link the Aedis Expedition in Panama, to the Rabbit Hole and all of its activities going back to the nineteen-thirties!" Eleanor exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

"It would mean this informer has inside knowledge of the Rabbit Hole's use," Barney said carefully.

"I know Barney, I know," Charles replied somberly. "It means we have a traitor in the camp, an old one or a well-informed one. That list is short."

"It means that James Hauser was right," Eleanor whispered. "Do you think he'll come back?"

"He's in Germany right now, working with Gerhardt Lange on his Chancellor run. Our friends in the Hauptmann Group want Lange as Germany's Chancellor and their fair-haired boy, Eduard Stuart, as Britain's Prime Minister," Charles replied, referring to the Iron Club's counterparts based in Germany. Established after World War II, the Hauptmann Group carved a niche as fanatical Anti-Communists and earned favor with several Western and Right-Wing governments. "The Hauptmann's plans rely on those two in place. They also want Randolph in the White House in the next election. If this investigation is sanctioned, with those accusations, it'll ruin this family and bring Hauser back to finish what he started in the nineties."

"Who can it be?" Eleanor demanded. "How can such a person remain under the radar for this long?"

"You talk to Fred..." Charles began.

"Don't even think of it!" Barney snapped. "Fred is one of us. He'd never betray the team."

"Barney, the report says they have evidence of everything David..." Charles began then turned to look back at the portrait of David Haines on the wall of patriarchs. Fischer looked as though he expected David to leap from the painting at the mention of his name and do something horrible to him. He continued in a whisper. "...did in Europe. Before, during, and after the war."

“David recruited us in *forty-three*, how could Fred know anything beyond that? With what we did in Germany for David, he’ll put himself in the noose as well. He’s bombastic, but not a traitor, Charles.”

“David did take a liking to you two,” Charles said defensively. “I know you were his heir apparent and took over after he died in sixty-two, but it could be possible that David kept something from *you* and told Fred?”

“Fred would’ve shared that long before he called it quits after Panama,” Barney countered.

“What happened down there?” Eleanor asked. “After all this time, you never said why Fred left.”

“It had nothing to do with disloyalty and everything to do with James Hauser’s behavior,” Barney said. “If this report is accurate, we’re looking at someone who has access to information on all of David’s activities. Someone with an ax to grind against the family.”

“All those records are at the club. That’s a huge accusation, Barney,” Charles countered.

“Who would do this and why?” Eleanor said to herself. “Why now?”

“If you’re asking why. David left a huge legacy and stepped on many toes along the way,” Charles replied. “It wasn’t all bad, though; we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him.”

“If he were still here, we wouldn’t *be here* if it were up to him,” Barney said coldly. “As for why now, who knows.”

Charles nodded at Barney’s comment, then studied Eleanor. It was the first time the matriarch was at a loss for words. Over the last forty years, her decisiveness kept the massive empires of the Haines family and the Iron Club in check. That was all at

risk from an unseen enemy within their community. Barney walked to the desk and stood beside her.

“What are you thinking, Eleanor?” he asked.

“We have to get to the bottom of this,” she replied. “If this Aedis informant is one of our people, we’ll *need* an outsider. Someone that can sort this out, sweep the stables clean, and protect what we’ve built. I don’t know what David did before the war, but I do know what he did after the war. If that alone becomes public knowledge, it’ll ruin this family beyond repair. Everyone’s at risk, even the ones not connected to business or politics. Randolph’s career is over, forget the run at the Oval Office.”

“James Hauser would come after *us* this time, not just the associates,” Charles added. “He’ll think we shielded the informant back in the nineties.”

“Yes, that as well,” Eleanor said numbly. “Do we have anyone on or off the books that can handle this for us?”

“Five or six private companies come to mind,” Charles replied. “All are ex-Activities personnel, very reliable.”

“If they’re ex-Agency, then they’re suspect,” Eleanor replied. “We’re too close to the Company; the informant could be there.”

“There’s a firm out of England we might try, Sefton and I had dealings with them in the fifties,” Barney said absently. “Sam Crosby and William Baumann have used them once or twice as well.”

“Baumann?” Charles replied.

“Yes, I had a small issue I needed resolving in North Africa, and William recommended them. I’d forgotten about them, since their internal crisis in the early sixties,” Barney said. “I’ll ask Sam to seek them out.”

“If they’ve dealt with Sam, that’s Activities, Barney,” Eleanor warned.

"Sam's relationship with this firm comes from his time at the embassy in London. They only operate in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Sam and Will recommended them on that basis. They don't have a presence on this continent, according to Sam," Barney assured.

"I think we should give them a shot," Charles offered.

"Can we trust them?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes, I think we can," Barney said.

"Think?" she pressed. "We need to control this, whomever we use. This informer is well placed and knows a great deal. Rooting them out may lead to a purge, which is in our favor. Hauser will need to see that we're on top of this."

"We can trust them," Barney nodded. "I'll reach out to Sam to make introductions."

"All right, gentlemen, it's settled then," Eleanor leaned forward and placed her palms on the desk. "I'll not let over forty years of work go down the drain because of an overzealous Senator."

"Agreed," Charles replied.

"Absolutely," Barney said as he stared across the room at David Haines' portrait. Eleanor followed his gaze, slowly reached for his hand and squeezed it gently. Barney looked down at her, tried to smile then turned to face Charles. Fischer somberly nodded, stood, and collected the file before he walked quietly out of the room.

"He did us a favor by bringing us together all those years ago," Eleanor assured as they both stared at David's portrait.

"Did he?" Barney replied. "We've been managing his secrets for so long..."

"We'll get through this, Bubsie." Eleanor patted his hand. "I mean, *Lieutenant*."

Barney smiled.

